

AFTER THE DUST SETTLED



SNAKEBITE

JONATHAN MARY-TODD

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darkcreek

MINNEAPOLIS

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Summary: On the plains of a near-future United States, Malik, Beckley, and a few other survivors of a catastrophe that killed most adults struggle to survive, and face off against a band led by a man who ensures their obedience by scarring them with non-lethal snakebites.

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To the C.C.I.M.S.A.S.—friends in the wilderness.

CHAPTER ONE

We were boiling water near a brook when Martin's shouts drifted over from the bushes. Beckley says you have to boil water to get rid of bacteria. I don't know what bacteria is. Not really. Beckley can't explain it, and I'm not sure she knows either, but *Gene Matterborn's Wilderness Survival Guidebook* makes a big point of it. And Beckley trusts the guide.

"You guys! Come here! It's—a guy!"

"What?" Hector shouted back.

“Just come over here!”

I could tell from Martin’s voice that he was red in the face. Hector and I started for the bushes and left Beckley and her sister, Emma, by the brook.

Martin stood under the shade of some pine trees near a man’s body. The treads on his shoes were worn, and the skin on his face looked patchy, gray, and loose. One eye socket had caved in, or been bashed in. A bird’s nest could’ve fit in the crater. His eyes were gone.

“Looks old,” I said.

“Smells old,” said Hector. “Is that his puke, Martin, or yours?”

Martin wiped his chin and told Hector to shut it. He turned to me.

“What do you think happened, Malik?”

“He’s probably been here a long time,” I said. “Could’ve been anything.” I pulled my bandana up over my nose. “Maybe Beckley could tell. Probably spent days waiting for help . . .”

We had been on the move for a few seasons by time we found the body. More than

a moon had passed without us seeing another person. In some hills a while back, a man and his son had let us cook some deer in their cabin and then told us not to come back.

Hector squatted near the body. “Think he has anything we can use?”

Martin grimaced and took a step back.

“Don’t worry,” Hector snickered, “I’ll hold my breath.”

The man on the ground wore long pants with large pockets—big enough for a canteen or a roll of bandages. Hector patted the man’s legs on each side before reaching in each pocket.

“Nothing,” Hector said. “Cleaned out.” He coughed a few times and stood up. He looked at Martin. “Smell’s not anything,” he added.

Martin looked past Hector to the body and went stiff. “Shhhhhhh,” he said, jaw fixed. “Snake.”

It crept out of the caved-in socket, a spurt of black with waves of red scales. The snake slid across the tattered rain jacket that covered the man’s ribs and moved toward Hector’s ankles.

“Back away,” I said. “Slow. Don’t look it in the eyes.”

Hector reached for a stone near the body. “No time.” As he tried to wrench the rock off the ground, the snake pierced his right wrist. Hector flipped the rock over, roaring, and missed the snake by a head. The crawler made a trail through the dirt in the direction of Martin. Martin had turned gray like the body.

I shouted “Back! Up!” over Hector’s cursing. I looked for a bigger rock. Then I heard Beckley: “Eye contact”—her lanky frame came into view, and she brought a narrow log down on the snake’s head—“is more of a mammalian thing, I think. I don’t think the snake would’ve taken it personally.”

She twisted the log a few times, grinding away at the head. “You know, boys, the more you read up on this stuff, the less likely you are to freeze when it happens.”

The color came back to Martin’s face. “Some of us were born ready,” he chuckled. “Like Hector.”

“You’d have died of fright before the thing even reached you,” Hector snapped. “What I get for actually checking the body.” He held onto his right wrist. Beckley bent over to peer at it through her cracked glasses.

“Oh dear. This already looks like swelling.” She looked up at Hector and winced. “Miiight be venom. I’ll check *Matterhorn* for specifics.”

She straightened up and started talking to no one in particular. “We’re gonna need to put some pressure above the bite. It’ll help stop the flow. And keep the bitten area lower than Hector’s heart, so any venom doesn’t spread.

“Malik,” she said, turning to me, “you grab the snake. Careful—I think I bashed the head in good enough, but it could maybe still snap as a reflex.”

“Grab the snake?” I said.

“For dinner.”

CHAPTER TWO

Beckley paged through *Gene Matterhorn's Wilderness Survival Guidebook* while I sharpened my knife against a rock.

"Ah," she said. "Here we go. 'Usually, you might not consider poisonous snakes a potential food source. But sometimes you might not have a choice. Follow these steps to safely prepare your serpentine cuisine.'"

"*Cuisine?*"

"I think it means food. I don't know about the part before that. 'Begin by removing the

snake's head with a clean cut at the neck. Make the incision'—that means cut—'a few inches down from the base of the skull. That way, you'll avoid the poison glands located in the snake's head.'"

Beckley had flattened the head after the snake bit Hector. I gripped the scaly body with one hand and sliced through the neck.

"Nice," Beckley said. "Emma, you want to get rid of that? Clean your hands after."

Emma flicked her wrist, sending the snake's head into our fire pit. "Whoosh," she said, and her sandy hair bobbed up and down. I watched the head crumple in the pit for a moment.

"Malik, are you listening?" Beckley said. "To remove the snake's skin, make another incision down—not across—the snake's body. You can then strip the skin off like a sheath. The remaining meat can be baked or broiled according to your resources and preferences. Fully cooked snake meat will appear flaky and white."

The snakeskin came off like a wet sock—not in one smooth tug, but after a bunch of

jerks. I hung the meat over the flames along a broken-off tree branch. Beckley tucked the guidebook in her sack and then tended to our fire, dumping another handful of twigs in the center.

“Where are Martin and Hector?” Emma asked her sister.

“Hector’s probably still fuming,” Beckley said. “Martin said he’d keep watch on him. Which was fine by me.”

Beckley sat up out of the smoke for a moment and wiped off her glasses with the bottom of her shirt. The glasses used to be her mom’s—she gave them to Beckley as soon as they fit her daughter’s face, believing Beckley would have more use for them. Most of our clothes, our shoes and blankets, were our parents’, or were stitched together from pieces of old pants or jackets. A week after Beckley got the glasses, a crack appeared in one lens. She’d been playing in the woods outside the motel where we lived and came back pale, tears around her eyes. Beckley’s taken better care of them since—she keeps them banded

to her head with a shoestring and won't let anybody else touch them. She also needs the glasses to read, and she's way better at that than the rest of us. I'm not sure what any of us would do without them.

After a few minutes of poking at the fire, Beckley crouched down again. She reached in quick and pinched off a flake of snake meat.

"Well," she said, "I think we're ready."

• • •

My mom first met Beckley's parents during a storm of rumors. They had stopped at the Frontier Motel around the same time everyone's phones stopped working. Mom left that part in anytime she talked about what happened. "Just like that," she'd say. "We couldn't get ahold of each other."

The Frontier was a place where people would stop and rest for a night or two before they got where they were going. My mom told me there were lots of places like it in America. We've even seen some others now that we've been moving, places with floor stacked on top of floor and room after room of beds. Places

to stay away from because people fight to keep them.

Nothing surrounded the Frontier but stretches of trees and a gravel road. A painted bison stood watch out front.

Talk of what had happened started to spread as soon as the phones cut out. People talked about fighting in the east and on the coast, or guessed about new kinds of weapons. Lots of people left the motel in a panic. Others stayed and waited for news, any news, that never came. The ones who left early, my mom explained, got what was left of the fuel nearby. Soon the ones who stayed stopped seeing cars completely. As if no one anywhere had fuel left after a while.

The rest of the people at the Frontier took fewer and fewer trips beyond the motel's woods. The first times out "did not encourage further trips," is how Beckley's dad put it one time. Without really deciding to, my mom would say, the people who stayed started to build a life together. For years, ten or more, the Matterhorn guide lay out on a

table in the empty motel check-in room, with mostly only Beckley ever reading it, next to a book with big pictures of wildflowers and something called *Ten Steps to Improving Your Golf Swing*.

• • •

“Hector,” Beckley called out from across the fire. “I think I know what bit you. There’s a chart in the Matterhorn guide.”

Hector lay across a fallen tree, keeping his bitten arm low to the ground. He uncomfortably balanced a poker topped with snake meat with the other. “Yeah? So am I gonna die?”

“I’m not that lucky,” Martin said.

Hector gave Martin the finger with his bad hand and winced.

“The snake was a Great Plains checkerback,” said Beckley. “‘Black, white underside, red markings.’ The guide didn’t have a black dot next to the name. That means it’s not fatal.”

“Not fatal?”

“You’re not dead,” I said. “Be happy.”

Emma set down her poker and turned to Hector. “Can I see it?”

“The bite?” he asked. He glanced at Beckley and then glanced away, so it was clear he wasn’t asking for her okay. “Uh. Sure.”

Hector lurched up and planted his poker in the ground, looking queasy. He unpeeled the wrap holding a cold rock against the wound.

“You’re such a creeper,” Beckley said to her sister.

Emma’s face turned from deep attention to something more complicated. It looked like she’d seen too much of what she had wanted to see.

Around Hector’s two puncture marks was a stretch of seared red skin, dotted with small bubbles like water come to boil.

CHAPTER THREE

Beckley's dad was a *botanist*—a plant man—and he helped keep people alive that first year at the Frontier. Showed them what they could eat nearby, what they could grow. He and Beckley's mom had stopped in the first place because she was about to have Emma. The nearest *hospital* was too far out. Beckley would have been five then, a year older than me. Martin's parents had stayed at the Frontier for safety's sake, they'd say. My mom would say she just didn't know what else to do. Martin's mom

found Hector by himself that first panicked afternoon, yelling out tearful, furious, and confused in the room next to her family's. No one met his parents or saw them leave.

A cluster of others stayed on, some even for years. But by the time our mothers and fathers began to get sick, it was only them—only the ones with kids were left. My mom told me we'd been what kept them going.

• • •

“Where are we going?”

Hector spoke up from the back of the pack. He walked slumped to the side, his left shoulder carrying all the weight of his pouch. His left hand cradled his bitten arm. Beckley led the group, Emma alongside her.

