AFTER THE VIRUS

By Scott Morrow Johnson

**CHAPTER 1**

When she ascended from darkness, the world around her was one she no longer recognized. It was not different, necessarily, nor had much seemed to have changed. The mailbox was still there, still made of aluminum and atop a wooden post. To be certain of its existence, she wrapped her arms around it. She kissed the mailbox, not expecting to do so.

She heard a voice from across the street. (The street, too, was unchanged – the black tar, the scattered leaves, even Mr. Petrusky’s Ford pickup truck, covered in dirt in parked in the same spot, as always.) She squinted through the violent sunlight, using her arm as a shield, and saw Tommy Benevides, the neighbor kid from across the street. He looked the same as she remembered, even though two years had passed – in darkness.

“Hey, Suzie! Is that you?” He was waving excitedly, standing outside of his house. His hair was flat on his forehead, slightly parted in the middle, and his bangs hung down over his eyes. He smiled to expose a missing tooth, just like she’d remembered. He was as familiar as the mailbox, only she felt no need to hug, or, God forbid, kiss the little pest.

Suzie waved back and looked up at the blue sky. So blue. A color she hadn’t seen in two years. The brightness hurt her eyes. Everything hurt her eyes, as if she was seeing it all for the first time. Thirteen years old (or was she 14? had a birthday passed without her knowledge while she was lost in the darkness?), Suzie Maxwell came back to the world like a newborn baby.

And yet this world was not new, just somehow different. The sun. The sky. The clouds. The trees and their falling leaves. The houses up and down her street. The smell of Sneezewood in the fall. All of these things, she realized, had not changed. The only thing that had chanced, in two years, was Suzie.

She turned around to look at her house. Tommy called out to her from across the street, asking her a question, but she did not hear. She walked toward the house. It *looked* like hers but did not *feel* like hers. The color (off-green) was the same. So was the house number (5413). The sound of the birds chirping came to her like a dream of the past.

She walked through the yard, up the stairs. Beneath her, an open cellar door. The doorway to darkness. She ignored it and kept moving forward – being *pulled* forward.

The front door, too, was the same, with the lone exception being a sign that read: PROPERTY VOIDED, VIRAL INTRUSTION. The door handle was cold to the touch, as if covered in ice. She could hear Tommy behind her, shouting now, but she could not understand what he was saying. So much time had passed since she’d been spoken to, or had spoken to anyone.

She turned toward the driveway and noticed something else that was different. Her mother’s car was gone. It was never gone, not unless Suzie was in the backseat and her mother was driving to the grocery store or school or the shopping mall. Places Suzie wasn’t even sure existed anymore.

(*Of course they exist; nothing has changed)*

She cupped her hands over a window near the front porch, trying to look inside, but the shades were pulled.

“Hello?” she called out. Her voice was a cloud of dust, unused for too long. She could feel a pain in her chest, some impending doom, but she could not remember why.

“Suzie,” she heard from behind her. She whipped around, startled, to see Tommy Benevides standing behind her. Standing too close. Humans are not allowed to stand that close. Not anymore. Humans got too close; that’s how this all started. Too many people, too darned close to one another.

Without thinking, she reached out and pressed her hands against Tommy’s chest, pushing him away. No, *shoving* him away. He tumbled backward, down three steps and onto the sidewalk below. He lied there, sprawled out and crying, as she stood above him. His sniffling was the only sound on an otherwise silent morning. Even the birds seemed to have gone quiet, as if they were watching the scene all unfold.

Suzie looked at her hands. Horror washed over her. Contaminated hands. How could she? After all this time, how could she let herself do that? How could she… *touch* someone?

Tommy got to his knees. His elbows were bleeding. He looked up at her with venom in his eyes. Suzie reached for the cold door handle. She grabbed it and turned, but nothing happened. She kicked the door. She considered breaking the window. She called out again, “Mom!” Her voice was stronger this time. “It’s me! Let me in!” Kicking. Shouting. Crying. Slamming at the door handle with contaminated hands. “Mom! Mom, please!”

When she finally ran out of steam, she could see movement out of the corner of her eye. Tommy was standing but did not come forward.

“Stop,” he said softly. Suzie looked at him but then turned her anger back toward the door. She kicked it again. Punched it, hurting her hand. She shouted again for her mother to open the door. “Stop!” Tommy yelled. She fell to her knees, heaving in breaths of cool, outdoor air. Air she never thought she’d breathe again. “She won’t answer,” Tommy said calmly. “Nobody will.”

Turning her head to look at him, now feeling a bead of dirty, salty sweat fall from her cheek to her mouth, Suzie asked: “How do you know? You’re just a kid, Tommy. What do you know?”

Tommy swallowed. He stepped forward, putting his hands out, as if to say *I mean no harm.* “They’re all gone,” he said.

“Who?”

He took in a deep breath. She noticed for the first time that he was taller than she remembered. “The adults,” he said. “It wiped them out. Every last one of them.” He nodded toward the door. Suzie looked up, seeing those words staring back at her: VIRAL INTRUSION. “It took them all,” he said.

Suzie dropped her head and closed her eyes. The autumn air no longer tasted sweet. The scent of Sneezewoods faded away, and all she could smell was the dirt and sweat on her upper lip.

“It’s over,” Tommy said, quietly, as if he was talking to himself.

Suzie hung her head and listened to the silence that followed. The fluttering of wings broke through, and when she opened her eyes and looked upward she saw a flock of birds flying through the sun. The sun burned her eyes, and she had to close them for relief. She saw her mother’s face, then it faded away.

“It’s over,” Tommy said, his voice slightly louder but still barely above a whisper.

Suzie stayed like that, with her eyes closed into darkness, waiting for the image of her mother’s face to return.

It never did.

When she opened her eyes again to look at Tommy Benevides, he wasn’t there. He, too, had disappeared.

**CHAPTER 2**

Suzie tried all the houses on the block. Every door was locked. All the handles were freezing cold. That same sign, VIRAL INTRUSION, was plastered across all the doors.

Even Tommy’s door was locked, although she could hear water running inside. (*Running water?!*) She knocked but no one answered. She looked at her hands again. *Contaminated*. She needed water. She needed soap.

“Please,” she said to the closed door. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I pushed you, Tommy. Please, help me.” She waited. The water had stopped running. “I shouldn’t have pushed you like that,” she said. She could hear someone whispering inside. She remembered Tommy had a little sister, about three years young than he was. They were annoying little brats, always shouting and teasing people as they walked past the house. But now they were all she had. “Please,” Suzie said again. She held up her hands and looked at them with disgust. How could she allow herself to *touch someone*? It was the one rule, there at the end. The one thing her mother forbid her to do.

She wiped her hands on the front door of the Benevides house, then turned and walked away.

Suzie kept trying doors, realizing now that the contamination was spreading. She no longer cared. If Tommy was right, if all the adults had been taken by the virus, then she didn’t much care if it took her. Suzie was only 13 years old. Tommy was 9 or 10, his sister three years younger than that. Without adults, they couldn’t possible survive.

Suzie was suddenly hungry. She’d left the shelter only when they’d run out of food. She’d left the underground shelter only when they had run out of food. She remembered that now. Memories started to trickle in: the shelter, the dwindling food, her ailing mother leaving “temporarily” to get more.

She’d tried all the locks on her block and had moved on to the next. She whistled a tune just to hear something other than her own breathing. Something from Taylor Swift. It dawned on her that, if Tommy was right, Taylor Swift might be gone, too. And Megan Rapinoe. And (gulp) Ryan Gosling. She whistled louder, trying to quiet her brain.

Suzie tried another door. This one rattled a bit. The door was locked, but the handle was old – rusty and loose. She kept working it, eventually feeling the lock give way. With a few more wiggles, the handle fell off. She easily kicked the door open.

“Bingo, kiddo,” she whispered. A phrase her dad used to use. Got one hundred percent on a quiz? *Bingo, kiddo*. Helped him with a crossword puzzle? *Bingo, kiddo.* Made an open jump shot? *Bingo, kiddo.* Her father was one of the first to succumb to the virus. That was three, four years ago now. She remembered the day he first got sick, how he’d been in the hospital for a few days before they realized his virus was highly contagious. Her mother handed her the phone shortly thereafter, to say her last goodbyes. Suzie told her dad that she loved him, and that she knew he’d never stop loving her, even after he was gone.

*Bingo, kiddo*, he’d told her. The final words she would ever hear him say.

When she stepped inside the house, she was overcome by a stench so powerful that it nearly dropped her to her knees. A big part of her wanted to retreat, to scramble back to the freedom of the clean air outside, but she pulled the top of her shirt over her face and kept moving forward. A food-waste basket filled with rotten food and maggots greeted her in the kitchen. Behind that, a dead cat. Flies were hovering all around. Suzie heaved but had nothing in her stomach to come up.

She skipped the refrigerator and went straight for the canned food. Three cans of chili and a pack of Ramen noodles were all that was useful. She opened a can of chili, grabbed the rest, then tried the sink. To her relief, the water turned on. She set down the cans, washed her hands without soap, then found a glass to fill with water. She gagged at the smell and gulped the water down. She set down the glass and hurried back out toward the clean air. As she reached the open door, she looked to the couch, where a body lied, motionless. She jumped back, thinking she’d walked in on someone sleeping, but then she saw the decomposed face and the flies. She threw a hand over her mouth, holding back whatever bile wanted to come up from her empty stomach, and ran out into the yard, where she could breathe deeply again.

She started eating the cold chili with her fingers, heading west. At first she did not know where she was going, but then she realized that her feet were leading her toward Emma’s house. Taylor Swift and Ryan Gosling might be gone, but at least she’d have Emma. Her best friend. While the virus may have taken everyone else that mattered, Emma was likely out there somewhere. She was young and healthy. God, how Suzie had missed her.

She walked up 58th, past the market, and couldn’t get over how empty the streets were. The windows of the market were shattered, and she could tell with a quick glance that everything inside had been cleaned out. *By who? When?* Her body shuddered with the thought. The emptiness of everything sent chills through her body, but she kept on. The wind whistled, like one of those old Western movies she watched every once in awhile with her dad. John Wayne was his favorite. As she walked the streets of the ghost town that she called home, she pretended to be John Wayne. She tried to walk like him. She tried to think like him. She *was* John Wayne, carrying a can of chili in each hand instead of pistols.

She crossed 25th, ignoring the DON’T WALK signal for the first time in her young life. She started up the hill toward Emma’s house when she heard a jingling sound in the distance. Very faint, but audible in the silent, thin air. She turned but saw nothing. Just vacated houses and unused streets.

Suzie thought of the first time that her parents let her stay home alone, when she was only eight years old and her parents were going next door for an adult New Years Eve party. Suzie was supposed to be asleep but sat in the quiet darkness of her bedroom and listened to the silence. She heard every creak of the framing as the wind blew, every squeak from inside. After a few minutes of listening so closely, she began to hear sounds that weren’t there; silence will do that.

As she turned to head back up toward Emma’s house, she felt that same sensation: that the silence made her imagine sounds.

Still eating the chili out of the can, Suzie walked another half-block and heard the jingling sound again. She tried to ignore it.

*(It’s just in your head. Or is it?)*

The sound came again, closer this time, and she whirled around quickly. She thought she saw someone, or some*thing*, duck behind a tree about a block away.

She finished off her chili and held the can, her only weapon. She realized that it was entirely possible that some cats and dogs were still walking the streets. To test this theory, Suzie rolled the can down the center of the street, downhill, toward the tree. The can kept rolling, down past the tree, the sound echoing through the autumn air, until it settled against a curb. The silence returned.

Suzie’s steps were measured and slower as she continued on up the hill. Emma’s house was two blocks away. She prepared herself for what she might find.

Without breaking stride, Suzie turned her head. She hadn’t heard anything; she’d more *felt* it. This time, there was no doubt. Not one, but two humans – definitely *humans*, both taller than the Benevides kids – scurried off and hid behind a short wall.

She was definitely being followed. There was no doubt about it.

**CHAPTER 3**

On the day that her father died, Suzie was already in self-quarantine. She hadn’t left her house in days, and her mother had been good about being among the first to hit the grocery store to stock up on canned goods. By the time the federal government caught on that this was more than just a passing scare, Suzie’s mom had already cleared out the cellar and installed a sealed door just beneath the front stairs.

Shortly thereafter, the president ordered all families into their homes. Anyone found on the street was shot on sight. The virus was declared so deadly that hospitals were shut down, as doctors refused to go to work for fear of contracting the deadly contamination. The death tolls rose from hundreds, to thousands, to tens of thousands. Within weeks, the news channels started charting in it percentages: 2 percent of the world’s population, then 11 percent, then 26 percent. No one could trace the source of the virus. Conspiracy theories flooded the internet. It was alien invasion. Then chemical welfare. A government plot. Population control. Except the deaths were coming on a worldwide basis, with no consistent pattern to who fell ill.

The only constant, and no health expert cold figure out why, was that children were immune.

Suzie’s mother started showing symptoms two weeks into their self-quarantine in the shelter under their house. The water supply and vitamin C were becoming scarce, and by the time the government began conducting house-by-house sweeps, marking those contaminated by the virus, Suzie’s mother was barely able to get out of bed.

But, somehow, she pulled through. While the death counts outside surpassed 50 percent of the world’s population, Suzie’s mother held on. The symptoms were still there, but the progression slowed.

Every night, Suzie lied down next to her mother and prayed that they would have another day. Her mother would move away from her, would chastise her for exposing herself. Suzie would try to move closer. But she was not allowed to touch. She would lie a few inches away, praying. Just one more day. For two years, her prayers were answered. Suzie had been a skeptic before; eventually she came to believe again in the power of prayer.

On a day when they were down to their final two bottles of water, with only a few cans of soup and pinto beans left on the bottom shelf of their cellar, Suzie dabbed a moist cloth on her mother’s forehead. The unrelenting fever had broken again; Suzie came to realize it would never fully dissipate.

“Hon, please,” Suzie’s mother said, her once-strong voice, the voice of a well-respected attorney, now barely a whisper. “Don’t touch. Please, keep yourself safe. And no more water. Do not waste any more water on those washcloths. Not a single drop.”

“But you’re dying,” Suzie had said.

Her mother smiled with her eyes; her mouth was too dry and sick to manage one.

“We’re all dying,” her mother whispered. She nodded. “We’re all dying. From the moment we are born.”

Suzie had never looked at life that way. She’d never wanted to.

“Maybe we’re dying, Mom,” she said, resisting the urge to kiss her mom on the forehead. “But we’re not dead.”

*Bingo, kiddo*.

When the water supply ran out, and the last of the food was devoured, Suzie’s mom found the strength to get out of bed and search for more. Suzie begged her not to go.

“You’re dying,” Suzie pleaded.

Her mom winked. “But not dead,” she said.

“Mom, *please*!”

Suzie’s mother wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and slipped her feet into sandals. She looked Suzie in the eye.

“One day, you’ll understand, Suzie Q,” she said. “You become a mother, and that’s all you are. That’s your one responsibility. You protect your kids. Or you die trying.”

That was the last Suzie ever saw of her mother.

Three days later, she gave up hope. She woke up tired, hungry and with little memory of where she was or how she got there. She looked at the empty shelves, channeled the strength that was left inside of her, and went out into the light.

She escaped the darkness and vowed never to go back.

**CHAPTER 4**

Suzie didn’t know who they were, or what they wanted, but she did know for certain that she couldn’t go straight to Emma’s house. That was no longer an option, not unless she wanted her best friend to be in danger, too.

Suzie turned a corner and sprinted a ways, ducking between two houses into the backyard of people whose lives she never knew. She watched carefully as she ducked down beneath the rusty springs of an abandoned trampoline. The gravity of the situation fell upon her at that moment. For most of her thirteen years on earth, she could depend on her parents to protect her. Even after he father died, her mom was always there.

Now, there was no one.

She tried not to breathe, knowing that any sound would alert her predators to her location. She swallowed and could hear the dryness in her mouth. That one glass of water hadn’t been enough. If only her mother had realized that water had been so close, had been upstairs, in the house above, right there in the kitchen sink. Suzie looked across the yard of this stranger’s house and saw a hose spigot. She licked her dry lips. She waited until the predators passed.

After a minute or two, she could hear them coming, whispering as they turned onto the street where she hid. She quietly lied on her stomach and watched between blades of unmowed grass.

They came into view, two boys, not much older than Suzie. One of them wore a brown, fur bear hat with long ears that extended all the way to the kid’s waist. He was carrying a small chain, some kind of bike chain. The other kid was shorter, kind of chubby, with greasy hair and, in his hand, he carried a baseball bat. They crept along the sidewalk, in view, then out of view, until Suzie could no longer hear their quiet steps and the soft jingling of the bike chain.

And still she waited. She watched a bunny silently hop across the yard. A few minutes later, two more. One of them looked at Suzie, holding her gaze for a full minute. As if it were saying: *What’s a HUMAN doing here? In OUR world?* But then it hopped away.

Suzie looked up at the back of a house she did not recognize. She was only a few blocks from her home, and yet there had been so much distance between her family and whoever owned this house. Such was life in the city, before the darkness. You barely knew your neighbors; there were too many to possibly know.

Now, the were all gone. All but the children.

It dawned on Suzie that there were still so many questions. Did *every* child survive? Did some of them die without food? Without water? Without shelter?

Without love?

Suzie thought about her mother again, trying to picture her face. Most of her memories from the shelter had melted away. God’s way of protecting use from the past. If there even was a God. She was having a hard time believing anymore. On the day her dad first got sick, she started praying. She prayed every night until the day he died. Then she gave up.

Down in that shelter, Suzie decided to try it again. She prayed for her mother. Same result. *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice …*

No God, no Dad, no Mom. Suzie felt like she didn’t have anyone anymore. There was nobody she could count on. She wondered if John Wayne had anybody.

That made her think of Emma again. She’d find her, no matter what it took.

Slowly, carefully, Suzie crawled out from under the trampoline and made her way, still crouched over like a soldier trying to avoid enemy fire. Every leaf that crunched under her feet sounded like gunshots in the still peacefulness. The cacophony of her breathing pounded like a parade in her head. At one point, she looked to her left and saw a mound of fur. She froze, thinking it was a sleeping dog, but then she saw the flies. She covered her face.

When she finally made it to the spigot, she was surprised by the volume of the squeak it made when she turned the rusty handle. Nothing came out at first, and Suzie could feel her heart sink. She cranked more, the sound shouting into the void, until a few trickles of water came out. Parched, she wrapped her lips around the spigot. More contamination, she thought, but she drank anyway. The cold water felt like life breathing back into her.

And then – BAM! – the water gushed out with incredible pressure. Suzie choked and fell backward as water flowed out all around her. She sat up in the puddle and sipped, feeling incredible relief. She lapped at the water like a dog. With every sip, Suzie could feel bursts of energy building inside of her. She wondered if this was the same feeling that coffee gave her father in the morning.

Suzie took as much water as she could. Most of it ran off her cheeks and chin and into the mud puddle beneath her.

She paused, put her hands into the water, and cleaned them thoroughly. Then she continued drinking. She remembered a time when her parents had taken her to the ocean and had let her play in the waves. Her father had laughed when she frolicking in the water, the sun baking her face as she took saltwater into her nose and mouth, spitting it out and giggling before she jumped into her mother’s arms.

WHAP!

Another loud sound, only this time it came with searing pain down her spine. She fell into the mud puddle, and someone shut off the spigot. Panic overcame her, but when Suzie tried to stand and run, a foot landed on her backside, sending her back to the earth, face first. She took in another mouthful of water, only this time it tasted like mud.

**CHAPTER 5**

She could see two shadows. The pain in her back throbbed, like she’d been hit with a lead pipe. She’d never been hit that hard before, not ever.

“Stupid girl!” a voice shouted. A teen-age voice. She turned her head and was not surprised to see the chunky kid with the baseball bat standing over her. He was chewing gum and blew a large, pink bubble that snapped in his face. Next to him, the taller kid with the bear hat clapped ungloved hands together. He wasn’t holding the bike chain anymore.

“What are you – a moron?” the taller kid said. He used his boot to prop up her hip and push her onto her back. He leaned over, right in front of her face, and pointed to the dripping spigot. “Water ain’t gonna flow forever, morongirl!” he said. He had eyes the color of watermelon skin and a tongue like the fruit inside. He spit when he talked, so Suzie closed her eyes and covered her face.

“Please,” she said. “Don’t touch me. Whatever you do, don’t *touch* me!”

The chubby kid threw the bat on his shoulder and laughed.

‘C’mon, kid. Don’t be such a baby,” he said. “That virus, it’s the *least* of our problems.”

(*That was the river/This is the sea*)

The taller kid sneered and stood straight. “Unless you’re seventy-five years old, right?” he said. Both the boys laughed. He looked at Suzie with those watermelon eyes. “You’re not seventy-five, are ya, morongirl?”

Suzie knew a rhetorical question when she heard one, but she answered anyway.

“I’m thirteen,” she said.

The two guys looked at each other.

“Hmph,” the taller one said. “Woulda guessed eleven. Actually, you’ve got the boobs of a 10-year-old. A 10-year-old *boy*!”

He reached out for her, laughing, as if he was going to grab her chest. He was making this face where his lips were puckered up, and he was making a smooching sound. Suzie found her inner John Wayne and kicked him right in the groin.

“I hope you get virus of the balls!” she shouted.

The taller kid fell like a tree, while the other boy stifled a laugh.

“Dang,” the chubby kid said. “She kicks like a *seventeen*-year-old boy.”

