

THE ONLY HOPE FOR HUMANITY ISN'T HUMAN.

PARTIALS

DAN WELLS



PARTIALS

DAN WELLS

BALZER+BRAY

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the rule breakers,
the troublemakers, and the revolutionaries.*

Sometimes the hand that feeds you needs a good bite.

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Part 1

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Part 2: Three Months Later

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher

CHAPTER ONE

Newborn #485GA18M died on June 30, 2076, at 6:07 in the morning. She was three days old. The average lifespan of a human child, in the time since the Break, was fifty-six hours.

They didn't even name them anymore.

Kira Walker looked on helplessly while Dr. Skousen examined the tiny body. The nurses—half of them pregnant as well—recorded the details of its life and death, faceless in bodysuits and gas masks. The mother wailed despondently from the hallway, muffled by the glass. Ariel McAdams, barely eighteen years old. The mother of a corpse.

“Core temperature ninety-nine degrees at birth,” said a nurse, scrolling through the thermometer readout. Her voice was tinny through the mask; Kira didn't know her name. Another nurse carefully transcribed the numbers on a sheet of yellow paper. “Ninety-eight degrees at two days,” the nurse continued. “Ninety-nine at four o'clock this morning. One-oh-nine point five at time of death.” They moved softly through the room, pale green shadows in a land of the dead.

“Just let me hold her,” cried Ariel. Her voice cracked and broke. “Just let me hold her.”

The nurses ignored her. This was the third birth this week, and the third death; it was more important to record the death, to learn from it—to prevent, if not the next one, then the one after that or the hundredth, or the thousandth. To find a way, somehow, to help a human child survive.

“Heart rate?” asked another nurse.

I can't do this anymore, thought Kira. I'm here to be a nurse, not an undertaker—

“Heart rate?” asked the nurse again, her voice insistent. It was Nurse Hardy, the head of maternity.

Kira snapped back to attention; monitoring the heart was her job. “Heart rate steady until four this morning, spiking from 107 to 133 beats per minute. Heart rate at five o'clock was 149. Heart rate at six was 154. Heart rate at six-oh-six was ... 72.”

Ariel wailed again.

“My figures confirm,” said another nurse. Nurse Hardy wrote the numbers down but scowled at Kira.

“You need to stay focused,” she said gruffly. “There are a lot of medical interns who would give their right eye for your spot here.”

Kira nodded. “Yes, ma'am.”

In the center of the room Dr. Skousen stood, handed the dead infant to a nurse, and pulled off his gas mask. His eyes looked as dead as the child. “I think that's all we can learn for now. Get this cleaned up, and prepare full blood work.” He walked out, and all around Kira the nurses continued their flurry of action, wrapping the baby for burial, scrubbing down the equipment, sopping up the blood. The mother cried, forgotten and alone—Ariel had been inseminated artificially, and there was no husband or boyfriend to comfort her. Kira obediently gathered the records for storage and analysis but she couldn't stop looking at the sobbing girl beyond the glass.

“Keep your head in the game, intern,” said Nurse Hardy. She pulled off her mask as well, her hair

plastered with sweat to her forehead. Kira looked at her mutely. Nurse Hardy stared back, then raised her eyebrow. “What does the spike in temperature tell us?”

“That the virus tipped over the saturation point,” said Kira, reciting from memory. “It replicated itself enough to overwhelm her respiratory system, and the heart started overreaching to try to compensate.”

Nurse Hardy nodded, and Kira noticed for the first time that her eyes were raw and bloodshot. “One of these days the researchers will find a pattern in this data and use it to synthesize a cure. The only way they’re going to do that is if we...?” She paused, waiting, and Kira filled in the rest.

“Track the course of the disease through every child the best we can, and learn from our mistakes.”

“Finding a cure is going to depend on the data in your hands.” Nurse Hardy pointed at Kira’s papers. “Fail to record it, and this child died for nothing.”

Kira nodded again, numbly straightening the papers in her manila folder.

The head nurse turned away, but Kira tapped her on the shoulder; when she turned back, Kira didn’t dare to look her in the eye. “Excuse me, ma’am, but if the doctor’s done with the body, could Ariel hold it? Just for a minute?”

Nurse Hardy sighed, weariness cracking through her grim, professional facade. “Look, Kira,” she said. “I know how quickly you breezed through the training program. You clearly have an aptitude for virology and RM analysis, but technical skills are only half the job. You need to be ready, emotionally, or the maternity ward will eat you alive. You’ve been with us for three weeks—this is your tenth dead child. It’s my nine hundred eighty-second.” She paused, her silence dragging on longer than Kira expected. “You’ve just got to learn to move on.”

Kira looked toward Ariel, crying and beating on the thick glass window. “I know you’ve lost a lot of them, ma’am.” Kira swallowed. “But this is Ariel’s first.”

Nurse Hardy stared at Kira for a long time, a distant shadow in her eyes. Finally she turned. “Sandy?”

Another young nurse, who was carrying the tiny body to the door, looked up.

“Unwrap the baby,” said Nurse Hardy. “Her mother is going to hold her.”

Kira finished her paperwork about an hour later, just in time for the town hall meeting with the Senator. Marcus met her in the lobby with a kiss, and she tried to put the long night’s tension behind her. Marcus smiled, and she smiled back weakly. Life was always easier with him around.

They left the hospital, and Kira blinked at the sudden burst of natural sunlight on her exhausted eyes. The hospital was like a bastion of technology in the center of the city, so different from the ruined houses and overgrown streets it may as well have been a spaceship. The worst of the mess had been cleaned up, of course, but the signs of the Break were still everywhere, even eleven years later: abandoned cars had become stands for fish and vegetables; front lawns had become gardens and chicken runs. A world that had been so civilized—the old world, the world from before the Break—was now a borrowed ruin for a culture one step up from the Stone Age. The solar panels that powered the hospital were a luxury most of East Meadow could only dream of.

Kira kicked a rock in the road. “I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“You want a rickshaw?” asked Marcus. “The coliseum’s not that far.”