“Today we begin to take the long way around Rapid City, South Dakota,” Beckley said. “The map says Rapid City is home to seven large dinosaur sculptures, and I know Hector would *loooooove* to see the dinosaurs, but still, let's agree it's better to not risk the trouble. From there, we keep going past the end of the plains.”

Like always, we stuck to the woods. Whenever we could. *Highways, interstates*—we saw so many names for roads—Beckley and I agreed sometimes these were all right. Mostly scattered empty cars there. Everything was already picked over. But cities gave people things to have and things to fight over. We kept moving, and we stuck to the woods.

“There should be more of what we’ve been seeing so far, which means keep your eyes out for signs of corn or potatoes. Walleyes if we pass another brook,” Beckley said.

“So we’re still headed nowhere,” Hector replied.

“Carefully,” I said.

There was no talking to Hector, but it passed the time. I turned my head back toward him. “What is it you *want*? Where do you wanna go?”

“We almost never see people. And when we do, they’re usually dead,” Hector said. “Beckley, you hearing me? I’m talking to you, too. We could stop this, claim a place.

Anyplace. Half the towns we move around are empty. You know I'm right about that."

"We almost never see people because we stay out of those towns," Beckley said. "We stay alive and it works." She went back to talking to Emma about something called solar stills.

"Malik," Hector continued. "We are young. And the rest of the world is dying. We should try to take what we want, at least."

"We don't know a thing about the rest of the world. We should be careful."

Most days, moving forward was enough to keep me feeling level. We did it for safety, but there was a rush to it too. At least for me. Every day, seeing something different. Sometimes I felt guilty for enjoying it.

We had left the Frontier Motel after Martin's mom passed from the sickness that ran through our home. She had been the last adult to go. Martin's mom was a nervous person, and she passed that to Martin. More than any of the other parents, she treated Hector like one of her own. But still, he got

off without the same habit of worrying. By the time she died, sometimes Martin's mom seemed scared of us somehow. Like she looked at us and saw something she didn't recognize in us. Maybe that was fair. We'd grown up in a different world than she had.

The sickness didn't touch the motel's young. We don't know why not. One time Martin said maybe it had, and our bodies could fight it. Maybe we were made of different stuff—whatever stuff his mom saw. We packed a few days after that, after not much talk. Felt like we were running from something else none of us could see or name. Even Hector never talked about going back.

...

We'd been walking since early morning in the high heat. Every glimpse of sunlight between the shade of two trees seemed like a warning or a trap, like stepping through it would bring the sun's full gaze your way. Behind me, Hector's cherry-oak skin looked faded, strangely sweatless.

“You all right?” I said.

He nodded, jaw stiff.

“You’re probably just fatigued from the bite,” Beckley said. “Maybe we shouldn’t have tried to cover so much ground this morning.

“If the venom was going to kill you,” she added, “probably you’d already be dead. There—let’s stop up ahead.”

Beckley pointed to a stream at the edge of our line of sight. A group of trees stood bent above it, casting enough shade for all of us to lie down if we wanted.

“Sounds good,” I said.

Hector hadn’t decided to get bit by the snake and then trail behind, but the hard time Martin had keeping up was all Martin’s fault. The rest of us sped up our steps on the way to the stream, and he panted behind us.

Martin had found a long, red wagon in a shack outside an empty farmhouse a half-moon earlier. It read “Radio Flyer” on the side in sweeping white letters. He used it to drag his backpack for a few days before he did

the really smart thing and filled it with dirt. He seeded it one time when we passed a low bush of wild berries. His “garden on wheels.” Beckley had encouraged him. Her dad before her, in a way.

Beckley and I were the oldest kids at the Frontier and took in as much as we could about hunting, foraging, surviving. Beckley’s dad said he could tell we felt a *responsibility* to the others. But Martin was the only one who’d really listen in when he talked about botany. The red wagon slowed him down, and its rusted front handle screeched anytime he turned it.

Emma broke into a run when the stream got close enough. Forcing back stalks of tall grass with her arms, she cupped some water in her hands and held it to her mouth before her sister shouted.

“Emma! Not unless it’s treated!”

“But it’s clear!” Emma whined.

“Doesn’t matter. Don’t drink it unless we’ve purified it. Not unless you’re dying from lack of water.”

Beckley took out the steel pot at the bottom of her pack and got to work. Martin took a knee near the water and scooped up some of the water himself.

“Martin, you too?” Beckley moaned.
“Honestly, you can’t wait—”

Martin blushed, and the first scoop ran through his fingers back into the stream. “For watering the plants,” he said. He flicked the water clinging to his fingertips at Beckley’s cat shirt. It read “No kitten around,” and for years it was the only place we’d seen a cat. The first time we saw a real one, foraging at a garbage dump, it was mean and fat from trash.

“When do I get to eat some berries?” Hector said, back against one of the streamside trees. “You’ve been dragging that wagon around since the last full moon or longer.”

“When they’ve *ripened*,” Martin replied.

Beckley laughed hard, letting loose several short wheezes. I set my backpack down beside a tree near Hector’s pouch and rested my head on it. My feet throbbed in the pair of heavy brown boots I’d found

during another sweep of a garbage dump we'd taken a season back. Between long wincing, I watched Hector unpeel the rag he'd wrapped around his wounded arm. I arched up when I saw the bite.

The rash of red skin had turned purple. Small bubbles still dotted the area. It looked hard, uneven, and permanent, like the face of the moon. I stared at Hector and he stared back at me, and I moved to get Beckley. I told her to bring the book and waved for Martin to stay by the water with Emma.

Hector looked sicker than he had at the start of the morning. Beckley read and reread the Matterhorn guide's pages on snakebites to herself.

"The entry in the guide's not long," Beckley said, like she was asking for a favor. "The snake's—checkerbacks'—venom 'causes severe swelling and paralysis in small animals.' Non-lethal . . . but. Um. Potentially disfiguring in humans."

"It's not gonna stay like this. Right?" Hector said.

Beckley took her glasses off from around her head and wiped them on her skirt, avoiding Hector's eyes.

"I don't know."

• • •

"The best strategy for dealing with bears is to avoid them completely. But if your survival situation finds you trapped near one of these animals, remember these three don'ts: Number one. Don't run. A husky-looking bear can still outpace most adult human males. Number two. Don't make eye contact. The bear is likely to *interpret* this as a challenge.' That's where eye contact comes in, Malik."

We had decided to stay near the stream for the day—begin our walk again the next morning. Beckley read aloud to Emma by the light of that night's campfire.

"You can, however, attempt to speak slowly and in a calm tone in an effort to put the bear at ease. Number three. Don't fight back. Attacking a bear marks the start of a losing battle. If the bear appears prepared to do

you harm, play dead. Drop to the ground and protect your neck and skull with your hands. Strike back only as a last resort. If the bear continues an assault past this point, aim for sensitive areas such as the nose and the eyes.”

“You’re going to give her nightmares,” I said.

“No,” Beckley replied, “she likes it.” Emma smiled and nodded her head.

“There bears around here?” I asked.

“Should *I* be worried?”

“Shouldn’t be, not in the Dakotas,” Beckley replied. “There’s a chart on it in *Matterhorn*. They’re supposed to be a little farther out, in the west.”

“Yeah, but that’s before we were born,” Martin said. “Maybe there’s not even a west out west. Who knows?”

“Don’t talk like that,” Beckley said.

Martin saw that he was scaring Emma and quickly puffed himself up.

“Dooooon’t be afraid of bearrrrrrs, Emma,” he said, deepening his voice to a goofy growl. “Weee just want to be your friennnnnd.”

Beckley snorted and then looked embarrassed for it. Emma wrinkled her nose at Martin, and he kept going.

“I’m not gonna hurrrrt ya. I’m just lookin’ for some fish!”

He grabbed Emma’s backpack and unzipped the top, tossing out socks and old T-shirts.

“Stop it!” Emma giggled.

Martin lumbered around the outside of our circle, growling and dangling the bag out of Emma’s reach. He set it down after she threatened to dump out his garden.

“That garden’s going to feed us for the next two moons!” Martin shouted, half-serious again.

“Stop touching my socks!” Emma squeaked back.

Starting a fire, boiling water—so much of what we did, we did because we had to. Martin was good at doing the other stuff, the kind of stuff that laughs came out of. He relaxed and reclined on the grass, chuckling to himself. Then he looked over at Hector. Hector sat

dead-faced at the edge of the fire, like the whole chase, the whole night, had gone on without him noticing.

CHAPTER FOUR

I woke up to the sound of loud splashes.

Hector walked back and forth out of the stream, running handfuls of clothes through the water and hanging them on low branches nearby.

“Hector!” I shouted. “You don’t have to be doing laundry right now, man. You can rest. We could’ve switched.”

His arm was unwrapped, but it didn’t look any better. He started at me flatly.

“I can do it,” he said. “It’s fine.”

Beckley woke up one tree over and rubbed her eyes. “Hector,” she said confusedly. “You’re wading.”

“Would you tell him he can skip his turn doing laundry?” I said.

Beckley shrugged and nodded at him, feeling around on the grass for her glasses. Hector didn’t look at either of us. He rolled up a pant leg and put his feet back in the water.

Beckley left Emma to rest and walked with me to look around for berries or whatever else we came across.

“Do you think he’s okay?” I said.

“Hector?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe he just wants to feel useful,” Beckley said. “And, I mean, he is. It’s not like he *lost* the arm. Hector can do his laundry turn if he feels like doing the laundry.”

“He just—doesn’t look happy. I mean, angrier than usual. And I get it, you know? This whole last year, moving from place to place. I thought I’d go crazy too, our first winter outside the Frontier.”

We took a few steps without either one of us talking.

“You ever think he might be right?” I continued. “About just *stopping*. We’re not heading anywhere. How long can we keep moving without moving toward something?”

I didn’t want to. Seeing new places was the good part. But Hector had me thinking.

