

D.J. MOLLES



THE REMAINING:
REFUGEES

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BY

D.J. Molles

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CHAPTER 1: KILLBOX

The two men worked quietly.

In the cold morning light, diffused through a thin veil of clouds, their breath came out of them in bone-white plumes. Thick beards covered both their faces. The shorter, balding man crouched over a single-burner camp stove and attached the small green propane tank. As the shorter man worked, the taller man held his tan-coated M4 rifle at a low ready and scanned the derelict streets around them.

The concrete surrounding them sparkled with a thin sheen of frost. Squat buildings stared down over them like empty and plundered tombs. Their windows were either boarded up with grayed plywood, or smashed through, leaving only jagged glass teeth protruding from the window frames. Directly behind where the two men worked stood a two-story brick building, and as the tall man scanned, he could see dark figures atop the roof, silhouetted against the sky. The figures peered over the side and watched intensely.

The two men worked in the center of a four lane street. Along the edges, trash had gathered at the base of the buildings and the gutters, where wind and rain had swept them. All of it was old and sun-bleached and melded into anonymous heaps. From these mounds of trash, hastily disguised, small green rectangles poked up. Wires ran off of them and trailed up the side of the building to where they dangled from the rooftop.

A lighter clicked.

Lee looked down to see Harper setting the lighter's tiny butane flame to the gas grill and slowly turning the propane on. There was a shallow hiss, and then blue flames jumped up from the burner sending up a wave of heat that felt pleasant on Lee's face. Harper adjusted the flames so they quivered low and then set a grungy looking aluminum pan atop the grill.

"Your turn," Harper stood, his knees popping.

Lee took one last look at his surroundings and bent to the ground where he had laid a small canvas satchel. He opened the top and retrieved the only item it contained: a gallon bag full of deers guts, the pale coils of intestines steeping in a marinade of blackening blood. His nose wrinkled as he bent over the grill and dumped the bag into the heating pan. The air smelled immediately of a stagnant slaughter house.

Harper growled low in his throat and shook his head. "Disgusting."

Lee nodded in agreement and gingerly zipped the plastic bag closed, stuffing it back into the canvas satchel. Letting his rifle rest on its sling, Lee pointed for the building where all the thin black wires trailed up to the roof. "Let's go."

Harper snatched his own M4 off the ground and they headed for the open door at the base of the building. Lee matched his pace, just barely showing the limp in his left leg. The ankle had never healed properly from his fall down the elevator shaft three months ago. His back hadn't been the same either, and it had become quite a process to get mobile in the morning.

They picked their way through the ransacked interior of the building—an old mom-and-pop pharmacy. The shelves had been tipped over, everything emptied and looted. Refugees and scavengers had taken what they needed, leaving behind the pill bottles and packages. At the back of the pharmacy where a sign that read "Cold Remedies" hung over empty white shelves, a door opened into a stairwell that led up to the second level, and from there to the roof. The door was in splinters from when Lee kicked it in earlier that night. The place still smelled of death. They had not moved the bodies of the pharmacist and his wife. They remained huddled in the dark corner of this shit-stained storage area.

The only light in this upstairs area came from an open skylight with a pull-down ladder

provide roof access, and from the three glow sticks lying on the dark floor like a strewn constellation leading to the ladder and creating an eerie green glow across the floor.

Harper went up first and Lee followed.

On the roof, he found the other eight members of his team with their backs against the brick abutment of the roof and their rifles lying across their laps. Seven men and Julia, Marie's sister from Smithfield. She had insisted on being a part of the team and working as their medic. After she had explained her background as an EMT, Lee welcomed her to the team.

He crossed the tar-paper roof and sidled down between Julia and LaRouche. The sergeant's olive tactical vest was worn and grimed to a grayish tan, and some of the edges were frayed from their constant hard use. His light brown hair was about as overgrown as Lee's, but he kept his reddish beard hacked shorter with his knife. As Lee sat down next to him, LaRouche dug a packet of Red Man out of his cargo pocket and stuffed his cheek with a giant chew. He'd found a box of the stuff squirreled away in a house earlier that week and had been so overjoyed that Lee thought he might shed a tear.

LaRouche offered Lee the pouch, but he declined.

Lee turned his attention to his right, where Julia sat. Her skin was pale to the point of looking green and her lips were seized down to a short, flat line across her face. She avoided eye contact with Lee.

"You gonna be alright?" he asked.

She nodded, but didn't speak.

He leaned back and stared up at the granite skies. "It has to be done."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I just can't find a way to make it right, Lee. I'm sorry, but I don't think I'm ever going to be comfortable with it like you are."

Lee didn't respond for a moment, just watched his breath drift up into the air. *It's going to be a cold winter*, he thought. *Not usually this cold by November.* He moistened his lips. "Just because I don't like it, doesn't mean I'm comfortable with it."

"They're people."

"I don't know."

"They're people," she repeated.

Lee looked at her again, and this time she met his gaze.

He nodded. "Okay."

The smell of burning innards began to drift up to them from where the bloody mass boiled and smoked on the pan below them. He turned to his left where LaRouche, Harper, Father Jim, and the rest of the group were lined up, their hands resting on the grips of their rifles.

"Everybody locked and loaded?"

Thumbs up from everybody.

Silence and grim faces.

Lee rose to his knees and peered over the abutment to the street below.

The downtown area of Lillington was spread out over a few small blocks. The building they were perched on stood at the southwest corner of Main Street and Front Street, where they had set up their small burner, letting the smells of dreadful cooking waft across the small town. Opposite them were a collection of small businesses: a barber shop, a diner, the Lillington Chamber of Commerce, and a few boutiques. Everything stood gray and dead and falling apart.

Still, there could be some salvage there.

Lee rested his bearded chin on his hand as he knelt. He watched and waited and remained silent along with his group as the minutes dragged themselves by like wounded animals, slow and painful. One of the group checked the chamber of their rifle, and then snicked the bolt back into place. LaRouche spit out a stream of tobacco juice that hit the tar paper with a sharp *splat*. Somewhere to

lilting voice of a winter bird called out from a barren tree.

"Cap," someone whispered.

Lee looked over and saw Jeriah Wilson, the stocky black kid fresh out of the Air Force academy. He'd been a running back throughout high school, and his build showed it. His face bore only patchy wisps of hair across his chin, but his once-regulation crew cut had now become shaggy.

He tapped his ear and pointed out to the east towards Main Street.

Lee strained to hear, and for a brief moment as the steady cold breeze lulled, he could hear the patter of numerous feet coming from the streets below them. He looked at Jeriah again and nodded, then leaned up slightly over the abutment so he could see Main Street. Everything looked empty and devoid of life, and yet Lee could hear their soft footfalls just around the corner.

They were coming.

He shifted slightly and his hand came down slowly to touch the comforting grip of his rifle. His eyes stayed locked on the intersection.

The footfalls were louder now, and interspersed with short, breathy snorts that could have been mistaken for some other noise from nature, if Lee was not so familiar with it. It was the noise they made when they were tracking something. Especially when they were tracking by smell.

The first one came around the corner quickly and then slowed.

Seeing it made every muscle in Lee's body stiffen.