“Screw you, Avis,” the taller one said, struggling for breath as he writhed around in the dirt.

The chubby kid, Avis, pulled the bat from his shoulder and gripped it, standing over Suzie. She pulled the hair from her face and waited for the blow.

“Don’t do it, Avis,” the taller kid said, standing up. He was still wincing in pain. “She’s strong, and she’s got spunk.” He nodded. “We can use her.”

“*Use* me?” Suzie scoffed.

The taller kid wiped off his pants at the groin and reached out to help her up.

“We all need each other,” he said. Suzie avoided his hand and stood on her own. “We’re still all kids, right?” he said, putting his hand on the long ears of his bear hat, pulling it like a rope. “We’re all working toward the same thing.”

Suzie stared at him. She was wet and muddy. She wanted to kick the guy again, but she knew he was right. They’d need each other.

“So,” she said, “what do you need me for? Like, what is it we’re working toward?”

“Survival,” said the chubby kid, nodding.

“Of the human race,” added the taller kid. He smiled for the first time. He was missing one tooth, and the remaining ones were brown or yellow. “I’m Trick,” he said.

“Suzie.” She spit mud out of her teeth and onto the ground. “Call me Morongirl again, and I’ll crush your *other* nut.”

He put his hand out, offering to shake, but she just shook her head.

“Germs,” she said.

Trick laughed. “That’s all over now,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“Well,” he said, “for starters, we’re not adults.” He rubbed his hands together, spit on them and held them in the air. “Germ-free. Good time to be a kid.”

“How can you be sure?” she said.

“I’ve met lots of kids in the past few months. All alive. Seen a lot of bodies, too. All adults; all dead. Do the math. As long as you’re not an adult –“

“But we will be,” Suzie said quickly. “God willing.”

Trick looked her up and down. He grinned out of one side of his mouth. “Okay,” he said. “Do what you gotta do. Suit yourself.” He looked at the spigot, then back at Suzie, holding up one finger. “Rule No. 1,” he said. “Don’t waste water. Nobody knows why it’s still flowing, how long we’ll have it, or how to get it back if it’s gone.”

Suzie nodded. “My bad,” she said.

“Actually,” Trick said, rubbing his face, “that’s Rule No. 2.”

“What’s Rule No. 1 then?” she asked.

“Stick together. We need each other, remember?”

Trick and Avis led her through the side yard and out into the street. She didn’t know yet why she was following them, or where they were going. Maybe that need for someone else was enough. She thought about telling them about Emma but she decided to hold off for now. Just because she needed them, that didn’t mean she trusted them.

Not yet.

She followed at a safe distance as they led her back to the pathway up the hill. She pretended to be minding her own business but made a point to eves-drop on their muted conversation. She could hear that guy Avis asking why they were keeping her around.

“I told you,” the tall guy, Trick, said under his breath. “She’s strong.”

“She’s a *girl*,” Avis said, condescendingly.

Trick looked at him but kept walking.

“Exactly,” he said.

Avis looked confused. He shrugged his shoulders. The two kids stared at each as they walked.

“She’s a girl,” Trick whispered. “Think about it.”

**CHAPTER 6**

At the top of the hill, Suzie could see out toward the city. The buildings and Space Needle were still there. Part of her was convinced that people were working inside those buildings. It seemed unfathomable that the whole city had shut down.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked as Trick and Avis led her across an alley, out toward where Suzie used to go to elementary school.

“This is base camp,” Trick said. “This is the only place where you know you’re safe.”

“You ever play freeze tag?” Avis asked. She nodded. “Well, up here is like the timeout zone. Nobody, and nothing, can get us.”

They came to the southwestern corner of the school grounds. Trick led them through a few bushes, up a small hill, to a fence.

“What now?” Suzie asked.

Trick smiled. He leaned over, grabbed a corner of the fence, unhitched it from a homemade latch, and lifted.

“Only way in,” he said. “Only way out.”

Avis led, and Suzie followed. She scurried on the dirt, getting past the fence, then stood up in the familiarity of the school playground. Part of her expected Ms. Sondegaard, her fifth-grade teacher, to come out the doors across the way.

What was different about the school were the stacks and stacks of canned goods, firewood, soda, packaged sweets, jugs of water and supplies like batteries, flashlights, first-aid kits and coats. A handful of kids, all boys, filled the yard, along with a few tents and folding chairs.

“This,” Trick said, waving his arms and bowing theatrically, “is home base.”

“I’m friggin’ starving!” Avis shouted, dropping his bat on the pavement and running toward the assortment of food.

Suzie could feel her stomach growl. She still had the three cans in her pockets but didn’t feel the need to offer them up – yet.

By her count, about 12 kids, ranging in age from about 7 to 17, were milling about. She only saw one other girl, a dark-haired high-schooler who was shooting baskets by herself.

“What is all this?” Suzie asked Trick as they walked slowly across the playground toward the others.

“This is the new society, *our* society. Everyone chips in, and everyone gets food and security in return,” Trick said. “Here, we all work *with* each other, *for* each other. That’s kind of our motto, if you hadn’t noticed: We need each other.”

“I noticed,” Suzie said.

Trick stopped.

“You see, we’re trying to learn from the past. All those adults, they were always working *against* each other. Always in competition. Things like war and murder – *they* created those things.” He waved his arms toward the fence surrounding the playground. “We’re keeping all that out.”

Suzie nodded. “Makes sense,” she said.

“As far as I can tell, there aren’t many of us left. This is pretty much it, from what we’ve found in the city. I don’t know where you came from, but as soon as Avis and I saw you, we’re like, ‘Two more helping hands. Great!’”

He started walking again. Suzie followed.

“Trick,” she said. “How come you wanted me here? I mean, what did you mean when you said I was *useful*?”

He shrugged. “Like I said, you’re strong.” He adjusted his groin and winced. “I still don’t feel right downstairs.”

Suzie stopped. “Yeah,” she said. “Except I heard you say something else. I heard you say something to Avis. You said it was because I was a girl.”

“I said that?”

She nodded.

“Doesn’t hurt,” Trick said, shrugging. “Look around. There’s a lot of growing testosterone here.”

“Sure, but-“

“Put it this way,” he said, turning to look Suzie in the eye. He was tall and skinny, and those watermelon-skin eyes made her nervous. “We’re trying to build something here. Last time, it didn’t go so well. We left the men in charge, and all that led to was war and greed.”

“And class systems. And hatred. And global warming,” she added. “Bickering politicians. War-mongering jerks.”

“Exactly,” Trick said. “And that’s when women were in the mix. The men were in charge, but at least they had women behind them. Imagine what this society would be like *without* girls. You feel me?”

“Yeah,” Suzie said. “I feel you.”

Except she still didn’t trust him. Not all the way. *A woman’s intuition*, her mother used to call it. *Listen to it.*

Suzie could hear it, banging a drum inside her.

“C’mon,” Trick said. “Let me introduce you to the others.”

**CHAPTER 7**

A 5-year-old boy named Griffey brought over two grape Kool-Aids for Trick and Suzie. She took the cup and nodded at the boy, who had a small mouth and a cowlick at the top of his forehead that made his hair stick up. Suzie watched him walk away and was struck by the cruelty of a boy that small having to grow up without parents.

There was a circle of folding chairs but Suzie’s back still hurt from the whack of Avis’s baseball bat, so she preferred to stand. She looked around the playground – about 100 yards long, and maybe 70 wide. *One way in, one way out*, he had said. Had he meant that as a source of comfort? Or as a warning?

Suzie looked over toward the spot where the fence was loose and sipped her Kool-Aid from a plastic cup.

“Suzie, right?” a voice said, startling her. She turned quickly, finding Trick standing next to another guy who looked to be at least 20. The sight of him gave her hope. Were not all the adults gone?

“Yes,” she said. “Suzie.” Instinctively, she started to reach out her hand. It’s what her father had taught her. *Firm grip, kiddo. A John Wayne grip*. For a split second, Suzie fell into another time – in some ways, a simpler time; in others, more complex.

As if struck by electric shock, she pulled her hand back and folded her arms across her chest. “Sorry,” she muttered.

The guy laughed. He had a five-o’clock shadow and perfect brown hair. His dark, friendly eyes and kind smile set her at ease.

“Old habits die hard,” he said. Something her father might say. Suzie had to resist the urge to blurt out all the questions circling in her head: *Are you an adult? How did you survive? Are there more out there?* The guy put his palms out, then held up his hands, like a bank robber held at gunpoint. “Virus-free,” he said. “Promise.” Another question came to her: *How do you know?*

“Suzie, this is Brandon,” Trick said. “Brandon Cruz. He’s, like, the senior member of the group. Brandon here was about to start his senior year at Roosevelt High.”

“Roosevelt *High School*,” Suzie blurted out. “I thought you were …”

“An adult?” Trick offered.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ll turn 18 next month,” Brandon Cruz said. “For whatever that’s worth.”

Suzie remembered when she started playing organized basketball as an 8-year-old, and there was this assistant coach who was at Roosevelt High. All the other girls on her team had a major crush on him. This guy Brandon, he was even more handsome. He was like a model.

“Listen, Suzie,” he said. She couldn’t maintain eye contact. “We’re so glad you’ve found us. We’re in a tough time right now. All hands on deck.”

*Wow*, she thought, *this guy really talks like someone’s dad*.

A kid came over and pulled Brandon away.

“Nice to meet you, Suzie,” he said, smiling before turning away.

Suzie watched him go.

“Is he, like, the leader or something?” she asked, still staring.

Trick laughed. “We don’t have a ‘leader,’” he said, using his index fingers as quote marks. “Another mistake the adults made. Everything they did, they always felt the need to put someone in charge. They preached democracy, but they practiced monarchy.”

“I’m not sure I know what that means,” Suzie said.

“Good,” Trick said. “Let’s keep it that way.” He turned toward the girl who was shooting baskets by herself. She had shiny black, thick hair, pulled up into a bun on her head. She had the kind of body Suzie dreamed of one day having, a thin frame and breasts so perky they looked made by a sculpter.

“That’s Becky,” Trick said, noticing Suzie’s gaze. “Want to meet her?”

“Sure,” Suzie said, shrugging. Becky was the only girl Suzie had seen since coming out of the dark cellar, and while she craved some kind of female connection, she felt intimidated as they approached.

Becky eyed them briefly but didn’t stop shooting.

“Hey,” Trick said. “I’ve got someone you should meet.”

The girl nodded but kept shooting. “Becky,” she said without looking at them.

“I’m Suzie.”

“Nice to meet you.” Becky said only this, but her body language added: *Now, beat it*.

Suzie didn’t know what to do. She stood still for a few seconds, waiting to say *something*, but everything that popped into her head sounded shallow. *I play basketball, too!* Maybe, *I love your hair!* Or even, *Let’s do some girl stuff sometime!*

“Good to meet you, too,” was all Suzie could offer. Becky didn’t say anything to that. She just kept shooting baskets.

As Trick led her away, Suzie turned to look at Becky. She stopped shooting for a brief moment, holding the ball under one arm, and warily watched Suzie go.

“What’s with her?” Suzie asked.

“I’ll explain later.”

Trick showed her how everything was organized. He led her past the stacks of food and explained how it worked: three cans and one sweet, per kid, per day. Suzie listened distractedly, thinking about the cans in her pockets, when Brandon Cruz passed. She tried not to stare. He smiled without saying anything.

Trick explained why the folding chairs were in rows: all decisions were made by the group; if they couldn’t agree, it would come to vote. Votes worked like this: every kid got one vote per year of his/her age. Brandon Cruz got seventeen votes, so did Becky. Trick got sixteen votes, Avis fifteen.

“So you’ll get thirteen,” Trick said. “That’s what you said your age was, right?”

She nodded and folded her arms across her chest, remembering how he’d reacted the first time he heard her age.

“Nobody leaves here along, for any reason,” he said. “That’s Rule No. 1: We stick together. Remember?” She nodded. Trick stopped to look at her. “You seem quiet,” he said.

“It’s just … It’s a lot to take in.”

He pointed to the tents.

“That’s where we sleep,” he said.

“Where do we, um … y’know?”

“Pee and poop?” He pointed toward the wooded area behind the fence. “You’re on your own.”

“And … to wipe?”

Trick drew in a long breath. “Well,” he said, “if you remember, the TP ran out years ago.”

Suzie sighed. She kind of had to go to the bathroom, but she decided she could hold it.

For no reason in particular, she thought of Emma again. And of the Benevides kids.

“So if we have to, y’know, leave …” Suzie said.

“To go where?”

“I don’t know. Just to … get out, I guess.”

Trick turned toward the tents and food and gallons of water.

“And leave all this?” he said. Then he took off his bear hat, reached out, and attempted to put it on Suzie’s head. She recoiled, and a slight scream escaped her.

Trick looked down at the hat, then at Suzie. She’d fallen down. Her knees were to her chest, and her hands were over her head, as if waiting for an explosion. The warm air had turned cold. He reached down, grabbed his hat, and placed it back on his head. He adjusted it, stood straight up, and smiled, staring out toward the fence.

“Five have tried,” he said, sticking his chest out. He looked kind of like a pirate, standing on the mast of a ship. “Three came running back, within a day.”

She looked up at him, her eyes asking the obvious question.

He stepped forward and leaned over her.

“Yeah, it’s a shame about those two,” he said. “Fortunately for us, the graves were shallow. Less digging that way.”

**CHAPTER 8**

“Attention! Attention! May I please have your attention!”

Brandon Cruz was standing atop three wooden boxes. While Trick assured her that the group had no chosen leader, Suzie looked up at Brandon without any doubt that he was in charge.

“Gather around,” he shouted. Twelve of the others obeyed. Curiously, the other girl, Becky, slid behind Brandon and watched from two or three feet away.

“Thank you,” Brandon said. They all fell quiet. Suzie took her eyes off him for only a second, to make sure Trick wasn’t anywhere close.

“Incredible job today, boys. Simply incredible,” Brandon said. “I want to thank you all – for your effort, for your loyalty, and for your dedication to this cause. Remember: we’re all in this together. For all we know, the fate of the human race lies here, in this playground, among this group of amazing kids.”

Suzie took in every word. The way he spoke. The way he commanded attention. She was certain that, if this all worked out the way it was supposed to, Brandon Cruz would one day be president of the United States. Whatever was left of them.

“Let’s bow our heads in remembrance of those we’ve lost,” Brandon said.

As she started to, Suzie caught sight of Becky, who was standing behind Brandon’s pulpit with a scowl on her face. She was staring right at Suzie.

“Dear God, thank you for whatever afterlife you’ve provided to our loved ones,” Brandon said in prayer. “While this world is no longer theirs, we will fulfill our duties as heredities to their groundwork. Amen.”

He cleared his throat. Suzie glanced at Becky again. Becky’s jaw tightened, then she looked at Brandon.

“Let’s not forget, too, the lessons we’ve been blessed by history,” Brandon told the children who at in the folding chairs surrounding him. “Societal norms like greed and envy and resentment are no longer of use to us. They’ve done little to those who came before us; let’s eliminate them from our future as a race.”

“Darned straight!” Avis called out from the pack. He was eating a chocolate-chip cookie and had brown stains on his face. Suzie couldn’t help but to notice the inconsistency of the boy shouting for equality and human connection being the same kid who took a baseball bat to her spine a few hours earlier.

“Let us take lessons, too, from the other species that continue to inhabit the earth,” Brandon continued. “When a wolf makes a kill, he invites his brothers to feast. When a goose flies to warmer weather, he leads his brothers in flight. And when a honeybee builds a hive, he rubs shoulder to shoulder with his peers.”

“Six-foot rule!” Trick called out through cupped hands. “Social distancing applies to honeybees, too!”

Another kid, maybe 12 years old, shouted: “Do bees even *have* shoulders?”

Brandon laughed along with the others.

“Well-constructed arguments, boys,” he said. The laughter died down. “The point being, we are all still in our youth; we are still in guidance of others. Our duty is to learn – from history, from others’ mistakes and from past success. What we, as a group, have decided is that the success of this excursion can only be achieved if we work not *against* each other but *with* each other.

“Who’s with me?”

A cheer came up from the small crowd below. Even Suzie found herself inspired enough to clap. While Trick had done just enough to make Suzie want to run away, Brandon Cruz was enough to make her stay. And not just because of his milk-chocolate eyes.

“Okay, on that note,” Brandon said as the cheering died down. “I need a couple volunteers to make a run tonight. There’s a four-block radius just south of the cemetery that has yet to have been explored. We’ve already hit most of the grocery stores in the area, but I believe there’s a Safeway that hasn’t been crashed.”

“I’ll do it,” came a quick voice from behind Brandon. He turned, to where Becky was standing along, her hand in the air. Brandon broke into a smile.

“Right on,” he said. “Are there any other-“

“And I want *her* to come with me.” Becky was pointing at Suzie, her eyes burning a hole in her forehead.

“It’s settled then!” Brandon called out, and he climbed down from the pulpit.

“Here! Here!” someone shouted. The others clapped. Suzie felt too swept up in the moment to protest. Besides, she didn’t mind the thought of getting to look around a bit. She also wanted – no, *needed* -- a chance to crack that Becky girl. If they were the only two females left on earth, they’d have to find a way to get along.

“Here! Here!” someone shouted, again, and Suzie was swarmed by boys with hands in the air.

She kept her eyes on Brandon Cruz throughout. He’d left the pulpit and stepped straight into the arms of Becky, greeting her with a passionate kiss. By the way she kissed him back, it was apparent to Suzie that it wasn’t the first time.

Suzie felt something turn inside of her. *Envy* *and* *resentment are no longer of use to us*, Brandon had said. Suzie tried to swallow them both down but was too parched to pull it off.

When Brandon’s lips parted and he released Becky from his embrace, her eyes were staring right at Suzie. She smiled at her for the first time.

It was not a friendly gesture.

**CHAPTER 9**

Becky led the way but said nothing. They walked through the cemetery, and Suzie couldn’t help but to think about what Trick had said: *Fortunately for us, the graces were shallow. Less digging that way.* Suzie tried to focus on her feet, rather than to look at the gravestones. Or the mounds of dirt where bodies had hastily been buried by hand.

She had trouble keeping up with Becky’s pace. The sun was setting to the West, and the view was so breathtaking that Becky stopped suddenly to take it in. Suzie almost ran into her back.

Becky stood in silence, the pink sky reflecting on her face. She pulled her dark, thick hair down and let it lay on her shoulders. Her blue eyes shimmered in the fading light. Suzie stood next to her, noticing for the first time what Brandon saw in her.

“Wow,” Suzie said softly, looking back out at the horizon. “It’s stunning, huh?”

“Typical,” Becky said, then she continued on.

Suzie fell in line. She scurried to catch up.

“What?” Suzie asked. “What’s that mean: *typical*?”

“Nothing,” Becky said, without looking back or breaking stride. “Just that whatever is mine, you seem to want it as your own.”

“Excuse me?” Suzie said, gasping for breath as she tried to keep pace.

Becky turned to her suddenly, so suddenly that Suzie ran into her chest. She immediately fell backward, brushing at her face as if contaminated.

“You think I’m blind, is that it?” Becky said. Suzie tried to respond, but Becky continued. “Blind or stupid. Listen, missy, I know what’s going on here. I know you’ve got it bad for Brandon. Believe me, you’re not the first. You won’t be the last.” She poked a finger at Suzie’s chest. *Poked* a *finger*. Blatant touching. Suzie squealed in horror.

“Relax, junior,” Becky said. “The virus won’t be nearly as painful as what I’m going to do to you if you don’t back off my man, you hear?”

“Back off? I haven’t-“

“You heard me, A-Cup. Or, wait, do you even wear a bra? Y’know, I’d take you to Target to get a training bra, but there isn’t any Target anymore. You know that, right? Or did you shop at Walmart? That seems more your style.”

Suzie felt a tear building up in her eye. She clenched her jaw, closed her eyes, and thought of John Wayne. He might have actually liked this world: fewer people, promises of working together, absence of greed and hate. He just wouldn’t have liked Becky. Who could?

“Where is this coming from?” Suzie said, opening her burning eyes. “Why are you-?”

“Stop it with the tears and innocent face, sweetheart,” Becky said. “You know what I’m talking about. I’ve seen the way you look at Brandon. Everyone has. Well, don’t even dream, honey. First of all, he’s way too old for you. Secondly, look at you. I mean, seriously. If garbage men were still on this earth, you’d be in the back of a green truck right now. And thirdly, if you were the last girl on earth .. well, let’s not go there. Because I’m not planning on-“

A howling sound stopped Becky in mid-sentence. Suzie recognized it right away. For most of her life, wildlife had not been part of city life. But as the months approaching the virus approached, the rabbits started appearing out of nowhere – first in backyards, then in packs on the streets – and shortly thereafter the coyotes came. Suzie saw one standing on the sidewalk a few feet from her front yard one day, maybe a week or two before her father got sick. Like some kind of omen. In hindsight, the sudden arrival of wildlife in the city should have been the first hint of humanity’s demise. Animals always sense danger first.

“What was that?” Becky said, frozen in place.

“Coyote.”

“I know *that*, stupid. What I mean is, where is it?”

Suzie looked back toward the elementary school they called home base.

“Sounded pretty far,” she said. “I say we keep moving.”

“Hmph,” Becky said. She seemed to be weighing their options. “Listen,” she said. “Don’t take this the wrong way. I know you don’t like to be touched. And, by the way you keep staring at my boyfriend, it’s quite apparent you’re straight. But …”

“What are you saying?” Suzie asked.