“I don’t mean walk,” said Kira, “I mean this—the hospital, the infants. My life.” She remembered

the eyes of the nurses, pale and bloodshot and tired—so very tired. “Do you know how many babies I’ve watched die?” she asked softly. “Personally watched, right there, right in front of me.”

Marcus took her hand. “It’s not your fault.”

“Does it matter whose fault it is?” asked Kira. “They’re just as dead.”

“No one has saved a child since the Break,” said Marcus, “no one. You’re a three-week intern in there. You can’t beat yourself up for not doing something even the doctors and researchers haven’t been able to do.”

Kira stopped, staring at him; he couldn’t be serious. “Are you trying to make me feel better?” she asked. “Because telling me it’s impossible to save a baby’s life is a really stupid way of doing it.”

“You know that’s not what I mean,” said Marcus. “I’m just saying it’s not you, personally. RM killed those children, not Kira Walker.”

Kira glanced out across the widening turnpike. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

The crowd was getting heavier now as they approached the coliseum; they might even fill it, which they hadn’t done in months. Not since the Senate passed the latest amendment to the Hope Act, dropping the pregnancy age to eighteen. Kira felt a sudden knot in her stomach and grimaced. “What do you think the ‘emergency meeting’ is about?”

“Knowing the Senate, something boring. We’ll get a seat by the door so we can slip out if Kessler goes off on another tirade.”

“You don’t think it’ll be important?” asked Kira.

“It will at least be self-important,” said Marcus. “You can always rely on the Senate for that.” He smiled at her, saw how serious she was, and frowned. “If I had to guess, I’d say they’re going to talk about the Voice. The word in the lab this morning was that they attacked another farm this week.”

Kira looked at the sidewalk, studiously avoiding his eyes. “You don’t think they’re going to lower the pregnancy age again?”

“So soon?” asked Marcus. “It hasn’t even been nine months yet—I don’t think they’d drop it again before the eighteen-year-olds even come to term.”

“They would,” Kira said, still looking down. “They would, because the Hope Act is the only way they know how to deal with the problem. They think if we have enough babies, one of them’s bound to be resistant, but it isn’t working, and it hasn’t worked for eleven years, and getting a bunch of teenagers pregnant is not going to change that.” She let go of Marcus’s hand. “It’s the same thing in the hospital: They take care of the moms, they keep everything sterile, they record all the data, and the infants are still dying. We know exactly how they’re dying—we know so much about how they’re dying it makes me sick just to think about it—but we know absolutely nothing about how to save them. We get a bunch of new girls pregnant, and all we’re going to have are more dead babies and more notebooks full of the same exact statistics for how those babies died.” She felt her face grow hot, tears coming behind her eyes. Some of the other people were looking at her as they passed on the road, many of the women were pregnant, and Kira was certain some of them had heard her. She swallowed and hugged herself tightly, angry and embarrassed.

Marcus stepped closer and put his arm around her shoulder. “You’re right,” he whispered. “You’re absolutely right.”

She leaned into him. “Thank you.”

Someone shouted through the crowd. “Kira!”

Kira looked up, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Madison was weaving through the press of people, waving excitedly. Kira couldn't help but smile. Madison was a couple years older, but they'd grown up together, practically sisters in the makeshift family they'd formed after the Break. She raised one hand and waved back.

"Mads!"

Madison reached them and hugged Kira excitedly. Her new husband, Haru, followed a few steps behind. Kira didn't know him well; he'd been in the Defense Grid when he and Madison met, and only transferred into civilian duty when they'd gotten married a few months ago. He shook her hand and nodded solemnly to Marcus. Kira wondered again how Madison could fall for someone so serious, but she supposed everyone was serious compared to Marcus.

"It's good to see you," said Haru.

"You can see me?" asked Marcus, patting himself in sudden shock. "The potion must have worn off! That's the last time I give my lunch to a talking squirrel."

Madison laughed, and Haru raised his eyebrow, confused. Kira watched him, waiting, until his lack of humor was so funny she couldn't help herself and burst into laughter as well.

"How are you guys doing?" asked Madison.

"Surviving," said Kira. "Barely."

Madison grimaced. "Rough night in maternity?"

"Ariel had her baby."

Madison went pale, and her eyes drooped in genuine sadness. Kira could see how much it hurt her now that she was almost eighteen. Madison wasn't pregnant yet, but it was only a matter of time. "I'm so sorry. I'll follow you back after the meeting to say hi to her, and see if there's anything I can do."

"That's a good idea," said Kira, "but you'll have to do it without me—we have a salvage run today."

"But you were up all night!" Madison protested. "They can't make you do a salvage run."

"I'll grab a nap before leaving," said Kira, "but I need to go—I've been falling apart at work, and could use the change of pace. Plus I need to prove to Skousen that I can handle it. If the Defense Grid wants a medic on their salvage run, I'll be the best damn medic they've ever seen."

"They're lucky to have you," said Madison, hugging her again. "Is Jayden going?"

Kira nodded. "He's the sergeant in charge."

Madison smiled. "Give him a hug for me." Jayden and Madison were siblings—not adopted siblings, actual birth siblings, the only direct genetic relatives left in the world. They were proof, some said, that RM immunity could be inherited, which only made it more frustrating that so far none of the newborns had done it. More likely, Kira thought, Madison and Jayden were an anomaly that might never be repeated.

Jayden was also, as Kira often informed Madison, one of the more attractive human beings left on the planet. Kira glanced impishly at Marcus. "Just a hug? I could pass along a kiss or two."

Marcus looked awkwardly at Haru. "So. Any idea what the meeting's gonna be about?"

Kira and Madison laughed, and Kira sighed happily. Madison always made her feel better.

"They're closing the school," said Haru. "The youngest kids on the island are turning fourteen, and"

there are practically more teachers now than students. I'm guessing they're going to graduate everyone into trade programs early, and send the teachers somewhere they can be more useful."

"You think?" asked Kira.

Haru shrugged. "It's what I'd do."