Staring at it from his concealed vantage point, Lee thought it was a young boy, dark haired and short of stature. He wore a stained pair of jeans and what had once been a white t-shirt, now tattered and darkened with gore. Steam rolled off the boy's shoulders, his body still hot from whatever wretched hovel he and his hundreds of den mates had packed themselves into for warmth. They liked low places, like basements and cellars, and they all huddled together during the night in one giant twitching mass.

The thought of it made Lee's skin crawl.

"Eyes on," Lee whispered.

"Eyes on," LaRouche repeated down the line.

In the street below, the boy trotted cautiously out, now hunching down, now standing erect. He squinted eyes surveyed the scene, but always came back to what had drawn him to this intersection: the scent of the deer guts, steaming atop that single-burner grill.

Marie had been right. The smell of cooking drew them in quickly. It tickled some tiny memories in their violently rearranged brains that promised food. It worked better than anything else.

The boy sniffed the air and eyed the grill again, then began to move closer. Behind him, his den mates appeared, a bedraggled horde of them. They began to chitter back and forth to each other excitedly. As they drew closer, their calling got louder, and they began to bark and screech and growl. They worked their hands reflexively and snapped at the air with their jaws. Lee counted as they moved onto Front Street, measuring them in segments of 25, up until he reached approximately 150. The old and the weak and the nearly-dead straggled in, taking up the rear of the column.

Lee crouched there on the abutment and breathed very slowly so that the fog of his breath would not give him away. His pulse was strong and quick, and he could feel the tightness in his stomach and in his throat.

He lowered himself very slowly and touched LaRouche on the shoulder. The sergeant looked up at him and Lee whispered, "You ready?"

LaRouche moved his chaw around in his mouth and nodded, his lips stained brown. He reached down to his side and held up a little green box with a wire running off of it.

Looking out onto the street again, Lee watched as the horde gathered around the boy. Now other den mates were on the scent, and they were less cautious, and quicker to move in on a possible source of food.

This was a herd, not a pack. There was no leader, only the instinct to stay together, to move together. The stink of the burning entrails began to mix with the pungent living odor of the infected and it lifted up on the breeze and made bile rise in the back of Lee's throat.

"Little closer," he whispered to no one in particular, his lips barely moving.

Now the tip of the crowd had reached the bubbling pan of guts. They stood back perhaps three feet away or so and circled around, wary of the heat, but certain that there was food there. They were all on the verge of starvation, their skin stretched taut over their bones and their ribs standing out like the rungs on a ladder. The rest of the horde bunched up behind them, fanning out and filling the street.

Almost there, he thought.

The sweat on his palms chilled in the air.

The first of the infected leaned forward and took a swipe at the pan, knocking it off the grill and spilling the hot, bloody contents into the street. They screeched and jumped forward, their claw-like fingers rasping across the concrete as they grabbed chunks of organs and long strings of intestine. The horde pressed in, compacted, became one blob of flailing, grasping limbs, and the screech became desperate as the feeding frenzy began.

"Now," Lee said.

LaRouche counted out the three clicks from the detonator: "One, two, *away*."

Lee watched as the four, daisy-chained Claymore mines exploded from where they were hidden in the piles of trash, scattering tatters of white paper that billowed out into the crowd like some violent confetti cannon.

The outside of the horde appeared to wilt as they were cut down by the hundreds of steel balls shooting out of the four simultaneous detonations. With the dust and smoke still hanging in the air and the horde of infected still unsteady on their feet, as their eardrums bled and their animal minds attempted to comprehend this thunder that had struck down their den mates, the rest of Lee's team crested the abutment with their rifles at the ready and barrages of withering fire erupted along the rooftop.

The creatures below howled in rage and pain. They turned in mad circles, striking out at each other in the smoke, biting and slashing at anything before them. They began to scatter, but then they bunched up again as their instinct took over, and they would run this way and that, as the rifle fire echoed off the storefronts and confused them.

Their screeching began to lessen as more and more of them fell. The horde became a few stragglers trying to cling to life, and then only a dozen or so wounded that crawled and moaned and growled. The rifle fire became sporadic until there was only one infected left.

It was the same small boy that had come around the corner. His left arm was sheared off at the shoulder and he clutched his belly with the hand he had left and made a hideous noise.

Calmly, LaRouche raised his rifle while all the others ported theirs, smoke rising from the barrels. The boy writhed and moaned as LaRouche squinted through his sights and fired. Then there was silence.

LaRouche spat. "That's the last one."

The group looked down at their handiwork.

In the street lay the sprawled remains of what was left of Lillington's populace. Some of the dead stared up into the sky with glassy eyes, while others lay face down in their own muck. The space between their bodies glistened darkly as thin streams of red meandered away from the road and towards the trash-clogged drains.

LaRouche slapped Harper's shoulder and pointed. "Shit, Harper. I think your grill is still going." Harper nodded slowly and looked slightly nauseous. "Yeah."

LaRouche was clearly impressed. "Damn thing's indestructible."

Lee grabbed his pack up from the floor and slung his arms into it. "Everyone refresh your mags—~~Those that had not done so already put fresh magazines in their rifles and stowed the half-full ones in the pockets of their field jackets.~~ They stooped and gathered their empty magazines and put them in a different pocket.

Julia remained still during this.

She hadn't fired a shot.

"Wilson," Lee pointed to the Air Force cadet. "Get your guys and pull the Humvees around. Let's start setting up shop."

Wilson nodded and headed for the ladder down, his three companions falling in behind him.

The two Humvees that Lee had repossessed from Milo were parked around the corner. The block of buildings which they stood in created a perfect square around an empty parking lot. With some measures to fortify the doors and windows of these buildings, the interior parking lot could be used as a base and the buildings as a wall. A little concertina wire and some barricades, and Outpost Lillingstone would be secure.

Wilson and his team slid quickly down the ladder and disappeared into the empty pharmacy below. Lee thought about telling them to be cautious—there would be others lurking in the city. But it was unnecessary. Everyone was already cautious. They all jumped at shadows and slept lightly, always anticipating the next round of misfortune.

"Let's go down there and check it out." Lee put a hand on LaRouche's shoulder. "You mind keeping overwatch again?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Nope. I got it."

They went down and emerged from the pharmacy onto Front Street. It was Lee, Harper, Julia, and Father Jim. They were a good team, Lee had to admit. Though Julia refused to take part in the traps they set to clear the small towns of infected, she still did the training and pulled her weight along with everyone else. Plus, her medical knowledge made her invaluable. Lee had spent a lot of time training his team, and they were practiced and tested almost every day. They were still a far cry from professional soldiers, but they were fluid, most of them were decent shots, and they got the job done.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the shop, they stared at the carnage in the streets.

"Jim, Harper..." Lee pointed to the front of the shop. "Post up here. We'll strip the pharmacy."

The two men nodded their heads. Julia followed Lee back into the building. The interior already looked ransacked, but most things did these days. There wasn't much left, but they managed to pull a few large bottles of medications that Lee was unfamiliar with, along with some prescription pain relievers, and some over-the-counter items such as anti-diarrheal medicines, ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and antibacterial ointments. Julia piled these items into her pack just as the Humvee rumbled into the back parking lot.

Lee called out to Jim and Harper and they all headed for the back lot.

