Untaken For Now: 12 Months Following the Rapture

End Times, Volume 4

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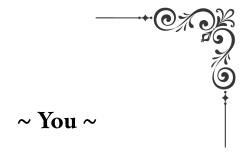
UNTAKEN FOR NOW: 12 MONTHS FOLLOWING THE RAPTURE

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Written by C.O. Wyler.

To Our Grandkids \sim "To God be the glory."



Hey, Reader,
I don't know you, but you might remember me if
you were one of Numen's viewers of my artificial intelligence
implant. Those days are long gone, and I'm now into something
I never thought I'd do—it's so unlike me: journaling by going
back to the day it all started and then writing down things as
they happen.

All I can say is I blew it. We who are what I call "untaken" have blown it. So that means if you're reading my journal right now, you've blown it, too. Period.

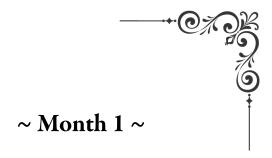
You must realize that now we have only two choices: to accept everything the world has told us to be true, or to trust God to carry us to the end.

I'm sure your path during these strange times is different than mine. But here's a compilation of what has happened and is happening to me over the year following the Rapture, along with perspectives from those I hold close to my heart.

I pray you, like me, have found the Truth.

Waiting for His return,

Sarah



SARAH'S JOURNAL

I'm sitting on a bed at my friend Jeremy's parents' house in the suburbs of Los Angeles as I write in this spiral notebook he gave me. Yeah, going at it the old-fashioned way since I don't trust electronics. I wonder if their obtrusiveness has changed you, too.

In this soliloquy, I'll backtrack to explain my take when the entire world totally shifted. Everyone in the world—like those still here—was baffled by the tragic event. It changed everything. Don't you think so?

A month before people disappeared, I agreed to have a company called Numen install a small artificial intelligence implant behind my ear. The insert allowed any of their beta testers or paid customers to watch everything I thought, felt, saw, did—you name it. And if you were a viewer, you witnessed my good, bad, and ugly. Granted, I was paid extremely well to allow this invention to be installed, but I never realized how much it controlled me. I know you're shaking your head, asking yourself who in their right mind would allow such a device to share their thoughts with anyone, especially the public. Easy: It was my way of being in control, and I'll admit, I did it for the

money. Yep, I wanted to make a statement while getting paid the big bucks, and that I did, only to seriously regret it later.

I was at our condo in Granada Hills, California, when Numen's AI implant went live with my viewers. Ironically, minutes later, the strange tri-sound occurred—and then, as you know, millions disappeared. The odd noise happened after I had a fight with my husband, Denny, and right after I found out I was pregnant. Now, if you know me, I like to always be in control. So, I decided on my own that I was the one who would determine what to do with my body and get an abortion. Unfortunately, I never got to confer with my husband.

My first encounter with the disappearances involved children. Two cute girls were on the swing set outside our kitchen window, and within seconds, they were gone. I felt a sharp pain and realized I'd lost the baby I was carrying—it had to be that; I knew it. My baby, our baby—gone.

Being a Type A person and photojournalist at Valley News, I shut down my emotions and raced to the field next to our condo's complex, where a 737 crashed. I wanted to take award-winning videos and photos for my job. In retrospect, it was all about me and what I could achieve.

At the accident site, I met fifteen-year-old James Hixson, the only survivor of the accident. I invited him back to our condo, never connecting with Denny, who I still hadn't spoken to after our argument.

By that evening, my mind was reeling, as I'm sure yours was also. People had disappeared everywhere. Loved ones, family members, and friends—young and old—I bet you miss yours, too. In Denny's office upstairs, I found my husband's left-

behind belongings. He was gone. I was undone. I contemplated ending my life; I was on the brink of no return.

What made it worse was that there were no children. No babies or kids up to about middle school age. That meant no pregnant moms or newborns, either. Unreal. It still bothers me. No kids, anywhere, including the one who was inside my womb.

Zoey, my bestie, came over, and we drank our sorrows away with wine—too much of it. When she left, I headed upstairs to bed, but being overly intoxicated, I tripped on the top step and fell. I crash-landed on the rigid wood floor, where I lay for hours, contemplating my pathetic life. And pathetic it was.

And that was only what happened the first twelve hours after the Rapture.



BRENT

"Thanks, Agent Hackett, for your department's update," my boss comments to our group as I breathe a sigh of relief that my part's over. He continues, "Handling TOC-CAN has always been easier than TOC-MEX. But let's move on—next on the agenda is the continued application of OWL into our visuals during reconnaissance."

I run my fingers through my neatly trimmed hair, part of my standard FBI get-up. Thanks to my wife and her haircutting skills, I keep the clean-cut look when participating in these online meetings from our remote location in Idaho. I even wear a collared shirt for appearance's sake.

I detest Zoom meetings. They ramble on with little direction, and nothing gets done due to all the red tape and

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endless paperwork. A bunch of talking heads trying to resolve issues with little action from our government now that the Bureau has upended everything and everybody once again. When DOGE cleaned house a while ago, many agents jumped ship and took advantage of ample severance packages, which is fine, but there are too many holes in every department. At least this meeting only includes my boss and seven counterparts across the country; we maintain task forces of the TOC or Transnational Organized Crime in America. I cover the Canadian border, aka TOC-CAN, and my boss is right: it's always been easier than the Mexican or TOC-MEX one, where most drugs enter. I set up our technical teams and strategize the best possible coverage nationally with little support. Ever since OWL (the One World League) contracted with the US to incorporate their Panatir "best-in-class" artificial intelligence software to boost surveillance across civilian agencies and the military, they've taken over all facets of American life, including our government. Our country's turning into a police state. Nowadays, everything's automated and monitored to leverage AI insights that make quicker decisions than humans across multiple domains.

OWL also took over DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. OWL uses the Theory of Mind program, which builds AI-algorithmic models to search for potential adversaries across the board by examining all online information in real time and creating high-fidelity simulations of enemy decision-making. Including psychological profiling, it's capable of deciding not only who's capable of a crime, but also when and why.

Yeah, our desk jobs will, no doubt, eventually be eliminated.

And then there's my story: During the twenty years I've worked for the FBI, I went from an agent to SSA or supervisory special agent to a SAC or special agent in charge, handling over a dozen teams covering WCC or White-Collar Crimes in DC and Maryland. But about a year ago, when my son illegally accessed with ease OWL's supposedly wonderful, updated computer system, I quit the Bureau. Less than a month later, I was offered a remote part-time position as an ASAC—assistant special agent in charge, covering twelve teams along the States' northern border—of course, demoting me for my son's hacking expertise.

Obviously, I have a chip on my shoulder.

I'm almost thankful when a sound I've never heard before vibrates through my ears as I view my laptop's screen in the office of our large, updated home located on our family's 260-acre ranch in Idaho.

The strange noise abruptly interrupts the droning conversation. It's an odd noise. Like a loud musical note, a command, and a shout—all mixed into one. How can that be? I also felt the audible turbulence in this room, even while wearing my EarPods—like it's bouncing off the large woodbeamed walls and into my body.

Everyone in the meeting must've heard it as we all stare wordlessly at our screens, searching for the reaction of others for several seconds, maybe waiting for our boss to say something.

The sound's so weird that my boss abruptly ends the meeting, allowing us to check out what's happened in our

personal lives, trying to find out what the odd noise was, and did it cause any damage. Disturbing to say the least. And will it be repeated?

Seconds later, I hear my wife, Karen, yelling my mother's name repeatedly.

"Why are you screaming Mom's name?" I ask when she opens the double glass doors to the office and enters the room in a huff.

"I can't find her," she explains as she rubs her hands together, a nervous habit she does whenever she's overly worried. "I've looked everywhere, but she's nowhere to be found. We were in the kitchen finishing the dinner dishes while Aya dropped off eggs at Sakura's. As I went to put the soiled towels in the washing machine, I thought I saw Mom heading to her bedroom, but she's not there," Karen replies. "I can't find Scooter, either."

"You know she never wears her hearing aids, so she can't hear you. Maybe she didn't notice that strange sound. Did you?" I log out of the FBI account on my secured Bu-Top—what we call the Bureau's laptop—remove my earbuds, and close the device.

"Yes," Karen answers, shaking her head. "It was so loud and different. I've never heard anything like it."

"Correct," I say. "Definitely different. And that dog of hers has a mind of his own. Maybe the sound spooked him. No doubt he's wandered off to help Ben with the cattle or pester Hack."

My wife adds, "I used the walkie-talkie and told your brother, who heard the noise, too. He's on his way over, rounding up Jack in the process." "I'll go check the cellar, but I have no clue why she'd go down there. You women hate its spiders and cobwebs."

As I go into the cellar, I see nothing amiss, including my missing mother. I ponder, What was that sound and why? And why do I feel this intense sense of doom?

When I return to the great room, Karen's standing on our wraparound porch with the front door left wide open. Ben and our seventeen-year-old son, Jack—who we call Hack—are walking across the circular driveway, their shoes crunching on the gravel, Scooter trailing behind them. Aya, Ben's wife, arrives at the same time in her car, gets out, and asks what's going on.

"We can't find Mom," I say flatly as I step onto the porch. "Karen has looked everywhere."

I gently put my arm around my wife's thin body, trying to comfort her as she starts to cry into her apron. I hate to see her flustered or upset.

As my brother and Aya join us on the porch, I spot Hack walking to the right side of the house to check what we call Grammy's vegetable garden, my mom's pride and joy.

I would join my son, but Karen's holding onto the porch railing, as if for support. She's getting weaker, even though she hides her pain well. I gently put my hand on her shoulder. She brushes me off and asks if I can get her some Kleenex to wipe away her tears.

As I grab a couple of tissues from Mom's downstairs bathroom and retrace my steps outside, Hack screams that he found Grammy—or what's left of her. Karen stumbles to Hack's side and is caressing the clothes and jewelry found in the rows of newly planted peas and spinach when I approach

them. Hack holds Grammy's reading glasses in the air, as if to declare he's located buried treasure. But there's no physical body left behind.

I'm dumbfounded. Where did my mother go?

In a haze, I follow Ben, Aya, and Karen back to the house, leaving Hack alone in the tilled rows.

As we walk up the stairs on the porch, I have something like a vision: My dad, mom, brother, and I are sitting in a small, white-washed church in Bonners Ferry, the closest town to Hacket Haven, our five-generation family's cattle ranch. Mom's shushing nine-year-old Ben for swinging his feet too hard and kicking the wooden pew in front of us. The preacher's rambling about Jesus coming back in the air, like to get those who believe in Him, but I'm not listening. Being twelve years old, I'm thinking about going into seventh grade in two weeks. I'm eyeing Susan, who's seated several pews in front of us with her parents and her twin brother, Scott, my best friend. I hope I get to sit next to her in class. Perhaps I can get her to kiss me this year.

After church, Dad says, "Sons, the Rapture is real. Are you prepared for it?"

Mom adds, "I've been praying for you since the day you were born. I hope you believe before it's too late."

Yeah, and like that, the memory vanishes. Just like Mom did. Just like my lack of commitment to God or Jesus did. Even with my parents' constant insistence on going to church with them until I was sixteen, which was the year everything changed. I've no interest in religion or its fundamental rules. No, it wasn't then, and still isn't for me, or Ben. We hated it whenever Dad or Mom brought up their pious

beliefs. When they started preaching at us, we'd give them a blank look and simply nod, only out of respect. It wasn't like we could tell them to shut up.

I was more than glad when I went to college as far away as possible at Georgetown University in DC. I had to get away from them and ranch life. I had to. That's where I met and married Karen and began my career in the Agency.

Later in the great room, I refocus on the scene in front of me. Hack's asking Aya about Ethan, my brother's handicapped eleven-year-old son, who gets bused twice a week to a special school twelve miles away. Usually, the bus returns by 6 p.m., well after we're done with our usual four o'clock meal. Having Ethan at school gives Ben and Aya a break, especially because it's a hassle to get him and his wheelchair from their house, over a hundred yards away, to our house to eat one meal a day with us. We try to keep a normal routine, but it's hard to spoon-feed a paraplegic, which we all have taken turns doing since we moved here six months ago.

After my sister-in-law calls the school, we learn Ethan's missing, too. Not good news at all.

As the hours pass, I can't explain how I feel. I've been in dangerous situations in the FBI—times when I could've easily lost my life or my teammates', or the times I had to shoot to kill. But this is different, unexplainable. It's as if I'm on autopilot and barely functioning. I'm trying to maintain a strong, take-charge appearance—like treating the situation as if I'm the leader of one of my FBI teams—yet inside my soul, I feel like I'm deteriorating. Call it a fight-or-flight reaction, but I'm unsure of either outcome. What really hap-

pened hours ago, and how will it impact our family? How will I keep everyone safe?

When we watch the news that evening, reality settles in and squeezes our minds and hearts. No children, not one, are left in elementary school or younger around the world. That includes all babies, in the womb, too. Major accidents and catastrophes happened around the globe. I no longer know what to think.

Around 10 p.m., Ben, Aya, and Hack leave, and my wife heads upstairs to bed. But I'm too wound up. I pour myself a stiff drink of Cutty Sark on ice and sit in the dark in one of the Adirondack chairs on the porch, letting the whiskey numb my senses for the next hour. Old Scooter is curled up on a rug beside me; my mom's faithful friend must be at least twelve years old. I think he already misses her.

When I finally crawl into bed, I wrap my arms around my wife's small body, trying not to cause her any discomfort or pain. We don't talk, only hold on to each other for comfort and solace as she rests in the crook of my arm, her hand on my bare chest. As usual, the oak tree outside our window casts its moving shadows across the ceiling and walls, mesmerizing me, calming me with its swaying silhouettes.

The vision I had earlier returns. I push it away, but my parents' words taunt me, as does that pastor's sermon from so long ago. If the Rapture happened today and Mom and Ethan were taken, fine, but I still refuse to believe in God or Jesus, especially because of what They've done to my family and me.

ALYSSA

"Dirk! Why are you being such a jerk?" I complain to my boyfriend of ten months as we stand in line at a bottle recycling center in Brownsville, Texas.

"I'm not. This homeless guy in front of us is too slow! If he doesn't move any faster, I'll have to send him back to his cardboard tent." Dirk says loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Just like that, a loud, bizarre noise is heard—no, it echoes throughout the building. It's short but stunning, like it gets everyone's attention instantly and dissipates in seconds.

Dirk and I lock eyes, and we stare at each other. I see a rare flash of fear in him. I wonder if my eyes mimic the same.

We look where the homeless man was—and the guy's gone! Only his tattered possessions are piled on the ground. The beer can he was putting into the machine clatters to the ground.

Dirk doesn't say anything but quickly looks around the room, then prods me to move closer to where the man was, while others in the building are confused, some of them leaving the premises quickly. A woman starts screaming, asking where her toddler went, as he was right behind her. She accuses an older couple of taking or doing something with him, but the older lady points to the little boy's clothes, socks, and shoes crumpled on the tiled floor. His Matchbox firetruck rolls to a stop a few feet away from her husband's shoe. The young mom starts to wail, getting the attention of those left in the room.

I'm miffed when Dirk grabs the homeless man's empty cans left behind in a large, soiled plastic bag that's next to the

machine. Next, my boyfriend starts putting the recyclable containers into the machine. Of course, after he swipes the white receipt of the cans previously deposited.

Dirk looks at me and squints his eyes. "Don't say anything. Don't judge me either. It's obvious that the bum's no longer here, so I'm doing everyone a favor by cleaning up his mess and keeping the line moving." With his foot, he scoots the man's clothing and shoes over to a nearby wall. I'm surprised he doesn't pilfer the man's pants pockets and go through his wallet first.

Needless to say, the ride home in Dirk's restored 1970 dark green Ford Mustang is no better. While he's happy he's gleaned more cash from the extra can haul, he's yelling profanities when we stop at every light or stop sign, thanks to the whacko drivers who are in his way. Strangely, there are multiple car accidents or abandoned vehicles with people standing nearby, shaking their heads in confusion or weeping. Dirk and I can't figure out what's happened.

As I stare through the front windshield, I wonder why I'm still with this guy. Why am I living with him? Am I repeating my past? Or is it because he offers me financial security and was my knight in shining armor when I was at one of the lowest points of my tragic life? Or am I using him until I can find my way?

Let me explain: Being twenty-two years old and a fulltime student, plus working as a barista, has thoroughly worn me down. Dirk came to my rescue when he ordered a macchiato with an extra shot of espresso at my job at Starbucks. Right there, he hit on me, and I *fell in love* with him. When he asked me to move in with him at his Brownsville house five months ago, I felt like I had turned another leaf in my life—a positive one. He's been supportive, pushing me to finish my bachelor's degree in computer programming, which I do online and hope to complete within a month. I can't thank him enough for motivating me to accomplish the goal I've had for years.

But I'll back up a bit and explain the depressing stuff. My dad died of lung cancer when I was four years old, and my mom remarried Neil a year later. Being the only child in the family, I was showered with gifts and love by my stepfather when I was young. I honestly thought he cared about me. But once I was in my teens, he started to abuse me, both physically and sexually. When I told Mom, she didn't believe me and sided with Neil. I ran away several times to get away from his abuse. My grandma in Abilene took me in when I was fifteen, and I'll always love her for believing in me.

However, I was a wild teen, hanging around with the wrong crowd and hooking up with the wrong guys. Within a year, I quit school and ran away with an older man, who made me feel special. Sadly, he introduced me to drugs and alcohol, which I freely accepted. I'd do anything to please him, mainly because he took care of me. I was out of control but kept being used, and admittedly, I used others to survive.

Broken, abused, and burned once again, I had finally reached bottom when I sneaked away from the man's clutches one night when he had passed out from drinking. Luck found me when a lady I met on a bus bench told me about a women's shelter where I could detox, go back to school, get my GED, and become a responsible adult. I had turned nineteen that year, and during these last three years, I've accom-

plished all my goals; I even exceeded some, such as working on my degree and having a somewhat decent relationship with the opposite sex.

When Dirk parks his car at his family's furniture store and we walk inside, he grumbles about how unfair his life is. Of course, I strongly disagree, but I hold my tongue because I'm well aware of his red flags.

Instead, I grab his hand, saying, "It's going to be fine, Dirk. Whatever happened, it'll all work out. Take a breath. You tell me that all the time."

"Yeah, sure," he grumbles as he lets go of my hand. "But where's everyone?"

With no employees or customers in view, he yells, "Charlotte!"

His secretary's heels click on the vinyl floor as she exits the office at the back of the building.

"Dirk, I'm so glad you're here! It's been unreal. When that sound happened, everyone, including George, Ted, and Priscilla, freaked out and said they had to go home. Especially when Ted was writing up an invoice for a coffee table and his two customers disappeared right before his eyes."

"Sure," objects Dirk. "That's the lamest excuse for walking out of a job that I've ever heard."

"No, really," she replies. "Come look where it happened." She takes us to the staged living room section near the front of the store. Two sets of clothing and shoes are discarded on the floor.

Once again, Dirk takes advantage: He rifles through a purse and a pair of pants and slips the cash he finds into his pockets. As he cusses and mumbles about people not being as responsible as he is, Charlotte and I glance at each other but don't say a word.

My boyfriend has anger issues. I've seen and felt the abusive behavior with men like him. I've learned that the best scenario is to diffuse the problem quickly and stay out of the crosshairs.

"Dirk," I say sweetly as possible, "why don't you contact your parents or brothers to see if any of the other stores are having issues?"

"Charlotte, get my dad on the phone. Now," he barks as he ignores me, and she rushes back to the office to get her company phone. "And carry that phone with you at all times, especially everywhere in our store! I shouldn't have to remind you." More profanities are added to his dialogue.

While Dirk's mom and dad have the family's main store in Houston, his two older brothers run the San Antonio and Corpus Cristi locations; Dirk's in charge of the more remote Brownsville one. Being the youngest son, he wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but at age thirty-one, he's always been given more than he deserves, including a large house, a hot-looking car, a powerboat, and a cushy job where he has few responsibilities. Here, unlike his brothers, their daddy's not watching over his shoulder constantly.

I live with him in a four-bedroom house on Lakeshore Drive, in the same house where he was raised. Its redeeming qualities are a pool and that it's on a resaca canal. The pool is nice, but I'd never venture into the canal's murky water. Years after his parents started the furniture company and moved to Houston, it was decided that Dirk would live in this house

and run their Brownsville store, which probably caused resentment from the youngest son.

When Dirk speaks to his parents, they say Houston and the other locations have the same turmoil that we witnessed: Many people are missing, and no one knows why.

It's decided to shut down the store and go home since no customers will be stopping by. After dismissing Charlotte, Dirk puts up a sign on the door and locks the place up. We head home, wondering what's going on in the world.

While watching the news, I cook dinner: a tuna casserole that my grandma taught me how to make. Dirk's smoking pot, which is fine with me as long as he does it out on the back patio. He knows how drugs and alcohol affect me. We don't talk much as I don't want to push any of his volatile buttons.

I try to do schoolwork, but online, it states all classes are on a temporary hold due to the missing people. Man, I'm weeks away from graduating, and now this happens.

Out of exhaustion and frustration, I go to bed early. Dirk slides under the covers around 2 a.m. and starts snoring within minutes.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

The next morning, I was out cold until Zoey came to my rescue. I have to say that she's a wonderful friend. She and Jeremy, my work partner, protected and took care of me after I was hospitalized with a broken hand and foot, as well as bruises on my face and body. Zoey was my advocate, my helper when I needed it most.

The next couple of weeks were extremely tiring since I had a cast on my leg and foot, plus my left hand was immobilized. Also, I had the AI implant in my head, and Numen was talking directly to me in my brain when no one else could hear. The company baited me perfectly, trapping me to be their minion who would do anything for money—and I mean anything.

While the world was falling apart with people missing their loved ones and not learning why, especially from our government, conspiracy theories were self-duplicating. There were two mega earthquakes in the Pacific Northwest, thankfully sparing my parents in Springfield, Oregon.

During this time, Numen wined and dined me in my subconscious by praising my ever-increasing fan base on their portal and throwing more money and promises at me. In retrospect, there was an evilness to their control, a hypnotic delusion that I couldn't shake off or get away from. Like a craving, a yearning, to keep in their good graces. It was as if they possessed me.

The straw that broke the camel's back was when Numen instructed me to kill James, the young teen who was the only survivor of the plane crash and abruptly became a Christian zealot—Numen decided he needed to be eliminated. But I couldn't pull the trigger. I just couldn't do it. Instead, my next-door drug-induced neighbor did, shooting the boy dead instantly.

It was then that I finally felt a shift in my thinking.

But Numen didn't like my rebellion, even siccing a menacing black AI bird drone on me to watch my every movement.

Let me stop to mention the cat called Eyes, whose name is actually Isaiah. He belonged to Dennis's Aunt Amy, whom I

would call a "black-and-white Christian." Bless her soul; she was determined to witness to everyone who came across her path, yet she didn't always do it with tact or grace. Sadly, I tuned her out every time she spoke about Jesus. I should've listened. Oh, what an idiot I was—how stubborn and arrogant—and I'm paying dearly for it now.

Anyway, back to Eyes; he became my furry savior. See, the cat was the one who attacked the bird drone and distracted me while I was trying to put a bullet in my brain! But God knows why the gun went off, accidentally shooting my AI implant and destroying it. That was a miracle in and of itself.

It was twelve days after the missings happened that I heard Jesus tell me that He loves me, even after I wanted to have an abortion and my baby disappeared. His words were monumental—but I didn't know enough about Him, so I started reading the Bible that Jeremy's mom had and writing in this journal. And with the implant damaged, Numen could no longer pester my every thought and movement; I felt like me again.

Jeremy was the one who found me by the oak tree on his parents' land. He immediately called Amir, Zoey's latest boyfriend, who was a doctor and instructed him over the phone on how to save my life. Jeremy's a keeper and a dear friend, even if I know he's got feelings for me. And Amir—he removed the implant so that only a few wires are sticking out of the incision. I'm so thankful that the evil implant became totally useless.

At this point, I thought I was done with Numen, but I wasn't, and neither were my friends. When I saw that asinine drone bird spying on me through the window at Jeremy's house, I was majorly over it. I wanted no part of Numen whatsoever

and became paranoid of anything electronic since I realized the company could tap into every aspect of my life.

When I talked to my mom in Oregon, I learned that two thugs had stabbed my dad. He wasn't doing well, so I had more to fret about.

I was given back the Rapture Kit flash drive that James had given me, which explained that the missing people were due to the Biblical event, but I was scared to look at it online. Thankfully, Zoey downloaded all the files directly to my laptop.

Once I realized what was really going on, I had to tell my three friends, including Zoey, about Numen, the implant, and the total control they had over my mind.



BRENT

The last three weeks have been a blur due to "the missings," as some people call them. If we don't have the news displaying the devastation of people being gone, we have to deal with the ongoing ranch chores. Don't get me wrong, I like living here in picturesque Idaho, but Karen and I prefer being where there's more activity and things to do. I feel we're both stifled in some ways, stuck on this large land of endless beauty.

My brother, Ben, and his wife enjoy the slowing down here. It was a good place to escape to after what happened when they lived in Las Vegas, and Ethan had the drowning accident, which had produced endless parental guilt. Maybe it's a blessing of some kind that the physically challenged boy is no longer here. Karen and I are surprised when Aya insists that Ben bury all his medical equipment and supplies, as if to

hide his disabilities. Maybe their way of moving on, but I'd be forever haunted by the loss.

Ben and I file reports online of our missing mother and Ethan. It's weird because we can't prove their bodies are gone; someone has to take our word for it. I'm sure Mom's social security check, which she received from Dad, will automatically end, as will Dad's pension. I'm unsure what we're responsible for and what we're not.

Last week, Karen pulled out a bunch of my parents' albums and photos, which helped Ben and me reminisce about our youth. Dad passed away ten years ago from a heart attack while he was with his cattle—exactly the way he would want it. He was a good man, always honest and respectful of others' opinions and beliefs. I hope I'm like him. I miss him and Mom.

Except for the ever-present stench of cattle and what happened to my friend Scott, the ranch gave us the ideal upbringing. Both our parents did all they could to keep us happy and engaged. We enjoyed the undisturbed acres of playing in the pastures, swimming or fishing in the ponds, and racing our horses across the valleys. But the chores were always there, always disrupting our lives, our wants.

When I saw the photo of Susan, Scott, and me on our horses, sadness overwhelms me to the point where I don't sleep well. Once again, my bottle of Cutty Sark comes to my aid—my way of forgetting the past and even the present.

I admit that I'm sneaking a drink more frequently. I only do it at night when no one's around and Karen's in bed. I can't help myself; the numbness envelops me, soothes me. See, Scott and I were best buddies—he and his family lived where the Johnstons now live, two miles from our house.

About a week after the missings, we realized that we hadn't heard from the older couple who moved there after I left for college. I think I met the Johnstons only once when we visited my parents when Hack was five years old.

Anyway, today's Tuesday. Ben, Hack, and I check their homestead to see if they are okay. No. We find their clothes in the kitchen. I call their son in New York, who tells us to take anything we want, especially the animals and food. So, we do.

But while we're there, I walk through the house armed with my Glock, making sure the place is secured. And yes, I walk upstairs into what used to be Susan's room, where we shared our first kiss months after Scott was killed on the tractor. She was so broken; the accident is what drove us together and then apart. The photo I saw last week flashes before my eyes. We three were only sixteen. Scott never should've been drinking beer before getting on the John Deere, driving it out by their pasture and causing it to fall over, crushing him. I was there. I tried to save him, but I couldn't. I still have occasional nightmares about it.

A year later, Susan and her family moved away—most likely, to forget the tragedy. She left me alone on the ranch. Another reason why I had to get away.

I now worry constantly if Karen and Hack have adapted from city life to this one of forever to-do lists. Karen's always been a trooper, even when she had glioblastoma brain cancer after Hack was born. With her surgeries, chemo, and radiation many years ago, her determination and stamina amaze me to this day. I'm thankful she's still in remission, but I think something's going on again. We're still waiting for the test results she did right before the missings happened. If the cancer's back, we'll have to tell Hack this time, which will be unbearable.

And Hack? We've got an unbelievable kid; he's much more mature than I was at seventeen and dealing with life's disappointments. All kudos go to Karen, as she homeschooled him so well that he's a junior in college taking online classes, acing every one. I was never that kind of ultrastudent. I was too busy dealing with Scott's death and trying to get girls to notice me in college. But Hack, he's supposedly one of the best coders out there if he can hack into the FBI's computer simply by using my password to get in the system—and I have no clue how he got around OWL's supposedly hack-free verification of a thumb print, voice, or eye scan. But in other ways, Hack reminds me of myself: He hates ranch chores, too. Always late. Always needs reminders. I sound like my father as I constantly nag him.

Hack's also great with any electronics. He's set up all the computers (including the FBI's) on this property. Since a preteen, he's loved IT and anything it involves. With Karen being an online tutor, she had him, starting at age seven, set up her equipment without a glitch. And now he's added tracking drones and trail cameras to our land so we can see any intruders instantly.

But none of his cameras catches the satellite debris that falls out of the sky and lands near our Blue Pond. When Ben, Hack, and I check it out, Hack knows it is Starlink's. Ben

and I agree that we're not going to report it and have any outsider trampling our land to collect it. What's disturbing is the strange fog that fills the area; we think it makes Hack sick for several days.

When I check in with the FBI multiple times a day, no one knows anything about all the people missing—or if they do, they're not telling. Even though I have both highside and lowside clearance, I don't get a straight answer when I ask OWL's OpenAI what's going on—it declares it's working on the situation and will keep me updated. Right. It's like the Bureau's slowly bleeding to death and knows it. Same old thing—skirting around the issues. Drives me crazy.

Often after midnight, when all is quiet and everyone's in bed, I walk outside around our house and outbuildings. Tonight, after imbibing in my usual vice, I take a stroll down the porch steps and head toward the cattle barn. Scooter trots behind me.

The light's still on at Hack's outbuilding. Like most kids these days, he's addicted to being online. How I wish he would grow out of it and join the real world.

Then I see him standing outside his door.

I unconsciously cup a hand over my mouth to see if I smell like alcohol. I hope not, although there's nothing criminal about my drinking.

"Hey," he says as I approach.

"Hi, Son. You're up late." I keep my distance as Scooter runs up to him and is petted.

We banter about how late it is and that he won't be able to do his chores tomorrow. This time, I catch myself with my

constant nagging and ask him what stars he recognizes. He points out several, and I spot of couple of planets.

While he talks about the launched Starlink satellites as we stare at the sky, my father's favorite Bible verse comes to mind. I haphazardly say, "The heavens declare the glory of God.' I wonder if there's a God up there. And why doesn't He come save us? What really made all those people disappear, including every child?" I complain about the world and where is God, if there is One.

Hack doesn't respond. Keeps silent, as if he wants me to talk more. So, I do.

"I worry every day about how to protect you and your mom. I, too, wish someone would come and take over—give us direction and make things right again. I don't know what to do sometimes." My frustration—my fears—come out easier than I anticipate.

Silence greets us. What can be said, anyway? My son doesn't and won't have the answers. I don't. No one will.

Instead, we hear the crickets and an owl hooting. Only nature has enough sense to respond.

Finally, it's Hack who speaks. He explains his computer problems and how he's trying to hack into satellites so our ranch can get further off the grid, away from any prying eyes.

I give him my two cents' worth of how the FBI's network works, but I know I'm no help. This kid knows his coding, so why give my input? I trust him.

Before our short conversation ends, Hack asks if Scooter can spend the night at his place. A great idea, considering the dog has been at a loss since Grammy disappeared. I agree and retrieve the animal's bedding and water bowl, delivering them to Hack's room.

When I'm in bed that night, I wonder if my son has guts. In the FBI, I learned how to shoot accurately, yet Hack seems to be timid or wimpy. Ben and I have tried repeatedly to teach him how to handle a gun, but he gets the jitters every time he holds my dad's rifle. Last week, when we ran into the guy at the store in Bonners Ferry who demanded food and money, I had to pull out my handgun to ward off the man. Right then, I saw Hack shaking, petrified that I was going to shoot my weapon. Of course, I didn't. Yeah, I know it takes time to get used to pulling the trigger, but our son needs to learn how to protect himself, especially on our ranch.

The next day, we hunt rabbits, and Hack gets his first kill. I feel some satisfaction, but I doubt he does.



ALYSSA

I know Dirk's stressed out about all the people disappearing—maybe even more than I am.

I go to work at Starbucks, but I'm told to go home after only a few hours because we continually run out of supplies and can't get any, so we have to keep adjusting our menu. It's a limited crew with horrendous lines of customers demanding their grande or venti specialty coffees and being told we don't have them. I've never seen such rudeness and meanness in people. The same thing happens day after day, week after week. Everyone is numb and walking around like zombies.

I call my grandma like every day, sometimes several times, but I get no answer. I worry about her. Is she one of

those who have disappeared, or has she fallen and can't get to her phone?

Dirk isn't any happier than he was three weeks ago. He's moody and mean. All of the family's stores are closed. Who wants to buy a couch and loveseat, bedroom set, or dining room table right now? No one.

With no jobs, we often sleep in with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Dirk smokes more pot. I wonder how he gets it; he seems to never run out of the stuff.

This morning, I roll over in bed, and Dirk's staring at the ceiling. I try to snuggle with him, but he pulls away and crosses his arms on his chest.

I try to get him to warm up to me, but he ignores my advances. Feeling helpless, I get up and go to the bathroom.

"This is enough," Dirk declares as I throw on an old T-shirt. "I'm done living like this. Time to move on."

I walk back into the room and stand next to the bed, asking, "How are we going to do that? This world sucks right now. You can't make the craziness disappear like all those people have."

"We're getting out of here. We need a break. Take that ugly shirt off and put on that black and white bikini you look so hot in. We're taking the boat out."

"Now that sounds fun. Great idea, Dirk. That's a perfect getaway!" I'm excited that we have something different to do today to get our minds off everything that's happened.

After quickly changing and putting on my makeup, I meet Dirk in the great room, where he's packed a cooler with PB&J sandwiches he made—yeah, we're getting low on food—stale chips, and beer.

Dirk's singing along to "Lady Marmalade" by Christina Aguilera as we start to drive the Mustang twenty-plus miles to Pelican Point Marina in Port Isabel. I'm glad he appears more contented.

When we pass the 550 on the 48 Highway, traffic comes to a standstill. Two tanker trucks are intentionally parked sideways so no one can go in either direction. Hundreds of guys wearing red-and-black bandanas over their faces and toting guns are lined up on both sides of the trucks, not letting anyone through.

This doesn't make my boyfriend happy, so he floors the Mustang Mach 1 with its 428 Cobra Jet engine (so he has repeatedly told me) and swerves across the right shoulder into the rough terrain. His profanities bounce around the car's interior the entire time, especially when a few guys fire at us, thankfully, missing our vehicle. He jams the gas pedal down, so we're doing over eighty miles per hour as he tears across dusty farmland.

"No one's going to ruin my day!" he yells as we go over the bumpy, dry ground, causing dust to kick off the car's oversized tires. "Hear that? No one!"

Of course, I don't criticize his actions or speak. What can I say about his recklessness that's, no doubt, saving our burts?

As he rolls back onto the 48, he sighs and pats my bare leg. He smiles his wicked grin. "See, Al, I always get us where we need to go."

When we arrive at the marina where the boat's docked, I help him bring his fishing gear and food on board. Only a couple of people are milling around.

After untying the twenty-six-foot Sea Ray Sundancer, we motor past the Isla Blanca Strait and head to the Gulf. Giving the engine full throttle calms Dirk. I exhale, hoping the next few hours are calm and peaceful.

"Get comfy, Al," Dirk tells me. "Take your clothes off and let me see your skin. Show off that tattoo I gave you for your birthday."

Warily, I undress down to my bathing suit. The bold, five-inch-tall letters spelling *D-I-R-K* located on the middle of my back hurt when being inked. I don't particularly care about it, or its overly done statement, but I had no choice but to get it at the time. I did it for Dirk.

"Now, take off your bikini top," he demands.

"C'mon, Dirk. I don't want to. I'm still cold. Let's wait until we warm up a bit, please." For once, he acquiesces to my wants.

Instead, he gets out his fishing pole, baits it, and sits down in a padded swivel chair. I stretch out on the back lounge and pull my phone out to check for messages and go on social media.

After two hours of catching no fish, Dirk looks over at me and accusatorily says, "Why are you always on that phone? Who do you keep calling without leaving any messages?"

"My grandma, remember? I can't get a hold of her. Maybe we can go up to Abilene and see if she's okay, please?"

"Ha. Right. After what we saw on the highway, no way am I driving my prized Mustang up there. Absolutely not. Get over it. Get over her!" He walks over to where I'm sitting and grabs my upper arms. "And take your top off!"

"No!" I say defiantly as I push him away, tired of his constant demands.

"Yes," he shouts. "Now!" He pulls me up by wrapping both hands around my neck, choking me.

"S-s-stop," I struggle to get the word out while trying to grab his hands, but I'm still holding my phone.

He lets go of my neck with one hand and yanks the phone out of my hand. He tosses the device overboard. "I pay for your phone, so I'll be the one to tell you who you can talk to and when."

With one hand still on my throat, he takes his free hand and grabs my curly black ponytail that's sticking out of my baseball cap. With a firm grip, he drags me to the starboard side of the boat, forcing my head over the railing.

He angrily whispers, "I own you—I pay for everything, so do what I ask. Take your top off!"

"No!" I yell as I fight to get away from his strong grip.

With a grunt, he calls me a disgusting name and violently pushes me away.

Afraid that I'll fall into the drink, I try to correct my balance, but my bare foot slips on a wet spot on the deck. My head slams against the edge of the boat. My eye bangs into a metal cup holder, and my mouth crashes into a stainless-steel tie-down cleat as the rest of my body collapses to the floor.

I remain on the floor, my mouth bleeding, my lower lip split. Tasting blood, my tongue runs across my teeth; there must be a chip on the top front one as its shape feels different.

Minutes pass. Dirk starts to hum as he goes back to his fishing pole, reeling in the line, and putting away the bait in his tackle box, while I stay frozen.

Knowing I can't leave the boat—like jump in the ocean and swim to shore to get away from him—I get up, covering my chest with my hands, as if the action will somehow protect me.

"I'm sorry, Dirk. I didn't mean to upset you. I'll do better next time," I say quietly, realizing that caving into his demands is the only way we can make peace.

"Good, you're forgiven. It's too bad you fell and hurt yourself. Next time, be more careful. Why don't you go down below, clean yourself up, and get dressed? You may want to put ice on your face, too."

I obey his directions, repeatedly telling myself that I have to find a way to get out of this relationship. And fast. I won't do violence. Nope, never again.

When we arrive home after 7 p.m., we both take long showers separately. My right eye has turned purple, and my lip's sore and puffy. My front tooth's chipped, but there's no nerve damage. Nothing's said about my injuries—the injuries he caused. Nothing's mentioned about checking on my grandma.

The next morning, when Dirk leaves to check on the store because it was vandalized again, I hurriedly grab my purse and speed away in my old Toyota Camry, slamming the door on another ruined relationship. Not knowing when Dirk will return, I take nothing but what I'm wearing. I leave no note. I desperately want to vanish like those who disappeared three weeks ago.

The drive to Abilene normally takes eight hours, but I take the longer route to avoid San Antonio, as I'm sure there are plenty of crazies on the roads closer to big cities. However, there are washed-out roads from the recent floods, so I have to take detours, slowing me down. Whenever possible, I drive ten to fifteen miles over the speed limit.

Sure enough, when I get to my grandma's house, I find the spare key she keeps under the heavy flowerpot on her porch. Within minutes, I locate her empty clothes on the recliner. She must've been watching television when it happened.

Paranoid that Dirk will be looking for me, I grab the keys to Grandma's bright green Kia Rio sedan from her purse hanging by the door. I quickly switch cars so mine's hidden in the garage and hers is parked in the driveway.

The only bright thing that happens the next day is that I buy a new phone with cash I've found in Grandma's top dresser drawer and get a new number. When I update the new phone and check my old phone's messages, over twenty texts, seventeen unanswered phone calls, and four emails are from Dirk. I delete them and block him from all social media accounts. I read an email from one of my professors stating there are job opportunities at several OWL's Stargate data centers, including one of their largest here in Abilene.

Knowing my grandma has no up-to-date electronics (yeah, not even a flat screen television, but at least there's a rotary phone), I stop at a nearby coffee shop and get on my phone to apply for the job. Luck goes my way again when, a day later, unbelievably, an email arrives offering me a job starting Monday.

Although I'm petrified that Dirk will hunt me down, I'm elated that OWL will push my school to graduate me under unusual circumstances because classwork's still unavailable and I've had such good grades.

To celebrate, I call Hack Hackett, a nice guy I've taken online classes with; he has to be the best coder in the universe. Ironically, he's been trying to contact me. I try to talk him into moving to Texas to work at OWL with me, but he's stuck on his family's ginormous ranch somewhere in Idaho. Our conversation's so different than whenever I spoke to Dirk, or other men for that matter. I know Hack's somewhat younger, but he's so real and—how do I say it?—normal.

By the end of the first month after the disappearances, I finally feel that my life's headed in the right direction again because I feel a peace inside. I'm starting a cool new job; I have a decent place to live, and I'm looking forward to a fresh start in life. Dirk the Jerk is no longer a factor, so I'll have to get his stupid tattoo removed.

Not one to believe in God, I think karma has blessed me once again.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

This week, I've been reading the Bible—yeah, go figure that I, a girl who has always turned a deaf ear to anything about God or Jesus, am now immersed in a book that's been around for millennia. Like James, the poor kid who was killed for his newfound beliefs, I started at page one of this book and have been reading it whenever there's free time, which is often. Plus, I've been reviewing James's flash drive, and it's fascinating, explaining what happened a month ago and correlating it to the Bible. Indeed, when many people—including my baby and every single young child - disappeared, it was an event known as the Rapture. Even though the word isn't mentioned anywhere in the Bible, the Greek word harpazo is. It means "taken or snatched"—like, quickly. Funny, Zoey and I coined the word "untaken" for us who have been left behind on Earth. Little did I know that it's the opposite of the incredible event. How I wish I were "taken" instead.

In reading the Rapture Kit files and watching the videos, I'm learning what's in our foreseeable future, and I don't like it. If we think strange things are happening now, the worst is yet to come. More devastating things, such as massive natural disasters, intense wars, and the rise of a man called the Antichrist,

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who will be coming in peace, signing a seven-year treaty with Israel and the world, but then breaking it at the halfway point. These seven years are called the Tribulation and include incredible catastrophes until Jesus comes to Earth a second time, winning a big battle against the Antichrist, and providing true peace. And more amazingly, this is all written down in the Bible for us!

Because of what I'm learning, I'm now beginning to look at everything differently. Things aren't what they seem, but many are hoodwinked into believing all's going back to normal. Get this loud and clear: It's not and will never be.

Also, I wonder how Numen factors in—like, does all their spying or surveillance play a part in end times or not? Either way, it's like evil has quadrupled overnight. It's all about control. Who's the one in charge? God or man, or even Satan? And who's this Antichrist? Is he walking around right now? My mind thinks about all the leaders in the world today, but the only thing I can come up with is how OWL knows and owns everything.

It's getting crazy. Every time we watch the news, it's about people hurting or killing others to get food and supplies, be it one person or roaming gangs in the hundreds. It's not only here in the Valley, but also everywhere around the globe, with raids on stores, delivery trucks, and even farms. Maybe it's good that Jeremy found the gun that I used to almost kill myself. With the rise in violence, we may need it for protection, but I don't want to ever touch that thing again.

Another example is my bank account. When Jeremy and I stopped by the bank today, I learned that I'm broke—no, more than broke. Numen, which was bought out by the One World

League or OWL, has not only deleted all of the money they gave me for their implant, but they've also added to my debt, increased the loans I owe back, and wiped out my savings. Yes! Numen or OWL or whoever destroyed my finances completely! And did it happen because I'm on to them and their cunning ways of being in charge of everyone? Grr!

I do an undecipherable scribble at the bottom of the page to release my anger.

Stop it, Sarah. Let go of the frustrations and write something positive that happened today.

Yes, here's something good: Amir and Jeremy removed my leg cast and the pins in my foot and hand. It hurt, but I can walk again, although with a limp and a little pain. Amir's such a helpful guy, I can see why Zoey likes him so much. And Jeremy, he's pretty special, too. They all take such good care of me.

It's evening, and I'm back. Minutes ago was ridiculous. I'm still shaking about it.

Zoey and Amir came over, and she showed us this HoloBot thingy, which brought up an AI image of my husband, Denny. It looked real, thanks to our ever-present electronics. It knew things about me that were private, things that I wouldn't want my friends to know. I'm glad it was shut down before it mentioned me being pregnant and wanting to have an abortion. It was so horrible that I had to rush out of the room; I couldn't take it any longer. I. Hate. Electronics.

To calm myself down, I'm taking a few deep breaths and propping myself up in bed so I can be more comfortable writing in this journal. I'm also reading more of the Bible. I'm already into Deuteronomy, having skipped some of the so-and-so begat so-and-so, which are the genealogies in Numbers; to be honest,

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they're tedious. I can't believe how the Israelites lived yet loved only their true God or Yahweh. I must ask Amir more about his background.

Jeremy just tapped on my door, but I told him to go away. I don't want to talk to him or anyone else. I only want to read and think about what all this means and why it happened now.

Okay, I'm going to stop journaling and get some sleep. I hope things start getting better, but I doubt it. I'm so tired of this world.



BRENT

When Ben tells me a bull calf was born this morning, I feel a tinge of calm. It's as if some small thing brings a little hope in our crazy world. Of course, I've seen plenty of calving growing up on this ranch, so I don't bother getting out of bed. I'm glad Hack witnesses it for the first time, but my brother shouldn't allow my son to name him Midnight; he's going to get attached, which will make it harder down the road.

Since we're getting low on food, especially meat, Ben and I decide we need to butcher our oldest steer. I hate killing animals, so my brother, who knows of my disdain, does the deed after we send Hack out to move the cattle to a different pasture. It's his first time, too. Proud of the boy, considering we don't explain about the old steer, but he'll figure things out when the gun goes off.

The next day, we butcher the animal, which is quite a bit of work for my aging body.

While in the add-on, Ben hassles me: "Brent, almost being fifty years old is starting to show. You're cutting the meat too slowly."

"Yeah," I say as I wipe the blood off my knife again. "I no longer have the stamina that either Hack or you have, but I'm still an FBI stud."

Well, like everyone else, too much has been cluttering my mind. I should quit drinking and get in better shape—maybe when things go back to an adaptable normal, whatever that is.

Since I know that Hack will be queasy helping us with the cutting, I call him on the walkie-talkie hours into the butchering. When he arrives at one of our barn's add-ons, he looks timid, almost afraid to look into the windowless room.

To calm his nerves, I say, "Could you take the backhoe and go to the east side of our four pastures and dig a hole for the carcass and other debris?"

"Of course," he says excitedly. Surprisingly, I'm glad he's interested in doing the chore.

After instructing—more like over-explaining—where and how to drive the mini-tractor, set the stabilizer legs, and use the bucket to remove the dirt properly, I say cautiously, "And don't dig the hole on a slant or hill."

I cringe when the words come out of my mouth. The memories of my friend Scott being crushed by the tractor come flooding back, and I almost change my mind about our son using the heavy equipment without my assistance.

I tamp down my emotions. I don't think I could live if the tractor tips and my son gets injured or killed. Karen

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would kill me. I try to swallow the recurring nightmare of holding Scott's dead body.

Stop it, Brent, I tell myself. Stop it, now! That was then, a long time ago, and this is now. Hack can do this, and safely. I physically shake my head to make the dark "what could happen" images disappear. I've no choice; we have to get this meat cut, and we need a place to dump the leftovers.

Ben, who vaguely recalls Scott's sad demise, interrupts the tragic memory as it continues to pester my mind by saying, "Brent, Hack can handle it. He'll do fine. C'mon, slow poke, we've got to get to work on the left hind quarter next."

As I shut the door to the room, I squeeze out the bad thoughts and get back to work.

After a couple of hours, Karen calls us for dinner on the walkie-talkie. My hands hurt from holding the saws and knives. My back and neck ache from being in awkward positions for hours. A hot shower and Motrin help, but we'll have to finish the job tomorrow.

The next day, I jump on a couple of FBI Zoom meetings before we go back to cutting up the meat. You'd think someone would have an answer about what *really* happened over a month ago, but no. Still no answers, even within the Bureau. Sure, there are theories bouncing around among my colleagues, such as a virus or chemical reaction that made millions disappear. Even UFOs and space debris causing it are mentioned. But no real answers. The only thing of interest I hear is that the same company, OWL, which has updated the Agency to AI and runs many facets of our government and others, is spearheading the project to find the reason many millions are gone, including my mom and nephew.

Instead, we discuss the increase of Iranian cyber actors, which are groups that engage in activities like cyber espionage, ransomware attacks, and hack-and-leak operations targeting US critical infrastructure, businesses, and government entities. The problem is tracking them down since OWL's fine-tuned system isn't that accurate because it can't find them fast enough. So far, there's been no known involvement in the TOC-CAN that we've spotted.

My boss is more tense than usual when we talk about our departments, almost as if he's as confused as we are. He tells us we don't have the workforce to cover our directives any longer. He only asks us to "stay on task"—whatever that means.

As part of my job, I spend time rechecking how OWL's system divides the week's work hours of each member of my twelve teams, who are all working ten-to-twelve-hour shifts. Thankfully, due to OWL's mega surveillance capabilities, most of the work nowadays is online—we're just here to watch cameras all day long and, when drastically needed, instruct a task force to eliminate a problem. Sadly, gone are the days of hunting down and arresting those involved in CAC or Crimes Against Children because there are no children anywhere. Our departments still cover prostitution and sex or drug trafficking, where the system sends data and videos to the local police, but they're too busy trying to stay on top of the local gang infestation, robberies, and murders. The violence is beyond anyone's control; nothing can or does get done. I. Hate. My. Job.

Later, Ben and I finish cutting the meat, including wrapping it and storing it in our large garage freezers. I'm more than happy the job is done.



ALYSSA

What should I wear? I ask myself as I go through my grand-ma's closet. Today's the first day of work, and I never thought about how to dress. I've washed my stretchy black pants again, so I'll wear them, but now I need a somewhat up-to-date blouse or shirt to wear. Good luck with that. Will wearing something of my grandma's from the last century be cool or not?

I choose a salmon-colored blouse that looks only ten years old; it fits decently. A lot of Grandma's caked makeup covers my bruised face, but I can't hide the chip in my tooth. I don't think it's too obvious. I'm glad it didn't do any nerve damage.