"They're probably going to yak about the Partial's again," said Madison. "The Senate can never shut up about those things."

"Can you blame them?" asked Haru. "They killed everyone on Earth."

"Present company excepted," said Marcus.

"I'm not saying they *weren't* dangerous," said Madison, "but it's been eleven years since anyone has seen one. Life goes on. Besides, we've clearly got bigger problems now. I'm guessing they're going to talk about the Voice."

"We'll find out soon enough, I guess," said Kira, nodding toward the north; the coliseum was just visible beyond the trees. The Senate had its own building, of course, in an actual town hall, but "town hall" meetings like this one, where the entire city was asked to attend, were held in the coliseum. They rarely filled it, but the adults said it used to fill up all the time, back in the old days when they'd used it for sports. Before the Break.

Kira had only been five years old in the Break; most things about the old world she couldn't even remember, and she didn't trust half the things she could. She remembered her father, his dark face and his messy black hair and his thick-framed glasses pushed up on the bridge of his nose. They had lived in a split-level house—she was fairly certain it was yellow—and when she turned three she had a birthday party. She didn't have any friends her age, so there were no little kids, but most of her father's friends were there. She remembered she'd had a big toy box full of stuffed animals, and she'd wanted to show it to everyone, so she'd puffed and strained and pushed it down the hall; it seemed like a half an hour or more in her mind, but she knew it couldn't have been that long in real life. When she'd finally reached the living room and shouted for everyone to look, her father had laughed and chided her and taken the whole thing back to her bedroom. All her effort, gone in seconds. The memory didn't bother her; she never thought of her father as mean or unjust. It was simply a memory, one of the few she had of her life in the old world.

The crowd was heavy now, pressing together as they passed through the trees around the coliseum. Kira held tight to Marcus with one hand and Madison with the other, Haru trailing off the back like the end of a human chain. They wove a path through the mass of people and found a row of empty seats—near a door, like Marcus wanted. Kira knew he was right: If Senator Kessler got off on another rant, or if Senator Lefou got talking about shipping schedules or whatever boring thing he was on about this month, they'd need an easy way to slip out. Mandatory attendance was one thing, but once the important stuff was over, they wouldn't be the only ones leaving early.

As the senators filed onto the dais in the center of the floor, Kira shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wondering if Haru would be right. There were twenty senators in all, and Kira recognized just about all of them, though she didn't know all their names. One of the men, though, was new: tall, dark, powerfully built. He stood like a military officer, but his suit was simple and civilian. He whispered something to Dr. Skousen, the Senate representative from the hospital, then slipped away into the crowd.

"Good morning." The voice boomed through the massive stadium, echoing through the speakers and off the ceiling. The center of the coliseum lit up with a giant holo-image of Senator Hobb. There

were twenty senators, but they always let Hobb take the lead in town hall meetings, delivering the opening remarks and most of the announcements. He was definitely the most charming.

“This town hall meeting will now come to order,” Senator Hobb continued. “We’re very glad to see you all here; it’s important that you take part in your government, and these town hall meetings are the best way for everyone to stay connected. At this time we’d like to offer special thanks to the Long Island Defense Grid, specifically Sergeant Stewart and his team, for hand-cranking the generators all night here in the coliseum. As we have pledged to you, these meetings have never and will never draw electricity away from the community.” There was a light smattering of applause, and Hobb smiled kindly while he waited for it to die down. “We’ll start with our first order of business. Ms. Rimas, if you’d please join me on the stand?”

“It’s the schools,” said Kira.

“I told you,” said Haru.

Ms. Rimas was the head of the East Meadow school system, which had dwindled over time to a single school for which she now served as principal. Kira listened with her hand on her mouth as the old woman spoke proudly of the work her teachers had done, the success their system had shown over the years, and the great things accomplished by the graduating students. It was a send-off, a triumphant look back at their hard work and dedication, but Kira couldn’t help feeling sick about the whole thing. No matter how they spun it, no matter how much they tried to focus on the positives, the ugly truth was that there simply weren’t any children anymore. They were closing the school because they had run out of students. The teachers had done their job, but the doctors hadn’t.

The youngest human being on the planet, as far as anyone knew, would be fourteen years old in a month. It was possible that there were survivors on other continents, but no one had ever been able to make contact with them, and over time the refugees on Long Island had come to believe that they were alone. That their youngest was the world’s youngest. His name was Saladin. When they brought him onstage, Kira couldn’t hold back her tears.

Marcus put his arm around her, and they listened to the string of heartfelt speeches and congratulations. The youngest students were being accelerated into trade programs, just as Haru had predicted. Ten were accepted into the pre-medic program Kira had just completed; in another year or two they would begin interning at the hospital just like she was. Would anything be different then? Would infants still be dying? Would the nurses still be watching them die and recording their stats and wrapping them for burial? When would it all end?

As each teacher stood to say good-bye and wish their students well, the coliseum grew quieter, almost reverent. Kira knew they were thinking the same thing she was. The closing of the schools was like the closing of the past, the final acknowledgment that the world was ending. Forty thousand people left in the world, and no children. And no way to ever make more.

The last teacher spoke softly, tearfully bidding her students good-bye. The teachers were joining trade schools as well, moving on to new jobs and new lives. This final teacher was joining Saladin in the Animal Commission, training horses and dogs and hawks. Kira smiled at that. If Saladin had to grow up, at least he could still play with a dog.

The last teacher sat down, and Senator Hobb rose and walked to the microphone, standing calmly in the spotlight. His image filled the coliseum, solemn and troubled. He paused a moment, gathering his thoughts, then looked up at the audience with clear blue eyes.

“This didn’t have to be.”

The crowd murmured, a rustle of movement rippling through the stadium as people muttered and glanced at their companions. Kira saw Marcus look at her; she grabbed his hand tightly in her own and kept her eyes glued on Senator Hobb.