“Well, it’s just that … My older sister, when I got scared as a kid, she used to hold my hand. Weird, I know. Weirder when it’s not your sister. So what I’m really asking is a little … out there.”

“You want to hold my hand,” Suzie said. She did not say it as a question.

“*Want* is a little strong,” Becky said, forcing a smile. “Maybe … *need*?”

“You *need* to hold my hand. After all those horrible things you just said to me. After you made me cry.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Becky said sheepishly. “The boob jokes were harsh, I know. I used to have an ironing board for a chest, too, and my big sister never let me forget it. But I really need–“

The howling sound again. It may have been Suzie’s imagination, but it seemed to be louder and closer.

She felt Becky’s cold hand touch hers. Becky threaded her fingers between Suzie’s. It was all Suzie could do not to pull away. So much time had passed since she’d felt *true* human contact. Even her mother avoided touching her for that final year, for fear of passing on the virus.

Suzie clenched Becky’s fingers between hers. She could feel the warmth washing over her. She never knew she could find such comfort in another human being, other than her mother and father.

“We need each other,” Becky whispered. She laid her head on Suzie’s shoulder. She was trembling. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

Suzie did not think a response was necessary. Holding her hand said enough.

**CHAPTER 10**

They were still hand in hand when they arrived at the Safeway parking lot. Becky thanked her, and they turned to look at each other.

“What was her name?” Suzie asked.

“Who?”

“Your sister.”

Becky looked down at the pavement between them. The light was starting to fade from the sky above.

“Allyah,” she said softly.

“How old was she?”

Becky looked up at her. “When?”

“When …” Suzie swallowed hard. Living with people dying around you had been difficult; talking about the people who’d died was turning out to be almost as hard. “Did she, um, make it?”

Becky looked up at the darkening sky. “She was nineteen.”

“The virus?”

Becky nodded.

Suzie nodded back. So, even 19 years old was too old. That answered another of Suzie’s questions.

“I watched her die,” Becky said. “I was there the whole time, holding her. I knew it wasn’t smart, with the virus and all, but the truth was that I couldn’t imagine living without her – I guess I wanted to go too. But …”

So many stories. They all end the same way. Suzie thought of her mother and how she wanted to badly to hug her at the end. How she avoided touching her because she thought she could catch the virus. She remembered how weak she looked, how helpless. If Suzie had to do it all over again, she would have taken her in her arms and stopped her from leaving. She would have held her until the breathing stopped and all life left her body, and then Suzie would have held her longer. Damn the virus; she would have held her longer.

A million times over, that’s what she would have done.

“Are you scared?” Suzie asked, standing in the parking lot of the Safeway.

Becky looked at her with wet, blue eyes that were red around the edges. Her beauty was unfair, that one girl should have that much going for her. Suzie wondered if, looking like Becky did, she’d ever had to fight for anything in her whole entire life.

“Scared,” Becky said, as if chewing on the thought. “Of what? Of the coyotes?”

Suzie shook her head. “Of the virus,” she said. “You’re almost an adult, technically. Right? I mean, they say kids can’t get it.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Becky said. “Sure doesn’t feel like I’m an adult, though. I mean, I guess Brandon and I have to be, in a way, with all these kids around. They’re looking to us for so much. It’s …” She turned and looked out at the horizon. “I don’t think it works like that. I mean, the germs that are in the air – that *were* in the air – they can’t live forever, right?”

She turned to look at Suzie, as if Suzie might have the answer. Suzie didn’t say anything, so Becky took in a deep breath and swallowed, so hard that Suzie could hear her throat opening and closing on the quiet autumn evening.

“Brandon would go first,” Becky said, closing her eyes. “If it works that way. He’s seven months old than I am. So, I guess …”

The wind picked up. Suzie wondered how many people were out there, still alive. She touched Becky’s arm.

“You guess … what?” Suzie asked.

Becky’s eyes opened. “I couldn’t take it. Not again. If it takes Brandon, I … I …” She broke into tears.

“Maybe it’s not like that,” Suzie said. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. It probably doesn’t work that way. I mean, the virus, it’s run its course, right? Of course it has. There are no more carriers, there’s no way it can –“

“I have to be ready,” Becky said, wiping away tears. “I *have* to be ready, just in case.”

“What do you mean?”

Becky smiled. Suzie wasn’t expecting that. Her blue eyes gleamed in whatever light was left in this day – a Wednesday? a Thursday? It no longer mattered, really.

“Oh, you’re so young,” Becky said. She placed her warmed hands on Suzie’s cheeks. Suzie didn’t want to pull away. She felt like she’d finally found an older sister of her own. “So, so young. You don’t understand, do you?”

“Understand what?”

Becky’s smile faded. She took in another deep breath. “It’s only Brandon and me,” she said. “We’re all that’s left. As far as we know.” Suzie stared at her, still not understanding. “If the human race is going to exist, it’s up to us. It’s up to *me*.” Her head dropped. She blinked away tears and looked at her feet. “Until today, I was the only person who could birth a child – the only one we knew of.”

“Until today,” Suzie whispered.

“If Brandon is only going to be alive until 18 – that means he and I have only two months together,” Becky said. “The future of humanity was relying on us. We had *two months* to decide the fate of the human race.”

“Until today,” Suzie said again.

Becky nodded. “Until today,” she said. “Now you’re here, so it’s not all up to Brandon and me.”

Suzie felt the world spin. Her head went light, and her legs gave way.

The last thing she saw was a memory – not her father’s face, nor her mother’s, but Trick’s.

*Imagine what this society would be like without girls*, he’d said.

As her body collapsed to the pavement in the parking lot of Safeway, Suzie finally understood what he’d meant.

**CHAPTER 11**

When Suzie came to, she was seated and leaning against the side of the store, her feet pointed out toward the curb. Becky was rubbing her arm.

“Oh, thank God,” Becky was saying.

“What? What happened?” Suzie’s head was throbbing. She couldn’t remember why she was in this parking lot.

“I thought you were … well, y’know,” Becky said. “You see as many people die as I have, and you just …”

Suzie replayed the last few minutes. The school playground, the argument, the coyote, being one of the two females left on earth. Ah, yes, that’s what started the spiral.

Suzie started to feel dizzy again.

“You okay?” Becky asked. Suzie nodded. “You probably just need food. And water. Let’s –“

Becky started to stand, but Suzie grabbed her by the arm.

“Hang on,” she said. Becky sat back down. “So let me get this straight,” Suzie said. “I’m basically a *womb* to these people? Is that what this is about?”

“What do you mean?”

“When I first met Trick and Avis, they were all excited about bringing a girl to this … this, what is it?”

“A society, I guess. A society of leftovers.”

“Okay, a society. Whatever. I couldn’t understand why being a girl meant so much to them. Now I do.”

Becky nodded. “Suzie, I was the only girl,” she said. “The *only* one. That’s a lot of pressure.”

Suzie could feel something weighing down on her. “And you don’t think *I* feel pressure?” she said. “This isn’t fair, Becky. You’re almost eighteen, too. Who knows if you’ll even be around in-“

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true, Becky. We have to be realistic. You might *die* of this.”

“I might not.”

Suzie stood up and started pacing. She did not want to share this responsibility. She pulled her hair back and rubbed her head. She watched Becky pick at a blade of grass in the sidewalk crack.

“I don’t want to go back there, to that playground,” Suzie said. “I don’t want to be part of this *society*.” She spit the word out. “I’m not here to be groomed for *mother*hood. I’m thirteen years old, Becky. Thirteen. My parents just died. I don’t have anywhere to live, and I’m not sure if I’ll eat again.”

“Well, we could fix *that* right now,” Becky said, using her thumb to point toward the wall of the Safeway, “if you’d shut up and help me break into this place.”

Suzie groaned. She threw her hands up. She kept pacing. A day ago, she was hiding in an underground shelter waiting for her mom to come back with food. Now she was being told that she partially responsible for the continuation of mankind.

“Why me?” she said.

“This isn’t just you, Suzie. It’s *both* of us. We’re *both* in the same situation.” Becky stood up. She grabbed Suzie gently by the shoulders and looked her in the eye. “This isn’t about *us*,” she said. “This is about the human race. Without us, it could cease to exist.” Suzie pulled away from her and turned her back. “Look,” Becky said, “we’re not asking you to have someone’s baby tomorrow.”

“That’d be a miracle.”

“We’re not even saying it has to happen anytime soon. It just *has* to happen.”

Suzie turned and looked out at the parking lot, empty except for three cars. She tried to collect her thoughts. She just wanted to be a kid – a *normal* kid. She wanted to be worrying about her upcoming basketball game, or the Social Studies test, or which candy she’ll pick out at the movie theater.

“This isn’t fair,” she said. “I’m not even … I mean, I don’t even like any of those boys up there. I can’t imagine ever … *ew*!”

Becky chuckled at that. Suzie looked at her and shook her head. She’d never had a sister, had never even had a brother, but right now she felt like Becky was the closest thing she’d had to it. They were both girls, maybe the only two girls left on earth, and they were going to need each other. They were sisters from another mother, as people used to say.

“Come here,” Becky said. Suzie took a step forward, and Becky whispered in her ear: “This is hard. So much of this is hard. And you’re too young to be having to figure all this out. When I was thirteen … I can’t even remember. I just know that the fate of the human race wasn’t on my shoulders.” Suzie dropped her head and nodded. “Or my ovaries,” Becky added, chuckling.

Suzie looked up, and that’s when she saw the car. A blue Pinto, parked askew in the lot about 50 yards behind where Becky was standing. How had she not noticed before? It was one of only three cars in the lot, but Suzie had been so distracted that she hadn’t noticed the color and make.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. She put her hand over her mouth. “No way,” she muttered between fingers.

Becky turned but saw nothing.

“What?” She looked back at Suzie. “What is it?”

Without answering, Suzie started running toward the Pinto, a car she knew as well as her house. She’d sat in the back of that car hundreds of times, had helped her mother wash, had drawn a picture that was on the wall of her bedroom. Her hands were out in front of her, reaching for something. Tears were streaming down her face. “Mom!” she yelled. Becky ran behind her, calling out her name. Suzie ignored her. “Mom!” she screamed through the looming darkness. She reached the car, stopped, then scrambled around to the back bumper. She crouched down and saw the bumper sticker. UW LAW SCHOOL.

She felt something awaken within herself. “Mom,” she whispered. Suzie clenched a fist and used her other hand to feel along the side of the car. She looked in the windows, wanting *so* badly to see her mother inside. Even if she was sick, Suzie would find a way to save her. She would *find a way*. Back at the camp, Suzie had access to food, water and other supplies. Her heart skipped with anticipation.

“Mother!” Suzie screamed, cupping her hands to look in the window. When she saw no one inside, she started pounding her fists against the window. She wanted to break through the window and search inside the empty car. The doors were locked. She kept pounding. Becky was standing a few feet away, but Suzie hardly noticed her. She kept pounding her fists until she ran out of gas and turned to look at the dark Safeway.

Of course. “She’s in there,” she whispered. “She must be.” She gathered her strength and started running, but Becky caught her and cut her off.

“Don’t do this,” she said.

Suzie stared at her, nostrils flaring. She could not catch her breath. “Get out of my way,” she said.

Becky wrapped her arms around her and looked toward the store.

“You don’t have to do this,” Becky said. “You might not like what you see. Really, Suzie, you don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do.” Suzie pulled away from her and added: “I need to know.”

Becky nodded and let her go. She walked a few steps behind her, toward the store. They were less than twenty feet away when Suzie saw the shattered glass of the front door. A few steps later, she saw the body collapsed inside.

She ran toward it, knelt down, and knew right away that her mother was not breathing.

She felt like she’d lost her mother all over again.

**CHAPTER 12**

In the early days of the lockdown, Suzie did not yet miss the things she would. Emma, yes, for sure. But most of the other school kids she all but forgot. Days and weeks would pass before she began to think about her classroom and her teachers, the school bus, the bustle in the halls between classes. The sounds and smells that had become part of her everyday life were replaced by unlimited television time and endless internet searches.

About the time that *The Bachelor* reruns became monotonous, and typing phrases along the lines of “Artists Who Sing Like Billie Eilish” had all run out, Suzie started missing all the little things that life had to offer. Basketball practice. Riding bikes to the ice cream shop. Movies at the Cineplex. Shopping for clothes.

She missed her dad’s banana pecan pancakes. Tik Tok. Sweet-and-sour candies. She missed the smell of coffee and the sound of her mom, singing in the showe.

Eventually, Suzie started to miss things she didn’t even realize she enjoyed. Chewing her fingernails. Watching people interact. Being able to walk to the bookstore and flipping the pages of books. Meeting someone new. Making someone laugh.

She even found herself missing the bad times. Her mother and father generally got along, but there were a few arguments that stuck with Suzie. She remembered one that seemed ridiculous, looking back on it, but at the time Suzie was worried that her parents might leave each other. It all started when her mother came home late from working at the law office, and she couldn’t find any cucumbers in the refrigerator. Suzie’s dad told her to look in the fruit drawer. Suzie’s mother found one, and while she was slicing it in the kitchen while Suzie and her dad played dominoes at the dining room table, Suzie’s mom grumbled audibly about “why he’d put a vegetable in the fruit drawer.” Suzie’s father pointed out that cucumbers were, technically, fruit. Her mother turned to him, knife in hand, and explained that “everyone knows a cucumber is a vegetable. Ask a chef!” That she was holding the knife made it, to Suzie’s childish mind, a bigger deal than it was. She cried herself to sleep that night, with her face buried in a pillow. She was certain that her mother would be gone the next day.

As Suzie looked back on it, she remembered the words to a song her dad liked:

*You’re trying to remember/How your life used to be.*

*That was the river/This is the sea.*

What Suzie would give to have one more day of listening to her parents argue and make up.

It took awhile before Suzie realized all that her mother had lost as well. The daily trips to the hospital to visit Suzie’s dad were no longer allowed. Suzie’s mom was no longer allowed to go to work, or the gym, or to Brenda’s house to play cards. When you’re young, you’re bored, not lonely. You’re impatient, not miserable. You’re tired, not depressed.

No one ever sat Suzie down and explained what *depression* was. She’d heard this girl Brittany throw the word around when they were in fourth grade together, like in a theatrical way, but Suzie never really gave it much consideration.

Watching her mother change after her father died, Suzie didn’t need any explanation. She was watching the definition of depression before her very eyes.

In many ways, Suzie’s mom died long before she even got the virus.

Looking back, Suzie realized that she, too, started changing long before the darkness began. Losing her father was only part of it. She also lost her freedom. She lost her routing. Her social interaction. The sound of neighbors cutting the grass. The smell of fresh-baked bread at the Saturday farmers’ market. She lost live music. Face-to-face conversations. Discovering new things with others.

She never got to flirt. She never had her first kiss. She lost her ability to plan ahead. To hope. To dream.

When the virus first hit, Suzie had nightmares. Violent dreams about what would happen, how the world was going to end. Then her dad died, and all the dreams were about her past.

By the end, all Suzie had was darkness. She would fall in and out of sleep all day, hoping and wishing that her mother would pull out of it, but she never dreamed. Not once.

All she had was darkness. Even when she opened her eyes.

**CHAPTER 13**

They carried Suzie’s mother to the cemetery in total darkness. Her body felt as light as a pillow.

There were no lights, as the adults were no longer around to keep the electricity going, so the only light came from the moon and stars. Suzie stared up at the sky as they walked, trying not to look at her mother’s lifeless face.

They set her down on a patch of dirt, and Suzie fell to her hands and knees, digging a grave with her hands. Becky watched for a minute or two before joining her.

Suzie never got to see her father get buried. Social gatherings were just starting to be banned around the time of his death, and funerals were banned. Suzie cried on the floor of her mother’s room that night, and the following day they started preparing the shelter. She spent every second with her mother after that, growing together despite their distance. Suzie started to pull away near the end, angry with her mother for getting sick. At the time that Suzie needed her most, her mother was drifting away.

She’d begged her mother not to go at the end. Suzie knew in her heart that she wouldn’t come back. Her father was supposed to come back, too, so Suzie knew what was going to happen. *That’s your one responsibility*, her mother had said. *You protect your kids. Or you die trying*.

Suzie lifted her mother and lowered her into the two-foot-deep hole. Once she was laid flat, Suzie knelt, leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. She stood, looked away, used her sleeve to wipe the tears from her eyes, then started kicking dirt into the hole. She was grateful for the darkness.

When the dirt was in place, Suzie knelt down and patted it in place. Her tears wet the dirt. She kissed the ground, stood and clapped her hands together. The dirt caked her hands and clung to the inside of her fingernails. Suzie looked up at the sky.

“What do you think happens to them?” she asked.

Becky smiled. “The good ones go to heaven,” she said.

Suzie looked at her. “You really think that?”

“I guess you have to believe in something,” Becky said.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

They started walking back to the camp at the playground. Suzie felt lighter somehow. Her tears were gone, and she no longer felt sad.

“If there is a God,” Becky said as they left the cemetery, “why do you think he did this? Why do you think he took all the adults away?”

Becky walked out into the empty street and shrugged. “Maybe God had nothing to do with it,” she said. “Maybe God’s the reason the children all lived.”

Suzie took in a deep breath and looked up at the night sky as they walked. “I don’t feel like a kid,” she said. “Not anymore.”

They stopped. Becky smiled at her. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “Maybe there aren’t any children anymore, either.”

Suzie looked up the hill, toward where the school was. There was enough light from the moon to see the street. Cars were parked along the curb, cars that would never be moved.

“Can we make one more stop?” she asked.

Becky looked at the sky. She shivered. “They’re expecting us,” she said. “And since we don’t have any food or supplies …”

“It’ll be quick,” Suzie said. “It’s not that far out of the way.” Becky scrunched up her forehead, like Suzie’s mother used to do, when she was still healthy. “I need to do it,” Suzie added. “I need … what do you call it?”

“Closure?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Closure.” She tilted her head. “Whether or not you’re coming, I’m going.”

Becky let out a long sigh. She sounded like a parent. Maybe she was right: maybe there weren’t any children anymore. “Where are we going?” Becky asked in resignation.

Fifteen minutes later, they were standing outside Suzie’s house; what used to be Suzie’s house. As she stood there, she realized she didn’t have a home anymore. In the distance, they heard another coyote howl. Seconds later, the pack started cackling. It was an eerie sound, like children screaming in the park. Back when kids were care-free and used to be able to play.

The sound made Suzie shudder.

“How are you going to get in?” Becky asked.

Suzie held up a rock that was about the size of a loaf of bread, took a few steps into the yard, and fired it through the front window. Both girls jumped back at the sound of shattering glass.

“Solves that problem,” Becky said. “Now, how are you going to see in the dark?”

Suzie looked at her and shrugged. “I spent the first 11 years of my life in that house, and the last two living under it,” she said. “I think I know my way around.”

Becky smiled at her, and Suzie felt something awaken in her that was different than what she’d felt when Brandon Cruz was up on the pulpit. She was starting to realize that people are drawn together for different reasons. Sometimes Suzie used to feel alienated by other girls, but somehow Becky pulled her in.

“Be right back,” she said.

Once inside, Suzie felt at home again. She moved through the dark hallway by rote, as if she’d awaken in the middle of the night having to pee. Both bedrooms were at the end of the hall, just like she’d remembered, and Suzie’s first instinct was to turn left. But instead of entering her own bedroom, she turned to the right, into her parents’ bedroom. She walked quietly, as if she was concerned about waking them from sleep.

She bumped her knee on the bed frame but ignore the pain. So much had happened over the past 24 hours – not to mention the past 24 months – that a simple bruise seemed inconsequential. She pulled open the curtains and let in the moonlight. She could see photographs on the wall and an unmade bed. Not knowing why, Suzie began pulling the sheets up, tucking them in and pulling taut the wrinkles. She’d never done it before, had never even made her own bed, and yet she pulled the sheets in place, folded the over and inspected her work with military precision.

On her way out, she found the photograph that had brought her here. She pulled the framed picture off the wall, crossed the hall to her own bedroom and felt around on the shelf, finding something she had not needed in years. Ricky, she called her stuffed hippopotamus. Ricky Ricardo. She’d needed it every night to sleep when she was younger. When she turned 8, she no longer slept with it.

Suzie went into the bathroom, set the photo and Ricky Ricardo in the sink, and turned on the shower. She undressed, sat down to do her business, then she stepped into the running, cold water and scrubbed whatever dirt she could from her body. She dug under her nails. She washed her hair. It felt like a new beginning.

She stayed in there for longer than usual, even though the water was cold. It was clean, and she hadn’t felt clean in a long time. She wished she could wash herself of so many things: pain, memories, fear. If only life were that easy.

Suzie turned off the shower, dressed, grabbed her things and went out the front door, knowing she would probably never return. A new life awaited her.

As she joined Becky on the lawn, Suzie looked across the street and saw a faint light in the Benevides’ window. She could see Tommy’s face, illuminated by candlelight, looking out at her. He used his hand to flatten his hair on top of his forehead while he stared out with large, sad eyes. His other hand was on top of his sister’s head, the top of which was barely visible. He looked older – like not hours, but years, had passed since she’d last seen him.

Suzie turned away, but his face remained in her memory.

She walked with Becky, back up the hill toward the school, while holding the framed photograph and the stuffed hippo against her chest. They talked the whole way – of their past lives, their families, basketball, restaurants they liked. Suzie told her about Emma, and Becky told Suzie more about her sister, Allyah.