Beckley squinted at me, maybe searching for something to say back. I kept talking.

“I’m not saying I agree. I’m not saying we stop *here*. I want to be careful, like you. Maybe when we find the place, we’ll know it. But what if this isn’t keeping us—your sister—alive? Maybe we’re just wearing ourselves out, a little bit at a time.”

When we got back to the stream, Martin was helping Hector take the last of the drying clothes out of the trees. He arranged them in piles by person on a blanket while Hector plucked them off branches. Cloth by cloth, Martin watched as Hector snapped a shirt or towel in the air, trying to whisk away the last of the water, cringing with each sharp movement of his punctured wrist.

• • •

“I can’t cross it.”

“If we want to keep moving east, we *have* to cross it.”

Later that day, we’d reached another stream, wider than the one before it and in our way. Martin wiggled the handle of his Radio Flyer wagon, motioning in the opposite direction.

“I can’t take the garden across. It’s too heavy,” Martin said. Hector snickered behind him.

“Look at the map!” Beckley said. “We keep going this way if we ever want to reach the Mississippi. That’ll mean by next season we’ll have better soil, easier north-south travel—”

“If you have a boat,” Hector muttered.

“This stream isn’t even on the map!” Martin said, poking at the slick folded-out sheet. “Are we for sure on course?”

Beckley pinched one of the stems of her glasses and wiggled them slightly against the bridge of her nose.

Martin lowered his head and took his eyes off Beckley's. "You said the mobile garden was a good idea."

"It *is* a good idea. We just didn't think enough about the *logistics* . . ."

The waterway in front of us was a couple body-lengths across. There wasn't any telling how deep—it was dark in the middle, maybe up to the waist. Wide enough that it would be hard to carry a wagon full of heavy soil across, anyway.

Hector snatched the map away from Beckley. "I wonder what else doesn't show up on here," he said. "*This* is the problem. This map. It makes you think all this wandering means anything."

Emma gripped one of the straps dangling from her sister's backpack.

"If Martin wants to keep his damn garden, we'll walk 'til we find a way to move around the stream," Hector said. "Malik? You okay with that?"

Beckley looked at me like there was a pack of wolves at my back, like she was trying to

signal danger with her eyes. I pressed my palms against my forehead and sighed.

“Fine. Enough.”

• • •

We spent the afternoon mostly in silence. Sometimes a joke from Martin would float up in the air and die. As the sun got lower, Beckley took the map out more and more often until Hector grabbed it back.

“I don’t know where we are,” she murmured, half to Emma, half to herself.

“Come on,” I said slowly. “Sun’s setting that way. We ever get too turned around, we always know how to tell east–west.”

Beckley didn’t reply.

The stream was narrow enough to not feature on our map, but it kept going as long as we were able to walk alongside it. It was near dusk when we saw blood moving downstream past us in the water. The sky was dark enough that we barely noticed at first. It got thicker as we moved forward. We followed the trail to a body that lay twisted like a knot. The man’s limbs were bent, maybe broken.

The blood came from a hole in his side, surrounded by a stained ring of T-shirt cloth where something had torn him open. His eyes were lifeless, but his skin was pink. He could have died the moment before we found him or over the afternoon's last few hours, in time with the setting sun.

Beckley moved a hand over Emma's eyes. Emma wriggled out a second later to scan the body again. After a few breaths, she began to stare bug-eyed at Martin. He looked back at her, confused, and opened his mouth to speak when a soft hiss filled the air. Martin's face went blank, and his hand let go of the wagon handle. His knees hit the ground a moment later. The shaft of an arrow stuck out from the back of his head.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next few arrows jetted past us, landing in the stream and skipping on the water.

I shrieked for everyone to get behind me as I pushed the wagon up on its short side, between our line and where the arrows were flying from. Dirt and the roots of the berry plants emptied out onto the ground as *thip-thip-thip* and then *clang!-clang!-clang!* sounded along the other side of the wagon. Blood from Martin's head trickled under my knee and I coughed, hard.

We hadn't seen them coming. Why would we have even thought to look?

The arrows couldn't break through to our side of the wagon, and they stopped after a few moments. None of us spoke. I lifted up one knee, craning my neck back to see Hector taking two leaps toward the stream. Red-eyed, he squatted down in the water and brought up a gray rock between his hands. He hurled it over a spread of bushes into the arrows' dark starting point. One, then another. I moved to grab him, slipping out from under the cover of the wagon. Hector thrust an elbow in my direction, not turning to look, and charged toward the dark holding another rock. An arrow grazed his thigh, bringing him sliding across the grass. The rock he'd meant to throw landed a couple paces from his head.

From the dark, past the bushes, we heard a voice like tree rot.

"Move in! In!"

Two of them slid through the brush. Then two more, then a few more, making a half-

circle like they were multiplying outward. Mostly boys. They looked near my age or Beckley's. Maybe younger by a year or two. But faded somehow, or crumpled, like broken grownups. They wore stiff, cracked-seeming black clothes like the leather bag my mother carried her things around in. Across one's eye or down one's neck were ripples, waves of small craters that split the skin.

Hector swung wildly as they moved forward, stumbling as he rose while two of them set on him. Closer but still out of sight, the voice rasped again. "Bags! Any bags! And the young one!"

They walked in quick steps toward me, Beckley, and Emma. One crouched down to search Martin's bag. A few had quivers for arrows slung on their backs. Some others held staffs, sharpened at the end or with a stone roped around the top.

"Stop!" Beckley shouted. "Don't touch that! All of you—"

I tightened my grip on the edge of the wagon, and after that I stopped hearing her.

The wind cooed as I swung left to right, right to left in front of me. More clangs sounded against the wagon. A scarred-faced boy's hand grabbed it, and I pushed one side forward into his jaw.

The arc of the wagon kept some back. One kid moved around my reach and went for Beckley. He grabbed her backpack and her with it, taking Beckley off her feet with a yank. The boy, one of the oldest-looking, dragged her along the grass for a few backward steps. She struggled to slip out of her straps until the boy's head thudded against a low tree branch, stopping him flat.

I felt a row of knuckles rap against the back of my head and kept swaying, dizzy. Past the mess of limbs, I saw a man step through the opening the younger ones had cleared through the bushes. Like them, he was clothed in ragged blacks, and he was tall—taller than anyone I'd ever seen. He looked a lifetime older than the others. His face wasn't scarred like the kids', but it was sunken and

bony. His eyes formed an overhang atop his pointed jaw.

One of the boys tumbled back toward the tall man after the wagon's edge hit him above his eye. The tall man gripped him on the shoulder and pulled him up. He said something to the boy, low and angrily, and pointed to Emma, who was trying to reach the first branch of a tree, kicking and scraping her feet against the trunk. Beckley called down to her from a thick branch above, balancing nervously and lowering her bag for Emma to grab onto when she got far enough up.

Creekside, Hector ran a rock across a small boy's face. He looked to the tall man and then sprinted for Emma. Once Hector reached her, he grabbed Emma with both arms, set her over his shoulder, and started across the stream. Big splashes met his heavy steps. He was in up to his waist, shakily holding Emma above water, by the time the scarred kids moved to follow.

"In! In!" the tall man shouted. "No getaways! *Get* this one!" He stepped back

and darted along the path he'd come in through.

Two kids stayed with me as I stole glances at Hector and Emma's first steps on the stream's other side. One, an older girl, I kicked stiff on the side of the knee, and she went down yowling. A short, wide boy, with craters and rippled tissues across his eyes like a mask, lifted one of the rocks Hector had brought onshore. He heaved the rock forward, and I batted it down with the red wagon.

"Leave!" I said and shook the dented wagon with both hands.

The wide boy snarled and grabbed another rock. As he ran forward, a blanket floated down from a tree. The boy caught it with his face and took a few sideways steps, blinded, before I downed him with the broadside of the wagon.

Beckley's bag dropped from the treetops, and she scrambled downward along a trunk moments later. She picked the blanket off the boy and folded it into her backpack.

“A million—different—uses,” she huffed.

With the sun fading fast, we set off across the stream. I looked back to Martin’s lifeless shape with a chill.

CHAPTER SIX

When we got to Hector, he was splayed out across prairie grass at the start of a clearing, drifting in and out. The side of his face was bloodied and swollen, like from a boot or a heavy stick.

"They got her," he murmured. "I couldn't—"

We helped him up, and the three of us walked back toward the water, Hector leaning on me and Beckley. In the dim light, we looked across the stream to the clearing

where we'd lost Martin. His bag was gone, taken, along with the one Hector had left as he'd tried to keep Emma out of reach. The girl whose knee I'd busted and the boy with the mask of scars had disappeared. The body we'd discovered that afternoon lay drained and white. Martin's wagon lay bent, turned sideways on the ground, the berries dumped before they were ready.

CHAPTER SEVEN

No one thought stayed in my head for more than a moment at a time. Who were they, and where'd they take Emma?

I had waded to the clearing under the trees to grab the bags no one had stolen and then back across the stream to where Beckley wiped dried blood from Hector's brow. I dropped her backpack down next to her.

"Sorry about yours," I said to Hector. "I think they got it."

He breathed out slowly but didn't speak.

Beckley unzipped her pack.

“If we can take a guess at where they’re going . . . because they maybe interrupted us moving *east*, but Hector says they left moving *west*, into the sun, I’ll check the map to see—”

Her hand let go of the zipper, and she turned to Hector.

“The map! Hector, you had the map!”

“Shut up, Beckley,” he whispered.

Beckley’s arms shook at her sides.

“If—you hadn’t been so—so *damn* impatient . . .”

“Not now,” I said softly. “He’s hurt.”

“My sister’s gone, and Martin, who was *practically* your brother—”

“Shut up, Beckley!” Hector shouted.

Beckley turned away. She and Hector both let out fast breaths, heavy and unnatural.

The sun was gone by the next time Beckley spoke.

“Maybe we can track them. I think we can track them.”

In my head, I saw Martin take the arrow. I saw the wagon hit that kid above the eye. I

tried to hold onto Beckley's words and stay focused.