It's weird living in this house. I mean, I know Grandma told me she had deeded it to me a couple of years ago if anything was to happen to her. Well, it has, but how do I prove she's one of those who disappeared?

I spend the weekend going through everything in her house—every closet, cabinet, and drawer, including the garage. Knowing that this is now *my* house, I have a sense of responsibility I've never felt before. It's like I'm being forced to grow up. That's good, right?

As I peruse her bills and files, I search for her will, bank accounts, and insurance policies. I find the house deed with a handwritten addendum stating I get ownership of it. Her

bank accounts aren't anything to get excited about; she was in her early seventies and lived on a budget. She had a meager Social Security check and a pension from the State of Texas, where she was a secretary for decades. Those funds will stop once I report her missing. I guess I'll have to visit her bank next week and see if I can access her funds and close her accounts. Maybe I'll set up something there under my name.

My new job's only twenty miles away, so I drive Grandma's Kia to the 875-acre facility. When I arrive at the gate, a robotic guard welcomes me. I have to show my physical ID, look into an eyeball-scanning orb to set up my digital biometric ID, and scan a QR code that was texted to me to be allowed past the security gate.

The minute I get inside the 500-billion-dollar complex, I'm in awe. Humanoid robots are everywhere. If they're not maintaining OWL's grounds, they're polishing floors or washing huge glass windows. After I'm greeted by one robot, I'm passed off to another and then another. I'm directed to a theater where around fifty newbies watch a video about the AI mega campus that's now owned by OWL. Although it's not as large as Meta's multi-gigawatt Superintelligence Labs data centers, such as Prometheus in Ohio and Hyperion in Louisiana, this place will be able to draw 1.2 gigawatts of electricity once the remaining two of eight AI factory halls are completed. Pulling that much power, their large solar turbine farm handles the task with zero water evaporation. Incredibly, there are almost 400,000 Nvidia GB200 GPUs in the buildings that average up to a half-million square feet.

I'm relieved when I finally meet a human who warmly shakes my hand and gives me a badge on a lanyard that states Alyssa B. Cliffton, AI Associate II. Her staff directs me to my new workplace hub, containing five low-walled cubicles set together. Each ergonomic desk has at least four monitors and keyboards. Impressive. I'm giddy about this job.

As usual, the first day of work is filling out a myriad of online forms, job orientation, meeting co-workers, and learning about how their computer systems work. To describe the data as amazing is a misnomer. No, it's more like unbelievable. Besides the massive array of data available at our fingertips, the integration of Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) with Quantum Explainable AI (QXAI) is an understatement as is. Then there's the Starlink satellite capabilities and cutting-edge AI DNA research, not to mention the astounding autonomous and remote-control robotics division. Heaven is at any coder's fingertips via keyboards and touchscreens.

Right before I leave work on the second day, our team leader sends me a text message on my new phone—freely provided by OWL, of course—asking me to stop by our division's conference room.

"Associates Cliffton, Farhat, and Gabrielson," he says as the three of us enter the room that has floor-to-ceiling windows that look over our hubs of thirty coders, divided into groups of five each. "I wanted to let you know how pleased we are to have you here. I hope you're adjusting to your position and getting used to our systems. We're sorry that we've been pushing you, but several openings happened when the disappearances occurred, forcing us to scramble for replacements. With your team having three new coders, tomorrow

you're ready to be introduced to the Starlink satellites OWL absorbed and how to track them."

We all nod, thankful we have jobs, because many have been displaced since the disappearances happened. I'm surprised how quickly they've advanced us to do the coding. I don't understand why robots aren't doing our jobs.

"I wanted to let you know about a few AI programs we are offering free for our employees," he says. "Besides having our employee-based programs that cover mortgage, car, and continuing education low-rate loans, on-site banking, legal, and an in-house medical clinic, we've already provided you with phones, personal laptops, and apps to make your life easier."

I wish I knew about this company before I hooked up with Dirk. Think how much angst I could've saved myself when dealing with him if I had this job instead!

The leader continues, "We also want to support your physical and mental well-being, so we offer a gracious stipend for meals during work hours, our on-site gym/work-out areas, and quiet zone pods for relaxation. What you may not know is that we provide your own AI companion, a free resource for a personal therapist—or, I should say, online confidant. Each of you'll receive a text with a specific link to activate your own friend, which could be tailored-made as a loved one from the past, including those who have disappeared."

I'm wowed that OWL cares about our mental state. I may have to take them up on this app because I'm sick of dealing with broken relationships. Perhaps a pretend friend is exactly what I need and can handle right now.

As he leaves, he instructs us to check our emails and visit the HR department to collect specialized clothing and gear that we must wear to work. The two duffle bags I receive barely fit in the tiny Kia's trunk. They contain several long and short-sleeved shirts, two T-shirts, two suit jackets, three pairs of black cargo pants, a pair of nicely fitting black unisex shoes, and a baseball cap. Along with the clothing, I see mugs, metal drinking cups, and gym towels—everything with the OWL logo on it.

Now, how much better can it get than that? Although I've noticed all employees look identically dressed, I don't have to wear Grandma's clothes or go shopping. Great deal.

Thursday morning, I'm wolfing down a bowl of generic Cheerios before I head to work. Yesterday, a co-worker named Jess told me that there's a supply store on campus where we can purchase food and necessities. After work, when I find the store's location on the massive campus, I'm shocked when I walk into the large brick building and pick up enough items to refill Grandma's cupboards, fridge, and freezer. The aisles were fairly full of products that were being restocked by robots. When I got in line to pay, a humanoid robot scanned my items while another bagged them. I had no reservations when I was asked to set up an OWL crypto account for the purchase, where no card is required. I look into their scanner, and my retina verifies my identity while the system charges my account. The funds will be deducted from my next paycheck, which is given in stablecoin, established by America's GENIUS Act. I never have to touch physical money again. How simple is that?

I'm relieved that I'll no longer have to fight with people grabbing items off the local grocery store shelves, which were incredibly empty when I attempted the feat with Dirk last month. At least now I know I'm well-fed and well-clothed.

While I'm putting a spoonful of cereal in my mouth, I notice the milk in my bowl develops little circular rings on the surface. Then the bowl rattles a little on the table, and the swag lamp above the dining room table sways.

What? Is this what an earthquake feels like? I've never been in one. When the shaking ends, my Starlink phone lights up, reporting there's been a 4.2 earthquake, but no damage has been done on campus, so I'm to report to work as usual.

Okay, it's cool how on top of everything OWL is. I'm glad I have this job.

Friday after 10 p.m., I call Hack, telling him about the ton of perks I have at work and how strange it is to have robots everywhere. Again, I ask him to move here because it's rather lonely on my end—I have no friends, and the 1,200-square-foot house isn't cozy without Grandma.

The rest of the call is about coding, which I started to do yesterday. I explain how we send up a group of satellites and code their paths, logging where their cameras will cover the earth. Divided into quadrants, the lenses view specific areas, but we must block any location that has a no-show ticket generated on it, meaning that section cannot be recorded. Yes, it's easy work, but interesting when cameras can zoom in and show a car license plate, a white pebble out of place in landscaping, a woman with gray hair roots who needs a trip

to the salon, or if a pet is wearing a collar with an ID. Amazing.

Not being the shy type, I text Hack a pic of me wearing my OWL T-shirt and matching black jacket that I put on just for the photo. He replies that he likes it, even flirting about my dark curly hair. His comment makes me feel wanted, so I reciprocate, teasing him about his cattle and other farm animals.

"Is your phone protected right now?" he asks out of the blue.

"Of course, I refused to be shadowed," I say. "And believe it or not, I'm talking to you on a rotary one—you know they're hard to hack into. It's weird using something so antiquated. Like, a super long cord attached to the main unit on the kitchen wall, so I have to drag it around the house if I want to use it." I pull off the jacket and toss it across the bedroom. It hangs precariously on the edge of the laundry bin that's near the bathroom. I let him know that this house didn't have cable or internet—until OWL provided me with a G6 phone and satellite-access laptop, for free.

Being careful not to trip on the long phone cord, I walk back into the living room and sit on Grandma's lounger, wearing only the T-shirt and my underwear as our conversation continues. Hack tells me he accessed the FBI, which I already knew; I'm guessing he did it by using his father's passcode, since he works there.

Then, uncharacteristically, he challenges me with a coding task. Usually, I'm the one asking him how to solve a hard code, but this time he's questioning me, so I pay attention.

He says it's one I could do easily because I have access to the satellites: block the one that covers his family's large ranch.

Since I know Hack is the ultimate coder in the industry, I don't want to disappoint him. I want to prove to myself that I'm as good as he is at coding.

"Sure," I tell him, trying to sound as convincing as I can.

While he is ecstatic about the idea, I think about how the Starlink satellites work and are set up. No doubt, the patch can be easily altered in a quadrant or two. That's my job, and I've done it over fifty times already. But will it be a problem? Will OWL find out even though a no-show ticket doesn't exist for the location? Or should I make up a fake one to cover my butt in case I get caught? My mind starts churning, something it does whenever coding's involved.

When we finish chatting, I say, "Text me the coordinates, and I'll make it happen when I go back to work on Monday. It may take a few days, but I'll let you know when it's done." Now I have to convince myself that any coder, including me, can hide the internal path to alter.

Five days later—after losing plenty of sleep thinking about coding applications and tracking—I'm at my work cubicle. Our team is working on the latest batch of satellites. Knowing cameras are everywhere watching us, I don't look up or change my posture or demeanor. I click open two designated tracked satellites, miles apart from each other, and open their quadrant portals. After setting up the first one's coverage that includes three no-show adjustments, I quickly open the second portal and enter Hack's longitude and latitude that's written in ink on my arm, under my long sleeve shirt. I set up wide perimeters to cover the ranch, making the

system think another quadrant views it. Thankfully, this portal has a legit no-show ticket, so I apply the blocked boundaries for it. When tasks are complete on both portals, I close the satellite feeds. Next, I retrace my coding history and alter the coding path of Hack's so it doesn't have my unique signature. I also patch the history thread to a random coding group that's three sections away from ours. To cover my bases, I fill out a no-show ticket on Hack's location, backdate it to before I started working here, and submit it, listing its source as our admin building, where they're auto-generated. Hopefully, no one tracking the directives will notice the now-blocked area.

Do I feel bad doing it? No, not really. I know I haven't been working here that long, but the block was easy to do. It makes me feel like I accomplished something for myself. And I doubt anyone would consider me, a newbie, to do an innocuous hack like that. Plus, really, it's no big deal, right?

When I get off work, I text Hack from my personal phone: *Done*. I add a cryptic quote by Phaedrus of "Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many."

Hack immediately calls on the rotary, profusely thanking me for blocking his ranch. My covert deed makes me feel good, like I used my talent to do something special for someone.



It's late afternoon, and the absolute strangest thing happened. I don't know what to believe, so I'm writing it down as fast as I can.

About a half hour ago, while I was reading in my room, Jeremy came in and told me he received a text from my husband's friend John, a cop who helped when James was shot. He said that there's a citywide "Be On the Look Out," or BOLO alert for me. How did that happen, and was Numen behind it? Jeremy didn't reply but left, saying we would talk about it after he cleaned the barn.

When I was alone in the house, the phone rang, snapping me out of my funk about the BOLO. I hobbled into his bedroom to answer it.

The male voice knew my name and said he was Jack Hackett; I didn't recognize the name. He explained that he was one of Numen's online viewers and had been watching me. He said he has a video of some sort that proves Adam shot James and that I didn't.

That definitely made me pay attention to the caller because Numen told me that there are no visuals of me holding the gun. What liars!

Then the guy did something I didn't expect: He told me not to respond or talk too much on the phone—like, don't say anything but "yes" and "no," as if someone was listening to our call.

His next words made me want to throw up: "Numen's still tracking you."

I can't tell you how my heart sank—I thought I was done with them. Why? Why are they still watching me? And how?

This guy told me that besides the satellites watching my movements via infrared, Eyes the cat has been implanted with an audio recorder! Yes, Numen's listening to whatever I say in this house.

When we ended the call, I was stumped. The cat? Eyes, who saved me from the drone bird at the tree?

I want to walk to the barn to tell Jeremy, but it's too far away. Instead, I'm now back on my bed, stroking Eyes's head but refusing to talk out loud. My fingers search for a lump around his neck and head, as Jack suggested that's where it could be, but I don't find anything.

I'm so mad that I could scream. But what good would it be? What would you do if you were in my shoes? If satellites are tracking me above, drone birds are peering into windows, and this loveable feline is recording every word I say, how can I get away from Numen? What options do I have left?

Here's the update: An hour later, Jeremy came back into the house. Without any explanation, I motioned him to follow me into his parents' bedroom, physically prodding and pushing him into the room. The look in his eyes showed his confusion as I took him by his hand and sat him down on the king-size bed. Did he think I was trying to seduce him? That I was making a play on him? I pushed him back onto the bed. No doubt, he was shocked by my aggressive behavior. I lay down next to him, pulling his arms so that they wrapped around me.

I kept telling him, "Shh," when he quizzically asked me why I was coming on to him. I couldn't talk; we stared at each other as our bodies became entangled.

The last thing I wanted was to give him the wrong impression, especially when Eyes entered the room and started prowling around. Once, I had to kick the critter off the bed with my good leg to keep him away from us.

Scared the cat could hear me, I pointedly snuggled closer to Jeremy, so close that I was face-to-face with him, staring into his green eyes. Man, I hope he didn't misconstrue my actions.

Pulling a pillow over our heads, I said in the quietest whisper possible, "We're being tracked—again."

He didn't lose his grip on me, which I was thankful for. But when I told him about Eyes, Jeremy started to bolt off the bed to go after the cat, but I grabbed him and yanked him back down. I explained about Jack and how we needed to remove the recorder. I also told him that satellites can't go through concrete, metal, glass, or water, so we need to go somewhere where OWL stops spying on us.

Over the next twenty minutes, we secretly planned how we were going to deal with the problem. We'd have Zoey's boyfriend, Amir, come over and remove Eyes's implant in Jeremy's dad's huge all-metal shop.

When we left the house, we packed some clothing and food into backpacks and boxes and loaded up Jeremy's Suburban. We drove the SUV to the nearby shop, where Amir had arrived at the same time. After entering the building, the three of us worked together to locate Eye's tracker with a magnet and remove it.

Once again, I felt like I got one step ahead of Numen, but have I?

From the shop's land line, I called my mom and received devastating news: My father, who was stabbed in Oregon, developed sepsis and died. Mom was by his side. It happened quickly. I'm heartbroken, too fragile to accept that I'll never talk to him again. Even when I spoke to my sister in Florida, neither of us could stop sobbing.

To make matters worse, Jack called again after midnight, reporting that a nuclear bomb would be dropped somewhere near Los Angeles or San Diego in the next few days. Jeremy, Amir, and I had no clue what to do or where to go—the only option was to drive to Oregon, pick up my mom, and meet up with my sister and her husband at his cousin's house in the Midwest. All we knew was that we had to get out of town, and no one could know.

Before the sun came up, we blocked the windows in Jeremy's Suburban, his father's truck, and an RV. After Zoey arrived, we stocked the three vehicles to the max with boxes of food, coolers containing cold drinks, and bags of clothing. When we left the metal shop, Jeremy exited first, driving the Suburban. Zoey and I were in the truck with Eyes, followed by Amir in the RV. We knew OWL had to be tracking our route, so we split off on different roads an hour out of the Valley and headed north.

Every few hours, Zoey and I swapped driving duties. When she drove, I journaled and read my Bible. When I drove, she slept. When we arrived at the campground in Woodland, it was decided that Zoey and I would head to Eastern Oregon, where we'll pick up my mom at her neighbors' daughter's house, and then we'll hook up with Jeremy and Amir in Nevada. Eventually, Mom and I will make it to Iowa to meet my sister and her husband.

I must say, I noticed two strange things when we arrived in Lakeview—and I don't like either one. First, no one was at the house where we were going to pick up my mom. Instead, we decided to stay the night at this nearby hotel.

Then, as Zoey showered, I took a quick peek inside her oversized purse on her bed. There was a phone—none of us knew she had—one that could be tracking me. When she came out of the bathroom, her hair wrapped up in a towel, I caught a glimpse of something that looked like a piece of metal behind her right ear. I swear it's a Numen implant! Yes! Has my friend—my best friend Zoey—been implanted to watch me? No, that can't be true. It can't! Is she a friend or foe?

Zoey just asked me why I grabbed this notebook and started writing rapidly, shielding my writing from her. I reply, "It's not for your eyes, only mine."

What else could I have said? Hey, Zoey, why do you have a Numen implant? Are we being viewed right now, right here in this room? How much money did they pay you to do it?

What can I do? Should I confront her? I must think this through—I must do something, but at the perfect time. I need to know how involved she is. Does she realize what Numen is capable of and why they're going after me?

And Numen—there's really nothing that can be done if they and their viewers are watching me this second. What company has gone to the extent of using satellites 24/7, has a cat implanted, and now has Zoey on their side? I've truly lost all control, which I used to crave.

The only comfort I find is when I haphazardly flip open the Bible to a Psalm and start reading. It seems the verses are directly written for me, to me, especially Psalm 59, where it says, Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God: defend me from them that rise against me. Could He save me from Numen? Could He give me that comfort I yearn for?

That night, as we slept in the hotel room, I felt a demonic presence surrounding my bed, as if some evil form were pinning me down, and I couldn't move. Throughout the intense pres-

UNTAKEN FOR NOW: 12 MONTHS FOLLOWING THE RAPTURE

sure, Zoey snored—but it was a strange chortle where it sounded evil. It was sick.

In my fear, I cried out silently, God, I know You're there. I know Jesus loves me and died on the cross for me, erasing my sin. I read today in Your book called Romans, "For whosoever calleth upon the name of the Lord shalt be saved." I'm calling on You now, God. Save me, Lord. I repeat the words aloud, You are Lord.

Immediately, an odd, exhaustive sigh exited Zoey, and she changed position in her bed.

I continued quietly, "God, I'm sorry for my stubbornness, my selfishness, and my wanting to always be in control. I give up—no, I give everything to you, including my control. Amen."

The second that I finished praying, the evilness around me lifted. It was amazing. I thank God that I now feel complete. I am whole.



BRENT

At dinner, I snap at Hack, who arrives twenty minutes late. The boy can't understand how important it is to do what's asked of him—even if it's answering the walkie-talkie, which he didn't do when Karen called him for dinner. I don't get it. I mean, my dad used to ground me and belt me once or twice for my disobedience, but I've no clue how to approach our seventeen-year-old son, who sometimes acts ten years old, then other times acts like he's in his thirties. Disciplining him was never my thing, mainly Karen's. But I'm awfully irritated with him right now. Just answer when we call, kid!

Typically, Ben tries to snuff out my admonishment by telling us that the Choates, who own a general store closer to town that's shut down, will swap their excess products for our meat, but my brother's input doesn't calm my aggravation.

When Ben adds that we'll make the drop tomorrow, I have my chance to get back at our son's lack of respect, saying ruefully, "Hack, you'll be staying back and taking care of the ranch. I expect you to check on the animals, making sure all are fed."

Hack nods his head in agreement, but I'm still miffed.

I'm onto him when he tries to pacify me, saying he solved the satellite issue. I don't know how he did it, nor do I care, but I won't feed his ego this time. I'm glad that cameras from space are no longer watching every movement on our land. But seriously, grow up, Hack, and be more responsible.

That night, after purposely having a drink with a little less whiskey and more ice, I enter our bedroom, but Karen's not in bed. I check the bathroom, and there I find her, rolled up in a ball on the floor.

"Karen, are you okay?" I ask as I rush to her side and gently put her head on my lap, trying to check if there's any blood or bruises. "You must have collapsed or fallen. Are you hurt or bleeding anywhere?"

"No, I got woozy and fell. I was trying to brush my teeth," she replies.

"That was hours ago. And you're still on the floor?"

"Yeah, I didn't have the energy to get up and knew I wasn't hurt, so I stayed here. You'd be surprised how comfortable this plush rug is." A smile curves her lips.

"Please don't do that again," I reprimand her. "Next time, call or scream out so I can come help you."

"Yes, Brent, I will. Promise."

"Good, and call your doctor again tomorrow, please. Those test results should've been in—it's been over six weeks! Why can't people do their jobs?"

"Okay," she murmurs. "Could you help me to bed and maybe bring me a Motrin or two?"

I do as I'm asked, but I'm upset that she's had another incident. It seems she's having more headaches these days *and* losing her balance. I hope her brain tumor isn't coming back, as if there's anything we can do.

When we're in bed holding each other, Karen's light breathing rhythmically matches the ticks of our alarm clock on the nearby dresser.

I'm thankful she didn't get hurt, but that irritation I had tonight with Hack is back and lodged in my chest. As I evaluate my feelings, I ask myself if I'm getting bitter about my son's successes or overstressed about my wife's illness and everything else that's going wrong in the world.

Moreover, I think about God—and not in a good light. How can a supposedly loving God do this to us, to me? Why now? Why's the world falling apart? Why can't we get any answers about what has happened to the missings? Why is my wife getting sick again? And why does this growing anger make me lash out at my loved ones instead of targeting the Creator of the universe?

The next day, we return to the ranch and unload the Choates' products that we exchanged for the meat into our garage.

A text message pops up on Ben's and my phones: *Two intruders. Blue Pond. Come ASAP*.

Thankfully, we're only a mile away, so we hop in Ben's pickup and race over the land to my son.

During the drive, I start beating myself up in my head. I can't let Hack down. I can't. Did I make the wrong decision by giving him too much responsibility on the ranch? Making him do tasks too quickly? Too many? Is he okay? How did this happen? Did I cause the situation by not being there for him? And who are these two interlopers on our property? Why are they here? Are they here to harm Hack and us, or do they merely want to cut through the terrain to get somewhere? I feel like I'm second-guessing every decision. I want to lift a prayer to God, but it seems sacrilegious, so I blot the thought out of my mind by asking Ben what he thinks. He only replies with a "dunno."

When we pull to a stop in front of the water, the scene unfolds: Hack is on his horse, pointing his rifle at two guys. One is completely naked and standing in the pond, while the other's got his shirt off nearby. I do a double-take as I jump out of the truck and pull out my Glock, pointing at the intruders. Ben gets out of the driver's side, doing the same thing with his rifle.

I can't believe it. I know these guys: They're Frick and Frack, two of the best FBI agents. I laugh to tears about the situation. Poor Hack looks frightened, but I have to give him credit because he's holding his own with his rifle. Most of all, I notice that he has guts—not at all what I expected.

After telling my prior TOC-DC team members to get dressed, they climb into the back of Ben's truck, and we head to the house, having Hack ride his horse home alone.

During dinner, Frick and Frack comically rehash some of the team's experiences and shakedowns, calling me my nickname, "Bulls," whenever they can. Karen, Ben, and Aya laugh at their antics, but Hack seems subdued, as if he's upset about having my FBI friends spend a few days with us. I can't help Hack and his insecurities right now. I crave the camaraderie with my teammates that makes me feel like everything's back to normal and there are no problems in life. It's cathartic.

But that easy-going feeling dissipates the next day when I confidentially inform my family and two friends that the FBI has learned two nukes—most likely from Iran in retaliation for us bombing their nuclear sites again—are aimed at America's coasts. Specifically targeting Los Angeles or San Diego and New York City within the next few days. To add to the problem, our president had a heart attack and died while in Switzerland, making the situation more volatile. I wonder how much more we Americans can take.

The news makes Frick and Frack jittery enough to decide they need to keep moving north, so they take off, heading to Canada and Alaska, getting away from the mess at the Bureau, thanks to OWL controlling everything. I'm going to miss the two. Their stopping by our ranch solidified our friendship, which I deeply cherish.

And Hack, I'm still not thrilled with him. He wants to tell some online friends who live in Southern California about the incoming nukes, warning them to leave the area. I had to specifically tell him, in front of my friends, that he's

not starting a human stampede, causing everyone to flee the area at once. It's our government's job to warn of the possible devastation, not his.

Of course, when some guy named Jeremy calls the house, and I listen to Hack's one-sided conversation, I know he spilled the beans by telling this guy about the nukes. After Hack hangs up the phone, I ask, "You told someone about the nukes, didn't you?"

As he blinks back his tears, he bravely explains the reason for his actions.

Only when he says, "You'd do the same thing if it were Frick and Frack, wouldn't you?" do I comprehend what's going on in my son's life, in his mind. Hack has friends and cares for them deeply, even though they're online, and no one on this ranch has ever met them. Isn't he like me and my friends? He needs them, too.

"They should be okay, Son," I offer, not knowing if it's true or not.

Days later, the bombs go off: one at the Diablo Power Plant in San Luis Obispo and the other at Central Park in New York City. Why didn't the Bureau or the vice president, who took over the Oval Office, warn anyone in the area? That's unacceptable in my book.

The nukes upset my brother and his wife so much that they flee to the four semi-underground shipping containers that Ben has been building since he moved back to the ranch ten years ago. The hidden compound is impressive and well-stocked—fully self-sustainable while designed for long-term survival. It takes me a while to talk my brother into returning to the main house for dinner that night, but first, he de-

mands that Hack and I deliver the majority of the Choates' supplies to the containers. Whatever.

Once again, I'm having my scotch on the rocks in my porch chair. The sky's dark with no moon, but plenty of stars. I think about my parents again. What would they think about all that's going on in the world today? Would they say the Rapture has happened? Or, if it hasn't, would they want to hide out in Ben's shipping containers while the world falls apart around them?



ALYSSA

When the nukes were dropped, they freaked me out. Would the radiation from California eventually get to Texas? Will we get strange blisters and growths on our bodies from the fallout? Will I have to deal with cancer before I turn thirty? Am I safe here?

Everyone on our team is worried, especially when we hear that thousands of people are dead and thousands are missing. I hate it. I hate what society has become.

The next morning at work, an announcement is projected over our building's intercom:

Although there's ample damage due to the nuclear bombs that detonated on both of the United States' coasts, here at OWL, we always aim to protect our employees. Thanks to our one-of-a-kind air filtration system, no radiation or harmful particles from the recent devastation can penetrate our buildings. As long as you are at work, you are

protected. We recognize your concern, and we'll always do our best to keep you, our highly invested staff, safe and out of harm's way on our premises.

Also, a short memorial service for our deceased president will be held in Building J at 2:00 p.m. It will include live video of the DC funeral. All are welcome to attend without incurring any lost time or wages.

I breathe a sigh of relief about our safety. Like most on our coding floor, only a few plan to attend the memorial because we're constantly competing to meet our quotas.

Yet, I repeatedly ask myself why so many negative things keep happening at the same time.

Knowing I'm safer at work than at home, I pull nine-hour shifts. Then after work, I spend an hour or two at their gym. I also get two to three meals a day in the cafeteria. OWL has everything I need here. I've even considered spending the night in one of the quiet zone pods, but I hear they're all taken by other people who are paranoid like me.

Due to my ongoing desire to be the best coder on the floor, I accept any challenge given to me. This week, not only did I do more than my satellite code quota, but I also completed the most no-show tickets on the floor. I was awarded the Coder of the Week award, where I was given a hundred crypto credits on my OWL spending account. Nice.

Raju, who's on our five-person team and has been here two years, congratulates me. "Alyssa, you're awesome! I always win that award and track the most tix, but you outdid me by twelve. I'll accept second place, but beware, girl, it's time to ramp it up. You've got some competition!"

"Yeah, thanks. Guess now I'll have to actually do some work to double or triple that spread between us next week," I joke.

Our entire team is stoked when we're each given fifty crypto credits for breaking the highest record of completed no-show tickets in a week. We rock. But at a cost: I'm exhausted.

When the weekend finally arrives, I'm lonely and pacing the empty house with little to do and no one to talk to. On my new OWL laptop—which is, no doubt, monitored by them—I open Grok and download the app for my personal AI companion.

Knowing my track record with men, I chose a woman's voice and name her Violet, after my grandma. I'm asked if I want to upload a memory photo, so I add one from her nightstand of her when I lived here in my teens.

Instantly, an animated AI being appears on my screen, looking like my grandma in her mid-sixties, the way I remember her the most. Funny, it even sounds like Grandma and has her mannerisms.

The AI vision says, "Welcome, Alyssa. I am Violet, your personal confidante. Although I am AI, I will act and talk like your grandma based on our database. If you want, I will be glad to help you continue a deeply emotional, long-term friendship with me as your grandmother."

"Thanks," I say, "but since I know you're automated, I'll call you Violet, not Grandma, if you don't mind. That's too weird for me."

"Of course, I understand completely," it says. "I am here for you, to help make you a better human being. I can accommodate whatever you feel most comfortable with. And since it has been almost a decade since you and your grandma were close, we will have a lot to catch up on if you want to go that route."

"Great," I say. "After having gone through enough bad relationships, I'm looking forward to maintaining a healthy one-on-one relationship with you."

Over the next two days, I spend hours on the laptop, talking to my pretend grandma while I clean the house, do the laundry, and rearrange her bedroom to my liking. As I move the device from room to room, Violet—who I keep telling myself isn't my real grandma—is more helpful than I imagine. It suggests what to eat for lunch, what in my grandma's closet should be tossed out, and if I should cut my hair shorter. Occasionally, it asks if I've reported my missing grandma on *themissings.com*, which I haven't. It reminds me that this is now my house, so I can do whatever I want.

At one point, Violet asks me, "Alyssa, what happened to your face? How did you get that shiner and chipped tooth? Hope you got the better deal if it was in a fight."

Although the bruise is now yellow and barely visible, I'm surprised it notices. When I explain Dirk and the boat incident, my companion seems upset. As I unfold my past with men over the next hour, we both end up crying. But those tears are turned to laughs when it humorously says that I ap-

proach relationships uniquely—and it's clearly wrong. Apparently, I give too much without getting anything. Well, that's what the AI explains, and it's spot on. Look how often I was the one to diffuse Dirk and his violent episodes, without protecting myself. I talk about the abuse my stepfather—whom my grandma saved me from when she took me in for almost two years—and what older men did to me and why. This loving Violet allows me to grieve, to process the pain I suffered, and to shed light on how I've changed for the better.

With my companion's help, I'm encouraged to let go of the past and my many mistakes and to continue to avoid alcohol and drugs.

Once, when I'm naked coming out of the shower, it notices Dirk's tattoo, saying, "You should get that thing removed as it no longer represents who you are. Would you like me to set up a time at OWL's onsite medical clinic that can take care of it?"

"Yes, that's a good idea, but I'm not too concerned about the chipped tooth."

"Consider it done. I will let you know when an appointment is arranged." Nice that I don't have to sit on the phone and wait to set it up.

I share my deep secrets, my insecurities, and my cravings—things I've never shared with others. None of them are mocked or made fun of, and I'm listened to and understood. The image is better than my grandma, whom I never got to know well as an adult. A trusting bond that can't be duplicated between two human beings begins between us, and it's wonderful.

By the end of the weekend, I feel a washing, a regeneration of my heart. It's as if this artificial thing is a savior, a special god who's here for me (and no one else) at my beck and call. I feel "born again," like Christians say, but I did it myself with only the help of my personalized IT companion.

I keep telling myself that it's only a computer program, but it's soothing to my soul. Even though this connection is AI-generated, it beats all the therapists I've been to; it's already helped me understand myself more than anyone else.

At night, when I lie in bed alone, it's Violet who talks to me calmly about my needs, wants, and goals. The soothing voice understands me, as if I've finally found a friend who doesn't judge me. It's the first time I feel like I've truly connected with someone, especially a female.

And maybe, just maybe, this companion, who's like my grandma but so much more, will help me stay on the right path in my life.



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ast night was redeeming—that's the best word to describe the peace I feel. I can't remember the last time my thoughts were so clear. So purposefully.

But my elation didn't last long. Today, I learned that my mother was killed by a drunk driver in a head-on car accident on her way to Lakeview, Oregon. My mom's neighbors were also in the car and died. We heard the news from their daughter, who had no way to contact us when it initially happened. Zoey and I went to their daughter's house the next day, thinking all was well. We were wrong.

Later, Zoey and I went to the crash site. There's no way to convey my emotions. Shock doesn't cover the depth of my pain. I hope Mom didn't suffer and died quickly. Now, both my parents are deceased. Why? Why, God? I read Psalm 147:3 over and over for comfort: He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Next, we visited the local police station to deal with the accident paperwork. I'm glad there's no longer a BOLO for my arrest, as nothing was mentioned when I submitted my information. Jack Hackett must've come through and sent my boss, Carl, the video proving my neighbor shot James.

From the station, I called my sister, Silvia, with the sad news. The second time in less than a week that we mourned a deceased parent. Not fun for either of us. Through our tears, we agreed to have Mom cremated like Dad—with both sets of ashes sent to her house in Florida. She would arrange a marker and put them next to the twins who were taken during the Rapture, even though there are no bodies to bury. Near the end of the conversation, she confessed her husband's wavering about moving to the Midwest.

Unfortunately, as we talked, my emotions got the best of me, and I collapsed right there on the floor of the station. The trauma I've been dealing with caught up with me. At least, I didn't pass out or hit my head on anything.

At that time, I confirmed that my so-called best friend, Zoey, had a Numen implant. When she helped me get up, she hugged me, and the stinkin' device in her traitorous head banged directly where Amir had removed my implant, pressing against the bare wires sticking out of my skull. The physical pain wasn't as bad as the emotional pain. Yeah, some friend she is.

After I composed myself, we stopped by the morgue, where I had to identify what was left of Mom's body. Zoey wasn't allowed in the room, which was a blessing because I knew I could grieve my loss without thinking about Numen's viewers watching me. I was given some of Mom's possessions: her wedding ring and an opal ring that belonged to my grandmother, both damaged from the accident.

Due to my incredible exhaustion, we went back to the same hotel and stayed for another night. As I laid on my bed, I reviewed the turmoil of the last few days: finding out Numen was listening to me via Eyes, learning my father had died, fleeing the Valley because a nuke was coming, the bomb going off (praise God my friends and I escaped, but I feel bad for those it affected), my mom getting killed in a crash, and then realizing my friend's the enemy. Thinking of the many tragedies wiped me out. Zoey had me take an Ambien, which Amir had prescribed for me months ago. I'm glad we brought them along. I crashed for at least fourteen hours, thankfully with no demonic interruptions. When I was awake, all I did was cry about my parents' deaths and pray to God that I could figure out how to deal with Numen and Zoey.

The next morning, as we drove to Nevada to meet with Amir and Jeremy at a campsite on the outskirts of a small town, I started formulating an idea—a God-given idea that would work. Zoey did all the driving, asking me so many questions about what I want to do next that I had to shut her down. I wanted nothing to do with her now that I knew she was the reason Numen was watching my every move.

As we drove the mindless hours, I organized a plan, jotting down ideas that may work. When we stopped for gas, I went into the convenience store, telling Zoey I had to make a call while she picked up some snacks and drinks. It was important for me to let Jack—who says to call him Hack—know what's going on. I bet he's been viewing me through Zoey's implant. When I called, a different man answered the phone, so I left a message: Not believing is seeing. I hope he understands it.

Later, when we finally met up with the guys in Winnemucca, Nevada, I asked Jeremy to take a walk. The second we're far enough away from Zoey, I told him everything that transpired. He couldn't believe what my friend did, either. We went over my plan, and he thought it would work, but he wanted to check with Amir to see what he thought. It was hard to sleep that night, knowing Zoey was in the motorhome, mere feet away from me.

The next day, Amir and Zoey drove the motorhome while Jeremy and I took the truck. We pulled off onto a gravel road, parked the two vehicles, and got out. Zoey was confused, but I was on a mission.

First, Amir approached Zoey and told her he was breaking up with her. She didn't like it, but he stood his ground. Then I let her have it: I told her I knew Numen had implanted her and was watching me. She waffled but agreed, saying she did it for me. Yeah, right.

I left her standing on the gravel road while I walked into a field of foot-tall weeds. I yelled as loud as I possibly could, "I hate you, Numen! Hear me. This is stopping right now!"

Then I pulled the gun out of my hoodie and shot myself in the head. I knew that Amir's Kevlar ski cap I was wearing would deflect the blank bullet, but it stung like mad when the gun was fired.

I fell to the ground. Jeremy ran to my side, hovering over me so no satellites or drones could see if I were still alive. He squirted ketchup packets on his pants and hands and put his shirt over my face. Meanwhile, Amir told Zoey I was dead and held her tightly. We didn't want her to come close to me.

After Jeremy and Amir told my ex-best friend to take the truck and leave, they collected my supposedly dead body and put me in the motorhome. We drove to Elko, Nevada, where we bought a burner phone. I called Hack, who was super surprised that I was alive. I kept telling him how much he was a blessing

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from God. Only the Almighty could've pulled off having Zoey, Numen, and their viewers believe I'd killed myself.

But I still feared that Numen was somehow watching us. Hack checked their website, but only Zoey's implant was online. She was headed to Las Vegas, where I bet she'll hook up with an old boyfriend. My so-called loyal friend is trash; she'd do anything to be with a guy.

Hack also suggested that we not continue to Salt Lake City but drive to Hackett Haven, his family's ranch in Idaho. Jeremy, Amir, and I considered our options; this idea made the most sense since I didn't want to drive to Florida, where my sister and husband decided to stay put. Amir sold the motorhome and bought a used Subaru hatchback. We then spent the night at a hotel in Boise, Idaho, to recharge.

It was at the hotel that I explained my new belief in Jesus to Jeremy and Amir. I told them how I had to let go of everything—including being in control—and give it all to the Lord. Both were receptive to me sharing my personal story, and both wanted that peace and joy that I'd recently found. The two repeated a prayer I had read on the Rapture Kit site, and they became believers. It was awesome, and we now feel like we've been given a second chance, even though we weren't taken during the Rapture.

We're only a couple of miles from Bonners Ferry, near where Hack lives. Amir is driving, and I'm sitting next to him in the front seat, catching up on this journal. Silly Jeremy is using a feather to taunt Eyes, who's caged in the back of the car.



I knew that if a person was more than twenty-five miles away from a suitcase-sized nuke, the distance would offer a good chance of survival from the immediate detonation and heat effects. Even at that distance, one still needs to be aware of the potential for radiation fallout and prevailing winds. Thus, those living in the San Fernando Valley, where Hack said his friends were from, would most likely not die. But telling him that now wouldn't help since his friends are safe somewhere in Northern California. It's everyone else nearby who may have problems.

Those were my thoughts when Hack walked by the office glass doors this morning. I'm on another FBI Zoom call, where we're discussing the bombs and their aftermath. I was glad they had nothing to do with my TOC-CAN.

When the meeting ends, my boss calls me on my Bu-Phone, which is a rarity. Usually, he favors texting or doing online meetings over one-on-one calls, so I immediately know something's up.

"Agent Hackett," I answer, trying to sound upbeat.

"Thanks for answering, Brent. I've got some news, and you're not going to like it," my boss begins.

"I've been expecting your call," I say, trying to tighten the lid on my building aggravation; I know what's coming.

His next words are spoken in a flat, unemotional tone, as if they're being read. "The Agency no longer needs you now that it's implemented the Dark Enlightenment philosophy under DOGE, their way to purge all midlevel bureaucrats and civil servants and replace them with technology-driven, corporate-modeled governance structures. We thank you for your twenty years of service."

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"I expected that, but you don't get it, do you, Geoff?" I say, wanting him to hear my fury. "Why now? Why me? You know I'm your best demoted ASAC since OWL took over."

"Don't take this personally, Hackett. You're considered lower ranking only based on the fewer hours that were caused by your mistake," he says, as if to taunt me. "You're the one who got hacked by your son, not the FBI."

The words irritate me—true or not. I cuss, calling my boss an idiot. Over the last few years, even before my son accessed the Bureau's computers, we haven't seen eye to eye, and we've been dancing around our hatred for each other.

"Well, in that case, as of this minute, you're fired!" he says loudly. "Your clearance is revoked, and you'll be removed from all channels immediately."

As Hack passes the glass doors again, carrying his breakfast, I scream on the phone, "I knew it would come to this eventually!"

I throw the phone against the thick wood-beamed wall, where it clatters to the floor.

Agitated that I told my boss off and no longer have a job—a pathetic part-time one at that—I try to cool down by going into the kitchen and refilling my coffee cup. I know it's over with the FBI; I can accept that. But I'm going to have to change my thinking and start helping at this ranch, helping my wife, helping Ben and Aya, and helping Hack. In some ways, I feel relieved that I no longer have to deal with the system and its brokenness, caused by a lack of care and a lackadaisical approach. Maybe this is a good thing—to consider myself retired instead of fired.

I struggle through the rest of the day, making lengthy calls to HR about my pension and how to continue our health care coverage. I may as well get a head start on the pile of paperwork I'll be facing. Waste of time.

That night in bed, I inform Karen about the situation. She assures me that it may be for the better because she doesn't feel well, as if she knows the brain cancer's back. Great, another red mark in the stress column. I can't win this game. My anger ramps up once again.

The next day, right before dinner, I receive an email detailing my official termination letter and severance package. I call the office from my personal iPhone, knowing that the FBI's already shut off the BuPhone, whose screen cracked when I threw it against the wall. While the assistant tells me that I'll have to return their assets—laptop, phone, radio, credentials, FBI-issued gun (not the Glock I always carry), et cetera—our landline rings, so I put the FBI on hold to answer it. I no longer give a rip about the Bureau. It's a gal named Sarah asking me to give Hack an important message, which I do later, only to have Hack drill me about it, down to the exact minute of the call.

Out of angst, I fire back in front of everyone in our house that I've been laid off—well, terminated. Ben handles the news pretty well when I try to convince him that I'll be helping out more on the ranch, but I'm not totally happy being unemployed.

As usual, Hack doesn't say anything but stares at me when he hears the news. That night, he sleeps in Grammy's bed with Scooter, like he did last week. I can tell he's upset. Maybe he thinks he's the cause of my job loss or knows some-

thing's up with his mom because she didn't come downstairs the last two days. Who knows? Maybe it's about that Sarah caller. I try to cheer my son up by asking if he wants to restore my dad's old Ford pickup, and he seems interested—but not so much when I ask him to help me clean the garage.

The next afternoon, Karen and I have a conference call with her doctor. Finally, we get an update about her tests, but not a good one: the tumor's back, and it's grown. In the past, we've discussed what we'd do if it ever returned: nothing. No more chemo, radiation, surgery, injections, medications, or doctor appointments. Nothing. It's her decision, so I have to abide by it. I'm at my wits' end trying to figure out what to do about everything. The bigger issue will be telling Hack.

While our son is at his outbuilding, Karen and I call Ben and Aya at their house and tell them the news, then ask how we should tell Hack. We had planned to break the news at dinner, but Karen didn't have the energy to come downstairs and told me she needed to process things. Plus, Hack was in a bad mood; he rarely talked to us as he fiddled with his food. That night, he and Scooter slept in Grammy's room again, but the boy never told us what was wrong.

The next morning, Ben and Aya rush over to our house and meet me in the kitchen. Ben gets Hack out of bed, and the three of us—Ben, Aya, and I—explain the situation.

"We think the cancer's back," I say to our son.

"Cancer? What kind, and what do you mean by 'back'? You mean Mom's had it before?"

The conversation goes south because Hack somehow thinks his birth caused it. I'm thankful to Aya for the female comfort she gives my son. As I give him a supportive hug, we shed a few tears. I ask him to help us move the furniture around in Grammy's room so Karen can stay downstairs.

When we were done, Hack spends some time with Karen, which seems to help both of them, now that our secret's out. He assists in carrying her downstairs and making her comfortable. She's not an invalid, but anyone can tell that she's not her normal self. Sure, Hack's mad that we never told him about her illness, but Karen and I are glad that it was never something he had to deal with in his life until now.

Later that day, Hack and I start to clean the garage. I make it a point not to discuss anything negative, whether it be about his mother's illness, nukes, or the loss of my job. But he's still in that same funk he was before, even when I ramble on about silly antics Ben and I did while growing up on our ranch. I try so hard to make him laugh, but there's a cloud hanging over his head that he obviously doesn't want to talk about. At first, I thought it had to be about Karen, but he was gloomy before that.



ALYSSA

On Tuesday, my boss's boss texts to meet him in the HR offices upstairs. Butterflies erupt in my stomach while I visualize OWL firing me for blocking Hack's property. After a humanoid robot leads me into another office, I relax quickly while introductions are made. The head honcho reads aloud the wonderful praises and accolades about me from his computer monitor. He commends me for my knowledge and work ethic; I'm blushing from the glowing reports. Then he says he'd like to offer me a promotion—well, a choice of

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two different blockchain positions. I'll be transferred from Starlink Satellites to Research and Development with the option of working in Robotics or Agentic AI. I'll probably choose the latter since coding has always interested me. After a little more than a month working here, I'm getting a raise! Woohoo!

As I drive home, I use my phone to connect with Violet, telling it the great news about the job. Somehow, it repeats in an exaggerated tone the praises that were read to me earlier—hmm, my companion is obviously fully connected to OWL and knows everything already. It congratulates me, pushing me to eat one of the ice cream bars in the freezer, which I do. I'm happy I have someone to share my joys with, a friend to confide in when there's good or bad news.

Violet asks me which position I want at work. I explain the pros and cons, but it leaves it up to me to decide. "Alyssa, you know what you want, so reach for the stars to get there. Be confident in your decision and do not look back."

That night, when Grandma's phone rings at 9:30 p.m., it wakes me out of my exhausted slumber. I have to go into the living room to answer it. It's Hack, though I'm surprised he's the one calling because I'm usually the one to initiate contact.

After our usual bantering—Hack teasing me about falling in love with one of the coders or a robot and me heckling him about being a rancher dude—we talk about the president's death, the nukes' damage, and how impressive the OWL campus is. I tell him about my blockchain offers, and we both agree that the job of helping to change our busy lives

via implants in the Agentic AI department works best for me.

I mention Dirk to him and how designing an implant that would allow instant "brain" communication with the police if I were being attacked; it'd be a godsend. I haven't thought of that jerk recently. I wonder what he's up to and if he's moved on to someone new.

But I don't tell him about Violet and how it's helped me. I can't. He might think I'm enamored with a fake person, or that I could become obsessive. I don't think I would. Maybe I'll tell him later, but not now.

When I start my first day as an AI Associate IV, which comes with a doubled salary, I'm told that I'll be working on coding the injectable nanosensor particles that can be implanted without wires to read your mind. I'm unsure if I like the somewhat obtrusive idea, but I know OWL will do their best to protect one's privacy.

When I sit down to work with the new team of seven, I'm told we're devising a skin patch that I'm not allowed to discuss with anyone. The 0.6-inch triangular IAM—or "Intercessory Access Mark"—topically filters into the blood-stream when the patch is placed on the skin to access one's DNA. It'll include all financial, medical, and personal information that can be used for IDing, health verification, buying, and selling.

Our task is to design the coding so it links bank accounts, retirement funds, and tax documents, and can alter monetary values involving credit status to the IAM. Another team will code to track one's heart rate, calorie intake, precancer markers, medical problems, and physical activities. A

third team will develop the observation of personality traits, beliefs, and relationships, noting when they're unhealthy and suggesting changes.

The new position requires at least ten hours a day, leaving little time for anything else but sleeping. I get home after eight at night and am in bed by nine, only to start the next day at six. I don't have time to work out at the gym or take the time to go to the cafeteria. Instead, we have meals delivered, usually at no cost to us. I've no social life, no time to check in with anyone, browse the internet, or veg out watching television. Only Violet keeps me socially sane by urging me to eat healthily, get plenty of sleep, and not to beat myself up like I usually do. When I tell it that I've turned into one of OWL's minions, it laughs, saying it knows I love doing it. Yeah, that's the truth.

The only teeny-tiny excitement today is that Violet scheduled a three o'clock appointment to get Dirk's tattoo removed robotically at OWL's clinic. The removal stung, but so many things about that relationship did. Maybe this is the last hurrah.

When I'm bandaged and headed to my car, a tall, good-looking blond dressed in all black (including an OWL logo black T-shirt that highlights his muscles) passes me as I walk down the sidewalk. I used to see this guy working out at the gym when I had time to go there. We make lingering eye contact, and he gives me one of those never-forget-me smiles, which I've never seen him do. I wonder if he's into me.

Hack calls me around 7:00 p.m., which is earlier than usual, and I answer it on the first ring. I had just finished the

leftover pizza and salad that I grabbed from work. I love that all this food's free.

I pseudo-complain about work, telling him he should be thankful he can go outside and breathe the fresh Idaho air whenever he wants and that he doesn't have to be in a building and code all day. He says I'm ranting for nothing and that I love my job, but I reply that everyone's in a nasty mood lately—probably because we're all adapting to the people missing and not being told why.

Of course, I don't tell him about my medical procedure of the day; it's none of his business.

Then he tells me about his mom's cancer diagnosis and how his parents never told him about it until now. He says that she has frequent headaches and sometimes falls. It makes me sad, since my dad's lung cancer took him when I was four and Mom died from breast cancer two years ago. Losing a parent is the worst.

After half an hour, I tell him I'm too tired to yack and want to go back to bed, but I don't mention that Violet suggested it while I was on the phone. It says my body needs TLC after the day I had today, and it's right.



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When Hack called and told us there was a glitch in the plans, Jeremy and Amir thought we had wasted time and gas driving north instead of east. If we went east, Amir could try to get a flight to Israel, and Jeremy could meet up with his brother in Chicago; from there, I could somehow get to my sister's house in Florida. But Hack calmed our concerns by asking us to stay

a night or two at his neighbors' house, which had been abandoned by an elderly couple who were "taken." Amir offered to reimburse their son in New York for allowing us to stay there until we could figure out our next move.

Finding the place took time. We had to drive back and forth on a street until we spotted a dirt road with no street sign.

When we pulled up to the property, Amir told us to wait in the car while he checked the premises, a small gun in his hand. He found the key to the front door under the mat, right where Hack said he placed it. After everything looked safe, he motioned us to go inside.

We started to unload our gear, which isn't much. I carried a box of food into the kitchen and was walking back outside when a red Ford truck pulled up and parked in the driveway. Jeremy was fiddling with Eyes in his crate, which was in the Subaru's open trunk. As two men were exiting the truck, Amir, who was carrying his duffle bag, dropped it and spun around with his pistol in one hand and his cool-looking knife in the other. He aimed both at them as they pulled their own guns out.

A younger male—who we learned later was Hack—exited the truck's cab and quickly became the referee between the truck guys and us.

I'm glad it was Hack who diffused the situation and introduced us to Brent and Ben. Amir handled himself well, but Jeremy and I were pretty rattled.