Suzie still battled the urge to check on Emma, but her discoveries over the past few hours, and her difficulties dealing with being a girl in this new society, convinced her not to take Becky there. Not yet.

Once they got within a block of the school, they could hear commotion. Shouting and boys screaming stopped them in their tracks. The smell of smoke wafted in the cool, fall air. A bright light billowed above the playground, like the aftermath of war.

“Let’s go,” Becky said, grabbing Suzie’s hand.

They ran toward the playground, scurrying up the small hill between the bushes, to the opening in the fence. It was already unlatched. They barely got to their feet when Brandon Cruz noticed them and started heading their way.

Suzie expected him to welcome Becky with a kiss, but his aggressive walk and the angry look in his eye told her that Brandon was not in a loving mood. A bonfire burned behind him as his came toward the girls, wagging his finger.

“You forgot to seal the fence when you left!” he shouted. He was 10 feet away, closing fast. “You stupid girls! How could you?”

Without warning, he reared his arm back and swung it forward, slapping an open hand across Becky’s cheek. A squeak escaped her mouth as she dropped to one knee. Suzie gasped and threw a hand over her own mouth. She couldn’t remember ever seeing a human being hit another – only in the movies. And she certainly hadn’t witnessed a male striking a female. Suzie felt vulnerable and confused.

“Stupid girl,” Brandon said again, standing over Becky. He glanced at Suzie, who tensed for a blow that never came. “A coyote got in,” he said, pointing toward the opening in the fence. “Oh, God, it was bad.” He started rubbing his forehead. “I can’t believe you didn’t seal it.” The bonfire cracked behind him. Trick was now coming forward to join Brandon. From beneath him, Becky cowered and looked up from behind her extended arm.

“It got Griffey,” Trick said.

Suzie brought up her other hand, as both of them now covered her mouth.

“What do you mean?” she asked through her fingers.

Becky stood slowly.

“The coyote, it got into the camp and … and …” He put his face in his hands. “It was awful,” he said. “Right in front of our eyes.” He grabbed Becky by the shoulders. “*Right in front of our eyes!*” he shouted.

Trick looked back at the bonfire. “We had to burn the body,” he said quietly.

The look of rage returned to Brandon’s face. “This is all your fault,” he said. Becky was visibly trying to pull away from him, but his grip was too strong. He began to shake her by the shoulders. Suzie, clutching the photograph and stuff hippo to her chest, tried to protest but couldn’t find her voice. “Griffey died because of your stupid, thoughtless oversight!” Brandon shouted.

Then he struck her again, this time with a closed fist. Suzie was standing three feet away but both heard and felt the impact.

Becky crumpled to the asphalt. Suzie buried her face in Ricky Ricardo’s fur.

*It’s all our fault*, she thought.

**CHAPTER 14**

Suzie spent the next two weeks mostly alone. They’d provided her with a tent, in which she whiled away her days, staring at the framed photograph and thinking about the past. The picture inside the frame had been taken when Suzie was 6 or 7, during a family vacation to Whistler, B.C. She was sitting in a hot tub, between her mother and father, all of them wearing stocking caps. Suzie had her mother’s smile, it was clear, but she had her father’s spark. He was a therapist who had scheduled his clients around when Suzie was in school. That way, he could spend more time with her. Suzie’s mother, an attorney, was busy all the time, often at work until after Suzie went to bed. She remembered how great it used to be on vacations – just the three of them, without distraction or interruption. A rare blessing in a world filled with distractions and interruptions.

As much as Suzie hated to admit it, those first few days when her father had been in the hospital were also somewhat of a blessing. She had no idea that he was not going to pull out of it, so having the three of them together again, uninterrupted, even if it was in a hospital room, brought some sense of connection. She didn’t like seeing her father in a hospital bed like that, so vulnerable and weak, but she never had any doubt that he would one day get healthy and come home.

He was, after all, John Wayne.

Sitting in the tent, she battled with her longtime enemy again: loneliness. Being an only child, Suzie wrestled against that opponent often. When her father passed away, and her mother had come down with the virus, Suzie felt lonely too, even someone was there with her the whole time.

Since the night when the coyote had gotten into the camp, Suzie had only seen Becky a handful of times. They crossed paths the day after it happened, when Becky had a golf-ball-sized shiner under her left eye, but Becky passed quickly without making eye contact. Suzie thought about the nights when her mother had come home from a long day at work and was short with her. *Give her space*, her father would say. *Give her time.* Suzie thought the same would be true for Becky. She just needed time.

Only as the days passed, and the interactions became even more sparse, Suzie wondered if maybe she’d done something wrong. She replayed that night, how close they had become, and she couldn’t think of a single thing she’d done to anger Becky. Maybe she’d gotten too close; some people were like that. Suzie felt as if this was the time when Becky needed her the most, and yet she was pushing her away.

Three nights in a row, Suzie cried herself to sleep, succumbing to the loneliness and to the thought of losing someone else she was starting to love.

One afternoon, after about two weeks spent mostly alone, Suzie was lying in her tent, squeezing her stuffed hippo Ricky Ricardo, when Trick suddenly popped his head in the tent. She quickly tucked the stuffed animal beneath her pillow.

“Morning, Sunshine,” he said, even though it was mid-afternoon. He waved a two-pack of Twinkies at her, then tossed gently – a gift, for no apparent reason she could discern. “Haven’t seen you around camp much,” he said.

Suzie shrugged. She looked at the Twinkies, then set them aside.

“Look, you’ve got to earn your keep around here,” Trick said. “This ain’t no free ride. Those Twinkies and all that, it doesn’t come for free. Welfare stamps and unemployment checks? That stuff isn’t around anymore.”

He laughed, although Suzie didn’t find it funny.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked.

“Less moping, more mopping, for starters,” he said. He laughed again, then flashed his missing-tooth smile. He backed out of the tent, looked around, then poked his head back inside. “Listen, a few of the guys are out shaking down houses for more food and supplies,” he said. “Some of the younger ones, they’re organizing the shelves. A lot of heavy lifting and stuff. You? I’d say the camp could use some tidying up. Maybe grab a broom and-“

“Where’s Becky?” Suzie asked. “What’s she doing?”

He flashed his brown-and-yellow teeth again. “She’s making herself useful,” he said. He raised his eyebrows.

“What’s that mean?”

Trick leaned his head out, looked back toward the tent Becky shared with Brandon, then looked back at Suzie. Without saying anything, he made a circle with two fingers on one hand, then poked the middle finger of the other hand through it, back and forth.

“The king and queen are tied up,” he said, using a horrible British accent. Then he shrugged. “We all gotta do what we gotta do to make ourselves useful, right?”

“You’re gross, you know that?” Suzie said.

“Hey, you’ll get there, too, Sunshine,” he said. “Maybe you could make yourself more useful, instead of being so uptight all the time.” He raised his eyebrows. Suzie felt the urge to kick him in the balls again. “You ought to loosen up, give having fun a try sometime.”

“Oh yeah? Well, maybe you ought to try growing a brain sometime.”

Trick’s smile faded, and he was about to say something in response, but they were interrupted by commotion outside the tent. Trick dropped the flap of the tent and went to intervene. Suzie tucked the photograph under the pillow, next to Ricky Ricardo, and went to see what was going on.

Two kids, both about 15 years old, were holding Avis by the arms. A pile of candy was at his feet.

“Get *off* me!” Avis was yelling. “Swear to *God*, I’ll beat every pimple off your ugly faces.”

“Let him go!” Trick yelled.

“But he *stole* this stuff,” said one of the boys, a stocky kid that Suzie only knew by the name of Connor.

“Just let him go,” Trick said.

The kids held tight. “You’re not our boss,” the other kid said. He was small and scrawny, with dark hair and dark skin, one of only two African-American kids at the camp. Charles, that was his name.

“Quit *touching* me, you twinks!” Avis shouted.

Suzie walked toward him, wanting to say something, but stopped suddenly. She hated that word, and she knew she should challenge him for using it, but she couldn’t find her voice. Loneliness still had her wrapped in a headlock.

“What’s going on here?” Brandon was out of the tent now, buttoning his shirt as he hurried to join the conversation. His hair was messed up, and his face was red.

“We caught Avis trying to steal candy,” Connor said.

“Caught him red-handed,” Charles added, pointing to the Snickers bars and packages of gummy worms at Avis’s feet.

“Let his arms go,” Brandon said. The kids immediately obliged. Avis pulled his arms free theatrically then tugged at his shirt.

“Twinks,” he said again.

Suzie felt angry words climb into her throat but not come out. She remembered a time when she was in the University District with her father, when she was about 6 years old, and some crazy man was yelling racial slurs at passersby. Suzie had asked her father what the guy was saying, and her father said: “Pay him no mind, Suze. Some people get so much hate pushed down in them, that it’s all that comes up when they try to speak.” She felt the same thing about Avis. She had to look away.

At that moment, she saw Becky climbing out of Brandon’s tent, putting her dark hair up in a bun. They made eye contact, but Becky looked down quickly. Suzie thought she saw something unfamiliar in her eyes. Shame?

“Okay, this needs to be dealt with,” Brandon said, but he said it without confidence. He was rubbing his hand to his chin, as if to say: *Someone has to deal with this, and I wish it didn’t have to be me.* He looked up and called out: “Everyone gather around!”

The others obeyed. Suzie couldn’t help but to notice how much power Brandon had in camp. For a society that preached the importance of not having a leader, this sure seemed like some kind of monarchy.

Becky strode up behind Brandon, a blanket wrapped around her, still keeping her head down as she stood a foot or two away from him. She still had a bluish-green mark under her eye, and she looked sad and powerless. Suzie hated seeing her like that.

“Avis,” Brandon said. “Come stand beside me.”

“This is dumb,” Avis grumbled, but he did as Brandon asked. They always did.

Brandon put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s come to our attention that Avis has been caught stealing food,” he said to the dozen or so people – *kids* -- who were gathered around. “This needs to be handled in a fair and objective manner. The question is: how?”

“Cut his balls off and feed them to the coyotes!” Trick shouted, laughing.

“This is serious!” Brandon said, sounding more like a parent than a 17-year-old kid. “We can’t have this happening in camp. We all know the rules. I know we didn’t want rules initially, but we’ve been forced to have them. Now, if someone breaks them, he needs to be punished. What do you say?”

“No sweets for a week!” one kid called out. Brandon nodded.

“He has to sweep the grounds for a month and clean up the bathroom area daily!” Brandon nodded at that too.

“How about we kick him out of camp?” Becky said softly. She was looking at the ground. Suzie could tell she was joking – Suzie’s dad was a master of sarcasm – but nobody laughed.

“That seems a bit harsh,” said Brandon, the literalist. “Who else?”

Suzie stared at Becky, waiting to make eye contact, waiting to tell her something silently: *I got that*, or, *They’re so dumb*, or maybe even, *Can we still be friends?* But Becky never looked up.

“Fifty pushups?” Charles said. Brandon nodded.

“That would take him a week!” Trick joked, smiling at Avis.

“Okay, any others?” Brandon asked. When no one responded, he said: “So let’s vote. The options are: No sweets for a week, cleanup duty for a month, or 50 pushups. Can I get a show of hands?”

“Wait,” a voice said. It was Suzie’s. Her John Wayne had come out. “Who says he needs to be punished?”

**CHAPTER 15**

Brandon, with one hand on Avis’ shoulder and the other in the air, stopped talking and looked at Suzie. “Huh?”

“I said, Who says he needs to be punished?” she said in front of the group. “We didn’t vote on that. This is a democracy, right? We vote on everything?” The others were all looking around at each other, shrugging their shoulders. “Well, why didn’t we put that to a vote?”

One of the other boys scoffed. “Of *course*, he has to be punished!” he called out. “Don’t be dumb.”

Brandon held his hand out, quietly the boy. He nodded. “We can’t just let this go,” he said.

“Who says?” Suzie continued. “I mean, I didn’t vote on that. Did anybody else vote on that?” She glanced at Becky, who was watching her. “It seems like some decisions are being made without vote.” Avis was also staring at her, suddenly nodding his head.

“All violations have to be punished,” Brandon said. “Let’s not be silly. That’s just a fact.”

“Why?” she said.

“Yeah, why?” Avis echoed, theatrically. The others laughed.

“That’s how life works,” Brandon said. “If there’s no negative consequences, people will keep doing the same stupid things. Bank robbers would still be robbing banks. Murderers would still be free to keep killing people.”

“And fat kids would keep stealing candy?” Suzie asked.

“Hey!” Avis protested.

“Of course,” Brandon said, patting him on the shoulder. “Without punishment, people don’t stop.”

“Did your parents teach you that?” Suzie asked.

Brandon took his hand of Avis’s shoulder and took a couple steps toward Suzie. “They didn’t have to,” he said.

“Well,” she said, “I thought we were trying to do things *differently* than the adults did. I thought we were trying to learn from their mistakes.”

“This is ridiculous,” Connor said. “Someone shut the little girl up, and let’s vote.”

“Hear her out,” Brandon said, holding his hand up to quiet the boys.

Suzie looked around at all the faces.

“You ever heard of B.F. Skinner?” she asked. They all stared at her blankly. “Well, he was a psychologist. Studied human behavior. My dad, he’s a … well, he told me about him. Anyway, this guy Skinner, he once said something like: ‘Punishment doesn’t change behavior. It only teaches people how to avoid punishment.’” There was silence. One kid cleared his throat. Brandon was staring at her blankly. She could see Becky, out of the corner of her eye, hanging on every word. “Some of the most evil people of our lifetime, people who did horrible things, it’s because they were either trying to avoid punishment, or they were tired of being punished.”

“What are you saying?” Brandon asked.

“Well, my mom, she was a lawyer,” Suzie continued. “She taught me that jail doesn’t work. It just doesn’t. It teaches people how to avoid punishment, and it turns scared, desperate boys and girls into angry, violent criminals.”

“Let’s just vote already!” someone shouted. “I say we make him do pushups!”

“Well, I say we vote, first, on whether or not he *deserves* punishment,” Suzie said.

“Fair enough,” Brandon said. “Let’s put it to a show of hands, if that’s what you need.” He stepped back to his spot in the circle and looked around. “Who here votes that Avis, the dessert-stealing bandit, needs to be punished?” Everyone but the two girls raised their hands immediately. Becky kept staring at Suzie, then looked away and slowly put her hand in the air, bent at the elbow, her fingers even with her ear.

“Okay,” Brandon called out. “That’s settled. Now let’s-“

“Hold on,” Suzie said. She walked across the circle and stood next to Brandon. “As long as we’re handing out punishment, how about we vote on this?” She turned her head and looked at Becky for a moment, then turned back to the boys. “Who thinks we need to punish Brandon, for what he did?”

“*Brandon*?” someone scoffed.

“What did he do?” asked another.

Suzie turned around and pointed to Becky, who immediately dropped her head.

“Look at her eye,” she said. “We all saw it. We all know what happened. How come that goes unpunished?”

Brandon’s face, which had gone white, was starting to flush.

“That was two weeks ago!” Trick shouted.

“She left the *fence* unsealed!” added a kid from the back. “You were with her! You should know!”

“A kid *died* because of you guys,” Avis said, suddenly no longer grateful for Suzie’s support.

Brandon put his hands up in the air, quieting the crowd.

“Listen, she’s right,” he said. “I do need to address that. I’ve apologized to Becky in private, and she’s forgiven me –“

“So we heard!” Trick called out, raising his eyebrows. “Sounded like she was forgiving you pretty good!” The others laughed.

Brandon smiled sheepishly, parted his hair, and continued. “But I do need to address it publicly.” Such the politician. Suzie could see the entire camp punching their ballots in their heads. “That night, I was overly emotional,” Brandon continued. “I should not have reacted that way. I’ve never laid a hand on a woman before, and I’ve assured Becky that I’ll never put hands on her again.”

“How do we know?” Suzie asked, looking at Brandon but addressing the crowd.

“Excuse me?”

“Well, you’ve never been punished,” Suzie said. “If you don’t experience punishment, you’re going to keep doing the same thing, right? You said it yourself.”

The camp went totally quiet. Brandon, never at a loss for words, had none. A crow cawed in the distance. Suzie looked at all the boys’ faces, one by one. The attorney’s daughter. Mother would be so proud.

“Okay,” she said. “So let’s vote. Who says Brandon should be punished for abusing his girlfriend?” Suzie raised her hand, high and proud. “Who’s with me?”

All the boys stared at the ground, hands in their pockets. Brandon cleared his throat. Suzie looked around at the crowd, her gaze eventually falling on Becky. Her hands were in front of her, interlocked at the fingers. Becky turned her head to look away.

“Who’s *with* me?” Suzie asked again, staring daggers through Becky as she continued to hold her arm high in the air. The silence continued. Suzie’s arm began to get tired. An anger built inside of her. John Wayne was a man, but he’d have raised his hand. Wouldn’t he?

Furious, Suzie pulled her arm down and stormed off – past the tent and the shelves, past the playground and the basketball hoops. She walked all the way to the edge of the fence, leaned over to unlatch the bottom corner, lifted it, and went out into the wild world.

**CHAPTER 16**

Trick, of all people, was the one who found her. She’d gone back to the back yard with the spigot and was sitting under the trampoline, cross-legged.

He grinned when he saw her, pulling at the long tassels of his bear hat as he looked at her with those watermelon-skin eyes. Suzie folded her arms and turned away. But as he approached, cautiously, she scooted over to leave room. *We need each other*.

“This isn’t gonna end with a kick in the nuts, is it?” he asked.

She stifled a grin. “You better hope not,” she said.

He ducked his tall frame into the space between the trampoline and grass and sat down.

“Well, maybe I deserve it,” he said. Suzie unfolded her arms. “I kinda left you hanging back there. We all did.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’m listening.”

“Really, I probably should have decked the guy for punching his girlfriend like that. But he didn’t mean to do that. I mean, tensions were high –“

Suzie felt her body being to tighten. She folded her arms and started to turn away.

“Yeah, no excuses,” Trick said. “That was messed up. If I had to do it again, maybe I’d clock him.” Her body loosened. “But maybe not,” he said. “Maybe you’re right about the whole punishment thing. I mean, we’re trying to come together, not splinter apart.”

“Something like that,” she muttered. She pulled her knees up to her chest, folded her arms across them and rested her chin.

“You okay?” he asked. His voice sounded genuinely concerned. He could turn it on and off like that.

“I’ll never be okay,” she said. “Unless I wake up in my parents’ house, to the smell of my dad making banana pecan pancakes, and realize this was all a bad dream, I’m not going to be okay.”

“None of us are,” Trick said. “It’s unfortunate, it really is. But –“

Suzie let out a laugh. She put and hand over her mouth, waved her other hand in the air, then she started giggling.

“This isn’t supposed to be funny,” Trick said. “We’re talking about dead parents and pandemics and the apocalypse, you know.”

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m not laughing at you. I’m not even laughing *with* you. I just thought of something.”

“What was it?”

She stretched her legs out and turned to look at him. For all of his faults, Trick could give this look that made you feel like you were the only person left in the world. It was a good feeling, despite the poignant circumstances.

“It’s just that you said: ‘It’s unfortunate,’” Suzie said, pursing her lips. “That made me think of something my dad used to say a lot.” She lowered her voice: “’That’s unfort.’” She giggled again. “I’d spill my juice: ‘That’s unfort!’ I’d dribble the ball off my foot: ‘That’s unfort!’ I’d trip on the way into school: ‘That’s unfort!’ It became our thing. Everything was ‘unfort.’ I guess it was his way of minimizing things, of bringing it all together. Whether it was grape juice on the kitchen table, a skinned knee, or a virus that wiped out most of civilization, everything would be ‘unfort.’ As long as it’s just ‘unfort,’ you can manage it.”

“That’s what we’re doing, huh?” Trick said. “Managing.” He took a deep breath and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a wallet.

“Is that yours?” Suzie asked.

“Kinda,” he said. “Now.” He opened it. The first thing she saw was a driver’s license. She recognized the photo but couldn’t place the face. It was a man in his 50s. “I found this,” he said. “In one of the big houses up on the hill.” He reached into the billfold and produced a short stack of $100 bills. He counted twenty of them, then tucked them back into the fold. He showed her the driver’s license. “That’s Michael Wellington, CEO of the fourth-largest company on the Forbes 500 list.”

“I kind of recognize him,” Suzie said. “From the internet. You have his wallet? And all that money?”

“That’s not all.” Trick said. He pulled out a debit card, flipped it over, and a four-digit number was written on masking tape on the back. “Smart enough to build a multi-billion-dollar company from the ground up,” Trick said, “dumb enough to tape his PIN number to his debit card.” He folded the wallet closed and held it in his hands. “Anyway, I have in my possession the path to all the riches I could ever want – could ever *need*. I could take this to any ATM and withdraw enough money to buy fifty houses, six boats and an unlimited supply of video games.”

“Except …”

“*Except*, there aren’t any more working ATM’s,” Trick said, shaking his head and looking down at the wallet. “And, even if there were, money has no value anymore. I could have a stack of *ten thousand* $100 bills, and it wouldn’t get me diddly.” He waved the wallet in front of his face. “I might take this wallet and throw it in the fire.”

“Hmmph,” Suzie said. “I think my dad used to call that *irony*.”

“That’s one word for it,” Trick said. He smiled with his discolored teeth. He took off his bear hat and fluffed his brownish-red hair. “Some people might just call it ‘unfort.’”

They both laughed at that. Suzie felt so comfortable that she actually clapped him on the back.

“So,” she said when the laughing stopped, “why do you keep it?”

“Keep what?”