"Where do you think they're going?" I asked.

"I—we don't need to know," Beckley said.

"As long as we're able to follow them."

She started to talk fast again, agitated.

"Those kids, that man—they came in quiet—"

"Out of nowhere," I said.

"—but there are so many of them. They have to leave a trail."

Next I thought of the tall man, his cracked face and sunken cheeks. His voice harsh and uneven, like a campfire's crackling. I tensed up as I started to pull out my sleeping bag, two thick blankets from the Frontier stitched together.

"Malik, what are you doing?" Beckley asked.

"What?"

"We have to go!"

"Beckley—"

"Malik, they have my sister!"

I closed my eyes and told myself that what I'd say next, I'd say because it was right and it'd keep us safe. Not because I was tired or because I was afraid. But I was both, and I hoped that I wouldn't be wrong too.

"It's black out. We're fried right now, and Hector's hurt." I sighed. "We go out now, and we'll get ourselves killed. By snakebite or drowning or those kids—"

"Anything could be happening right now!" Beckley cried. "She could be dead!"

"If they wanted her dead," Hector said with odd calm, "they'd have killed her when they grabbed her."

Beckley let loose a muffled sob.

"We can help her," I said. "We'll get her back. But we can't help her yet. Sleep if you can, guys. We'll leave in the morning, and we won't stop."

Hector grunted, and I heard the backs of his shoes brush against the ground.

"Hector?" I said. "You okay to move out tomorrow? What are you . . . ?"

His unsteady footsteps sounded past me.

“Martin,” he said.

I didn’t know how to reply.

“I’m not gonna leave him to get eaten by squirrels or for someone else to find him all gray and . . .” He trailed off and kept walking.

“You need to *rest*,” I said. “Stop—”

It wasn’t until halfway across the stream, after pinching his shirt and trying to pull him back, that I realized I was going to help Hector bury Martin. Hector almost tripped twice, and I steadied him past the edge of the water. I woke the next morning near a wide mound of dirt, my hands filthy and caked with the stuff. Hector sat near the grave, wide awake. He clutched a bent, cleaned-off arrow, and I could see in the new sunlight beads of water dangling from the tip.

I motioned to the mound.

“Do we—do we mark it?” I asked.

“No,” Hector said. “Nobody else’s business.”

We made our way through the stream for the last time to wake Beckley. She lay atop my Frontier blankets, her glasses folded in her

hands. She gathered her things and looked quietly in the direction the first arrow had flown from. Then we were gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Losing Martin and Emma threw a light on me and Beckley and Hector like we were up against a cave wall. The gaps between us looked wider, and every move one of us made seemed bigger. No room to do or say the wrong thing. The day's walk was quieter than any before it. Quiet from the fear that somebody'd lash out—hot tempers—and the bigger fears for Emma or of another attack. And of knowing that there were no instructions in Beckley's guidebook for

whatever happened next. The only breaks in the silence were Beckley's discoveries once in a while, which she spoke about just loudly enough that Hector and I could hear. We moved through the summer heat with the dull comfort that she'd been able to make out a trail.

Beckley bent back some tall grass and waited for me and Hector to stop behind her. "Does this look like the heel of a boot to you?"

I saw a U-shaped dent in the mud beneath me.

"It's not as clear as the ones we saw earlier, but I think we're still on them," she continued. "Have to be. There's no other clear path to split off on . . ."

Once in a while, at the Frontier, a grown-up would take a few of us and we'd hunt deer or elk. At least look for them—we didn't always come back with something. But after leaving the motel, hunting didn't make much sense. Too much meat to carry around and not enough people to eat it all at once. Nuts, fruit, or fish were usually enough. But between

those afternoons at the Frontier and the Matterhorn guide, we'd learned some things. Game trails were paths of trampled bushes and grass. Signs that something had come that way. If you were lucky, maybe even footprints.

"We can't be that far behind," Beckley said. "They had to have stopped sometime during the night too. No sign of a camp, but . . ."

That was as much doubt as any of us offered out loud. We were all afraid, I was sure, Beckley and Hector the same as me. But I tried to ignore the small doubts because they weren't useful.

Movement—keeping up the walk—wasn't the same as having hope. Even so, once we'd been tracking for a while, we were able to keep ourselves going. Anything that would have slowed us down didn't stick. A couple days into the turnaround, I felt a weird confidence creep in alongside the fear, both sentiments sharper than before the attack. But it started to seem that the two could live together.

• • •

The hardest part was the first few nights after Martin died. When we knew we had to stop for a while and tried to remind ourselves that so did the people we were chasing.

Three days after we changed course at the stream, we had to be almost on them, Beckley said again. She seemed struck by the same nervous boldness I felt. Hector's face showed mostly anger, but it was good not to see fear there either. It was only the times we spent sitting still that I felt weak.

I took the time before dusk to gather crickets and grasshoppers, to try and clear my head. I stepped softly through grass that went on forever, listening for the chirps.

Since we'd turned around, everything looked familiar. They'd even taken away the good part of the walk.

When I got back, Hector was holding the end of a long, straight branch over the fire he or Beckley had made. He rotated it slowly atop the flames 'til the head of the branch blackened.

"I borrowed your pocketknife," he muttered and pulled the branch back. I looked

closer and saw a split across the branch's flat head. Hector pulled the arrow he'd taken with him from behind his back. He started to untie the thick string that held the arrowhead to the shaft. Holding the big branch close to his face, Hector pinched the flat sides of the arrowhead with his other hand and wedged it into the split at the branch's end. Then he began to tie the thick string around the head of the branch.

"A spear?" I asked.

"We need weapons, Malik," Hector said. He handed me back my knife, an old gift from the Frontier toolshed. "You've already got that thing."

"That's not exactly—Hector, what are you planning?"

"This isn't even worth talking about," Hector snapped. "Those ugly-looking kids murdered Martin."

"If we come at them ready for war, they'll murder us too," I said. "I was thinking, if we could sneak Emma out—"

"*If*. Doesn't matter. We need to be armed."

From the side of the fire where Hector stood, I could hear Beckley's footsteps getting closer.

"Hector!" she called. "I misread the instructions. You don't need to blacken the spear if you're sticking something sharp on the end. It only matters if you've carved the wood down to a p—"

She stopped when she saw me, as if she hadn't made me out past the flames at first. From her hand dangled a bundle of long strings. They came together in a knot in her palm. At the other end of each string was something balled up in cloth. The strings hung straight and low, like each of the cloths had something heavy wrapped up in it.

"It's a bola," Beckley said. "Matterhorn."

I glanced at Hector's spear and then back into Beckley's cracked glasses with a doubting eye. She tilted her head at Hector and nodded.

"On the weapons issue," she said, "we agree."

CHAPTER NINE

“I had a dream last night,” Beckley started.
“I was heading up a winding mountain.

I had to walk in loop after loop to get upwards, but I’d only get a little higher each loop. Anytime I looked up, I’d still see the mountaintop pointing way into the clouds.”

I dumped the clumps of crickets and grasshoppers out of the jar I’d caught them in, into the metal pot that Beckley carries with her, and shut the pot’s lid. Leaning in from my seat, I held our meal over the fire. Beckley continued.

“During one loop up the mountain, I stepped on a big, loose rock and slipped. I started tripping backwards, almost fell off the path. And then—it was him. Just like he looks on the cover of the book. Gene Matterhorn. Skin like mine, a square chin, black hair and mustache. He grabbed my hand and pulled me back onto the trail.”

The crickets slowly stopped chirping in the pan.

“He dusted off my shoulder, wearing the same big grin from the book,” Beckley added, “and then—something happened. The red and black squares on his shirt started to move. Like, in waves. And then it was like it wasn’t a shirt at all. Checkerback snakes, crawling across his chest. They slid around his neck, onto his head. One after another ’til I couldn’t see his face. I pulled back, and then his hand gripped my wrist and a snake slipped down his arm and then up along mine and—”

She stopped and shuddered. For a moment, we all looked at the ground.

Hector spoke next. “The kids with that old man,” he said. “On their faces—did you see ’em?” He paused. “They looked like this.” He held his bitten arm up to the firelight. The harsh reds and purples surrounding the wound were gone. But the tissue was scarred and warped, like the swelling had gone down wrong. The same scarring we’d seen across the faces of the kids we’d been tracking.

“Like they’d all had checkerback bites,” Beckley said. “Maybe . . . it’s how he leaves his mark. The tall man. To show them they’re his or something. Like branding.”

“*Branding?*” Hector said.

“People would do it to cows,” Beckley said. “Burn signs on them.” She shook slightly. I set the pan down in the dirt, walked around the fire, and rested a hand on Beckley’s shoulder.

“If you’re worried about Emma . . . we’ll get to her—”

She cut me off. “They won’t do it to Emma.”

Hector fingered through the cricket pot, dropping a few at a time in his mouth.

“Where do you think they came from? All those kids,” I asked.

“Maybe they’re like us,” Beckley said.

“Like us?”

“I mean—lost their parents somehow.”

Hector scowled.

“Maybe that older guy took the ones he found, that got lost or let go when . . . whatever happened happened,” Beckley continued. “When the world stopped working.”

“Like me, you mean,” Hector said.

Beckley wiped off her glasses and avoided Hector’s stare.

“Or maybe,” Hector said, “he just killed whoever was with them. Took what he wanted, like he took our stuff. Could’ve been kids like *you*, Beckley.”

“*Easy*,” I told Hector. He passed the pot my way. The quiet felt worse at every pause, so I started again.

“What do you think they want?” I asked.

“This old man takes the kids. Maybe teaches them to live out here, away from cities. Builds

a small army. For what, though? To just take and take?"

"We've just been walking and walking," Hector said. "Until they turned us around.

"Maybe they've got it right," he continued. "They grab what they want, and that's it. It's not like the world's gonna give us anything."

"I'm not like that," I said. "Neither are you. What we do is harder. We're stronger people for it."

Hector picked his spear up from the grass behind him and stamped the butt against the ground.