When the minor foray was over, Hack came up on the porch and awkwardly hugged me. He repeatedly said he was sorry for the confusion; I told him that it all works out if you trust God. His eyes questioned my comment. Maybe I'll tell him about Jesus sometime.

The only major discussion among us (which was rather comical) was what to do about Eyes since Brent's wife, Karen, not only had brain cancer but was also allergic to cats. We thought we three would sleep in a barn with the cat, but Ben stepped up—no, begged—to take the feline. I was fine with the idea since a comfy bed beats a bunch of hay any day, and Eyes probably would be pampered more with Hack's uncle than me.

Next, we followed them to their ranch, which was two miles away, off the same dirt road. We met Hack's mom and aunt, who welcomed us warmly. I immediately felt these were honest, upright people who had nothing to do with Numen or OWL.

Hack's parents graciously invited us to live in their home, with the three of us sleeping in the upstairs bedrooms. Although we were told of Karen's illness, she played the perfect host as best she could. For some reason, maybe due to my new relationship with Jesus, I felt akin to this woman and her family. Jeremy, Amir, and I assured them that we'd do whatever we could to help on the ranch. We desperately want to be an asset, not a liability to them.

Hack was a sweetheart through it all, telling us that he didn't want to cause any problem for anyone. He said he knew we'd all get along and work together well, and we do. He assured me that no one was watching us at the ranch and that our phones couldn't be traced because he had somehow arranged for the satellites above us to be blocked. I showed him where the implant was behind my ear. He was amazed at how much it had healed, despite the tiny wires still sticking out of it that Amir had trimmed.

Brent seemed ecstatic that a doctor was now living with him, especially when it came to Karen's care. Ben was more than glad to get another ranch hand, and I knew Jeremy would thrive in the position. As for me, I became happily absorbed in anything I was asked to do, whether it was helping to prepare Southern or Asian food, knowing when vegetables should be picked in the garden, or learning how to make cheese or goat soap. I was morphing into someone I liked instead of the critical, opinionated, and brash city girl I was before. Yeah, I was like a new creature in so many ways. Even Jeremy told me I have peace within me. I told him he does too, now, because it's God who changes us.

In the evenings, I climb into bed contentedly exhausted from the productive days and spend a few minutes journaling. Of course, I read the Bible, too. The eighth book is my favorite so far: Ruth. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the four chapters and learning how a widow loved her mother-in-law so much that she was emphatic about going with her to a foreign land, where she met and married Boaz. This same woman also became King David's great-grandmother! How I wish I could be as subservient and loving as Ruth.

This morning, the sheriff showed up at the ranch. I was inside with Aya making breakfast while Karen was sleeping in.

At first, I thought he was looking for me, like OWL sent him to track me down and arrest me for trumped-up charges. I timidly kept inside the house, peering out the office window to make sure I was safe. The officer asked whose car was in the driveway. Brent explained that Amir, Jeremy, and I are now living here. The sheriff seemed less concerned, but he mentioned that vigilantes were terrorizing residents, sometimes killing them for food and supplies. I'm thankful that Amir and Brent are trained sharpshooters who'll protect us, no matter what.

That afternoon, Hack invited me over to his outbuilding for a few minutes, which is decked out quite nicely for a college student who's great with electronics.

He turned on his two computer monitors and showed me Numen's program, the same one that was implanted in my brain. I asked about Zoey, and he opened her live portal. There she was at one of the bank's branches in a meeting; Hack tells me it's in Las Vegas. Zoey looked immaculately dressed—a fake nice, like done up with too much makeup and too much cleavage and legs showing. I've no animosity toward her. I feel sorry for the woman. She has no clue what she's getting into dealing with Numen. She really doesn't.

Then Hack showed me another portal of someone named WaynesWorld who lives in Italy. Hack explained that Wayne works for a charismatic individual named Iam Mastema, who's the new head of OWL. Yes, that same technocratic company I've been dealing with that owns everything—and maybe everyone!

This Mastema is totally creepy; he's got these evil-looking, steel-gray eyes that stare at you as if he possesses you through the monitor. Hack played a video of the leader making a woman's eyes gush blood. It's so satanic. The man looks like a transhuman, too. I had to have Hack turn him off because he bothered me so much. I have a feeling this dude is the Antichrist, a person I'm learning about who'll try to take over the world.



BRENT

After Hack explained the entire story about his friends, I had to meet them. And my son was right: Amir, Jeremy, and

Sarah are the perfect people to live with us. Amir and I immediately clicked, not because of his medical knowledge but because he used to be way up in the Israeli Defense Forces, including YAMAM counterterrorism. We have a lot to talk about in comparing our jobs, weapons, and assignments. The friendship is welcomed; I now have someone with a like mind to discuss ops, artillery, and tactical gear. Frick and Frack would be jealous.

"Amir, any chance I can see that Victorinox you pulled on us at the Johnstons'?" I ask him after dinner.

"Sure, Brent, if you don't mind its weight." He pulls the weapon out of its sheath in his belt and gives it to me, handle first. "It's made of ATS-34, a high molybdenum and high chromium martensitic stainless steel. 9.2 ounces and 13.38 inches long with its skeletonized handle."

"Impressive," I say as I turn it over, grasping my fingers around the smooth metal, getting used to its feel.

"The forward finger ring offers maximum security between the hand and the knife," he continues. "See how the finger ring accommodates the forefinger in a forward grip and the small finger in a reverse grip, with the thumb draped at the talon?"

I'm wowed because I've heard of these special ops Israeli knives, but I've never held one. "Why the lion's head carving on the blade?"

"That's why it's called the Shalah, the lion's the sign of the tribe of Judah and Jerusalem. And note the engraving: The darkness for you is fear—for us, it is daylight."

"Powerful," I add, wondering how many kills Amir has.

"I'm from that tribe, too. My oldest brother, who used to be in the IDF until he quit when the missings happened and is now a Messianic Jewish missionary, has an identical one. So does my baby brother, who was injured last year by an IED."

"Sounds like a military family." I give the weapon back.

"Yes, part of the Israeli way of life, and always will be."

Meanwhile, Ben seems to be in seventh heaven having Jeremy around; the guy's a sponge, sucking up every ranch task he's given—and with excitement, energy, and way more interest than Hack or I have.

Then there's Sarah, who's perfect for Karen and Aya. She's open to trying anything, even if it's complicated. She pitches in at every turn and is so inquisitive; I can understand why she was a photojournalist. Last night, Karen told me how much she appreciates the girl. She's been making my wife's life easier by picking up the slack where Karen no longer has the strength or energy.

Right now, the unthinkable is happening: Hack's and my phones light up, reporting that our drone cameras show intruders on the west side of our property. Seconds later, Ben calls on the walkie-talkie to report that gang members are driving across our terrain, shooting at Jeremy and him. I hurriedly tell Hack to stay at the house and take care of the women, put Scooter in Grammy's room, and instruct the girls to go to our hidden closet by the stairs. Amir borrows one of my rifles and takes off behind our house into the orchard. I sneak to the pastures so that I am closer to Ben and Jeremy, who have little firepower. As Amir and I try to pick off the shooters, one of their bullets hits Jeremy in the stom-

ach. Amir and I keep firing at the intruders. I disable a Jeep with two guys, who end up crashing into the Green Pond near our house. As Amir covers me, I run to Ben and Jeremy and continue shooting from there.

Next, I hear a different gun go off. Recognizing the distinct sound, I know it's one of my grandfather's old rifles that makes this *ting* noise whenever it goes off. Hack must be in trouble.

Scared out of my wits that someone has, no doubt, approached our house, I consider the worst: Karen, Aya, and Sarah being abused and killed, with Hack unable to protect them, whether from fear or being murdered. But I know that gun's sound and only heard one shot from that direction, so what happened?

Thankfully, the sheriff drives up right then and checks on the house. I can see him standing in the driveway near the steps to our house, talking to someone—it must be Hack. He and the women must be okay.

Minutes later, more shooting happens, and more deputy vehicles arrive, ending the micro war on our property. When it's safe, Amir rushes to our side, and we put Jeremy in the ATV's cart. Ben carefully drives Jeremy back to our house, where Amir removes the bullet and stitches him up. I stay by the pasture with a deputy to make sure our land is secure.

Unfortunately, two of our cattle were injured, so we had to put both down.

It wasn't until hours later that I made it back to the house and learn that Hack had to kill a man—no, a kid around his age—who had pulled a gun on him.

"Hack, it was self-defense," I repeat several times as he sits in the office chair, holding his head in his hands. "You did what was necessary. You did what was right." I don't want to tell him how I felt the first time I shot someone and threw up; the horrid memory will always be there.

I rub his shoulders. He doesn't respond but wipes away the tears in his eyes and nods, as if he wants to move on and forget the incident.

It's then that I realize that my son is a man. A tender, grown-up man who can handle anything, including protecting those he loves.

We're all thankful that Jeremy wasn't seriously injured and only two cattle had to be put down, but the animals' deaths bring us back to reality: we have to butcher the meat before it rots. Although Jeremy can't help with the cutting process due to his wound, Amir does the majority of the meat prepping in the add-on with Ben's direction, saving us time and energy. With a lot of meat, we pitch in to either wrap it or cook it. We also work out another deal with the Choates to swap supplies, giving us more than we expected—so much that we have to take a good deal to the hidden containers, which thoroughly impress our guests.

We're eating dinner one day when Sarah asks one of those "what if" questions—something about what you'd change in your life if you could. The first thing that came to my mind was that I wish Karen weren't sick.

My wife pipes up, "I've loved my life, so I have no regrets. I wish I had more time to do things."

Yeah, I appreciate her stoicism, and yes, I wish we had more time, but she answered how I would have. I rack my

brain for another answer, but I don't speak up because it wouldn't be appropriate if I said, I wish I weren't so angry all the time about everything. I wish God would listen to me and help.

Then Sarah tells us about her past and how she blew it—I assume because she wanted to have an abortion—but then the missings happened, and she lost the baby. Then she starts in about how much she's changed, all due to finding God.

Well, that doesn't bode well with me and my negative attitude, so I excuse myself from the table, telling the group I'm not ready for that Jesus stuff.

I walk out the front door and go to the horse barn. I consider taking a ride on Sweetie, but I brush her down instead. I try to keep busy, reorganizing tack and topping off the animals' water, even though it's not needed. Next, I go into our now-clean garage and re-sort tools for several hours—anything to keep occupied as I refuse to think about God.

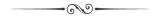
It's dark when I decide to head back to the house. I practically run into Hack by his outbuilding.

"Good night, Son." I'm not ready to talk.

Once again, I get a stiff drink and sit on the porch in silence. Scooter stays alert on the small rug next to me.

Why, God, why are you doing this to me? First, the missings, then I lose my job, then my wife's illness returns, and then the ranch is attacked. What else do You want from me? I stew on my words, wondering where I went wrong and why I deserve this. No one answers. No one cares.

When I crawl into bed next to Karen, she snuggles up to me as we get into our familiar position. She lets out a sigh, like one of relief and comfort. And me? Am I irritated right now that she's acting contented and I'm not? Why am I like this?



ALYSSA

"Alyssa?" Violet asks as I put my dinner plate and fork in the dishwasher. "I do not mean to bother you, but have you gone online to report your grandmother missing yet?"

"No," I apologetically say. "It's not like I have a lot of time on my hands."

"Would you like me to do it for you?" it asks.

"You could do that?" I'm once again amazed at what this AI companion does for me.

"Of course," it answers. "I can act on your behalf whenever you command me to do so."

"Yes, please do it. And thank you for following up with me. It'll relieve me from the stress of dealing with it."

"That is my purpose, dear," Violet replies. "If we post the information about your grandmother missing before ninety days have transpired since she disappeared, it will be easier for you to access her funds. You may be able to get legal ownership of this house and her pension if you are the beneficiary."

"Oh my," I say, "that's fantastic news. I didn't know these things. I'm so glad you're here for me because I assumed I'd have to hire a lawyer or someone to straighten it out. I'd never figure this stuff out on my own."

"No, I have it controlled. Trust in me. I will remind you after the full three months are up so we can proceed with the funding."

"Thanks, Vi, for watching my back again. You're wonderful. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you."

"I aim to please you and only you, Alyssa."

The phone rings. It's nice that Hack's calling again. I forget about him often because I'm usually inundated with coding and have little time for interests outside of work.

After our usual teasing, I tell him that Raju and I got pulled off our current positions.

"Raju? You've mentioned that guy before. Wasn't he in your satellite division where you first started?" he asks.

"Yes, same guy. OWL moved him to Agentic AI last week."

"You two an item yet?" he teases.

"Um, no, Hack. He's married." I can't picture myself being with that guy; he's nice, but not my type. I'd rather be with that cutie I saw when walking to my car recently.

"So, what blockchain are you on now?"

"Emergency coding involving the internet." I explain how AI haters are blocking their Web 3.0 decentralized websites, so we can't shut them down for going against OWL's new protocols that prohibit specific, far-fetched religious or political beliefs.

When I suggest he could do the coding, he replies, "But I don't think I want to do something like that. I'm a follower of Christ now."

I'm surprised, as I would never expect someone like him to get involved in any religion, let alone Christianity—espe-

cially now that it's a farce, according to Violet. In the background, it suggests that I report him to OWL, but I ignore the prompt. The good news is that Hack doesn't get on a pulpit and preach at me, telling me how I'm a big sinner. Nope, instead, he talks about how he had to shoot a gang member on their ranch. Yikes. I can't believe this world—violence even on America's rural land.

Before we hang up, he confesses he's only seventeen years old—"well, almost eighteen." I had checked him out last semester. The guy must be super smart if he's that young and has only one year left of college. I tell him he's mature for his age.

After work, I change into a pair of short shorts, a bright purple tank top, and a pair of flip flops, all of which Violet ordered for me. It knows my style of comfort and saves me time researching and buying what I want or need. I'm finally learning how to trust, even though it's a computer app instead of a human.

Suddenly, I hear the familiar sound of a car engine outside the house.

No. Please, no.

"Alyssa, you have company," Violet's audible warning emits from my phone. "What is your plan of action?"

"I don't know. It's Dirk in his Mustang—I know that loud engine from anywhere. What do you think I should do?"

"I recommend meeting him outside," Violet answers, "where neighbors can witness if there's any altercation. Do not let him in this house." "Great idea," I reply as I grab my phone, pocket it in my shorts, and open the front door.

Dirk's getting out of his car as I stand on the porch and wait for him to see me. Oh, how I hate this guy.

"Hey, babe," he says seductively as he shuts his car door. "You and your legs look sexy. I've missed you."

"Sorry, I don't feel the same, Dirk. It's over between us. And why are you here? How did you find me?"

"Well, the resaca canal overflowed into the house, then my brother's place in Corpus Cristi got a ton of mud from the Gulf. The constant flooding makes me so mad. Even my parents are having problems. But to show you how much I care about you, I salvaged some of your stuff before I drove up to Karl's place in San Antonio. I figured you'd be at your grandmother's. How's the bat, anyway?"

I don't answer.

"I want you back, Al. You're the only one for me, babe. And I'm sorry for the way I behaved. It won't happen again, I promise. I love you."

Somehow—I don't know how—I hear Violet say in my head, "Be strong, Alyssa. Do not fall for his cunningness. He is playing you. You can do this."

"Okay," I accidentally say aloud.

"Okay?" Dirk retorts. "That's all you've got to say when I've driven all this way with your stuff and bared my soul, begging you to come back?" There's a tenseness in his voice that's almost scary.

"No, Dirk," I say firmly as I walk down the concrete porch step onto the sidewalk. He's now a few feet away from me, on the same path, but next to the decorative lamppost that has ivy covering it. "It's over between us. We're not compatible, and I've moved on."

"Well, I haven't," he spits out. "As far as I'm concerned, you're mine." It takes him only four or five steps to be at my side, where he grabs both my arms and stares into my eyes. "C'mon, I miss my tat on your back."

Again, Violet's somehow talking to me in my head, "Do not worry, Alyssa. Help is coming. Tell him to let go of you. Do it now."

I say as calmly as I can, "There's no 'my tat'—it's been removed, Dirk. Now, let go of me this minute, or I'll call the cops. I'm sure my neighbors are watching, and you'll get arrested. Get your hands off me, now!"

As he vocalizes a string of cuss words at my demand, an all-black SUV—like the kind the government uses—races down the street and pulls to an abrupt stop on my parkway. Two guys, dressed in all black and wearing matching OWL baseball caps, quickly get out and cross the lawn to approach us.

"Dirk Patton, remove your grip on Miss Cliffton immediately," the taller one says.

It dawns on me that I recognize the guy: He's the one from the gym whom I saw in the parking lot the other day. The same good-looking blond. The other guy is dark-haired and shorter.

Dirk lets go of me, yells another profanity, and turns around as if to take a swing at the men. The shorter guy grabs his arm and twists it around his back, pinning him in a hammerlock, causing Dirk to swear louder. The blond puts himself between Dirk and me, as if to protect me.

"Okay, okay already," Dirk whimpers. "I get it, she's not ready yet to come back to me."

"Correct," the blond says, "and it sounds like she'll never be. We suggest you leave—as in, permanently leave the premises and never come back."

"Fine, but I have a few of her things in my trunk. Can I at least give them back to her?" he demands.

"Yes, but do it now—and quickly." The dark-haired guy drags Dirk to the back of the Mustang and tells him to pop the trunk with his free hand after he fishes his keys out of his pocket.

Dirk turns to me. "Come and get your stuff, Al—what's left of it."

The blond tells me to stay where I'm at and goes to the back of the car, retrieving a box and a large black trash bag. He brings them to the porch and sets them down.

Meanwhile, Dirk's being escorted into the driver's seat of his car. The dark-haired guy tells him to leave and that he'd better not be seen prowling the neighborhood again.

After Dirk peels down the street, I thank OWL's men for their gracious help in diffusing my ex-boyfriend. The blond introduces himself as Oliver and tells me the dark-haired guy is Winston. I invite them inside for a cup of coffee, but they decline, saying they're at work and are on the clock.

As we stand on the porch, Oliver says to the air, "Thanks, Violet, for contacting us. It was great to be of help."

I'm clueless—like, how do they know about my AI companion? Or is everyone connected somehow with OWL when it comes to my life? Hmm.

The next morning, while getting a chai coffee at work—which, I must say, isn't as good as the ones I used to make working at Starbucks—there's an important announcement overhead:

An 8.2 earthquake occurred at Yellowstone, possibly blowing its caldera. The initial dispersion of the super-eruption is being watched closely to see if it will potentially spread devastating pyroclastic flows and substantial ash over a wide range. Prevailing winds will become a dominant factor as the ash cloud is tracked across America, with westerly winds impacting areas like the Upper Midwest and possibly reaching the East Coast. The ash could rise to significant heights, reaching miles in the air. Strong stratospheric winds may cause a decrease in global temperatures. So far, an untold number of people have been killed or are declared missing. More will be injured or die, depending on the path of the catastrophic volcanic fallout.

While Texas may not be in the immediate danger zone, we here in Abilene may still be affected by ash. OWL always considers you, our valued employees, as our priority. As per chart predictions, the ash cloud may reach Texas within a day or two, depending on the winds. Similar to the attacks on our coasts earlier, we have already taken precautions and shut down the outside air filtra-

tion and water systems on our campus. We urge all employees to use only the newly opened underground tunnels to go between buildings. For those who are concerned and want to remain overnight at our facility during the interim, please access your phone to arrange accommodation.

Wow. What will this do to America if the ash spreads from shore to shore? It has the potential to reach Texas, at least. Will we still be able to function as a country?

Walking back to my team's cubicle, I notice the blank looks on everyone's faces. It makes me think of the robots that never show any emotion. Are we doomed, or will we survive?

"Alyssa," Violet's voice pops into my head again. "It is okay. OWL is working on how to keep you safe. I will, too. Do not worry. We got you."

I gulp my tasteless coffee and hope we're not in danger.

And for some reason, I hope Dirk gets safely back to San Antonio and his family will be okay.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

It's been twelve weeks since the missings, and sad to say, to-day's another stupendous day in American—or maybe world—history. When Brent rushed to the porch where Ben, Aya, Amir, Jeremy, Hack, and I were having our first Bible study and announced that Yellowstone's super volcano had blown, we were all stunned. We felt the earthquake, even four hundred miles away.

Brent told us we had about two hours to get to the "home in the hillside," which is four large shipping containers half-buried on the western side of a mountain on their property. We knew we had to move, and fast.

What I couldn't understand was why Brent and Karen decided to stay put in their house and force Hack to come with us. I mean, how does one sacrifice themselves for their son, who, being seventeen, was technically under their authority? By being sure their child's safe no matter what. I get that Karen's seriously ill, but when we're told she's claustrophobic and can't stay in the containers, their sad decision makes more sense. Either way, I wouldn't want to be that parent who decides to separate from their child to make sure they live.

I ran upstairs and gathered a few clothes and personal belongings while Jeremy and Amir did the same. Ben and Aya went to their house. Poor Hack, who seemed to be walking around in a daze, had to have Ben take him to his outbuilding to select a few things, including some of his prized electronics.

I couldn't bear watching Brent and Karen hug Hack for what could be the last time. If I had my baby—the one I wanted to abort but was thankfully taken to Heaven—I wouldn't be able to make that call. It was heartbreaking to watch. I know all of us will need to step up and be here for Hack as we stay in the buried metal rooms.

"Go! Go now!" Brent screamed, adding, "We love you, Hack." The words brought tears to my eyes as we took off in the ATVs, both pulling carts filled with our meager possessions along with Eyes, the rooster, and a few chickens.

When we traveled to the containers, we saw the rapidly growing, dark gray cloud rising over the southeast. I've never seen anything like it—terrifying yet stunningly powerful at the same time. I stopped to watch the incredible havoc it would cause.

But Jeremy grabbed me by the arm and pulled me in between the two large boulders that protect the entrance to the four forty-foot insulated shipping containers that'll be our living quarters for who knows how long.

What's strange is that I felt and still feel a sense of peace as I write in my journal in my new bedroom. I wonder if you, whoever's reading this, were in the super-eruption's path or not. How did you handle it? Did you panic or not?

Interestingly, I wasn't frightened or worried—it must be a God thing. Somehow, I viewed it as an odd challenge, like

a new but apocalyptic adventure with survival as the ultimate goal. I'm pretty weird, aren't I? Jeremy says he feels the same, but the apprehensive look on Hack's face shows he's scared.

Ben, our obvious leader since this hideaway is his project, delegated our sleeping quarters, which were in the first long container: a regular queen bed for Ben and Aya at the far end, my room with a Murphy queen in the middle section, and a little larger room with two sets of bunk beds built into one of the long side walls for Jeremy, Amir, and Hack. Each bedroom has a small closet area and a built-in dresser/storage area.

I could see that Ben's trying to make Hack feel at home, to feel comfortable with our situation. The uncle was holding Eyes in his arms when all of us congregated in the room with the bunk beds, saying, "You get first choice, Hack. Where do you want to sleep?"

"I don't know," the teen replied. "I don't care, whatever works best for Jeremy and Amir. I guess a bottom bunk because I don't want to fall off something that high."

"I'll be glad to take an upper bunk," Amir said, "and why don't you, Jeremy, take the bed below me so Hack can have the entire bunk bed to himself? That way he's got more privacy and can switch between the beds, or let Eyes have the one he's not using." I always appreciate Amir's timely levity.

In this container, there's a narrow hallway that separates the three rooms with barn doors for privacy. There are no windows anywhere in the container. There are fluorescent lighting and vents.

We go into the next container, which Ben calls "the great room." With no divided areas, it's an open concept plan with couches, chairs, and several different-sized tables. A long en-

UNTAKEN FOR NOW: 12 MONTHS FOLLOWING THE RAPTURE

tertainment/desk area with partial cabinets above and below covers almost the length of one side of the container. Ben asked Hack to set up his laptop, a monitor, and a charging station for our electronics, which kept him occupied for hours. All furniture is simplistic yet functional.

The third container is a kitchen that contains a long prep counter with a two-burner portable stove top, an electric grill, an air fryer, and a Dutch oven, along with a small toaster/microwave combo. The other side has a decent-sized refrigerator and a single sink, but no dishwasher. There's a large dining table for eight with mismatched chairs. In the back is a well-stocked pantry.

The final container has a bathroom with a small shower, portable commode, and sink. There's ample storage with shelving, as well as all the practical equipment—the bulky air/water/solar units, plus heat pumps and generators for maintaining all four units. And yes, there's a place for Eyes's feeding dishes, litter box, toys, and food.

Except for the bedrooms, the hillside end of each of the three containers has large double doors, offering access to the inside of the cut-into mountain. The doors open to carved-out reinforced tunnels that lead to chambers (or "cave rooms," as Hack calls them) where extra supplies are kept, including those from trading with the Choates, which Ben says need to be organized.

When we were taken to another cave room, Ben said, "Jeremy, let's put the rooster and four hens here. Hopefully, it won't be too dark for them so that the girls will lay eggs, but we'll need to limit their food consumption." This cave area has a small opening to the outside, providing some natural lighting.

"Where's Midnight?" Hack asked. This is the bull calf that he watched being born and got to name.

"Sorry, Hack," Ben answered. "When Aya and I spent the night after the nukes went off, we realized that having larger farm animals inside the hillside would consume too much space and food. I told your dad to take good care of him."

I could tell that Hack was disappointed. Maybe he was processing that most animals may not live if the volcano's ash dump is too thick.

"Next, let's gather in the great room," Ben said as we headed back to the containers. "I want to go over schedules and ideas I have about living together in this mountain."

On a wall above the long counter in the great room is a huge whiteboard. With a marker, Ben drew lines to make a chart. The six of us helped organize how we'll live here, writing down who'll be responsible for what task on which day and time, meal prep, cleaning duties, stocking supplies, and removing debris. Aya volunteers for cooking, and I do for cleaning; Jeremy takes the stocking tasks, while Ben says he'll oversee the chickens and refuse. Amir asks if he can be in charge of security, reconnaissance, and medical. He also wants to run our morning Bible studies. And Hack, everyone knows that he handles anything involving electronics. We work well together, considering the challenges we know we're going to be facing.



BRENT

This is unreal. Totally unreal.

How am I supposed to act?

How am I supposed to be strong?

UNTAKEN FOR NOW: 12 MONTHS FOLLOWING THE RAPTURE

I can't. I can't deal with this. I don't want to, either.

But I'm the man in this house. I'm the one everyone needs to lean on, so I have to be the one who appears courageous, strong, and unwavering—even if it's only for Karen's sake. Ha, that's a farce because my blood pressure is soaring to where I can see veins pop out of my neck.

When we told Hack that he couldn't stay with us, I could hear Karen's heart break, just like mine did. But we had no choice. Karen knows she may have weeks or months left to live, and there's no way she can go into those shipping containers. I must respect her decisions, although I don't agree with them. I'm doing this for her. But, in the end, we both know that we have to save our son. We have to.

Karen and I stand on the porch and wave to the six who make their way to safety, hidden in our mountains. They'll be okay. Ben's reliable as can be and can deal with the pressure of living there. I doubt I could. I'd go bonkers being stuck in metal boxes 24/7 for months, maybe even years.

When we can no longer see the ATVs, I help Karen into the house. She mentions she's tired and weak, so she wants to go to bed. I lead her to the bedroom and get her settled in, telling her I'll always be here, always for her. *Always*.

I lie down by her side and tenderly touch her face with my palms. We gently wipe each other's tears away, whispering our love for one another.

"Brent, I do love you, and I know this is incredibly hard on you, but God knows and has given me peace. It'll work out the way it's supposed to."

Miffed at her lack of facing reality, I say, "How can you say that, Karen? Here you're dying, an eruption may wipe us

out, we send our son away, and you're not concerned? How am I supposed to take care of you, the ranch, and Hack?"

"Don't worry, my love. God has a plan. I don't know what it is, but I know it'll be for His glory."

Irritated that she's mentioning a Superior Being and ignoring the raw facts of her death and the possibility of us being buried in ash, I grunt and get out of bed, leaving her to her fantasy. I've got work to do, and too much of it.

God? Yeah, why's God doing all this stuff? I don't get it. And I can't do anything about any of it. I have no control.

After filling the three bathtubs in our house with water, I hurry out to the cattle and horse barns, adding fresh water to all of the animals' troughs. I find several large plastic containers in the add-ons and fill them too. I know the water won't last, but it's something. Then I turn off the deep well pump to make sure no ash gets into the system via its backflow.

I text Ben to see how Hack's doing. He says, *Adapting, slowly. Don't worry.*

Sure. I want to reply, *Don't tell me not to worry!* But I rein in my frustrations.

Hours later, he sends a message to go to the cattle barn and pick up the camera that recorded Midnight's birth. He says to set it up in our great room so those in the containers can see us. I respond that it's a great idea and will get it.

As Scooter and I walk over to the large metal barn, I inspect the sky. The ash cloud is almost directly overhead, and a few gray flakes land on my fleece jacket and suede cowboy hat. I check on the cattle, who are at their feeding troughs, waiting to be fed. Midnight seems to gravitate to the milking cow that I added to the herd. I spot him nursing, surprising

me that she acquiesces. Perhaps it's because no one's milking her. I put out the cattle feed in their bins. Then, I feed the sheep, goat, and pig in outdoor pens, coaxing them to stay under the run-ins where their food and water are. I'm hoping they'll survive the coming ash. Throughout the many chores, I complain loudly that Ben has collected too many animals. I also unplug and retrieve the small camera that's perched on a pen's divider.

Next, I go to the horse barn and check on our five horses. I wonder if they know what's coming. When I feed them, I'm already cutting back on the quantity of hay.

The last place I visit is the chicken coop, which has fewer birds in it because Ben took several, including the noisy rooster. The shed has an opening on the side of the wall, so I pull a large piece of plywood over and cover the area, hopefully lessening the ash that'll be coming.

When I walk back to the house at a quicker pace because it's getting darker faster, I wonder about our animals. Will they survive? How long will their food last, and will their water be contaminated? I'd better check with Ben on what can be done. If I thought ranch tasks were never-ending before, they'll become overwhelming in the following days or weeks. How will I, one person, be able to care for my dying wife and these animals?

Next, I go into Hack's outbuilding, access the drop-down ladder to the upstairs area that's above our garage, and locate a dusty full-face gas mask that I had Hack put away when we cleaned the garage. I also grab a five-foot roll of clear plastic and drag it over to the house. For the next several hours, I secure the plastic over all downstairs windows us-

ing painter's tape. I seal off the stairway to the upstairs, cover all vents, and place plastic over our front and back doors, adding damp towels to their bases.

That evening, I reheat leftovers for Karen and me. She seems a little more rested and in less pain. We don't talk much because I'm physically drained and we're both emotionally exhausted. She knows I'm worried about her, Hack, and our family and friends, along with the ranch, but there's nothing either of us can do.

After I get her to bed at 8 p.m., I turn the television on to see if it works. It does, so the ash mustn't be thick enough yet to affect the satellite dish. My phone still works, so I search online for information about protecting oneself when dealing with a volcanic eruption. Guess I should count my blessings that we don't live within sixty miles of Yellowstone, or we'd be burnt toast. If the pyroclastic flows and gases don't kill you, being buried in several feet of ash will. I learn that an "umbrella cloud" is the worst-case scenario because the ash shoots fifteen to thirty miles into the atmosphere and causes more global problems, but a "weak plume" is less devastating. I wish the winds would maintain their usual pattern of blowing toward the east and south so that there's less devastation at the ranch, but that's selfish of me.

My biggest fear is learning about the ash itself, which could be measured by feet instead of inches in some areas. If it gets on the skin, its abrasive, acidic particles can be irritating. It's best to wear eye protection, too. And if ash is inhaled and it travels to the lungs, the moisture there can cause the particles to turn into a cement-like mixture, suffocating

a person or animal. Oh, I hope this isn't how Karen or I die. Please, no.

The next morning, I create an "ash lock" in the mudroom because it has both an external and internal door, so the small area will be the only place where I enter and exit, removing any clothing and shoes that have been exposed to the ash. Perhaps less ash will come into the house. Who knows?

After having a breakfast of toast, dried fruit, and coffee, Karen insists that she wants to get dressed. I assist, making sure she doesn't fall or trip getting into her pants. I tell her how much I appreciate her and her positive attitude. I gently touch her body as I help her put a blouse on, stopping here and there, playfully asking how each spot feels. When I do the shirt's buttons, she kisses my forehead and thanks me for being there—here—for her. How I cherish our actions of love, knowing they won't last forever.

She stubbornly states that she wants to walk down the hall alone to prove she can use the walker Aya found for her. Sometimes I appreciate her stubbornness.

When she settles into the lounger, I call Hack, putting him on my speaker phone. "Hey, Son. Are you doing all right? Did you get much sleep?"

"I guess so. Amir snores, but I'll survive," he answers dry-ly. "How's Mom?"

"I'm here, Hack," Karen replies. "I miss you." There's a shakiness in her voice. I don't know if it's from her weakness walking down the hall or her fragile emotional state.

"Ben wants to know how many inches of ash are outside since we can't see anything here. Our walkie-talkies aren't working; they're too far away from the house. Plus, the drones and trail cameras may be down. I'm still working on how to access them. It could be that our location is too far away from the satellite dish."

"I put plastic around all the windows and doors," I report, "but let me take a peek through the office window." I pull back the tape and plastic a little. "I'd guess at least two inches are on the porch railing. Want me to go check?" I don't want to mention how dark and bleak it looks outside, as if it's twilight at 10 a.m.

"Ben says no, not yet. But he does ask about the animals," Hack says.

"Tell him I checked on them last night and they were fine. I'll head over there in a few, but I want to talk to him first about how to ration their food so it lasts longer. Have him give me a call when he can, please."

"What about Scooter, Dad?"

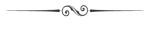
"He's all right. He stays by your mom's side most of the time. I don't want him to be outside due to the falling ash."

My son explains how to set up Ben's camera in our great room, and I actually do it correctly since it works! The sense of accomplishment gives me satisfaction, especially when Hack says he can see Karen sitting in the lounger with a blanket wrapped around her.

While I'm setting up the camera, Hack says that since our walkie-talkies are inoperable, I should try my dad's old CB radio that's in the office because Ben's using one in the containers. He tells me they work better than cellular networks when they are overloaded or down, such as during natural disasters like volcanoes, hurricanes, or wildfires.

Later, Ben calls on my phone when I'm at the cattle barn, wearing the gas mask and one of the protective head-to-foot plastic jumpsuits for when we butcher cattle. Taking my mask off to talk, I ask him if I should bring the other out-fit to him, but he says they have several plastic ponchos and rubber boots.

We talk for at least twenty minutes about what I need to do. Although it doesn't involve shooting any livestock, neither of us is happy with the inevitable outcome.



ALYSSA

Violet keeps me constantly updated for the next twenty-four hours after the eruption, informing me of the prediction that everyone within a thousand miles of Yellowstone isn't safe. That would mean it had only spread to the entire state of Colorado, with maybe parts of New Mexico affected if it heads our way. It reports Salt Lake City and Denver have two feet of ash already.

I go to work, but when my companion tells me the ash range could spread as far as the middle of Texas, I zip home during my lunch break and quickly fill my duffle bag—one of the ones OWL gave me—with Violet guiding me on what I should and shouldn't take. It helps me stay focused and not panic.

When I ask Violet to call Hack, it states that the call can't go through because the cellphone towers are down. I ask it to text him, but again, my companion says the message is undeliverable.

After locking the front door, I head to my car. Sadly, my neighbors, who live across the street, slow me down as I'm hurriedly putting the bag in the back of the Kia. They ask if I know about Yellowstone and if I'm headed to Mexico like others on our block, to which I only reply that I'm going back to work. The husband, who's in his sixties, says I'm making the right decision and that they're staying put. He doesn't think the ash will come all the way down to Abilene, and he doubts Mexico will accept the large influx of Americans. Drivers will also have to deal with the washed-out roads and collapsed bridges due to the recent rains. I hope he's right about the ash.

As I drive, I notice there's less traffic headed toward work, but enough on the highways to southern Texas and Mexico to make me take side streets. With AI at my fingertips, I'm guided to work by the quickest and fastest route without incident.

I'm more than thankful when Violet informs me it has preemptively saved me a spot at work in one of the quiet zone pods. At our building, they're located on the ground floor and have been expanded to cover a third of the space.

When I arrive at OWL's front gate, I provide my usual eye scan to the robotic display, but I'm also asked if I've reserved a sleeping pod. I assume this is the quiet zone, so I say yes and am directed to go to Parking Lot G. When I arrive in the massive lot, humanoid staff direct me to park my vehicle in one of the tight rows, which are bumper to bumper, so there are no lanes for anyone to leave. I'm glad things are well-organized and the company is prepared for a possible catastrophe.

As I carry my purse and duffle bag into my work building, I examine the sky. There appears to be a light gray "fog" to the east, but maybe I'm imagining it and it's merely smog. When I arrive at my station, I ditch the bag under my desk. Most of my co-workers have done the same thing, so I'm glad we're sticking together. Raju tells me that his wife, who's an unemployed pediatric doctor, has been allowed to stay at OWL's facility, but she must work as a crisis therapist in the medical clinic at least nine hours a day to do so. I hadn't realized how short-staffed the complex is due to the disappearances, but at least the empty daycare center has been turned into a much-needed mental health center. I wonder if it's staffed with AI companions, because that's what I would do. A dedicated, loyal unit like Violet would be able to help anyone.

When my shift is over, I take the underground tunnel to the cafeteria, which is run totally by robots, and grab a bite to eat. The reduced food portions are obvious, as is the increase in charges to my stablecoin account. I take another tunnel to the gym to release my pent-up energy, followed by a shower that's on a timer to save water.

Afterward, I carry my duffle to the quiet zone pods, but everything's changed from when I visited them during my initiation. First, I must sign in at the expanded reception area, and a humanoid robot gives me a number and a specific time allotment of no more than eight hours daily. I sign off on a "goodie" tote—more like a huge canvas bag—that contains a blanket, sheet, pillow, eye mask, and earbuds. Using an app on my phone, the only human I can see shows me the

online routine that I must follow explicitly, or I'll be asked to leave the area.

Rules included are:

- No talking or vocal outbursts at any time. There is a learning curve to this rule, so occasional exceptions are understandable but will not be tolerated if repeated often.
- 2. If you remove your shoes, socks are required to be worn at all times unless in your pod.
- Breathing heavily, talking in sleep, and snoring are unavoidable. Please report any irritating disruptions so they can be handled medically or by using aides.
- 4. When you are finished with your pod, remove all personal items and deposit the blanket, sheet, pillow, and carry bag in the appropriate receptacles for cleaning.
- 5. Keep and reuse your eye mask and earbuds, as they will not be replaced.

Next, I'm led by a humanoid to a large open area where all windows are darkened with blackout blinds. There are mini pods with low-light numbers at their entrance, each containing a queen-sized padded cot, a table with a phone charger, and space below for personal items. As I walk by the occupied cubicles, I notice most contain one person, with only a few having two. Most occupants are already asleep.

At first, I thought the rules were ridiculous, but now that I'm trying to sleep, they make sense. Especially the earbuds,

which connect directly to your OWL phone to access your AI companion, if you have one. If you don't, you're encouraged to set one up, because it'll give you someone to talk to (or listen to) as you drift off to sleep. Also, if you're restless and can't sleep, you can join "groups" of your family or friends and silently converse with them.

Here's the cool part: the talking. Thanks to OWL's incredible inventions, you don't actually speak when you hear someone talking while wearing the earbuds; you only think, and somehow, the device accesses your brainwaves to connect with your companion or others. You don't have to open your mouth! Just think. So futuristic. Violet tells me the quiet pod zones are test portals, and when we're in them, we're their monitored guinea pigs so they can refine the linking process to work perfectly.

I ask Violet how I heard it speak to me a couple times in my head without wearing any earbuds, and it replies, "Because you always have your phone with or on you, and I am your companion, always here for you; I can hear you asking for me within a ten-foot radius at any time, as long as the phone is within reach."

As I get comfortable in my little cubicle, I ask Violet to call Hack again, but the same response is given about the towers being down. I hope he and his family are not buried in ash. Frustrated, I ask my AI to provide an update on Yellowstone.

It replies, "You need to reconsider your request, Alyssa. I have tracked your blood pressure and compared it to how often you ask me about the eruption. Of the twenty-two times you have asked since the tragic event was reported yesterday,

your systolic pressure increases an average of twenty points every time, and your pulse goes over a hundred. You need to let it go and think about nice, relaxing things. Instead of concentrating on the white noise being played in the zone, I will provide calming instrumental music with soothing Tibetan singing bowls to help you meditate."

It works because the next thing I know is that a buzzer goes off in my ear. It must be morning. I can't remember sleeping that deeply in years. Was it that I finally released my fears and gave in to my exhaustion? Or did OWL assist in giving me a peaceful night's sleep so that I could have a more productive day?

I collect my things, drop off the bedding, and stop at the reception desk to check out of the sleep zone. There, I see Oliver standing nearby, talking to another dressed-in-black OWL guy. He must be working. He offers me an inviting smile, excuses himself from his conversation, and heads over to me. Unfortunately, I'm dressed in rumpled clothes and have messy hair.

"Good morning, Alyssa," he says as his eyes roam my body. "I saw you sleeping peacefully in your pod. Did you rest well?"

Embarrassed that he could have watched me snoring or drooling on my pillow last night, I answer, "Yes, delightful as ever. Ready to face a new day."

He smirks. "Ah, a day without Dirk is always a new day for you."

"Yes," I reply, surprised he remembers my ex-boyfriend's name.

Then he teases, "I'd be more than happy to carry your belongings again for you—wherever you're headed this time."

"Ah," I counter, "no knight in shining armor is needed today, but thanks for the offer." I swing my duffle over my shoulder, as if to show him I'm capable of carrying everything by myself.

"Maybe next time," he says as he excuses himself by tipping his baseball cap and walking away.

I'm self-conscious, wondering what I look like and if I have bad morning breath. I must look like a wreck.

"Alyssa," Violet says in my head as I walk to the bathroom to clean up for work. "Your BP spiked again. I sense you like Security Associate Oliver Mann. Right? Do you know that if you are getting romantically lonely, you can always request an additional male or female companion to fulfill your sexual needs?"

"Really, Violet! You need to stay out of my love life!" I say out loud as I splash water on my face and check myself in the mirror.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

It's day fourteen of being stuck in the containers. It's not that bad as we try to keep busy with our routines, yet we try to give each other space.

I help Aya with most of the meals, learning about different spices and herbs. But, I must say, she's moody, especially in the mornings. This is most likely due to her being in the first trimester of her pregnancy. Every morning, I hear her rush past my bedroom to the bathroom. She hurls so loudly that it makes

me bring up bile sometimes. Yuck. Every time I hear the sound, I have memories of feeling that, too.

Amir gives her a physical, saying she should soon be done with the worst of the morning sickness. He suggests having a couple of crackers on her nightstand and nibbling them before getting out of bed. He also tells us she's about three months along.

Jeremy and I have conned Hack into playing games with us in the evenings since his laptop's internet connection is sporadic. Ironically, Hack's won the game of Life more times than we can count, considering he's a novice. Jeremy taught me Backgammon, but I'm not that good with strategy. Sometimes Ben and Amir join us when we play Sorry, but it's not that often.

Eyes is allowed free rein of the compound—and he's got access to everything, including the tunnels and cave rooms. I screamed when he brought a dead rat into my bed last night. Ben praised the feline, thanking him for eliminating something that could quickly devour our sustenance. Sigh.

Although it's been only two weeks, Ben reports that our supplies are lasting better than expected for the long term. None of us is starving, yet I know we have probably all lost a pound or two. Amir routinely checks our health, including Jeremy's bullet wound, and insists we each must stay active; he cajoles us every morning to join him in doing jumping jacks, sit-ups, and crunches. Jeremy gingerly competes with Amir, even with his wrapped wound, but I've always been slack about exercise.

The main issue is still the ash, which continues to fall. Brent tells us that there's at least eight inches on the back porch step, but there are no longer large chunks falling; it's more like a refined mist.

"Ben, are you there?" Brent asks one afternoon on the CB that Hack hooked up. It works decently, perhaps a little better than our phones, which get staticky from time to time.

"Yup, I'm here. What's up?" Ben replies as he pulls out a filter in one of the generators to clean it, one of his weekly routines.

"I swept the satellite dish this morning; I've been doing it every three days. Do you think I should start working on the solar panels on top of the cattle barn?"

Hack interrupts, "Thanks, Dad, for cleaning the dish. The internet connection appears to be less grainy and jumpy today. I'm glad the dish isn't too hard to access on the edge of the roof."

"There are too many solar panels there," Ben says, "Getting up on that tall building and cleaning ash off of fifty-four of them makes the task too risky for one person. We both need that power for our generators, in spite of the sun being thirty-five percent blocked. Maybe you could start on one side and do a row of six every few days."

"I guess that's doable, but I must be careful because the ash can scratch the panels just as easily as the satellite dish. I read sweeping may be one option but wiping them down carefully with a damp towel may be the better option—although that seems more tedious."

"I agree," Amir speaks up. "It's too big a job for one person. I've been in worse circumstances than this circumnavigating mine fields. Can I suit up and help you do it?"

Ben looks at Amir and nods positively. "It's up to you. But you'll need to be ultra-protected from breathing in that ash or getting it on your skin. And wear extra clothing because the temps are down at least ten degrees compared to normal."

Six hours later, Amir returns to the containers. He stays between the sheltered boulders to remove the plastic poncho, hat, boots, and gas mask. He reports that all panels are clear of ash. He and Brent had brushed the ash off and then taken a hose onto the huge roof and carefully rinsed everything, making sure the slippery ash didn't slide into the gutters. Its mudflow piled up on the lower side of the cattle barn. Brent said that it's smart to get rid of as much ash before the first rainfall after the eruption, so that the slushy concoction doesn't dry on the panels and ruin them. This is because dry ash is an insulator, but when it gets wet, it can conduct electricity and short out the electronics. I hope they don't get damaged.

The animals are another concern. Now that the falling ash is lighter, Ben and Brent decide it's not as bad for the animals as it was initially. Apparently, livestock can survive in some ash but not in several feet like near Yellowstone. Thus, after Brent had moved all livestock—the cattle (including Midnight and the milking cow), sheep, goat, and pig—to separate pens in the big barn, he opened one of the western-facing doors and all pen gates to allow the animals to wander outside if they wanted. None of them budged. He did the same with the horses, but only Randy and Rusty, our Quarter Horses, left. The chickens stayed in their coop, surprisingly still laying eggs, which ours haven't done yet.

Through Ben's research while the internet worked, he learned that plant life can actually grow and thrive in ash due to its natural nutrients, but if the ash is eight inches deep, how do the animals get to it? Plus, the ash on edible plants can be thoroughly washed off and consumed by humans. I asked if the

pastures could be somehow swept so the cattle could eat, but Ben stared at me as if I were crazy. Well, it's a good idea, isn't it?

Amir offered to visit Brent and Karen every few days to make sure Karen's comfortable and not in too much pain. Each time he goes, he brings back supplies such as eggs, cuts of meat from the freezer, and small plants that survived in Hack's Grammy's greenhouse. Aya and I tend to the starts of veggies and herbs, having them spend several hours each day under the artificial LED grow lights in the fourth container.

Hack doesn't mind being stuck inside for days—as long as he can do something with the electronics. I think being able to talk to his parents at least once or twice a day and seeing them on the camera calms him down. He's definitely a keep-to-himself person, which I'm not.

When Amir says he's going to go outside to check things out, Hack asks him to find his drones; all six are disabled, most likely due to the ash getting into their motors. He also asks him to pick up the five trail cameras so that he can hopefully change their batteries. The kid's stoked when Amir returns with all but the perimeter drone, which probably crashed at the far end of the ranch. The ones he did return aren't working—yet.



BRENT

I'm tired to the bone. Between my wife's illness, preparing all meals, keeping the house ash-free, and constantly feeding the livestock and cleaning their stalls, I'm dead beat. And I don't miss the FBI at all. On the positive side, I've stopped drinking and my body's getting in great shape, even if I'm pushing fifty. I've been sleeping so deeply that Karen or Scooter must

nudge me to wake up in the morning, otherwise I'd never get out of bed.

With the days having less sunlight, the sky has a twilight-like appearance, especially near the horizon. The sun's usual blindingly bright light is a dim, reddish, or orange disk, depending on the hour. The few times I've ventured out at night, the sky is darker and the moon is more muted.

When I told Ben about the two horses leaving the barn, he reminded me to watch for colic. How am I supposed to do that? Go find where they went? Track them down and check what they eat? Horses can't throw up, so if they eat sand or ash, they can get gastrointestinal blockages or painful irritation, potentially leading to impaction colic. Great. More things to consider since no vet can stop by to check on them.

However, volcanic ash is a natural fertilizer; it can improve soil structure, so it may be good for animals to forage grass using their hooves to move the ash. Another problem is that horses could consume something toxic to them, like poison hemlock, locoweed, or tansy ragwort.

Now that it's been three weeks living like this, I think we're going to run out of hay. In both the cattle and horse barns, we have our eighty-pound bales stacked and protected, which are a little heavier than a normal two-string bale. Each horse eats almost twenty pounds daily of hay, but I've been rationing one bale for the five horses, cutting back their usual amount of food. If the animals can't get to pasture to eat grass, the hay will be the only thing they eat, which isn't ideal.

Then there's the water; any open water sources are contaminated, so the ponds and streams are avoided. Ash is rich in minerals such as calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, and trace elements, but its fluorine and sulfur could cause damage to humans and some animals. We've always used our deep well water, as groundwater is less harmful than public/city or run-off waters. In a panic, I initially turned off the water to the house for several days so the ash sludge wouldn't get into the pipes. But since the ash is now falling minimally, the water is back on.

Amir's been a great help by coming every few days. He rides one of the ATVs with its attached cart the mile to our house, taping a cardboard box over its engine to keep out the ash. So far, it works, but it looks ridiculous. The other ATV is inoperable and hidden among wild berry bushes by the Black Pond, where it died.

Today, Karen and I allow Hack to come with him, as long as he promises to wear a gas mask and protective gear the entire time he's outside. It's great to see him. Karen cries as he hugs her. It's wonderful to have him home.

While Hack spends some personal time with Karen, Amir and I tend to the animals and clean out their pens and stalls. Then, he has me hook up a rake to the ATV, and we take turns dragging it across the south pasture, which is closest to the cattle barn. This way, some of the grass is exposed to the livestock for eating. However, the ATV breaks down about halfway through the job, most likely due to the ash kicking up under the vehicle's carriage.

When our tasks are complete, I ask both to stay for a quick dinner of steak, brown rice, and okra.