The two Humvees sat in the interior parking lot, one behind the other. The lead Humvee had been outfitted with a dozer blade that now sat angled up so as not to impede the vehicle's ground clearance—a bit of creative welding. Wilson and his three teammates were already offloading spools of barbed wire, some of which they had taken from the barricades in Smithfield, and some they had found in various farm equipment stores.

The back lot was half paved, and half dusty gravel. Two small sedans and a pickup truck sat abandoned, parked along the rear of the buildings. There were two entrances into the back lot, one from the south, and one from the west. The western entrance was only wide enough for one vehicle to pass through at a time, while the southern entrance was much bigger. For this reason, Lee made the decision to block the southern entrance. The materials to barricade it would be harvested from the refuse around them, including the cars already parked in the back lot, dumpsters, and any other heavy

objects they could haul into place.

—While the rest of the team finished offloading the Humvees, Lee sat in the passenger seat of the lead vehicle and grabbed the handset to the SINCGARS radio mounted inside. He dispensed with proper radio protocols and used plain English when he spoke.

"Captain Harden to Camp Ryder. How do you copy me?"

A hiss of static.

A gravelly voice answered. "Yeah, I got you, Captain."

Lee smiled. "Morning, Bus. Haven't had your coffee?"

"Don't remind me. Haven't had coffee in months." Bus cleared his throat. "Did you get Lillington cleared?"

"Yeah, it's clear."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Nope." Lee looked out at his team, now in the process of breaking into the abandoned cars on the back lot so they could be moved and used as barricades. "They're just getting everything set up right now."

"Sounds good. I know Old Man Hughes won't tell you, but everyone from Dunn really appreciates what you're doing out there. It's been cramped quarters over here."

Lee nodded. Old Man Hughes was the leader of nineteen other survivors from the town of Dunn to the southeast. He was a crotchety old bastard, but for some reason the Dunn survivors loved him. Due to overcrowding at Camp Ryder, the twenty from Dunn were slated to move to Lillington and establish an outpost there, along with another twelve from Fuquay-Varina.

"Not a problem," Lee said simply.

"I'll let Old Man Hughes know. They'll be on their way shortly. Any trouble on the roads?"

"No, the road was clear. Make sure they stick to the route we planned."

"Will do. What time should we expect you back?"

Lee thought out loud. "I think we'll leave most of the scavenging for the new residents. My guys need some sleep and I need to restock some of our ordnance. So we'll probably head out shortly after they get here." He clucked his tongue. "I'd say around noon at the latest."

"Sounds good. See you at noon."

"Roger. Out." Lee put the handset back on its cradle.

As he stood from the Humvee, he watched Harper exit the back door of the pharmacy. The old man's face was clouded, and he approached Lee with a purposeful walk, avoiding eye-contact until he was standing right in front of him.

Lee felt that old familiar certainty of the worst-case-scenario creeping up on him. "What's wrong?"

Harper squinted one eye. "Not really sure."

Lee stared at him blankly.

"Take a look at something." Harper began walking back towards the pharmacy, and Lee followed. "Jim just pointed it out to me. I hadn't noticed it before but...well, just come look."

They made their way through the pharmacy to the open front door and out onto Front Street. In the middle of the road, mired by bodies lying two-deep in places, and surrounded by the overwhelming stench, Jim stood and looked around at the corpses, a finger pressed thoughtfully to his lips. Lee turned to catch a glimpse of the rooftop behind and above him and saw LaRouche resting his elbows there on the abutment. The sergeant met Lee's eyes and gave a minimal shrug, as though Father Jim's actions mystified him as well.

Lee stood at the edge of the blood bath. "Jim?"

The man in the tortoiseshell glasses looked up and nodded by way of greeting.

Harper put his hands on his hips. "Tell him."

~~—Jim looked around, hesitantly, as though he was in the process of some complicated calculation~~ confident that his math was correct, but somehow coming up with the wrong answer every time. Finally he gestured to the bodies around him. "There are no females."

Lee's brow narrowed.

He looked around as though he might prove Jim wrong. He stared down at the pale limbs covered in dried and fresh blood. Their clothing barely clung to them in tatters. It was difficult to determine gender by a glance—malnutrition robbed them of most of their distinctions so that all that remained were bony sacks of flesh. Lee had to look at their faces and see the grizzled, mangy beards clumped together by clots of blood. Some of them were too young to have beards, but they were male as well. He searched and searched, but could not find a single female to discount what Jim had said.

"That's weird," Lee spoke slowly. "But..."

"There were none in the last two traps we set in Smithfield, either." Father Jim looked at him with fevered eyes. "Or at the university. Or at Dunn. In fact, when was the last time you saw an infected female, Captain?"

Lee didn't respond.

He had no answer.

"What do you think happened to them?" Harper asked quietly.

Jim began carefully stepping between the bodies, making his way towards Lee and Harper. "Not sure," he said simply. "Could be that they aren't as strong, so the male infected feed on them."

Lee thought back to the young girl, the first infected he'd encountered as he stepped out of his house and into this new reality, so long ago. She had been a scrawny thing, but shockingly powerful. "I don't know about strength being the issue," Lee said. "Besides, if that were the case, why not kill and eat the young ones too?"

Jim shrugged. "I have no idea. I'm just making an observation."

Lee stared down at the bodies for a moment more. He could find nothing further to say on the subject, so he nodded his head back towards the buildings. "Let's get rid of these bodies. I don't want to give the assholes from Fuquay-Varina anything else to bitch about."

They drove the Humvee with the dozer attachment out to Front Street and lowered the blade so that it was only an inch off the ground. Lee watched from the sidewalk as Harper moved the vehicle forward in slow, broad strokes, the blade gathering up a tumble of pale bodies and pushing them towards a vacant lot at the northeastern corner of the intersection. Then Harper would put the vehicle in reverse and back slowly through the thickening blood, the tires slinging droplets of it down the sides of the vehicle. The thought of all that infected blood still gave Lee cause to worry, but over the last few months, several survivors—including Lee—had come into contact with infected blood and not contracted the plague. They'd determined that simple blood on skin contact didn't contribute to infection.

After nearly an hour of back and forth, Harper had managed to clear Front Street of most of the bodies. The ones he couldn't get to—the ones that were huddled behind trees and in the corners between buildings—were picked up by hand and placed in the path of the dozer so he could push them into the growing pile. They mixed in pallets and pieces of wood and doused it all with diesel fuel and set it on fire with a road flare. Lee stood back away from the blaze and watched the acrid black smoke curl into the sky as Harper drove the Humvee-turned-dozer back into the parking lot behind the buildings.

The use of fuel was a shame, but they didn't have the equipment to dig mass graves, and leaving

rotting bodies out in the open was not only offensive to the senses, but a serious health hazard, even if they were uninfected. An expired human body became a petri dish for diseases of all types. On top of that, the rotting meat had been known to draw other infected into the area. It was best to dispose of them quickly.

Beside him, Father Jim looked down Main Street. "They'll see the smoke, you know."

Lee shrugged. "Nothing I can do about it, Jim."

"I know." He put a hand on Lee's shoulder. "But you know that asshole White is going to say something."

Lee smiled and looked shocked. "Father...such language."

Jim waved him off. "To call Professor White anything but an asshole would be to lie. And lying with your lips are an abomination to the Lord."