“The school didn’t have to close,” he said softly. “There are barely twenty school-age children in East Meadow, but across the whole island there are more. Far more. There’s a farm in Jamesport with ten children almost as young as Saladin—I’ve seen them myself. I’ve held their hands. I’ve begged them to come in, to come here where it’s safe, where the Defense Grid can better protect them, but they wouldn’t. The people with them, their adopted parents, wouldn’t let them. And just one week after I left, a mere two days ago, the so-called Voice of the People attacked that farm.” He paused, composing himself. “We’ve sent soldiers to recover what we can, but I fear the worst.”

Senator Hobb’s hologram surveyed the coliseum closely, piercing them with his earnest stare. “Eleven years ago the Partials tried to destroy us, and they did a pretty damn good job. We built them to be stronger than us, faster than us, to fight for us, in the Isolation War. They won that war handily, and when they turned against us five years later it didn’t take them long to wipe us off the face of the earth, especially after they released RM. Those of us who survived came to this island with nothing—broken, fragmented, lost in despair—but we survived. We rebuilt. We set up a defensive perimeter. We found food and shelter, we created energy and government and civilization. When we discovered that RM would not stop killing children, we passed the Hope Act to maximize our chance of giving birth to a new generation of humans with RM resistance. Thanks to the act and our tireless medical force, we grow closer to realizing that dream every day.”

Senator Hobb nodded to Dr. Skousen, sitting beside him on the dais, then looked back up. His eyes were shadowed and solemn. “But along the way, something happened. Some of us decided to break off. Some of us forgot about the enemy that still lurks on the mainland, watching us and waiting, and they forgot about the enemy that fills the air around us, that fills our very blood, killing our children like it killed so many of our families and friends. Because some of us have now decided that the civilization we built to protect ourselves is somehow the enemy. We’re still fighting for what is ours only now, we’re fighting with one another. Since the passing of the Hope Act two years ago, the Voice, these gangsters, these armed thugs in the mocking guise of revolutionaries, have been burning our farms, pillaging our stores, killing their own flesh and blood—their own brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and, God help us, their own children. Because that is what we are: We are a family, and we cannot afford to fight one another. And whatever their motivations are, whatever they claim to stand for, the Voice—let’s just call them what they are: barbarians—are simply trying to finish the job the Partials started. And we are not going to let them.” His voice was hard, a force of pure determination. “We are one nation, one people, one will.” He paused. “Or at least we should be. I wish I had better news, but the Defense Grid found a Voice strike team raiding a supply depot last night—do you want to know where? Can you guess?”

A few people in the crowd shouted out guesses, mostly outlying farms and fishing villages, but the giant holo-image shook its head sadly. Kira looked below to the man himself, a tiny figure in a worn brown suit made almost white by the spotlight. He turned slowly, shaking his head as the crowd called out locations from all across the island. He stopped turning and pointed at the floor.

“Here,” he said. “Actually, just over there, south of the turnpike, in the old Kellenberg High School. The attack was small, and we managed to contain it without much bloodshed, so you may not have even known about it, but still, they were right there. How many of you live near there?” He raised his hand, nodding at the others in the crowd who raised theirs as well. “Yes,” he said, “you live right

there, I live right there, that is the heart of our community. The Voice isn't just out in the forest anymore, they're here, in East Meadow, in our own neighborhood. They want to tear us apart from the inside, but we are not going to let them!

“The Voice objects to the Hope Act,” he continued. “They call it tyranny, they call it fascism, they call it control. You call it our only chance. You want to give humanity a future; they want to live in the present, and to kill anyone who tries to stop them. Is that freedom? If there's anything we've learned in the last eleven years, my friends, it is that freedom is a responsibility to be earned, not a license for recklessness and anarchy. If someday, despite our strongest efforts and our deepest determination, we finally fall, let it be because our enemies finally beat us, not because we beat ourselves.”

Kira listened quietly, sobered by the speech. She didn't relish the thought of getting pregnant so quickly—she had fewer than two years left before she came of age—but she knew the Senate was right. The future was the most important thing, certainly more important than one girl's hesitation to take the next step.

Senator Hobb's voice was soft, grim, resolute. “The Voice disagrees with the Hope Act, and they've decided to express their disagreement through murder and theft and terrorism. They're allowed to disagree; it's their methods that are the issue. There was another group, not so long ago, who used the same methods—a group who didn't like the way things were and decided to rebel. They were called Partials. The difference is that the Partials were unthinking, unfeeling, inhuman killers. They kill because that's what we built them to do. The Voices are human and, in some ways, that makes them even more dangerous.”

The crowd murmured. Senator Hobb glanced down, cleared his throat, and continued.

“There are some things more important than ourselves—more important than the limits of the present, and the whims of the now. There is a future to build and protect. And if we're going to make that future a reality, we have to stop fighting among ourselves. We have to end dissent wherever we find it. We have to trust one another again. This is not about the Senate and the city, this is not about the city and the farms, this is not about any little group or faction. This is about us. The entire human race, united as one. There are people out there who want to tear that apart, but we are not going to let them!”

The crowd roared again, and this time Kira joined them. Yet even as she shouted in chorus, she couldn't shake a sudden sense of fear, like icy fingers in the back of her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

“**Y**ou’re late, Walker.”

Kira didn’t speed up, watching Jayden’s face as she walked casually to the wagon. He looked so much like Madison.

“What?” she asked. “Don’t soldiers have to attend mandatory town hall meetings anymore?”

“And thank you very much for the attitude,” said Jayden, leaning his rifle against his shoulder. “It is a pleasure to have both you and your delightful wit with us on this run.”

Kira mimed a gun with her forefinger, silently shooting him in the face. “Where are we going this time?”

“A little town called Asharoken.” He helped her up into the back of the metal wagon, already full of ten more soldiers and two portable generators; that meant she was probably going to field-test some old equipment to see if it was worth bringing back. There were two other civilians as well, a man and a woman, probably here to use the second generator on some equipment of their own.

Jayden leaned on the edge of the wagon. “I swear, this island has the weirdest town names I’ve ever heard.”