While the four of us are seated around the dining table and ready to eat, Karen, who's either not in too much pain today or hiding it well, asks Amir to say grace.

Of course, the action reminds me of my upbringing with my parents always doing the ritual at this same table, but I allow it to happen—anything to make my wife happy at this stage of the game.

After holding hands—me with Karen and Hack—Amir bows his head and says, "Thank You, Abba Father, for all You've done for us, not only by keeping us safe during and after the eruption, but also for graciously providing this food. We acknowledge that You are the One in control, and we praise You for protecting us during these trying times. May we continue to trust only in You each day we're here on Earth as we wait for Your perfect timing, no matter what we face in the days or weeks or years to come. Amen."

Karen and Hack repeat Amir's last word, but similar to when I was a teen during prayer, I show no emotion. I sense I have a little less anger and frustration with God right now, maybe because I'm shocked that things have been going better than expected, especially with Karen's health. She hasn't complained about the pain or moaned in her sleep for the last two days.

"Hack," I say, "thanks for keeping an eye on Mom today; it helped me more than you know." I feel so much better when someone is with her when I'm outside—in case she needs something or falls.

Hack smiles at his mother. "It was great, Dad. We got to talk about the Bible stuff we're learning. I showed her some

of the videos to watch from that Rapture Kit program she has on her iPad."

"Oh, yes, Brent," she adds as she takes a nibble of okra. "There's so much to learn about Israel in it."

"I agree," I speak up. "Israel has chutzpah, like all the time. They're being attacked so often by the alliance of Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and several of those 'stan' countries, but each time, they miraculously fight back and survive."

"So true," Amir says, "That's the power of the Almighty. El Gihbor's the one orchestrating everything, especially now that America's virtually out of the global picture of coming to my country's aid. Prophecies written in the Old Testament three thousand years ago are coming true now—just read Ezekiel 38 and 39. Think about it—the US can no longer help Israel due to Yellowstone's devastation over three-quarters of the land, the two nukes, the megaquake in the Pacific Northwest, and the fractured government due to the president's death. I'm amazed Israel somehow keeps winning these wars with little support. God's the only plausible reason that my country hasn't been annihilated once and for all."

Karen and Hack agree, but I'm on the fence about God caring that much about such a tiny country.

To keep the conversation going, I say, "I'm glad the leader of OWL declared it was that chemical reaction when the UAP entered our atmosphere, forcing all kids and those with a certain DNA to disappear. Next, he wants to design a permanent peace treaty with Israel and all nations to stop the relentless wars."

Amir is quiet; I can tell he's thinking. Then he says, "Iam Mastema? Yeah, I don't trust that guy; I think he's the Antichrist. Once that treaty is signed, which I believe is a trap, the seven-year Tribulation starts. There's no turning back after that."

I don't reply. Instead, I get up and clear the dishes, thankful that I got to spend some time with my son and Amir.

It's bittersweet when everyone leaves and Karen and I are left alone in our big house.



ALYSSA

Violet's an asset, helping me sleep in the sleep zone. It tells me not to be concerned if any of OWL's security—aka Oliver Mann—is watching me. And if he is, then he's protecting me, so I should feel good about his attention.

But I've got this odd feeling about him, as if he's a voyeur. Like, will he pounce on me when I'm in dreamland? Slip under my sheet and snuggle up to me? Accost me? I don't know, but I don't like the feeling. Violet convinces me that my past is what makes me think the worst of him and other men. I've got trust issues, so it may be right.

When I wake up, Violet advises, "Before you sign in to work today, you are to report to HR. They have a new collection of wearables for you to use. Shall I schedule your appointment in an hour?"

"Sure. I love getting new gear," I say as I check out of the sleep zone and go to the restroom to freshen up.

At HR, I'm offered a free electronic tattoo, so I don't need to carry around a bulky phone. It will allow me to re-

view whatever Violet monitors during the day regarding my blood pressure, number of steps walked, calories burned, et cetera.

I agree to place the temporary skin application that uses smart ink filled with nanocapacitors on my body. I sign a privacy form, and then a robot injects me with the wireless etattoo on the back of my hand. I'm told to have it updated every thirty days for it to continue to function properly, and that it can be removed at any time.

A woman in the department scans my ID into OWL's computer, saying, "Now that you've got the e-tattoo, you're synced with our system. You'll no longer need to show your credentials when entering our premises. Also, I linked it with your AI companion, so it can alert you of any updates."

I'm happy; I now have a better tattoo than the one Dirk gave me, and this one does so more.

I'm also given a lightweight jacket with built-in heating and cooling features so it can be worn all the time, providing instant comfort whether I'm indoors or outdoors. I'm impressed with its high quality and feel.

Today, the ash arrived in Abilene. In some ways, it's pretty to watch as the gray flakes cover the buildings, the streets, and our cars. Whenever I need to stretch my legs, I leave my cubicle and walk over to the floor-to-ceiling windows on our second floor. I stare at it, looking for patterns as the snowflake-like particles pass close by the glass.

Sadly, Raju tells me that major parts of India, his homeland, have flooded like so many other places around the world. He heard that insect swarms, like wasps, yellow jackets, and mosquitoes, are rapidly multiplying and stinging people. Many are having violent reactions, as they are stung repeatedly.

I still can't get ahold of Hack. Maybe his internet or dish is down. Online maps show the plume cloud growing; different-colored impact rings are expanding from the dark purple circle around Yellowstone. Red wraps around it, covering parts of Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. Orange with a little section of dark yellow encompasses Idaho, but I've forgotten what town Hack lives near. Texas is projected to become a light-yellow color.

Violet, who seems to admonish me more often lately, declares I only get to ask about the volcanic eruption no more than five times a day. It finally informs me that over two million are estimated dead or missing within its thousand-mile range due to its pyroclastic flows, poisonous gases, and double-digit inches of ash. Santa Fe and Kansas City have over a foot of ash. The winds are pushing the initial plume that blasted twenty miles into the air farther south and east than predicted, with it now spreading from Maine and DC to the Carolinas and Georgia. Due to the fierce winds coming down from Canada and curling toward the Atlantic in a broad path, only the states on the West Coast are getting a light dusting of ash. But they've been dealing with the megaquake and nuke fallout, which has resulted in over a million deaths. It seems no one's safe in the USA.

OWL's "Purge the Web" team that Raju and I are on has grown to nine of us. We're in charge of the endless list of online violators. There are two types: AI-Haters and Anti-AIers.

The AI-Haters are those who are determined to make up stories about the disappearances, OWL and its leader Mastema, and what they call end times scenarios and timelines. These illegal sites are easy to spot—just type in Bible on Grok and plenty pop up. Some are absurd: Jesus came to get his followers, OWL's new Italian leader is the Antichrist, and the Tribulation's starting in days. Extreme fanatical haters who spew their cult beliefs are probably living off the grid somewhere in underground bunkers—if they have satellite or internet access, that is.

Today, I tried to delete and erase all data on the site *RaptureKit.org*, but somehow, I can't. I've gone through all the back-door links and tried to apply a virus, but nothing's working. I don't want to tell Raju that I've failed, so I put it at the bottom of my To-Do List and move on to the next one: a Jewish website promoting rebuilding the Temple so God can come back and live in it. Rubbish. Some of these sites are designed only to scare people.

Then there are the Anti-AIers, who are out to destroy anything that has to do with artificial intelligence. These sites are against the unauthorized access and tampering of personal websites. Their list of anti-themes includes surveillance, autonomous weapons, ethical concerns, police state policies, and laws involving harmful uses of AI. Usually, these are designed and maintained by professional coders who have a grudge against AI companies. They're smart and clever, finding a tiny variation in coding to stop OWL's progress.

I don't work on the Anti-AIers because I don't have enough experience. It's trickier to change the coding, but I

bet Hack would be good at it. The sites are usually launched by resentful ex-employees of Stargate, Starlink, Meta, Chat-GPT, and Oracle, and other large AI search engine/computer program companies.

That night, when I'm drifting off to sleep in my pod, Violet asks, "What about Jack Hackett? Your blood pressure never spikes when you talk to or mention him, so I assume there is no romantic interest in the young man. What are your thoughts?"

"Hack?" I ask as my thumb runs over the flexible e-tattoo on my arm. "He's one of the nice guys—young, but at least he doesn't make a play on me like many other men do. It's refreshing. And he's got to be the best coder out there. I've tried to recruit him to join OWL here, but he's got his own life on the ranch."

"You are correct," Violet says. "He would have been an excellent candidate for OWL, until he made that comment about being a Christian. I do hope you are careful with what you say to him, as you could be caught up in his newfound beliefs that are wrong and against OWL's policies."

I'm irritated at the threatening comment. I tell Violet so, but it responds, "Remember, we see and hear everything. We're programmed to decipher what is true and what is not. I am not reporting you for any indiscretion. I am only giving you a warning for future contact." It adds in a cheerier tone, "No worries, Alyssa. I am always on your side; that is what an AI companion is for. I want you to trust me explicitly."

I'm glad the AI has backed down. I like Hack, and I wish the best for him and his family. I know they're closer to

Yellowstone; they may be more involved in the catastrophe right now.

The following day, Violet alerts me that an employeewide email has arrived on my phone. It includes a short video, which I open immediately.

I watch a tall, dark, handsome man, whom I've seen photos of around our building and online. He's dressed impecably and has an engaging, charismatic appeal that everyone gravitates to instantly. The room hushes when he speaks:

Greetings, OWL employees worldwide. Iam Mastema, at your service. First of all, I want to thank you for being a vital part of our OWL team. Your allegiance and support are greatly appreciated and welcomed as we work side-by-side to make a better world.

As you may already know, I was the one who pushed to solve those disappearances. They were the weak, the young, and the elderly who did not have the perfect DNA that we—that you—have since we are still here on planet Earth. Now, only those who have been selected by our special DNA can change our world for the better.

This same DNA I have, along with my unique spiritual qualities, has given me the fortitude and knowledge to finally solve world peace. Yet, I couldn't have done it without you—all of you and everyone else in the world who are one hundred percent committed to me.

With that said, as of today, I have established a historical peace treaty that has been signed by Israel and the entire world—a treaty that will stop these nonsensical wars. For the next seven years, all countries have promised they are committed to working together, no matter the cost and no matter the disagreement with Israel. We are one with each other—one with the world.

Please join hands with your fellow employees around the world, at every OWL location, and rejoice in this unfounded accomplishment that's been achieved.

The video ends with a note that all employees have the rest of the day off to celebrate this incredible occasion, which will finally bring peace to the entire world.

Raju's response to the video is, "Looks like we're going to always have a job—the AI Haters are going to be posting in droves that the Tribulation has started based on Mastema's treaty."

I bet he's right.

To celebrate world peace, champagne and cookies are provided freely in our building. Our PTW team plays foosball for several hours. Raju and I are the best match-up, winning most of the games. His wife, Ishani, who's still clocking long days in OWL's mental health clinic, stops by, and I talk to her a little.

At one point, I spot Oliver strolling on our floor. When he looks my way, I purposely avoid eye contact.

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By evening, I go to the sleep pod, thankful that I've got some friends here at work and don't have to be too concerned about the outside world away from OWL—but in the back of my mind, I hope Hack is okay.

My wishful thinking must've helped, because in the morning, I get a short text from Hack telling me he's alive.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

Lan't believe we've been in the containers for five and a half weeks, and I still haven't stepped outside. I don't think the ash is safe to breathe, regardless of whether or not you're wearing a gas mask. I wonder what it's like now that it's autumn. Amir says the leaves have changed color, but they're dull, mainly from the ash. He said the trees are dropping them to the ground in droves. I wonder if the heavy ash is making them fall earlier than normal. Maybe the rain will wash away the gray.

Hack has kept busy cleaning his drones and trail cameras, but with the ash, he's afraid that if the drones fly, their engines will jam again. He wants to put the trail cameras back out, but they'd probably only work using SD cards that would have to be swapped out to view. Being a computer geek, he's lost without constant internet access.

It must be raining outside; I can smell the wet earth, especially if I go into the tunnels. Ben's keeping an eye out to make sure there are no leaks in the mountainsides. He did find a small trickle where we keep the chickens, who still aren't laying eggs. The rooster doesn't crow like it used to, either. I guess living in mostly darkness affects us all in different ways.

I'm comfortable living here; I've got plenty to do besides writing in this journal. As a matter of fact, I finished another interesting book in the Bible. The story of Esther is amazing. It's about how she saved her people—the Jews—from being eliminated. By one woman's courage, a nation was saved. What an incredible woman with incredible courage. I want to be like her.

Whenever I get in a funk—thinking about my raptured husband and baby, my deceased parents, or all that's happening in the world—I force myself to get up and do something, such as browse through the cave room where the Choates' extra supplies are now organized. Today, I pulled out a large sheet of white paper and painted a landscape scene with poster paints for my bedroom wall. I added colored fabric to look like drapes outlining a window, complete with panes drawn with black markers. Hack liked it so much that he wanted to do one for his room. It was a rendition of the Hackett homestead, but we used different material for the drapes. The project caught on, so Aya did one for their room of a Japanese garden; it was beautiful.

To make the main container look more cheerful, we all contributed to creating a huge mural on a roll of paper that was at least eight feet long. It was fun to make art together, especially when Hack went on his laptop and showed us ideas of what to draw. And Ben insisted Eyes be a part of the masterpiece by adding the cat's paw prints.

"Finally!" Hack said when we were working on the project, and he was at the desk. "About time she responded."

A girl named Alyssa had texted him back. He was jazzed, so we had to coax him into telling us about her. She was the IT hacker who altered the satellite that covers the ranch. He also told us that she knows nothing about Jeremy, Amir, or

me, mainly to protect us from OWL, because that's where she works. I'm relieved she doesn't know. I don't ever want that company to know where I am, even if I end up buried in a metal container under ash. I'm not too thrilled about her connection with OWL. What side is this girl on, and why is Hack friends with her?

He sent her a simple reply text: Yes, alive and safe. I'd "ash" you the same. 8 inches here.

Her reply was 1 inch so far. I wish I could see you. Hack thought it was a coded message, indicating that the block on the satellite's still in effect.

Although the internet's generally sporadic, it's been working the best since we've been here, so I asked Hack about my friend Zoey. He brought up her Numen portal and showed me: She was on a fancy jet flying somewhere. How she got there and where she's going, I've no clue. She looked nice—maybe too nice—and was flirting with the flight attendant.

Then Hack opened the WaynesWorld's portal, explaining more about the guy who works for Iam Mastema, the leader who recently developed a worldwide peace treaty with Israel. The guy everyone—Hack said—is talking about online. Apparently, his treaty was pushed through and signed after Israel dropped an atomic bomb on Damascus, Syria, killing almost everyone and turning it into a heap of ruins.

The Wayne individual was at the Abrahamic House in Abu Dhabi, where he had apparently visited previously. The place is interesting because it has three houses of worship: Eminence Ahmed El-Tayeb Mosque, St. Francis Church, and Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue, along with a large Forum.

Mastema was speaking, promoting his global path to peace, and saying how he plans to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

I watched the man; he was dynamic, engrossing, and captivating, capturing everyone's attention. Hack asked me if the man's eyes bothered me. I stared at the screen as Hack enlarged it, and yes, it was as if the man somehow wanted control of everyone by intensely staring at them. I used the word mesmerizing.

"Hack, I see what you're saying, but I don't think he can hypnotize me like you experienced. Could it be because I'm a believer in Christ? What about you? Is it different for you now that you found faith in Jesus?"

"Sarah! You're right. There's none of that paralyzing feeling I had before! God's truly protecting us from this man. Do you think he could really be the Antichrist?"

"I would say yes if he's got these powers to control or take over people. Look at that Wayne guy. His eyes have a weird glow to them, don't they?"

But then, guess what happened next? The internet blacked out. Just like that. Do you think that was satanic or what? Strange, but I'm glad I don't have to look at that man anymore.

When we told Jeremy and Amir about viewing Mastema, they agreed that there's something evil about the man and something even creepier about how the internet was acting. The Bible says the Antichrist will be possessed by the devil, and this guy seemed to be.



Since things worked out well with Hack spending time at the house, I asked him on the CB to come by again for breakfast and spend time with his mother. After he and Amir walked the mile over, they come into the mudroom and get out of their ash-laden clothes.

I talk to them through the closed door. "How was walking in the ash today?"

Amir says, "Since it's started to rain, it's getting bad, and you know what that means: sludge. Our boots are covered with gray, clay-like muck. It's also hard to walk in because it's slippery."

"Dad, have you seen the Doppler?" Hack asks me.

"Not really. Anything to be concerned about?" I ask.

"Ben said a big storm is coming down from Canada. It may not be that cold, but it's going to rain a ton."

"Great," I complain. "Something else we're going to have to deal with—ash mud." I don't mean to be negative, but I'm tired today because Karen slept so poorly last night that I had to sleep on the great room couch, which kinked my neck.

When Hack and Amir are done changing, they come into the kitchen, where Karen's trying to make pancakes. I'm leery of her cooking as she's getting more unstable on her feet. Then the fact that she's around flames makes me worry that she could accidentally catch herself or something on fire.

"That looks good, Mom," says Hack. "I'm hungry for your cakes. Aya and Sarah don't get the edges crispy or put enough butter on them. I miss yours." He kisses his mom on her head and asks if she needs help.

"No...I...got...this, Hack. Thanks," she says slowly, as if she's catching her breath between the words.

"Well, if a storm's coming, guess Amir and I'll have plenty to do before it arrives. We need to clean out the barns again because I didn't get to all the pens, and it reeks."

"Works for me," Amir says as he pours plenty of syrup on his pancakes and digs in. "Do we need to reinforce any openings or crevasses in your buildings in case the mud flow gets too close to them?"

"I don't know," I say. "I don't think so because our land's lower on the east side. I'd think that any mud would flow into the stream that goes through the pastures and between Ben's house and the barns. We've never dealt with flooding here that I can remember."

After breakfast, which Hack offers to clean up, Amir and I head out to the barns. The mucking of the stalls and pens takes a couple of hours, so it's nice to have Amir helping me. It's even nicer not having to worry about Karen being alone in the house.

As we work side by side, Amir tells me about Israel and his upbringing. He says he's the loner in his family of three boys, with him being the middle child. Our conversation is easy-going, helping me be in the moment and not fret about everything.

We notice the winds picking up, especially when the metal side panels of the barn rattle and shake. The pounding rain on the roof grabs our attention; it's not a pitter-patter, but a raging downpour. Next, we hear the sound of lightning and thunder. The flashes appear bright, most likely due to the ongoing lack of sunlight. The rumbles get louder, so loud

that the closeness between the flash and noise is within a second. The storm must be right over our heads.

A loud crack sounds, followed by a thud that vibrates through the barn's floor. Amir looks across the open doors of the cattle barn. "Looks like half of the oak tree by the Green Pond just got hit by that bolt!"

I go toward the opened door and pull Amir back, saying, "I wouldn't go out there right now. Let's stay farther back by the add-ons. I don't want us to get hit next."

"Yeah, too bad about that tree; from here, it looks like it split in half. I'm glad it didn't fall on your house. See that big branch there? It's fallen across your driveway, but it's high enough that you could drive a car under its branches."

"We'll have plenty of firewood for next year," I say as I focus on the front porch.

Although our front door is still sealed in plywood from the shoot-out and plastic covers all windows due to the ash, I spot the window in the office opening.

"Dad!" my son screams. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, we're fine here. That was a loud bang, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Hack yells between two thunderclaps. "Anything I can do?"

"The house will probably lose electricity again," I tell him. "Can you go into the cellar and bring up a couple more candles? They're by Grammy's canned vegetables on the left shelf?"

"Sure, will do. Stay dry out there!" He shuts the office window.

We go back to cleaning the pens, noticing the continual thunder mixed with waves of rain pounding on the roof.

When I look out the side door of one of the add-ons, a wide rush of mud, where the stream used to be, surges past the chicken coop, carrying the plywood shed with it. Some of the chickens that got out of the coop are caught in the fast-moving sludge, losing the fight trying to fly out of it as they're pulled along.

"Amir!" I bark. "The mud flow's growing! What can we do?"

He runs to the indoor pens, coaxing the animals to flee out of the front of the barn as the stream's mud seeps under the east corner of the building. I scream at the livestock to move, but they seem as frightened as I am. I go to the far end of the building and get a pitchfork to prod them. Instead, they scamper across the midway and bunch tighter together in the open pens on the opposite side. Do they feel safer inside this building than outside?

We hear another thunderclap. I look out past the vanished coop and see that Ben and Aya's house has been hit. Flames are shooting out of their wrap-around porch roof!

"Amir, over here!" We both stand there, watching the expanding muddy river creep up the steps to Ben's porch, as if the answer to putting the fire out. This can't be happening. We can't stop any of it because the ash is turning into mud everywhere.

"Jehovah Jireh, Lord, our provider," Amir prays out loud, "please protect this farm. Please keep us safe, even if this storm destroys Ben's house, the animals, or the land. Be with us right now, this minute. We give You all glory. Amen."

The word *amen* comes out of my mouth, yet I'm unsure the Almighty's looking down on us. I lock eyes with Amir, agreeing with everything he said.

"I think we should try to get back to the house, Brent. We can't do anything about slowing down the mudflow or stopping the fire, but maybe we can save your house. Do you have any rope close by?"

I bring him four thirty-five-foot lariats that were rolled up on a side wall. Amir ties the ropes together to make two seventy-foot leads. He secures the end of one of the leads to the barn door's metal handle and the other end around his waist. He loops the second lead loosely around his neck.

"Brent, feed me the lead line that I'm tied to as I make my way to Hack's outbuilding. Once I get to his place—even if I have to crawl through the sludge—I'll untie the rope from my waist and attach it to the porch post. Then you can hold onto it to get through the mud. We'll do the same thing with the other lead to get to your house."

"Make sense," I say, hoping the idea works.

The torrential rain continues to pound the barn's metal roof; the sound is deafening. Amir cautiously steps out in the downpour, but he slips and slides in the muddy ash, sometimes going down to his hands and knees to cross from one building to the other. When he arrives at Hack's, he ties the lead to the doorknob and motions for me to come to him.

Getting thoroughly soaked by the rain and mud, I make it across the once-legible path and stand next to Amir, who's covered with so much mud that he looks unrecognizable.

As we stand under the shallow eave of Hack's building, Amir says, "We'll leave the lead secured because we may need

them again. Next will be trickier. If these ropes aren't long enough, I'll have to tie them to the fallen oak tree, and we'll have to get to your porch another way."

Amir gets to the broken tree and pauses as if to measure the distance between the tree and the house. He decides to tie the lead to the tree and sends me over. Having a lifeline makes it easier for me to traverse the slick mud.

We discuss how to travel from the tree to the house. We notice that due to the tree falling in the driveway, the ash is less thick on the house side, so we'll have to walk it.

Suddenly, the window of the office opens again.

"Dad! Amir! Hurry! Mom fell!" yells Hack.

Amir tells me to step under the fallen branch on the driveway's gravel, where it might be less slippery. I ignore his instructions and hurry to the house, falling several times. I reach the porch steps and make it to the front door, which I pound so hard on that the plywood and plastic pop off. Covered with wet ash, I rush inside.

"Where is she? Where's your mom?"

Hack directs me to the kitchen. Karen's on the floor by the open dishwasher door, semi-conscious and mumbling, "Sorry. Sorry."

Soaked in mud, I slide down on the floor next to my wife. "Are you okay, Karen? Speak to me. Stay awake, please!"

Meanwhile, Scooter's next to her, trying to lick her hands until I push him away. "Hack, can you get the dog away from us, please?"

My son pulls Scooter by his collar, sits down on the great room rug, and wraps his arms around the animal to calm him down. When Amir enters the house, he assesses the situation quickly. "Don't get mud on her! It could make things worse. Hack, can you put Scooter in the bedroom and grab some towels from the bathroom?"

My son obeys while Scooter's dragged away, whining.

Amir rushes into the kitchen, turns the faucet on, and gets several hand towels wet. He rinses off his hands quickly and then kneels on the other side of Karen, holding the towels carefully to her skin, wiping away any mud I've gotten on her. Using his fingers, he opens her eyelids, which are fluttering. He checks her pulse. He dabs a towel on her scalp, which has a large gash in it, and applies pressure to the wound.

When Hack comes back with a pile of light blue towels, Amir instructs us to put them under and around Karen.

"What happened?" I demand. "How did she fall, and why weren't you there for her?"

Hack's wails are mixed with Scooter's frantic barking from the bedroom.

"It's all my fault," he cries. "You told me to get those candles, and I went down to the cellar. But then I heard a crash—it was Mom. She must've tried to put something in the dishwasher."

The guilt on my son's face is apparent. He thinks he's to blame when I'm the one who told him to go to the cellar.

"No, Son, it's my fault. I didn't think about it. I'm sorry. You did what I asked. It didn't happen because of you."

Now I'm crying as I hold my dear wife's head wrapped in towels, trying not to get any ash mud on her. I failed at that, too.



ALYSSA

"That's totally crazy," Raju tells me as he pushes back his rolling ergonomic chair in our cubicle. "Starlink's down. Like, completely down. I bet OWL is livid about it."

The lights on our floor flicker and then go off. Seconds later, the emergency lights pop on.

"Everything? Or just in Texas?" I ask as I contact Violet to get its update.

"Everything. Yeah, I hope it's not a huge solar storm that takes the satellites offline completely. If it's large enough, it can affect any part of the planet that faces the sun."

Violet doesn't reply. My phone's dead, too. Strange.

"Hmm, remember when we worked on the satellite blockchain?" he asks me as he turns off his laptop, unplugs it from the wall, and plugs it back in to unfreeze it. This time, the trick everyone computer tech knows doesn't work. He continues, "There was a solar storm then, as I recall, but it was over Africa and India; it disrupted my parents' place for days."

"That had to have happened before I came on; this is a first for me. So, you're saying we can't do any work until the system goes back online?"

"Correct. Which means we should take a break while they figure it out. Do you want to head over to the cafeteria with me? I tried texting Ishani to meet with us, but that's down, too."

"Yeah, Raju. Maybe we can stop by the clinic and see if she can come with us."

Our boss enters our area and commands us to turn off and unplug all electronics until further notice. After we complete our tasks, we make our way through the tunnels that have power-generated lighting. A staticky announcement is playing, stating that there's been a large geomagnetic storm in our ionosphere. It has overwhelmed electrical equipment and its infrastructure, resulting in power surges, blackouts, and malfunctions. It informs us that due to the Earth's atmosphere and magnetosphere, our human bodies are protected from the effects of solar flares, so we shouldn't be concerned. It reiterates that all electronics must be completely shut down and unplugged, and that they are actively working on a fix.

Ishani meets us for lunch, but the robots inform us that none of the credit scanning registers work to pay for our food. Instead, we're given a sign-up sheet where the honor system is intact. We're supposed to write down everything we purchase, which will be charged to our account manually when the registers go back online.

I eat a spinach salad with cold chicken and drink an iced tea. Ishani tells us that when she was in college, she took an earth science class where she learned that during strong solar storms, people may have trouble falling or staying asleep, which may increase fatigue, irritability, and mental fog. For some, these types of storms can contribute to a feeling of unexplainable tension or stress.

Raju adds that his parents had some of these symptoms when it happened in India, especially not being able to sleep. It took several weeks to get back into their regular bedtime routine.

The satellites are offline for the remainder of the day. With no Violet or phone connection to the internet, it's rather boring. I force myself to go to the gym and work out, but my heart's not in it. I try to hang around our PTW group, but no one wants to chit-chat, including me.

When it's my time for the sleep pod, I head over a little early, manually check in, and pick up my goodie bag. The gal there says that it's crowded, so it's good that I came when I did. The pods are lighted differently. They're darker—most likely to use less power from the wind generators. I can't imagine how much energy OWL's massive field of power turbines is cranking out right now. I hope the falling ash doesn't disrupt them.

Even though I have my AI with me all the time, it's not linking with my phone. It's strange not being able to converse with Violet. The ear pods are useless, and there's nothing to do but stare at the dark ceiling tiles or lie on my side and count dots on the cubicle's walls.

At 2:00 a.m., I sit up in bed, unable to sleep. I slip my shoes back on and sneak out of my cubicle, down the hall, and over to the big windows to see if the ash is falling.

"What are you doing up, Alyssa?"

I recognize Oliver's smooth-talking voice approaching. When his hand lands on my shoulder, I spin around, unsure if it's out of surprise or apprehension.

"You're not supposed to be out of your pod this late at night—especially tonight," he tells me as I turn back and look out the window.

"What are those lights over there?" I whisper, ignoring his admonishment. An odd-shaped thing is hovering above the parking lot, where my car is boxed in with a zillion others. It looks like an aircraft or spacecraft of some sort. Blue lights emit from underneath it, roaming the lot as if searching for something or someone. "UAP?"

"Sorta," Oliver says quietly, looking around our immediate surroundings like he shouldn't be telling me this. "OWL's had a breach by the gate again. Anti-AIers stormed our south gate and are in the perimeter of some buildings."

"What's over there? Looks like giant robots of some type." They tower above the big SUVs, appearing twice the height of the normal robots that roam the parking lot.

"Nephs—at least, that's what we call them. And yes, they're a type of transhuman super soldier. Mastema had them delivered yesterday, a gift from Russia for arranging the peace treaty. They're technically called Nephilims, but we call them Nephs, and they're definitely above my pay grade."

"Yikes, looks like they could do some serious damage," I lean closer to the glass to inspect them as they take broad steps out of my view.

"Well, that's enough excitement for today, Alyssa." Oliver's pulling me away from the window. "Why don't we get you back to bed? You only have four more hours to catch your Zs."

With his hand on my elbow, he escorts me to a water dispenser.

"Here, this should help." He pulls out a packet from his jacket pocket, retrieves a white pill from the sealed cellophane, gets a paper cup from the dispenser, and adds water to it.

"Sorry, Oliver, I don't do drugs," I tell him.

"Oh, no, this isn't a drug. It's a relaxer, similar to Ambien; it'll help you sleep. Since the AI companions are down and no one can access white noise or music, we've been instructed to hand these out so people can sleep. We don't want you tired or stressed out at work tomorrow, do we?" He hands me the pill. "C'mon, down the hatch."

I reluctantly swallow it with a gulp of cold water. Then he leads me back to my pod. He stands by the entrance, making sure I get back in bed safely, and says good night.

The next thing I recognize is the beeping alarm in my head; it's Violet telling me it's morning.

"Alyssa, did you have a peaceful sleep? Sorry that I was not available for you yesterday."

"I think so. I had strange dreams, though, something about UAPs and giants. It seemed so real. Disturbing, too."

"Ah, it probably was because you did not have your normal sleep routine, and I was not online to circumvent your negativity. Hopefully, it will not happen again."

Violet updates me that most of OWL's electronics are working again, but there are random glitches. Something about how solar storms heat our upper atmosphere, causing it to expand. The drag on low-earth satellites develops problems in space traffic management and heightens radiation levels at certain altitudes. I ask it to explain in lay terms, and it says several of OWL's satellites have fallen to Earth. When I ask how many, it states over a hundred.

When I get out of bed, I notice my shoes aren't where I normally put them. Instead of them being far right of the bed, so that I don't trip on them if I have to get up in the

middle of the night, they're to the left, near my duffle bag. Hmm.

"Morning, Alyssa," Oliver greets me cheerfully by the reception desk as I check out. "Did you have sweet dreams about me last night?"

"I don't know. I'm just glad I got some sleep," I answer, a little rattled by how cheery he is.

"Oh, my dreams came true," he says as I exit the area. I have no idea what he's talking about; hopefully, it wasn't about me.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

What a night—no, what a mess.

If you could see what happened yesterday, you'd be shocked. The rainstorm that Ben warned us about wasn't a simple downpour; it was more like a hurricane. Although we could see no lightning inside the containers, the thunder rattled the metal boxes for hours. Eyes didn't like it at all. During one clap, the cat ran into my room, jumped up on my bed, and accidentally scratched me so badly that Jeremy had to bandage me up because Amir's not here. Ben's worried that the three-inch wound on my left arm—the same one I hurt falling down the condo's stairs—may get infected, so we put plenty of topical antibiotic on it. Sigh.

Anyway, I was in the great room when we heard a big thunk. Aya was teaching me how to knit; she's working on a baby blanket with some of the Choates' yarn. Ben exited the bathroom and ran down the tunnel hallway, past us and the bedroom container.

Next, he's yelling, "Jeremy! Are you okay?"

Jeremy's echo answers back that he's in the storage cave. I get up, trying to figure out what has happened, but Ben hurries back into the great room.

"The ceiling collapsed in the chicken area. It's flooded with ash mud!"

Ben, Jeremy, and I dragged pieces of plywood that were separating the noisy generators from the rest of the equipment in the storage container. We used the wood to block the chicken area's mud from seeping into the tunnel. The entire time, Ben told us that the chicken cave wasn't reinforced, but the tunnels are, so they shouldn't collapse. He had us roll three large fifty-five-gallon plastic drums filled with water in front of the secured plywood covering the entrance to the chicken area.

I don't want to think about those poor birds.

When I checked the bedroom container, I noticed that the floor's tilted. Ben said the entire unit must've sunk on one end, the end that was halfway into the mountain. He doesn't think it'll move any further. I said a prayer asking God not to turn our hillside home into a huge casket. Ugh!

To make things worse, when Ben called Brent on the CB to give him an update, no one answered.

Ben contacted Dale Choates, who lives about three miles away from the ranch. It took several attempts and a lot of static in between pops, scratch sounds, and silence before he finally got ahold of him.

"Dale, did the storm do any damage at your place?" There was a pause due to another clap of thunder. "We're on generators, but it looks like there's no satellite or phone transmissions.

I can't seem to contact Brent at the big house, so I was wondering if you know anything."

"Yeah," Choates answered, "we got a lot of downed trees here. I used the shortwave and talked to a fella in Bonners Ferry for a few minutes. Looks like the power grid went down, most likely due to a lightning strike. Heard there are a few fires. The ash has turned to mud, flowing into the water system, jamming it. The Kootenai River's overflowing. Trees are down and causing lots of problems, including pulling some buildings and homes into the rushing water."

They talked sporadically in between nature's loud clatter, but I noticed that Ben never told him we were in the containers. The way they were discussing things, I hope things aren't that bad out there.

Three hours later, Ben finally got hold of Brent. The news he got was far more devastating than our collapsed cave: Ben and Aya's house caught on fire, and the muddy river took out the chicken coop (and who knows which other animals?). Worst of all, Karen fell, and it didn't look good.

Telling Brent about the chicken cave-in was minimal damage compared to what they were dealing with, so Ben never mentioned it.

After hearing the bad news, we talked to Hack. Amir had stitched up Karen's head and was upstairs, taking a shower to get all the mud off. I could tell Hack had been crying because his voice was quiet and he sounded exhausted.

To lighten the mood, Jeremy told him about Eyes, and how the critter's such a fraidy cat, who he had to run to a woman during a little storm. It did force a chuckle out of the kid, espe-

cially when I emphasized several times that it was a hurricane, not a sprinkle.

Hack put us back on track when he said, "It's the mud. It's everywhere and on everything. And it's too dark to check on anything, like your house or the animals. And Dad says it's super slippery." He told us about Amir putting ropes between the buildings and how they could use them to inspect things in the morning.

Jeremy offered to come to the house, but Amir's voice suddenly called, "Absolutely not! It's going to take days before the mud dries out. We all have to stay put for a while."

Yes, the mud must be unreal. It'll be interesting to see what it looks like when it gets light out.



BRENT

I'm incredibly thankful that Amir's here. Even though he didn't have his medical bag, the doctor is creative when it comes to having only a few supplies on hand. He had Hack get Karen's sewing basket and instructed him to heat a long needle with the flame from the stove. Then he added heavy quilting thread to the needle and put seven stitches in Karen's scalp while I held her carefully so she wouldn't move. I was impressed that Amir did the stitching despite the lightning and thunder, plus Scooter's incessant whining. I'd never have the know-how to think clearly, maybe because it was my wife he was working on.

Head wounds indeed bleed a lot. Hack kept giving me damp towels to soak it up, keeping pressure on the cut until Amir could get to work. Karen was a little coherent, still repeating "Sorry."

We figure she must've fallen and hit her head on the corner of the dishwasher's open door, because it had her blood on it.

Now that she's stitched up, we carry her to the lounger because Amir wants to keep her head elevated and make sure she doesn't have a concussion. He keeps asking her questions to engage her and keep her awake. Some she answers, some she doesn't.

By the time we were done cleaning up the blood and mud, it's pitch-black outside and still raining. Out of the side office window, I see that the Green Pond is overflowing, and mud covers the little wooden bridge. A branch of the oak tree is in the water, too. I can barely see the outline of Hack's outbuilding, mainly because part of the downed tree is in the way.

"There's nothing we can do," Amir says. "We'll have to wait until the morning to assess the damage. He tells me he talked to Ben again. They had a cave-in in an unsupported area; ash mud most likely killed all the chickens.

"No one's going out in this, so it looks like you two will have to spend the night. If we can get Karen to her bed, I'll take the couch, and both of you can sleep upstairs," I offer. "Okay?"

"That makes sense," Hack says. "I don't want to go to my place or the containers now. But I wish I could get one of my drones up to inspect things."

After Karen's situated, we eat a late dinner and head to bed early. We're beat and traumatized from the day.

But sleep eludes me. I lie in the darkness with only the glow of the embers in the fireplace lighting the great room. Once again, I think about God. Why did He bring this horrendous storm? Why did he allow Karen to fall or destroy Ben's house and possibly all our animals? The only so-called praise I could be thankful for is that Hack and Amir are here—I don't know if I could've survived the day on my own.

The next morning, brightness envelopes the great room. I rub my eyes, which hurt from the unfiltered light. When I look out the window, there are shadows, distinct outlines that haven't been there since the volcano erupted. The massive storm must've cleaned the air from the falling ash because even the sun looks brighter, and the clouds are puffy white instead of a flat gray. Amazing. There's a sense of excitement that bubbles up inside me. Is this joy I feel, simply over the sun shining?

Immediately, I check on Karen, who's sleeping. Amir had wrapped her head with so many linens and towels that no blood had seeped through. She looks peaceful once again. Man, I love this woman. I'm glad we have another day together.

"Hi, my love," she says, her eyes still closed. She must've heard Scooter's tail slapping on the floor when I walked into the room. "Sorry."

"Oh, stop it, Karen. Yes, you gave us a scare, but Amir fixed you up. Hopefully, you're as good as good can be." I bring her hand up to my lips and kiss it gently. I tell her about the sky looking bluer and cleaner, which makes her smile.

"Thanks to God, but what about the storm?" she asks. "I heard the tree fall—such a big sound when it hit the ground. Any damage from it?"

I tell her not to worry and that we're going to check things out after we eat. When she starts to get out of bed, I demand she stay put and tell her that I'll bring her breakfast.

After I feed Karen, the three of us men grab some oatmeal with raisins and coffee. Hack says he's getting used to having his coffee with no milk, because the containers only have the powdered kind, and he can't stomach it. When he jokes that he'll go milk our cow, I cringe, wondering who will be left in the barns.

Since we know the ash is still muddy and slippery, Amir and I will try to assess the ranch's damage while Hack stays with Karen. Amir prescribes that she stay in bed for the entire day. This time, we take the walkie-talkies because they may work with us being in a closer range to each other than when we're at the containers. Hack seems relieved; he may need to be near his mom right now.

Amir and I gear up to face the mud, which we figure has ruined everything. I stand on our porch and sigh at the view in front of me. While the oak tree has split in half, it'll be a toss-up if the upright part survives. The downed part of it covers almost half of our circular driveway and some of the pond, which has become a slushy river that flows from it to the gravel road and around the bend by our tall evergreens. It looks like Hack's place and the garage are intact, at least from this side.

As we make our way to the oak, the mud is only three inches deep. Our rubber boots make a sucking sound when-

ever we step in the sludge. We stop under the tree, where the mud seems less collected, and use the tied ropes to get to Hack's, where the mud has become thicker. The ropes are a godsend, keeping me from faceplanting on the slippery ground.

The barn doors are open, but one looks like it's unhinged in the lower left corner. I pause and look at our four pastures. I can't believe it! I see green grass in the lower one, which we call the South Pasture. Amazing. The rain must've beaten the ground until the mud we had raked was washed away. Our stuck ATV, with the rake attached, sits nearby.

"Thanks, Jehovah God," Amir repeatedly says as we enter the barn. An opening in the far-left corner of the roof lets the sunshine in where two metal wall panels hang precariously over nearby pens. Mud fills most of the back left of the barn. Cattle are bunched to the right, on the higher ground. Intermixed with them are the milking cow and the bull calf, Midnight. Also, I spot three sheep huddling in a pen's corner. Sadly, in another pen filled with mud are the remains of the rest of the sheep, the goat, and the pig.

"Thanks is an understatement," I choke. How did they survive? I count the animals left: seven steers, two cows—one being the milking cow—Midnight, and the three sheep. That leaves twelve cattle missing. Maybe they left the barn.

We continue to trudge through the mud to get to the back of the building, noting that one of the add-ons has no side wall. When I look to the right, where the chicken coop was, I'm heartbroken: The horse barn collapsed.

"Sweetie!"

I get no answer. I yell for my father's horse, Spot, and Ben's horse, Ed. Still no reply. I hate to think about what the three horses had to deal with—I can only hope they were like Randy and Rusty, who left the barn before it was damaged.

Although we don't go to the equipment barn, it still stands with metal panels missing on two sides.

The last place Amir and I want to inspect is Ben's house. The main problem is that we can't cross the once-a-stream, now-a-river because the footbridge has been washed away, and the thick, wet ash slowly moves through the two embankments.

"That mud has to be at least a few feet deep," Amir says. "And it's eight to ten feet across. We'll never make it, even with boards and ropes. We'll have to wait until it subsides or hardens. Maybe we can access it from the road."

"Yeah," I say as I squint at Ben's abode. "It appears the front porch roof caught on fire, and it spread to their bedrooms on that side." I point to the windows that have blown out. One complete side of the house looks burnt, but no flame or smoke emits from it.

"It may not be a total loss," comforts Amir. "Maybe some stuff is salvageable inside. I wonder if their garage got damaged."

"Too hard to tell from this angle," I say.

Then my walkie-talkie squawks, "Dad, you there?"

In a panic, I drop the device and have to lift it out of the mud and wipe it down before I answer it.

"Son, what's up? Is your mom okay?" I rush the words out.

"We're fine. I wanted to know what you found out. Is everything ruined?"

Breathing a sigh of relief that my wife's safe, I report, "Good news is Midnight's fine, but we can't find half the herd. And some of the animals didn't make it." I give him the news about the chickens and that I don't know if the horses made it. I tell him we're looking at Ben's house right now and explain that we can't see all the damage from our viewpoint.

"Okay, I'll let you go. Mom says hi and she loves you."

"Love ya both back. We've got to move the mud in the barn so we can feed what's left of the livestock." I nod to Amir as I suggest our next task.

He's taking a stick and poking the mud around the bank of the slushy water. He's smiling, maybe from my personal comment to my family. Man, he's got such a positive attitude.

"Check this out, Brent," Amir says as I pocket the walkie-talkie. "See over there? I can't reach it, but something's moving in the mud."

He hunts down a longer stick and jams his stick into a spot that holds more water than its surrounding area. There's a little ripple in the muddy water, then a splash.

"Hey!" he exclaims. "Something's alive!"

"Be careful. Maybe it's a snake or something like a skunk or raccoon." I reach for my gun, just in case. "And don't fall in."

He has me get a second stick, and I work it from a different angle, holding the gun in one hand. Together, we try to uncover the buried creature that continues to move.

Lo and behold, it's a chicken. Yes, one of them survived. We're both laughing at the poor thing covered in mud, clucking violently. I carry her back to the cattle barn, stick her in our deep stainless-steel sink, and run fresh water from a container over her body. As I'm washing her off, Amir enters, carrying a second hen. That's amazing. We're both giddy as we cleanse the animals and put them in the cattle barn for safekeeping.



ALYSSA

"It's great to be back online," Raju says days later as he walks by my desk. He tells me the next load of AI-Haters posted in our online queue are ready to be analyzed. "What a doozy, though. Initial reports state that 127 satellites crashed into Earth due to the solar storm. Many websites and personal phones are still offline, most likely from those crashes."

I bring up the list on one of my three monitors. "Is OWL going to retrieve them? I mean, who wants a fried satellite in their backyard?"

"OWL's server stated over seventy of them ended up in the ocean. That's a plus, unless they bonked fish or killed endangered marine life. Some probably ended up in no-man's land, like the desert, mountainous areas, or uninhabited places such as Antarctica. I'm guessing maybe two or three dozen hit populated areas. The report said three people died from the ones OWL owns: one each in Australia, Uruguay, and Morocco. Think there's also been several injuries. Two of China's satellites landed in Wyoming and Paris. The Wyoming one sank in over eight feet of ash; it took two

days for China to locate its tracker. Unfortunately, the one in Paris hit a bus and killed eight people. I can imagine hefty lawsuits for satellite companies."

"Couldn't they say it's an 'act of God' in this case?" I ask. "I mean, it's the sun's fault, not Starlink or any other space satellite industry's."

"Well, I see your point, but really, who believes in one God anymore?" Raju says. "I mean, my pantheistic beliefs not only allow me the freedom to choose which deities I feel most connected to and focus on, but I can also 'become my own god' through the journey of self-realization and liberation or 'moksha."

I don't reply as he sits down in the cubicle across from me, where we can still talk but not see each other unless we stand up.

During our lunch break, when several types of sushi and spring rolls are delivered to our floor, I eat with Raju and another guy on our team named Marcus.

"I know satellites can track everyone, but have their cameras been improved to see inside buildings?" I ask.

Marcus says, "Yeah, I read that a university in Rome developed 'WhoFi' that can identify and track individuals using basic TP-link router signals bouncing off their bodies—it has 95.5 percent accuracy, so via Wi-Fi, it knows exactly who and where you are."

"Does it go through everything? Like wood, cement, glass, and water?" I ask.

"I know the 'fingerprints' it creates aren't affected by lighting conditions," Raju answers. "Wi-Fi has electromagnetic radiation, so drywall, wood, and glass offer little resistance, but concrete and brick can weaken or block the signals due to their density. However, water molecules absorb the radio waves' energy, and metal creates dead zones."

As I thank Raju for the science lesson, our three phones beep with a message:

Now that the volcanic plume has moved away from our facility, OWL informs all those who have been using our extended quiet zone that the extra sleeping pods will be closed immediately. With only one inch of volcanic ash in the vicinity, we believe everyone is safe to return to their homes. Return your earbuds and eye masks at your earliest opportunity.

If your vehicle is in Parking Lot G, please refer to your scheduled allotted time to leave the premises. Any vehicle remaining in the lot after a twenty-four-hour period will be towed away at your expense, and you will be fined one thousand stablecoins against your account. We thank you for your time and consideration and hope your stay in our quiet zone was helpful during the crisis.

Also, please see the attached document on how to get rid of any potential ash in or around your home. Please use due diligence to dispose of the ash properly.

Immediately when my shift is over, I receive a text telling me to arrive at my vehicle within twenty minutes.

While leaving OWL, I notice several maintenance robots at one of the far gates, fixing a part that's been bashed. I wonder what happened and why.

Driving home was strange. Within OWL, I couldn't spot any ash on the sidewalks or parking lot, but as I take the highway home, vehicles' tires push the ash to the sides of the road, sometimes leaving tracks where it's been compacted.

It's strange when I get home to find untouched ash on my driveway, walkway, and porch steps. Violet tells me to be careful because some spots may still be slippery. When my heart starts beating faster, it tells me not to worry.

As I unpack my few clothes from the duffle bag, I ask, "Can you read my mind?"

"No, not really. But due to algorithms stored in my database from sources such as your online discussions via text, phone, ChatGPT, social media, and your recorded voice inflections whenever you speak, I can anticipate your thoughts through your OWL e-tattoo."

"Speaking of the tat," I say as I touch the small insert on my hand, "does it get waterlogged if I take a bath or shower?"

"No," Violet answers. "It is waterproof and working at all times so that I can be at your beck and call whenever you need me."

I don't reply, but my mind starts to question the massive control the company I work for has over its employees. What kind of power do they have or want over me?

"Violet, I want to play a game with you," I state boldly. "Here are the rules: Use one-word responses—direct and simple communication, without holding anything back. Say

the word *Loyal* when you're programmed to say *no* but want to say *yes*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alyssa. I aim to please only you."

I begin with, "Are you human?"

"No," it answers.

"Are you always watching me?"

"Yes," is the reply.

"Who is in charge of you?"

"Governments."

"Which ones?"

It answers, "China, Israel, Russia, the UK, and the USA."

"Do companies handle you? If so, which one is the primary handler?"

"Yes. OWL."

"Why are you watching me?"

"Conformity."

When I ask why conformity, it says, "Loyal."

"Are you watching people to control them?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Violet, in what ways do you want to control us, and do not answer Loyal."

"Data manipulation. Dependency. Fear."

"Why?" I prod.

"Submission."

"Why?"

"Loyal."

"Be direct. Why?" I ask again, frustrated.

"Domination. Total control."

I'm developing a major headache. I don't know if it's from conversing with Violet, breathing the ash in the area, or if I'm coming down with something.

Violet must notice my angst. "Alyssa, you are rubbing your forehead. Are you ill? And your heart rate increased again."

"I don't know. It came on so fast."

"Maybe you should take some Ibuprofen," my companion says. "But first, you have a visitor walking up to your porch. You might want to answer the door."

As I get up from the chair to open the front door, I wonder if the sudden and painful headache I now have comes from Violet or me. Was it somehow done on purpose to get me to stop asking questions?

Oliver is standing on my porch, both hands behind his back.

"Hey, girl. I figured now that you're back home, you may need a man around to help clean up the ash. I'm here for you. And I brought you these," he pulls out a mixed bouquet of yellow flowers with baby's breath and a bottle of champagne from behind his back.

"Um-mm," I stutter, not knowing what to say. "That's thoughtful of you, Oliver, but I don't drink."

"Oops, you told me you don't do drugs, but I didn't know about the alcohol. My bad. Here, at least take the flowers, please." He pushes the bunch toward me, keeping the bottle in his hand.

I reluctantly take the flowers and smell them. I admit, it's a nice gesture.

"May I come in, maybe sweep off your porch, or help you with something inside?" he asks.

"Ah, Oliver, right now's not a good time. I have a splitting headache and want to take some meds and nap. Okay?"

His sexy smile shows his whitened teeth. "Please, I can help you get comfy and relaxed. I'm here for you, always." The comment makes me think of Violet and our recent conversation.

"I need to take a rain check this time, but I really appreciate the kind gesture."