LaRouche joined them in the middle of the street, his cheek still bulging from tobacco.

Lee nodded to him. "How long you keep that shit in your mouth?"

LaRouche spat. "Gotta conserve."

Both Jim and Lee shrugged and nodded. It was a valid point.

From the north end of Main Street they could hear the rumble of a bus downshifting, muted by distance. Main Street dipped down into a slight grade and leveled out as it crossed over the Cape Fear River. Lee could see clearly in the winter air, and from the other side of the bridge, he watched the bright white bus come into view, led by a blue, sixteen passenger van. Those two vehicles would contain all that was left of Dunn and Fuquay-Varina, along with all the worldly possessions that they had managed to carry out with them. Which wasn't much.

Lee remained standing in the intersection as the vehicles approached, his hands folded and resting on the buttstock of his slung rifle. The gray skies washed the windshields out to a pale reflection of nothing, and he could not see who was driving either vehicle. He supposed the Fuquay-Varina group would be in the van, as there were only twelve of them compared to Dunn's twenty.

LaRouche appeared, heralded by a ruddy stream of spit. He smiled at Lee. "Can't wait to hear what the great Professor White has to say to you this time."

Lee smiled wanly, but didn't feel much humor in it.

The van crested the hill and began to slow, the brakes on it squealing as it pulled to a stop in the middle of the intersection with the driver's side window rolled down. Sitting in the driver's seat was an aging man with longish salt-and-pepper hair, pulled back into a pony tail. He looked over the rims of his thick glasses as though Lee were one of his pupils that had spoken out of turn in class.

Lee met his gaze and fought to keep his face neutral. "Mr. White."

Professor Tommy White of the once prestigious Chapel Hill University pursed his lips. The rumbling of the engines at idle filled the silence between the two men. Lee watched as the professor's eyes flicked to the burning pile of bodies. They stayed there and the man's face seemed to wilt. Then he just looked straight ahead again. Someone in the van began to weep loudly.

Lee sniffed and smelled charred flesh.

He pointed down Front Street. "Take your first left onto 8th Street. Entrance is on the left."

A teary-eyed girl of perhaps twenty years old appeared in the front of the van. She stared accusingly at Lee and bawled at him. "Why? Why'd you do it?"

"So you can be safe," Lee responded with thinly veiled annoyance.

The girl began to speak but Professor White held up his hand and shook his head. "It's pointless, Natalie. You won't convince him." White looked at Lee again. "We'll be going now."

Lee nodded. "Please do."

The van lurched forward quickly and made the right-hand turn onto Front Street, followed by the quick left turn onto 8th Street. Lee watched them go with a small shake of his head and kept telling

himself *you don't get to choose who you rescue. You don't get to choose...*

~~The bus lumbered after the van. From the driver's window, Lee could see Old Man Hugh standing in the center aisle while a younger survivor from Dunn piloted the bus. The old man tossed Lee a salute and a nod of thanks.~~

"Hey," LaRouche put a hand on his shoulder. "At least someone appreciates us."

Lee made a chuckling sound that was born of frustration and anger. "It just never ends with these fuckers, does it?"

LaRouche flicked his hand dismissively. "Those fuckers have been living off of guys like me and you for centuries. They love their safety and security, but they'll never stop bitching about how we accomplish it." The sergeant shrugged. "Ain't nothin' you can do about it."

Lee nodded. Without further words, they began to walk towards the newly created Outpost Lillington. They had nearly reached the door to the pharmacy when Jeriah Wilson burst through. His eyes found Lee and he raised his hand to flag him down.

"What's up, Wilson?"

"Hey, Captain." Wilson looked confused, maybe a little curious. "Just got a call from Cam Ryder. Outpost Benson made contact with a guy, some survivor, and they're bringing him into Cam Ryder right now."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "Okay. And why are they calling for us?"

"Well, they're calling for you," Wilson corrected.

"Did they say why?"

"The guy says he's from Virginia." Wilson met Lee's gaze. "And he asked for you by name."

CHAPTER 2: THE HUB

Lee stalked to the Humvee as quickly as he could without showing his limp, ignoring the young college kids from Fuquay-Varina that sided with their old professor and grumbled about him as he passed. A few of the middle-aged survivors from Fuquay-Varina murmured their appreciation to Lee and he nodded to them politely, but distractedly. Not everyone from Fuquay-Varina was opposed to him, but as a whole they went along with whatever Professor White said. Jeriah Wilson had been the one major exception.

At the big green truck, Lee ripped open the passenger door and snatched the handset from the cradle, keying it up before he even had it to his ear. "Captain Harden to Camp Ryder."

A click. Someone whose voice he didn't recognize came on. "This is Camp Ryder. Go ahead, Captain."

"Is there someone there asking for me?"

"Uh..." Shuffling, and then the radio clicked off for a brief moment. "Yeah, let me get Bus."

Lee waited quietly, leaning his elbow on the frame of the Humvee and chewing at the inside of his lip.

"Bus here."

Lee looked at the radio as though he might see Bus through it. "Is there some guy looking for me?"

"Yeah, two of our guys from Outpost Benson are bringing him to Camp Ryder." Bus sounded bewildered. "From what they described, the guy's on death's door. Dehydrated, starving, but they say he's wearing a vest, like a military one. Says his name is Jacob."

Lee racked his brain. "I don't know a Jacob."

"Well, he knows you."

"Was he armed?" Lee pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut.

"When they first found him, yes," Bus said. "But they said he wasn't hostile. Surrendered immediately and laid down his weapon. They said it was an M4, but they're also saying this guy doesn't seem like military at all."

Lee could think of plenty of people he knew in the military that didn't look the part. Not everyone was a lean, mean, fighting machine. Many of them worked behind the lines, and would never see a day of combat in their entire career.

Lee opened his eyes again. "Did he say why he's looking for me?"

"Um...damn, Lee." Bus huffed into the microphone. "I haven't talked to the guy yet. I just have second-hand information. I think they said he claimed to have information for you or something. Something about Virginia."

"Virginia?" Lee said incredulously. "What the hell do I need to know about Virginia?"

Bus keyed up again. "Look, I have no idea what this guy is about. We'll get him cleaned up and attended to. You just get back here so you can talk to him and figure out what's going on."

Lee licked his lips and felt them getting chapped in the cold, dry air. "Okay. We'll be enroute here shortly."

He hung up the handset and grabbed a bottle of water from the floor board and drank from it. The cold water ached as it filtered through the empty slot in his gums where he'd lost his tooth to the flying cafeteria chair. If the memory of it didn't make him cringe, it might have been humorous.

He turned outwards and regarded the parking lot, encircled by brick buildings. It was not crowded, the two Humvees, the van and the bus taking up much of the space, but also with over three

survivors carrying their personal items from the vehicles and placing them to the sides of the building. Everything they owned, wrapped up in a tattered old blanket, or stuffed in a ragged pack of some sort.

Looking out into all these people, he caught their sidelong glances at him and the expressions behind those brief moments of eye contact varied greatly. The survivors from Dunn revered him some sort of war hero. He and his team had rescued them after a hard-fought battle, and the appreciation showed. Then there were those from Fuquay-Varina, who Lee had simply stumble across, and their perceptions of him were much less generous.