"We're gonna have to hit 'em back, Malik. All three of us. You ready for that?"

I felt anger start to well up in me, and I wasn't sure if it was because he was wrong or right.

"I fought back at the stream, same as you," I said. "I'm talking about how we live our lives out here afterwards. Whatever we do, we can't be like that."

I looked down into the cricket pot and picked out a handful of blackened insects

before handing it to Beckley. When I sat back down, Hector hadn't loosened his grip on the spear.

"What we do from now on, we do for Emma. And for Martin," I said. I turned to Beckley. "That doesn't stop once we get Emma back."

None of us strayed far from the fire after eating, but the talking stopped. I fished through my backpack and tossed Hector a change of clothes since his were gone. He nodded thanks. Beckley inspected the knots in her bola again and again. The heat was high enough that I didn't want a blanket, so I lay out along the grass. A weak wind dragged smoke from the burning tinder across my line of sight. I felt trapped in my head with the last few days inside of me. The smoke itself looked like a scar across the middle of the open sky.

CHAPTER TEN

Backtracking across the plains made me wonder what we'd have done for water if we'd kept moving east. Following the tall, old man and his pack of kids meant taking a different path back than we'd taken to reach the spot where everything happened. No streams ran alongside us. We barely came across water at all the first few days of tracking. The grasses around us were tall, but everything felt dry. Plants crunched under our feet, some places. We were careful with

our reserves and felt relief at every chance to drink.

The morning after Beckley and Hector put their weapons together, I looked at my pocketknife like it was something I hadn't seen before. I had used it to cut meat off birds and coyotes, but I'd never thought long about cutting a person. Knowing what the person might look like—the tall man, the boy with a mask of scars 'cross his eyes—gave the thought heaviness, force. It made the knife something new.

Even the biggest blade of three was short, the width of my palm. *I might need something bigger anyway*, I thought.

I took off my bandana and ran the big blade slowly across my scalp, with no water to soften the skin and no puddle to look into while I did it. Short black curls fell into my other hand. My head had started to itch since the last time I shaved it. Earlier that morning, Hector—his hair normally longer, thick, straight, black—had borrowed the knife again and done his like mine. Nothing for someone to grab onto in a fight that way.

Nearby, Beckley whipped her bola at the head of her propped-up backpack, emptied of anything that might break and stuffed with dead grass. The bola stirred through the air, low to the ground, circling smoothly. She missed the backpack five times out of six.

“First time’s—there’s probably something of a learning curve, right?” Beckley said.

“There was less in the guide about aiming it.”

The day before, we’d noticed stray streaks of blood within sight of our path. And, before any of us could think for long about Emma, a few bloodied tufts of fur. Later in the walk, we found the bones of a coyote, stripped recently. The best sign we’d had so far that we were right on track, and we were close.

Hector held his spear point-up like a walking stick when we set off again. Beckley walked in front like usual. Her bola drooped at the ready on one of her backpack straps. She stopped as she reached the high point of a sloping hill.

“Look,” she said. “Up ahead. All those trees in the distance. Everything slopes upward from

here. It's harder to tell without the map, but I think we're headed back into the part it marked 'Black Hills.' Near there, anyhow."

She turned fully to face me and Hector.

"It'll be harder to track, possibly, once the grass starts to thin. But the hills'll slow them down too."

"So we book it," I said.

"Assuming they headed to the hills," Hector said.

"Assuming they headed to the hills, yes," Beckley replied. "That's why we watch the trail in the meantime."

By the time the sun had slid into the center of the sky, the rangeland we'd been walking through had broken up into patches among pathways of dirt and rock.

"Malik, Hector!" Beckley called out.

"Has either of you seen something I might've missed back there? It's getting harder to make out a trail here."

"Maybe we won't have to," I said.

We'd stopped walking for long enough that the sound of a soft trickle had drifted into

earshot. I led Beckley and Hector past a few trees. Sure enough, we saw a thin stream of water sliding downward along a short slope of rock. A few steps up the rocks, we could see a narrow brook moving around the steep hills nearby.

“They probably followed the water,” I said. “Wouldn’t you?”

We curved along the brook, against the flow of the water and past the pines. In not much time, we came to the remains of a fire pit, charred coyote bones in the center.

“It’s recent!” Beckley said in an excited whisper. “This could’ve been this morning! Last night!”

A few steps away, a light caught Hector’s eye. He craned his neck around to examine the base of a tree.

“Guys,” he said. “Look.”

He held up a glinting metal disc. It glared like a miniature sun when the light hit it. I looked in close and saw that one side was glass. Two tiny arrowheads wobbled in the center.

“Hector,” Beckley said, “this is big. You know what you’ve found?”

He shook his head and looked at the disc with new suspicion.

“It’s a compass. We can use it to tell which way we’re going—which direction. No more relying on sun and shadows . . .”

Up ahead I heard twigs snapping. I motioned for Beckley to stop talking. She and Hector stepped behind a pair of trees nearby. The sounds grew louder while we hid ourselves.

Pictures of the tall man’s pack jumping out from all sides ran through my mind, but the number of steps we heard didn’t grow as the feet got closer. Two people, maybe three. Beckley glimpsed around a pine and confirmed it, holding up two fingers. Then we heard a voice.

“ . . . don’t got many compasses. Caaan’t lose them! Andy’s not gonna let you carry one again.”

The other boy didn’t reply. The speaker—older, taller, wide build—kept going.

“You’re in truh-buhl. Andy is not happy. But he’ll be happy with me, I get to hand it back! He’ll know he can trust me with the important stuff.”

Then he kept going:

“Where’d you leave it?”

The younger boy was thinner, with skin paler than Beckley’s. His hair was a tangle of orange curls, and his scars hung alongside his left eye like the end of a hook.

“Where I slept. By the trees,” the boy said.

“Huh. Okay. You find it. I’m gonna fill my bottle,” the other replied and trudged off. He walked past the trees we stood behind, a couple body-lengths away, following the trickle of water.

The smaller boy stood frowning for a moment and scanned the area. He walked up to a tree a few trunks away, crouching down to look around the roots. He did this a few times while Hector, Beckley, and I looked at each other, all three of us waiting for one of the others to give some sort of sign.

Stepping softly, Beckley and I lined up behind Hector. The scrawny boy kneeled down at our tree, pawed around near the trunk, and stood up. Then, like he knew he was right, he narrowed his eyes and kneeled down again. Almost gently, Hector moved the tip of his spear toward the boy's face. He spoke a low command:

“Get on the ground. Now. We're going to talk.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The thin, orange-haired boy's eyes got wide as they met Hector's. He touched his hands to the dirt and twisted his neck up to face us.

"All right. Stay like that. You have a weapon?" Hector asked.

The boy shook his head no.

"How close are they? The rest of them."

Half the boy's face wrinkled, confused, while his scar kept the other half stiff. Hector pressed him.

“How close? Half-day’s walk? Day’s?”

“Less’n that,” the boy replied. “Half-day.
We stopped.”

“Okay. You take us there.”

The boy looked at Hector, confused again.

“They—they’ll *kill* you.”

He said it not like a threat, but like a fact.
Hector grabbed him by his collar.

“Come on! Up!” He dangled the compass
in the scrawny boy’s face. “Found it.”

The boy squinted at the compass for a
moment, then spat in Hector’s face. Hector
shook his head madly as he wiped the spit
off and lunged forward. I moved to hold him
back. Beckley waved her bola at the boy,
looking half-embarrassed to be threatening
him, while I talked Hector down.

“Relax,” I said, patting one of his
shoulders. I led the boy away from the trees
and into the open. “You, what’s your name?”

“Wendell.”

“Well. Lead the way, Wendell.”

“Any attempt to run and we will, um,
bludgeon you,” Beckley added.

“Wendell?”

We whipped around to see the larger boy Wendell had come with.

“Wendell, what . . . !?”

We all stood still as understanding lit up the older boy’s face. He pulled a wooden club from his side and shook it above his head.

“You, all a’ yah. Stop!”

“We are stopped,” Beckley murmured.

The older boy shook his club again, red-faced and glaring under a heavy brow.

“You know what? Forget it,” Hector said, and threw the spear straight and fast into the boy’s thigh. It sunk in up to the tip and hung wobbling in his leg for a moment. The older boy yanked it out, chucking it aside with a howl as a spray of blood hurried out of the wound. He got redder, and thick veins appeared alongside the scarring down the heavy boy’s neck.

“Hector,” Beckley said, “he’s still standing.”

“I *know that*,” Hector replied.

I grabbed Wendell by both arms as the older one charged, furious, at Hector. Hector stepped up and hit him once on the jaw, square

with his elbow, before the heavy boy tackled him to the ground, spurting blood. To look at him, he had Hector outweighed easy and he kneeled on top him, sliding thick fingers around Hector's neck.

Beckley crawled onto the boy's back and slid the strings of the bola around his throat, pulling back with both hands. The boy gagged and spat spittle. As Beckley yanked tighter, he rolled his shoulder with a grunt and sent her tumbling to the ground. Hector kicked out from under him.

The two of them stood up shakily, Hector gasping hard for air and the large boy spreading a hand across his bleeding thigh. Beckley sat up dazed a few steps away from them.

"Beckley," I called out, tightening my grip on Wendell's arms, "kick me the club."

The dropped hunk of wood rolled my way, and I stopped it with my heel.

"... Rip yer . . . from yer skull. Nobody gg . . ."

The large boy mumbled half-formed threats at Hector and then lifted his arm

from off the wound to gaze at his bloody hand. His fingers and palm were a deep, complete red.

“Nobody gets away fr . . .”

He lumbered forward one leg at a time as Hector raised his fists and scanned the ground for his spear. On the larger boy’s third step, his eyes glazed over, then shut. He fell face-first into the burned-out fire pit. Hector picked up his spear again.

Beckley crouched down beside the boy and tried to turn him on his back.

“I think he passed out,” she said. “Maybe you hit a vein, Hector.”