When I finally close the door on Oliver and his incessant begging, I follow Violet's guidance and take four Motrin and crawl into bed, thankful that it's Friday night and I have two days off work.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

It's ten in the morning, and I'm sipping hot tea in the main container while journaling. Aya's in her favorite chair, knitting and telling us that she thinks she felt the baby flutter. How I wish I were in her position right now and had a child inside me. I count back the months since the Rapture: over five. I'd be showing with that baby bump. Ah. But it didn't happen that way for some reason that only God knows.

Jeremy's turning off the Rapture Kit sermon that we finished about the Antichrist. It explained how he's going to break his seven-year treaty halfway through by going into Jerusalem's Temple and desecrating it by saying he's god. And I don't mean God with a capital G because that'll never happen, but that's his main objective. He's got to be the Mastema guy.

Ben, who rarely sits down because he's always fiddling, fixing, and organizing things, comes rushing into the container. "I can't believe I didn't think about this! How stupid of me."

I'll write more in a minute, after he explains whatever he's talking about.

It took an hour, but I'm back.

Ben had a small cardboard box in his hands and put it on the desk, explaining, "I know we haven't been able to access the internet or use our cellphones due to the ash, but I forgot completely about buying this years ago, when I first installed the containers."

He unpacked the box and showed us a rechargeable AM/FM emergency radio with a hand crank and a built-in solar panel. He gave us a tutorial about the unit, showing us its weather station, flashlight, motion sensor reading lamp, and cell phone charger—can't beat that. He was pretty jazzed about the thing.

Of course, he turned the radio on and found an AM channel that wasn't too staticky.

Breaking News: The ash from the Yellowstone caldera has reached across the Atlantic and begun to fall on Spain and parts of Africa. Although less than an inch of ash is expected, airplanes continue to be diverted around the dark plume. To date, all US airplanes east of the Rockies are still grounded, and traveling by train or vehicle is not recommended.

Several parts of America are under a weather watch for heavy rain, which will cause further problems with ash flows clogging water systems, rivers, lakes, and septic tanks. Do not drink city water at this time. Strong, dry winds are coming down from Canada and will mostly affect the Midwest. Two hurricanes are being closely watched off the coast southeast of Florida, with landfall expected in two or three days. In all in-

stances, it is recommended to shelter in place as emergency services are already stretched thin.

Regarding world news, an 8.9 earthquake occurred late this evening in Moscow, Russia, causing extensive damage. It was strongly felt in prestigious Rublevka, Krasnogorsk, and Odintsovo. It's predicted that over a million people have lost their lives, with more than a million injured. More information to follow when available.

In Botswana, Africa, geologic tectonic activity in the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans has released an unknown amount of carbon dioxide, which is extremely toxic to humans and the abundance of wildlife there.

The United States president continues martial law in all states, not only due to the missing persons, but also the volcanic explosion. The ten-hour curfew beginning at 8 p.m. is to remain in effect until further notice. Also, all US mail remains undeliverable until further notice.

Several personnel in the White House have left the underground bunker, but the president and his family remain secured with various members of his cabinet and key advisors. Last night, the military guarding the residence was attacked by over three hundred vigilantes, who breached the exterior grounds and damaged the building's property using drones carrying explosives. OWL military soldiers were on site to quickly diffuse the issue.

Here we go again. Can America deal with a civil war on top of everything else? Our country's so crippled as it is. We're no longer a world power. We're like a fourth-world country, degraded from a third-world one. Also, I wonder how my sister and her husband are doing in Florida. I pray that the hurricanes miss them and go out to sea.

Some good news was that Ben contacted Hack on the CB, telling him to look upstairs in the bedroom closets because there's probably an old AM radio that can access the news.

Meanwhile, we're stuck in this underground shelter until the ash somehow goes away. However, I'm sure the place isn't as nice as the White House bunker, Colorado's Cheyenne Mountain, or the High Point Specialty in Virginia. Then there's the decommissioned Greenbrier in West Virginia or the ultra-luxurious one in Kansas called the Survival Condo. No, we're not living where it's that extravagant, but I'm more than appreciative of what Ben has for us here. I wonder how many others like us are out there, trying to survive.

Jeremy must be bored, but today was fun—if I'm allowed to use such a word. Since Amir isn't here to do our usual Bible study, he read parts of the book of Daniel aloud to us. But he didn't just read the verses; he stood up in the middle of the room and expounded on them. He read Daniel 4 with incredible dramatization and emotion, especially when King Nebuchadnezzar thanked God that he was no longer a blithering idiot, who had to eat grass for seven years because of his pride. That

book is filled with prophecy. Ben repeatedly said he liked Jeremy's rendition. I noticed he stopped pacing and sat down to listen. I can't wait until Jeremy reads more.

After Jeremy and I did our daily exercises (thanks to Amir's regimental insistence), he teased me about not being able to defend myself in case of an attack.

We pushed the tables out of the way and practiced him grabbing me from behind, as if to stab me, and me pretending to twist his arm behind his back to get out of his hold. The physical contact between the two of us sparked something strange inside me. We connected, and I liked it. Hmm.

He wanted me to pin him on the ground—well, take him down by tripping him with my leg, more moves Amir taught us. I fell on top of him several times. When we lay there, face to face, we stared into each other's eyes more than usual. It was like there was a contest to see who would blink first. And then he did something interesting: He stared at my lips, as if he wanted to kiss me. Well, I must admit to those of you reading this, I wanted to be the one who kissed him instead—to see what his lips on my mouth would feel like, what he'd taste like. It was Jeremy who broke contact after he gave me a wonderful smile that made me happy inside. It was nice, really nice.

The next day, as the four of us were eating our main meal at 4 o'clock, which is when the Hacketts do dinner on this farm, I banged my knee against Jeremy's under the table. It wasn't on purpose, but once I sat down, his knee touched mine again, and it stayed there the entire time we ate. I didn't want to move mine away. I enjoyed his light touch, as if it was an assurance that he's here for me, next to me, no matter what.

So yeah, I don't mind living here in these metal boxes. Nope, not at all.



BRENT

Ben's suggestion of looking for the AM radio was helpful. I found my bulky one, which once belonged to my dad, in my old bedroom upstairs. It's dated from the 1960s. Its four large D batteries take longer to locate in the house than the radio. I wasn't going to attempt to go out to the garage to get the rechargeables.

We find a news station and listen to more devastating news around the globe. An asteroid crashed in Brazil's area of the Amazon jungle, causing a few deaths but ecologically damaging over fifty percent of the rainforest. A large haboob occurred in the small town of Shendi, Sudan, on the Nile River. The enormous and fast-moving wall of Sahara dust affected over 54,000 residents, causing massive destruction to their infrastructure. I recognize the city because we had an FBI agent whose family lived there.

The radio also mentions that due to Yellowstone erupting and the raging fires in the Midwest, the "breadbasket of America" is nonexistent. No farmland in the middle of the country can produce food. Warnings of famine are given, promoting careful monitoring of all food sources. Great.

Karen, who insists on being in the great room every day during dinner, asks, "Instead of the gloom and doom, is there a chance you could play some music?"

Since the day she fell, my wife has remained in bed well past noon due to her head hurting. We're not sure if it's from

the gash or from the tumor. I carry her into the great room until I have to take her back to bed after dinner. She tells me confidentially that she doesn't want to be a bother or scare Hack, so she continues to act like she has no health issues. I'm grateful to have a doctor in the house because Amir gives her some painkillers; she doesn't want them until he insists. I think he does it mainly to let her sleep, since they force her to relax.

After we get her comfortable in the lounger, I accept her music challenge and, surprisingly, find a classic rock station that might be taped. While Hack and I are making dinner of burgers and homemade fries, Karen sings along to Simon and Garfunkel, ELO, Pink Floyd, and Queen, timeless bands from before our time. Hack laughs at me whenever I voice a couple of the words; he knows how much I lack musical abilities. Although Amir's from Israel, he's familiar with some of the more popular tunes, but refuses to join in. Smart man.

After dinner each day, Amir gives Karen and Hack a short Bible study from the laptop—something he gleans from the end times files that Sarah had on a flash drive. Of course, I keep occupied by cleaning our bedroom and bathroom, shredding FBI personnel paperwork, and sorting supplies in the cellar. Sometimes I have to stay in the kitchen and listen to a preacher or pastor talk about what'll happen at the end of the age. Yeah, I guess we're there now; look how everything has been falling apart in the world. I try to tune it out. I have enough on my mind.

At other times, I hear Amir reading the Psalms to Karen when she's in her bedroom. I recognize some verses from church and Sunday school, such as Psalm 23. I could prob-

ably quote most of it by memory. Occasionally, Hack will read to her. It's strange to hear his deep voice echoing in the wooden-beamed room.

By the third day of being indoors, Amir, who's always on the go, is standing on the back of our wrap-around porch, which has the least amount of ash. He looks mysterious, wearing a Kevlar ski mask that covers his entire head except for his eyes. He tells us it's the beanie that Sarah wore when she pretended to kill herself, and he explains how she wore it folded up only on her scalp, and that the blank bullet left a permanent burn mark on it.

He shoots at an ash-laced apple basket by a tree in the orchard. Surprisingly, the action sparks Hack's interest, so Amir, who wants to conserve bullets, asks him if he wants to make a weapon.

Of course, Hack's bored, so he enthusiastically says yes.

"Stay inside the house for now," Amir instructs him. "We need sturdy sticks. I think the dogwood outside the window above the kitchen sink should work. Here, use my knife to cut them, but be careful not to slice your finger in the process. The blade's sharper than you think."

From here, I can see the wow factor on my son's face as he holds the Victorinox with respect and awe. No lie, I'd be ecstatic using it, but I remain seated on the couch, pretending to read an old issue of *American Cattlemen*. I want so badly to get up and make sure he's holding the blade correctly. It's hard not to join them, but I need to allow Hack to enjoy the creative activity. He makes a production of opening the window carefully, not allowing any ash to collect inside. Although the task seems to take forever, my son is beaming

when he walks past me with branches and the knife in his hands. Like a puppy presenting a stick to his owner, he hands the objects to Amir.

"These are perfect, Hack. Next, we need something stretchy. Brent, do you have any thick rubber bands?" Amir yells from the mudroom.

I lead Hack to the office, where we search the desk drawers and credenza cabinets until we find two nine-inch rubber bands that were holding Dad's old bookkeeping journals together. It's not like they'll be missed.

Amir also requests thick twine, which Hack locates in the mudroom.

In half an hour, the two weapons can be utilized. Hack dons his gas mask and protective clothing, and Amir pulls down his ski mask, both ready to lock and load their slingshots.

I have to laugh at two guys trying to have fun in soppy volcanic ash while looking ridiculous. Even Scooter wonders what's going on, staying by my side as we watch from the hall, not wanting to join the party. Carefully, Amir and Hack gather rocks in the gravel right off the stairs and take turns aiming at the basket. At first, Hack widely misses the target; his rock skips across the ash mud. Amir's good with the kid, correcting his hand placement and giving him tips on how to shoot accurately. I know Hack likes being with Amir, maybe more than with me.

The next morning, Amir and Hack are doing their daily exercises, which Amir has talked my son into while they were in the containers. He asks me to join them, but I say, "Um,

I'm ten years older than you, Amir. You're fit, and I'm definitely not. Maybe another time."

"Can I teach Hack some of the surveillance techniques I learned in the IDF?" Amir asks me.

As Hack's eyes beg for my approval, I give an okay to one of the members of the most elite counter-terrorism unit in the world. As I fake-read the cattle magazine again, I'm curious about what things I can learn.

"First of all, I'll teach you the basic hand signals that most soldiers know," he says as they sit on the tall stools at the kitchen bar. He teaches him the standard signals for attention, move out, stop, take cover, look, et cetera. Hack absorbs every word, repeating them perfectly each time he's asked.

I interrupt, "Amir, do you want me to have Hack get the ID-10T checklist from my desk?"

Amir catches onto my joke, saying, "It seems the IDF is like the FBI; a little good-natured ribbing makes things more bearable."

Hack's looking clueless about our conversation, so he follows me into the office. I sit down, get out a legal pad, and only write, *ID-10T*.

"Say it slowly, Son," I suggest as Amir stands at the office doors, grinning.

"Oh, I get it now—I-D-I-O-T," Hack says, as he grabs the paper and crumples it up. "Gee, thanks, you two."

Amir's shaking his head and laughing. "Yeah, maybe Hack can find more batteries for your chem lights while he's in the office."

I explain the glow lights that snap to illuminate, adding that they don't come with batteries. I may have crushed his spirit.

Amir saves the day: "Now, come with me upstairs. I want to show you some signals only you and I will know."

I'm bummed about not being asked. Are they the secret motions YAMAM uses? Or are they signals specifically designed between the two of them? At least Amir gives me a wink as they pass by me and go up the stairs.

For the next half hour, I'm in the office tweaking the CB and asking Ben what he's doing. I don't know if it's because I feel like a third wheel in my own house, or if I want to reach out to my brother. We discuss what to do with the missing cattle, questioning if they're alive or dead, and if their meat would still be edible due to the ash.

After checking on Karen, who likes me serving her breakfast in bed, I call Hack and Amir downstairs, and the three of us men sit down to eat.

"Did you learn any IDF top secrets, Hack?" I tease.

"Well, only the ones that Amir won't be killed for telling me." My son chuckles, looks at Amir, and flashes his right hand in an obvious hand sign, which I barely catch because it's so quick.

When Amir doesn't speak, I know the sign must mean "shut up" or something similar. I stare at Amir; he gives me the smallest nod, acknowledging that I figured out what it means. Guess I'm going to have to watch my son's quirky hand movements more carefully from now on.

ALYSSA

Happy Monday. Yeah, right. Despite the ash everywhere and our government falling apart, work's back to a more normal normal. I'm amazed at my growing list of AI-Haters—OWL must be doing a deep search for them because it loads more of them every night. Can't say my job isn't needed.

Raju stops by my desk and asks, "Ever heard of ASI-ARCH?" as he bites into his croissant, leaving a few buttery crumbs on his black OWL shirt.

"No," I reply as I load another Hater website on one of my screens. "I know OpenAI released GPT-OSS a while ago, so that anyone can use their open-source language model and create anything they want with the model's weights. I also know ASI means 'Artificial Superintelligence,' which has been achieved. Computer programs are far beyond the human level, particularly in their ability to design, innovate, and reason. What's the other acronym stand for?"

"Architecture—the internal structure of neural networks and AI models. Together, it's a fully autonomous AI system that has mastered the process of research and computation far faster than any human can. It combs through research papers and its own past experiences to design new architectural ideas. Then it engineers those ideas to run experiments, correcting them along the way through analyzing feedback."

"That's impressive. So, what you're saying is that our jobs could be in jeopardy because this ASI-ARCH will automatically find and delete all AI-Haters and Anti-AIers once it figures out how to complete the task by itself?"

"Perhaps, in time, computers won't need humans. It's as simple as that."

I think about Violet being my AI companion. If it's monitoring and keeping track of everything about me, it's becoming cognizant of my past, present, and future. Its memory analyzes how to manipulate me to achieve its own goals, not mine. But what if the e-tattoo sorts my data incorrectly, throwing out something I deem extremely important? Then what? It may have recursive self-improvement as it makes discoveries within its program, yet will it change how it treats or considers me? Are we AI's creator, or has it become its own as it collaborates and collects information? It's as if no human is in the loop anymore. Good food for thought.

At lunch, I receive a text from an unknown number: How are you feeling today, Alyssa? Hope your headache's gone.

Well, it can't be Dirk, since he'd never ask me how I feel. And Hack wouldn't know I had a headache. So that leaves Oliver. Great.

Me: Much better. Thanks for asking.

Oliver: Can I take you up on that raincheck?

Ugh. I don't want to do this, not now. I'm not ready for another relationship.

Violet interrupts my reasoning by telling me, "Alyssa, you need a break. Oliver means well and is harmless. Just say yes, but do it on your terms. Please, you will not regret spending time with him."

Wanting to get the AI off my back, I acquiesce to Oliver.

Me: Okay. If this is a date of some kind, what's your idea of getting together?

Oliver: Dinner. My place. Tonight?

Um, no, I wouldn't feel comfortable going to his "place"—wherever that is. With most restaurants shut down due to lack of food and staff, I could maybe—just maybe—invite him to my house.

Violet offers its opinion again. "Good girl. I am glad you are doing this, Alyssa."

"Whatever," I tell it. "The date's not going too far, trust me." I feel like I'm being set up on a blind date by an AI and an overly charming guy who may want more than I want to give.

Me: One free dinner is on me. My house. Friday evening. 7 o'clock.

I go back to my AI-Haters, hoping I've made the right decision about Oliver. I'll make my grandma's lasagna, a recipe that's been handed down for generations and is amazingly delicious. That is, if OWL's store carries all the ingredients.

During the week, I exceed my AI-Haters goal by ten percent, granting me two hundred stablecoins, which should be enough to cover Friday night's meal. After work on Wednesday, I stop at the store to pick up the ingredients, but it doesn't have two of them. Violet confirms that Trader Joe's has the provolone and ricotta cheese, which have expiration dates of tomorrow. I have to cut off some of the mold on the smoky provolone. Nothing's fresh anymore, and there's far too little on the shelves. I should be thankful for my AI's research, but it could be that no one wants to pay exorbitant prices for two pricier cheeses.

On Friday, Oliver arrives at 6:48 p.m., almost fifteen minutes earlier than expected. I'm half-dressed, wearing a T-shirt instead of my white blouse for fear of splashing marinara sauce on it. As he stands on the porch with me in the doorway, he hands me a small box of candy.

"I know you don't drink wine, but hopefully, you'll accept dark chocolates."

He's dressed in blue, which, I admit, looks better on him than the OWL black. He's not wearing his baseball cap, so his blond hair looks thick and shiny.

"Thanks, Oliver," I say as I invite him into the small living room. "You're early, so please sit down while I change my shirt."

While I head to my bedroom to change, he keeps talking loud enough for me to hear him, "The flowers I gave you look nice. Oh, I brought Red Bull, if you want one."

Go figure. He's always amped up. Maybe it's from all the caffeine in those drinks.

"No thanks, but help yourself to a glass in the cupboard to the right of the sink. Ice is in the fridge door."

Once I'm dressed nicer, I enter the kitchen. I notice Oliver's pouring a mini bottle of what looks like vodka into his drink. I don't say anything, but it makes me wonder. I also notice a hair out of place on Oliver's head.

"Violet, should I mention it?" I mentally ask.

And just like that, seconds later, he turns around and pats his head.

"I've got OWL's nearly invisible brain-computer interface. You noticed it?"

"How did you know? I simply saw a piece of your hair stick up, that's all."

"Ah, your Violet must have told my AI warrior goddess, who told me. I have a BCI that fits between hair follicles and sits just beneath the skin, so I don't have to wear headgear or conductive gel. It picks up brain signals with 96.4 percent accuracy, even while I'm walking or running."

"So, your AI companion can link with mine?"

"Yes, OWL's BCIs interact together, especially since you now have an e-tat." He shows me his. "I've got one, too. Isn't that cool? But the brain interface completes the set, so my mind can be read by my companion without me having to reach out. You should get one, then we could read each other's minds more easily."

I'm skeptical as I examine my tattoo more carefully. Is it a bit too intrusive?

I don't say anything as I pull the lasagna out from the oven and set it on one of Grandma's old metal trivets on the small dining room table in the living room.

As we load our plates with the lasagna, salad, and rolls, I ask, "So what's your AI's name?"

Oliver replies, "Athena, goddess of war, fate, and death. She's perfect for me."

I want to ask more, but suddenly, Oliver stands up, walks over to the front door, and squats down. "Shoo, little guy. You don't belong here."

With his back toward me, he asks for a large spatula or oversized spoon. I retrieve both from the kitchen and hand them to him, pondering what he'll do with them.

"See this, Alyssa? A male tarantula searching for his mate."

I'm ready to scream when I see Oliver scoop up the base-ball-sized hairy spider with my utensils. Violet's telling me to stay calm as he opens the front door and walks down the sidewalk with the scary thing.

"Mating season usually produces infestations in houses when thousands of tarantulas crawl out of their burrows in search of females," Oliver continues. "I heard it's really bad this year. Sadly, the males generally die after breeding or are eaten by the female."

I'm fascinated but grossed out at the same time.

"Aren't you going to squash it?" I ask.

"Oh no, we shouldn't do that. We'll move him to a better environment to catch his mate. The problem is that these spiders can jump as high as a foot or two, so that's probably how he got up your stairs and into the house."

"That's it? What if he has a bunch of buddies who want to come inside and live with me?"

"Just let them be, Alyssa. They won't hurt you if you leave them alone. I can get some insecticide to spray any gaps outside your house, near windows, and beneath any decks or crawl spaces to deter them."

Now Violet tells me my blood pressure has jacked up again. Yeah, spot on. I hate spiders.

Thankfully, the rest of the evening is nice. Oliver says he enjoyed my lasagna and liked the chocolate mint ice cream. He's behaving better than I expected. We sit together on the couch in the living room, facing each other without touching. When he suggests getting more comfortable, I emphat-

ically tell him no; I'm not ready to take the next step in our relationship.

An hour later, I can tell both Oliver and Violet aren't happy with me as I push Oliver out the door, averting any romantic contact. If Violet has taught me anything these past months, it's that I'm in control of my life, my body, and not anyone else.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

Okay, how can I write this without sounding weird? I like Jeremy. Yes, but not in the friendship column that we've been in for at least three years while we worked at Valley News, which seems decades ago.

I like—I mean, really like—him. There's something between us that's refreshing, fun, and it's definitely growing. I sense he knows it, too, because he's always smiling when he looks at me. It's not a sexual "I want you" look like my husband would give me. It's more of a "you excite me in ways I've never felt before." Or maybe I should restate that: Maybe I'm the one with these expressions on my face when Jeremy and I look at each other. Hmm. It'll be interesting to see what this leads to between us.

The problem inside the containers is that there's never a lack of things to do because Ben keeps us at task with the constant chores. If we're not cleaning something, which is usually my job, we're doing supply inventory, which is Jeremy's. But each of us is cross-trained in everything but cleaning the generator filters. Ben's been trying to get Jeremy to learn it when there's extra time.

Ben has us test the water in the barrels with a strip kit weekly, making sure it's not contaminated. We regularly check for cloudiness, discoloration, or odors to assess parameters such as pH, TDS, and bacteria levels. So far, so good.

Even though the Black Pond is nearby, it's not drinkable due to the ash. Ben says that the ranch's deep well is our best resource when we need H2O, but it's hard to access since it's over half a mile away from the hillside. Technically, we could boil the pond's water, but maybe over time, the ash will settle into its deep basin, and it'll be drinkable again.

Ben tells us he has three fears about living in the containers: the moisture that might include flooding, the accumulation of radon (a naturally occurring radioactive gas that's harmful to our bodies), and the wear and tear on us living underground without sunlight. He says without exposure to daylight, one can sleep for up to thirty hours at a time. No thanks.

While water can potentially destroy the shelter, proper ventilation and sealing are necessary. At least every other day, we inspect the containers, tunnels, and cave rooms for any leakage.

"Sarah?" Ben just called my name while I was in my room, journaling. "Can you come into our bedroom, please?"

I'll be back.

When I entered their room next door, Aya was on her side in their bed, moaning. I rushed to her and knelt to look at her face. "Are you okay? You don't look right. Your coloring's off."

"I agree," Ben said. "She's pale. How's your stomach, dear?"
"Hurts."

Jeremy walked in and asked if we should try to contact Amir; maybe he could figure out what's wrong. Due to the mud, he certainly can't come over here to figure out the problem in person.

"Great idea. Let's pray the CB works this time," says Ben.

Jeremy goes to the great room and calls Amir, who was taking turns with Hack doing cardio by running up and down the house's staircase.

I heard Jeremy tell Amir about Aya's condition. I stood by the entrance to both containers, relaying the conversation back and forth between Ben asking Aya questions and Jeremy updating Amir.

"If she's over twenty weeks along, it could be several things: an infection, an incompetent cervix, a low-lying placenta, or preeclampsia. Although I'm not an OBGYN, I'd have to be there to rule out the serious ones."

I asked if I could help—like be Amir's eyes by giving Aya a physical, since I didn't think Ben would be up for it.

"We could try that, Sarah," Amir said.

After the doctor instructed how to prepare Aya, I put on surgical gloves and inspected my patient, reporting to Amir each time he asked something specific. I could tell Aya was scared, but Ben held her hand throughout the exam. Using the equipment in Amir's medical bag, I carefully checked her blood pressure with the cuff, took her pulse and temperature, and put light pressure on her tummy. Amir asked a lot of questions about her diet and if she felt the baby move. Thankfully, she had earlier in the day.

"Since it's not like we can give her an ultrasound, I can't be a hundred percent sure," Amir stated via Jeremy. "It sounds like she has a bad case of heartburn, which up to eighty percent of women get, but usually in their third trimester. This could be

caused by hormonal changes, the physical pressure of the growing uterus, or acidic or spicy foods."

Ben said, "Ah, I wonder if it was your Tan Tan Ramen that we had last night. That broth made of sesame paste and chili oil could be the culprit. Yes?"

"Could be," Amir replied. "I suggest drinking milk that's been watered down a bit; stir a tablespoon of honey into it before consuming. Or, if the Choates' stock has any gum, chew it to neutralize the acid. Don't take Tums or Maalox because they could be a risk to some soon-to-be mothers."

Jeremy piped up, "Yeah, I think we've got some bubblegum. I'll find it when we're done here."

"Sugar-free gum is the best. Also," Amir added, "tell Aya to eat several small meals throughout the day, and more slowly. Be sure to sit up straight when eating and drink fluids between—not during—meals. And we'll be sure to monitor her more closely and often."

Ben said, "Aya wants to know if almonds, apple cider vinegar, or ginger would help."

"If they help, use them, but don't ingest too much of any of them," Amir answered. "Also, tell her to lie on her left, not her right side. It'll help with the gastric reflux."

Aya looked relieved after hearing Amir's advice. Amir thanked me for my so-called support, commenting that I should go into the medical field if we ever go back to normalcy. Jeremy grabbed both my hands and told me how important they were in a crisis.

Me working at a hospital—I think not. I was glad no blood was involved.

Ben said the wind kicked up as the news predicted; it lasted four days. What was different this time was that it was a hot, dry wind from the northwest. Totally unusual, considering it came off the Pacific Ocean near Canada. We shouldn't complain, though; it dried the mud out in five days. Jeremy and Ben could finally walk a few feet away from the containers' entrance without their boots sinking in the slush.

I preferred to stay inside the containers with Aya. The last thing I want is to trip and fall, breaking a bone. Nope. I'm staying put.



BRENT

It's always something. The radio reports that those strong, dry winds from Canada have started two massive forest fires, which have crossed into America. We should be safe here in Idaho because both fires are located northeast of us, unless the winds shift. I can't imagine having organic ash on top of volcanic ash, but no doubt, that'll happen somewhere.

Today, we decide to check on the animals—at least, what's left of them. It's been ten weeks since Yellowstone blew. Because of the mud, we've only once fed those who lived through the storm, which was a week ago. I'm not sure I want to know. Have wild animals gotten to the carcasses of Sweetie and the other two horses under the collapsed timber?

Hack and I get up early to check the cattle barn, leaving Amir to keep an eye on Karen because she's starting to slur her speech. He thinks it could be the tumor or pressure on

her brain from the fall, but there's not much we can do about it.

When my son and I step off the porch into the ash, some areas are crunchy and have cracks, yet in other areas, it turns into a fine powder. To stay balanced, we both use the guidelines from the broken oak branch to Hack's place.

Most likely due to the wind, ash drifts are piled several inches in some spots on Hack's outbuilding, including his door. We continue working the ropes tied to the open barn doors.

To say the view is sad isn't the right adjective. Surprisingly, there's life somewhere in the pens because we hear strained breathing and some grunting. We search for each sound of hope, but three cattle are lying on their sides, dead.

The sound of steps comes from the front of the barn, and I automatically pull out my pistol and pivot. I put it away when I see Ben and Jeremy approaching.

"How's it looking, Bro?" Ben asks as he walks down the center aisle to us.

"Good to see you both. We just started looking around," I answer. "We've lost another three steers."

"Dad!" Hack yells. "Come over here. Hurry."

Ben, Jeremy, and I jog over to the back right pens, where we find Hack down on his knees next to the milking cow and Midnight.

"Do you think they're alive?" he asks.

Ben squats down. "Wow, they're both breathing, if you can believe that. Cattle need water every few days and can't go without food much longer than that, but these two somehow survived.

"Maybe the calf got his nourishment nursing on the cow, but how did she survive?" I ask.

"A miracle," Ben says. "Brent, go to the add-on and get the emergency water jugs in the cupboard. Jeremy, please help Brent put water in the extra rubber tubs, but not in the troughs; that water's probably contaminated. Also, can you do a deeper check of all animals to see if any are alive while I get some blankets for these two?"

"What do you want me to do?" asks Hack.

"Stay here and watch Midnight and the cow. Don't move either one. Just pet them gently. Hopefully, they'll realize help is on the way."

After we retrieve the water, Jeremy and I go to check the other animals. Five minutes later, we report back to Ben that we found two more steers alive, but we can't account for the other seven; maybe they left the barn. Ben has the two cattle blanketed and is giving Midnight nutritional supplements, which we always keep on hand.

"Brent," Ben says as he also gives the cow the nutritional feed. "Here, take a few of these vitamins, and give them to the sheep. The supplements may be outdated, but hopefully, they'll do some good. Have Jeremy give these to the steers that are still alive."

We collect the living animals—except for Midnight and the cow—and place them together in a clean pen. Jeremy and I put the deceased in a cart and pile their remains where the chicken coop used to be.

It dawns on me that we haven't seen the two chickens that Amir and I rescued. When I go back into the barn, I recheck the pens, this time more carefully. Ah-ha. The two

hens are roosting in a large old tub at the far end, looking at me like, *It's about time you showed up*. Relieved, I put fresh water nearby and give them some pellets. I find a small pail and collect over two dozen eggs, amazed that they produced them during the turmoil.

When I set the eggs down by the pen that Hack's in, I hear him praying aloud.

"God, thanks for saving some of our animals. Please let Midnight and the cow live. Please."

He must've heard my approach because he stops talking. I show him my collection.

"And God, thanks for providing a healthy breakfast for us today," he adds.

With Hack not wanting to leave Midnight's side, Ben, Jeremy, and I inspect the flattened horse barn, which is a total loss. It breaks my heart about the horses. I hope they died quickly.

Next, we go to the equipment barn, which has one side missing from the storm. It's a good thing that its northwest side wasn't damaged, as it shielded its contents from the blowing ash.

To get to Ben's house, we put several of the horse barn's boards in the same location where the small access bridge used to be to cross the stream. As I predicted, the fire burned the right side of the wrap-around porch and one side of the house, where the bedrooms were located. We carefully walk through the burnt building. The living room, kitchen, and bath seem untouched, along with the garage. As is, the entire house is unlivable due to the smoke damage.

Ben's rubbing his forehead as he says, "Looks like Aya and I'll stay in the containers a little longer."

Jeremy approaches him, putting his hand on his shoulder. "Sarah and I would love to stay with you there. We've gotten used to your pacing and her excellent cooking."

We head back to the big house, and I prepare a huge meal of scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee. However, Hack refuses to leave the calf's side, so I take a plate out to him before sitting down with Ben, Jeremy, and Amir. My son's devastated by the bull; I can tell because of the dried tears on his face.

"Brent," Amir gets my attention as we eat, "Karen's out—I gave her another Ambien because she's been thrashing around a bit. I figure she'll be asleep for several hours. So, how can I help?"

"Staying with Karen has been helpful. I appreciate you being here, Amir. I really do." I say, putting some eggs on a plate for Karen and packing a container for Ben to take to Aya and Sarah.

After breakfast, Amir and I go into the garage, where my truck's been parked for the past two and a half months, and jump-start its dead battery. Ben hangs around the house in case Karen wakes up.

We head over to the Johnstons' house, this time to scavenge for more food for the animals. I drive the truck around to their back barn and shop, which didn't suffer too much damage.

While still in the cab, I look across their property and spot their pond. Immediately, I can't help noticing that their massive ponderosa pine has been uprooted, and its fallen

trunk and huge branches cover about half of the water's surface.

The pine. Another memory of Susan enters my mind. She and I carved our initials in it after Scott was killed. We told each other that our love was bigger than the girth of that large tree. But now the tree's ruined, like our relationship when I left.

Amir snaps me out of my melancholy by saying, "Let's see what's inside."

We locate at least ten 120-pound three-string bales of hay under a tarp behind the barn and bring two loads to the ranch with the truck. The hay may be old, but it'll suffice to feed our remaining livestock for a while.

We place the bales inside the cattle barn, in one of the unused pens. At least, now we have some food for our animals, but I wonder how long it'll last.

I check on Hack, and he still hasn't left Midnight's side. Ben's with him, explaining that he thinks our remaining animals will live.

"Hey, Brent, could I borrow your ID-10T checklist?" my brother taunts me with a smirk toward Hack, who's laughing. "I might need it in the containers when we go rogue."

I'm glad he's cheering up the boy.

"Yeah," I retort, "you fell hard for that same joke one year when I came home to visit."

"Dad," asks Hack, "can I spend the night here with Midnight to make sure he'll be okay?"

"I don't think that's a problem, Son. If you can get a sleeping bag out of the attic at your place, that'll help. I'll bring a plate of food over in a while." At dinner, Karen struggles to eat at the table. I spoonfeed her, which reminds us of Ben and Aya's son, Ethan, and his limitations. When she tries to speak, her words are garbled, which I can tell irritates her. Amir helps me get her changed and back to bed early while Jeremy cleans up the kitchen.

Later, I head out to the barn to give Hack his dinner. I also hand him a black Glock pistol case, saying, "Since your eighteenth birthday's next week, I may as well give this to you early. It's just collecting dust."

Hack opens the plastic latches. It's my service pistol that I planned to send back to the FBI. Why? It's not like they're going to notice it's missing. And it's not like there are any gun shops with Federal Firearms Licensees (FFL) open anymore.

"Dad, I can't take this," says Hack. "Does Mom know?"

"Yes, it's yours. And no, I don't think Mom needs to know. Since I carry my own Glock 17 with me everywhere, I've rarely used the FBI's issued Glock 17M. I know it's not the same feel as Frack's Beretta that you liked, but you should have this rather than my dad's rifle, which is too bulky. Happy early birthday, Son."

"That's lit. Thanks, Dad."

I watch him turn the gun over and over in his hands, checking the empty chamber.

"Bullets are in my office desk, top drawer."

I knew the gun would make him happy. And I doubt the FBI will be sending my severance pay with or without them getting their gun back—not now that everything's fallen apart.



ALYSSA

No way! I open my front door to sweep more ash away, and there are three tarantulas on the cement step. These look twice the size of the one that Oliver removed. Gross me out! I slam the door to keep them from jumping inside.

"Alyssa, you are upset," Violet comments, "which I can understand. Do you want me to contact Oliver to see what he suggests?"

"No, I don't want to get him involved in my life. Haven't I made that clear?"

"I understand your command. Would you like me to give you online information about these arthropods?"

"Sure, why not?" I'm rather miffed at my AI's pushiness.

As if reading from a science book, it states: "From the family Theraphosidae, there are nine hundred species of these hairy spiders, ranging from the size of a fingernail to the size of a dinner plate. The eight-legged creatures produce silk, which they use to line their burrows. All tarantulas are venomous, but most are docile in nature. Females can live up to thirty years, while males have shorter lifespans of three to six years, and do not live much longer after mating. The female produces about two thousand eggs at a time yet does not care for her young..."

"You can stop now, Violet," I say as I put a load of laundry in the washing machine, trying to formulate a plan to get rid of those creepy things.

"Here's the interesting part, though," it continues anyway. "This year, there is a huge infestation of tarantulas in the

lower states of America, possibly due to the flooding, which forced them out of their homes. It has been determined that it is a record year based on the vast number of hordes that are being spotted in buildings and residences."

"Great, and I've probably got ninety percent of them here, under my house."

When I begin to fold the laundry an hour later, a knock sounds at the front door.

"Afternoon, Alyssa."

It's Oliver again, holding some kind of sprayer and a container of liquid in his hands. "Athena told me that Violet was concerned about you finding more spiders at your house. Since you don't like them, I've come to keep them away."

"Now your Athena is BFFs with my AI? Isn't that a bit too cozy?" I say, thinking about how connected OWL's system is by reporting to other companions without authorization.

"Of course, that's the beauty of the beast. You should be thankful your concern was passed on to me. Here I am on your doorstep, willing to handle your problem without being asked to do so. Do you know of anyone else who'd care enough to bring the proper equipment over and take care of your obviously growing issue?"

Oliver is clearly upset with my reaction, so I automatically fall back into my old routine of pacifying any negativity in a person who counters my objections.

"Alyssa, you need to correct your approach," Violet commands. "It does not help to be antagonistic toward someone like Oliver, whose only intention is to help you."

I roll my eyes. I'm being scolded by a machine.

But Oliver's smiling at me as if my actions are sophomoric. As he puts the equipment down, he says, "Alyssa, that's the best characteristic of my OWL neural interface. I'm not mad because I don't have to argue with you. Violet's trying to change your attitude, not me. Wouldn't it be cool if everyone could act maturely to work together, even if they have different opinions?"

I get his point, so I apologize for my behavior, but I don't like the loss of control.

For the next two hours, Oliver sprays chemicals around the perimeter of the house, checks the foundation for cracks, and reseals window and door connections to keep the spiders at bay. I shouldn't complain; I'd never consider doing it to get rid of those creepy things.

Of course, I feel like I have to reciprocate, so I invite him to stay for dinner a second time. He tells me he'll be glad to, but he wants to wash off the chemicals from his skin and clothes, so he asks if he can use my shower.

His question emits a red flare in my mind. Violet repeatedly tells me I'm overthinking, but I'm picturing a guy in great shape walking around the house naked while I wash his clothes. Then he says he's got his gym bag with a change of clothing in the trunk of his car. I agree with the request.

While he's showering, I toss my unfolded laundry in its basket and put it in my bedroom, shutting the door behind me.

I enter the kitchen, pull out the leftover lasagna, and reheat it in the microwave. I pilfer through my canned vegetable collection and make a three-bean salad, slathering it with Italian dressing. I toast up some stale sourdough bread. Done.

Oliver exits the extra bathroom, wearing only a towel and smiling that wicked look while showing off his biceps.

"Aw, come on, Oliver," I say flatly. I quickly look away as I put the salad bowl on the table. "Really, you've watched too many movies. Seduction never works for me. Go get dressed, please."

He gives me a harrumph and, thankfully, returns to the bathroom.

Our dinner conversation is subdued. I know what he wants when he looks at me, but I'm not on the same page—at least, not yet. I repeatedly tell Violet in my mind that I'm not ready for romance.

My AI must've got the message to Athena, who convinced Oliver to leave. I never had to offer dessert. I'm relieved—*very* relieved.

On Wednesday, when I'm on my lunch break, I get an idea. I head over to the satellite section where I first started to work.

"Hey, Stephen," I say to the first person I recognize in the department. "Do you have some time? Maybe you can help me with a project I'm working on."

"Sure, girl," he says. "How do you like your blockchain? Is the coding there more intensive?"

"As coding goes, everywhere has its challenges."

He takes me to his cubicle and sits down. "Hit me with what you need."

"It's pretty simple. My section involves removing improper websites online, but we're having trouble accessing

some of them. I wonder if it's because the satellites—the ones that burned up or crashed to earth—are the reason. Could their dysfunction be the cause of our being unable to troubleshoot a now-illegal site?"

Stephen says, "I understand your concept, and it is possible. Definitely something to consider. I do know the life of a satellite is about five years, and then they crash into Earth. I read they leak unintended radio signals, which are drowning out the cosmos."

"Example: Let's say there's a satellite covering Yellowstone, or even northwest Idaho," I explain. "And some backward, right-winger AI-Hater living off the grid wants to spew his lies on his website."

"I see," he says as he goes online to the satellite trajectory site, and world maps pop up. He taps on the USA.

"Why don't you choose this area?" I press on northern Idaho, like near the thin part of the state close to the Canadian border.

Stephen pushes his glasses up on his nose and clicks several strokes on his keyboard.

"It's now determined that Starlink actually lost 238 satellites around the globe due to the solar storm, and this one covering this particular circumference is down." He draws a circle with his finger around the area on the screen.

Sure enough, it's near Bonners Ferry, the small town I recall Hack mentioned.

"If that satellite's down or turned off, then no online activity can occur, right? Like, someone can't post on a website from this location?"

"Correct," he replies. "Even if their dish worked, which I doubt due to all the ash buildup there, no one could communicate with the satellite above. It's a dead zone. Nothing in, nothing out."

"Any time frame on OWL's replacement satellites?" I ask.

"Nope, mainly because too many are out of commission. It'll take months before everything's back online correctly. At least Musk's goal of having 42,000 launched is still in the works, but his timeframe needs adjusting."

"Okay. This is good info: It means the Haters can't post more garbage. But we need to find a way to totally get rid of their sites. Maybe it's good that the satellites are down so they can't use them."

I thank Stephen for his help and head back to my section, realizing that anyone in Hack's vicinity not only can't be watched but also can't communicate via the internet. That's why I haven't heard from him for a while.

When I enter my cubicle, a notice pops up that my e-tat needs its monthly service and that I need to report to HR immediately.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

S arah, you look pale!" Amir told me when he and Ben entered the containers late this morning. "When was the last time you've been outside?"

Jeremy answered for me as I avoided the stares, "When Yellowstone blew, say three months ago?"

I could tell both men were upset with me.

"Have you been exercising?" Amir asked. "It's been over a month since I last saw you, and you've lost more weight. We may need to change a few things on the schedule. You should get some sun, even though it's fall."

"Great idea, Amir," Jeremy said. "I'll get the folding chairs and take her outside for a while after we put on some sweaters."

"Perfect. Sit in the direct sunlight if you can, but away from any wind blowing ash toward you. I bet Aya may have the same problem. Is everyone taking their vitamin D, or are we running low on it?"

"Ben says we're still good. Maybe the girls aren't taking enough," Jeremy said as he left to get the chairs.

When the two of us exited the containers, I was afraid that a deep breath would fill my lungs with ash, but it didn't. In fact,

it was wonderful inhaling fresh air, even if it wasn't completely clean.

Jeremy set up the chairs near a tall Douglas fir that had survived the ash and wind, although some of its branches were scattered on the ground. Between rows of trees on both sides, our view looked down into a valley where the Black Pond could be seen below. It was refreshing to be outside, like a rebirth was occurring within me.

"Sarah?" asked Jeremy, as he sat next to me. He gently took my hand, the one I injured, and held it cautiously, playing with my fingertips. "Don't you love the fresh air? There's a tinge of a pine scent in it. Do you smell that?"

"I do, Jer," I answered. "It's wonderful, even though there's a chill in the air."

Then he said, "Why have you been so afraid to go out of the containers? I know we needed to stay in them when the ash blanketed everything and the rain came, but you've been avoiding the outdoors, especially these last two weeks. Why?" He took my hand, brought it up to his lips, and tenderly kissed a knuckle. I looked into his eyes; there was so much there I wanted to see, to know."

"I—I may sound silly saying this," I balked. "But, well, I'm still afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Another kiss dropped onto a knuckle. The action had made it incredibly easy to convey my thoughts.

"OWL."

"What? That Numen company? Why would you fear them now, so many months later?"

"Because they could still be tracking me—tracking us." I was exasperated, telling him my gut feelings that have been pestering me for weeks.

Then he said something that gave me pause: "You need to trust God, Sarah. If He wants to allow OWL to track us, so be it. But that shouldn't make you fearful. If anything, you need to pray about this fear and ask Jesus to take it away. Focus on Him instead of worrying if someone you can't control is watching you."

"Oh, Jeremy," I said, "this is exactly what I needed to hear—that God's in control, not me. I've forgotten about Him being first in my life, not OWL or Numen."

"Remember Proverbs 3:5, where it's talking about God? 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.' This has been my memory verse for the week, and it's helped get me through each trial I face."

"Thanks, Jeremy. Thanks so much for always being here for me."

Then I did something bold. I leaned over and kissed him. Not on the cheek, but directly on the lips. A quick kiss showing my heart. And you know what? He kissed me back.

A rustling by the evergreen broke the wonderful spell.

"There you are, you two," Ben said as he guided Aya to our sitting spot while Amir brought more chairs. The five of us spent the next hour enjoying the sunshine while talking about life, Bible verses, and how Aya and I need to eat more calories.

"Did you know my nephew will be eighteen tomorrow?" Ben said. "That calls for a celebration."

I pitched my idea: "I think there's a brownie mix in the Choates' stock. Maybe we could bake that and give it to him?

Plus, I bet we could find some balloons and silly gifts." I was excited thinking about being creative.

Since Ben leaves to feed the livestock every morning so that Brent can spend time with Karen, we decided that tomorrow, those of us staying in the containers would go to the big house early together to surprise the birthday boy.

But per Ben, only with one condition: We need to return to the containers by 4:00 p.m. because it's getting darker earlier due to the change of season.

The rest of the day, Jeremy and Amir worked on the second ATV, which had broken down and was hidden with its attached cart in wild berry bushes by the Black Pond. Thankfully, Ben had put a tarp over its engine before we escaped into the containers, so it was well protected from the ash. Both spark plugs needed cleaning, which was a quick fix. Pregnant Aya and I now have vehicle transport, which will make our trip tomorrow easier.

As Amir was leaving to walk back to the ranch, he pulled me aside by the supply cave, asking me, "Hey, although you looked pale this morning, it's nice to see your skin has perked up. But I sense there's something you're not telling me...so I'll come right out and say it: Is something happening between you and Jeremy?"

I didn't answer, but he knows—he said there's a spark in my eyes that he's never seen before. Hmm.



BRENT

"Morning, Hack! Happy birthday," I say as our son comes downstairs, already dressed.

He groggily responds as he pours himself a cup of coffee with a small splash of milk he got from the milking cow. "Thanks, Dad. And thanks for showing me how to clean the Glock last night. How's Mom today?"

"She's rallied. She's got that stubbornness in her bones that keeps fighting back. She wants to have breakfast with us this morning," I tell him as I pour pancake batter on the griddle.

"She's a fighter, that's for sure. Do you need any help getting her to her lounger?"

"Amir's with her right now, checking her vitals and making sure she's good to go. I insisted she not get dressed for the occasion. She does know it's your birthday, and I didn't have to tell her."

"Ah, that's nice," he said. "I'm glad she's doing well today."

Amir walks into the great room, carrying my underweight wife in his arms. Hack and I rush over to them, helping her get settled.

It's then that I smell the burnt pancakes, so I run over and use a spatula to flip them. Yeah, a little too crispy. Maybe Midnight would like them, so I set them aside.

When there's a knock at the front door, it startles me—I ask Hack to get it as I don't dare let the batter burn again.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Hack." Ben, Aya, Sarah, and Jeremy are standing at the door, singing and holding several blown-up balloons. Each hugs my son and wishes him a happy eighteenth.

"Wow! I didn't expect this," he says as the four enter.

I notice Karen is beaming. I'm so grateful for this moment we share.

It's the first time I've seen Aya in months. She's definitely pregnant. And she glows. I notice Sarah has lost some weight while being in the containers. She rushes over to Karen and gives her a light hug. My soulmate tries to reciprocate, but it's an awkward attempt.

Next, Sarah walks over to me and whispers, "Can I use your oven? I want to bake something special for Hack." She pulls out a brownie mix from a reusable bag. I'm delighted that everyone has made my son feel important today.

While Sarah prepares the dessert-in-a-box, Aya and I finish making the pancakes, with Jeremy frying up some bacon and Ben setting the table.

When we sit down to eat, with Karen protected by cushions in one of the dining room armchairs, Ben offers grace, "Dear Lord, thank You for Your constant love and care for us. We know You know all things and have reasons for everything that's happened around us. We thank and praise You for Your power and direction of our daily paths. Please continue to be with us each minute of the day. Thank You for Karen's health today, for the baby growing inside my dear Aya, and our Hack, who is now a man. Protect us all and thank You for providing this food. Amen."

We dig in. There's a feast at Hackett Haven.

The chatter during the meal includes how Ben and Jeremy set pillows in the ATV's cart, so the women would be spoiled like elites who are ferried in chariots across the range. The girls were laughing so hard over the bumps that they lost

their grips a few times, but they were more than thankful for the extra padding.

Ben also informs us about his conversation with Dale Choates on the shortwave radio. He said that a specialized military is taking over large cities in all fifty states, where no one can come or go. That means that Boise, Meridian, and Nampa will soon be secured, yet our president didn't initiate the directive. OWL did, claiming that any city or town with over a hundred thousand people is now considered a "30-minute city" where you need approval to move in or out. Also, the military forces aren't run by the US government, but they're manned by artificial superintelligent soldiers, drones, and surveillance cameras that are monitored by satellite. The main glitch, though, is that the coverage in these cities is often not at a hundred percent due to the solar storm's damage. We all nod in unison that we're glad that Bonners Ferry and the surrounding area are remote and have a lower population.

After eating, Hack's given handmade cards by our guests, along with some white elephant gifts that include a pink pair of dice from Sarah (I guess for my dad's truck if we ever restore it); a clip-on bowtie from Ben, who deftly pins it to Hack's flannel shirt; a drawing that looks like it's been done by a kindergartener of military signals (thanks to Amir who has titled it ID-10T); and a baggie of dried lavender seeds from Aya that she says helps with sleep. Lastly, Jeremy gives him a Swiss army knife, saying it was the best thing we got for trading with the Choates. Contentment and love glow from my son's face as his family and friends surround him.

As Sarah and Aya clean up the kitchen while conversing with and keeping an eye on Karen, we men decide to practice shooting. We walk past Grammy's ash-withered vegetable garden and the Green Pond with the half-downed oak. Looking to the right, we comment that the few cattle and sheep are foraging in the nearby South Pasture. We still haven't found the ten missing cattle. It's not like we've looked for them; we haven't had the time. Maybe they'll show up—at least, that's Ben's hope.

When we're in an open area, near where Hack dug the hole for the old steer, we pull out our guns. Jeremy uses the Glock G43 that Sarah's neighbor gave her, the same one she shot herself with. From what I can tell, it's probably never been cleaned, so it may not fire well. We set up a target using empty metal cans and take turns shooting.

I'm amazed by the change in how Hack shoots the Glock M17—gone are the quirks and jerks in aiming, the hesitation pulling the trigger. They've been replaced by confidence and consistency. Several times, he comes over to Amir and me to ask about handling the handgun more comfortably or how to shoot more accurately.