“The wallet.”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s hard to explain.” Trick took a deep breath “I guess it’s because I still have hope. As crazy as that sounds. Like, rationally, I know it’s never going to be the same. But somewhere inside me, there’s this little kid who thinks it might be.”

“I get that.”

“When I was five years old, my dad left my mom,” Trick continued. “It was two years before I saw him again, and when I did, he was a real jerk. I was at my grandparents’ house, and he showed up and was acting all weird and stuff. I was glad when he left, and he never called me after that. But still, I used to lie in bed at night, imagining he’d come walking through the door. I had this messed-up image of him coming home, getting back together with my mom, and everything returning to the way it was. Like, everything returning to normal.”

Suzie smiled.

“That’s a sweet story,” she said. “Maybe that’s what kids do: we try to keep everything *normal*. Adults dream about making a bunch of money and moving into big houses. We dream about things going back to the way they used to be.” Trick nodded. He didn’t seem so bad, for the time being. “Let me ask you something,” she said.

“Shoot.”

“How come when you’re around all the other guys, you can be such a … well, you kind of act like the way you described your dad. But when it’s just us, you can be really sweet and intelligent.”

Trick shrugged and looked at her with his watermelon eyes.

“You have to be a certain way when it’s just guys,” he said. “Maybe that’s why we need a couple girls around.” He tilted his head. “When I’m with you,” he added, “I can be myself.”

She smiled and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. She knew what he meant: when she was around Becky, she could be herself. She hadn’t been able to put it into words like that. Maybe it was because Becky was the only other girl in the camp; maybe it was more than that.

Suzie turned to tell Trick she was ready to go back to the camp, and that’s when he leaned in, ready to kiss her.

**CHAPTER 17**

There, back under the trampoline in the backyard of some strangers’ house, she lashed out at him again. This time, she used her whole body. She turned her head away, put her arms up in a shape of a cross between them, and pushed Trick backward, kicking at him as she did.

*Bingo, kiddo.*

Trick fell back, into the dirt, and Suzie crawled out from beneath the trampoline, hitting her head on the bar as she stood up. She didn’t let it stop her. She took a few steps, then turned back to face him.

“I was wrong about you!” she said. “You’re just like your dad!”

“It’s not like that,” he said.

She stomped her foot in the dirt, her hands on her hips. “You boys!” she shouted. “You’re all the same!” With that, she turned and began to walk away.

“I don’t even like you, morongirl!” he shouted. “This isn’t about that! You get that, right? It’s about the human race!” He crawled out from under the trampoline. She was already in the street, giving one last look back. “There’s gonna come a time when the future of the human race might be up to you,” he said. She turned away, started running. “Just you! It’s all going to be up to you! You might want to start being nicer to us boys!”

She barely heard his final words. She kept running, not turning around to look back, not caring if he was chasing her, not concerned about ever seeing him, or anyone at that stupid camp, again. They could keep their food, and their society, and their “safety.” She wanted no part of it. They might need each other, but she didn’t need anyone.

Suzie did not stop until she’d run to the end of the block, on across 65th, back through the neighborhood that surrounded the elementary school, down the hill, and did not stop until she reached the edge of the cemetery. Even in daylight, she had trouble finding her mother’s grave. It took at least a half an hour before she came upon the patch of dirt.

She knelt alongside the grave and closed her eyes. She could see her mother’s face, just as if had looked in that hot tub in Whistler, with the stocking cap on her head. She wondered what her mom would say. She tried to channel her voice.

An autumn wind picked up, tousling her hair. She knew Trick wouldn’t think to look here. Up the hill, toward the schoolyard, she focused her eyes and wondered what Trick would be telling them. Calling her names. Like *Morongirl*. *Stupid*. *Prude*. The wind swirled. She could hear her mother’s voice.

*Pay them no mind. Do you, Suzie Q.*

Suzie wanted so badly to go back and get the photograph. To have Ricky Ricardo in her arms. They were the only things she missed about that stupid playground and those annoying people.

With the wind came a chill. Suzie folded her arms up underneath her shirt and hugged her body.

*Pay them no mind.*

She lied down in the dirt next to her mother’s grave and pictured herself out on the basketball court. *Do you, Suzie Q*. She’d been a decent played – good enough to make the sixth-grade team, but not good enough to start. She imagined she was the player she always wanted to be. She dribbled like Sue Bird and shot like Elena Delle Donne. She imagined playing on a team with Becky, the two of them taking on five boys at the schoolyard. Suzie would dribble between two defenders, rise like she was taking a shot, then flip the ball to Becky for an open layup.

*Pay them no mind.*

Now she was playing *with* Sue Bird and Elena Delle Donne. They were on the Olympic team. They were playing against Australia or Germany or Sweden. A bunch of tall women with blond ponytails and scowls on their faces. Suzie and Sue Bird were an unstoppable backcourt. They passed back and forth, dribbling between their legs and doing no-look dishes behind their backs. By halftime, they were ahead by 60 points.

They ran into the locker room, celebrating, but when Suzie put her hand up for a high-five, Sue Bird looked at her and backed away. She shook her head.

*Germs*, Sue Bird said, wagging a finger with that pretty smile of hers. *I’m an adult, remember?* Except there was no sound. Only Sue Bird mouthing the words.

A chilly wind blew the door to the locker room open. The players ran back out onto the court, where the stands were now empty. Suzie shivered as she waited for the second half to start. Sue Bird wrapped her arms around herself. Suzie could see her own breath. The opposing team came out of the locker room dressed in gloves and hazmat suits. Suzie could hear them breathing from behind a mask.

The referee threw the ball in the air for a jump ball. Suzie looked up, and the ball fell to the floor. All the other players were gone.

She woke up shivering, not realizing she’d fallen asleep. She heard someone calling her name. Was it still part of the dream? She was curled up in a ball but looked up to see Becky, wearing one jacket and carrying another, heading her way. Suzie sat up but did not wave. Becky smiled.

“I figured I’d find you here,” she said, then handed Suzie the jacket.

“I’m not going back,” Suzie said, putting it on.

“I’m not asking you to. I was just, y’know, worried.”

“Thanks.” *Sis*.

Becky sat down next to her and wrapped her arms around Becky’s shivering body. She could feel Becky’s warmth through both jackets. She began to think that maybe love was possible, despite these tragic times.

“Why’d you do it?” Suzie asked.

“Do what?”

“Go back to him. To Brandon. After what he did to you.”

Becky removed her arms from Suzie and placed her gloved hands in her lap. She looked down at them.

“It’s complicated,” she said.

“Not really.” Suzie turned to look at her. Something about Becky’s face brought comfort, even with the small bruise beneath her eye. “My dad taught me that if a man were to ever lay a hand on me, that was it,” Suzie said. “Leave him, and never go back.”

“Yeah, well, your dad’s not here anymore,” Becky said. Suzie could tell by the look in Becky’s eyes that she’d immediately regretted saying it. “I’m sorry,” she said. “That was …”

“Messed up.”

“Yeah, that was messed up.” Becky clapped her gloved hands together and looked out at the horizon. Through the trees, parts of Lake Washington were visible to the east, downtown to the west. “Listen,” Becky said. “If I’ve been avoiding you, I’m sorry. I guess I’m kind of embarrassed. You know, woman to woman.”

“About what?”

“Going back with him. Like I said, it’s complicated,” Becky said. “If this was all about me, your dad would be right: I should break up with him and not even think twice.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, then looked down at the dirt. “It’s not just about me anymore. It’s about the good of society. As a woman, I have a higher calling now. I think we both do, you and me.”

“We’re just ovaries and wombs. Just like it used to be.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Becky said. “This isn’t a *woman* thing; it’s a *human* thing.” She shook her head. “You’re not there yet, Suze. You’ve barely hit puberty. Wait ‘till you get to be my age.”

“You sound like an old woman.”

“Well, I might be, considering. Maybe I don’t have that much time left. Nobody knows. In these times, you’ve got to consider our mortality. Even at 17. Going on 18.”

Suzie sighed, turned her body and pulled her knees to her chest. She looked down at the dirt where they’d buried her mother.

“Did you come here because of Trick?” she asked.

“What about him?”

“What did he tell you about what happened?”

Becky moved closer, so they were side by side. “I haven’t seen him all day. Why? What happened?”

Suzie ran her fingers through the cold dirt. “I don’t really want to say,” she said. “I just … I think I’ve figured something out.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

Suzie turned to look into Becky’s eyes. Her sparkling, bright blue eyes.

“I don’t think I’m into boys,” she said. “Like, in that way.”

Becky stared back at her, dumbfounded.

**CHAPTER 18**

In the end, Suzie went back to the camp. They walked side by side, but without holding hands.

She saw Trick from a distance, but she said nothing to him, just went back into her tent with the photograph and the stuffed hippo. She climbed under the sheets and struggled for sleep that came in short bursts. Staring at the top of her tent, she still felt lonely, but less lonely now. Becky had taken the news well – if that’s what you call the revelation that you’re confused about your sexuality -- and Suzie felt like they now had attained a deeper level of trust.

But she’d only told her half the story. She’d told her that she wasn’t into boys, not that she might be into Becky.

Was it only because she was the only other girl she knew to be alive? Was it because of the situation, because they’d been through such deep emotions together? Or was it something more fluid – like Suzie wasn’t necessarily into boys or girls, per say, she was just into Becky? Was she even into Becky? Or was she just connected to her emotionally, and appreciative of her natural beauty?

All that Suzie knew for sure was that her feelings were unrequited. Becky might respect her, and might trust her, but she could never love her. Becky was into guys, obviously. She was also too old for her.

Suzie didn’t want to know what John Wayne might think about all this.

The daylight faded, Suzie stepped outside to get something to eat, and then she returned to her tent and finally fell into a deep sleep. It was a dreamless sleep that left her feeling refreshed and alive. Grateful to be alive.

Becky poked her head in Suzie’s tent and asked if she wanted to shoot hoops.

“I haven’t got shoes.”

“That’s okay, c’mon.”

Becky led Suzie to the court, handed her the ball, and Suzie tried to drive on her. Becky blocked the shot.

“Here,” she said. “Try again. Try a stutter move, or a crossover. Something to keep me off balance.”

Suzie took the ball and tried again, faking one way, then driving the other. Becky blocked the shot again.

“Ball fakes,” she said, showing Suzie by holding the ball up and faking a shot. “Stutter your move, then when you get me going one direction, use a ball fake. That often gets them in the air, when they don’t want to be. You never want to let people know exactly what your next move is. Keep them guessing.”

The next time, Suzie got past her and got a clean shot but missed.

“Good,” Becky said. “Your milkshake was perfect. You just didn’t add the whipped cream at the end.”

They practiced like that, day after day, with Becky teaching and Suzie learning, for about two weeks. Eventually Suzie got good enough that they could play one-on-one. After another week, Suzie almost actually beat her once.

Three kids joined the camp in that time, all boys. One of them looked a little bit like Tommy Benevides, which made Suzie wonder if she should go back and save him – if he was even still alive. Then she remembered Tommy’s little sister. She was too young to understand all of this, especially being a girl.

Onne day, Suzie and Becky were playing one-on-one when they heard shouting over near the southeast end of the playground. Suzie was leading 3-1 and didn’t want to stop, but Becky grabbed the ball put it under her arm and started staring with wide eyes.

“That’s not …: she said.

Suzie used a hand to shade her eyes from the sun on a sunny autumn day. She saw what looked to be an astronaut on the other side of the fence. She wiped her eyes, but the astronaut was still there. The guy was calling to them, but because of his bulky suit his words were indecipherable.

Becky, Suzie and a few of the others started walking toward him, slowly and cautiously.

“Not too close,” Becky told Suzie and the younger boys.

As they got within 50 feet, Suzie could see that it was not an astronaut suit but a *hazmat* suit. The kinds that were used during the peak of the virus.

Everyone fell silent.

“Thank … God!” they could hear a faint voice saying from inside the hazmat suit. Suzie took a few more steps and realized that it was … an *adult*. “I’ve found you,” the man was saying. “Oh, thank God … I’ve found someone.”

Stay back,” Beck said, using her arms to shield Suzie and the boys. Her voice was firm. The basketball was rolling away from her.

Brandon walked to the front of the pack. Becky grabbed him by his arm, but Brandon pulled away.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Brandon!” Becky shouted. “Be careful!”

Brandon gestured to her to be quiet.

“Tell us who you are,” he said.

The man in the suit was struggling for breath. He was using the fence to hold himself up.

“The name’s Ted Gaines,” he said through strained breathing. “*Doctor* Ted Gaines.” He stood on the other side of the fence and caught his breath before speaking again. “From U-Dub,” he said. “Medical Center.” Suzie and Becky looked at each other, each thinking the same thing. *An adult*. “I’ve been ...” the doctor continued, “I can’t believe it. I thought … I thought I was the only one.”

“What do you want?” Brandon called out.

The doctor coughed. Brandon and the others took a step back as one.

“I’m weak,” the doctor said. “I’ve been … living on my own. … Secluded. In a lab. … I was protecting myself … from the virus. … That virus, the one that’s gone now.” He coughed again. “I’m alive,” he said. “But I’ve run out … of food and … water. … I just need …”

“We can’t help you!” Avis called out. “Go away!”

The doctor pointed toward the shelves of food and jugs of water.

“I see that you’ve got-“

“GO *AWAY*!” Brandon shouted. The anger he’d had the night he struck Becky was back in his voice.

“But if I could just … could get a cup of-“

“You heard us!” Becky shouted. “We don’t want your kind! Take your virus and go!”

“But you don’t understand,” the doctor said, struggling to keep his feet. “I’m protected. .. I’ve survived it. … It’s a … It’s a miracle. … I just … I just want to be safe. … You can never be too safe.”

“No adults allowed!” Connor shouted.

Behind the hazmat suit, the doctor’s body language changed. He stood up and stuck his chest out.

“Look here,” he said. “You … you little … maggots!” He started to climb the fence, but the gloves were too cumbersome. He dropped to the grass on the other side of the fence. “Let me in there!” One of the boys, a 6-year-old named Lodi, screamed and ran away. “I can *see* the water!” the doctor shouted. “I can *see* the food! For God’s sakes! I’m a *human being*!”

Suzie walked up behind Becky and whispered: “Maybe we should just let him in. Give him some food and water, send him on his way.”

“We can’t risk it,” Becky said. “We let him in, who knows what else gets in?”

“I’m a *human* being!” the doctor was shouting. “How can you do this … to me?”

“Sir,” Brandon called out, trying to keep his voice level. Suzie noticed that he had taken another step back. Brandon’s hands were shaking. “Please,” he said, “step away from the fence.”

“How dare you!” the doctor screamed. He started fumbling with his gloves.

“What risk?” Suzie whispered. “The virus, it’s over.”

“We don’t know that,” Becky said. “Besides, he’s an adult. Who knows what-“

“Sir,” Brandon shouted, giving up on all pretense of control. “Do NOT remove your gloves. For the sake of us all, do NOT-“

The man ignored him. One glove came off. His fingers wiggled in the air, causing a whoosh of concern from the boys on the other side of the fence.

“Oh, dear God,” Becky whispered.

The other glove came free. Another kid screamed and ran away. Brandon took several steps back.

“I’ll die without food!” the doctor shouted. He grabbed the fence and tried to climb again, then stopped and wrestled off his mask. At that point, Brandon turned and ran, hiding behind the tents and one of the storage shelves.

“It’s not safe!” Becky yelled. “You’re exposing us all!”

The doctor, his wrinkly face and sweaty hair exposed, began climbing the fence again. “You’re letting me die!” he shouted.

Suzie felt fear swim through her body. Panic was all around. Kids were running and scattering. Suzie was scared – not necessarily scared of dying, or of even contracting the virus, but she was scared about what was happening. The camp, for all its faults, had a safe feel to it, and that was being compromised by this man.

“Becky, get back,” Suzie said, grabbing her friend from behind. “You’re too close.”

“I’m fifty feet away,” Becky said.

“No, you’re too *close*! Too close to 18! We can’t risk it!”

Becky looked at Suzie but shrugged her shoulders. The doctor had reached the top of the fence and was struggling to pull himself over.

POW!

With one sound, all the movement stopped. The doctor paused for a moment, his eyes bugging out, then one hand lost its grip.

“You maggots!” he yelled.

POW!

The doctor fell to the ground, lifeless. Suzie turned slowly, seeing Trick standing, with gun in hand.

“Wow,” Avis said, his mouth agape. “You’re quite a shot, Trick.”

“Where did you get *that*?” Becky shouted.

“Not important,” Trick said, lowering the gun slowly. He looked in the cartridge. “What’s important is that there are two shots left. We can’t waste them.” He set the gun down. “Now,” he said, “let’s disinfect the fence!”

No one was in a hurry to follow instructions. Even Brandon, the unappointed leader, was ducking for cover. Trick looked over at him, and Brandon shouted: “I can’t chance it! I’m turning 18 *next week*!”

Trick called the others together. The supply shelf had gloves and disinfectant. An emergency kit near the school entrance had masks. Suzie helped the others clean the fence, their hands and faces protected, while Becky started a fire in the center of the playground. In the same spot where they burned what was left of Griffey.

They used rope to pull the doctor over the fence, into a wheelbarrow, then they dumped his body, and the wheelbarrow, into the flames.

“So much for global warming,” Trick said. He shrugged. “We already tried that, anyway. Too late now.”

Black smoke billowed. Something popped in the fire. They all jumped back.

Suzie watched the cloud reach up toward the heavens. Becky walked up beside her.

“Phew,” she said. “That was close.”

Suzie nodded. She wondered if there were more close calls to come.

**CHAPTER 19**

They sat around in a circle, looking at the gun from a distance. There were 13 of them, including the three new kids but minus Griffey (death by coyote) and Connor (during the doctor scare, he disappeared, apparently having fled the camp in a panic). The gun Trick had used was in the center of the circle, laying on the asphalt.

“Really, Trick?” Becky said. “A *gun*?”

Trick threw his hands in the air in resignation.

“I found it under the mattress in somebody’s house a couple weeks ago,” he said. “Knew it might come in handy.”

“A *loaded* gun,” Charles said, shaking his head.

Trick shrugged and tugged at the tassels of his bear hat. Suzie thought of the wallet, the one the rich guy left behind.

“Is there anything else you might need to tell us about?” she asked, staring lasers at him. “Do you have any sticks of dynamite? Nuclear weapons? Maybe *a dead body*?”

“Let me think,” Trick said, looking at the sky with hand held dramatically against his chin. “Nah. Don’t think so.” He flashed a grin. “C’mon, guys. It’s just a gun.”

“A *loaded* gun,” Charles said again. “Kind of gives me the creeps that it was for … what did you say? *Two weeks*?”

“I say we’ve got no choice but to get rid of the gun,” Becky offered. “Before somebody gets hurt. That’s the first thing. Then we’ll vote on how to handle Trick. Obviously, this is a punishable offense.”

Everyone looked at Suzie.

“Hey, I may be anti-punishment,” she said, “but a gun’s a gun. We can’t ignore this.”

Brandon stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. The fire was still burning behind him, where they’d disposed of the guy in the hazmat suit.

“The only thing we’re *ignoring*,” he said, “is the most important point.”

“What’s that?” Becky asked. Everyone was watching Brandon as he paced around the outside of the circle.

“Well, for starters,” he said, “Trick’s not the bad guy here; he’s the hero. If not for that gun, who knows what could have happened?”

“Thank you!” Trick shouted, throwing his hands in the air.

“And, secondly,” Brandon Cruz continued, “this whole incident has provided a very clear warning that there are still threats out there.”

“*Threats*?” Becky said. “It’s one crazy doctor. He was the only adult who survived.”

“Oh, yeah?” Brandon said, stopping to look at her. “Are we sure of that?”

“We know that the virus killed all the adults,” Suzie said. “Well, except the one that was hiding in some secret lab while wearing a hazmat suit.”

“You know what my dad used to say about rats and pigeons?” Brandon Cruz said, beginning to pace again, this time in the other direction. “He used to say: ‘If there’s one of them, there are others.’ And he was right. There was always a nest, and another annoying pest waiting to come out.”

“So, what, we need, like, an exterminator?” Avis said. The others laughed.

“An *adult* exterminator!” one of the younger boys shouted. The laughter grew in volume.

Brandon stopped at the opening in the circle where he’d started. He waited for the laughter to die down.

“Actually, that’s right,” he said. “You may think it’s funny, but an ‘adult exterminator’ is not that far off.” The others looked at him quizzically. Brandon walked to the center of the circle and picked up the gun. Having seen his propensity for violence, Suzie felt her jaw tighten. She clenched her teeth and felt a hot flow of adrenaline rush through her body. “We don’t need *less* guns,” Brandon said, holding the pistol out while pointed at the ground. “We need *more* guns.”

The others looked around at each other. Suzie didn’t take her eyes off Brandon, there in the center of the circle. He flipped the gun around, so he was holding it by the barrel, and held it out to Trick.

Trick looked up at Brandon confused, and Brandon just nodded. Trick reached out and took the gun back.

“We need to build an artillery,” Brandon said, nodding at him. “There’s danger out there. We need to be ready.”

“Oh, c’mon, Brandon,” Becky said. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack,” he said, walking back to his seat in the circle.

“It’s dangerous,” Charles offered. “A gun? In a camp full of kids? Loaded?”

“No way, Brandon,” Suzie said, standing and shaking her head. “I’m not with you on this. Not even close.”

“Me, neither,” said Becky, standing and moving next to Suzie.