“You guys are loaded for bear,” said Kira, looking at the soldiers’ heavy rifles. They were always armed when they left the city—even Kira had an assault rifle slung over her shoulder—but today they looked like a war party. One of the soldiers was even carrying a long tube she recognized as a rocket launcher. Kira found an empty seat and tucked her bag and medical kit behind her feet. “Expecting bandits?”

“North Shore,” said Jayden, and Kira blanched. The North Shore was essentially unsettled, and thus prime Voice territory.

“Valencio, you’re late!” shouted Jayden, and Kira looked up with a smile.

“Hey, Marcus.”

“Long time no see.” Marcus grinned broadly and vaulted into the wagon. “Sorry I’m late, Jayden. I had a meeting that got a little heavier than I planned. Very hot and sweaty by the end. You were a major topic of conversation, though, in between bouts of passionate—”

“Just skip to the part where it’s my mother,” said Jayden, “and then I’ll do the part where I tell you to go to hell, and then we can maybe get on with our jobs like we’re supposed to.”

“Your mother died of RM eleven years ago,” said Marcus, his face a mask of pretend shock. “You were, what, six? That would be incredibly crass of me.”

“And your mother’s already in hell,” said Jayden, “so I’m sure you’ll be seeing her soon. We should probably just drop the whole thing. Bastard.”

Kira frowned at the insult, but Marcus only smirked, looking at the other people in the wagon. “Ten soldiers, huh? What’s the run?”

“North Shore,” said Kira.

Marcus whistled. “And here I was worried we wouldn’t get to do anything fun. I guess we’ve

pretty much picked everything else clean by now, though, huh?” He looked across the truck to the two other civilians. “You’ll have to forgive me, I don’t recognize either of you.”

“Andrew Turner,” said the man, reaching out his hand. He was older, late forties, with the beginning of a sunburn through his thinning hair. “Electrician.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Marcus, shaking his hand.

The woman smiled and waved. “Gianna Cantrell. I’m in computer science.” She was older as well but younger than Turner. Kira guessed maybe thirty-five—old enough to have been in computer science well before the Break. Kira glanced at her stomach, a reflex she wasn’t even aware of until she’d done it, but of course the woman wasn’t pregnant. Salvage runs were too dangerous to risk a child; she must have been between cycles.

“Interesting mix,” said Marcus. He looked at Jayden. “What’s the deal with this place?”

“Grunt salvage went through a few days ago,” said Jayden. “They logged a clinic, a pharmacy, and a ‘weather station,’ whatever that means. So now I get to go all the way back out there on a bunny run. You can imagine my joy.” He walked to the front of the wagon and climbed up beside the driver, a young woman Kira had seen a few times before—still a year or two below the pregnancy age, which made her fit for active duty. “All right, Yoon, giddyup.”

The girl flicked the reins and clucked at the four-horse team—the Defense Grid had a few electric cars, but none strong enough to haul a load this heavy with any degree of efficiency. Energy was precious, and horses were cheap, so all the best electric motors had been commandeered for other purposes. The wagon lurched into motion, and Kira put her arm behind Marcus to grip the side of the wagon. Marcus pressed in closer.

“Hey, babe.”

“Hey.”

Andrew Turner looked at them. “Bunny run?”

“That’s just slang for a salvage run, with specialists like you guys instead of the normal grunts.” Kira glanced at the man’s growing sunburn. “You’ve never been on one?”

“I did a lot of salvage in the early days, like everyone, but after a year or so I was assigned to solar panels full-time.”

“Bunny runs are easy,” said Marcus. “North Shore’s kind of spooky, but we’ll be fine.” He glanced around and smiled. “Road conditions aren’t great outside of the settlement, though, so enjoy the smooth ride while you can.”

They drove for a while in silence, the wind whipping through the open wagon and tossing Kira’s ponytail straight toward Marcus. She leaned forward, aiming the frenzied hair squarely at his face and laughing as he spluttered and brushed it away. He started to tickle her and she backed away in a rush, slamming into the soldier beside her. He smiled at her awkwardly—a boy about her age, obviously pleased to have a girl practically sitting in his lap, but he didn’t say anything about it. She scooted back into place, trying not to laugh.

The soldier next to Kira barked an order. “Last marker. Eyes up!” The soldiers in the truck bed straightened a little, held their weapons a little closer, and watched the passing buildings with hawk-like intensity.

Kira turned, watching the vast, empty city roll past—it looked empty, and it probably was, but you could never be too careful. The markers showed the edge of the East Meadow settlement, and the edge

of the region their military could reasonably patrol, but it was hardly the edge of the actual urban area. The old-world city stretched out for miles in every direction, almost coast to coast on the island. Most of the survivors lived in East Meadow, or in the military base to the west, but there were looters, drifters, bandits, and worse sprinkled all around the island. The Voice had become the biggest fear, but they were far from the only one.

Even outside of East Meadow, the road here was well traveled and fairly open; there was garbage of course, and dirt and leaves and the random debris of nature, but regular traffic kept the asphalt relatively clear of plants, and only rarely did the wagon bump over a major rut or pothole. The realm beyond the curbs was another story: Eleven years of disuse had left the city derelict, the houses crumbling, the sidewalks cracked and buckled by burgeoning tree roots, rampant weeds, and vast masses of kudzu that coated everything like a carpet. There were no lawns anymore, no yards, no glass in any of the windows. Even most of the side streets, less traveled than the main roadway, were crisscrossed with lines of green, Mother Nature slowly reclaiming everything the old world had stolen.

Kira liked it, in a way. Nobody told nature what to do.

They rode in silence a while longer; then one of the soldiers pointed to the north and hollered.

“Pack rat!”

Kira twisted in her seat, scanning the city, then caught a flash of movement in the corner of her eye—a school bus, the sides hung heavy with odds and ends and the top piled high with boxes and crates and sacks and furniture, all precariously strapped down with hundreds of yards of rope. A man stood beside it, siphoning gas from the tank of a parked car; two teens, Kira guessed maybe fifteen and seventeen years old, stood next to him.

“Dude,” said Marcus, “he’s still using gas.”