He resented them, though he tried hard not to let it bother him.

He resented their looks and their whispers.

He resented their simplistic worldview.

But most of all, he resented being judged. He resented that every action was worthy of intense scrutiny, and that some Monday-morning quarterback would always have an astounding hindsight solution for him, that somehow, he should have already known. "Weren't you trained for this?" they would ask him. And he would bite his tongue and try not to think about kicking their teeth in.

This was the war he was destined to fight.

A war where victory would be measured in how many he could save, regardless of the opinions. And though he may be weak in patience and politics, he was gifted in fighting and winning. And if winning meant putting up with some assholes who thought they knew how shit should be run, then so be it. That was just a pill he would have to swallow.

He finished what was left in the water bottle and dropped it in the front seat so he could refill later. His thoughts turned back to the stranger from Virginia that somehow knew him. From across the parking lot he saw Harper and Jim standing together near the pharmacy entrance and eyeing him with open curiosity. He waved them over.

"What's going on?" Harper asked as he approached.

Lee adjusted his rifle sling so it was more comfortable across his shoulders. "I don't know. Some guy from Virginia is asking for me. By name, apparently. I don't know the guy, though." He craned his neck to survey all around him. "Where's LaRouche?"

Jim threw a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of Front Street. "He and Jake are helping secure the doors and windows on the outside."

"Alright." Lee rubbed some warmth back into his bearded face. "Jim, go get LaRouche and let him know we're leaving in five. Jake can stay. Harper, relay to Wilson and his team that we'll be leaving. I want them to stay here and help for the time being. I'll radio them if I need them back over at Camp Ryder. I'm going to, uh..." Lee trailed off. "I'll be ready in a minute."

Harper and Jim nodded discreetly.

Lee turned away from them and headed into the crowd.

He found Julia making her way down the line of refugees, checking everyone for illness before they let them cram together in tight spaces and get the whole outpost sick. Cold, flu, and the ensuing pneumonia, promised to be a problem for them this year. People simply couldn't sanitize like they used to. There was now a full generation of people who had been addicted to sanitizing gels and wipes whose immune systems were not quite as robust as they should be for this type of lifestyle.

Julia was easy to spot by her tawny hair, pulled back into some practical arrangement Lee didn't know the name of. It was darkened now with sweat and oil and smoke from three days in the field, and it was plastered back to her skull because she constantly worried at it with her dirty hands.

He fell in step behind her as she worked her way through the thirty or so refugees.

"How are you?" she asked one of them, an older woman.

"I'm fine, just tired."

"Any persistent cough, runny nose, or soreness in your throat?"

"No."

"Any aches or chills?"

"No."

"Can you breathe through your nose?"

The woman demonstrated.

Julia held up a penlight. "Open your mouth and say 'ah.'"

"Aaahhh."

Julia shined her light around, decided everything was good except for a case of bad breath—n so uncommon nowadays—and smiled. "Thank you."

Lee nodded to the older woman as they passed to the next person. "We're heading out in five minutes. Wilson and his team are staying. You staying here or coming with us?"

She looked at him and Lee didn't see any of the reproach from earlier.

She nodded quickly. "I'll be ready to go in just a few. I'm finishing up now."

"Okay." Lee turned partially away, but felt the need to reiterate the time-frame. "Five minutes."

Her eyebrows went up slightly. "Yup. I'll be ready, Captain."

He decided not to say anything else.

In four minutes they were rolling. A thin layer of clouds ranged across the horizon, showing a glimmer of sterling in the thickest parts, shot through with ribbons of bright sunlight like gold and silver smelted together.

The Humvee with the dozer attachment growled out of the parking lot, bristling with weapons. It exited the outpost and left the town and its new residents behind them. Harper drove, with Lee in the driver's seat. Jim and Julia sat in the back, and LaRouche was crammed in the middle on the .50 caliber M2 machine gun mounted on top.

Lee turned to look out the driver's side of the vehicle and found LaRouche's dirty boots once again resting atop the radio console—a natural footrest for whoever was sitting in the turret. Lee elbowed them off.

"Keep your fucking feet off the radio, LaRouche," Lee griped for the umpteenth time.

"My bad," LaRouche mumbled from up top.

All the windows were down, letting the cold wind blow through the vehicle so that they could rest their weapons in the window frames, pointing out into a world that had grown dangerous and alien.

"Well, I'm very pleased with Outpost Lillington," Father Jim offered up brightly. "It seems like a very secure location."

Lee looked out the passenger side window at the passing terrain. He nodded slowly, and remained introspective.

"Should lock down this section of highway," Jim continued. "Extend the patrols out a bit...make movement a little safer..." He seemed to realize that no one else was in the mood for conversation and let his words trail off. He turned back to his own window.

Lee's mind poked cautiously at the questions that nagged him, like you might poke a stick into a dark hole in the forest floor, unsure of what lay inside. Who was the man from Virginia, and what did he want? What news did he bring? Lee wanted to believe that it could be good news, but felt in his gut that it was not. Good news didn't come with a single man, sick and exhausted from miles on the road.

Underneath all of that, a question remained that seemed so inconspicuous in its simplicity but Lee felt was just the tip of something vast and unseen, and it whispered foul omens:

Where had all the females gone?

They passed over the Cape Fear River. The water looked cold and dark, the same color as the woods that surrounded it. The weather had only been this cold for the past week, and a few trees along

the banks still clung stubbornly to their brown and wilted leaves, but for the most part the forests were bare. Just a tangle of empty limbs and gray bark, splashes of emerald here and there where a lonesome evergreen stood.

Clattering over the four-lane bridge, Lee wondered when the last time it was that the bridge had been refurbished. Infrastructure was just another one of the many concerns constantly vying for attention in the back of his mind. Survivors were integral to the success of his mission. He had to rely on them to assist in rebuilding.

But there were so few.

Far fewer than he had ever imagined.

Engineers were at the top of his list: civil engineers, electrical engineers, mechanical engineers...the list went on. At this point, he'd take any kind of engineer he could get his hands on. But it seemed that they were lucky to find survivors at all, let alone someone with a specific skill-set.

"Heads up," Jim said suddenly from behind him.

Lee's eyes snapped into focus and he looked out the passenger side of the vehicle. The grade of the earth coming off the road sloped down into a deep ravine that cut towards the Cape Fear River and ran parallel to the roadway. On the other side of that ravine, the ground rose up in a steep incline and was there, about midway up the face of that hill that Lee could see what had drawn Jim's attention.

"Movement! Right side!" Lee called.

"I don't think..." Jim pushed his glasses up on his face and squinted to see farther.

There were four of them in all. Two large ones and two small. They were strange and bulky in their appearance, and it took a moment for Lee to realize that all of them were heaped with heavy coats and blankets to keep them warm.

LaRouche swiveled in the turret, bringing the fifty about.

Jim slapped at LaRouche's legs. "Don't shoot! I don't think they're infected!"

"Relax!" LaRouche dodged his legs about. "I'm not gonna waste 'em..."

"Stop here!" Jim spoke with urgency.

Harper looked back incredulously. "I'm not stopping here..."

The sound of Jim's door unlatching.

"Close your fucking door!" Harper barked at him.

"Hey!" Jim leaned out the window, his door still hanging partially open. "Hello!"