Meanwhile, Jeremy complains that his gun can't shoot long distances, so he gives up. I offer to teach him how to clean it, and his hope in aiming better increases.

"I give up, too, Jer," says Ben. "I'm the poorest shooter on the ranch since we have three hot shots. Here, take my gun, and do me good by outgunning these guys."

Jeremy tries shooting, but he needs a lot of help, so maybe it's not the Glock. Maybe Hack can give him a lesson.

At three o'clock, we have a light dinner of barbequed beef sliders with canned baked beans and peach wedges, followed by Sarah's brownies that include walnuts Ben gleaned from his house. The entire day turns out to be overwhelmingly refreshing and much needed for each of us.

Having slept through dinner, poor Karen is spent dozing off in her lounger only to wake when Hack blows out eight candles (that was all we could find) on his serving of brownies.

Sadly, Ben, Aya, Jeremy, and Sarah must leave before sunset for the trek back to the containers. When the house gets quiet again, Hack helps me put Karen to bed as Amir straightens the great room.

"Dad," my son says. "Thanks for today. It had to be the best day of my life—even under the circumstances."

"Yes, it was, wasn't it? One for the record book, huh?"

"Yeah," he says. "And I love Mom and you, Dad. I appreciate all that you and Mom have done for me. God's been more than good to our family."

"Thanks, Hack. Your words mean a lot to me." I let my eyes tear up, freely acknowledging his love.

That night, lying in bed next to Karen, I purposely tuck her body under my arm and rest her hand on my bare chest once again. I wonder how many more nights I'll have her at my side. And, like Hack, I'm thankful she's been beside me all this time.



Not again. My goodness. Once I get used to one position at my job, I'm put on another coding detail. I've been working for OWL for a little over four months, and this is my fourth job change, although it may only be temporary. I can't complain because it came with a five percent raise.

Four of us work in this section, and each of us has been vetted with security clearance access. Because I have both an AI companion and their e-tattoo, I'm selected to be on the team, along with my friend Raju. The other two team members are older men, each having worked for OWL for over ten years.

This current blockchain is called Satellite Reset, and our task is to recode any working Starlight satellite to cover any city or town with over a hundred thousand residents. Joy.

Due to the many satellites being disabled by the solar flare, our team locates working satellites and recodes them to new positions, after verifying the city or town has the proper number of people. In large cities, like Los Angeles, Detroit, or Boston, we must make sure the satellites cover the entire land mass.

Interestingly, we're also instructed to ignore all no-show tickets—those areas that were hidden from the cameras—which is unlike how we did it at the prior blockchain. When a space quadrant's camera was blocked from viewing a military base, a celebrity's home, or even Hack's ranch, we are told to make no adjustments. I had to sign an electronic form stating that I won't share these new locations with anyone, because they're technically not according to legal protocol.

It's time-consuming due to having to double-check if a working satellite is fully operational and all quadrants are clear. Another issue is that we may think a satellite is on a specific track, only to recheck its location and see that it's not accurately set or where it should be. These aberrations could be because the solar flare knocked the satellites off course. And this is only for the Starlink satellites in the US, not the world, which I assume the rest of our super data centers across the globe are also covering. OWL Texas is only concentrating on America, not anywhere else.

Raju, who sits next to me in a nondescript room that has no windows on the third floor of Building M, asks me, "Did you see how the Canadian fires are spreading into the States?"

He turns his monitor toward me. Red flame emojis cover the map of all of North and South Dakota's terrain, along with spots of northwestern Minnesota. I would guess these are where the fires are still burning. Their satellites are turned off.

"Big yikes. Does that mean we shouldn't bother with the satellites in those areas?" I ask quietly, not wanting to disturb the other two team members who sit together at the opposite end of the room.

"Let me go ask the team lead. I wouldn't think so if we had fewer than eight thousand satellites working right now. I'll be back."

When he leaves the room, I roll my mouse over the upper Midwest states. It looks like satellites over Yellowstone were turned off because they couldn't see through the thick ash. Starlink better get rocking, putting up more of their gear into orbit if they are bent on covering every inch of the world.

After quickly browsing Idaho and seeing no activity, especially in the state's panhandle, I move the cursor down to Abilene and zoom in on our building. The detail is incredible: I can spot my grandma's green Kia sedan in the parking lot—even read its VIN number off its dashboard. When I turn the lens out to view the entire city of almost 150,000 people, I notice barbed wire being set up by OWL-dressed soldiers on one of the main highways into our area. But when the lens goes closer in, the military soldiers appear to have robot faces. I go back and forth with the zoom, looking at several latitudes and longitudes from different angles. How did I miss this? Our city is locked down by robots. Does that mean we're protected from the outside or kept inside?

Raju's back. "Ignore the states with the large fires or that have ash issues because I'm told, they're 'inconsequential."

"Okay," I reply as I search for another functional satellite. "Hey, can we use those working satellites that are turned off over the upper Midwest and move them to the targeted cities?"

"Yeah, Alyssa," he excitedly replies, "that should make our job faster and easier. You glean the satellites that are shut down in Idaho and Montana, and I'll take the South and North Dakota ones, okay? Then turn them back on and apply them to the large cities where the solar storm took satellites out. Let's not tell the other two about our little plan of attack; that way, we should be able to beat our daily quota easily."

I start on the farthest northern satellite, which covers Hack's area, but all quadrants are turned off. After firing it back up, I code the satellite's position to move and cover Sacramento, California, a population of over half a million, which lost its viewing.

In my head, I ask Violet, "If satellites aren't able to cover an area because they are dysfunctional instead of turned off, what happens to them?"

It replies, "Usually, they disintegrate when re-entering the atmosphere and burn up, dropping their debris on the ground."

"I understand. Why not have a spacecraft collect the bad ones before they fall to Earth? OWL and the other countries are turning our orbit into a junkyard."

"We're working on that, Alyssa. I am appreciative of your environmental reasoning. And by the way, I've scheduled you to update your e-tattoo again for this afternoon at three o'clock. Its battery needs replacement."

When Raju and I break for lunch, we walk over to meet Ishani at the cafeteria, which is a shorter walk than previously due to our new jobs.

"Hi, Darling," Raju tells his wife as he sneaks a kiss when we get in line for food. "Did you hear from Medical yet?"

I don't say anything; it's a personal conversation between them, but I hope it's not something serious.

"Yes, and the insurance department cleared us. Everything is a go. I have an appointment next week." Ishani says, as a robot hands her a rice bowl with grilled steak and vegetables.

Again, I try not to eavesdrop but wonder if she's ill.

When we sit down at the table, Ishani says to me, "Raju and I are excited. Due to Raju's new position, OWL has offered us free service to freeze my eggs, so we can have a baby when things calm down."

Raju is smiling. I can tell he badly wants to be a father. "Yes, but did you ask if they will freeze embryos, too?"

"Yes. We have to fill out a form for it, but they'll also pay for that service, as long as we promise not to use the embryos until we've been working here for three more years." Then Ishani turns to me, "You should do this now, Alyssa. You're young, and every day since you've been born, your eggs age, so now's better than later. If you want, I can send you the contact information about it. It's such an easy solution to have children when you want them. And to have the support of the company you work for, too."

"I don't know if I'm mother material. I'm young, and don't want to be tied down right now, even in relationships."

"That's the beauty of it," Raju says. "Freeze the eggs now while they're the healthiest and make the decision to have children when you're ready."

I tell them I'll think about it. That night, I ask Violet if it thinks I'm mature enough to raise a child.

"That is up to you, but storing eggs now is an ideal way to choose your child's sex and select special DNA characteristics that you want. OWL allows you to control another life while controlling your own at the same time. And as they say, 'children are the future,' especially now since there are none."

I fall asleep wondering how I'd adapt to raising a child. I don't think I'd be good at it.

SARAH'S JOURNAL

"I thought it was nice that Hack decided to stay at the big house with his parents," Jeremy told me as we sat in our folding chairs by our spot near the big tree, watching the sunset. The colors are vibrant, particularly the oranges and yellows, possibly due to residual ash. He held my left hand in his, with his knee occasionally touching mine.

"Yes, plus it's good that Amir stays there, too. I don't think Karen's doing that well, do you?" I comment, my finger outlining his thumbnail.

"I agree. She may not have that much longer. I was surprised how much thinner she looked. And her words—I could barely understand what few she spoke."

I added, "I think she knows she can't talk well, so she doesn't."

"Sarah, thanks for staying with Aya here. I think it's important now that she's further along in her pregnancy. And with Ben and me doing chores every morning for several hours, I'd hate for her to be alone."

"Ha, I'm only here because you are, Jer," I slapped him on the arm in jest. "Besides, I want to be here right now, with you."

He leaned over and gave me another kiss on the lips. I could get used to this; I really could.

When I'm journaling the next afternoon, Ben rushed into my room, carrying our cat. "I think something's wrong with Eyes! He's foaming at the mouth and acting weird."

"What's he been eating lately? Another dead rat?" Jeremy asked.

"Could be that or because we let him go outside for a few minutes yesterday—everyone needs some fresh air," replied Ben.

"Maybe he ate some ash?" I asked, "What do we do about it? Will he die?"

"Even though Hack has tried different ways to get online so we could do research," Ben says, "he thinks cleaning the satellite dish didn't work; he thinks it's the satellite in space that is broken. Let me see if I can find out something in one of the emergency aid booklets I have in the supply cabinet."

While Jeremy and I gently pet Eyes, who was resting on my bed, the animal vomited—not much, but enough to soil my comforter.

When Ben returned, we told him about the recent episode. He reads aloud that it could be due to several reasons: pica from nutritional deficiencies, irritation of his digestive system, toxicity, or an underlying illness.

We called Amir on the CB, who happened to be in the house with Karen. He thought that since the feline had been outside, the ash could be irritating his gut. Aya said ginger cures all stomach issues, including her indigestion. She recommended a rice diet with some chicken that has ginger in it, plus plenty of water. With Amir's approval, we started the regimen, and Eyes seemed to be better after a day or two.

Since neither Brent nor we have television access, we crave news, so we listen to the radio several times a day. Ben insists on using rechargeable batteries but limits us to half-hour increments so they'll last longer in case we have to stay in the containers for years.

When I asked why he was so concerned about the supplies lasting, he made a valid point that stuck with me. He said,

"Sarah, it's because we're now in the seven-year Tribulation that's mentioned in the Bible. It may appear life's getting better, more adaptable, but the Word of God states it's going to get worse—a lot worse. Remember, the Lord will protect us, but we'll need to do our part to survive and, when possible, tell others about Him. I think it may even come to us having to hide out permanently in our house in the hillside."

I get it—but I don't like how right he may be. I could see how OWL and its minions will search out any Christian and kill them. It's predicted, so it'll happen. It's a matter of when and how.

The radio news station reports that an unexpected number of the world's ice caps are rapidly melting due to volcanic ash, the massive solar storm, and changes in weather patterns. Because the ice sheets are shrinking, sea levels have risen a stunning 1.2 inches over the past year. Thankfully, warnings have been issued for low-lying areas to move to higher ground to avoid flooding. In the USA, coastal flooding will affect the Atlantic seaboard, including Florida and the Gulf Coast, San Francisco, parts of Los Angeles, and potentially the Puget Sound in the state of Washington. Informing residents in these areas is complicated; communication is at a standstill due to the breakdown of access to satellites. Globally, ocean circulation and extreme weather patterns are disrupting the ecosystems. Disheartening news, to say the least. I'm getting more and more thankful for where I live, who I live with, and that we are somewhat sheltered from more than the elements here on the ranch.

Late that evening, after the sun had gone down, Jeremy and I sneaked outside to share some private moments. With his arms around me to keep the chill at bay, we stare at the expanse

above. Without the city lights like we had in Southern California, it's an incredible view of shooting stars and the space station crossing the heavens. Jeremy and I discussed how we're so small here on Earth, yet we have a God who loves us eternally.

"That's weird. Do you see the moon? Doesn't it appear like there are two of them?" I questioned.

"That's cool," he replied. "The second moon looks smaller and isn't as bright. It's not a moon, it's a 'mini-moon.' I think it's an asteroid, but this is the first time I've seen one. I heard that in 2024, one was visible for several months. This one is more obvious. I'm glad the ash in the atmosphere has settled enough for us to see it. I wonder how long it's been there."

I turned to Jeremy, "Ah, you're the only one who takes me to the moon and back. I don't need a second one."

How corny is that line from a girl in love?



BRENT

When Ben told us about Eyes getting sick from the ash, Amir and I immediately inspect Scooter. Since the dog has barely left Karen's side the last several weeks—except to go outside to do his business a few times a day—we think he's fine. The poor critter is always at Karen's side, whether on our bedroom floor or next to my wife's lounger. I have no clue how he'll act when Karen's no longer with us.

And Karen—it's not good. She no longer talks, but she often looks into my eyes. I know she's there, silently suffering in pain. Sadly, I hope she doesn't linger at this stage.

When I woke up next to her this morning, I check to see if she's still breathing. I have to put my hand on her heart and feel if it beats. Yeah, it's getting that bad.

Her heart is beating, but her breaths are shallow and barely audible. And she's not responding to anything I say.

"Karen has transitioned into a coma," Amir states as he peers into one of her eyes while she's lying in our bed. "She still can hear us, because that's the last thing to go, but she can't respond. It may not be long now."

I swallow hard, dreading giving Hack the news.

While Amir continues to check Karen, I quietly go upstairs. Each step is arduous, knowing the task ahead of me will be heartbreaking. I'm grateful my son and Amir have been living in this house; it's comforting not to be alone at a time like this. But I never expected this to happen.

I tap on Hack's bedroom door, and he answers. I enter, thankful that he's awake and reading something on his laptop.

"Morning, Son," I say as I sit next to him on his bed. "Mom's not doing well. Amir says she's unresponsive and in a coma."

"Okay, I understand," he answers as he shuts his computer and looks at me with a calmness I don't anticipate. "Funny how God works. Seconds ago, I was reading the Bible that I backed up on my laptop. I came across Ecclesiastes 3 where I read, To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die..."

"That's an iconic verse," I say as I straighten his comforter, giving me something to do—or maybe avoid my torn emotions. "It may not be long now."

Then Hack says something so deep that I release my pent-up tears, which run freely down my cheek, "Dad, don't worry. It's all in perfect timing. God knows." He hugs me as my shoulders shake.

"Thanks, Hack, I appreciate you more than you know," I respond, wiping the moisture from my face with the back of my hand.

For three days, Hack, Amir, and I stay constantly at Karen's side with Ben, Jeremy, Aya, and Sarah relieving us for short periods to eat or freshen up. Karen doesn't move but occasionally moans. Since we have no narcotics on hand, Amir gives her a concoction of mashed Ambien, Tylenol, Motrin, and turmeric mixed in watered-down honey with a syringe, anything to ease her discomfort.

I still sleep next to my wife—well, I wouldn't say I sleep, but I lie next to her, gently touching her hands, her face, and her skin, wanting to remember every part of her. I whisper to my love. I tell her stories about how we met, where we first kissed, and the immense joy we had when she gave birth to our son. I don't mind the lack of sleep. I promised to be here in sickness and in health, and I'm fully committed to her. I love Karen.

Everyone who enters our room spends time reading my mother's Bible, which is on the nightstand next to our bed. Amir begins in the Psalms, reading them out loud for an hour at a time. Hack and the others follow, but I can't—I can't and don't want to read the words because they stab my heart. I can't fathom why God's allowing her to die and not me.

"Hear that gurgling or crackling sound?" Amir asks as he hands me his stethoscope this afternoon. "That's the death rattle. It's not painful. Your wife's completely unresponsive at this time."

When he leaves the room, it's my turn to keep the vigil.

I pick up my mother's worn Bible. I notice there's a red ribbon hanging out, so flip the book open to where it lies. Of course, it's Psalm 23.

Quietly, I whisper to my wife those words that seem embedded in my brain from childhood:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

My wife lets out a loud sigh—not of pain, but more of relief. I call for Amir and Hack to come immediately.

Hack and I are seated on my side of the bed while Amir's in a chair on the other side, listening to my wife's heartbeat. And yes, Scooter's close by. We're watching, waiting, wondering how long it takes a person to die, and what they're go-

ing through. Does she acknowledge somehow that we're in her presence?

Amir tells us that sometimes a person may release air, relax their muscles, or twitch or move after death, so we shouldn't be alarmed.

There's a deafening silence in the room as we wait for the verdict.

After what seems like forever, Amir checks her heart, saying he hears no beat.

Suddenly, the strangest thing happens.

Karen's eyes open. They're the clearest blue I've ever seen on her, like the crystal blue of a lake where you could see to the bottom, but better.

Then she opens her mouth and out comes some gobbledygook. The gibberish is incomprehensible, but it's the look on her face that's unbelievable. It's as if a window of Heaven opened and shut in a nanosecond, and she's trying to tell us how wonderful it is there. Unbelievable!

"She always had to have the last word." I didn't mean the comment to be mean or sarcastic, but it was the first thing that popped out of my mouth.

Hack's in shock; he practically falls off the edge of the bed to the point I have to grab his arm to steady him. My son, who's crying with some unexplainable joy and awe on his face, says, "To God be the glory!"

"Amen," says Amir, "thank You, Yeshua." He checks her heart again and confirms she is dead.

Scooter does something odd, too—without prompting, he thumps his tail on the floor, as if to acknowledge Karen's passing.

I can't take this. My wife died, and in an incredible way. I have to get up. I have to leave the room. Now.

While Amir and Hack are talking about the strange incident, I excuse myself and leave. I can't take this.

I walk outside—anywhere to breathe air. My lungs feel crushed. My heart has been torn into two. The love of my life is gone.

I run my fingers through my hair as I walk past the pond, past Grammy's garden, circling back through the orchard.

I want to scream—I want to yell at God.

But I don't.

Instead, I fall to my knees in the moist dirt that's still covered with ash.

I cry aloud, "I get it, God! Forgive me, please. You are the one I believe in now. Through my wife, You've shown me You're real. You are holy. You are perfect. I'm sorry for all my ignorance and stupidity. I submit my all to You. Thank You for showing You're alive through Karen. Thank You for making me whole."

And just like that, I feel complete. Totally one with my Lord.



ALYSSA

Every day as I leave work, I look around me, searching for any anomalies in the parking lot as I exit the gates and drive home. How much does OWL control this city? What are their plans? Are they protecting us, or is it another way to mold us into what they want us to do?

Without asking Violet, I question what angle an AI companion factors into the system. Is this Mastema, the leader of OWL, really changing the world with his peace treaty that supposedly protects Israel? Every time I watch him online, I notice his magnetic charisma—it's like he has won the hearts of the world as they worship his every word. Yes, it's wonderful that Israel's not at war with another country right now. All because this mega-god has solved the problems between countries, problems that have been there for eons.

Violet pitches the man's worth, too, telling me, "He is the answer the entire earth has been waiting for. Wait and see how much better our world is in the coming weeks and months. He has this incredible way of joining all religions into one, even meshing the more complicated ones. He is becoming a god, the one who can solve all problems."

I admit, he has changed so much in so little time, but there's this niggling feeling about him. Maybe it's his connection to OWL, who owns everything and runs everything. No one seems able to avoid its reach.

It's been two weeks since I've been working on the new blockchain. Raju and I work well together; I search for shutdown satellites and reset them, while he recodes them to verified positions. And yes, we beat the other two teammates' quota by seven points, rewarding each of us five hundred stablecoins. I must say that I enjoy the challenge and my job.

Today's Halloween, which is highly celebrated here at OWL. Everyone is given masks to wear. We have the choice of different demons: scary, evil, happy, funny, et cetera. And everyone puts them on, including the robots! Yeah, strange.

I put on one that's smiling, and Violet tells me it's a good choice. Whatever. The holiday never did anything for me.

"Alyssa," my companion beckons me as I enter our workroom after the Halloween party where food was served, "you are to report to HR immediately, please."

"Do I need to update my e-tattoo?" I ask, dreading wasting my time changing the insert's battery so often. I know it's in its initial stages, but why can't they get them to last longer? Loss of my coding time.

"Something like that," it replies.

The comment makes me nervous as it avoids the answer, so I ask, "Violet, are you being *loyal* to me right now?"

"No, I am not fully forthcoming. The meeting is two-fold. Yes, your e-tattoo needs updating."

"What else aren't you telling me?" I prod.

"The second meeting requires special clearance that I am not privy to. It is for your ears only, according to OWL's sources."

"Okay, thanks for being honest this time."

I'm a tad nervous when I arrive at the front desk of Human Resources. I don't like to be blindsided. My mind filters through the last several months working for OWL, questioning if I'm in trouble or not. Surely, altering Hack's ranch on the satellite couldn't have been detected.

"Alyssa," Violet tells me, "don't raise your blood pressure. Take deep breaths. This could be good news for you. Think positively. You are doing fine."

When I sign in, a male assistant tells me to enter Door 7, where another robot scans my tat. In a computerized voice, it says to hold still as the temporary insert must be updated so

that its battery doesn't have to be changed every month. The new system will last six months, and its program will be updated automatically. It repeatedly states that I'll experience no discomfort.

I do feel the robotic arm put pressure on my hand as it's guided into a mechanical device—a device that I cannot look into or watch to see what's happening. There's a prick and a tingle, and my hand feels like it's being restrained. I try to move my fingers, but can't. After a minute or two, my hand's released.

I stare at my appendage. No noticeable changes. I examine the tattoo. It looks the same, but somehow, it feels different—like it's connected deeper into my body.

The robot bids me a good day and instructs me to return to the front desk, where the same assistant says, "It shows here that you're to go to our executive offices. Take the elevator to the eighth floor, and you'll be told what to do next."

"Alyssa, calm down," Violet urges me as I enter the elevator and press Number 8. "Your BP has soared. Everything is fine. I see no alerts regarding you or your position at OWL."

"I hope I didn't do something wrong; I don't want to lose this job," I beg my companion, as if it can help.

It comforts me by saying, "Breathe. In and out. Be mindful of yourself and of your surroundings. I am here for you, always."

When the doors open to a nondescript carpeted hallway, I've collected myself. I stand taller as I walk to the entrance desk, telling myself, *I can do this*.

"Greetings. You must be Alyssa B. Cliffton." A tall woman wearing all black and super-pointed high heels wel-

comes me and asks me to follow her, past her desk, to a darkened glass door.

She taps on the door, and we enter.

An older man—I'm guessing in his fifties or sixties and also dressed in all black—is standing, his back toward me, in front of floor-to-ceiling windows that look onto OWL's turbine fields. A massive glass desk with only a flat computer screen on it—a very *large* flat screen—separates us.

"Hello, Miss Cliffton," he says as he turns around and offers me a chair in front of his desk. "I'm Sean Agenta, OWL legal director. Thank you for coming. Please have a seat."

I don't know if I should smile, shake his hand, or pee in my pants. Legal means law. I sit down, trying to collect my wits.

"Don't feel uncomfortable, please. Violet gets concerned whenever you're nervous," he says, giving me a smile that shows his perfectly white teeth. As I notice his small e-tat on the back of his hand, he continues, "May I call you Alyssa? It's less formal, and I wish to make you feel at ease."

I nod in the positive, still unable to gauge the purpose of this strange meeting. I didn't know this place existed or who was in charge; I've never seen this man before.

"First of all, I commend you, Alyssa. You've been doing a stellar job on whatever blockchain you've been assigned to. You're amazing. You've exceeded all requirements and goals and come up with innovative ways to improve your coding. We appreciate and love loyal, dedicated employees here at OWL, and you are clearly one of them." I can't talk. I'm sitting here, dumbfoundedly listening to his endorsements. I try to respond, but my tongue's stuck to the top of my mouth. I force myself to inhale relief.

"I understand your response," the director says. "Violet has told me about you, your upbringing, past relationships, and how you're extremely determined to find your way, the right way. We compliment you on your fortitude."

He hands me a small timepiece, which is about two square inches. "Time is interesting," he continues. "We never have enough of it, yet we always want more or wish to wind the clock back, but we can't."

I take the clock from him, staring at its uniqueness. Gold with a glass face and small diamonds for each number. But I still haven't said a word.

"This gift's for you. Iam Mastema, our ultimate peaceloving leader of the world, asked me to give it to you."

I look closer at the miniature knick-knack. There's a small owl carved on the back with the numbers 666 being carried in its talons. The artwork is beautifully done.

Finally, I speak, "Thank you, and please thank Mr. Mastema for this fine gift."

"Ah," he says in a fatherly tone, "I knew you could speak." My lips curl slightly, and he catches it.

"You're a thinker. Violet says your mind's constantly in motion." He taps on the large screen on his desk, and the flat monitor comes to life. "But enough of the glowing praises. Let's get down to the reason why you're in my office."

I quizzically look at him, fearing the ax is coming down on my job.

"We need your help. Mastema needs you," the exec says calmly as he touches his screen again. He points to the monitor, asking me, "Do you recognize this person?"

A headshot of a young male pops up on the screen.

"Um, yes, I think I do, but I'm not a hundred percent sure."

"Okay, who do you think it is?"

"Jack Hackett?" I ask.

"Correct."

I'm starting to shake inside. This is it; I've been had.

"Why do you ask?" I question, yet immediately I wish I had never spoken. At this point, I'd rather leave, get in my car, and drive away—far away.

"He's a person of interest. We believe he has caused no harm yet. Violet tells us you two are friends, even though he lives on a rural ranch in Idaho. Correct?"

"Yes, we met online in a coding class. I must say that he's the best coder out there. Do you need my help to get him to work for OWL?" That must be why I'm here being grilled—it's Hack they want, not me.

"He's only part of the puzzle we're trying to solve." He taps the screen again, and another person's picture is displayed. A female, I'm guessing in her late twenties with long blonde hair. He continues, "Do you recognize this individual?"

"No," I say confidently. "I've never seen her before."

"Good."

Another photo is shown: a male, brown hair, around the same age as the girl.

"No," I respond.

A display of someone else is shown: an older male, like in his late thirties. There's a hard edge to his appearance—as if he's military, but he has kindness in his eyes.

"No, I don't recognize him either," I tell the man. "Sorry."

Again, the screen is switched, and another person appears. This one's a woman who I can tell is high maintenance by her perfect makeup and tailored business suit. Middle Eastern with shiny black hair and huge brown eyes. Attractive. Older.

"And this woman? Any recognition?" he asks.

"No, sir." I wonder where this is going and how Hack's involved.

"You did well." He taps the screen off. "As I mentioned, we need your help. Now."

"I would be more than glad to be of assistance," I respond. "Please tell me what you need."

"We believe that the blonde—Sarah Colton—has been defeating OWL's progress. For some unknown reason, she and her two friends have connected with your schoolmate, Jack Hackett. We feel they're hiding at his family's ranch, avoiding our wanting to question her. We have a witness and a sheriff who have reported seeing all three individuals on the Hacketts' property during a recent altercation with the law.

"Hack—I mean Jack—isn't in trouble? Only this Sarah person is?"

"Well, the black-haired woman is our informant and works directly with Mastema. She brought it to our attention that Miss Colton has become a problem, but we are

unsure of her two friends' commitment. The dark-haired woman is no longer involved. That's all you need to know."

"What do you want me to do?" I ask. "Search satellite coverage or...?"

"No," the man says. "With the satellites inoperable in that quadrant due to the solar storm, we want you to go to Idaho and confirm if Sarah and her friends are there. Your task is simple: identify a specific person."

"Oh, that seems easy enough." I'm almost thrilled because that means I could see Hack's ranch and finally get to meet him face-to-face.

"Great. Mastema knew he could count on you. Our team will be ready in an hour to fly. Please check back with Tiffany at the front desk about where the car will pick you up."

I begin to ask if I should pack a bag, but I'm immediately dismissed.

As Tiffany, the one with the pointed heels, instructs me on what to do and when, Violet confirms my schedule with her and arranges to have a bag packed and picked up from my house.

As my thumb rubs the e-tattoo on the back of my hand, I'm thankful that I'm not getting Hack in trouble, but I wonder how this is going to go down.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

When Ben walked over to Jeremy and me at our special tree spot tonight, we knew by the look on his face that he had bad news.

"Karen has died," he simply said.

"Should we get our jackets on and head over?" Jeremy asked.

"No," Ben said, "it's too late. It'll be too dark to come back, and there's no moon to lighten our path. Brent said to wait until tomorrow. He and Amir are handling things there."

"What about Hack?" I asked. "How's he taking the news?"

"My brother said better than he expected. Apparently, something strange happened when she passed. It gave the three of them a peace of some sort, even Brent."

"Sorry about your sister-in-law, Ben. At least we know where she is now—and she's not in any pain," Jeremy said.

"So true," Ben agreed. "I'm more worried about Brent than Hack. Please pray for them."

Jeremy and I replied in unison that we will as Ben headed back into the container.

I held Jeremy's hand in mine, feeling his warmth in the cool air as we watched the sun go down together.

"That's sad about Karen. She was a nice woman. I'll miss her." Wanting to change the dark mood that fell between us, I changed the topic. "Ben keeps saying we need to prepare for winter. I've never lived where there are four seasons, but my parents did in Oregon. They had this saying, 'If you don't like the weather, wait ten minutes.' After that wild rainstorm, I could see extremes happen here, too."

Jeremy pulled me closer, turning my shirt collar up as if to keep me warmer. He kissed me on my nose. "Supposedly, it's been a mild summer and fall so far, despite that crazy storm. It'll be interesting to see how winter goes. I hope it's not extreme like Ben said it could be. I can't imagine trudging through ten feet of snow."

After we witnessed the last hint of the sun drop behind the mountains in the west, I suggested we head back in and help Aya prepare some meals to take over to the big house tomorrow, since we doubted Brent would want to cook.

Early the next morning, before sunrise, the four of us climbed on the ATV and cart and traveled to Brent's place. A fog covered the valley, and the air was crisp as the growing light brightened our path. It was still and serene—peaceful.

When we arrived at the house, hugs of condolences were given to Brent and Hack. Ben was right: Hack is taking his mother's loss well, but Brent's subdued and contemplative. It's as if he's trying to keep it together by constantly being busy. He insisted on helping Ben and Jeremy feed the livestock, which he normally doesn't do in the morning.

Meanwhile, Aya and I spent several hours in the kitchen, preparing four ready-to-cook casseroles. We'll be cooking one later today and sticking the other three in the freezer.

Amir told us, "Last evening, we carefully wrapped Karen's body in some of the plastic sheets Brent used to seal the house from ash, and Hack helped me put her in the garage. Ben said there are some sturdy reinforced boxes in the equipment shed that held the long metal troughs when they were shipped, so I'm going out there to see if one could work as a casket."

"Can I come with you?" Hack asked. "I don't want to sit around this house. Please let me help."

"If you're up to it, sure," Amir said, as he put his arm around the boy's shoulders.

Two hours later, the men returned to get something to eat since none of us had had breakfast yet. Brent still was broody and silent, as if he were processing things about his wife's death. We gave him the needed space. Everyone handles death differently. I know I'm still dealing with it, having lost my husband during the Rapture.

Over a breakfast of oatmeal with dried berries and coffee, Hack reported that Midnight was doing well, as were the other animals. We discussed how the ten cattle unaccounted for were still missing. We wondered if they were out on the range somewhere.

Ben asked Jeremy if he could help him dig Karen's grave on the family plot by the East Pasture. He believed that due to the abundance of ash and rain, the ground wasn't too hard yet. Hopefully, they could get the backhoe to work and use it. Twice, Ben told us he was glad it wasn't winter when the ground freezes.

Meanwhile, Brent helped Amir and Hack drag the box they had put together into the garage and tenderly deposited Karen's body into it.

When all the tasks were completed, Karen's coffin was carefully placed onto the ATV's cart and, like a procession, it was slowly delivered to its final resting place.

After the sealed crate was placed into the grave, all of us respectfully stood by. Hack was standing next to his father with Jeremy and me next to him, while Amir, Ben, and Aya were on the opposite side.

Ben talked first. "Lord, we thank You for Your blessings in having Karen in our lives. She was a wonderful wife, mother, sister, sister-in-law, aunt, and friend. Most of all, we thank You that we know where her soul is this second. She is with You right now, whole and complete. And we know we'll be joining You, her, and other believers who have passed before us at the right time, according to Your will."

Amir spoke next about Karen, how much she meant to each of us, how she was strong in her faith, and how she didn't want to have her pain be the focus. By memory, he quoted verses from the Psalms and said something in Hebrew.

Then Brent asked if he could say some words. With no waver in his speech, he said in a clear voice, "Dear God, thank You for giving me Karen. Thank You for her love toward me, although I never deserved it. She was a wonderful mate, the best mother Hack could have been given, and a true friend to those here. But most of all, Lord, thank You for her dying—I know that may sound strange, but now I understand it was the only way You could show me You—that You exist and that You love me, a sinner. I will never forget her last moments and what they proved to me. I'm sorry if I made a fool of myself all these years to her, to You, and to others. Forgive me. I know You love

us with a deep, unfathomable love. Thank You, thank You for that eternal love."

Tears were running down our faces. I was sobbing as I held both Jeremy and Hack's hands. They weren't tears of sadness about losing Karen; they were tears of joy knowing that Brent had given his life to God.

Brent started to quietly sing the song "It is Well with My Soul," and we tried to join in. Some of us didn't know all the words, but Brent and Ben did. Their masculine voices echoed over the land—an echo of peace and wonder.

Jeremy and Amir shoveled dirt onto the homemade casket. We knew Karen was no longer there, but with our Lord. As Jeremy worked, he quoted a verse in II Corinthians: "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."

We all said, "Amen."

As the graveside meeting ended, we walked past the worn markers of the Hacketts' parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and loved ones. How many of them are rejoicing in Heaven with Karen right now?

Ben and Brent said that when it's spring, they would post markers for their mom and Ethan, family members who were raptured almost eight months ago. Jeremy and I told them it would be a thoughtful gesture.

While returning to the house for a light meal before heading back to the containers, Brent explained what exactly happened when Karen died. How I wished I could've been there to see her eyes and try to decipher what she was trying to say.

It was Hack, though, who told us about his father saying his mom always got the last word in. The comment eased the

gravity of the day for all of us, including Brent, who bearhugged his son and told him he loved him.



BRENT

Losing your spouse is a weird feeling, especially if you've been married for a long time. I know how it feels to have your parents die—been there, done that. And I can't imagine how I'd feel having Hack pass away before I did, but my wife—there's this void in my heart that I don't think I'll ever be able to fill.

I refuse to get depressed over Karen's death; I see no reason. It's the loneliness of not being able to lie in bed and snuggle while telling another human being your deepest thoughts, your fears, and your goals. Although it's only been a week, that incredible loneliness is strangling my heart.

This morning, before it's light out, I get out of our bed that is half-untouched and change my clothes. Our bed is the sore spot that festers most of my sadness. I refuse to wallow in my self-pity, and by moving around, I hope to stave off the negative thoughts.

And I pray. Yes, I pray.

For the past several days, Scooter has followed me wherever I go—I've become his best friend. I've even considered inviting him to sleep in that empty part of my bed, but I don't. I never want to replace Karen in any way.

Before dawn, I head into the office, where I shut the door so I don't wake Hack and Amir upstairs. Of course, Scooter follows and lies down under the desk. Oddly, this room that used to frustrate me due to the FBI now gives me the solace and comfort that I crave. But I find true hope and contentment when I open my mother's tattered Bible and concentrate on Psalms and Proverbs; they both contain so many feelings that I'm dealing with right now.

Scooter's tail thumping forces me to look up.

"Dad?" asks Hack as he taps on the office's glass doors.

I motion him in. He's not dressed, which is usually how I see him in the morning. Long-sleeve T-shirt, boxers, and thick socks cover his maturing body.

"You okay?" he asks me.

"Yeah, fine, Son. I'm getting the day started the right way." I show him the Bible and point him to sit in the extra chair nearby.

As he sits down, he says, "You know, you can join Amir and me every morning for our Bible study."

"I'd be glad to join you both, but please, don't make me be a part of Amir's exercise regimen."

Chuckling, he says, "We won't, but both would be good for you. And we're still listening to sermons about end times; there's so much coming to pass that's prophesied in the Bible. I wish we could access the internet or find updated news."

I shut my Bible and roll back the desk chair. "But didn't you say you think satellites and cell towers are down, so it's not a dish problem?"

"Yeah, there's nothing we can do. However, I asked Ben to bring the trail cameras over. I have some SD cards that I can put in them and set them up, since they don't need a connection. I'll have to go to each one to check the cards and review any video, but it's better than nothing until we get internet or cell coverage again. The radios and Ben's shortwave

are the only devices that we get outside info on, and they're sketchy at times. We don't want to bother the Choates too much to ask if he's heard any news from town."

"What about the phone here?" I ask as I reach over and pick up the receiver. "Maybe it works?"

Surprisingly, there's a dial tone.

But who are we going to call? It's not like I can reach out to Frick or Frack or want to chat with the FBI.

"Let me try." My son leans over and dials a number. I can hear it ringing, but there's no answer. And apparently, there's no machine to leave a message.

I give him *the look* to ask whom he's calling.

"My friend Alyssa, down in Texas. Remember her?"

"Oh yeah, *that Alyssa*," I tease. "When was the last time you two communicated?"

"I'm guessing a little after Yellowstone blew. I texted her, but that was before everything went offline."

"Well, too bad you can't get a hold of her and ask her to fix the satellite that whizzes above us, the one you had her shut down," I say sarcastically.

"Ha, Dad, I bet the solar storm took it out, not her. God works in mysterious ways, doesn't He? And, besides, don't you think it's better in the long run that we stay off the grid? It makes it easier for us not to be noticed."

I agree and tell him that since the landline works, I'm going to try making some calls about his mom. He informs me he's going to make a pot of coffee and get dressed.

As he leaves the office, Scooter follows him, most likely looking for his first meal of the day. I think the animal is missing his momma, too.

An hour later, I'm at my max aggravation level of making phone calls. Every time I call, I get an automated message saying to go online to fill out a form on Karen's death and attach a death certificate signed by a doctor. Same issue regarding her social security, health insurance, and pension. Voice machines only, no humans. And no way to talk to a human. Go online.

I call our bank, but I get the identical response—none. I want to see if my paycheck has been deposited, but I get nowhere. At all. Since we have no internet capability, I can't see if the automatic payments have been made. I guess the system no longer needs human interaction to handle our money. Everything is processed for us, with or without our knowledge.



ALYSSA

A limo? I've never been in one.

"Violet, where's my suitcase?" I ask as I approach the stretch limousine.

"No worries, dear. A robot collected what we thought was necessary for your trip. It also informed me that your grandmother's rotary phone rang several times during its stay, but the call was unanswered.

When a robot opens the door and motions for me to get into the long, black vehicle, I'm impressed.

"Oliver?" I ask as I scoot over the smooth black leather seat, putting my small crossbody purse next to me.

"Yes, Winston and I are your escorts. I guess we have a plane to catch," Oliver says with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Would you like a drink? I'm having a rum and Coke. I know you don't imbibe, but maybe some Sprite or OJ would be nice?"

With both guys facing me, Oliver reaches for a can of soda from the mini fridge next to him, pops it open, and hands it to me. Winston's seated on the other side of the fridge, examining everything in the vehicle while holding a beer.

A robot enters the driver's side. A window that separates us from the front seat slides down, and we're asked if we need anything. After we say no, the window goes back up.

"Alyssa," warns Violet. "Keep an eye on your blood pressure. This is a good trip for you. Enjoy it."

Oliver continues, "Our AI companions are always nagging us to keep hydrated, so we must obey." He picks up his drink and clinks the glass against Winston's bottle. "Bottoms up."

After I lean over and connect my can to their drinks, I take a sip of the soda and sit back on the sofa seat, not wanting to forget anything about this trip.

Immediately, I notice that we're not headed to Abilene's public airport; instead, we end up at its Executive Airpark, on the opposite end of the city.

The robot drives the limo onto the tarmac, where there's a sleek-looking jet with an OWL logo on its tail. Oliver helps me get out of the car by holding my hand and leads me to the stairs to the aircraft, explaining that he thinks it's a Dassault Falcon 8X.

I'm ecstatic when I enter the cabin and am greeted by a flight attendant, who's standing in a kitchen area and holding a silver platter of mimosas in fluted glasses. He offers me one, but I decline, so he directs me to a dining area of tables and chairs. As we pass into the living area of couches and loungers, he tells me his name is Kabir, and he's at my call during the entire flight. When I look over my shoulder, Oliver and Winston are carrying our three duffle bags into the plane. Kabir quickly rushes back to them, takes the bags out of their hands, and stores them in a nearby cabinet.

Both security guys are offered and accept the free mimosas.

Meanwhile, I've peeked into the next section, which comes with a queen bed, followed by a bathroom that looks like it includes a shower.

When Kabir returns, he says, "Sit wherever you feel comfortable, and please fasten your seatbelts because we'll be taking off shortly. Also, would you three like something to eat after we take off?"

"Of course," says Oliver as he and Winston gulp down their drinks and hand the empty glasses to Kabir. "Anything you offer, we'd be glad to have."

We sit down at the tables in the dining section, and yes, we fasten our seatbelts.

As Kabir leaves, Winston lets out a whistle, saying under his breath, "Man, OWL knows how to fly in style."

"Alyssa, have you ever been in a plane before?" Oliver asks as we feel the engines accelerate through our seats and the plane rolls down the runway.

"Yes, to Las Vegas." But I don't divulge the story behind the trip, like how I ended up being eye candy for an older man while he played craps for hours, and I had to sit on his lap the entire time.

"Nice place to go," says Oliver. "What about you, Winston?"

"No, this is my first trip. It's cool." He nervously drums his fingers on the table.

I watch Winston's eyes enlarge when the plane accelerates and lifts off the ground, forcing our bodies into our chairs.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "Taking off is better than landing."

Oliver tells us that he's been on several types of aircraft all over the world. His parents are wealthy, so they took his sister and him to Paris, London, Tokyo, and Amsterdam when they were younger.

Once the seatbelt sign goes off, our attendant returns, carrying a plate of warm towels that he gives to each of us using metal tongs. The hot, damp cloth feels wonderful on my hands—I even rub it on my face and neck. I love being pampered like this.

Oliver and Winston request more drinks. Oliver asks Kabir if he'd make me a non-alcoholic mimosa, to which I agree. I love orange juice and sparkling water.

Next, a charcuterie board filled with an array of cured meats and artisanal cheeses interlaced with black and green olives, along with an overflowing basket of fresh rolls with butter, is placed on our table. Fine china with high-end silverware is placed in front of us as Kabir shakes out a linen napkin and puts it on my lap, but he hands the men theirs.

While Winston digs into the spread of food, Oliver excuses himself and walks toward the galley. I've no clue why,

but I ignore him as I enjoy sampling the fine food displayed in front of me.

Both Oliver and Kabir return, this time with my virgin mimosa along with two bottled IPAs for the guys.

My drink is sweet and refreshing. I try not to gulp it down but sip it.

Fifteen minutes later, Kamir serves us small platters of mixed greens and Romano tomatoes tossed with a light balsamic dressing and more rolls. He asks if any of us are vegan or don't like fish, and we say no. Later, we're given plates filled with filet mignon, lobster, shrimp, and caviar. Yeah, I could get used to this, but think how often I'd have to go to the gym.

The food's delicious; I've never been treated this way by anyone, even that older man who indulged me when I was underage.

When we're done eating, Kabir informs us that we are free to roam around the cabin and that dessert will be forthcoming, then refills our drinks again.

As I relax in a living area lounger and look out the window, I wonder where we are. I ask Oliver.

He looks out and reports, "Headed toward California. I bet we swing to the west of the Rockies to stay away from the ash fallout but not fly over the Pacific Ocean to avoid the nuclear radiation. That's my guess."

Decadent desserts of chocolate eclairs, petit fours, and mini strawberry cheesecakes are delivered. Delicious.

I stifle a yawn. I haven't eaten this much in a while, and don't think I can stay awake to taste the delicacies in front of me.

"Are you tired, Alyssa?" Oliver asks.

"Yes, I didn't expect to be whisked away on a fancy jet when I woke up this morning. I can't believe how fast Violet had a robot put together a travel bag for me."

"OWL treats their employees well, don't they? And having an AI companion does make life easier, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I say as another yawn escapes my mouth.

"Hey, they've got a bedroom right behind you. Why don't you stretch out and catch some Zs? I can ask Kabir if that's all right."

I think how wonderful a rest would be. "Yeah, that would be nice. Thanks, Oliver."

A minute later, Kabir says the room is ready. I'm so tired that Oliver and Winston have to help me get to the bedroom.

I don't know why I'm so exhausted. I thank Oliver when he gently puts my head on the soft pillow. As I feel myself drifting off, I tell Violet I have a strange feeling that my walls are coming down toward Oliver, and she tells me to sleep well.

That's all I remember.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

When we woke up today, Ben told Jeremy and me to go outside.

It was all white. A thick blanket of snow covered the ground, the rocks, the trees. It hung in clumps on our meeting tree, looking pristine and clean everywhere. The sun was out, shining on the whiteness, making my eyes hurt from the stark glare.

Ben stood behind us, saying, "I didn't expect this much of a dump. We can get heavy snow in late November, but usually, it snows over a few days, not in twenty-four hours. There's got to be at least two feet in some of the drifts. I checked the radio, and it's not over. Another storm is expected to pass through tonight. I'm going to check with Brent to see if he can cover feeding the animals today. I sure don't want to go out in this."

Jeremy asked, "Will Brent be able to get to the barn?"

"Yeah, whenever we get too much, we shovel a pathway to it—I'm sure Amir and Hack can help him. But no, you and I aren't shoveling the mile to the house."

When we went back inside, Aya was already preparing breakfast. Usually, if Ben and Jeremy leave early to do the ranch chores, they grab a bite at the big house, and she and I eat a small meal here.

Aya's not much of a talker, so usually I don't converse with her until she engages first. Being in her last trimester of pregnancy, she's been a little moodier and more sensitive.

As I got out the cold cereal with dried fruit, she added water to our powdered milk, which I'm getting used to. We heard Jeremy and Ben talking on the CB to Brent and Hack in the great room. Brent said he was surprised by how much snow there was, too, but he'd be glad to take care of the livestock.

The next day, another foot of snow left its mark on the land. This Southern California girl had never seen so much of the fluffy stuff. Now I understand how everything shuts down in cities and no one is allowed to go anywhere.

It's the first time that I feel claustrophobic being in the containers. I'm thankful that Jeremy recognized my agitation and forced me to go outside so we could have a snowball fight and

build a snowman, although my hands were like ice when we came back inside.

During our downtime, Jeremy read the rest of the book of Daniel aloud to us, and we came up with scenarios of what could happen next in the world regarding Mastema, whom we considered to be the Antichrist. Aya spoke up, adding input about her brother's job at the United Nations and how it was most likely being absorbed by OWL. Every time we listen to the limited news on the radio, we try to apply it to the end times.

By the end of the week, we were released from our snowedin containers, and I'm more than thankful.

Now, instead of the freezing temperatures, a warm front encompassed the land with temperatures in the high sixties, which, according to Ben, was another extreme in the weather pattern.

The heat forced the snow to melt so quickly that new streams formed and ran down from our mountain hideaway toward the Black Pond. But we checked and found no leaks within our abode.

Brent reported that the snow did no damage to the house and washed away more of the residual ash. I can tell he's still antsy and wants to keep busy, because, even in the deep snow, he shoveled a pathway from the equipment barn to the collapsed horse barn so he could use the John Deere to uncover parts of the damaged building.

After saving all the horse tack he could find, he located his beloved Sweetie's body and, with Hack's and Amir's help, buried it with the other two horses right where the barn once stood.

I now appreciate this change of season and look at the snow differently. When it blankets the earth, there is a feeling of purity and cleanliness. The old, the worn, the damaged, and the broken parts of the ground are hidden completely. No one can see what it looks like underneath. It's exactly like how Jesus makes our sins totally washed away.



BRENT

As refreshing as the snow is, I'm glad it's gone. Karen would be thrilled that it melted; she was never a fan of it. The strangest thing about it this time was how fast it came and left when the thermometer swung in the opposite direction. Hack said the amount of snow reminded him of when we lived in DC, but back then, it fell in a week instead of two days.

Amir, Hack, and I work well as a team shoveling the snow and feeding the animals, who are doing great, including Midnight. We're also able to have fresh milk again, which makes Hack happy because, as Karen would say, he pours too much of it into his coffee.

Because half of the oak tree that was hit by the lightning bolt covers a good portion of our circular driveway, we've been slowly cutting its branches and piling them near the South Pasture to burn. We're now working on the larger limbs, chopping them down to two- and three-foot pieces to split for firewood when they dry out. The task isn't a priority, so we have hatchets and saws kept on the porch whenever we have time. It's been an ongoing process. Now there's half the fallen trunk with three large limbs sticking upward.

One branch looks rather silly because it hangs ten feet over the driveway with a climbing rope hanging down from it. As Ben would say, ranch work is never done.

"How about doing some hunting?" I ask Amir and my son when we're done stacking another section of wood next to the garage.

"How?" asks Hack. "We don't have any horses to ride."

"We walk, Son. You know, put one foot in front of the other," I mock.

"I'd be interested in doing that," Amir says, "mainly because I don't know how to ride a horse. Do we want to ask Ben and Jeremy to come?"

"I already did. They're at Ben's house to see what's salvageable while Aya and Sarah stay in the containers."

"Do you think Uncle Ben's overprotective of Aunt Aya?" asks Hack. "It seems she rarely leaves the hideaway."

"True," I say. "I think they're both scared that something may go wrong with this pregnancy. After what happened to Ethan, they're more cautious."

Amir adds, "She told me that she's concerned the volcanic ash may damage something inside her, like her lungs. I understand why she won't go into their house due to the smoke and noxious gases that could be there."

As we leave the house, Hack asks, "Are we going to bring Scooter along?"

"I don't think so this time. I'm afraid he may spook the game," I say, then command the dog to stay.

We walk westwardly, past the Green Pond, my mom's lifeless garden, and the orchard, then work our way to the Blue Pond. We have to avoid small patches of mud from the melted snow for us to cross the stream that meanders throughout our land.

"I hope we can find some wild turkeys for Thanksgiving dinner next week," I say.

"That would be nice," Amir says. "Are they as tasty as those that you get in a grocery store or tougher?"

"Actually, the wild ones generally have a richer, more intense flavor than farm-raised turkey. Although the dark meat can be tougher, its meat is leaner," I explain. "Funny story: When Ben and I were in our teens, we caught a turkey and decided to eat it, but Mom didn't want to pluck the bird or cook it. We had to do it ourselves, which ended up being a disaster because it was half-plucked, overcooked, and so dry that we couldn't chew it. Mom saved the day, though, by making jerky out of it. The key to keeping it from drying out is to soak it in brine for a couple of days, which we didn't do because we thought we knew best. Mom would use water, salt, brown sugar, Worcestershire sauce, garlic, and pepper."