“Well, I am,” said Avis. “Everybody’s got a right to bear arms. It’s in the constitution.”

“You need the right to bear love handles, Avis,” Becky said. “Besides, all the people that wrote the constitution are long gone. We’ve got our own rules. And I think not having *guns* around *kids* should be one of them.”

“I’m with Brandon, too,” said a younger kid. “I’m scared somebody might try to get in again.” He stood up and scurried over to join Brandon and Avis.

“We can’t risk being without protection,” said a fourth kid, going to Brandon’s side.

“We can’t risk having a *loaded* gun … around a bunch of *kids*!” Charles said, standing and joining the girls.

The standoff continued that way, with group members going to stand at one side or the other, until there were five beside Brandon and five beside Suzie.

The only person still seated was Trick. He was holding the gun, looking to make sure the safety was on. The other twelve stared at him. He looked up, went back and forth with his eyes, then he snapped to attention.

“Oh, I see,” he said. “I’m the deciding vote, huh?”

“C’mon, Trick,” Suzie said. “Do the right thing.”

“I am,” Trick said. He set down the gun, then he stood up. He walked over to Brandon’s group. “I am, he repeated, looking right at Suzie.

Brandon folded his arms in triumph.

“So, it’s settled,” he said. Suzie gave him an evil look. “Now,” Brandon said, “let’s start looking around for anything else we can turn into a weapon. We’ve got to armor this place up, in case we’ve got a war on our hands.”

“For Pete’s sake,” Becky mumbled. “You sound like …”

“He sounds like,” Suzie cut in, “an *adult*.” She didn’t say it in a complimentary tone.

**CHAPTER 20**

Suzie offered to let Becky sleep in her tent that night.

“With your boyfriend being such a you-know-what and all,” Suzie said.

But Becky declined. Suzie tried to believe it wasn’t personal, that it had nothing to do with Suzie’s revelation about her sexuality, but she did understand if there may have been some awkwardness to the whole situation now.

Becky ended up sleeping next to Brandon, and Suzie lied alone in her tent wondering how a guy could have so much power over someone. The guy had hit Becky – twice! – in front of the entire camp, and she’d gone running back to him. Then he supported the idea of having a loaded gun in a camp full of children, and, again, she was right back by his side. Suzie was baffled by it all.

She wondered if, or how, the dynamic might change in the coming week. Brandon was due to turn 18 in a few days – he’d said so himself – and so, by societal terms, he was on the verge of becoming a man. An *adult*. The kind of people from which this camp was trying to protect itself. If the virus was still out there, Brandon may very well catch it. And what might that mean for the rest of them? Most important, what might it mean for Becky?

And for the fate of civilization. It took two to make a baby -- even Suzie knew that, even if she’d never tried.

Suzie lied awake, playing it all over in her head. She tried to imagine a basketball game again, one where she was the star, but it all kept coming back to Becky and Brandon.

The following day, Brandon was up early. She saw him enlisting younger boys to clean the grounds – not just with a rake and broom but with sanitized wipes and bleach. He was taking every precaution, she could see, to make sure the virus wasn’t going to be a threat. Just in case.

The majority of the days that followed were spent sanitizing the grounds and putting together weaponry. The threat had been real enough to put the boys to work. The cliché about turning boys into men was happening right before Suzie’s eyes.

On the day before Brandon’s birthday, Suzie and Becky were organizing supplies when no other boys were around within earshot. Becky was quiet and went about her business. At one point, Suzie offered a challenge of one-on-one on the basketball court.

“It’s 40 degrees outside,” Becky said without looking at her.

“C’mon, Beck. For old time’s sake. You chicken?”

“I said *no*!” Becky shot back at her, turning around to emphasize her point. Then she went back to work. She put a few more cans in a line, then pushed aside the rest of the inventory and walked briskly toward the fence. Suzie gave her a minute, then went to join her. Becky was sitting in the dirt, her knees pulled up and her forehead on top of them. A drizzle began, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“What’s up, Becky?”

Becky just shook her head, without looking up.

“C’mon,” Suzie said quietly. She touched Becky’s arm. “Something’s up.”

“I’m fine. Go away.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Suzie said. “Whenever something has gotten to me, you’ve been there. So I’m not leaving. Sisters don’t do that.”

“We’re not sisters,” Becky said, her head still down.

“Well,” Suzie said, “right now, I’m the closest you’ve got.”

Becky raised her head, looked at Suzie and wiped away a tear. She forced a smile, then looked out at the yard. A group of boys were busy turning broom handles and lawn-mower blades into weapons.

“I guess I’m scared,” Becky said. “About tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” Suzie asked.

Becky looked at her with red eyes. “Brandon’s birthday,” she said. “His eighteenth.”

“Oh, yeah.” Suzie scooted closer to her. “I don’t think anything’s going to happen,” she said. “Anything bad.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t *know* that,” Becky said. She wiped another tear from her cheek. “I know Brandon can be a real jerk. I know that.” She grinned through her tears, trying to blink them away. “If there were options better than Trick and Avis here, then maybe I’d leave him and choose somebody else. Somebody …”

“Better.”

“I guess.” Becky fell backward, against the fence. The rain was starting to fall harder. She pulled her hair up into a bun. “Love is complicated, Suze,” she continued. “It’s confusing enough, then you throw this whole world-is-ending thing into everything, and it’s pretty much impossible. How are you supposed to love, truly *love*, with all this going on?”

“All I know,” Suzie said, “is that this is when we need it the most.”

“Yeah, thanks, Ed Shearan,” Becky said, grinning out of the corner of her mouth. “We need hot meals and hospitals and school and electricity and Smart phones and *parents* right now, too, but none of that is coming to find us, either.”

“Point taken.”

“I just don’t know, Suze. I don’t know what I’ll do if …” Becky took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose another person I love. A girl can only take so much.”

Suzie took her hand. Becky started to pull away, but them she looked Suzie in the eye and let it happen.

“Do you know what my dad used to tell me?” Suzie said. “He used to say: ‘God will never give you more than you can handle.’ I think that’s true.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in God.”

Suzie bit her wet lip. She looked up at the falling rain.

“I did,” she said, “back then.”

“What about now?”

Suzie sighed. She looked at Becky, then her head dropped. “I’m not so sure,” she said. “But I do know that I’ve been given a lot. A *lot*. Bad stuff. We all have. I lost both my parents. You lost yours, and your sister. That’s a lot to take.” She looked up, smiled and squeezed Becky’s hand. “But we’re handling it.”

Becky nodded. “Yes, we are.” She wiped raindrops from her face.

“Look at it this way,” Suzie said, letting go of Becky’s hand. “I’ve got a few Jewish friends, and they had older brothers and sisters who were having Bar Mitzvah’s and Bat Mizvah’s at 13 years old. You know why? Because in their culture, that’s the age when you become an adult.”

Becky nodded her head across the yard.

“You know, Avis over there, he’s Jewish,” she said. “Are you telling me *he’s* a *man*?”

They giggled.

“Point proven,” Suzie said. “That man-baby over there, technically, he’s an adult. By his culture’s standards, right?”

Becky was still giggling. “I guess.”

“Well,” Suzie said, “he’s not dead. The virus didn’t get him. So what’s to say, just because you’re jerky boyfriend turns 18 tomorrow, that he’s officially an adult? You think the *virus* is charting that stuff?”

“It took my sister at 19,” Becky said.

“That, I can’t explain. No one can. Except maybe Dr. whatever-his-name was, and he’s just ashes right now. What I’m saying is, I don’t think we have to worry about getting sick on our 18th birthday. Brandon’s not going to die tomorrow, and you’re not going to die in the spring.”

“We’ll see,” Becky said, unconvinced.

They stared out at the boys in silence. Suzie wished they could stay like this, side-by-side, away from the others, forever. Not in a romantic way. She liked having a sister. A sister who just happened to be beautiful.

They stood up and started walking toward a covered area.

“Let me ask you something,” Suzie said. “Is this also about that other thing?”

“What thing?”

“You know, the whole have-to-get-pregnant-to-save-the-world thing. Are you worried that if the virus does take Brandon, you may never get that chance?”

Becky stopped and turned to look at Suzie, her face turning red and her eyes glowing as she tried to suppress a smile. She looked around, making sure no one was within earshot, then broke out in a grin.

“About that?” she said. “I’m not supposed to tell you this, because Brandon and I wanted to share the news together, but …” She put her hands over her mouth. It was the happiest Suzie had ever seen her.

“You’re *pregnant*,” Suzie whispered.

“I’m pregnant,” Becky said.

And they hugged like sisters. Becky broke into tears of joy, and Suzie couldn’t fight back her own waterworks.

As they held each other, Becky whispered: “Mind if she, or he, calls you Aunt Suze?”

Suzie squeezed her even tighter. “I’d like that,” she said.

**CHAPTER 21**

The next day was filled with joy and celebration, despite the driving rain that tried like hell to wash away the happiness. Brandon welcomed in his 18th birthday with cake for breakfast – for everyone. He announced that he felt as healthy as ever, and to prove it he built the pulpit in a covered area and danced on top of it.

The others danced around him, singing songs from their past. They started with 50 Cent’s “In Da Club,” which morphed into a shouting version of Pink’s “Get This Party Started,” and then they were singing songs from more recent days, songs like “Dance Monkey” and the Jonas Brothers and Lizzo. The girls danced along with them, and the party eventually spilled out into the rain. They gathered in a circle around Brandon, dancing and splashing, holding their faces in the air to catch raindrops on their tongues.

At one point, Becky danced into the center, grabbed Brandon and kissed him on the lips. The boys all groaned and threw things at Brandon. Even Suzie couldn’t help but to smile. Becky let her hair down and kicked off her shoes. In so many ways, Suzie wished that she could be like her. When they’d first met, the only thing that Suzie envied about Becky was her boyfriend. That became the only thing Suzie didn’t envy about her.

Gradually, a circle formed around Becky and Brandon. Suzie and the other 10 boys danced around them, chanting.

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lolly! Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!*

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lolly! Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!”*

Trick was the first to sing solo, chanting: “I know a guy, his name is Brandon!”

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo.”*

“Becky’s bra is what his hand’s in!”

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!”*

They all laughed wildly and then kept chanting.

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lolly! Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!*

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lolly! Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!”*

Avis sang next: “I know a girl, her name is Becky!”

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly Lo.”*

“Her man is ugly, but she’s sexy!”

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!”*

More laughter. They kept dancing in a circle. Suzie stepped up next.

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lolly! Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!*

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lolly! Hey, Lolly, Lolly, Lo!*

“I know a guy his name is Trick!”

“*Hey, Lolly, Lolly Lo.”*

“Sometimes he’s nice but usually he’s a … y’know.”

It brought down the house. The boys were cackling and pointing at Trick, unable to finish the song. Even Brandon couldn’t contain himself. He dropped to the ground, into a puddle, and laughed uncontrollably. A group of five guys picked up Suzie and carried her in the air, around the circle, while Trick mimed being knocked out cold in a prize fight.

The rain picked up. They all continued laughing as they ran toward the covered area. Becky retrieved towels for each of them; she shared hers with Brandon.

Avis shook droplets of water out of his hair, like a dog, and pointed at Suzie.

“You *killed* it, girl!” he shouted.

“That was pretty good,” Trick said, shaking his head while adding, “for a girl.”

Charles grabbed warm bottles of root beer and passed them around. They talked and laughed for about an hour before a lull overtook them and they all sat down, listening the hail hammer the aluminum roof above the covered area.

Brandon sat with his arm around Becky, who was a few feet away from Suzie. Charles and Avis were playing rock-paper-scissors next to her, while Trick was teaching three of the younger kids how to pretend to pull half the index finger off one hand. One kid had scrambled into the rain to pee through the fence, while another lied on his back, too tired to move. The last two were sipping grape sodas and making faces at each other.

“Psst, Becky,” Suzie whispered. Her wet hair hung down over her eyes. Becky’s was pulled back into a ponytail that hung over one shoulder. “This isn’t so bad, huh?”

“Who needs adults?” Becky said with a wink, then she took a drag off her root beer and bit into a candy cigarette.

“Guys! Guys!” the kid who went for a pee started yelling. He was pointing toward the street at the other side of the fence. They all stood up in a line, straining to see. Suzie stood on her tiptoes, looking between two kids’ shoulders.

Out on the street, a dark mass moved behind the parked cars. Not until there was an opening did she realize what they were looking at: a massive grizzly bear.

“Whoa!” a few of the boys gasped.

The bear didn’t seem to notice. It kept moving, and within seconds it was out of view.

“That has to be,” Brandon said, “the biggest living thing I’ve ever seen up close.”

Suzie was also mesmerized by the beauty of the animal. But when she sat back down, she shuddered at the thought of wildlife, taking over the city.

“Guess what,” Trick said as the kids went back to their spots and started sitting down. “*We’re* the endangered species now And trust me: all those bears and coyotes and bats sure aren’t making any protected lists.”

Avis looked over at the shed where they’d started storing the homemade artillery.

“Maybe we’ll need that stuff for something bigger than an adult,” he said.

“Hey,” Beck said, “that bear’s not hurting anyone.”

“Not yet,” said Avis.

They went back to listening to the rain.

“You hear this one?” Trick asked after a minute or two of silence. “Two guys are out in the woods when they stumble upon a grizzly bear. One guy starts tying his shoes. The other guy says: ‘You’re going to try to outrun a *bear*?’ The other guy finishes tying his shoes and answers: ‘I don’t have to. I just have to outrun *you*.’” Nobody laughs. “Get it?”

“Not really,” one of the younger kids said.

“Well,” said Avis, “you missed out. It was *bear*y funny.”

One kid laughed. Another threw and empty cup at Avis’ head.

“Terrible,” Brandon said, but he laughed anyway.

“Yeah,” Charles said. “I *bear*ly laughed.”

“Boo!”

“Hey,” Trick said. “Leave him alone. He can’t *bear* to get booed!”

They all laughed, although Suzie didn’t understand why

“Why need dads?” she said. “We’ve got plenty of dad jokes.”

They laughed some more then went back to listening to the gentle sounds of the decreasing rainfall.

“Anybody got an extra shirt?” Avis called out.

“How come?”

“The grizzly needs it. He was *bear* naked.”

With that, the others started dumping root beer on Avis and playfully poking at him.

“Social distance!” he called out. “Give me my six feet!”

All the boys crowded him, every one except Brandon, and jumped up and down, showering Avis with root beer, grape soda and chips. Suzie thought they’d go on like that forever, and she giggled then looked over at Brandon and Becky, who were staring lovingly into each other’s eyes. She felt a pang of jealousy – not because of her initial attraction to Brandon or her later curiosity with Becky’s beauty, but simply due to what they had together. For better or worse, they had someone to love. They were the only two people in the whole camp who did.

They kissed each other briefly, then Brandon wiped off his knees and stood up. He tapped two empty root-beer bottles together to gain everyone’s attention.

The others slowly backed off Avis and gathered around. Avis shook the root beet out of his hair and licked his upper lip.

“I want to start by thanking everyone for making this day such a memorable one,” Brandon said. “Thanks to you, my 18th birthday has been a blast. It’s been a long time since we’ve had something to celebrate, and I wanted you all to know how much it means to me to have felt so much love.”

“Here! Here!” someone called out.

“It goes without saying that, despite the dire circumstances, we’ve become something of a family,” Brandon continued. “We came together under the philosophy *We Need Each Other*, and I’ll be darned if we haven’t lived that motto. I couldn’t imagine doing through this with anyone else.”

They all cheered at that, even Suzie.

“I do want you to know that the celebration is not over,” Brandon said as the cheering died down. “In fact, it’s just beginning. As we stand here to celebrate my 18th birthday, we also need to celebrate a birthday that’s on the horizon.” Becky stood, smiling. He put his arm around her. “I’d like to announce,” he said, grinning like a world champion, “that Becky and I are pregnant!”

A hush fell over the crowd. Suzie was the only one who wasn’t shocked by the news. A full ten seconds passed before anyone said a word.

“Well, holy baloney on lettuce and rye,” said Trick, the first to break the awed silence. “There’s gonna be a baby in camp. THE FUTURE OF MANKIND LIVES!”

They all shouted and wrapped Brandon and Becky in a group hug, hopping in unison as they howled with glee. At one point, Charles broke off and found a pack of stale Swisher Sweets on one of the shelves. They all took one and lit up, even Suzie. She coughed and gagged at the horrible cigar taste, but she continued to celebrate with the others.

They danced and sang, well into the night. It was quite a celebration to see, one that lasted well past midnight and into the early hours of the next day.

Suzie fell asleep with a smile on her face, feeling a part of something for the first time in years. Exhaustion overtook her, and sleep came easy; her dreams were vibrant and detailed.

The jubilance echoed through the night, up into the stars and on through the darkness.

When Suzie awoke the next morning, all joy evaporated. Her hair was wet not with rain or soda but with sweat. Her body was trembling.

Suzie awoke with a fever.

**CHAPTER 22**

She woke up in a pool of sweat, confused and disoriented. She couldn’t remember her last dream, but it had let her with a racing heart and panicky thoughts. Her mouth was dry, her throat sore.

Suzie stifled a cough and kicked off her blanket. The inside of her tent seemed to be moving slowly around her. She reached up and touched her forehead. The heat scared her.

She remembered when she was young, and her mother used the back of her hand to feel Suzie’s head. Like a magician, she’d been able to detect a problematic temperature, skin to skin. And yet when young Suzie had reached up and felt her own head, she could feel nothing. This was not like that; she could feel the undeniable heat.

One time, and only one time, when Suzie’s mother was sick with the virus down in the shelter, Suzie reached out to feel her forehead. Her mother grabbed her by the wrist, preventing her from touching her skin. “*Never* do that again,” her mother had said. “Until this is all over, you’re *not* to touch me.” Suzie’s eyes had welled up with tears, having heard the anger in her mother’s voice. Her lip quivered. Her mother just pulled up the blanket and turned away.

Now Suzie was the sick one, and she’d never felt so alone. Her body shivered, despite the heat. She wanted someone to hold her, someone to tell her that everything would be okay. It had been a long time since someone had told her that – so long that she wasn’t sure she’d believe them.

Suzie’s tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Water. She needed water. She coughed. It took all her strength just to sit up. She coughed again.

She remembered her mother’s cough. How long did it take to go away? A week? A month? A few months? Suzie couldn’t even imagine feeling like this for such a long stretch of time. If she believed in a God, she’d have asked him to take her now, to spare the others.

She got to her knees, feeling the drainage of mucous. She broke into a coughing fit and stumbled out of her tent. Two little boys were standing a few feet away, staring. They both stepped back. One of them ran off.

“Water,” Suzie whispered. She coughed again, this time a phlegmy, wet cough, and the other boy ran away. She was alone.

Suzie thought of the doctor. The one in the hazmat suit. She felt his helplessness. No one was there to help. Everyone had gone away. She was totally alone.

*You become a mother, and that’s all you are*, her mother had said. *You protect your kids.* Suzie, on all fours, whispered: “Oh, yeah, Mom? Where are you *now*?”

Another cough snuck up, ejecting through her throat and out of her mouth.

“Are you okay?” a voice called out. She looked up slowly and saw Brandon standing about 20 yards away, outside his tent. He was shouting. “You’re white as a sheet!”

“Water,” she said.

Brandon nodded. One of the boys ran to fill a cup, brought it back to Brandon, then stood next to him. Brandon took three steps forward, set it down, and backed up.

“It’s too far,” Suzie said hoarsely. “I need …” She coughed for the fourth time. The mucous in her chest was unrelenting. It came up again, this time into her nasal passage. She tried to fight it back. The germs whirled inside of her. The virus was trying to release. She reached up to pinch her nose, but it was too late. A wet, violent sneeze flew out, sending particles into the air. Liquid contamination.

Heads popped out of tents. Fear danced in all the boys’ eyes. Brandon put out his hand and waved them back into their tents.

“You’re sick!” he called out to Suzie. She’d seen him this scared only once before, and that was when the doctor showed up in the hazmat suit. “You’re sick!” he yelled again. *Dying*, she thought. There was no doubt. Brandon was clearly thinking. He had a hand on his chin and was looking down at the pavement. He kicked a pebble that rolled into the space between them.

“You can’t stay!” Brandon said. “It’s too … dangerous!”

Suzie started crawling, slowly, toward the cup of water. Brandon backed away, quickly.

“I’m sorry!” Brandon shouted.

Suzie reached the cup and gulped it down. She immediately wanted another.

“Please,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

Suzie held out the empty cup. Brandon turned and walked away, back toward his tent. No one else came to help her. The cup fell to the ground.

Brandon crouched down to go into his tent, then turned to look at her. “You have to go,” he said.

She took in a deep breath. “Says who?” she managed.

He stood up again and folded his arms. “The society,” he said. “It’s for the good of all of us. It’s for the good of humanity, what’s left of it.”

Suzie found the strength to get to one knee. She looked up at him and grinned.

“Did we … vote?” she said.

Brandon smiled back. He was the teacher, and she was the pupil. She had demonstrated a lesson learned. His smile faded. His mouth shrunk into a wince. She could see how this pained him. He did have some good in him, after all. She knew he didn’t want her to die alone. He just didn’t want her to contaminate the camp. There was no in-between.

Things were so much more complex now than they had been when the adults were around. Suzie’s father, in some regards, was one of the lucky ones. There were still available hospital beds; he died in one. Suzie’s mother died in an underground shelter. Tens of thousands died in the streets. Most died alone. As the virus spread, hospitals became morgues. Funerals were banned because of the rule against social gatherings. Hundreds of thousands ended up dying silently, without anyone realizing they were gone.