“Maybe he’s found a way to filter it,” said Gianna, peering at the bus with interest. “A lot of the outer communities do—still destroys the engines, but it’s not like we’re running out of those anytime soon.”

“They should just move into town,” said Turner. “He could have a real house, we could hook him up with electricity and security and ... well, everything.”

“Everything but mobility,” said Gianna. “And anonymity, and freedom—”

“What do you mean, ‘freedom’?” asked the soldier sitting next to Kira. His name tag said BROWN. “We have freedom—what he has is anarchy.”

“Safety, then,” said Gianna.

Private Brown hefted his rifle. “What do you call this?”

“Large communities were the first to fall in the Partial rebellion,” said Gianna. “Population centers make easy targets, and if the Partials, wherever they are, develop a new strain of RM that overcomes our immunity, guns aren’t going to do any good against it. A place like East Meadow would be the worst possible place you could be.”

“Well, you’re welcome,” said Brown. “I’m glad all my life-risking is so appreciated.”

“I’m not saying you’re not appreciated,” said Gianna. “I’m just saying ... well, I just said what I’m saying. Obviously I chose to live in East Meadow, I’m just pointing out why he maybe didn’t.”

“He’s probably a Voicer,” growled another soldier. “Raising those kids to be spies or assassins or hell only knows what else.”

Private Brown cussed him out, and Kira turned away, ignoring them and feeling the wind on her face. She'd heard enough of these arguments to last a lifetime. It was a hot day, but the wind made it pleasant enough, and she always enjoyed the chance to snuggle up to Marcus. She thought about her night, and her morning, and the dead child and everything else. *What was it my father used to say?* she thought. *"I am stronger than my trials."*

I am stronger than my trials.

CHAPTER THREE

It was hours later when they reached Asharoken, and the sky was already beginning to dim. Kira hoped they could finish the salvage quickly and camp somewhere farther from the shore. Asharoken was more of a neighborhood than a town, connected to the rest of the island by an unbroken mass of houses and roads and buildings, but Kira could instantly see why the grunt runs had avoided it for so long—it was a narrow isthmus of land stretching north from the island, the sound on one side and a bay on the other. One shore made people nervous enough; two was almost too much to handle.

The wagon stopped in front of a small veterinary clinic, and Marcus groaned.

“You didn’t say it was a dog clinic, Jayden—what are we going to find here?”

Jayden jumped down from the wagon. “If I knew that, I would have picked it up myself when I was here two days ago. Grunts tagged meds and an X-ray machine; go do your thing.”

Marcus hopped down to the street, and both he and Jayden held up a hand to help Kira. In a fit of mischief she took both hands, and smiled inwardly as they helped her down with sullen scowls.

“Sparks, Brown, you go in first,” Jayden barked, and half the soldiers began to pour out of the truck, hauling one of the generators with them. “Patterson, you and your team secure the area, keep it secure, and escort the medics to the next site. It looks like someone’s been through here since yesterday, and I don’t want any surprises.”

“Someone’s been here?” asked Kira. “How can you tell?”

“Eyes and brains and a shiny new haircut,” said Jayden. “It’s probably just a pack rat, but I’m not taking chances on the effing North Shore. If you find something good in there, honey-bunnies, prep it for transport and we’ll pick it up on our way back. I’m taking my team north to site three—Patterson, I want blips every fifteen minutes.” He climbed into the back of the wagon and called out to the driver, “Let’s move.”

The wagon lurched into motion and headed north. Kira slung her medkit over her shoulder and looked around; Asharoken was buried in kudzu, like most of these little cities, but the Long Island Sound was lapping gently at the shore, and the sky was clear and calm. “Pretty town.”

“Eyes up,” said Patterson. The other soldiers fanned out, slowly building a perimeter around the clinic while Sparks and Brown approached the broken building with assault rifles raised to their eye line. Kira was fascinated by the way they moved, their entire bodies turning and raising and lowering to keep that eye line as solid as a rock—it almost looked like the gun was on invisible rails, while the soldier moved freely around it. The front wall of the clinic had been mostly glass, now shattered and overgrown with kudzu, but a central pillar of concrete had been marked with the bright orange glyph of a salvage crew. Kira had done enough runs to recognize most of the glyphs, but this was the one she knew best: “partially catalogued, return with medics.” Sparks and Brown covered each other seamlessly as they entered, picking their way through the rubble and vegetation. Patterson climbed carefully to the roof, keeping to the edges where the footing was firm, and kept watch from elevation.

While they secured the building, Kira and Marcus tested out the generator. It was a heavy frame with two wheels on one end; the bottom held a massive battery and a hand crank, while the top held a

small solar panel and coil after coil of cords and plugs. Medics came on every salvage run to keep the workers safe, but when the grunts tagged a piece of medical equipment, they brought these generators so the medics could plug it in, test it, and see if it was worth bringing back. The island was cluttered enough as it was, there was no sense filling East Meadow with salvaged junk they couldn't even use.

The street was full of parked cars, the paint rusted, the tires flat, and the windows broken by years of neglect and exposure to the elements. One of them held a skeleton, grinning horribly in the driver's seat—an RM victim who'd tried to go somewhere, tried to drive away from the end of the world. Kira wondered where he'd been trying to go. He hadn't made it out of his driveway.

A full two minutes later, Brown opened the door again and waved them in. "All clear, but watch your step. Looks like some wild dogs are using this place as a den."

Marcus smirked. "Loyal little fellas. Must have really loved their vet."

Kira nodded. "Let's fire it up."

Marcus tilted the generator back on its wheels and slowly walked it in, but Kira noticed Brown had pulled up his mask, and she paused to prep her own: a folded cloth bandanna that she dabbed with five tiny drops of menthol. Any bodies left behind would have rotted years ago, like the skeleton in the car, but a pack of dogs would have brought in more carrion of their own, not to mention musk and urine and feces and who knew what else. Kira tied the bandanna around her nose and mouth, and walked in to see Marcus gagging and searching his pockets for his own mask.