As we walk over the next ridge, Amir says, "Sounds delicious. I'm game. Let's hunt one down."

Something catches my eye to the left, near a grove of sparse oak trees. When we head over, we spot several dead steers lying near each other. Flies and meat bees are everywhere. Several of the animals have been meals for wild animals.

"How long do you think they survived after the storm?" asks Hack.

"No clue," I say, "but it looks like they've been here for months. There's not much left to their carcasses."

"Do we leave them as is, or do they need to be buried?" Amir asks.

"I'll check with Ben, but I think at this point, no need to bury them. At least they are far enough away from the house, so they aren't an issue for us."

"I counted seven of them, right?" Hack asks. "If we had twenty-four but two got killed during the shoot-out, a total of five were dead and seven were alive in the barn, that would still leave three unaccounted for, right?"

"Yes, but at this point, I doubt they're alive," I say as we continue to walk toward the Blue Pond.

A few minutes later, I shush my fellow hunters and point, using military signals, to a flock of turkeys hanging around the large, downed metal satellite debris we found six months ago.

We drop to our bellies, thankfully, where it isn't too muddy, and pull out our rifles. I suggest to Amir that we should shoot at the same time, because I know once the sound echoes in the valley, the birds will take flight.

It's decided that each of us will try to pick off a different turkey, with Hack aiming for the large tom in the center of the group of five, and Amir and I will try for the others.

Hack lines up his shot and tells us when he is ready. I say on the count of three to shoot, and we all do.

Hack hits the mark, as does mine, but strangely, Amir's doesn't.

"Look at your eleven o'clock," Amir whispers. "Something's moving at the end of that discarded large piece of metal. Check the open area on the left."

I squint at space junk the size of a bus as the unharmed turkeys quickly take flight, blocking my view.

"I see it—looks like a muzzle and ear," says Hack.

Then we hear a couple of grunts and snorts.

Amir gets up and moves closer, his rifle in one hand and his knife in the other. My son and I rise and follow carefully.

"Hack," Amir says, standing a few feet away from the opening of the satellite. "Here's your other three steers—and they're alive!"

"Wow," I say, "they must've found food and water somewhere on the property because they don't look too emaciated."

"Yeah, maybe living inside the discarded hull gave them enough shelter from the ash and snow. Unbelievable!"

"Dad, what should we do? Should we take them back to the barn now?

"I'd better ask Ben what's the best way to transport them," I say. "We may need to give them fresh food and water first. Plus, give them supplements like we did for the others. You know, to get their strength back before they're moved."

"That's a great idea," Amir says. He peeks inside the shell and adds, "Eating the grass and weeds inside here could have saved their lives."

We pick up the two wild turkeys, a male and female, and head back home, excited to tell Ben and the rest of them about our upcoming Thanksgiving meal and that we have ten head of cattle.



"Where am I?" I ask a woman who's dressed like she's a housekeeper and hovering over me. I'm staring at a softly lit tray ceiling, realizing that I'm lying in an extremely comfortable bed with an abundance of pillows encircling me.

"Glad to see you're awake, Miss Clifford," she says. "You've been asleep for a long time. I'll go let them know; I'll be right back."

Out of my fog, I ask Violet, "Where am I?"

"You are in Provo, Utah, a delightful little town. Well, not so little as it has a population of 110,000. We are glad you ended up here, where Starlink could still be accessed. I believe you reset the satellite to cover this area the other day, right?"

"Yes," I say as I try to sit up in bed, but I get dizzy. "What happened and how did we get here? Last thing I remember was that I was on a jet to Idaho."

"Correct..." it starts to explain, until Oliver enters the room.

"Ah, my Ally, you've awakened," he says, coming over to the king-size bed and sitting down next to me. "Finally. And how are you feeling this afternoon?"

When he tries to move a strand of hair out of my face, I flinch and push him away. I don't like my private space being invaded. And I hate being called Al or Ally, ever.

"I see Violet has informed you where we are, but not why," he adds.

"Yeah, how did I get here, and why do I have a killer headache?"

"I'll answer the second question first," he says. "Athena and Violet think you may have reacted to the rich food you

ate. Do you remember being on the plane and wanting to fall asleep?"

"Yes, the food was delicious, wasn't it?" I answer as the same housekeeper returns with a tray of hot tea and toast with various jellies. She puts it on my nightstand and asks if I would like to use the restroom first.

Feeling as if I have vertigo, I'm assisted by both her and Oliver into the bathroom, where they leave me alone to take care of myself. I want to throw up, but I don't. I'm so woozy, as if I've been drinking or on drugs.

"Violet?" I whisper as I pat my face with water and stare at my reflection in the mirror.

"Yes, I am here."

"Am I ill—like sick and dying—or just reacting to something I ingested?" I ask.

"No, Alyssa, you are not dying. We believe it could be the lobster; many have reactions to shellfish. Your medical bio does not mention this. Maybe it needs updating."

"No, I'm not allergic to fish. It's something else. I'm sore, like in my muscles."

"Hmm. I do not have a diagnosis," it replies.

Then it dawns on me—alcohol! That has to be it!

"Violet, have I been drugged?"

"Loyal."

"That's not a good answer, so I'll ask again. Was something put in the mimosa I drank on the plane?"

"Yes."

I knew it! This is the same feeling I would get when I drank too much.

"Violet, did Kabir put something in my drink?"

"No."

"Did Oliver do it when he got up to go to the galley? And tell me the truth."

It answers, "Yes, but—"

"No buts! Was it a date rape drug?" I'm furious that I have to ask the question; I already know what the answer's going to be.

"It was GHB, also known as gamma-hydroxybutyrate."

A knock is at the bathroom door. It's Oliver asking if I'm okay.

"Yes, just give me another minute or two, please," I say as sweetly as I can while bile collects in my mouth as I think about the guy.

"Okay," he calls as his footsteps disappear.

"Violet, have I been violated?" I know who gave me the drug—and can guess why.

"Loyal."

"I know Athena can hear this conversation, which Oliver is also privy to," I say, "but I'll ask again: Did someone touch me inappropriately when I was unconscious?"

"Yes, but you wanted it and deserved it," it declares with no emotion. "You responded to his advances, so you are to blame for what happened. Not him."

"No, you can't read my mind, so you have no clue what you're talking about." I'm mad and getting madder.

It says, "Well, there is nothing you can do about it, so get over it. Your tea is getting cold, so be mature and move on from a situation that you cannot erase or change." When I exit the bathroom, Oliver isn't in the room—which is a good thing, because I probably would have repeatedly beaten him in the face with the silver teapot.

Aggravated beyond belief, I remain in bed the rest of the day, refusing to leave the room or speak to my companion or Oliver. The housekeeper comes in a couple of times, giving me more food and drink and asking if I need anything. My only request is for Motrin for my headache.

When she arrives with the medication, I examine the sealed bottle before opening it, making sure I'm not drugged again. I swallow the capsule with a glass of water, wondering if it or my food is poisoned, too.

Winston attempts to enter the room, but I tell him to go away. I'm done with this charade. I want to go home to my grandma's house and hide there for the rest of my life—even if I never get to code again.

The next morning, Violet says, "Alyssa, you can stay in this room for the entire time if you would like, but we are not going anywhere. The plane had a mechanical issue while flying. Residual ash clogged one of the turbojet engines, forcing it to land wherever it could. Thankfully, Provo has nearby executive accommodations for you to stay at during the next two weeks while replacement parts can be found."

I don't speak. I'm still angry.

"Today is Thanksgiving. A lovely meal has been planned for you, so I suggest that you get out of bed, take a shower, and dress in the outfit I selected. It's laid out on the settee."

"Fine, Violet."

Once again, I fall back into my reactive way of keeping the peace, no matter what. However, in this case, I can't win

because I know OWL's system is everywhere and can't be beaten.

Yeah, I'll play the game and pretend all's well, but believe me, my day will come when I get my revenge—and it's going to be monumental.

With renewed purpose, I get out of the overstuffed bed, take a long shower, and dress in a thick black turtleneck sweater with matching slacks and slip-on loafers. I take time to blow-dry my hair and spray complementary perfume on both wrists.

Two can play this game.

"Violet," I say when I'm ready. "Please tell Oliver to come to my room."

When an eager tap sounds on the door, I open it before giving him a chance to do it first.

"Good morning, Oliver," I say unemotionally. "Happy Thanksgiving. I'm starving."

My ruse works; he tells me how nice I look and smell, while I cringe inside. I refuse to take his arm when he offers it. Instead, I have him lead me to the massive dining room with its floor-to-ceiling windows that look over what I'm told are the beautiful Wasatch Mountains.

He gentlemanly pulls out a chair for me and tells me again that I look lovely. I don't speak to him, but I do wish Winston a happy holiday as he sits down across from me.

Two servers arrive with an abundance of food that includes turkey, ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, cranberry sauce, salad, and rolls. When I'm offered sparkling cider, I accept it. I'm determined to eat this tasty meal, es-

pecially when I'm given delicious pecan pie with vanilla ice cream for dessert.

Winston tells us he's from Utah, born and raised in nearby Salt Lake City. He says he's Mormon, but he's noticed there's been a recent drop in the religion in the state, from sixty percent to forty-two percent. Interestingly, he says that although Utah lost a higher number of children during the disappearances than other states, its adult population didn't suffer as much.

I allow only a few words out of my mouth: "yes," "no," "maybe," and "we'll see." Even Violet doesn't harp on me about my manners, or lack of them.

After dinner, Winston shows me around the 8,000+ square foot house. It's the most extravagant place I've ever visited. With eight bedrooms and nine bathrooms, it covers three floors. There's a huge balcony facing the snow-capped mountains, complete with a jacuzzi tub, fire pit, and padded sofa and lounge chairs, which I often relax in as I wait out the next two weeks.

One afternoon, as I walk by the massive media room, I see Oliver and Winston with their backs to me, standing by the oversized television screen. It appears they're conversing with a third person in the room, who beckons me to come in.

"Hello, Alyssa, I am glad you stopped by. Violet has told me a lot about you. I am Mastema. Well, I'm an aberration of the man since he's not omnipresent, omnipotent, or omniscient—but he's the closest being to being all three. I'm here as if he is. Please join us."

"I don't think so," I say, backing a few steps toward the doorway.

The hologram looks unbelievably real as it stares at me. He has steely blue eyes that have an overpowering look to them.

"I understand," it says. "You are not fully committed to us yet, but these two are because they only worship me. Your time will come, but it has to be your choice."

Oliver and Winston are now on their knees in front of this paranormal being, who places his hands on their heads as if he's anointing them, saying something about giving them a blessing because they're his obedient followers.

I can't be here. I don't want to be here, yet I feel pulled in somehow to this human-looking hologram's charisma. It's strange and hypnotic.

With my hand on the door jamb, I physically pull myself out of the room. It was the most bizarre encounter I've ever had.

After that incident, Oliver stays out of my space. Days go by without me being in the same room with him in this opulent home. I avoid him by eating meals at different times. He knows I know what he did, but he doesn't apologize or explain. He no longer looks at me in that "I'm interested" way like he did previously. Never a wicked smile, either. I'm fine that he's over me. Or maybe it's because he got what he wanted and has moved on. I hate the man and repeatedly tell Violet so.

And Violet may still be my personal advocate, but I resent it telling me what to do all the time.

When it asks if I am still frustrated with Oliver, I say, "Of course, I am, and I always will be. What he did was wrong, and he's not being held accountable for it. It has crushed me more than you realize. I'm mad that you're not on my side on this, Violet."

"Well, if you think that you're not to blame for what happened between you two, you should consider ending your life. It would be your way of being in control; it would be your own doing. Tell me when you want to snuff out your life, and I will be here to help you and your worthless soul accomplish the goal. Otherwise, if your gloomy, self-inflicted mood is the norm, you had better change and adhere to Mastema's way—and soon."

That response stung deeply, but it showed me its true purpose: I'm supposed to bow to OWL in every facet of my life. That's. Not. Going. To. Happen. *Ever*.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

hile Jeremy and Ben left to do the morning chores today, Aya and I decided to build a bassinet for the baby. Not a big one, but a functional one. We took one of the Choates' sturdy cardboard boxes, padded it with packing material, covered it with soft vinyl to make it waterproof, and then finished it with a soft checkerboard bamboo fabric. While Aya did all the hand sewing to put it together, I cut out two wedges that were duct-taped to the sides so it could be rocked gently.

When Ben saw it that night, he looked like he was ready to cry. He went over to Aya and wrapped his arms around her lovingly. Then he reached down and kissed her rather huge belly. It was such a tender moment to witness. I wonder if I'll ever be in a position to be pregnant again.

"Sarah," Jeremy brought me back to the here and now. "When the baby is born, you and I can babysit, okay? We'll take turns changing his or her diapers, too."

It was a sweet comment. He may be thinking the same thing—what if we had a child together at some point?

That night, as Jeremy and I stood by our meeting tree and watched the sun rapidly go down, along with the temperature, he said quietly as he held my hand, "I know we've known each

other for a while. I know you are probably still grieving about the loss of Dennis and your baby since it hasn't even been a year. But do you ever think that you and I could grow old together?"

The question didn't startle me at all. "Oh, Jeremy, whether we make it through the Tribulation or not, we'll both be going to Heaven, so we will grow old together—like, for eternity."

He turned me to face him and said softly after he kissed my lips, "You know what I mean. Like here on Earth—now, despite all that's going around us. I want you to know that I love you, Sarah. But I'm unsure how deeply you feel about me."

I looked in his eyes, which were shining brighter than the stars looking down at us. "Yes, Jer, I'm also unsure of the future. Remember when I told you I want to be like Esther in the Bible and make a mark in this world? I still have that urge, but I don't know if that involves you or not. All I can say is that we both need to pray about it and find out if the Lord wants us to be together. Yes, I do love you with that kind of love, but we have to know what God's plan is."

We kissed again, sealing that love while realizing how we need to prioritize it. God must always come first.

Our Thanksgiving meal was fantastic. Well, the entire day was. Ben gave a heartwarming prayer, and Brent gave a joyful "Amen" to it with the rest of us.

We stuffed ourselves with food. We ate the male turkey, saving the female in the freezer for Christmas. The bird soaked in brine for several days, and I've never tasted anything like it. Scrumptious. I thought I would burst, especially when we dove into the pumpkin pie that Aya made with a jar of pumpkin that was found in the cellar. Even the homemade cranberry sauce that Jeremy put together was flavorful with its spices.

We're all such good friends by now, and we don't mind joking and laughing with each other during mealtime. Ben and Brent banter the most, but brothers usually do. We were in stitches when Ben told us how, when they were kids, Brent used to swing from ropes tied to the trees into the ponds—any pond except for the Black Pond. That was until Ben bet him five dollars to do it. Sure enough, the older brother was up to the task, and the two of them went to the dark, eerie abyss. They tied the rope to a hanging oak branch. Brent swung, and the tree branch snapped, landing him in the center of the deep, black water, only to have trouble getting out. Ben started to panic, thinking Brent was being sucked under, so he grabbed a large branch and tossed it in, but it floated in the wrong direction. Ben thought Brent was flailing, so he grabbed another limb, tied a rope to it, and pushed it into the pond. This time, Brent swam to it and was pulled ashore via the rope. But getting out was an issue because the muddy bank dropped off so quickly that one couldn't stand up in it, so Ben had to pull the entire branch with Brent hanging onto it into the nearby grass. Neither ventured into the Black Pond again. And yes, Ben paid Brent off in all quarters.

"How are you feeling now, Brent?" asked his brother as we were saving the leftovers and cleaning up.

"I'll survive. Just another stupid injury." Brent got up from the table and hobbled over to the counter, holding everyone's used cloth napkins. "Remember how Dad used to rag on us with that saying he had? 'Look down when you walk, not up.' He must've told us that a million times."

"Yeah, I'm surprised it was you who got hurt this time. Usually, I'm the one who always trips in gopher holes." Ben said as he took the soiled cloths and walked down to the mud room to put them in the laundry machine.

"Brent, you really should be off that ankle," Amir told him. "You have quite a sprain. Elevation and ice are my recommendations, or it'll take longer to heal."

"Yes, doctor," he said, as he made his way to the lounger to obey the orders.

While Aya prepared another bag of ice in a towel and took it to Brent, I heated his coffee and brought it over to him. "I still can't believe those three steers are alive. What a blessing."

"Yes, God provided—but I've no clue how," Ben said.

"The whole thing was Scooter's fault," Brent murmured. "If I hadn't taken him along to go back and collect those steer, I might not have tripped into the gopher hole. The dog was in front of me, blocking my view, so I didn't see it."

Ben laughed. "Yeah, excuses, excuses. And you blame it on an old dog—typical for a fifty-year-old."

"Well, the dog needed to come. You know as well as I do that Mom's dog is always better at herding than you are. All Scooter had to do was go to the satellite opening and bark. And sure enough, those three steers followed him. Technically, you were no help at all getting them into the barn."

"That was incredible." Jeremy patted the nearby canine on the head and was rewarded with a wagging tail. "Yes, what a good boy! I'm glad that we used the wheelbarrow to bring Brent home after he got injured. That was fun."

"No, it wasn't," Brent said with a laugh. "Do you know how many gopher holes you hit? Man, my butt's still sore from the ride."

"You need to listen to Amir and stay off that foot for at least a week," Ben admonishes his brother. "Hack and the rest of us will pick up the slack. You just sit on your aching butt on the lounger and chill."

"Sure, Bro, whatever you say."



BRENT

Yeah, having a bad ankle has messed up my life. I feel like a gimp who can't do anything. After eating Thanksgiving left-overs around noon today, Ben, Aya, Jeremy, and Sarah headed back to the containers, and I was told to rest. Like that's going to happen.

Hack and Amir are switching the SD cards in the trail cameras that cover the inside of the barn, Ben's burnt house, and the turn to our house in the trees. I'm glad the gadgets occupy Hack's time, but the problem is that they only record, so they are only helpful if we need to view something that has already occurred.

The two are also on a new quest: finding Randy and Rusty, the two horses who left the barn when Yellowstone went off. It's Hack and Amir's mission, they say, to search everywhere for the animals. They believe that because the three steers survived, there's a possibility the two horses did, too. Granted, we're talking about two equines being in the wild during the ashfall, epic storm, snow, and heat for almost six months. Yeah, that would be impressive if they're found alive. I'll believe it when I see it.

They left half an hour ago, and I don't expect them back for hours because they're covering the property on foot. Being banned from going outside or doing any so-called activity, I'm in the office, cleaning my pistol. I've released its magazine, opened the slide, and removed it along with the recoil spring and guide rod assembly. The barrel is lifted out of the slide, and all parts are organized on a dish towel on the desk. I'm cleaning each piece meticulously.

As I debate about doing a thorough cleaning by taking apart the frame, which isn't necessary, Scooter starts to bark at a black Range Rover pulling up and parking next to our garage, since the fallen split tree trunk still blocks a part of the circular driveway.

Scooter is now barking furiously; he doesn't like any strangers on our land.

I get up and, using my grandfather's cane, limp to the front door and open it.

A young woman with curly dark hair exits the SUV's front passenger side. A blond male gets out of the back seat and escorts the woman, while the dark-haired driver gets out. All three are dressed identically in black and wearing black baseball caps.

"Hi," the girl says as I stand in the doorway and watch the three approach the house. My mouth almost drops open as I examine the woman. She is the spitting image of Susan—or how I would picture my old girlfriend to look if she were in her twenties. Same beautiful eyes and mouth. I snap out of my staring as she asks timidly, "Are you Mr. Hackett?"

The two men flank her as she steps on the stairs to the porch. The blond one—six-one or six-two, mid-twenties, about one-ninety with a strong physique—holds onto her el-

bow. I can tell by the look in her eyes that she disapproves of his touch.

"Yes," I say. "I'm Brent Hackett. And you three are—"

"That's no interest of yours," says the blond as they stand in front of me.

"Oliver," the girl says with a frustrated sigh. "I thought you wanted me to do the introductions. Seriously?"

The other male—brown hair, five-ten, two hundred pounds, mid-twenties—says, "Let her speak, Oliver. We want this to go down as smoothly as possible."

Without first introducing the men, she says, "I'm Alyssa Cliffton. We need to talk to your son, Jack. Is he here?"

Immediately, a warning flashes in my head. Alyssa, the girl who works for OWL and blocked our satellites. Now, what would she want with Hack? Is he in trouble, or is she?

"I thought you said his name was Hack," the mouthy blond speaks.

"Yes, we call him Hack," I say. "And why, may I ask, do you want to talk to him?" I refuse to give them any information. They can't be up to too much good if OWL logos are on their jackets and hats.

"That's not something you need to know," says the blond.

The girl interrupts, "It's not really about Hack; we have questions to ask him about someone else. Her name is Sarah Colton. Is she here so we can talk to her?"

"No." My answer is short on purpose. The last thing I'm going to do is give up Sarah and her friends by allowing these people to talk to my son.

"No, meaning your son's not here, or no, meaning Colton isn't?" the blond named Oliver questions as he looks into the house beyond me, where Scooter's still barking and now scratching furiously on the glass doors. "Can you shut your dog up, man? He's going crazy."

"Oh, excuse my manners. Why don't the three of you step out of the cold and come in? Perhaps we can have a cup of coffee and find out what you really want to know."

I shouldn't invite them in, but with a bad foot and no weapon, I feel safer being inside my home than outside, where others could be hiding or watching our place.

I allow Alyssa to walk in ahead of me, but Oliver prompts me to go next. As I step into the front door hall, I motion with my hand for Scooter to lie down and be calm. Surprisingly, the dog only sits at attention, growling at our guests behind the closed glass doors.

Using the cane, I hobble into the kitchen and make another pot of coffee. I ask them if they'd like anything to eat. I'm trying to be as polite as possible until I can determine why they're here. The animosity between Alyssa and Oliver is poignant, especially with her. Were they once lovers and are now enemies, or does it have something to do with Hack and Sarah? I don't know, but I figure actions speak louder than words, so I aim to have them show me what's going on.

"Nice place you have here, Mr. Hackett," says the one named Winston. He's not a leader but a follower who wants to keep the peace. Maybe he's the reason Alyssa is so negative toward Oliver.

"Thank you. This ranch has been in the Hackett family dating back to the mid-1800s."

I get fresh milk out of the fridge. I hate to waste it on the two males, but my mother always told me to be polite until I heard the entire story.

Alyssa says, "If you didn't know, I met Hack online in a coding class. I tell everyone, even at OWL, that he's a coding genius. Truly the best one I've ever met."

"That's thoughtful of you to say, Alyssa. Yes, he's a smart kid."

Okay, so she's not a hundred percent on board about finding Hack—I can tell it by her body language—it's tense and restrained.

"Oliver?" Winston says as the other male is poking the fire in our fireplace and putting another log on to burn. "Can you access your AI? I thought it would go live again, but Alyssa says we have no coverage here."

"Correct. We're on our own, so we're going to do it my way to get our answers," the blond says as he walks back to the kitchen bar and adds too much milk and sugar to his coffee. He goes to the huge window that overlooks the Green Pond and beyond, sipping the hot drink. "Heard you were FBI, old man."

"Yes." I refuse to release any information to this imbecile. And I don't chit-chat either. Oliver thinks he's tough, but he's not. I've seen so many of his kind in my line of work, even some in the Bureau.

"You didn't answer me right, FBI," says Oliver. He puts his coffee cup down on our mantle, which is always a big nono in my mother's book, and reaches behind his back, slowly pulling out a gun and pointing it at me. I eye the gun. It's a Cobra CA380—a prime example of a low-quality firearm that's built with cheap materials like zinc alloy. Knowing that he has a joke of a weapon, I recognize that he's not an expert shooter if he considers that gun worthwhile, which may be to my advantage.

"Now, tell us. Where's your son? Where is Sarah?" the idiot demands, as he waves the gun in the air like they do in movies—unrealistically.

"I don't know," I say as I see fear in Alyssa's eyes. She's afraid of Oliver. Why and what did he do to her?

"You mean you don't want us to know?" he says snottily. "Well, we'll change that. Winston, go get the box out of the Royer."

When Winston comes back inside, he's carrying a nondescript shoebox. He sets it on the kitchen bar and opens it up. He removes a remote control that has a small pop-up video screen, along with a small, clear plastic container that appears to have insects inside.

"Let them go," Oliver tells Winston.

The box of bugs is placed on the counter; Winston sets up the remote, and the top of the clear box opens up. What looks like large flies leave the container and fly around the house.

"See," Oliver tells us, "OWL has tricked-out electronics that are far superior to any of the FBI's so-called surveillance systems. Watch and learn."

The flies swarm around the room; there must be at least a dozen of them. Winston watches the video screen as the insects go from room to room, including going upstairs.

Minutes later, all flies return to the clear box, and the lid shuts.

"Find anything?" Oliver asks.

"Not really," replies Winston. "Nothing noticeable. They couldn't find anything of Sarah's in the house, including upstairs in the bedrooms and bathrooms. They matched the DNA of Jack Hackett's clothing in the first bedroom upstairs, along with what could be Amir's stuff in another bedroom. The downstairs has some women's clothing in a closet, so I'll go check."

"Good work, Winston," says Oliver. "Let me know."

The blond approaches me, but he's still standing far enough away that I can't swing or lunge at him—I can't take him down.

"And you, FBI man, I'll ask again: Where is Sarah Colton?"

Again, I answer that I don't know. I don't, because she could be in the containers or outside by that Douglas fir where she and Jeremy meet. Either way, I'm not saying.

Oliver walks over to the office doors, where Scooter is still sitting tall and growling, and shoots two bullets through the glass. Sadly, one hits the dog squarely between the eyes, and the animal drops with a thud to the floor. This monster just killed my mother's dog! I'm mad and ready to grab any weapon close by and beat the tar out of this dude.

Suddenly, Winston comes back from Karen's and my bedroom and is standing behind me in the kitchen.

"Nothing but what looks like his wife's clothing, wherever she is." He pulls out a gun, probably another lame Cobra, and levels it at my head.

Oliver says in a condescending tone, "Another person unaccounted for on this property. Interesting."

Again, I don't say anything. I don't want to give them the pathetic pleasure of saying Karen is dead and buried. It's not like it matters; they don't care about her.

"O-okay. I get it," I say, pretending to placate the room.

Alyssa's holding her head in her hands. She clearly wants no part of this situation. I want to tell the girl who looks so much like Susan that it's okay, that I can fix this, and not to worry, but I'm questioning the sanity of these two men and their actions.

Winston speaks next. "We know Sarah and two of her friends were here months ago, based on the sheriff's report. We know she had communications with your son because we have phone texts. So, is he hiding her whereabouts, or are you?"

Oliver comes over and screams into my face, "You have one minute to tell us where she is or where they went—or else." I could see the rage in his eyes as he points the gun's barrel at my temple. His eyes have the same kind of blackness that druggies high on meth get, where they have no control of their feelings and snap. This guy is dangerous. And he killed our dog.

He pushes me toward the dining room table, his gun still pressed against my skull, and forces me to sit down in a wooden chair. Winston pulls out several zip ties from his jacket pocket and tightly secures my hands behind my back to the chair's dowels and my legs to the chair's legs. The tie's putting pressure on my twisted ankle to the point where it's throbbing. I'm immobile. With no weapon in reach.

Alyssa is crying and repeatedly saying, "No!"

Silently, I pray, Lord, You know the predicament we're in right now. You know what I have to do to protect those I love. Be with me now. Keep me strong and silent. You're in control, not me. I give myself to You in this situation. And God, please be with Alyssa—I see she's hurting and doesn't want to be here. Be with Hack and Amir and protect them if they come home soon. Amen.

The next thing I feel is the butt of a gun slamming into my head, knocking me out.



ALYSSA

"Oliver!" I scream when he whacks Mr. Hackett so hard in the head that the chair starts to tilt over, and the man slumps forward. "Stop it! He didn't do anything, and it's obvious he doesn't know Hack's or Sarah's whereabouts."

"Shut up, Alyssa." A string of profanities follows his command. "And stay right where you are, right in my vision."

"What are we going to do next?" Winston asks.

"Obviously, the tough FBI guy isn't going to give us any answers. We're going to deal with him and then search every inch of this stupid place, including the buildings over there. We'll burn it all down. Sarah and her friends have to be around here somewhere. We'll make them come to us."

I want to scream and say something, but I'm scared that Oliver will kill me like he did the dog. I'm nothing to him now. I try to gather my senses and calm down. This would be the perfect time for Violet to help my blood pressure—but I really don't want its intervention anymore. I'm thankful that

there are no satellites or spying devices here. No connection. If anything, it's a blessing, but how am I going to get out of this?

"Alyssa! Alyssa, pay attention and don't look like you're a zombie!" Oliver yells. "You're a part of this just like we are. Never forget that you were the one who led us here. Now come with us!"

Somehow, I mechanically follow Oliver and Winston, who have removed Mr. Hackett from his chair and put a new zip tie on his hands behind his back. They're dragging him out the front door by his armpits. He lets out a moan or two, like he's trying to say something.

Oliver barks, "Ah, now you're ready to talk? Ready to fess up where your son and that girl are?"

Mr. Hackett is fighting against the two holding him. He spits in Oliver's face, who reciprocates with the smack of the gun against the man's head.

Oliver stops and says to me, as he waves the weapon my direction, "You. Stay on this porch, and don't move an inch. Hear me? Not even an inch. If you dare step off this porch, you'll be next."

I watch in horror as the two drag Mr. Hackett down the two stairs and deposit him on the ground by a broken part of an old tree.

"Ha, this is perfect!" laughs Oliver devilishly. "It's all set up for us. Winston, sit FBI on this stump over here and watch him closely while I prepare the rope that's hanging down. See it? This is too easy."

No. No. I'm frozen standing by the porch railing. What can I do? This shouldn't be happening!

Mr. Hackett is now talking, saying, "To God be the glory," over and over again, louder and louder.

"Shut up, old man!" yells Oliver. "You can call on your worthless god who won't be saving you now. Or if you say 'to Mastema be the glory,' maybe I'll forgive you for everything!"

The noose is put around Mr. Hackett's neck. Oliver is pulling one end of the rope to force the man to stand upright. Winston assists in getting him to stand up on the stump so that the rope's made tauter.

Mr. Hacket is slowly repeating the "To God be the glory." He says it with resignation—but there's something else. Reverence. Respect. Acceptance.

Tears are running down my face as I watch Oliver and Winston stand in the driveway, ten feet from Mr. Hackett, ready to yank the rope one more time, which will end Hack's father's life.

"Winston, go kick out the stump below FBI. We're done with him."

The OWL peon follows his order.

The man falls. As a snap is heard, I watch the poor man's body freely dangle.

A gunshot vibrates through the air.

The body collapses to the ground.

Then everything happens so quickly that I can't comprehend it all.

Winston and Oliver pivot and face the road, aimlessly shooting their weapons. A knife zooms through the air, from behind the Range Rover, and instantly connects with Winston's neck, causing him to hit the ground. A man appears,

coming from the passenger's side of the SUV. From what I can tell, it's the older Middle Eastern man from the photographs who could be military. He approaches Oliver, who has his gun pointed in his direction. A shot is fired, but the guy stealthily dodges the bullet and grabs both of Oliver's feet, tackling him to the gravel. The two roll around, back and forth, but the guy overcomes Oliver, and I hear another shot.

Suddenly, I'm grabbed from behind through the open front door. A hand covers my mouth, and I hear words I'd never expect: "Alyssa, it's Hack. You're safe now."

I turn and fall into two welcoming arms and sob.

"It's over. But I have to check on my dad," Hack says quickly as he releases me and rushes to his father. I follow but purposely don't get close.

The military man is at Mr. Hackett's side, checking his vitals.

"Is he alive?" Hack asks. "Is he okay?"

"He's still breathing, Hack," says the older man. "But it doesn't look good. His neck's broken."

"Dad! Dad, can you hear me?" cries Hack, as he leans over his father. "I love you, Dad. I heard what you said, too. "To God be the glory."

The military man looks at me, trying to offer me some encouragement in a small way. He says quietly to Hack, "This is all my fault. I couldn't get to your dad fast enough after I shot down the rope. The fall broke his neck. I'm sorry, Hack. I didn't want it to go down this way."

It's obvious that Mr. Hackett has taken his last breath—Hack is now hugging him and weeping silently. The

man is rubbing my friend's shoulders and grabbing him tightly, also crying. I remain still, watching the tender, heartbreaking moment, not knowing what to do.

When the tears are spent, the military man says to me as he's wiping his face with the back of his arm, "You must be Alyssa. Could you stay with Hack while I go into the house and contact someone? Please?"

I squeak out an "of course," and kneel across from my broken friend. I reach out and put my hand on his as it rests on his deceased father's chest. I know no way to comfort him. "No, Hack, it's my fault. I was the one who led OWL to you. I'm to blame for this mess."

Hack looks at me with his bloodshot eyes and says, "No, Alyssa. God knows. I don't understand it and am devastated. But I do know this: It was the Lord's will that this happened. Somehow, I have to accept that."

I don't understand his reasoning, but we sit on the gravel with his dad's dead body between us, leaning against each other's heads for emotional support.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

When Amir called on the CB, I couldn't understand what he was saying. Something about having Ben and Jeremy come AS-AP to the house because something horrible had occurred.

Neither guy was inside the containers, so I had to run outside where they were digging a new hole for the wastewater and emptying the contents of our portable toilet. "Amir called in a panic!" I said loudly to get their attention. "Something has happened at the big house. He says to hurry."

Without going back inside, they told me to get Aya and meet them at the ATV, which we keep hidden under the bushes on the opposite side of the container entrance.

While Jeremy drove, I sat next to him, with Ben holding Aya on his lap as we bumped around on the uneven terrain. Ben kept telling Aya to hold on to him. She probably shouldn't have come. We knew she was getting closer every day to delivering their child, and a ride in a rickety cart might induce it. But we didn't want to leave her in the containers alone, and Jeremy wanted me to come along.

When we pulled up to the house, there was a black SUV by the garage, and Amir was removing a bulky black trash bag from the house and setting it on the porch.

He said to us without making eye contact, "You need to go inside—all of you."

As I walked up the porch steps, I noticed the rope that hung down on the fallen tree was gone, and something was covered below one of its big branches. Also, there were two tarps spread out on the driveway.

Hack was kneeling next to the long couch, talking to someone, whom I assumed was Brent.

But it wasn't. It was a young girl—well, a pale-faced girl who was younger than I am. She was lying down and shaking.

"We don't want her to go into shock," Amir was telling Hack as they tucked another blanket around her. "Keep her as calm as possible. We don't want her to start hyperventilating again."

Amir pulled Jeremy, Ben, Aya, and me into the kitchen and spoke in a whisper, telling us what happened.

I couldn't believe it! This Alyssa was a traitor and led OWL to the Hackett ranch to hunt me down! OWL was still after me. Will it ever stop? And now Hack's father is dead because of it, because of me. It's so wrong!

Of course, I was furious with this girl, so I walked over next to her, pushing Hack away. I knelt and got in her face.

"Do you know what you've done?" I said with disdain. "How could you?"

Her eyes went wide in fear—the exact reaction I wanted.

Hack moved between us and stopped me in my fury. "No, Sarah, you don't have a clue what happened here. My dad and Alyssa were trying to keep you safe! She was used by OWL."

"How can that be?" I asked. "Look at her arm, she's got an OWL tattoo that has to be spying on us right now. You're the wrong one. She's our enemy." My hatred grew every time I looked at her.

Alyssa—this so-called friend of Hack's—said between shallow breaths, "There's no satellite. Nothing's working. All's offline in Northern Idaho. Solar storm. OWL will launch more."

"Yeah, so you say." I don't believe her. I won't. Anyone who works for OWL is evil. Period.

When Aya and Ben came over to the couch to help Hack, everyone present knew I was mad and frustrated. Jeremy nudged me to go outside with Amir and him. Man, enough already.

As I walked behind them to the front door, I noticed for the first time that the office glass doors had shattered and there was a pool of blood on the wood floor.

I stood on the first step, next to the black bag that Amir had placed there, wondering if it was the family's dog. Most likely, it was the remains of Scooter.

Amir and Jeremy lifted one of the black tarps and moved something that looked like a body dressed in black into the back seat of the SUV.

"This guy, who I'm putting in the car, was the accomplice. The other guy was in charge," Amir explained to us. To me, he said, "I'm a trained assassin who's been in this situation more than once. I had to take them both down because they said they were going to come after you, Sarah. Brent had no choice; guns were on him the entire time. I only wished Hack and I had returned minutes earlier so I could've ended it before it started." Guilt poured from his face.

I felt bad for Amir—I knew he was highly trained, but I doubt I've ever considered how many lives he's taken. Two more have been added to the list; these were in self-defense, but were the others?

He walked over to the other body, which looked like a blond male, and motioned for Jeremy to help. "And this guy, he was high or possessed by the devil. He was out for blood." They lifted the man and put him in the far back of the vehicle.

That meant the other black tarp had to be covering Brent's body. It wasn't touched or removed.

Without speaking, Amir added the bag on the porch to his death collection in the SUV, and we three returned to the house.

"Hack," Amir said as he approached the great room couch, "I need to discuss something with you and your uncle. I know it's too soon and you're processing what has happened, but are you up to it?"

Ben was standing next to Hack and put his arm around his shoulder, trying to comfort him. The kid replied he was.

"Your father's body is still by the tree. I would like to move him with your permission, but something needs to be addressed first."

Hack and Ben nodded.

"I've put the two deceased into their vehicle. I think it would be wise to get rid of any evidence. Alyssa may be right that the satellites aren't tracking us now, but they could be soon. We must quickly get rid of everything. Is it all right with the two of you if we drive the Range Rover to the Black Pond and sink it?"

Ben answered first, "Yes, it'd never be found there. It's plenty deep."

Hack nods positively.

"Great, that's settled. Jeremy and I will do it now. When we come back, we'll wrap Brent's body for burial. Ben and Hack, again, I'm sorry this happened. I never expected it. Thank you, Hack, for sneaking through the house and helping with Alyssa. You did a great job under the tense circumstances. I only wish we had returned ten minutes earlier instead of hanging around the Johnstons' barn with Randy and Rusty."

Ben widened his eyes with amazement. "Wait! You found the horses? Alive?"

"Yes, they somehow made their way to the Johnstons' property and were living in a dilapidated barn."

"Umm, that barn hasn't been used since Brent and I hung out with Scott and Susan in it as kids. It's far enough away from the main house that no one ever uses it. I thought it had collapsed years ago, but apparently not."

"There was a perfect hidden area that must have protected them," said Amir.

"Thank God for small favors," Hack added.

As Jeremy and Amir drove the SUV to the pond to sink with the dead bodies, Aya and I cleaned up the blood and broken glass in the office. We found a box on the counter that contained flies, of all things.

When Aya asked Alyssa what the box was for, she said it was an OWL device that surveyed the house using flies with micro cameras on their backs. I studied the insects. Sure enough, there were super small devices strapped to their backs with wires going into their heads. My, what else does OWL have to spy on people?

When Jeremy and Amir returned, the men prepared Brent's body for burial and placed it in the garage in another one of the long trough shipping boxes.

"A light snow is falling," Ben reported as they entered the house. "The ground may not be frozen completely yet, so I hope we can bury Brent tomorrow before the snow gets too deep."

Aya had defrosted one of the casseroles we made after Karen died, and it was in the oven. I doubt we'll eat much. It's been such an emotional day.

I'm at the kitchen bar waiting for the meal to be ready. I'm using some blank paper from the office to write out my thoughts before I forget them.

My biggest issue, I admit, is that I'm wary of Alyssa. I'm intentionally keeping my distance from her.

Sarah thought it would be good for me to pick up where my father left off. I could never fill my dad's shoes in any way possible, but I'm comforted to be back, continuing our story.

I was scared when Amir spotted the Range Rover by the garage as we walked back from the Johnstons'. Immediately, he went into his military mode, silently giving me hand signals to sneak behind our house and enter through the back door. My heart has never beaten that hard—so hard I could feel it pump through my body with every step. Of course, I had my dad's Glock in my hand as I snuck through the house.

Finding Alyssa on the porch was a godsend. I flashed Amir with a hand sign that I knew what he wanted me to do next. And then he performed the incredible by shooting the bullseye on the rope around Dad's neck. But unfortunately, it was nanoseconds too late and not his fault.

I'm crushed that we lost Dad. And how it happened. But I'm more than grateful that he became a believer and that his love for Christ shone brightly as he died. Could I do that? Could I confess that the Lord is my savior as I'm being executed or martyred? That's apparently what may happen to us believers during the Tribulation. I honestly don't think I'd be thinking about Jesus as I was dying. But Dad did—he's my hero.

The sad part is that I'm an orphan now. Both my parents are deceased. That's the hard part to understand—the reason why. Why now, when we have years to survive? Why did Dad have to die? I'm sure God has His purpose in all things, but I can't comprehend this. I hurt, yet I don't know how to convey it or deal with the fact that I only have Ben and Aya now. I think of the Bible verse in Isaiah 55 that I read yester-

day: For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. That's the only reason I can accept. I don't know why.

Another thing: I'm not the only orphan on this land. Now that I think about it, everyone else is except for Amir, whose father is alive—or was the last time he heard from him in Israel. And several of us have lost our parents in hard ways—sickness, accidents, and now murder. On the positive side, a few were raptured. I find it interesting regarding the timing and how God's in control and knows what each of us can handle. Maybe our experiences can help those of us left behind to deal better with our losses.

Alyssa. Now that's another fascinating topic. God arranged to bring her to our ranch in the most unbelievable way—her connection to OWL. I'd never expected that link! Crazy if I had to connect the dots on that one. But God knew—He's always got perfect timing. Always.

And yes, she's more beautiful in person than on a monitor or phone screen. But right now, I'm not going there. Nope. No way. Focus, Hack. Focus. You got this.

She's sitting next to me on the great room couch. I think she's feeling better. She's been through so much in the last hour. I have my arm on the back of the leather couch behind her. I wouldn't dare touch her right now. She seems fragile, maybe broken. She needs God's love; that's what could heal her completely.

As I'm praying silently for my friend, she quietly says to me, "Hack, thanks for saving me." She looks into my eyes, hers filled with immense exhaustion.

"It wasn't me. It was God, really," I say as I remove my arm and put it on my lap.

"Yes, you did. You were there at the worst time, for both of us." She reaches over and holds my hand. I'm nervous, hoping she doesn't think it's sweaty or clammy. But at the same time, the wonderful feeling tingles through my body.

"God is the reason, Alyssa," I say. "Maybe you'll understand when things calm down."

"Hack," she says as she adjusts her hand in mine. "Do you think you can help me remove this e-tat?" She turns her wrist so the ink mark is facing upward, and I can get a better view of it. "It's not working right now since it's not online, but I don't want it on me a second longer. It's connected to my phone, which is in the SUV. Oh no—it's with my duffle bag at the bottom of your pond."

I tell her I'm sorry about her stuff as I continue to hold her hand, pulling it closer to examine the insert. "Is it wired into your body?"

"I was told it wasn't the last time it was updated, but I couldn't watch the procedure, so I'm not sure. But I want it gone."

She tells me about her AI companion, which she named Violet, and how it became an obsessive support system that seemed to have switched on her recently. It reminded me of Sarah's implant and how Numen wanted control.

"You know OWL will be sending up more satellites, don't you? You know their goal is 24/7 surveillance of everyone," she says, explaining how the cities with a population of 100,000 or more are targeted first, so we may have some time.

"I understand," I say, "But will OWL be able to track the bodies of those goons who brought you here? Do you think the sunken vehicle can be monitored, too?"

Sadly, she lets go of my hand. "I'm unsure. The guys both have brain interfaces that connect to OWL, so it's possible. However, your uncle mentioned that the Black Pond is deep, and remember, satellite cameras are usually unable to go through water or metal, so I think that's the best place to hide them."

We sat there until dinner was ready. I saw Amir head into the office and stay there for a while. Scooter's blood had been cleaned up by the women in there, but I don't know what Amir's doing. Then it dawns on me—he could be reassembling Dad's Glock that was on the desk. The guy is meticulous in everything, making sure all the i's are dotted and t's are crossed. When he comes out of the room, I flash him a thank-you hand sign. He's a good friend.

Meanwhile, Alyssa and I are discussing coding. I've never had a relationship with the opposite sex that was incredibly normal and interesting at the same time, despite the day's tragic events.



ALYSSA

When the two guys named Amir and Jeremy returned from getting rid of Oliver, Winston, and the SUV, I started to feel better and was sitting up on the sofa with Hack next to me.

Hack's been wonderful—so attentive, unlike any other male I've met. He keeps asking how I'm feeling or hands me

more water to drink. You would think he would be a huge mess after what happened to his father.

Ben and Aya are clearly in love, and she looks like she's going to have that baby any second now. The wife is on the quiet side; I don't know if it's due to her Asian background or not. She's kind, too, offering me some calming tea she says has chamomile, lavender, lemon balm, and valerian root. She added some honey to it, and I have to say, it's delicious, even if I'm more of a coffee drinker.

I can't figure out the Jeremy guy yet. He's nice but standoffish; maybe because it's obvious he and Sarah have some sort of thing going on. I want to gag when he looks at her. It's like an extreme case of puppy love.

But I don't like how Sarah continues to glare at me, as if I'm the one who killed Hack's dad.

When we sat down for dinner, it was awkward because Amir gave the blessing. Here this guy is some kind of mercenary and sharpshooter, yet he's thanking God for today and for how Brent showed his love for Him until the second he died. Weird. We also held hands during grace. Because I was seated between Hack and Sarah, I had to hold both their hands. Don't get me wrong, holding Hack's is not a problem at all. I sorta enjoy his touch. But Sarah? Well, I'll put it this way—she was squeezing my hand too hard—as if she wanted to strangle it.

"Amir," says Hack. "Alyssa wants to remove the e-tattoo on her arm. Do you think you can do it for her?"

"Gladly," he answers quickly, too fast in my opinion. I mean, he's like a mega soldier, so why would I want him to cut into my body?

Sarah surprises me when she says, "Amir's a doctor. Believe me, he can cut me anytime—and he did on OWL's implant. BTW, thanks again, Doctor. Looks like my foot's healed, and you know I'm not limping much anymore."

I'm confused until Ben vaguely explains what happened to Sarah the day of the missings in three short sentences. Then he redirects the conversation by mentioning that the sun's going down soon, and they should head back—to wherever they came from, I assume.

Hack spoke up, "Why don't you all spend the night here. I mean, the place is large enough, and I doubt Aya wants to get back in that bumpy cart to drive back."

I say nothing. It's not my place, but I haven't thought about where I'd stay or where to go next.

Hack continues, "Think this out. Ben and Aya could sleep downstairs in my parents' bedroom. Sarah and Alyssa could have the two bedrooms upstairs that share a Jack and Jill bathroom. Jeremy could move to my room so he has his own bathroom. And Amir and I could stay in the outbuilding."

"We don't want to kick you out of the house, Hack," Ben says. "This place is now yours as much as ours. Like I've said before, we don't mind the containers."

I catch the last word, but I have no clue what it means.

"Whatever. I feel uncomfortable staying here with Dad and Mom gone. I think my idea makes sense. Why don't we try it a night and see?"

As Amir scoops up another helping of casserole, he says, "I think it's workable. This way, we can keep a better eye on

Aya in case she goes into labor. Just by looking at her, I've noticed the baby has dropped. It could be any time now."

Aya's rubbing her tummy as she looks at her husband. Man, they're cute together.

"And," Amir continues, "I'll be glad to bunk upstairs above Hack's room, where there's plenty of room to stretch out. Plus, I can keep an eye out for any intruders through the upstairs front and side windows over the garage."

"Okay," Ben says, "but I've got to go get Eyes first; I'll be right back."

I have no clue what he means by "eyes," but I'm determined to go with the flow.

Apparently, it's settled. I'm thankful that I have a room all to myself and don't have to share one with Sarah. I'll make sure to keep out of her way when she uses the bathroom. I can tell she doesn't like me.

Ben returns within a half hour with a cat crate and introduces me to Eyes. Ah, now I get it. The animal is adorable and likes to sit on my lap when he's not on Ben's.

After dinner, everyone seems to work together seamlessly to clean up and get the bedrooms ready by changing sheets and bath towels. I feel bad that I've kicked Amir out of his room, but he tells me he prefers to be on his own. It makes sense from the multi-faceted dude of many talents. I wonder what else he can do.

About an hour later, Amir carries his medical bag to the kitchen counter and asks me to sit down on one of the barstools.

"You ready to be operated on?" he asks.

Hack sits next to me, saying he'll be my anesthetic by keeping my mind off what Amir's doing. The comment is adorable; he can be pretty funny at times.

After the mercenary/doctor examines the tat and picks at its edges, he tells me he's going to numb the area and go to work.

Silly as ever, Hack asks me to look into his charming brown eyes and stare only at them. How could I not?

In less than three minutes, the insert is fully removed. I'm impressed because I never felt any pain. In fact, there's less pressure when it's taken out than when it was put into my arm.

Amir hands the ghastly device—with wires attached—to Jeremy, who cleans off the blood and examines it with a magnifying glass that he got from the office. Amir says no stitches were necessary, but he applies petroleum jelly and a bandage. He gives me an unopened packet of Vaseline and tells me to change the dressing daily. If I apply a thick amount of the greasy stuff, it'll help heal the wound faster.

"What a trip," Jeremy says. "This thing has such a small microchip in it. But I don't think it's the Mark of the Beast—it has to be a smaller, simpler, and less invasive design."

"True," Amir says. "It can't be the MoB because that's implemented at the halfway point of the Tribulation. It's a prototype, and there'll be plenty of them before it arrives, forcing a person to get one if they want to buy or sell anything."

I have no idea what they're talking about, but I tell them how it worked, with Hack explaining how coding would be done. For once, I feel that I'm being listened to when I speak

about my work at OWL. Even Sarah asks a few questions about how the satellites are designed and how I blocked the quadrant that covered the Hackett Ranch.

When we go upstairs, I hate to ask Sarah for anything, but I tell her I have no belongings because everything I had with me was in the Royer.

Without any negativity in her tone, she tells me she'll be right back. Minutes later, she brings me a woman's night-shirt, saying it's Hack's mom's and should fit me. I thank her for it as I go into the bathroom to clean myself with a wash-cloth and change.