I let go of Wendell after Hector pointed the spear back at him. Then I moved to the heavy boy, removed his boots, and started pulling at his pant legs.

“What are you doing?” Hector shouted.

“We can’t let him bleed to death out here,” I said and tugged off the tattered black pants.

“I guess that’s fair,” Beckley said. “I’ll see what we have left in the way of bandages.”

Hector scowled at both of us.

“It’s not like we’re gonna take him *with*, Hector,” Beckley added. “We lack the materials for a stretcher, for that matter. This’ll just be so he doesn’t wake up dead.”

Once again, Wendell stared at us in confusion.

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By early evening, Wendell had led us to a paved road that he said was on the way. Once we crossed it, he said, we’d be close to where they were camped in a little town.

“How little?” I asked. “That was all of you? When you attacked at the stream.”

“Yeah,” the scrawny boy said. “All.”

“You better be telling us the truth,” Hector said and tapped Wendell’s shoulder with the flat side of the spear point.

Beckley walked up ahead with the boy and talked a little longer, then turned back to me and Hector. She made it sound like we’d be moving around the hills a while longer, not moving deep into them.

“But we’ll be hardest to track if we head up that way once we take Emma back,” she said.

“We might have to split up from there. For a little while.”

After a long stretch of walking, we gave up on dragging Wendell by the arm and let him walk in between us. In the silence that followed the talk about the camp, I started to ask him other things.

“So, is . . . that all you do? Hunt, and kill and steal.”

“With Andy? He feeds us,” Wendell replied. “He finds places to stop.”

“You mean you feed him,” I said back. “His hunting pack.”

Wendell looked at me with surprise, and then with understanding. Like I’d said a thought he’d had but never heard out loud. He said nothing. Was he ashamed?

“He helps us,” he said. Hector laughed, and Wendell’s voice sounded weaker. “No. No. He helps us. I got sick in the winter, and I got a deer coat before anybody.”

“So where do you come from? The rest of you,” I asked.

Wendell took several steps before answering.

“Sometimes Andy finds them lost somewhere, or left behind in places, I think,” he said. “Other times, if—they’re younger than the rest, like the girl at the water . . .”

Beckley looked at him sharply. A flicker of the setting sun fell on the scar near Wendell’s eye. I touched the side of my face in the same spot.

“What happened to all of you guys? Was it Andy that did it?”

“The snakebites—he says it’s ’cause there’s danger in the world. Everywhere. Lots,” Wendell said. “He says it’s how he shows kids, so they understand. He takes the snake away when he knows you get it. He says he holds back the dangers around. It makes us a group, after we all used to be lost.”

“What about *you*?” I asked.

He paused again.

“Did . . . Andy . . . find you lost someplace?” I added.

“What about your parents?” Beckley asked. “People that cared about you?”

The boy grimaced and nodded slightly.

“I say I don’t remember. None of us say we remember. But I remember.”

His mouth hung open like he was looking for words he didn’t have.

“Andy says we’re dumb and he’s smart. But—” his face flushed. “I am smart. I remember lots of things.”

We walked into the night, well past the road we had crossed. Wendell stopped us as we reached a large sign. It was at least a body-length across, and I could make out chipped paint and the grooves of big letters carved neatly into the wood. Squinting in the moonlight, Beckley read the sign aloud: “Hillside Hamlet. A thriving community on the edge of the Black Hills. Ess-tudd nineteen ninety-one.”

“Here,” Wendell said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hillside Hamlet stretched out low and wide near the edge of a tree-covered slope.

On opposite ends of the little town, narrow, empty roads led out between the hills. A few strands of road also ran through it, with smaller dots of blacktop along each one. Four or five houses circled around every bud. From our overlook, all the houses looked the same. Same roofs, same-sized garages in the same spots.

“What is this place?” Hector asked.

“It’s so . . . organized,” Beckley said. “This is breathtaking.”

“This is it,” Wendell said. “That girl—your sister—should be down there. Will you let me go?”

“When we *have* her,” Hector said and tilted his spear. “You stick with us. You run, you shout—”

“He’s right,” I said to Wendell. “Sorry.” I pointed down at the lookalike houses. “You know where your crew is camped? Where we can find Emma?”

He nodded, then waved to a cluster of homes to the right of where we stood. “Andy brought us in on this road. Same way we’re headed. Should be one of those places.” Wendell glanced anxiously between the three of us.

“Okay,” Beckley said. “Come on, Wendy. Let’s move.”

The few trees along the hill were lengths apart. The cover of night would have to be enough. Beckley and Wendell started down off the side of the near road into Hillside Hamlet. Hector and I followed behind.

“I’m beginning to think you want to make friends with our prisoner,” Hector said in my general direction.

“I only think—this one, he really doesn’t seem that different from us, you know? He just doesn’t *know* anything else. And besides. If that man, the others, if they find him guiding us? They’ll probably kill him too.”

Hector ignored me and hissed, “No running! No shouting!” to the others up ahead.

• • •

Wendell couldn’t say for sure which house, out of five around the hub of road, Emma might be in. He just said that of the clusters of buildings at Hillside Hamlet, he thought Andy and the others had laid down in the ones in front of us. Andy might’ve taken a house to himself, Wendell told us—“He gets mad at too much noises”—and the boys and girls had likely split up among a few places.

We paired off, me and Hector so I could mind Hector’s temper, and Beckley and Wendell. Fewer footsteps at once that way, and more places covered in a short stretch of time.

I think we also figured that Wendell might throw Hector to the pack the first chance he got, but since Wendell had done some navigating with Beckley, he seemed a little more at ease.

Hector and I approached the house nearest to us in the circle while Beckley and Wendell took the one next to that. At the front, near the door, I saw the numbers 2 and 0 and 5. The 5 dangled upside-down by a screw.

“How do you want to go in?” I whispered.

Hector pointed around the side of the house. We crept along the outside walls and underneath windows. We did this on each side of the place, one of us keeping his head low and peering in a window each time we turned a corner. At the last wall, we doubled back one corner to a loose, damaged-looking door—maybe what the kids had used to enter. The windows next to the door showed an empty room that looked like the Frontier Motel’s kitchen, but smaller. I recognized things I’d seen other places too: a *fridge* and a *stovetop*. Words I hadn’t used in a while.

Hector pushed the door open slowly. I tightened up anytime a noise came from its hinges. My thoughts flashed to the scarred kids, then to my pocketknife. Then I stepped in after him.

We moved left from the back of the house, toward a long, large-windowed room that also looked empty. The smell of burnt cloth filled our noses as we entered. I looked down and saw the damp remains of a fire pit on the carpet. People—here.

Hector pointed toward the ceiling and mouthed ‘upstairs?’ I nodded. We stepped softly out of the long room toward a large stairway closer to the front of the house.

Several steps ahead of me, Hector crossed to the base of the stairs. As he took the first step up, a click sounded behind him. One of the boys from the stream stepped out of a doorway, eyes on Hector. I grabbed him before he could see me, pulling my inner elbow tight across his mouth and using my other arm to hold one of the boy’s arms in place. Hector turned back, propping his spear

against the doorframe at the bottom of the stairway.

The boy wriggled in my grip, tilting his head and giving me a wide-eyed sideways glance. He grunted again into my elbow.

“Malik. The club,” Hector hissed.

I rolled the big piece of wood his way with my foot and started to sweat. The boy’s grunts got louder.

Hector slipped his fingers around the club’s wider end, lifting it above the struggling boy’s head, the blunt topside facing toward him.

“Wait—” I said.

He brought the club down on the boy’s skull, a few short, controlled pounds. The boy crumpled to the floor, moaning. I gasped hard for air, and Hector put one hand on each of my shoulders.

“Another second and he would’ve given us away,” he said.

I said nothing, and we climbed the stairs. Hector was first at the top. He turned back to me.

“You, uh, watch the hall. I’ll check the room.”

We could see three doors from the end of the stairs, each of them open a crack. Hector slid from wall to wall as I stood guard, grabbing onto the club's handle again to try and stop shaking. After the first door he tried, Hector held up four fingers. Two doors later, he crept back to me.

"Six, maybe seven of them—the rooms are dark," he said. "But . . . no Emma."

I nodded and touched the handrail, prepared to step back down, when a scream—clipped, but loud—filtered through the walls from another house. A girl's scream. Beckley's.

We bounded down the stairs, no longer caring about the noise. As Hector and I burst outside, we saw Beckley pulling Emma through the front door of the next house over. They sprinted in our direction, Emma stumbling to keep up.

Beckley slowed down just long enough to seize my arm with her other hand and yell at us to run along with her. Footsteps pounded on the houses' front walkways.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Beckley panted. “I didn’t want to scream but—”

I glanced down at Emma and saw a coil of scar tissue from her nose down past her lip. The left side of her mouth looked flushed and swollen. When I looked up, the boys and girls who’d rushed out of the houses had started forming a circle on the rim of the hub’s driveways. Thirteen, maybe fourteen of them. Two dragged the limp boy Hector had hit between them. They dropped his body at their feet and glared at us—then past us. Beckley held tight to her sister while Hector and I turned, following the two boys’ line of sight to make out a tall frame in the darkness, like a knotted, bending tree.

“My goodness,” Andy said, low, slower, more relaxed than at the stream. “This is a surprise.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dead flowers, broken-off pieces of handrail, parts of floorboard—they were piled together on the blacktop. A girl not much older than Emma rubbed two sticks together to start the fire.

We weren't tied up or chained down, but we were trapped. The circle of Andy's kids kept its shape all around us. Even Hector gave up his weapon to Andy after he saw how many of them were prepared to go for Emma when he raised it. Andy squinted at the spear for a

moment, bobbed it up and down slightly in his palms, and then set it atop the woodpile. Beckley's bola followed.

"I'd believe the young girl could settle in with us," Andy said. "You all might be too old for it."

His words were slow, measured. The first flickers of the fire lit up his craggy face. He leaned in close to Beckley and then me.

"You children. You've been out on your own a long time?"

Neither of us answered.