"You should pay better attention," she said smoothly, walking past him to the back room. "All I smell is the brisk scent of mint."

The med room was well stocked and didn't look like it had been hit yet—though someone had obviously been rifling through it recently, leaving prints and scuffs in the thick layer of dust. *Probably the grunts, she thought, though I've never seen a grunt run actually sort through the meds before.*

Kira started organizing the counter space, designating one area to keep and one to destroy. Salvage training was the first thing the interns learned: which meds could last, and for how long, and which were too far gone to be safe. Bringing expired medication back to East Meadow was even worse than bringing back broken machines, not because they took up space but because they were dangerous. The medics were the caretakers of the entire human race; the last thing they needed was for someone to take the wrong pills—or worse yet, for a vast stockpile of discarded medication to get into the water table. It was safer and easier to sort it out here; they'd even learned how to deal with animal meds, for exactly this kind of scenario—a dog antibiotic was still, at the end of the day, an antibiotic, and without extensive manufacturing facilities, the islanders had to take what they could get. Kira was already sorting the cupboards efficiently when Marcus staggered in, his mask finally in place.

"This place smells like a crypt."

"It is a crypt."

"And the animals are not the worst part," he said, "though I swear there must be a whole dog civilization in here to have this kind of stink." He opened another cupboard and started tossing medicines into Kira's piles, knowing exactly which was which without even looking. "No," he said, "the worst part is the dust. Whatever else we collect from this place, I'm taking a pound of it home in my lungs."

"It will build character," said Kira, laughing as she tried to impersonate Nurse Hardy. "I've been on nine million-billion salvage runs, intern, and you just have to learn to deal with it. Breathing corp-

dust is good for you—it activates the kidneys.”

“Salvage isn’t just good for you,” said Marcus, launching into a dead-on impersonation of Senator Hobb, “it’s essential for the very survival of all mankind. Think of the part you’ll play in the glorious new page of history!”

Kira laughed out loud—Hobb was always talking about the “new page of history.” Like all they had to do was keep writing, and the book would never end.

“Future generations will look back with awe at the giants who saved our race,” continued Marcus “who threw down the Partials and cured RM once and for all. Who saved the lives of countless infants and…” His rant died off, the room feeling suddenly uncomfortable, and they worked in silence. After a while Marcus spoke again.

“I think they’re getting more nervous than they let on,” he said. He paused. “They didn’t mention it in the meeting, but they really are talking about lowering the pregnancy age again.”

Kira stopped, her hand in the air, and shot him a quick look. “You’re serious?”

Marcus nodded. “I saw Isolde on my way home to change. She says there’s a new movement in the Senate pushing for statistics over study—they say we don’t need to look for a cure, we just need to have enough children to hit the immunity percentage.”

Kira turned to face him. “We’ve already hit the immunity percentage. point-oh-four percent means one out of every twenty-five hundred kids will be immune, and we’ve passed that twice now.”

“I know it’s stupid,” said Marcus, “but even the doctors are getting behind it—more babies helps them either way. More opportunities to study.”

Kira turned back to her cupboard. “Another drop would take it to seventeen. Isolde is seventeen—what’s she going to do? She’s not ready to be pregnant.”

“They’ll find a donor—”

“This isn’t a dating service,” said Kira harshly, cutting him off, “it’s a breeding program. For all we know, they put fertility drugs in the water supply—in fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they did.” She took the boxes from the cupboard angrily, slamming them down in the keep pile or throwing them full force in the trash. “Forget love, forget freedom, forget *choice*, just get yourself knocked up and save the damn world already.”

“It’s not seventeen,” said Marcus softly. He paused, staring at the wall, and Kira felt her stomach twist into a knot as she anticipated what he was going to say. “Isolde says there’s a referendum in the Senate to drop the pregnancy age to sixteen.”

Kira froze, too sick to speak. The pregnancy age wasn’t a restriction, it was a rule: All women of certain age were required, by law, to get pregnant as soon as possible, and to be pregnant as frequently as possible.

I’ve known this was coming for two years, Kira thought, ever since they enacted the thing. Two years to prepare myself, to psych myself up, but still—I thought I had two more. They keep dropping it. There’s no way I’m ready for this.

“It’s stupid,” said Marcus. “It’s stupid and unfair and I know—I can only imagine how it feels. I think it’s a terrible idea, and I hope it dies as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you.”

“But what if it doesn’t?”

Kira coughed, squeezing her eyes shut. “Don’t start this now, Marcus.”

“I’m just saying that we should ... think about it,” he said quickly, “*if* the law goes into effect. If you don’t make your own choice, they’ll just—”

“I said not right now,” said Kira. “This is not the time, this is not the place, this is not anything approaching the circumstances in which I want to have this conversation.”

“I’m not just talking about sex,” said Marcus. “I’m talking about marriage.” He took a step toward her, paused, and looked at the ceiling. “We’ve been planning this since we were thirteen, Kira—we were going to intern together, work at the hospital together, and get married—this was your plan too—”

“Well, it’s not my plan anymore,” she said quickly. “I’m not ready to make these kinds of choices, okay? I’m not ready now, I sure as hell wasn’t ready at thirteen.” She turned to the cupboard, swore softly, and turned again to the door, walking out. “I need some air.”

Outside she pulled off her mask, sucking in long, deep breaths. *The worst part is, I can totally see their point.*

The trees to the north lit up suddenly with a brilliant orange, followed a second later by a deafening roar. Kira felt the shock wave pass through her, twisting her gut. She’d barely had time to process the sight and sound of the explosion when her hearing returned and she heard the soldiers shouting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Private Brown rushed toward Kira, grabbing her in a full tackle and dropping her to the ground beside a parked car. “Stay down!”

“What’s going on?”

“Just stay down!” Brown pulled out his radio and thumbed the call button. “Sergeant, this is Shaylon. Are you taking fire, over!”

The radio crackled; nothing but white noise.

“Someone’s shooting at us?” asked Kira.

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be asking Jayden,” said Brown, and thumbed the radio again. “Sergeant, do you read? What’s your situation?”