“Okay, let’s vote then!” Brandon shouted. “All in favor of allowing this sick girl, carrying the deadly virus that wiped out all of our parents, to stay among us, say, Aye!”

The silence sapped whatever strength Suzie had left in her.

“You could have phrased it better,” she whispered.

“You heard them,” Brandon said. “Please, let us be. Give us our health.”

“I don’t understand why I’m being punished,” she said.

“You’re not,” Brandon said, folding his arms. “Maybe that’s the lesson you can take with you, a lesson that your parents apparently never taught you.” He nodded. “When you don’t get what you want, it’s not necessarily a punishment. Sometimes we have to look outside ourselves, at who else is being affected.”

Suzie pushed off the asphalt and found it in herself to stand. Her legs were wobbly.

“Where should …?” She coughed into her hand. “Where should I go?

“Away!” one of the others shouted. It sounded like Trick.

Brandon pulled the top of his shirt up over his mouth, like one of those masks all the adults were wearing before the virus took them all away.

“Please,” he said through the fabric. Then he turned and walked away.

**CHAPTER 23**

Suzie stumbled back to her tent, retrieved her picture frame, wrapped herself in a blanket and grabbed Ricky Ricardo. She headed for the opening in the fence, taking careful steps.

The only way in, the only way out.

She stopped only once to look back. Brandon was back in his tent now. She could see Becky’s head poking out, watching her. Suzie wanted to wave, but her arms were full.

She coughed and continued on. Her head felt heavy. She considered going back for aspirin but then thought better of it. She was, after all, a walking virus. Children were supposed to be immune – but if she’d contracted it, how could the others not be scared? She remembered what they had done to the doctor. She thought of the sound of the gun going off, of the popping flames in the fire after the doctor’s body had been dispensed and turned into ashes that floated off into the sky.

She reached the fence. It opened easily. She did not secure it behind her. The coyotes wouldn’t need to get in; they’d find her first. The thought, somehow, brought comfort. She remembered the joke about the two guys and the bear. *I don’t have to run faster than the bear. I just have to outrun you*. She understood the joke now. She chuckled under her breath. It turned into a deep, painful cough that burned her lungs.

Sweat dripped down her cheeks, onto her chin and down into Ricky Ricardo’s fur. She didn’t want to leave Ricky behind. That’s what her mother had done. Always, there was someone left behind.

She walked along the fenceline, on the south end of the playground. She could smell someone starting a fire and could feel the eyes of a dozen kids watching her go.

“Suze!” one of them called out. She knew without looking. The only remaining female in the camp.

Her head down, Suzie stopped. Becky came running toward the fence but was careful not to come too close.

“Suzie, I’m sorry,” Becky said. “I wish …”

Suzie looked up. Becky was standing on the other side of the fence, her hands folded in front of her. Suzie imagined this was what it was like to get a visitor in prison.

“You know I don’t want to make you leave,” Becky said. “I don’t want this. No one should have to be alone.” Suzie coughed into her hand. “We can’t risk it,” Becky continued. “*I* can’t risk it. I’m going to be a mother. If it were up to me, I may have raised my hand back there. I may have said something. But I’m thinking for two now.” Becky’s head dropped. “Maybe one day you’ll understand.”

*You become a mother, that’s all you are.*

“Today is that day,” Suzie said.

“Huh?”

“Today. I understand today. I get it. You can’t risk-“

“You’ll understand,” Becky said. “You’ll *really* understand. Someday. When you’re a …” The phrase hung in the air. Becky stopped, as if she’d remembered something. She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

For what? For making her leave? For the likelihood that Suzie would never be with a man, would never see what it’s like to be a mother? Or because maybe Suzie won’t live long enough to make that decision?

“I’m sorry, too,” Suzie said. Becky started crying. “I don’t want to go,” Suzie added. “But I have to.”

“Yes, you do.”

Suzie continued walking away. Becky called out to her one last time. “I can’t believe you’re leaving me with all these *boys*,” she joked. When Suzie looked back, she was grinning.

“They need you,” Suzie said, continuing her walk. “More than I ever could.”

“That’s not true!” Becky called out. “We need each other. We *all* need each other!”

Suzie smiled but kept walking. She wandered through the neighborhood south of the school and down toward the cemetery. She thought that if she were going to die, that would be a perfect place for it to happen. But when she reached the fence that surrounded it, she felt this overwhelming desire to keep going. She thought of a phrase that her father had planted in her from a young age: “Babies fall down. Big girls get up and keep going!” He’d say it often over the years, when she got knocked down on the basketball court or came home crying after being teased at school. “Babies fall down. Big girls get up and keep going.”

She walked past the cemetery, down to the Burke-Gilman trail. She found a working water fountain and cut up to the south end of the ravine. She walked through the wooded area, finding a tree with wide, long branches that made it look like a teepee. She crawled inside, lied down, and waited for whatever fate awaited her.

She must have slept for hours, because daylight was already fading by the time she opened her eyes. A light drizzle was happening outside the tree branches. She heard something chomping nearby, and she raised her head to see a bunny, about two feet away. It was one of the largest rabbits she’d ever seen. Its mouth was chewing rapidly, making the whiskers twitch, and its one black eye was staring at Suzie. She sat up, then the bunny hopped away.

Suzie remembered the spring when the rabbits first came. She hadn’t seen a single rabbit for her entire life, then one year they were everywhere. The coyotes followed. The birds became more plentiful by the end of that summer; the geese stuck around until late fall. The animals had come to inherit the earth, and nobody had even noticed.

Suzie thought of the grizzly bear. How it had lumbered along the street next to the elementary school. She heard something rustle in the bushes nearby. Something inside of her stirred, and she forced herself to stand. *Big girls get up and keep going!*

Suzie walked through the rain, shivering and coughing, up the path between the trees. She saw another rabbit and a dead dog. She walked through an alley and passed what looked to be a dead human. The sky above her continued to darken and closed in on her. Around another corner, she saw another body, only this time she got a clear look. It was a woman, with rubber gloves and a hospital mask over her mouth. Flies were all around her.

Suzie walked the quiet streets, seeing no movement. She reached The Ave, which was once a hotbed of restaurants and shops, a place where college students from U-Dub drank and laughed and flirted. Suzie and Emma had walked the Ave once with Emma’s mother, marveling at the sounds and movement. Emma had commented how *cool* it would be “to be a college kid.” A dream that would never happen.

Suzie reached a bus stop, where she could get temporary refuge from the drizzling rain. The bench was overgrown by weeds. Suzie recalled seeing a homeless man sleeping at a bus stop once, in the middle of the day, and she’d thought of the indignity that humans could let each other suffer like that. Alone. How could you just leave someone alone like that? It was one of the mysteries that Suzie would never grow old enough to understand.

She laid her blanket on the weeds beneath the bench and lied down to rest. She squeezed Ricky Ricardo with all the strength she had left, vowing not to let him go. She coughed and sneezed. Her head throbbed.

She remembered the words of a song playing on a CD in her dad’s car once.

“*Death is just the moment/When the dying ends.*”

**CHAPTER 24**

Her father came to her first, his hair longer than she remembered, his shirt white and his khaki pants rolled up past his ankles. He wore no shoes.

“We’re not ready,” he whispered. He blew her a kiss, then he faded away.

A bus pulled up, the one her mother took to the law office every morning. The doors opened. Her mother looked out, reached out her hand, then the bus doors stared to close.

“Not yet!” her mother called out as the glass doors closed.

There were dozens of others, all adults, surrounding Suzie. They were careful not to get to close. No children were anywhere to be found. The adults walked with slumped shoulders, with hollow faces and empty eyes, like zombies walking through the streets. No one spoke. No one smiled. No one looked at Suzie.

Of all the pain left behind on earth, it was nothing compared to the suffering that seemed to be taking place here, where the adults lingered without children. She could see it on their faces. She could feel it in the air.

Someone grabbed her from behind. She turned. Emma’s mother pulled her hand back.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have.” Emma’s mother was a vibrant, beautiful woman, with straight blond hair that always looked shiny and clean. But on this day, her hair was a shade darker. It was frizzled and covered part of her hollow face. Between the strands, Suzie could see just one eye – she’d never seen her without makeup. “I forgot,” Emma’s mother said, referring to the rule about touching. Emma’s mom looked both ways, saw that no one was watching them, then she leaned forward and whispered: “I have a message.”

“A *message*?”

“For Emma.” She closed her eye, the only one Suzie could see. Suzie remembered Emma’s mother always smelling nice, but on this day she could not smell anything. She struggled to look at her. “Every day of the week,” Emma’s mother said, “and twice on Sunday.”

“What does that …” Suzie started, but Emma’s mother had faded away. She simply dissolved, like they do in the movies.

Like they *did* in the movies.

Suzie turned around just in time to see another bus, pulling up to the stop. The doors opened.

“Not here,” her mother said.

*You still love me, right?* Suzie tried to say the words, but she did not hear them come out.

The doors closed. Suzie’s mother was talking again, behind the glass. Suzie could not hear. Suzie’s mother banged at the window of the bus. She ran down the aisle. She stood at the fire exit, slapping open palms against the glass as she stared at Suzie with large eyes.

“Not here!” she shouted. “Not …”

Suzie awoke, still lying in the bus stop. She was thinking about the dream, and then she was thinking about the last time she’d seen her mother. How she had found her in the doorway of that grocery store, how she’d carried her empty, lifeless body to the cemetery. How she’d dug a grave with her hands and had lowered her into the earth.

No one would be around to do the same for Suzie.

She heard an unfamiliar sound. Through the night, she could see lights. She felt disoriented. Was she still dreaming? She looked to her right and saw the headlights of a car, moving slowly down The Ave. As it passed, she stood up and strained to see inside. The car was black, and so were the windows. Whoever was driving hit the gas, and the car sped off into the night.

She could hear the engine in the distance.

She thought about Emma’s mother. She realized she needed to find Emma. Now, she had a message for her.

**CHAPTER 25**

Suzie walked along the busline, back up past Cowan Park and the zipline she used to ride with Emma when they were kids. She walked past the abandoned fruit stand, where Emma and Suzie used to buy peaches, and what used to be the high school, where they never got to go to school. She carried her photograph and the stuffed hippo against her chest and turned onto 65th, walking slowly down the middle of the once-busy street. She found an open garage door, and inside she came upon two plastic bottles of water. She slammed them down, one after the other. She rummaged around, looking for food, realizing that she’d need to fend for herself now, for however long she had left. She realized that she was not just searching for food, but also for weapons.

She coughed, for the first time in about an hour. Her cough was dissipating. She didn’t feel as warm. Suzie kicked open a door leading into the house and went inside. She found a pantry; she drank a can of soup and ate stale tortilla chips. She found more water and went into the bathroom and looked through the medicine cabinet. She found a bottle of cough medicine and a bottle of pills. Inside the bottle, she saw about 20 pills. She wondered what would happen if she took them all. Would she see her parents again? Then she remembered Emma. She had a message to deliver. Putting the cap back on the bottle, she tossed it aside, took a sip of cough medicine and placed that bottle in her pocket for later.

Suzie went back out on the empty street, feeling a little better. She remembered how the virus had ebbed and flowed in the first days of her father’s sickness. By Day 3, they’d all thought he was out of the woods. By Day 7, her mother took her home, fearing the contagion. And she never saw him again.

Suzie kept on, crossing 25th and turning north, toward Emma’s house. Her pace quickened. She was almost running, filled with anticipation.

Once she reached Emma’s street, Suzie felt an unwavering sense of dread. So much time had passed. Could she really expect to find her? She turned away, but she had nowhere else to go. She *had* to know.

Suzie walked slowly up the street and stood in front of Emma’s house. A loose shutter hung off one of her bedroom windows on the second floor, threatening to fall. Emma’s mother’s garden, always immaculate, was overgrown with weeds. Chewy, the family dog, laid motionless under a bush. Suzie swallowed hard.

Slowly, carefully, she moved forward.

“Emma?” she called out.

The only sound came from the loose shutter, squeaking in the wind. She took a few more steps, onto the front steps. “Emma? It’s me, Suzie.”

The front door was wide open. The lock was broken. She walked inside and looked around, seeing that the kitchen had been cleaned out of any available food.

“Emma?”

The house felt almost as familiar as hers. A part of Suzie fully expected Emma to appear at the top of the stair, with her hair braided and a smile on her face and a joke for the ready. Another part of Suzie, the rational part, knew she’d never see Emma again.

The stairs creaked under her feet. The wind blew through an open window upstairs, whistling out to her like a ghost. Suzie continued to creep up toward the heavens. The late-morning light shone in through clear glass. Emma’s bedroom door was open.

“Emma?”

She stopped and waited for an answer. She could hear the squeak of the shutter outside. The sunlight from an open window at the top of the stairs blinded her. She used her arm to shade her eyes and continued on. The floor creaked under her as she turned to face the bedroom. She stepped forward and saw something on the bed.

A body. Motionless. On Emma’s bed.

**CHAPTER 26**

Suzie sat cross-legged on the floor of Emma’s bedroom, playing with her Strawberry Shortcake doll. A few feet away, Emma pulled books from her shelf, looking for the latest Mercy Watson.

“Alexa, play Katy Perry!” Emma said, without looking up.

The first few notes of “Roar” came on, and 6-year-old Suzie immediately tossed the doll aside and stood, ready to dance. Emma found *Mercy Watson: Something Wonky Goes This Way*, set it on the chair, then joined Suzie on the dance floor of her bedroom.

“*I’ve got the eye of the tiger!*”

They joined hands, raising them in the air as they sang. This was before the germs and the virus and the social distancing and the stock-market crash and the dead parents and the dismantling of society. This was when the biggest problem in either of their live was this: Katy Perry, or Bruno Mars?

“You’re gonna hear me ro-o-o-oar!!” they shouted. Emma’s big brother banged on the wall. No, *he* was the biggest problem in either of their lives.

When the song ended, they fell onto the floor, breathing heavily.

“I *LOVE* that song,” Emma said.

“I love Katy Perry,” Suzie said.

Her brother banged on the wall again. “Katy Perry sucks!” he yelled.

“*He* sucks,” Emma whispered, and they both giggled. The next song started. “Alexa, stop!” Emma called out. She grabbed her Mercy Watson book. “Treehouse?” she asked.

Suzie picked up Strawberry Shortcake and took her over to a dollhouse. “It’s cold out,” she said. “Let’s stay here.”

“My room’s boring.”

“I like your room.”

“I do, too,” Emma said. “But I spend, like, *every* night here. Can we just go to the treehouse?”

“Not right now,” Suzie said.

Emma grabbed Strawberry Shortcake out of her hands. “Then you can’t play with my dolls!”

It was their first fight. It was a ridiculously silly fight. Unless you’re a 6-year-old girl. To every other human being, a spat over not wanting to play in the treehouse would seem asinine. To every 6-year-old girl, it seems totally reasonable.

“Why are you-?” Suzie started.

“If you’re not gonna do what *I* want to do, then you can go *home*!”

Suzie felt a tear well up in her eye. Her lip quivered.

“Don’t, Suzie.”

But Suzie did. The tears flowed. Emma sat on the bed, her face to the wall, and read her book. Ten minutes passed. Emma’s mom came in, dressed in a white blouse and a red vest, her straight blond hair shining in the bedroom light.

“What’s going on here?” she asked.

Suzie folded her arms. “I want to go home,” she said softly.

Two minutes later, they were walking to the end of the block, turning onto 58th Avenue. Emma trailed behind her mother and Suzie. Emma was pouting. Whenever Suzie glanced back, Emma looked away.

When they got to Suzie’s house, the tears were welling up again. Suzie ran into the house, looking for her father. He took her in his arms and asked what was wrong. There was a knock on the door. Emma’s mother. Emma was standing on the sidewalk, arms folded.

“Hey,” Suzie’s dad said. “What’s going on?”

Emma’s mother looked embarrassed. Suzie had never seen her like that.

“It’s Emma,” Emma’s mother said. “She, um, doesn’t want to go home without saying a proper goodbye.”

Suzie appeared in the doorway. She looked out at Emma, who forced herself to make eye contact. Suzie walked out onto the lawn.

“I want a hug,” Emma grumbled.

“Why?” Suzie asked.

“Because we always hug,” Emma said. She walked across the lawn, her arms at her sides, then reached out and hugged her friend. “There.”

Then Emma and her mother left.

That was what childhood used to be like. It would never be that way again.

**CHAPTER 27**

Suzie stood in the doorway of Emma’s room, feeling something pushing against her from behind. Something that wasn’t there. Her chest felt tight. She coughed into her hand, then wiped her hand on her leg. Her head still hurt. The fever was decreasing, but it was still there.

“Emma?” she whispered. She took a step forward, across the bedroom floor that once served as a dance floor to 6-year-old girls.

She could see that the body on the bed was too tall to be Emma. Then she realized she hadn’t seen Emma in two years. The body wasn’t moving. For the first time, Suzie noticed the smell.

She stepped closer. She reached out. The fever already had her; it couldn’t get Suzie again. The body was cold. Suzie turned it over. Emma’s mother’s face was covered by her scraggly, undyed hair. Suzie gagged but held down whatever food was inside of her.

She stepped back, looked around the room. She searched under the bed and in the closet. She ran downstairs, looked under every cushion, behind every door. She even checked the basement.

Emma was gone.

Clutching the photograph and stuffed hippo, Suzie left the house, walked down the sidewalk, and headed down the hill on 58th. She got halfway to the bottom when she was overcome by the belief that Emma was following her. Just like all those years ago. She turned quickly, but no one was there. Tears filled her eyes, and an emptiness washed over her. She had the same thought that she’d had all those years ago, when they’d had their first, and last, argument: that she would never see Emma again. This time, it wouldn’t end up with a hug.

*We always hug. There.*

Suzie was fully engulfed in a sobbing fit by the time she got home. The weather had turned cold, and Suzie knew she’d have to spend the night in the one safe place, in the one spot she never wanted to see again.

The shelter.

The door was open. She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. If the virus was going to take her, it might as well be there.

Except as she cleared the tears and pulled her hair away from her eyes, Suzie noticed something else. The fever was gone. A 24-hour flu. Kids got them all the time. Back in the day, they were as common as … well, the common cold.

Suzie used her hand to feel around on her forehead. No heat. She felt *normal*. She hadn’t had the virus, after all.

The wind blew, and Suzie felt a chill over her body. Not a fevery chill; a *normal* chill.

*Not yet*, her parents had said.

Not yet.

Suzie smiled, even though she didn’t know what to do next. She felt alone again. Her familiar enemy.

She looked across the street, toward the Benevides house. There was no movement. She turned and looked at her front door.

PROPERTY VOIDED, VIRAL INTRUSTION.

She walked up the front stairs, peeled off the sign, and crumpled it up, leaving it on the front mat.

Suzie was about to walk back down the stairs when she saw something in the mailbox. A yellow piece of paper. She pulled it out.

Written across the front:

**AN OASIS! YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

**THERE ARE OTHERS. COME TO THE**

**HUB ON THE UNIVERSITY OF**

**WASHINGTON CAMPUS. AN OASIS!**

Suzie didn’t understand. She turned the paper over and saw writing on the other side. It was handwritten:

Suzie:

If you’re still out there, if you’re still alive, come here! There are a bunch of us! We all found each other! There’s food! Water! Beds! Everything I need! … except you.

Please, meet me there.

Praying for you,

Emma

Suzie dropped the flier onto the grass. She broke into tears again. Tears of joy.

**CHAPTER 28**

Suzie arrived in darkness.

The Hub was right where she’d remembered, near the center of campus. Her father used to take Suzie and Emma to the bowling alley there every few weeks. She’d walked along the bus line, until she was about a quarter-mile away and could hear the sounds of laughter and shouting. Suzie walked faster the rest of the way. From that point, even a child could have figured out how to get there.

Two teenage girls were outside smoking cigarettes. They stopped talking as Suzie approached. Their eyes got wide. One of the girls dropped her cigarette and stomped it out.

“Are you *new*?” the girl with the cigarette asked.

Suzie nodded. She was out of breath.

“Wow. How did you …? I mean, this long?” Suzie shrugged. The girl smiled, then held out her cigarette. “Smoke?”

“It’s okay,” the other girl said. “Your mom’s not gonna find out. Promise.”

The two girls laughed.

“I’m thirteen,” Suzie said. The girls stopped laughing. The one who was offering the cigarette looked at it, then pushed it back toward Suzie.

“Yeah, there are no laws here, kid,” the girl said. “I mean, there are rules. But no laws. This is the Oasis. You know there are no adults here, right?”

“Do you know Emma?” Suzie blurted out.

The girl put the cigarette back in her pack and took a drag off the one in her hand.

“Lots of Emmas here,” she said, then she blew out smoke into a cloud. She turned to the other girl. “Four or five of them that I can think of, huh, Rach?”

“Right?” said Rach, who Suzie guessed was actually named Rachel. “Lots of Emmas.”

Suzie tried to look past them. She could hear people having fun inside. She wondered if it was always like this, if it was like Brandon’s birthday party every day.

“How many people live here?” Suzie asked.

“*Here*? A few dozen maybe.”

“Forty, I’d say,” Rachel said.

“Most of them, the younger ones, they live back in the dorms,” the first girl said.

“The *dorms*?” Suzie scoffed.

“That’s where most of the kids sleep.” The girl flicked her cigarette into the grass. “We’ve still got room, though. There are tons of beds available. Only a few hundred are spoken for.”