"Hrmph. The younger one hasn't been much for talk either."

Andy grabbed a fistful of Emma's sandy hair, and she squealed. I clamped onto his wrist, and he swung the back side of his hand against my cheek. The hand felt like nothing but bone. He unclenched his fist and stepped back. Blood swished inside my mouth.

"Let me tell you kids something. A man my age . . ." he laughed—or coughed, I couldn't tell which. "I saw things from the beginning. Some people took to eating their

fellows . . . right away, it seemed like. Might surprise you to know I waited years. Plenty of times since, I've had to, when food's scarce. But I'll tell you: I just . . . *can't* . . . find the taste for it."

He shook off his ragged black overcoat and threw it to a boy nearby, the short boy from the stream with a mask of scars around his eyes. Flames atop the woodpile rose like on command.

"These boys and girls, though. I've got to show them something," Andy continued, leaning in close again. "You've upset them."

He lumbered toward the limp, mumbling boy nearby and dragged him by the front collar toward the center of the circle.

"This!" he shouted, his voice suddenly loud enough to fill all of the open air. He pointed to the kid Hector had clubbed. "They did this! That's—" he heaved, then arched up with new ferocity "—to a partner, a brother!"

Andy let the boy's body drop from his bony hand and slump to the ground. He stood quiet for a moment, twisting his neck to look

halfway around the circle. He stretched out his arm and pointed to Wendell, who stood half-hidden in the shadows of two taller girls.

“You, boy,” Andy said, quiet again. “Max says you led them here?”

The squat boy I’d struck with the wagon tipped his head yes in silence, but Andy kept his eyes fixed on Wendell.

“That right, Wendell?”

Wendell nodded slightly. Andy narrowed his gaze underneath the cliff’s edge of his brow.

“I—I could tell they were tracking me. I got lost from Oscar. I th-thought if I’d bring ’em here, we could—”

“All right,” Andy said flatly. “Good. That’s good.” He took a step away, stopped, and turned back to Wendell.

“You’ll do it then.”

One of the girls who’d stood next to Wendell walked toward Beckley, Hector, Emma, and me. She began to tie my wrists together. As she bound us up, one after the other, Andy drew a long hunting knife from his boot. He rubbed the flat side of the blade

between two fingers, whisking off dust or dried blood, then refocused his attention on Wendell—turning the knife so the handle pointed outward.

“You can finish what you started, leading ’em here,” Andy growled. “Take the knife, Wendell.”

The fire had started to crackle and hiss. Wendell took the knife by its handle out of Andy’s grip.

“All right,” Andy said. “Max!” He shook his pointing finger at the squat boy, then at Hector. “That one first. The rock thrower.”

The boy approached Hector and hit him with a swift, short punch in his gut. Hector fell to his knees. Max grabbed Hector’s bound wrists and pulled him closer to the building flames.

“Just a clean cut across the neck now, Wendell, like you’ve been shown,” Andy said. I saw the flash of a grin in the firelight. “Then we’ll start to cook.”

From the ground, Hector squinted up at Wendell. Of the two, Wendell looked more

afraid. He held the knife like a boulder rested on top of it. His hand twitched as he lifted it to Hector's neck. The circle of kids around us began to murmur, restless.

Hector looked to me and Beckley for a moment—almost peaceful. Then he glared back at Wendell.

“Do it already.”

• • •

It was maybe everyone's shock that kept us alive after that. Like when we had seen Martin die, time seemed to slow down. The same when Wendell pulled up on Hector's arms and slit the ties with a spastic flick of the knife, and none of Andy's kids moved to stop him. Only after, when Hector plucked Beckley's bola from the fire, did people wake back up. Flames coated the pieces of canvas that held the bola's rocks, and it landed around Andy's throat like a necklace of hot coals. Between screams and barked commands, he threw the bola down and recovered his knife from where Wendell had dropped it.

We ran from the fire through a weak link in the wall of bodies surrounding it, panicked and tripping over our own legs. I pulled at the ties around my wrists as Andy's kids gave chase.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We burst through the front door of a house on the far end of Hillside Hamlet. Our sprint away from the woodfire had led us down the center of town, past several more hubs of houses. Each one looked the same as the last, like we were running in a loop. My thighs burned, and I bent over panting as Hector freed my wrists.

While he undid the knot, he spoke to Wendell. "Thanks. You—you saved my neck."

"I dunno why," Wendell murmured.

“They’re gonna kill us. They’re gonna kill all of us.”

With my arms free, I started pushing on the end of a couch that lay in a room left of the front entrance, covered by long tears and patches of exposed stuffing. After everyone was untied, Hector and Wendell helped me push it through an entryway and against the front door. A moment later, hands pounded against the blocked door from outside.

“The couch isn’t gonna keep ’em out of here very long,” I said. “Beckley! Check around back! Can we get out that way? Can they get in?”

Beckley was holding her sister’s hand and inspecting a knocked-over table in the room to the left. She lifted up the edge of the tablecloth stuck underneath the wood table, tattered, ripped in places.

“Something is wrong here,” Beckley said.

“What?” Hector shouted over the banging at the door.

“I’ll check the back,” Wendell said, shifting around near the couch.

I walked to the table near Beckley and kicked at one of the wooden legs 'til it broke off. I picked up the leg and turned to Beckley.

“What are you talking about?”

A carved stone smashed through a window farther back in the room, casting glass across the floor.

“I don’t think we’re alone, Malik!”

“Yeah, they’re right outside. Can we get to the hills—”

“No,” Beckley said, “listen, I—”

Her eyes widened. I followed her gaze toward a small black bear cub trotting into the far end of the room, the part full of glass. Not big enough to be threatening.

“No no no no no,” Beckley said, trying to quickly, quietly shoo away the cub.

“Bigger problems, Beckley!” Hector yelled. “We’ve got bigger problems!”

“You don’t get it,” Beckley said. “We don’t want to be anywhere *near* that thing if the mother—”

A crash rang out, and another stone went through the window closest to us. Beckley

covered her head as shards of glass rained over her. The bear cub scampered out of the room the way it had come.

Hector pressed his back against the near end of the couch. The front door's hinges started to shudder from the pounding, and I scanned around for Wendell. Beckley held tight to her sister's shoulders, small pieces of glass clinging to her cat shirt. She looked around from the front door to the room full of glass to the stairway leading to the upper floor to the front entrance again.

I heard grunts. I turned and saw Max, the boy with scars across his eyes, crawling in through one of the busted-out windows. Shards of glass crunched against the bottoms of my boots. I butted the table leg into his nose, and he groaned and slid back the other way.

"Hector," I shouted. "Is it holding?"

Several bangs sounded against the front door.

"We're okay!" Hector replied.

I started moving toward the kitchen in the back of the house and tossed Beckley the table

leg. “Watch the windows. There will be more of them through there.”

Emma picked up a slender piece of glass and swung it through the air.

“Careful!” Beckley said.

“I need *something*,” Emma replied.

The kitchen looked empty. A door to the basement whined on its hinges, moving with the breeze. The door to the backyard was closed—but one window was open wide.

Something hard and smooth hit me in the back of the head. I spun around and saw a girl, blurred, swinging at me with a rolling pin. When I ducked, it cracked against the side of the fridge. The force of the miss sent the girl backward a step. At the sound of Andy’s voice she halted.

“Thaaat’s enough,” he said, appearing somewhere behind me. The tall man moved in with Wendell as his hostage, one elbow wrapped around the skinny boy’s neck, his hunting knife held up to Wendell’s face. “You,” he continued, nodding to me. “Get your friends.”

I lowered my arms to my sides and stood still for a moment. I knew, in a way, that he'd harm us no matter what. Whether we fought or not. But looking at the dim outline of the tall man, seeing the glint of the blade, I couldn't let something I did force his move. The back of my head felt swollen and hot.

"I'm about to yell, and then every one of us will be in here," Andy said flatly. "Don't make me any angrier in the meantime."

He drew the knife closer to Wendell's face.

"And you—the level of my disappointment—"

With a wheeze, Wendell wheeled his legs in the air and drove one heel down against Andy's knee. The tall man stumbled back, and back again. He held his grip on Wendell's neck all the while. The two tumbled downward through the basement doorway, the sounds of strained wood steps tracking their fall. Andy's knife clattered against the hard basement floor.

The girl in the kitchen moved next, and I swung with my leg for her ankle. She went down jaw-first on the kitchen tiles. Her

flailing arm sent the rolling pin spinning. I hurried down to the basement.

Downstairs was even darker than the kitchen. A small window near the ceiling on one wall let in a sliver of moonlight. I called out for Wendell. A few lengths away, he said he thought he'd broken an ankle.

I jerked my head back and forth.
“Where's—?”

Andy's sudden low grunt reached me before the blade did, but I couldn't move fast enough. It cut into the side of my shoulder, not deep but a clean swipe. I focused on my balance, trying to stay on my feet as the sting got quickly worse. The tall man fixed on me in the dark, letting off angry spittle as blood started to trickle down my arm. He swung the knife again, slicing through the air, fiercer and more reckless.

Against the basement concrete, I heard the thuds of someone jumping on one leg. With a lunge, Wendell brought his bony shoulders into Andy's ribs. As they both fell to the ground, a squeal filled the room.

I waved around for Wendell's hand with my good arm. In a slurred yell, I demanded we go. A whining bear cub scampered from underneath Wendell and across the ground.

Wendell's palm gripped mine, and I pulled up. Andy, still sprawled on the floor, seized the tail end of Wendell's shirt. "Nnn-oh!" the old man growled.

A louder moan interrupted him.

The mother bear was massive. I couldn't tell where its black form stopped in the darkness, but it approached with hardly a sound. Claws came down against Andy's head like a whisper.

Before I realized it, Wendell and I were up two steps, then three, me watching from behind as he hopped from one stair to the next. Past him, I saw an outline—Hector. He helped lift Wendell onto the kitchen tile.

"Malik," Hector said, then stopped mid-breath. I reached up with my good arm, past the several steps still ahead of me, and felt fingers wrapping around my ankle.