The radio buzzed emptily, Kira and Brown staring at it desperately—an explosion could be an accident, or the Voice, or even Partials, for all they knew. Was this an attack? An invasion? The radio said nothing; then abruptly Jayden’s voice tore out of it in a ragged burst of static.

“Site three was rigged to blow! Five men trapped inside—get the medics up here ASAP!”

Brown whirled toward the clinic, rising to his feet in one smooth motion. “Casualties at site three!” Kira started running before he even turned back—she could see the smoke rising up from the site, not more than a mile down the road. Brown fell into step behind her, his rifle held tightly in front as he pelted full speed down the road. Kira felt for her medical bag, whispered a silent thank-you to whatever had kept it on her shoulder, and lowered her head for a sprint. Brown barely kept up with her.

She saw Jayden first, standing on the cab of an overgrown truck with a pair of binoculars, scanning the full circle of the horizon. Next was the wagon, the left front wheel blown off and at least two of the horses down, the others whinnying in terror. Last of all she saw the building—a smoking ruin between two other structures, like a tower of wooden blocks thrown down by an angry child. One of the soldiers was dragging another by the hands, pulling him clear of the wreckage. Kira dropped next to the fallen man, one hand on his wrist to check his pulse while the other probed his chest and neck for injuries.

“I’m fine,” the soldier coughed. “Get the civvies.”

Kira nodded and sprang back to her feet, staring at the shattered house in shock—where should she even start? She grabbed the standing soldier and pulled him away from the fallen one.

“Where are the others?”

“The basement,” he said, pointing down. “This corner.”

“Then help me get in there.”

“The building was two stories tall—they’re completely buried.”

“Then help me get in there,” she insisted again, pulling him toward the house. Kira was already picking her way through the rubble when Marcus arrived, still out of breath.

“Holy ... crap.”

Kira delved deeper into the ruin. “Mr. Turner!” she called. “Ms. Cantrell! Can either of you hear

me?” She and the soldier froze, listening, and Kira pointed to the floor on her left. “Down there.”

They knelt down, flipping aside a wide piece of ruined flooring. She paused, and heard it again—faint flutter, like a gasp or a muffled cough. She pointed at a section of brick and the soldier helped her move it, handing up bricks to Marcus and Sparks and the other soldiers, all scrabbling at the wreckage to clear it away. Kira shouted again and heard a feeble answer.

“Right here,” said a voice. Kira recognized the feminine timbre, knew it was Gianna, and hefted up a piece of fallen furniture. The soldiers pulled it up and out of the hole, and underneath, Gianna grunted in pain. “Thank the gods.”

Kira slithered farther into the hole to help her. “Are you still pinned?”

“I don’t think so,” said Gianna. Kira grabbed her hand firmly, bracing herself on another section of overturned floor. She lost her grip, slid down, and felt a strong hand grab hers from behind.

“I’ve got you,” said Kira, “and they’ve got me. Keep coming.” Slowly Gianna pulled herself free of the broken wood and bricks, and Kira hauled her up inch by inch. When Gianna was high enough, the strong hand on Kira’s pulled them both to the top of the pile, and Kira turned to see Jayden straining with the effort.

“Thanks,” said Kira.

He nodded. “Help me find the other one.”

Kira turned back to the hole. “Mr. Turner! Can you hear me?”

“He was next to me when the bomb went off,” Gianna panted. “He can’t be very far.”

Kira scrambled back down the hole, still calling his name. “Mr. Turner! Andrew!” She paused, listening closely, and bent down as far as she could. *Nothing*. She leaned back, examining the wreckage, trying to guess where he might have ended up.

“Behind that stone,” said Gianna, pointing past her to a large, flat rock standing upright in the rubble. “There was a fireplace in the basement, like a big chimney, all done in stone instead of brick. Probably the oldest part of the house.”

“We’ll never be able to move it,” said Marcus. Kira slithered down next to it, leaning in close.

“Andrew Turner!” shouted Marcus, but Kira shushed him.

“Quiet, I’m going to try something.”

The dust settled, and the air was still. Kira opened her medkit and pulled out the stethoscope—on of the digital models with sound amplification. She thumbed the switch, silently praying that the battery hadn’t degraded, and pressed the scope to the rubble.

Pom, pom, pom, pom...

“It’s his heartbeat,” Kira called out. “He’s right under the fallen chimney.”

“Those stones are propping up half the house,” said Marcus. “We’re not moving them.”

“As long as his heart’s beating, we are,” said Jayden. “Out of the way, Walker.” He slid down next to Kira and called for help from the others. “Yoon, get me rope, and tie the other end to one of the horses.” A moment later the soldier dropped a stiff nylon cord in between them, and Jayden huffed, reaching out to loop the rope around the rock. Kira pressed the scope to the stone again.

Pom, pom, pom.

“I can still hear the heartbeat.” She turned, looking for beams of wood. “Marcus is right, though—

sample content of Partials (Partials Sequence)

- [download online The Cinema of Steven Soderbergh: Indie Sex, Corporate Lies, and Digital Videotape \(Directors' Cuts\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [download online Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction \(3rd Edition\) here](#)
- [Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research \(Cambridge Studies in the History of Psychology\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [Does God Exist: An Answer For Today pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [read online The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists \(Blackwell Companions to Sociology\) book](#)
- [download Adobe Dreamweaver CS6 on Demand pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)

- <http://qolorea.com/library/The-Cinema-of-Steven-Soderbergh--Indie-Sex--Corporate-Lies--and-Digital-Videotape--Directors--Cuts-.pdf>
- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Climate-Change--A-Very-Short-Introduction--3rd-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://honareavalmusic.com/?books/Constructing-the-Subject--Historical-Origins-of-Psychological-Research--Cambridge-Studies-in-the-History-of-Psyc>
- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/Does-God-Exist--An-Answer-For-Today.pdf>
- <http://qolorea.com/library/The-Coming-Insurrection.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Adobe-Dreamweaver-CS6-on-Demand.pdf>