“A few *hundred*?” Suzie’s mouth dropped.

Rachel took another cigarette out of her pack and lit it.

“Yeah,” she said. “Crappy boy-to-girl ratio, though, if you’re asking me. There’s, like, eight of us for every one of them.”

“Right?” said the other girl. “But there are still enough boys to … well, you know, have fun.” She looked Suzie up and down. “You might not be old enough, but you’ll get there.”

“Six confirmed pregnancies, that we know of,” Rachel said, winking. She held up her cigarette. “That’s why we gotta smoke out here.”

“Six pregnant girls,” Suzie asked. “*Six*?”

Rachel exhaled smoke. “Just doing their part to keep civilization going, y’know?” she said. Both girls started laughing. Suzie tried to look past them again.

“How old’s this Emma?” the first girl asked.

“Thirteen. Actually, maybe fourteen. What month is it?”

Rachel stomped out another cigarette. She pointed toward a tall building across campus.

“Middle schoolers are in Godfrey Hall,” she said. “C’mon, I’ll take you there.” She nodded her head and started walking. Suzie’s heart swelled with anticipation.

“Wait,” Suzie said.

Rachel turned back, showing frustration. From out of the darkness, about 20 feet behind Suzie, a boy and his younger sister emerged.

“This is Tommy,” Suzie said. “And his sister …”

“Mia,” the girl said, barely audible.

“They’re my neighbors,” Suzie said. “I brought them with me.

Rachel shrugged. She popped a piece of gum in her mouth.

“We’ll drop them off at the elementary kids’ dorm on the way,” she said.

**CHAPTER 29**

Suzie’s father once talked to her about something called the stages of grief. It was after her hamster, Hercules, died. She couldn’t remember what the stages were, or what they had to do with Hercules – the stages of grief weren’t going to bring Hercules back – but she remembered the conversation after each of her parents died. After she knew what true grief was.

She thought of it again when the world started falling apart. There were, she realized with the benefit of hindsight, eight stages of societal disintegration:

1. Disbelief. *This isn’t happening.*
2. Fear. *What is happening?*
3. Need for explanation. *Why is this happening?*
4. Blame. *Who is responsible for this happening?*
5. Human bonding. *We’re in this together.*
6. Panic. *You’re on your own. I’m running for the hills.*
7. Human separation. *I’ll take whatever I need to take, even if it’s yours.*
8. Animal instinct. *Kill or be killed*.

She watched as the virus brought people together, and she watched as it pulled them apart. The adults initially tried to rally as one, but they’d never really been one, so they splintered pretty quickly. Within a couple of months, as the death toll seemed to double every day, they started blaming the government, then things got divided on political lines. Shortly thereafter, the target became the medical community. Why hadn’t *they* seen this coming? A medical emergency had turned into a political debate. That was the most American thing ever.

It wasn’t long before the looting started. People were turning on each other. The poor upended the rich; the rich started hoarding money from the poor. A nation went from being 325 million separate people to being one, to be being divided in two, to being divided again, and again, until it was back to being 325 million people, each fighting to survive. Every man – and woman – for themselves.

Maybe it was God’s will that the children were the ones left behind. Perhaps there was a God, after all. A God that never gave you more than you can handle. Right when you’re on your way back into the darkness, He shines a little light. Isn’t that how this was all supposed to work?

Suzie remembered a moment right after she’d been told she couldn’t stay at the hospital with her dad any longer. Although she didn’t know it at the time, she would never see him again. Her mother held her hand as they walked toward the car – the blue one, the one that eventually got abandoned in a Safeway parking lot. They were about a block from the car when some homeless guy looked up at them from the doorway of a closed shop. He had a Big Mac in his hands, unopened. He’d probably gotten it from some passerby. He looked up and saw Suzie, perhaps sensing her hunger, and held it out for her. The burger was probably the only meal he’d been offered all day, but he was going to give it to Suzie. He could see her darkness; he was trying to give her light.

Without thinking, Suzie reached for the burger. McDonald’s wrappers are to children what water is to a man in a desert. Suzie’s mother grabbed her arm and pulled her hand away. Perhaps Suzie’s mother knew already that the germs were spreading. Maybe she was just inherently scared of homeless people.

Or maybe she just couldn’t see the light. Sometimes, it takes total darkness to see the light.

Suzie watched the man as they continued on, looking back at him even as her mother opened the back door of the blue car. The man held the Big Mac out again. *Please*, he mouthed. He nodded his head. It was as if he was trying to tell her that doing good for someone else meant more to him, in that moment, than filling his empty stomach.

What Suzie wouldn’t give for a Big Mac now. She wished she could thank the man. She wondered what happened to him, how he died. She imagined he’d lost his light somewhere along the way, just like all the others had.

She wondered again what heaven was like, if there was a heaven. If there was a heaven, there must be a God, and if there was a God, there shouldn’t have been a virus, and there shouldn’t have been all that darkness.

Suzie walked alongside Rachel after dropping off the Benevides kids at the elementary dorm. Suzie walked quickly, toward the light.

**CHAPTER 30**

The glow of a few dozen candles danced through the windows of Godfrey Hall. Suzie could see a group of girls gathered around a pool table. She heard laughing and teasing and shrieks of excitement. She knew without asking that all of these girls had lost someone, and she tried to remember if there was a stage of grief that allowed them to move on so freely.

“Good luck!” the teenage girl named Rachel said. She turned and retreated into the night, leaving Suzie alone.

The door was unlocked, and the chorus of sounds doubled when Suzie pulled it open. Suzie pressed the framed photo to her chest with one arm and quickly tucked her stuffed hippo behind her back with the other.

“No way you don’t scratch on the 8-ball!” one of the girls called out to another, who was wielding a pool cue.

An Asian girl rode on the shoulders of a white girl a few feet away. A girl with red hair climbed on top of a table and shot a rubber band at an African-American girl. A Latino girl messed up the hair of a pale girl.

“Do you know Emma?” Suzie asked the closest girl. The girl shrugged.

“Emma,” Suzie said to another girl, then another. She looked around frantically. There must have been fifty girls, all running amok. They were just being kids.

“Emma!” Suzie called out, but no one could hear her.

There had been times, many of them, over the past two years when Suzie found herself wondering if she was existing in a dream. She’d imagined herself waking up and trying to piece it all together: the chaos, the dead parents, the darkness, the pain. She was certain that she would wake up, trying to catch her breath, and she would marvel at the randomness that danced through her imagination. Except, of course, it wasn’t a dream.

As she stood among all the girls of Godfrey Hall, she had a similar thought: that she would wake up beneath the bench at the bus stop, or back in the dark cellar, or maybe be awaken by Trick inside her tent. She did not want to wake up. Not now. Then another thought occurred to her.

*Maybe this is it. Maybe this is the afterlife.*

She called out Emma’s name again, louder, but no one looked her way. Someone was playing an acoustic guitar. A group of girls was kicking a soccer ball made of athletic tape. There were dark girls and light girls, tall girls and short girls, aggressive girls and meek girls. But she couldn’t find Emma.

She opened a door that led to a staircase – what used to be a fire exit. She was tired now, wanting so badly to curl up and sleep, but adrenaline kept her searching. Her journey was not yet complete.

Still holding the photograph and the hippo, she ascended the stairs. Her legs felt like tree trunks. The door to the second floor was open. Girls were in the hallway, bowling with a soccer ball that they rolled toward 10 empty Pepsi bottles. Suzie bumped into someone. The girl smiled.

“Hey,” she said.

“Emma.”

“Nice to meet you, Emma. I’m Penelope.”

“No, I’m looking for Emma,” Suzie said.

“Who are you?” the girl asked. She had shaggy hair and bangs that hung over her eyebrows. She was standing in the open doorway of a dorm room. “I don’t recognize you.”

“My name is Suzie.”

“Hi, Suzie. New?”

Suzie nodded.

“Well,” the girl Penelope said, “you’re in the right place.”

Suzie looked around. “Where did they all come from?” she asked. “All these people?”

The girl laughed. Another girl, one Suzie couldn’t see, stirred behind her.

“All over,” Penelope said. “There are other dorms, too. There are older kids, younger kids, even boys.” She leaned in and used her hand to cover the side of her mouth. “They’ve even had a few pregnancies.” She raised her eyebrows.

“So I’ve heard,” Suzie said. She thought of Becky then. How she’d thought that she was civilization’s only chance. She knew that, if everything worked out here, one day she would go back and get Becky. She would bring her here, to this Oasis, and she would give her the gift of female companionship – again. That would be Suzie’s next journey. She would save Becky – from that playground, from that society, and from Brandon.

“I’m looking for a girl,” Suzie said.

“Yeah, who is it?” said a voice from behind Penelope. Suzie stood on her tiptoes to see inside the dorm room. She saw a girl, about her age, that was unlike any girl Suzie had ever seen before. One side of her head was shaved, the other side had dark hair that she had tucked over her ear. The ear was pierced at least six times, with a thin, gold, chained loop at the bottom. The girl had the longest eyelashes Suzie had ever seen, and big, brown, welcoming eyes, as well as moist lips.

“That’s Cal,” Penelope said. Cal nodded. She was wearing a black shirt that said Black Flag across the front. Suzie had never heard of Black Flag, but they immediately became her favorite band. The girl also had black nail polish and a heart tattoo on her left wrist. “You keep staring like that,” Penelope said, “you might go blind.”

Suzie blinked. Cal was looking at her in a disinterested way. “Sorry,” Suzie mumbled.

“You take that stuffed animal everywhere?” Cal asked. Suzie felt her face go flush. Before she could answer, Cal said: “I like that. A girl who does her own thing.”

At that moment, Suzie realized two things:

Cal was most certainly the coolest person she’d ever met;

And Cal was the most beautiful person she’d ever seen.

“I think I’m going to like it here,” Suzie said, only she hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

Somebody bowled a strike behind her, and the hallway broke out in celebration. Cal gave Suzie an upward head nod, put a backward baseball cap on her head, and went around a corner inside the dorm room.

“So,” Penelope said, with a weird little grin on her face, “this girl Emma you were talking about …”

“Oh, yeah.” Suzie tried to compose herself. She couldn’t stop thinking about Cal. Short for Calliope? Callie? California? “My friend Emma, she told me to meet her here. Do you know her?”

“Nah,” Penelope said, then she too turned and went into the dorm room. Suzie tried to peek around a corner, but Penelope shut the door on her.

Suzie went back to the stairway and up to the third floor. Only one girl was in the hallway, reading a letter by candlelight. She glanced at Suzie but said nothing.

“How many kids are in this place?” Suzie asked. The girl shrugged. “How many floors?”

The girl held up five fingers without looking up from her letter. Suzie was about to start knocking on doors, but she heard laughing from the stairwell above her. Someone was telling a story, and as Suzie backed into the stairwell and looked up, she recognized the voice.

They laughed again as she slowly started up the stairs, hope making her heart pound.

“So, then, this guy’s like: ‘Anacortes?’ And the teacher’s like, ‘No, Anacortes is NOT a continent. Try again.’”

“Anacortes?” one of the girls surrounding the speaker said, laughing.

“Duh. Right?”

Suzie was only halfway up the stairs but realized, with very little doubt, that Emma was the one talking. She hadn’t seen her in two years, might not even recognize her, but the voice and speaking style were unmistakable.

“So, anyway, the guy tries to look down at his cell phone, like under the desk,” the girl continued. Suzie couldn’t see the girl, as there were eight others crowded around her, taking in her every word. Emma was the type that always drew a crowd. One of the many things that Suzie appreciated about her. “He’s got a *cell phone*, right? In *fifth grade*!” A few chuckles. “So, this teacher, she asked what he’s doing under the desk …”

Suzie remembered the story. She was there. The kid’s name was Aiden. Or Caden. Or Braden. Maybe Grayson. One of those –*en* names that every boy in her North Seattle school had.

“… and the kid looks up, and you know what he tells her?” the speaker continued. Emma! There was no doubt.

“What?” the crowd asked, all abuzz with anticipation. They could not wait for the punchline.

“He said: ‘I’m looking up a website,’” a voice said from behind them. They turned to look at Suzie, who was finishing the story. When they parted, she could see Emma’s face. Older, and different, but definitely Emma’s face. “’It’s called UselessKnowledgeToWasteMyTime.com.”

Suzie delivered the punchline, but nobody laughed. They were all starting at her, even Emma. Emma’s blond, curly hair was longer than Suzie remembered, and her face was more thin. Her body was starting to develop curves, and her nose seemed too big for her face. But it was definitely Emma.

**CHAPTER 31**

“Suzie?” Emma whispered, standing behind the eight girls who all stared at Suzie with blank faces. Emma’s hands covered her mouth.

Suzie nodded her head. Emma ran past the others and wrapped her arms around Suzie. When she did, the framed photo fell to the floor, glass shattering. The other girls all jumped back, but Emma didn’t even seem to notice. She looked at Suzie’s face. She put her hands on her cheeks, to make sure it was real.

“It’s been so …” Emma embraced her again. “I can’t believe you’re here,” she whispered.

“I found you,” Suzie whispered back. “I got your note, and I found you. I knew I would.”

Emma’s grip loosened, and she took another look at Suzie. She placed her hands on her shoulders. “I don’t want to let go,” she said.

“Who’s this?” one of the other girls asked.

Emma turned to the group, putting an arm around Suzie’s shoulders.

“This,” she said, “is my best friend since childhood. My BFF. Suzie, these are the girls.”

Emmma introduced them, one by one, but the names didn’t stick. Suzie was too wrapped up in thought and relief. Just having Emma’s arm around her reminded Suzie how good it felt to be loved.

“I’ve got someone I want you to meet, too,” Suzie said, thinking of Becky. It seemed like weeks had passed since she’d left the playground society. “One day. But that’ll come later. She’s not here. Long story. She’s older than us, but really cool. You’ll like her.”

“Oh, my God. I’m *so* happy right now,” Emma said. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“I do,” said Suzie. She nodded to the other girls and whispered to Emma: “Can I have a minute?”

They turned away, back into the stairwell, and stood next to a window that looked out on a bright, three-quarter moon.

“This is going to sound really weird,” Suzie said. “I get that. But just hear me out.”

“Um, *weird* has been standard operating procedure lately,” Emma said. “Hello? Pandemic? Most of the world’s population wiped out?” She waved a hand in the air dramatically and, in a falsetto voice, said: “Abnormal, baby. It’s the new normal!”

Suzie laughed. Gosh, how she’d missed Emma’s sense of humor.

“Okay, well, this is *really* abnormal.” She looked Emma in the eye. She realized Emma was now two or three inches taller than her; they used to be the same height. Emma also had acne running along the bridge of her nose. “So I had a dream the other day – well, it was more like a vision,” Suzie continued. “I don’t know what it was. Anyway, it was probably just my imagination. Or the stress of what’s been going on ….”

“Continue.”

“OK, so I was, like, floating, and all of a sudden your mom, she appeared out of nowhere.”

Emma’s smile immediately faded.

“In my dream,” Suzie said. “My vision, whatever it was. She came to me. And she had a message.”

Emma stared at her, nodding.

“I don’t know what it means,” Suzie said, “but here goes. She said: ‘Every day of the week …’”

“’ … and twice on Sundays.’” This time, Emma was the one finishing the story. She nodded, then grinned. She looked out the window.

“You know what it means?” Suzie asked.

Emma nodded. She kept looking out the window, up into the moon and stars. Without all the lights and pollution of the city, the stars seemed to shine even more brightly.

“Let’s sit,” Emma said. She had this weird look on her face, like she was high on drugs or something. Suzie could tell that the words had had an impact on her. They’d said something deeper than the English language could describe.

“About a year ago, I caught it,” Emma said after they sat down next to each other.

“Caught what?”

“The virus, you dummy. I had the virus.”

Suzie’s eyes widened.

“It was horrible,” Emma continued. “I could barely breathe. My cough was so bad that it felt like I had broken ribs. And the fever was like nothing I’d ever experienced before. I didn’t just *feel* like I was going to die, I *knew* I was going to die. And I was okay with that.”

“I’m so sorry,” Suzie said. “That seems so …”

“Well, I didn’t die,” Emma said, “obviously. But at the time, I was pretty scared.”

She moved closer to Suzie. She took a deep breath.

“One day, my mom came in my room,” she said. “She sat down on the bed next to me. I wanted to tell her to get out. I didn’t want to give it to her. But, at the same time, I liked having her there. I needed her there. If I was going to go, I wanted her there.”

Emma’s eyes started to fill with tears. She wiped them away.

“Anyway, I’m sort of half there and half not, in that fevery state where you’re kind of asleep, kind of not. And I feel someone crawl under the sheets, right next to me. I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn’t. I didn’t need to; I knew it was my mom.

“Anyway, I can feel myself slipping away. I fall into this fevery dream, or maybe I’m actually dying – I don’t know. There are these flowers and fairies, and there’s this slow-flowing river beneath me. Something is pulling me forward, and I’m not fighting it. Then, out of nowhere, my mom’s there in the dream. She right there in front of me. She’s right up in my face, looking me in the eye.

“She says to me: ‘I don’t want to lose you, Sweetie. I don’t want to lose you.’ I can hear her voice now, exactly like she said it. She says, ‘If I could take this away, Sweetie, you know I would.’ I’m not sure why she was there, telling me this, but she was. She said: ‘If I could trade places with you …’ I could feel the pain in my lungs again, suddenly, and I just wanted it to end. I asked her: ‘You would do that?’

“And you know what she said, Suzie? She said: ‘Every day, and twice on Sunday.’”

“Every day and twice on Sunday,” Suzie whispered.

“Yeah. That’s what she said.” Emma let the tears flow. “And you know what happened? I started to fall. I was falling backward, away from wherever I was going. We *both* started falling backward, away from each other.” She paused. She was looking at Suzie, but it was like Suzie wasn’t even there. “When I woke up,” Emma said, “my mom was still there. But the fever was gone. I could feel it immediately. It had passed.”

“Oh, my god,” Suzie said.

“But that’s not all. I wish it was, but …” She stretched her legs out. She ran her hands across her jeans. She looked around, but they were the only two people in the stairway. “My mom,” Emma said. “She got it then. She got the virus. No, she *took* the virus. She took it from me. I didn’t know that could happen, but it did. Swear to god, it happened.”

“I believe you,” Suzie said.

Emma grinned. “I know you do,” she said. She turned to Suzie. Her face got even more serious. She leaned forward. “Here’s the thing,” Emma said. “I get this feeling, like she’s not the only one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think there were others. Other parents. Maybe they didn’t all see their kids in a dream, or maybe their kids didn’t remember it, but they had the same chance. To take the virus away, to *trade* the virus. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of.”

Emma smiled. She touched Suzie’s shoulder. “I think that’s why the children lived,” Emma said. “The adults were offered the opportunity to take it from them.”

“And they took it,” Suzie whispered, thinking of her own mother.

Emma nodded. “And they took it,” she said. “Any parent would.”

Staring into each other’s eyes, they said: “Every day of the week, and twice on Sunday.”

Suzie took in a deep breath. She remembered the darkness of the shelter. Her mother’s strained breathing. The cough that kept Suzie awake at night. *When you’re a mother*, she had said, *that’s all you are. You’ll do anything to protect your children.*

Anything.

Suzie thought of the way her mother stood inside the bus, looking out at her, saying: “Not yet.” Her father had said the same thing. She was beginning to understand why only the children were left behind.

Emma stood up and wiped off her jeans.

“I can’t believe you found me,” she said. “After all this time.”

Suzie couldn’t believe it, either. She stood up and looked out at the window, out at the night sky. The big, bright moon shone even brighter in all that darkness.

“This place,” Suzie said. “Everybody is so *nice* here. How can people be so happy? With all this going on?”

Emma, facing the moon, said: “You know, Suze. It’s not just the bad things that are contagious.”

**CHAPTER 32**

They slept next to each other that night, more for security than anything else. Suzie didn’t want to lose Emma again. Losing people didn’t get easier; it became more difficult over time.

Before they fell asleep, Emma told her all about the Oasis. It was structured like a school: taught by the older kids, but everyone had a say. They had elected leaders. They had laws. Rather than trying to run from the past, they tried to emulate it. They even had a monetary system. Suzie had mixed feelings about that.

Emma told her about her first crush. A kid named Radon. Fifteen years old. “Tall, dark and handsome,” Emma said. “Well, maybe more *hot* than handsome.” She giggled. “He’s got a cute friend, too. I’ll introduce you. There’s *lots* of cute guys here.”

Suzie didn’t have the heart to tell her about her revelation, that maybe she was more into girls than guys. She wasn’t ready yet, anyway. Too much, too soon. She promised to tell her about the society at the elementary school tomorrow, and then the other stuff. She had lots of plans: to go back and try to save Becky from the society, to take Emma to her house, to take the body of Emma’s mother to the cemetery.

There was still a lot to say and do, but they had plenty of time. Hopefully, they had the rest of their lives. Hopefully, they would never be apart again.

Just before they fell asleep, Suzie asked: “Do you think there are more places like this out there?”

“I’m sure of it,” Emma said. “All over the world. The beginning of something … well, *new*.”

That gave Suzie hope.

Hope, something she hadn’t felt in a long time. She fell asleep with it running through her veins.

She dreamed of Cal, and of the life they might have together one day. It was nice to dream about the future. It was even better not to be thinking about the past.

When she awoke the next morning, Suzie could see sunlight through the bare tree branches outside. She smelled oatmeal and pastries. She rolled over and watched Emma sleep, just make sure she was still there.

**THE END**