Andy gurgled with fury. The full-grown bear roared below him at the bottom of the basement stairs.

Moonlight from the kitchen shone down on Andy's face, red, rippled with wide streaks. He held his grip on my leg, past the moment I saw life leave his sunken eyes. As I broke away and stumbled into the kitchen, Hector stood locked on the tall man's body. The bear growled down below, shaking at the start of the narrow staircase, then turned to tend to its frightened cub.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“What are you doing?” I shouted.
“Hector, what are you doing?”

Hector dragged Andy’s mangled body up the last few stairs and across the kitchen tile.

“We’ve got to figure out how we’re dealing with the rest of those kids,” I continued. “And fast. Maybe something to distract ’em out front, while most of us—”

“They went silent out there, Malik,” he said. “Maybe they’re waiting for a command. A signal. I’ve got one for them.”

I helped Wendell walk one-footed through the room full of broken glass. Beckley called out from the other side.

“It’s quiet, you can have your table leg back. I—Malik, your arm! Hold on, give me a minute to—Hector, what is that? Oh my g—”

Hector set the tall man’s body against a wall by the entrance as Beckley yanked the bandana off my head for a bandage and started to dress my shoulder. Hector began pushing at the flat backside of the couch. After a few bumps, it slid away from the front door.

Emma looked to the body and then to me, asking with her eyes if he was gone. I nodded. She stiffened her lower lip and nodded back, shaking her sandy bangs.

“Where is the bear now?” Beckley asked. “We have to—”

“Don’t worry,” Hector said. “We’re leaving.”

With one arm, he tugged the body over the worn entryway rug. With his free hand, he flung open the front door.

None of the kids on the lawn moved when they first saw Hector. They stood in a

scattered formation, some looking twitchy, some looking tired, in the early glare of the new sun. When Hector dropped Andy's body on the outside step, several kids blinked or shuddered, but nobody moved to attack. Hector straightened his back.

"Look at this!" he shouted. "This is the man who used snakes to teach you lessons. Who you spend your lives listening to. Who you spent your lives fetching food for. He can't hurt you anymore."

"Hector, what in the . . . ?" Beckley whispered through the doorway. "Stop it and let's go!"

He didn't hear her. Or he ignored her.

"And he can't *help you* anymore."

Most of the boys and girls on the lawn let their shoulders droop or their weapons hang by their sides. They watched Hector with confusion and strange patience. Beckley kept whispering at Hector, and I set a hand on her shoulder.

Hector continued. "From now on, when you move? Move with me. He"—he pointed to Andy—"is gone now."

He stepped onto the lawn, up to a boy with a length of scar tissue down his chin. The boy held a spear, its head smaller than Hector's had been, and Hector gripped it at the top, his hand above the boy's. Pictures appeared in my head like a rabbit poking its head through tall grass. In flashes, then vanishing. Of Martin, and of Hector blackening the spear he'd made above the fire, and of Hector the screaming kid alone at the Frontier, and his eyes when he said that maybe Andy and the others had it right. The boy let his weapon go, and Hector pointed with it toward the hills.

"Coming?" he shouted to the boys and girls on the lawn. They looked to one another. And in silent agreement, they began to follow. With Hector at its head, the pack took its first steps in the direction of the hills.

"Hector!" Beckley shouted, and she stared at me for an answer through her cracked glasses.

"If we don't start to move soon, we might lose him," she said.

"I think we might've lost him a while ago."

The dark hadn't lifted by the time Hector and the rest disappeared at the edge of the small town. For a short moment in the dimness of early morning, huddled at the end of a driveway with Beckley and Emma, I thought I saw him turn to us, glancing back with no apology.

...

"We should get our bags," Beckley said. "Get moving again before the heat really starts. I don't want to hang around here and find any more surprises."

"All right," I said with a nod.

"The bags—oh no. They weren't in the fire, were they? Like Hector's spear?"

"No," I said. "Don't think so. They would've kept 'em. That was the point at the start, right? Them stealing."

"Okay. Then it's back to the other side of town."

"Then east?" I asked.

"Then east. I've got the compass in hand," said Beckley. "Emma, you ready?"

Emma nodded sleepily.

“Put the glass back before you go. You’re going to poke yourself.”

Emma pulled the long shard of glass from her sock with a frown. After Hector and the rest headed to the hills, Beckley’s energy shifted to the scarring next to her sister’s mouth. But Emma stayed calmer than her sister. She seemed to know there was no changing it, even if she didn’t understand it all the way.

“You’re handling this like a big kid,” Beckley said with an uneven laugh. But Emma had nodded like she knew that was right.

Beckley took a couple steps across the blacktop and swerved to call over at Wendell. He lay propped up against a half-circle of carved stones that surrounded a patch of dirt between two lawns. Maybe where a garden once grew. His elbows rested in the slots where stones had been taken and thrown through windows.

“You coming, Wendy?” Beckley asked.

“My leg,” Wendell replied.

“Right! Right. Um, wait here.”

• • •

Beckley flipped through the pages of *Gene Matterborn's Wilderness Survival Guidebook* as we crossed the length of Hillside Hamlet for the second time.

“Splints. I *know* there's stuff in here about splints . . . ‘*cold compress*.’ He always talks about a cold compress. Where can we find a cold compress? . . . Not these houses. I'm not checking these houses.”

I tightened the straps of my backpack, pulling at the plastic hooks at the ends with my thumbs. The eastern sky turned a brighter, fuller red, and the day ahead was empty.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

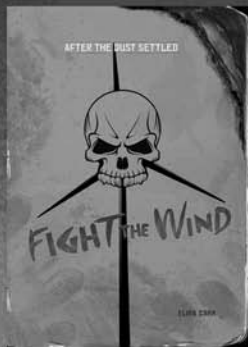
Jonathan Mary-Todd is a writer from Minneapolis.
He enjoys the outdoors, with qualifications.

*The world is
over.*

AFTER THE DUST SETTLED

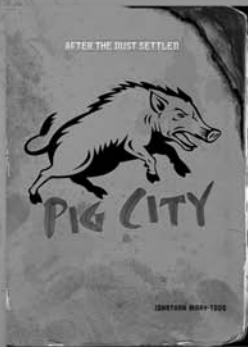
*Can you
survive
what's next?*

AFTER THE DUST SETTLED



Fight the Wind

Fix has a gift for machines. If he can fix up an old wind turbine, he and his friends will be able to live at their Iowa camp for as long as they want. Cleo says no way. She'd rather try to find a city that's rumored to be growing in the southwest. But if another rumor is true—that raiders are heading toward the camp—the only real choice will be fight or die.



Pig City

Malik and his friends try to avoid cities, but they look for shelter in downtown Des Moines once a winter storm hits. They're quickly trapped in the middle of a struggle between the city's two biggest gangs: the peaceful members of the Coalition and the forces of Pig City, who want to turn everyone else into hog food.



Plague Riders

When Shep's parents disappeared, he agreed to deliver medicine for the sinister Doctor St. John. The doctor runs the camp of River's Edge with total control, but the pills he makes are the only defense against the nightpox plague. On one trip, Shep learns that his parents may still be alive. With fellow rider Cara by his side, he prepares to escape from River's Edge.



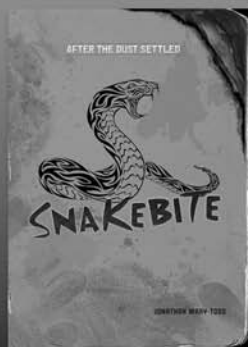
River Run

Freya and her sister have spent years as captives in a Minneapolis basement. After her sister disappears, Freya decides to break out—and finds herself heading down the Mississippi River with a strange young boy. Are the boy's sunny stories about Norlins true? Or will the end of Freya's journey be the most dangerous part?



Shot Down

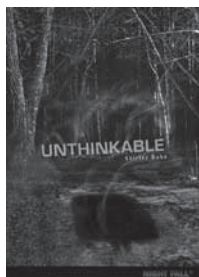
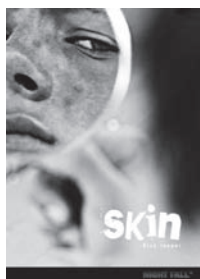
Malik and the Captain, a gruff inventor, are on a hot air balloon tour of apocalyptic America—until a bullet sends their ride to the ground. A crash landing is just the beginning of their troubles, as the two travelers discover a family that hunts people for sport and begin a run for their lives across the hills and fields of Kentucky.

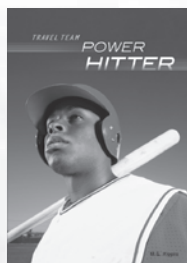
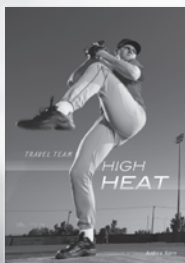


Snakebite

Beckley's crew has made its way from Montana to South Dakota, living off the land and staying out of trouble. But trouble soon finds them. First, a snake sinks its fangs into the moody Hector. Then a clan of savage kids runs off with Beckley's sister. Will the group's survival knowledge be enough to get her back?

Check out **NIGHT FALL** for the best in YA horror!



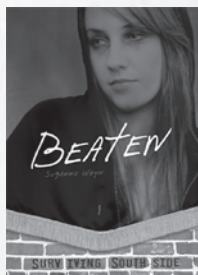


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Ever since the last of their parents died at the Frontier Motel, Malik, Beckley, Hector, Martin, and Emma have been on the move. Gene Matterhorn's *Wilderness Survival Guidebook* helps them defend themselves across the northern plains. It helps them identify the snake that bit Hector. But it doesn't help them avoid an ambush, where Emma is kidnapped by a weathered, gnarled man and his gang of kids, bearing the same snakebite scars as Hector.

Now the group is on the offensive, using the guidebook for new information: how to make weapons and track footprints. If they can trust one another—and avoid killing themselves—they just might be able to hunt down their attackers and get Emma back before it's too late.

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