Lee reached across and slapped Harper's shoulder. "Stop before he falls out..."

The Humvee screeched to a halt, causing everyone inside to lurch forward and LaRouche to slide to the top of the roof, trying to gain his balance again.

"It's okay!" Jim yelled again.

The figures were now almost to the top of the hill. One turned and Lee could see the face peering at them with dark, suspicious eyes, its jawline shadowed by the scraggly beginnings of a beard. It was a younger man with a tan complexion, possibly Hispanic, but difficult to tell from this distance. The unknown man turned back around and pushed the others ahead of him, what appeared to be a dark-haired woman and two small children.

"What are you doing, Jim?" Lee said with a note of caution.

From behind him, Lee heard the loud creak of the dry, rusted door hinges as the ex-priest flung his door open. Lee twisted in his seat and tried to reach through to the back and grab a fistful of his jacket, but Jim was already out the door.

"Hey!" Lee growled. "Get the fuck back in here!"

Father Jim completely ignored Lee, even left his rifle in his seat and stood outside the Humvee with both arms raised above his head. "It's okay! We're here to help! You don't have to be afraid! We won't hurt you!"

They continued to clamber up the steep embankment.

—Lee kicked his door open with force and slid out of his seat, bringing his rifle to his shoulder. He resisted the urge to simply grab the other man and stuff him back in the Humvee. Warning klaxons were blaring in his head and he could feel heat rising up the back of his neck. He reached out and put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "What are you doing? Leave it..."

Jim shrugged the hand off and continued waving his arms. His voice took on a desperate quality. "We're here to help you! It's okay! You don't have to be afraid!"

The four strangers reached the top of the hillock and dipped over to the other side, the man pushing the woman and the two children over before disappearing himself. Just before vanishing on the other side, he turned and looked at them again, and this time his eyes locked onto Lee. He appeared to hesitate for the briefest of moments, but then ducked down over the top of the hill.

Jim stood in the street with his hands still raised.

The look on his face was one of complete confusion.

The breath came out of him in a long blast of steam.

Finally he let his arms drop to his sides.

"What the heck?" he said, indignantly.

He turned back around and found the rest of his squad looking at him. From the driver's seat of the Humvee, Harper shook his head just slightly and then studiously avoided eye contact. Julia held his gaze a bit longer, showing a measure of concern. Lee looked at him severely and grabbed his shoulder again, this time more firmly.

"What the hell was that?" Lee demanded.

Jim looked over his shoulder towards the hill, but could see nothing. "I dunno...I just thought that...I thought..."

"Come on." Lee's pulled him towards the Humvee again. "Let's go."

"I thought they needed help."

"They probably did. But we're an armed vehicle—would you have stopped?"

"No," Jim mumbled.

LaRouche sighed and let the barrel of the fifty rise up and point at the tops of the trees. He leaned over and spat. "Maybe I shouldn't have pointed the ma-deuce at 'em."

Lee looked back into the woods. Faintly, he thought he could hear them crashing through the forest, just barely audible above the grumbling Humvee at idle. He ushered Jim back into the Humvee, the ex-priest seeming deflated and limp. He closed the door and then got back into the front passenger's seat and pointed on down the road.

"Let's keep moving."

There was a moment of silence, thick and uncomfortable.

Then Harper put the vehicle in gear and they continued on.

From the back seat, barely audible over the sound of the engine and the wind rushing by the open windows, Father Jim murmured, "I'm sorry. I thought we could help."

They arrived at Camp Ryder before noon.

In the span of a few months, Camp Ryder had undergone some extreme changes. Some of the ramshackle huts were gone, and "The Square" had graduated from an empty area with a fire pit in the center, to a noisy open-air market. Those that scavenged would set up spots inside The Square to barter items that they had found—anything from dental floss to batteries and canned food. Whatever everything Lee and his group gathered in their scavenging operations went into a pool to be distributed.

evenly through the group, scavenging had quickly become a livelihood for those with the impetus to go outside the gates.

The influx of Lee's rifles and ammunition had played a large role in making scavenging possible. Since accessing Bunker #4 three months ago, Lee had emptied it in the course of several trips to and from. The outposts they had set up at several key locations in the area ran patrols along the major roads, keeping them mostly clear of raiders and their roadblocks. He had distributed a rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition to every member of the community that wanted one, provided they were over the age of sixteen. This was a defensive measure. If the community came under attack from infected hordes, or from a human threat, Lee wanted each and every adult man and woman to be able to join the fight.

While the area was safer now than it had been after the initial collapse, it was still dangerous and they'd taken some losses. Infected were a constant threat, and the patrolling of the roads did very little to limit them. The previous week, two scavengers had been killed before they could make it back to their vehicles and flee. The infected had them almost completely surrounded by the time the scavengers knew what was happening.

Last month alone they'd lost five.

The month before that, seven.

But even with the constant danger, the scavengers had successfully created a thriving trade economy right there in the heart of Camp Ryder. They traded with themselves frequently, but people came in from the other communities that had been incorporated into the collection of towns and neighborhoods that was being called the "Camp Ryder Hub", and every so often they got visitors from the two groups of survivors that had decided to remain independent of Camp Ryder: Newton Grove to the southeast and Broadway to the west.

Speak of the devil... Lee thought as he noticed the red Isuzu Rodeo pulled in just past the gate.

The driver would be Kip Greene, from Broadway. He came to Camp Ryder for two reasons: to talk with Bus and to trade with the scavengers. The Broadway survivors were almost all farming families, and they had continued to tend their crops as best they could after the collapse. They used what they had to spare of their harvest to trade at The Square.

Harper pulled the Humvee up to the gate, where a group of three scavengers were preparing to leave and receiving white armbands from the sentries posted there. Every day had a random assigned color. An appropriately-colored strip of cloth would be given to the scavengers as they left so they could quickly identify themselves as friends when they approached the gate later.

The three scavengers hustled out of the way as the sentry pulled the gate open for the Humvee and they rolled into camp. Harper pulled their Humvee to the right and parked it out of the way. Behind them, Lee could hear the chain link fence rolling shut. Recently reinforced with scrap metal and hanging heavy on its hinges, it rattled and clanked noisily as it closed.

Lee eased his way out of his seat and took a moment to work some blood back into his stiff ankle. Feeling a little more limber, he walked to the rear of the vehicle and hauled his heavy pack onto one shoulder. Standing up, the hollow feeling of hunger seeped into his midsection and his stomach growled noisily. He glanced across the dusty parking area and could see Angela standing there with Sam by her side. They both waved to him when he looked in their direction.

Inwardly, he could not shake how strange this made him feel, still the imposter living another man's life. But outwardly he smiled, waved back, and made his way over to them.

Angela looked at him brightly, her pale skin flushed at the nose and cheeks against the chilling wind. She pulled her jacket closer around her. "Good to see you back, Lee."

She reached one hand out, and Lee took it. Not a handshake, but a quick and heartfelt squeeze. What there was between them was a mystery to Lee, but he had long ago decided to go with it, because

despite his reservations, it was something real. It was something he could come back to. Something ground him so that his entire existence was not an unending slough of death and conflict.

"Where's Abby?" Lee asked.

"She's learning how to sew with some of the other kids."

Abby hadn't warmed up to him, and didn't seem like she was going to.

"Did you hear about the guy that's asking for you?" Sam broke in, peering up at Lee with one eye squinted against the sun.

"Yeah, I heard," Lee said and glanced at Angela, who returned a quizzical look. To Sam again Lee said, "Did you learn anything new the last few days?"

"Mr. Keith taught me how to shoot his .22 rifle," Sam nodded with a smile. "We went out and got a couple rabbits. He said I was a natural. Showed me how to skin them and cook them and everything."

"Wow." Lee's eyes went up. "He took you outside the fence?"

"Is that okay? We didn't go very far."

"Yeah." He pictured the old man and Sam running through a field with wild-eyed and shi covered crazies sprinting after them, screeching and howling. Then he saw blood and entrails smeared across the grassy earth. He swallowed. "I'm sure Mr. Keith was smart about it."

Angela spoke up. "Where're you off to now?"

Lee pointed a thumb towards the Camp Ryder building. "I gotta get up with Bus and figure out what's going on with this guy from Virginia. You hear anything about it?"

She shook her head. "Last I heard he was in the medical trailer, passed out. He was in pretty bad shape."

"How so?"

"Jenny mentioned dehydration, dysentery, malnutrition..."

"He must've been on the road for weeks."

"Yeah." Angela nodded.

Lee craned his neck towards the medical trailer. "I should probably see what's going on with him."

"Of course. See you at dinner?"

"Yeah," Lee said, slightly distracted. "I'll be there."

Harper met with him as he made his way towards the Camp Ryder building.

Ahead of them, people gathered at the entrance to the medical trailer to peer in curiously at the man from Virginia. While the novelty of newcomers had faded somewhat as contact was made with more and more survivors, this particular newcomer had caused a stir. A man that showed up out of the blue and asked for Captain Harden by name was an immediate subject of interest, if not downright suspicion.

Lee and Harper stopped there in front of the medical trailer, and the passersby watched though they believed there would be some great reunion between Lee and the stranger. Inside the trailer, a nearly shapeless form of skin and bones lay crumpled like a discarded piece of paper upon one of the cots, a white bed sheet draped over it like a body in a morgue.

Lee could smell the man from outside the trailer. Most of the people managed to bathe regularly now, but they all still smelled of hard work and body odor, Lee probably being the most offending of them since he'd been in the field for the past few days. That Lee could smell the stranger over his own stink was a feat in and of itself.

"You recognize him?" Harper asked.

Lee shook his head. "Don't know him."

They didn't linger. The man was clearly passed out from exhaustion, and they could not expect

to have a lucid conversation with him until he was rested.

—They continued on to the Camp Ryder building.

A short series of cement steps led up to a pair of steel double-doors kept closed to block out the cold air. Pushing them open, the pair was immediately inundated with the overwhelming smell of the place, and the noisy clamor from inside. The building had once been a service bay for Ryder trucks and the smell of oils and car parts was forever steeped into the concrete floors and walls, however it was now home to several families and Marie's kitchen. There was always a slight haze of smoke in the place, and it bore with it the heavy scents of people and cooking food.

Immediately upon entering the building, a metal staircase to their right rose up to a second level that overlooked the floor below with a series of metal catwalks that led to a roof access point, a few utility closets, and what used to serve as a foreman's office—a twelve by twenty foot room that housed a desk, a filing cabinet, a few folding chairs, and a large corkboard with a map of North Carolina pinned to it.

In the office they found Bus and Kip Greene standing in front of the map. Bus wore the same olive green jacket as Lee and Harper—actually a Gore-Tex parka—and a pair of jeans with the beginning of holes in the knees, twice patched and twice ripped. Stress had drawn some of his size from him, but he was still an imposing figure, especially next to Kip Greene, who stood all of 5'8", with wiry arms and a thin neck.

"Captain...Harper..." Bus greeted them as they walked in.

Lee clasped hands with him. "Good to see you, Bus."

"How was Lillington?" Bus ventured cautiously.

Lee dropped his pack to the floor. "Nothing worse than usual."

"Glad everyone came out alright." Bus nodded.

Lee turned his attention to the man from Broadway. "Kip...how are ya?"

"Decent. You?" Kip nodded, his hands planted deep in the pockets of his tattered old Dickies coveralls.

"Good. But we could still use some help." Lee looked pointedly at him.

Kip smiled grimly. "Funny enough, that's what I came to talk about."

"Oh?" Lee perked up a bit. He took a seat at the edge of the desk. "I sense there's a caveat."

Kip nodded.

Bus folded his arms across his chest. "I've been trying to explain to Kip that we need to use Broadway as a launch point for Sanford..."

"My people aren't interested in being a base for you guys," Kip said, steadily.

"It's not just about us, you know." Lee pointed to the map. "You guys have been catching all the shit leaking out of Sanford since this started. You're doing an admirable job, but if you let us go in and clean house, you'll be able to focus more on your farming, and less on watching your back."

Kip shook his head. "Not an option at this point."

Lee let his hands drop to his lap. "Okay. Why don't you explain what you want with us, then?"

Kip looked up at Lee from underneath his eyebrows. "We've been taking a lot of heat from Sanford. More and more lately, in fact. I'm not sure why, but they're coming out of that place in droves. I don't know, maybe they're running out of food in there. They all look pretty lean." He adjusted the brim of his cap. "Anyway, we've been getting them as they try to go down 421, but..."

Lee waited.

Kip seemed a little abashed. "But we're running out of ammunition."

Lee folded his hands. "Ah."

"That's why I'm here. To set up a trade."

"And what are we trading?"

"Food for ammunition. We've got corn, wheat, peanuts and tobacco. We'll trade any of them, in any combination, as long as the deal is fair."

Silence blanketed the room.

Lee was the first one to speak. "Kip, you mind if I talk with Bus and Harper for a moment?"

Kip shook his head. He stepped out and closed the door behind him as the three men from Camp Ryder gathered in close so they could speak in hushed tones.

Lee spoke first. "I think this is a good opportunity to build up some goodwill by making a generous trade with them. Keep in mind, they'll probably need rifles as well, since most of what we can give them is 5.56mm and I doubt they have many rifles that are chambered for that."

"We could play hardball," Bus suggested. "If they need the ammo bad enough we might be able to break him down and let us use Broadway to get into Sanford."

Harper made an ugly face. "I don't know if playing hardball is a good idea. That might just piss them off, and then Broadway is out as a source of food *and* as a base."

Bus rubbed his eyebrows. "I just want to avoid a repeat of Smithfield. I sure as hell don't want you guys camping in the woods outside of Sanford while you clear it. We need them."

Lee spread his palms. "Ammunition is a finite resource. We can have the best of both worlds. Let's make a small but generous deal with him now so he's forced to come back soon. Then we can play hardball. If we have some goodwill built up with him and his group, we're less likely to scare him off when we do. Plus we'll get a little fresh food out of it."

"We need the wheat," Harper nodded. "Cornmeal would be good, too."

"Any value to tobacco?" Bus questioned.

Harper and Lee both shrugged.

"As a trade item, yes," Lee said. "But I wouldn't worry about it for now."

Harper grinned. "Don't tell LaRouche."

Lee stretched his arms. "So what's the offer?"

"You're in charge of guns and ammo," Bus pointed out. "You tell us what we can afford."

Lee considered it for a short moment. "How about we trade five rifles and 600 rounds total? That'll be six mags per rifle. Depending on their level of contact, that could last them one or two weeks."

"That's a good time-frame for us," Harper noted.

"Alright. Everyone agree?"

"Agreed."

"Yup."

Lee headed for the door.

He was about to reach for the handle when he heard shouting and the sound of footsteps pounding rapidly up the metal staircase. Someone cried out in alarm. The steps thundered as they drew closer. He didn't recall grabbing it, but Lee's rifle was suddenly in his hands and addressed toward the door.

The door burst open and a madman with sunken eyes and sallow skin tumbled in. The strange creature's eyes landed on Lee and the captain's finger went to the trigger. The thing reached forward and sunk down to its knees and seemed about to scramble at Lee on all fours.

Lee was about to pull the trigger when it spoke.

"You're Captain Harden!" the man said and clasped a hand over his face. "I found you...I finally found you!"

CHAPTER 3: BAD NEWS

LaRouche hit the top of the stairs, breathing hard, with his old Beretta M9 thrust out before him, aiming it at the back of the stranger's head. His eyes worked quickly between the man kneeling on the ground and Lee, who stood looking shocked. "You okay, Captain?"

Lee's eyes were wide as he stared down at the man. "Yeah, I'm fine." He lowered his rifle so the barrel was not pointing at the man's chest. Gaunt, sickly, emaciated—the dirty look of someone who has been on the road for a long time. "You must be Jacob."

The man clasped his hands together. The fingers were long, almost spider-like. Black dirt encrusted the underside of the ragged fingernails. The skin appeared browned, like leather. Deep-set eyes and a hawkish nose. Wiry, dark hair. The man nodded, clearly expending much effort on maintaining a handle on his emotions and just as clearly on the verge of failing.

"Yes. I'm Jacob. I'm from Virginia." His eyelids closed tight as he fought for control of himself. "You have no idea what I've had to do to get here. I thought...for a while there...I thought I just wasn't going to find you. I thought maybe you were dead." He opened his eyes and they glistened with tears. "Then I found this place and I fell asleep and I thought maybe I'd dreamed the whole thing up, and you weren't really here at all. But here you are!"

Lee glanced up at LaRouche, who had ported his gun. Lee gave him a nod, and the sergeant holstered up. Lee set his own weapon to the side and then knelt down and hefted the slender man up by his feet, grimacing at how horribly light he felt.

"Jesus, there's nothing left to you," Lee exclaimed.

Jacob laughed weakly and let himself be led to one of the folding chairs. Harper and Bus were still standing in a sort of daze, not sure what the hell was going on. For that matter, Lee wasn't sure either. Jacob didn't seem entirely sane, but then again, only God-knew what he'd been through to get there.

"You came all the way here from Virginia?" Harper asked in amazement.

Jacob nodded. "From Petersburg. I've been on the road since..." he looked at a scratched and worn watch that clung to his wrist. He regarded it with some confusion. "Shit. It's busted. When did it break? Damn...I don't know how long I've been on the road. A few weeks, I think. Last time I checked my watch, I'd been on the road for fifteen days, and that was at least a week ago. Maybe two." Jacob looked up and realized he was rambling. "Sorry. I've gotten into the bad habit of speaking to myself. Passes the time. Makes things seem less..." He didn't finish the thought.

Lee took a seat across from the man. "Do you need anything? Food or water?"

"Oh, no. Thank you, Captain. I've just," he swallowed and for a moment seemed to be lost in an unpleasant memory. "I've just been looking for you."

"Yeah." Lee shifted. "I'm sorry...I don't..."

"No. You don't know me." Jacob smiled. "Captain Mitchell sent me here."

Lee jerked like he'd been touched by a lightning bolt. "Captain Mitchell sent you here?"

"Yes."

"Why? What's wrong? Does he need help?"

Jacob's smile grew brittle, and then it shattered and fell away. His eyes looked to the floor, and Lee felt his stomach knot up, reading that expression as clearly as if it were a billboard sign and knowing that something had happened...something bad.

Jacob cleared his throat. "Captain Mitchell is dead."

LaRouche and Harper and Bus stood with incredible stillness, watching Lee and gauging his

response. Lee looked right back at them, caught in some indecisive loop as his brain whittled away those words and tried to carve from them some other meaning, though there was no other meaning to be had.

When he did speak, it was subdued: "He's dead?"

Jacob nodded.

The question burned in Lee's mind, and he spit it out suddenly. "How did he die?"

Jacob avoided eye-contact. "I had to kill him."

Everyone stiffened. Lee felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips, and he glanced at his rifle leaning against the wall. But after a moment of thought, Lee realized what Jacob must have meant.

"Because he was infected."

Jacob nodded again. "I tried to do it quick, I did. But I couldn't use the gun because they were all around us and in the trees and I knew they'd come running. So I used a knife. And he made me promise! He put the knife in my hand and he made me promise! I didn't want to, but I did...I did."

Lee stared. "Jesus Christ..." He rubbed his face rapidly. "So what about the people he rescued? Who's with them now? What about the Coordinators from Delaware and Maryland and West Virginia? Are they helping? I mean, shit...Captain Connors from Maryland should be right there across the water..."

"They're all dead."

There was a sudden humming sound in Lee's ears. "What?" His voice sounded muted, as though he were hearing himself from a different room in a large house.

"They're all dead," Jacob murmured.

Lee stared, his hands planted on his knees and his fingers digging into the fabric of his pants and the flesh underneath. The humming noise rose to a high-pitched ringing sound, and then throbbed in time with his heartbeat. He wanted to speak, and though he wasn't struck speechless, nothing came to mind but curses. He closed his mouth and the words and anger and indignation sat back in his throat and curdled there.

The thin man's eyes watered and grew red. He was on the verge of breaking down. "There's nothing left, Captain. There's nothing left up there. There's nothing left anywhere north of here."

That ringing in his ears, the sound of a teakettle in another room. It seemed to grow louder, to fill the vacuum created by the lack of words being spoken. He could feel his heart beating in his chest, sharp and rapid taps like a snare drum, and he could feel his palms beginning to sweat. But there was a numbness there, like the point of a pin being pressed against a thick callous so that you could feel the pressure, but not the pain.

Lee waited for it in silence, for the moment to become real and for that deep wringing feeling in his gut to come back again. He was familiar with it now, like a frequently visiting, but unwanted guest. But the longer he waited, the more certain he was that it was not going to happen. He felt little more than hollow disappointment.

He leaned forward in his chair until he was sitting on the edge and he steepled his fingertips in front of his face and rested his chin on his protruding thumbs. He closed his eyes and breathed deep through his nose so the air whistled past his fingernails.

He could smell his hands.

Like musty earth and sweat.

"Excuse me," Lee said quietly. "This is a lot to take in right now."

He opened his eyes again and looked at the pathetic form huddled in the chair before him, his skinny limbs like thin branches shoved into pant legs and shirt sleeves, like a scarecrow.

He spoke very slowly, choosing his words. "I think we need to stop and have you explain some things so that we're all on the same page. I understand that Captain Mitchell is dead. I understand that

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