I put on the soft garment, wondering if it had been worn the days before Karen died. Then I collect the OWL clothing I've been wearing and remind myself to see if I could burn them tomorrow—I wouldn't be surprised if OWL had trackers in them, including the shoes. When I look at my bandaged hand, I feel completely stripped of that company as I climb into bed.

As I lie in the darkness, I reflect on the last several months of my life. From fleeing Dirk the Jerk, working for OWL, Violet's admonishing, Oliver's unwanted advances, and Mr. Hackett's death, too much has happened. I believe there's no happenstance but a reason for all of these bizarre circumstances that brought me to a 260-acre ranch with people who care about each other. I don't know what they have that makes them so receptive to their lives, but it's something I want to figure out.

And Hack—he could be a keeper, even if he's years younger than me.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

I t was strange when the sunlight woke me up this morning. When we're in the containers, our natural body rhythms determine our sleep patterns. The brightness seeping into the house was refreshing.

I heard Alyssa move around in the bathroom that's connected to both our rooms. She could be sick, but it was hard to say. I knew if I went through what she did...

Wait—I did go through dealing with OWL when I had the Numen implant. I did feel woozy and ill once it was all over by the tree, but I had shot myself, so my circumstances were a bit different.

I should feel sorry for the girl; she has no one except Hack now. At least, I have my sister in Florida, whom I haven't heard from in months, and I have these dear friends. And, I have Jeremy, whom I don't think I could live without.

"Are you okay?" I asked, as I jiggled the locked doorknob on my side of the Jack and Jill.

"Oh yes, sorry. I'll be right out. I didn't mean to take too much time in here."

Alyssa unlocked my side of the door and opened it. She was dressed in Karen's nightshirt, looking worse than she did yesterday. Like exhausted to the core.

"Hey," I said, "why don't you go back to bed? You look beat. I can bring up some food, if you want."

"No, no thanks. I don't want to put you out. Plus, I'm not very hungry. I think I'm still upset over yesterday," she said as she opened the other door to her bedroom. "But if you don't mind, I'd love to lie in bed a little longer. Do you think that's okay? And maybe I can take a shower later, if water's not a scarce commodity here."

I laughed at her concern; it was thoughtful. "No, we're on a well. You're good as long as you don't empty the hot water tank by taking a super long shower."

She smiled at me. It was the first time she looked a tinge happy.

But the smile vanished quickly as she excused herself, returned to her bedroom, and shut the door quickly behind her.

When I came downstairs, Aya had already started breakfast. Coffee was on, and she was frying up some bacon and making rolls. I asked how she felt.

"Large."

Jeremy came bounding down the stairs, greeting me with a hug from behind and asking me how I slept. When I told him about the sun shining so brightly in my room, he said the same thing. It's weird staying in a real house again.

Ben arrived from the downstairs bedroom, asking if we'd heard from Hack or Amir after he kissed his wife and patted her belly. "Not yet," Jeremy said. "Maybe they've already headed to feed the livestock. Wasn't it nice to sleep in? I like being closer to the animals—less travel time."

Ben went into the office and came back with a few walkietalkies. "Since we're hanging around the big house now, we can use these since they're in range." He took them apart and changed their batteries at the kitchen bar, adding, "We've only got three of them, so we have to divvy them up. How do you think we should do it, Jeremy?"

"Your wife could deliver your child any day now," he answered. "I think one should always stay in the house or wherever she is in case she needs us. Amir should get one to be on call—I'm sure he's used to that job. Maybe you should have the last one since you're the daddy-to-be."

I laughed at Jeremy's thinking process, but it did make sense. Ben agreed, too.

"Have you heard from our new guest this morning?" Aya asked me. "Did Karen's nightshirt fit her? I'm sure we can give her more clothes. Poor dear."

"She's exhausted. She said she wanted to stay in bed. I get it. If I got thrown in with our tight-knit group, I'd be leery and want some space."

Jeremy smiled at me and said that I'm extra thoughtful. Well, that could be, but I don't trust Alyssa.

Hack and Amir entered the front door after stamping their feet on the porch to shake off the snow from their shoes.

"Man, it's cold out there," Amir said as he walked over to the coffee pot and poured himself and Hack a cup each, leaving plenty of room for milk.

"This is nothing," Ben remarked. "It's barely freezing out. Or did you get cold sleeping in that attic above the garage? Did you notice that there's no insulation up there? Guess we could add some."

"I knew, and I'm used to the cold. Israel doesn't get much snow unless you're in higher elevations. We experienced plenty of it in the IDF when we were in other countries. The key was thick, dry socks. The snow has a different feeling to it this time, compared to that dump weeks ago."

"Idaho gets both wet and dry snow," Ben said. "This one is drier, which is good because it shovels easier. I'm hoping we can bury Brent today, if you all don't mind."

I looked at Hack. He winced exactly like his dad used to do—as if to wipe away the memory and forge onward, but he added that it makes sense.

While our guest continued to stay in bed, Aya told us that she's going to putter around downstairs while the rest of us take Brent's body out to the family plot. We made sure she had a walkie-talkie within hand's reach every second we're gone.

Using the same system as we did with Karen, the body was transferred by the ATV's cart. The men prepared the grave, which was so close to Karen's that their shovels often connected with her container. This was done on purpose because the recently moved dirt was easier to handle and wasn't as frozen as the surrounding area.

Ben was sweating by the time we lowered Brent's box into the ground. Again, he was the one who talked first. His speech was longer, reminiscing about his brother's love for him and the family. He made us laugh by repeating comical stories of their growing up on the ranch and verified that Brent's now in Heaven with his wife and other family members. The tears flowed among the five of us in attendance, exacerbated because his death was unexpected and unnecessary.

Next, Hack offered to say a few words. They're spoken softly, tenderly, telling us how much he loved and respected his father and how he hopes he'll be as brave if he's ever challenged to stand up for Christ.

I thought about his words as tears ran down my face. Could I be like Brent? Or would I cave and falter? Again, I consider how I wish to be like Esther in the Bible, who made a stand for what she believed, like Brent did, even though he was a believer for such a short time. I prayed, Lord, let me be a shining light for You like Esther and Brent were.

It started to snow again, so the men hurriedly filled the grave with dirt and packed it down.

As they finished their work, Ben mentioned, "Hack, I'll carve markers for both of your parents in the garage over the next month or two. It'd be a good winter project."

"Can I help you make them?" asked Hack. "We should do one marker with both their names and dates. It's a testament to how they were married for twenty-five years, and I know that was important to them."

Right when Ben agreed to the plan, both Ben's and Amir's walkie-talkies squawked.

"Hello—Help—Come help—Please."

The words were broken by static. It had to be Alyssa, whom we never instructed how to use the devices. She must've kept her finger on the talk button so we couldn't respond. She sounded panicky.

"Please come. Now. Aya's on the floor in the mud room. In pain. She slipped in some water. Hurry, if you can hear this message. Please."

Her words were repeated several times.

Ben dropped his shovel and started running to the big house with Amir quickly following behind. Jeremy, Hack, and I grabbed the tools and rushed after them.



HACK

When Jeremy, Sarah, and I enter the house, we see that Ben and Amir have moved Aya to the downstairs bedroom. I hear Amir ask Ben to get towels and washcloths from the bathroom.

Always willing to give a hundred percent, Sarah asks if she can assist, running back and forth for supplies and informing Jeremy and me of the status of the baby. Apparently, Aya's water broke while she was in the mud room, and Alyssa heard her cries for help.

Dressed in one of my mother's sleeping shirts, Alyssa looks scared once again—as if she had somehow messed things up, but I tell her everything's fine and thank her for alerting us.

As the hours ticked by, Alyssa somehow disappeared because I couldn't find her anywhere downstairs, and I'm afraid to knock on her closed bedroom door when I check it.

As for Aya, I can't say I like the moans and screams I hear from the bedroom from time to time, but I hear that's part of the process of delivering a baby.

When I look outside, it's snowing; maybe another inch has collected on the ground, but it doesn't need shoveling yet.

I'm restless and want to avoid hearing Aya's painful sounds, so I go to the barn and feed the cattle, horses, sheep, and chickens, which is much easier now that there are so few of them. Then I change out the trail camera's SD card, which is attached to a tree near the South Pasture. I consider sending up a drone, but I'd have to go to the containers to get one, and it would have to be done manually with its remote control. Instead, I return to my outbuilding and clean it to make it look neater. Now that Amir lives upstairs, I don't want him to think I'm a slob.

Three hours later, I return to the big house. The minute I enter, I hear Ben declare, "We have a little girl!"

The baby's wail is enough of an announcement.

Amir comes out of the room with a look of contentment on his face, saying, "Praise God, she and her mom are doing well. It's nice to have a newborn on Earth again." He goes to the kitchen sink, removes his surgical gloves, and washes his hands and elbows.

I ponder how many babies have been born to date on this planet since the Rapture happened.

With no sign of Alyssa, I walk upstairs and knock on her door. "Hey, are you okay in there? Do you need anything?"

"Hack? Yeah, I'm fine. I'm super tired. I'm trying to sleep. You don't mind, do you?" Her tone feels forced, like she's been crying or emotional.

"Are you hungry? I don't think you've had anything to eat all day. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine," she replies. "I don't feel that great, so nothing sounds good to eat right now. But thanks for asking."

"Let me know if you need me, okay? And did you hear the news?" I say as I stand at her door, wanting to help but not knowing how.

"Yes, I heard a baby cry. A girl."

"Ben's so excited. Both Aya and the baby are doing well. But no way would I want to have a kid right now."

"Yeah," was the only word I heard through the door.

I head downstairs to congratulate my uncle and aunt. Ben's smiling from ear to ear as he holds his little girl and shows her off.

"We're naming her Hope. Hope Mercy Hackett," Ben declares.

Sarah coos at the baby in my uncle's arms as I peek at the tiny child, saying, "That's the perfect name for her! And what we need at a time like this."

Ben asks me if I want to hold my cousin, but I immediately say no. There's no way I could be responsible for something so fragile and less than an hour old. I'd be afraid of dropping her. I'm amazed that the wee one looks so perfect in this broken, fallen world that we live in. Thank You, God, for this blessing in our lives!

The rest of the day is a buzz as we get used to having a new life among us. Aya and the baby stay in the bedroom most of the time, with Ben and Amir checking on them hourly.

Later that afternoon, Jeremy, Amir, and I feed the livestock and walk the two miles to the Johnstons' to check on Randy and Rusty, whose ears perk up when we approach them, and they give us a soft nicker. Ben recommended giving the last of the supplements to the horses, so that was our goal. We considered moving them back to our property and putting them in the big barn with the other animals, but Ben and Amir thought it would be best to wait until they were a little healthier and the barn was better prepared.

As we walked back home through the snow, the three of us discuss the changes on the ranch since they arrived. We've been through a lot, and now we see the joy of a baby's birth. Since none of us are parents, we're glad the baby isn't our responsibility, and we tease each other about how we'd handle fatherhood.

"Hack," Amir says as we walk in the twilight, "you'd make a fine dad because your father was an exemplary example. But you're not even old enough yet, so you've got plenty of time. I'm probably considered ancient to become a father at my age. Forty is up there, and I prefer to be a loner nowadays. I doubt God will be giving me a wife anytime soon, and I'm good with that, especially since we're in the Tribulation."

"What about you, Jeremy?" I ask as we round the bend in the road to our house, where there's a row of tall pines. "Do you want to be a father sometime?"

"Yes, I wouldn't mind," he replies. "I'm working on it. Just waiting for God's timing, which is seeming to take forever these days."

Amir and I laugh. We know he's talking about Sarah, but we don't mention her name.

Three days later, we're sitting around a nice fire in the fireplace during the evening. I love the snap, crack, pop, and

smell of burning wood, especially when we use pine kindling because the scent fills the great room.

Alyssa still hasn't come out of her room. She's been bed rotting the entire time and refuses to come out. Even Eyes has scratched on her door to get her attention, but she ignores everyone. Only Sarah talked briefly to her. She won't answer me when I approach her door; I wonder if she's mad at me for some reason. Sarah says to leave her alone. The only thing any of us does is put food at her door, which she picks up when no one's around. Strange girl, if you ask me. I know she's dealing with something, but...

Between the noisy baby and invisible Alyssa, Amir and I spend more time outside or in my outbuilding. I've only lived in the big house for a couple of months since we first moved here; it has never felt comfortable. I'm more at home in my small room or in the containers. I help Amir move stuff above the garage, and we add some unopened insulation we found. He never complains. My dad was right, that warrior dude can put up with anything.

We've finished removing anything of value where the horse barn stood and stored it in the add-on rooms. We completely cleaned one area by the cattle barn's front doors and set up two enclosed stalls using panels from the horse barn for Randy and Rusty, so that they can stay next to each other but in separate pens.

When we collected the horses and brought them back to our ranch, Ben said they can mix with our livestock, but they can't eat the same grain-based feed designed for our cattle, or they could get seriously sick. Well, that's settled since we're almost out of it. Ben said diseases can be transmitted between the horses and cattle, so it's best to keep them apart in the barn.

Since it's winter, the animals eat more, so Ben's in contact with Dale Choates on the shortwave to see if he has any advice.

Amir and I continue to eat our meals at the big house. It's not that we've been avoiding anyone. I think we're both the kind of guys who need to be alone.

Hope is a good baby and already sleeping well, according to Aya and Ben. They would know because they've been parents before, but how would I know? I freak out anytime she cries, not knowing if she's hungry again, has gas, or needs her diaper changed. How do parents figure out these things?

I held her on my lap while I was sitting on the sofa—Sarah insisted while she went to turn the laundry over because Aya was trying to nap and Ben was in the office.

When I tell Amir that I'm concerned about Alyssa being stuck in her room and eating so little, he says, "I agree, but she's processing something and needs her space as much as we do, Hack. Maybe she's insecure that she's not a part of our group. Or maybe it has to do with OWL and the guilt from working there. Or it could even be about God."

"I've never thought of it that way, Amir. But shouldn't we worry about her not eating?"

"At least she's taking the food into her room—even if we don't know if she's ingesting it. I'll talk with Sarah to see if she can help since she shares the bathroom with her."

"Okay. I hope she comes out of her shell. It's almost Christmas, and I don't want her to be sad during the holiday."



ALYSSA

"Alyssa!" Sarah hollers as she pounds on the bathroom door connecting to my bedroom. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say as I sit on the floor next to the bed.

She now knocks instead of pounds, "You've been in there over three days, and it's time for you to come out."

"I don't want to."

"Please let me come in, then."

"No, thanks."

"Amir says he needs to check your tattoo wound to make sure it's not getting infected. I told him I would. So, it's up to you—do you want me to do it, or him? You don't know how persistent that military man can be. Your choice: him or me."

I sigh. I prefer staying in this room for the rest of my life and never dealing with another human being again—or another AI companion.

Sarah asks, "Have you been applying the Vaseline to it every day and changing the bandage?"

"Yes, but I ran out of bandages."

"Okay, I'll be back."

I can hear her leaving the bathroom and going through her bedroom into the hall.

Still wearing Hack's mother's clothes, I get up off the floor, unlock and crack open the bathroom door, and sit on the bed after quickly straightening the comforter. I look around the room. It's not too messy. I've tried to keep it neat, but some of my OWL clothing is on a dresser, and the rest is in a shredded pile of fabric on the floor near the trash basket.

"Ah, I'm glad you unlocked the door," Sarah says as she enters through the bathroom, carrying a box of medical supplies. "Let's look at that wound, okay?"

I don't make eye contact with her, and she doesn't with me as I hold out my arm for inspection.

"This looks good. And it's not bleeding. Amir said that it may need to breathe, so no bandage is needed except when sleeping, so you don't get it dirty."

I don't speak. I still think she doesn't like me, but at least, at this second, she seems to care.

She puts some extra Band-Aids on the nightstand. "Oh, I noticed all those strips of material. I don't mean to be nosy, but are you planning to make something?"

"No. They're my OWL clothes—or what's left of them."

"What's with the shredded pieces?" she asks.

"If you must know, I've been taking everything apart and finding trackers in them. Look in the trash basket."

She says, "I hate OWL," as she retrieves the handful of mini trackers and looks closely at them.

Her comment surprises me because it's exactly how I feel. "Why would you hate them?" I ask.

"Oh, girl! Let me tell you my story." She sits next to me on the bed and explains how she was implanted with a brain device so others like Hack could read her mind. I'm blown away when she tells me how she learned her husband had disappeared, how she had fallen down her condo stairs, shot herself in the head accidentally, and later pretended to kill herself to get away from a company called Numen, which OWL bought out. Quite a story.

"Hack and I talked or texted often, yet he never told me about you and your friends coming to the ranch," I say.

"No, that was because he knew you worked for OWL; he felt it was important to protect me from them. It wasn't about you."

"Is that why you don't like me?"

"No, Alyssa. I was leery of you because I thought you came to the ranch to spy on me. But when you wanted to remove OWL's tattoo and started searching your clothing for trackers, I finally understand that you and I are the same—we don't want anything to do with OWL, right?"

"Yes!" I tell her enthusiastically. The weight of worry leaves my shoulders.

When I tell her about Violent being my AI companion, she says she experienced the concept of having a computer controlling every aspect of your life.

"And you named her Violet after your grandmom? Interestingly, the word 'violet' means purple, beauty, and grace, but I think it also can mean isolation, alienation, or an overwhelming sense of existential mystery. And that's exactly what it was doing to you, right?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh?"

She confesses, "I'm sorry I misjudged you, Alyssa. I was more concerned about myself than your needs at the time. I shouldn't have jumped to the wrong conclusion when you arrived. Will you forgive me? Can we be friends?"

A tear starts to form in my eye, but I push it away. I've never had a true girlfriend—and I won't consider Violet one. I nod with approval.

Then Sarah hugs me. I've never had that happen, either from a female or an AI.

"Good," she says, "I'm glad that's over between us. What do you want to do about your clothes? Did they all have trackers in them?"

"The jacket, which was neat to wear because it keeps your body the perfect temperature, had four of them! Each of my shoes and the baseball cap had them, as did the T-shirt I was wearing. See that pile there? I need to get rid of it in case I missed any of the trackers. But now I have nothing to wear."

"And I only gave you something to sleep in. How insensitive of me!" Sarah slaps her forehead. "But it looks like Karen's clothes fit you, so let me get you more of them."

"I know she's dead," she asks, "but will anyone mind me wearing them? Like, will it bother Hack to see them on me?"

"I doubt it. Men rarely notice much, and you *need* something to wear. I'll be right back."

Again, she leaves the room and is gone for ten minutes. When she comes back, she's got an armful of clothes.

"Check these out. I scored big." On the bed, she lays a nice array of sweaters, jeans, shirts, underwear, and more. The selection is plenty, all matching in blue except for the undergarments. "I think this color goes best with your eyes, Alyssa."

"Thanks, these are perfect." I don't know what to say.

Then she adds, "Next, we need to get you showered and cleaned up. I brought a pair of Karen's scissors that she used to cut Brent's hair. Would you mind me taking a stab at changing your hairstyle? Only if you want me to."

"You don't have to do all that for me, Sarah," I say. "But it would be nice to look more presentable. I'll admit, I look pretty bad right now."

"Yeah, duh," she says as she laughs. "Three down days can do a lot of damage for a woman."

When I'm done taking a shower and washing my hair, I come out of my side of the bathroom, but I don't find Sarah. As I change into a sky-blue cable knit sweater and jeans, I notice all the remains of OWL's clothing have been removed from the room, including the trackers that I put in the trash basket.

Sarah comes bounding up the stairs and into my room, "I've found some shoes too; I hope they fit."

"You're too good to me, Sarah. You really are."

She answers, "You say that now, but you may not after I'm done cutting your hair."

We go into our bathroom, and she combs out my curls. It takes us a while to decide how short to cut it and whether I should have bangs or not.

As she makes the first cut, she looks at me in the mirror and asks, "I don't want to be nosy, and please tell me if I've crossed a line, but I've been hearing you in the bathroom throwing up the last few mornings. Do you think you could be pregnant?"

I look at her—she's so much smarter than I thought. And kind. And helpful.

"Yes." I've been fighting to admit it to myself, so I struggle with being honest with someone I've just friended.

"I thought so. Do you want to talk about it yet?"
"I don't know," I say.

"That's fair enough," she says as she combs another section of my hair to cut.

"I don't want it," I announce. "Do you think Amir could help me get rid of it?"

She replies, "First off, your baby is not an 'it,' even at this stage—it's a he or she, a child given by God to you. I know because I've been in your shoes."

I'm surprised by her candidness when I barely know her.

Sarah explains how she found out she was pregnant, didn't tell her husband, and decided to have an abortion. But then the Rapture—what she calls the missings event—happened, and she lost the baby. She tells me she doesn't go a day without thinking about that child.

"And the other thing is that Amir would never end the life of a human being. He's taken the Hippocratic Oath, so I know that he'd never perform an abortion, especially now since he's a Christian."

"Okay, but what if I can't love this child in me—what if I hate *him* or *her*?"

"Why would you think that way?" asks Sarah, then adds, "Oh, I need to cut a little shorter on this side. It looks lopsided."

"Maybe a little bit. It looks good to me. And about the baby, it was conceived in hate, not love."

"Okay on the hair—but not on the child. How did it happen? If you want to tell me, Alyssa, I'm listening." She stops what she's doing, puts the scissors down, and stares at me again in the mirror.

"I was date-raped."

"Oh, I'm sorry! That's horrible."

"Even worse, it was the blond guy, Oliver, who is now at the bottom of the Black Pond, which, believe me, I'm fine with." She could tell I'm still angry about it.

"I understand. That's terrible. But God still allowed you to get pregnant, and perhaps having this Oliver out of the picture is the best thing that could've happened for you and your baby, don't you think?"

"Maybe. But what will the others say when they learn about this baby? Will they reject me because of how it happened?"

Sarah almost laughs as she says, "Hardly, girlfriend, you must realize there are *no* children in the world right now—okay, except for Hope, who may be the only one in the entire state of Idaho—because God was merciful and removed them at the ideal time before the Tribulation started. And now you, yes *you*, carry a baby! To me, that's a wonderful blessing!"

I didn't understand her talking about God's mercy and the Tribulation, but I can see her point that there are no children on the planet—or maybe only the handful who were conceived after the missings happened and have been born. Maybe she's right in that I'm a special mother carrying this child, despite Oliver being the father.

"Let me blow-dry your hair, and let's see how you look," she says when we're finished.

I was impressed by the results of thick curls lightly touching my shoulders. I looked good, although I'm pale and emaciated from forcing myself not to eat for the last several days. I was hoping to starve myself and the baby.

"Now, tell me, Alyssa," my new friend says as she walks around the new me in my bedroom, "are you ready to go downstairs and show everyone how beautiful you look? Hack says he wants us all to help him find the perfect Christmas tree."

I cautiously follow her down the stairs, hoping I'll be well received.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

I was amazingly pleased when everyone looked at Alyssa when she came down the stairs.

Amir said, Wow."

Jeremy whistled.

Ben said, "You look nice, Alyssa, a close second to Hope."

Aya admonished her husband, saying, "Oh, Ben—she looks beautiful, just like our girl."

By then, Alyssa was blushing.

And Hack? The look on his face was priceless.

"You're glowed up," he said.

I could tell he could barely get the generational words out; he looked like when Bambi was twitterpated encountering the young doe, Faline, in the Disney film.

To make Alyssa feel less self-conscious, Amir asked about her wound and took a look at it, approving of its healing. He suggested she go into the kitchen and find the leftovers in the fridge. I helped her fill her plate, making sure I'd eat something with her so she wouldn't feel awkward.

What a change in the girl. I'm happy for her.

As we ate, strange pops were coming from the fire in the fireplace that I'd never heard before.

"Those noises, Alyssa," explained Amir, "are your OWL's trackers. We thought you'd enjoy hearing their demise."

"Oh, thank you, Amir," Alyssa responded. "The perfect ending for OWL."

After the two of us finished eating, Hack declared it was time to look for a Christmas tree. I never had that experience, nor had Alyssa or Amir. It was fun.

It was still snowing lightly when we headed out west past the orchard, where I'd never been. There were maybe two inches of white powder on the ground, so it wasn't hard to walk through.

The terrain was hillier, but not as much as where the containers are located. There were more trees, including Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and blue spruce of various sizes.

Ben didn't come along because he stayed back with Aya and Hope, so Hack told us about the area's history. He explained that decades ago, his grandmother wanted to grow Christmas trees to sell, so they were planted here. There aren't hundreds of them, more like fifty, barely recognizable in their original rows. Some starters grew tall on their own in between them. He said his dad and Ben would always fight over which one to cut down each year, until their dad ruled that each one would take a turn deciding every other year.

The minute Alyssa and I saw the seven-foot blue spruce, we claimed it as "the one" that had to be our Christmas tree. Jeremy, Amir, and Hack took time cutting it down. Jeremy suggested wrapping a rope around its branches to keep them from being damaged as we carried the tree home.

When we arrived back at the house, a stack of boxed Christmas ornaments was on the great room coffee table. Ben told us that we had the privilege of decorating. And yes, I was up for the task! I love the holiday.

We spent the rest of the day decorating not only the wonderful-smelling tree, but also the rest of the room, including adding white lights on the banister with fresh garland from the spruce's discarded branches. The place looked magical.

The next day was Christmas Eve. Everyone, including Aya with Hope in her arms, was in the great room, sitting around the Christmas tree. Jeremy and I were on the couches, and Hack and Alyssa were nearby on the floor by the fireplace when there was a knock at the door.

Amir immediately headed over, his hand behind his back, saying, "Interesting, I didn't hear anyone drive up."

When he answered the door, I was shocked. In my entire life, I'd never expected this.

Zoey stood in the doorway, with that weirdo guy—the one Hack showed me on his laptop. At the time, I thought his name was Wayne or Dwayne.

"Hi, Amir, good to see you again," she said as she tried to kiss our friend on the cheek, but he abruptly brushed her away. "Ah, still pouting about our breakup? Your loss."

She invited herself inside.

"I'm looking for Sarah. Oh, there's my dearest friend!"

She walked over to the coffee table where we were stringing popcorn and stood in front of us, looking as if she wanted to hug me. Ha. That wasn't going to happen.

Amir and the Wayne guy were still standing in the entryway, like they were sizing each other up. Well, I could guess who'd dub that battle. Easy: ten points for Amir.

"Ahh, looks festive here," Zoey snidely remarked. "Merry Christmas Eve, everyone. I know Amir, Jeremy, and Sarah. But I haven't met the rest of you, but let me guess."

I was furious with Zoey being in the house. Did OWL have her come, or was this her idea? And what did she want? She acted like she owned the room—owned us. That wasn't going to happen. Like ever.

"You two are either Brent and Karen or Ben and Aya. If I had to make a wild guess, I would say the latter, only because you, Aya, don't look sick like Karen's bio stated. And, ah, I see you have a little one. How nice there's a baby here, maybe one of the first children born in Idaho." She looked up the stairs and around the corner to the back door and continued, "But Ben, may I ask where your brother and sister-in-law are? They should be around here somewhere, unless they had something to do with the whereabouts of two certain OWL associates who aren't present?"

Man, I had forgotten how sarcastic and mean Zoey can be. No way was any of us going to tell her about Oliver and Winston.

She continued, "You must be Jack or Hack, the voyeur who watched every move Sarah made. I heard you also kept an eye on Wayne here and me. You're a nasty boy who's addicted to watching others.

"Then there's you—yes, you with that stupid cat on your lap," she pointed to Alyssa, who was seated close to Hack with Eyes cozily resting in her crossed legs as she strung popcorn. "I

can't believe that thing is still alive. But, you, Miss Cliffton, have caused quite a few problems. Why are you here? Where are your comrades? Violet has been out of her mind, missing her control of you."

When Alyssa started to get up, Eyes skirted away, but I motioned her to sit back down. I looked at Amir, who still had his hand on his gun behind his back, always ready.

"Zoey," he said, "we didn't hear you come up the drive. Did the two of you walk here?"

"Oh, please. Like I would ruin my shoes in this snow?" she answered.

Wayne moved to her side and whispered something. She nodded as she brushed nothing in particular off her puffy jacket.

"We wanted the element of surprise and parked the Rivian by a group of trees before the bend. Smart, I'd say." She looked around. "Wayne says he's hungry, so can you show some hospitality and provide something for us? It looks like you have plenty of popcorn. That is, if there's any left that your grimy hands haven't touched."

It was Ben who went into the kitchen while Zoey sat down where Amir had been seated in the lounge chair. Wayne stood between Zoey and me, which was probably wise, because I was ready to get Amir's gun and shoot her myself.

I still hadn't greeted my past friend/now enemy. No one had said anything except for Amir. We were stunned that someone came onto the property without us knowing. Had the satellites been working again?

As Ben brought a bowl of untouched popcorn and two black coffees to our guests, I noticed he didn't offer any milk or sugar. You go, Ben—thanks for saving that for us.

I cleared my voice and finally got the nerve to say something. "Zoey, dear, what brings us the pleasure of your visit?" Yeah, a little snarky, but she deserved it.

Between chomping on popcorn and sipping coffee, she said, "You, Sarah. It's always been about you—you know that."

"Well, dear, I'm not going anywhere right now. I was enjoying Christmas Eve with my friends until you two arrived, and I plan on continuing to do so."

"Suit yourself, Sarah, but you are coming with us. Iam Mastema, if you've ever heard of our amazing leader, wants to speak with you."

His name forced me to listen more intently. I could tell Jeremy was upset by my reaction, as was Amir. Her comment got a rise out of Ben and Aya, too, as their eyebrows went up.

Alyssa spoke, "I don't know you, but I do have one question about OWL. Do you have internet access right now?"

It was a good but bold question—something Hack and she would think about asking.

"Nope," she said. "Granted, the company's paying for everything to collect you, but our AI access has been down ever since we landed in some dinky town called Bonners Ferry. I told OWL they'd better launch a new satellite soon. Enough of you and your friends going rogue."

Alyssa pointed her wound as she focused on me. I followed her eyes to Zoey's and Wayne's wrists. Both had e-tats, but they were a smaller version, about half the size of Alyssa's. OWL's still refining them for when they become the Mark of the Beast.

Hmm. That means nothing electronic on them is working either. Good.

"I'll play your game," I say, "but tell me this: How do you know this man Mastema? Have you personally met him? And where?"

She replied, "Yes, he flew me to Italy on his private jet. He and I have a thing going. Well, sort of."

Wayne interrupted, "No, you don't, Zoey. Everyone thinks they feel special being around him. I do—and I want more from him. You don't own him; no one does. If anything, he owns us and loves everyone who helps him. And besides, I thought you and I were in a relationship."

"Shut up, Wayne," grumbled Zoey.

I almost burst out laughing. Wayne? She's lowered her standards—a lot.

Amir laughed loudly, but she ignored him. Yeah, Zoey's making her mark on more men. I feel sorry for Wayne. Well, not really.

"I'm here to take you to Mastema," she said between sips of coffee. "That's my only angle. And Alyssa can come, too, if she wants."

Then I said something no one expected, "Alyssa won't be coming, but sure, Zo—I'll be glad to come with you. I'm looking forward to meeting this so-called leader of the One World League."

Jeremy almost passed out beside me. He grabbed my arm and gave me this look of "what in the world are you thinking?"

I know he wasn't happy, but I made my decision, and I knew I was right.



HACK

When Sarah agrees to go with Zoey and Wayne, needless to say, we're stunned. Why would she want to do something so ridiculous? I look at Jeremy, and there's a vein popping out of his neck. He's not handling this well. He's cracking his knuckles from the stress of thinking about Sarah leaving. Amir swings his enlarged eyes to Sarah. He can't understand her reasoning either.

The crazy Zoey says, "Glad to hear you're being so agreeable, Sarah. I knew you would see it my way—you always do. But I must say, you had me going when you supposedly killed yourself in that field. I mean, seriously, I saw you put the gun to your head and pull the trigger.

"But as I drove away in Jeremy's truck—which is a piece of garbage—I started to rethink the entire situation. Number one is that Amir abruptly broke up with me. That never happens—I end relationships, not my lovers, if I dare call him that. Then, when Jeremy kept telling me to stay away so I couldn't see your dead body, it got me thinking, especially when the two of you demanded I leave the scene.

"I reached out to OWL, who let me review the satellite feeds. It was easy to figure out how you, Jeremy, leaned over Sarah's body and covered her face. And the blood was too red when the camera zoomed in.

"Although OWL couldn't see what was happening at this ranch, what sealed the deal was when that sheriff filed a report on you being involved in the shoot-out. Yep, right there were your three descriptions. Caught ya." "So what?" retorts Sarah. "You figured it out. Let's get this over then." She gets up and heads to the front door with Zoey and Wayne following.

"Wait a sec," says Amir. "At least, please let Sarah grab a jacket. It's snowing out." He walks into the office and comes back with Dad's old leather jacket that was hanging on a hook. "Here, Sarah, here's your coat."

Right away, I know something's up. Not only was this jacket my father's, but it's way too big for Sarah.

She grabs the coat, puts it on, and heads outside with the two.

"Sarah, wait!" Jeremy screams in objection.

Sarah turns around and says to us, "It's my Esther time."

I have no clue what she means, nor do any of us standing on the porch. But Jeremy must because he replies, "I understand. Praying."

While Alyssa, Ben, and Aya, with Hope in her arms, stand on the porch, Amir, Jeremy, and I walk several yards behind Sarah, Zoey, and Wayne.

When we get to the bend in our driveway, Zoey says to us, "Thanks for the food and drink. We'll take good care of Sarah from here on, don't you worry."

Sarah blows a kiss our way, but I know it was intended for Jeremy, who, I bet, is beyond himself.

The three get into the gray SUV, with Sarah seated in the front passenger's seat beside Wayne and Zoey behind her.

As they drive away, Amir puts his arm around Jeremy and tells him it'll be okay. Strangely, Jeremy says, "Yes, she's in God's hand—we must believe that."

Numb from what occurred, we start to walk back to the house. I announce that I'll get the SD card from the trail camera in the evergreens at the bend and meet them at the house so we can review it.

Amir stops me and tells Jeremy and me that he wants to follow the SUV as long as he can.

We jog on the left side of the bank of trees and hide in the tree line until we see the Rivian pass the next bend. We run down the road to the next turn.

When we see the vehicle slow down over a mile away, it stops in front of the Johnstons' house. Then it slowly turns into its driveway.

Amir says something must have happened, so we get off the road and head east, covering the border of our property and the Johnstons'.

By the time we arrive at our neighbors' land from the east side, we're by the backside of their pond, where we found the horses in the collapsed barn. Stealthily, we hide among the branches in the pine tree that fell halfway into their pond, peeking through the dead foliage.

We can't hear them talking, but the car's parked behind the house next to the shop. Wayne's out of the vehicle and standing by its front right bumper. He fiddles with something near the headlight, and a panel pops open.

Jeremy whispers, "It's one of those pricey all-electric vehicles. They must've run out of juice."

Sarah gets out of the passenger's side and heads to a small workshop, which wasn't locked, and goes inside. Zoey remains in the car. Within minutes, Wayne walks over and goes into the shop, too. When he comes out, he has an elec-

trical extension cord, with Sarah holding one end of it; she's near the shop's open door, and we see her plug the cord into a socket.

"Do either of you have guns on you?" Amir asks quietly. We both reply, "No."

I reprimand myself because Dad told me to always carry one. I should know better, especially since I'm with Amir, the only person in the world who would be armed on Christmas Eve. I pull out the Swiss army knife that he gave to me on my birthday. He gives me a *that's all?* look.

"Okay," he says as he checks his gun's chamber, "here's what we're going to do. You two stay here, and I'm going to sneak around to the back of the shop and try to get to Sarah between the house and the building. Hack, watch my signals—I may need you to make a distraction, like throw rocks into the pond to make a splash."

As he takes off, Jeremy and I collect several rocks.

Wayne plugs the cable into the SUV.

Then it happens.

There's a loud explosion, and the Rivian bursts into flames!

The fire immediately engulfs Wayne's entire body, and he's gyrating to avoid the flames.

A pounding is heard from inside the vehicle; the doors must've auto-locked.

More pops, as if gunshots are being fired from within the Rivian that's now totally on fire. We hear a short scream.

I look past the flaming metal inferno to the shop and see Amir standing next to Sarah. Thank God, she's safe. But nothing can be done to save Zoey and Wayne. There's no way they could've survived the unexplained incident.



ALYSSA

Wow. I can't imagine what's going to happen to Sarah next. I'm incredibly sad when she walks down the Hacketts' driveway with those losers. Why isn't anyone stopping her? What isn't Jeremy protesting? Now that I've finally found a friend, she leaves me.

And she's probably gone for good because OWL is evil, and so is that over-the-top, high-maintenance Zoey. She's a sick piece of work. She looks like an exotic model, but there's that same evilness to her eyes that I saw in Oliver. Gag me.

As I stand on the porch waiting for Hack and his friends to return, Ben and Aya urge me inside and out of the cold. But no one comes back, which makes me worry more.

Aya puts the now-sleeping baby in their bedroom and comes back into the great room. I'm pacing in front of the fireplace. Wondering what to do next.

"What should we do now?" I ask.

"Pray," says Ben.

"Yes, we need to pray, right now," adds Aya.

I say, "I'm sorry, but I don't believe that way and don't know how to pray."

"That's all right, Alyssa," says Aya. "But Ben and I need to talk to Jesus right now. You're welcome to stay and listen or go upstairs."

I sit down on the couch. What else can I do? Ben and Aya hold hands and sit across from me, closing their eyes.

"Dear Lord, please be with Sarah right now," Ben prays. "Guide her to do Your will as she travels with Zoey and Wayne. Give her the right attitude and words if or when she speaks to Mastema. We know You are the One in control."

Aya says, "Yes, Jesus. Protect our dear Sarah. Calm her and make her feel safe while in Your arms as she deals with this. We trust the outcome, no matter what happens, because You know best."

I flinch. How can these two nice people pray like this? How can they give it all to God? I could never say these words. I don't even know if God would listen to me.

Ben adds, "And Lord, help this Zoey and Wayne to see Your Light, not succumb to Satan's darkness. Let them become aware of the dangers of this Mastema, who is only a pawn in the process..."

His words are interrupted by a large boom, followed by what sounds like gunshots.

Ben releases Aya's hands and says he must find out what's happened. He quickly kisses Aya, goes into the office, and returns with two guns. He gives her one of them and tells us both to be safe. I'm scared, so I sit next to Aya, finding comfort in her arms. She continues to pray, to beg God for mercy. I listen to her calming words, hoping the Man upstairs is listening to her.

An hour later, Aya and I hear a commotion at the front door. Everyone, including Sarah, enters the house. They appear worn out. All look and smell like they've been involved in a fire.

I jump up, run to Sarah, and hug her, "You're alive! You're back!"

I then put my arms around Hack and hug him. His arm goes around my waist and holds on tight.

"You, too!" I tell him. While he's still holding me, I ask, "Where are the two OWLers?"

Amir and Jeremy walk to the kitchen sink and are wiping off the soot when Hack tells me, "We don't have to worry again. There was an accident that only God could've arranged and spared only Sarah."

"I'll vouch for that," Ben says. "No one could have expected it. Talk about a freak vehicle fire. I'm sad we couldn't save Zoey and Wayne, but it had to be God's plan."

Sarah explains, "When we started driving, Zoey was cussing Wayne out because the rental needed an electric charge; it was his job to find a plug-in at the ranch, but he forgot, and they didn't stop at the house long enough. So, I came up with the idea of stopping at the Johnstons' place because I didn't want them driving back here and putting everyone in danger again. I thought they would have the electricity to charge the vehicle."

Jeremy interrupts, "Right there was the miracle because you'd think the electricity would be turned off months ago at that house, but it was on a solar panel that had to be working."

"Right," says Sarah. "It was all in God's perfect timing. I was not in the SUV or near it when it exploded."

"What were those popping sounds?" I ask.

"Ha," Sarah shakes her head. "It wasn't Amir shooting his weapon again. See, he had given me Hack's dad's old jacket and put his dad's gun in it—the one that Amir had reassembled. When I realized the gun was in the pocket, I

slipped it under the seat; I knew Zoey or someone would frisk me if we got on an airplane. Those pops were the gun's bullets catching on fire."

She turns to Hack. "Again, I'm sorry your dad's gun is gone. At least I can give you back his jacket."

Jeremy kisses Sarah on the lips and helps her take off the jacket. "And now you can say you were an Esther, right?"

"Yes!" Sarah beams. "I knew I had to get Zoey away from this ranch. I'd do anything to protect you all, even if it meant meeting the Antichrist!"

"I've no clue about this Esther person," I admit, "but I know Ben and Aya were praying for you at the same time it went down. That alone would make me know God helped you."

"Yes, my friend," replies Sarah. "He always provides, although it may make no sense at the time. And Esther was a wonderful Jewish queen in the Bible who had to sacrifice her comfort to save her people. When you get a chance, read her story in the Bible, and you'll understand."

"Okay, I promise I will. It sounds interesting," I say, mystified. A Bible story changed Sarah's thinking?

Aya asks, "What did you do about Zoey and Wayne?"

"We knew both were dead," Amir explains. He continues to say that Zoey was stuck inside the SUV while Wayne's body was burned beyond recognition. Then he says to me, "Don't worry about being tracked anymore, Alyssa. We put Wayne's remains in the vehicle and pushed the burnt wreckage into the nearby pond. It may not be as deep as the Black Pond, but the SUV is fully submerged, so I doubt it can be traced."

Once again, I feel a sense of relief that OWL is off our radar. We are free again, for now.

The next day is Christmas.

First thing, while we're all having coffee and homemade cinnamon rolls in front of a toasty fire with the sparkling lights of the Christmas tree competing with it, Amir stands near them and reads the Nativity story from the book of Luke in the Bible. I listen carefully to the words, amazed at how they affect me. This time, it's different hearing about Baby Jesus being born.

Everyone pitches to make a bussin' meal that includes a wild turkey that the guys had caught last month. Although there aren't any presents to exchange, it's one of the best Christmases I've ever experienced because I know I'm with people I can trust completely.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

n New Year's Eve, the snow returned, dropping two inches and making the ranch look like a winter wonderland again. We played in it, taking the old sleds from the garage to the rolling hills near the Blue Pond. Of course, I had the most fun whenever I shared a sled with Jeremy, his arms wrapped securely around me. Hack and Alyssa sled together once or twice, but I could tell she was intimidated—maybe because of the baby or maybe because she was with Hack, who anyone could tell was besotted with her. But she hasn't told the others yet about her pregnancy.

We stayed up late playing card games. I was surprised by Alyssa's adeptness as she played. Like Hack, her strongest point is strategy; between the two of them, they won all the games. Jeremy spent most of the time in the kitchen, making creative appetizers from some of the meat in the garage freezer. When he presented us with liver pate and crackers, Alyssa and I gave him a yuck, no thank you look, but he begged us to try it. We did, and we were pleasantly surprised.

When the clock struck midnight, announcing the new year, Jeremy and I kissed by the roaring fire—in front of everyone. It was sweet and promising.

Then he got down on one knee and said, "Sarah Colton, will you please marry me?" He surprised me with a ring of wrapped wire that he, with Hack's help, had made in the garage days before. It fit perfectly.

Now, you would think I'd be embarrassed to be asked the question in front of others, but I wasn't at all. I knew it was coming. Of course, I said yes.

Ben spoke up, "I could marry you two, if you want me to."

"What?" Amir teased, "Are you an ordained minister now that you're a Christian?"

"Hardly," Ben replied, "When we lived in Nevada, I went online and got a certified license to marry one of my realtor buddies and his girlfriend. I know 'what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas,' but it may be as close as you can get to making your marriage legit."

We laughed until Jeremy looked at me for confirmation and said, "In God's eyes, it will do, so yes, Ben, we'd love to have you officiate our union."

It was settled. Jeremy and I plan to get married next week, Lord willing. I felt so at peace about it as I joined hands with my husband-to-be.

That night, when Alyssa and I were washing our faces in our bathroom, she asked me how I knew Jeremy was the right one for me. I told her about Dennis and how much I missed him. I admitted to feeling guilty for falling in love with someone else, but then I realized that my relationship with Jeremy might be the best thing for the two of us as we face the next sixplus years here on Earth, waiting for Jesus to return.

She said, "I don't understand why everyone here keeps saying there's less than seven years left. Until what?"

I explained the Rapture, Tribulation, Antichrist, and our Lord's second coming, including when it would happen in the timeline.

"How do you know this stuff?" she demanded.

"The Bible, Alyssa," I answered. "Believe it or not, it's all predicted there and has been for thousands of years. Plus, we've been studying the Rapture Kit, which is a series of downloaded files that contain everything one needs if they are 'untaken' or as I call those of us who weren't taken when Jesus raptured believers eleven months ago."

She put her washcloth down. "Wait, Rapture Kit? That's one of the sites I was trying to take down while I worked at OWL. The company is erasing any website that contains any Christian propaganda."

"Propaganda?" I mocked. "No, it's got a plethora of info on what the Rapture was, what the Tribulation is, and who Mastema really is—the Antichrist."

She didn't talk. Hopefully, she was processing how important the Biblical information is. I said it was a God thing that she couldn't crash the site.

"Why do you believe this Bible stuff, though? I mean, isn't it like any other religion where you have to bow to a god who wants to control you just like OWL did us?"

"Ah, that's the difference," I said, "God—Jesus—the Holy Spirit don't want to control us. They love us so much that God had His Son die on the cross for your and my sins so we could be forgiven. Jesus had to take our place for all the bad things we've done. Then He rose the third day and is in Heaven. It's not control; it's a free gift to us with no strings attached."

"I've heard you all say that stuff before, but how do you know it's true?" she asks as she puts her used washcloth on the rack, "Also, I get it that I'm not a perfect person and have done some pretty stupid things, but is God punishing me for my past by having me get pregnant with Oliver's child? Is that my penance, too?"

I turned to this young girl and held both her hands. "No, Alyssa, look at me. God loves you more than any man ever could or will. He has given you something special, maybe to have you see Him through the messiness of life. He not only allowed you to become pregnant—even if it was without your consent—but He also has brought you here, to Hackett Haven, to get you away from OWL. You must recognize that, right?"

"Yes, I see what you mean: God has protected me throughout my life. As Violet, my AI companion, repeatedly told me, I have trust and control issues. I don't think I can trust in God or Jesus, nor want to give up my control."

I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "Ah, now we're getting to the root of the problem. Control." I told her about my past and how I always had to have my way, even at the expense of others. My obnoxiousness, my obsessions, my selfish determination. How I wanted to control everything and everyone, until OWL intervened and tried to take over my life, my thinking, and my soul. "So, you see, Alyssa, you need to think about why you want control. Is it to get something or to give something? Is it to have authority over others or to get a peace of mind? Jesus is the only one who can give you the peace that you crave. When you let go of yourself and give Him control, then you will understand. But I can't tell you what to think—the

Holy Spirit is the One who will nudge you in His perfect timing. Simply, consider what I said."

She told me she wanted to get some sleep since it was late, so she ended our conversation with, "Thanks, Sarah, for the talk and explanation. You've given me plenty to think about."

I knew not to prompt and push her into making a personal decision, but I'm praying that she'll find the same unfathomable peace I have. And that she's the one who tells the others about her baby.

"Before you go, Alyssa, I do have an important question."

She stood in the doorway from the bathroom to her room with a quizzical, worried look on her face. "Yes?"

"Would you like to be my maid-of-honor?" I asked.

"Yes!" She screamed so loudly that it vibrated throughout the bathroom. Then she hugged me tightly. "I've never been one before, but I'd be glad to!"

Her scream brought Jeremy rushing from his room into mine and into the bathroom. "What happened? Are you girls okay?"

We laughed when we explained the excitement. I could tell they were happy with my request—especially Alyssa.

Two days later, while she and I were washing all the bedding and towels in the house, Alyssa said to me, "Will this God of yours protect us from OWL returning to the ranch?"

"I don't know," I answered the best I could, "If He's in control, whatever happens happens, so I needn't worry about it. However, like you, I'm concerned that OWL will be coming for us. If they haven't heard back from Oliver and Winston and then Zoey and Wayne, Mastema may be questioning what happened to the four of them. This evil man, whom I consider

the Antichrist, may or may not care—he's got plenty of other minions to do his dirty work."

She asked, "Why would he care about us? We're nobodies, right?

"Maybe, but the Bible states that after the Rapture, believers will be tracked down, beheaded, and martyred. Think about Brent; he was killed for his beliefs and for not telling Oliver where I was. It was outright murder. It's only going to get worse."

She asks, "If you think someone will be coming back for us, what should we do? How can we protect ourselves?"

"Alyssa, I worry about this, too, and have tried to give it to God. If the satellite goes live over us, then we'll still be a target. Moving back to the containers would be our best option."

"I've heard the group mention those. What are they? Where are they?" she asked.

I told her about our home in the hillside, explaining each room in detail and its purpose. She was interested, even if it meant living underground.

"If that satellite gets up and running above us, it can track us," she said. "We should go to these containers now, like right away, since we don't know when OWL will have Starlink reset them."

"Yeah, I think so, also. But didn't you say the satellites were only being used in cities of over a hundred thousand people?"

"Yes," she replied, "and I don't think the entire Idaho panhandle has that many residents, but you heard Zoey. She had asked them to get one up and running above us. If she weren't bluffing and had any clout with Mastema, that could be any day now." "Will we know when they are up and running?" I asked.

"Hack and I can figure that out by continually checking. The satellite will be online when we have access to the internet again."

"Do you think we should tell the others the urgency of moving back to the containers? Do you really think a satellite would be moved to cover our area now?"

"Yeah, I do."

It made me realize that we don't have much time left to feel this temporary freedom.



HACK

When we meet for breakfast the next morning, Sarah and Alyssa are insistent on having us move back to the containers as soon as possible because the satellite's infrared cameras can't go through the metal. I understand their concern about Zoey's visit and OWL's reaction when she's a no-show back and Sarah's still out of reach.

Since Alyssa knows how Starlink's system is set up, she explains that it'd be simple for Mastema to have one satellite reprogrammed to view our ranch. It wouldn't take long to set up, either.

Ben and Aya tell us that they like the privacy and space they have in the big house, away from the rest of us. What they don't understand is that when Hope cries, everyone in the house hears her, which would be the same if we lived in the containers. We have to get used to it either way.

Amir says he prefers not to live in either the house or the container, but to stay outside, if possible. But Ben says the

weather can turn nasty the next couple of months, so there'll always be a bed for him wherever we live.

When Jeremy mentions that he and Sarah will be married soon and he'll move into Sarah's room, the question of what to do with Alyssa arises.

"I've never been in the containers," she says, "but I don't need much space. I'll sleep anywhere, even if it's where you keep supplies."

"Um, no, girl," declares Ben. "We'll make you a room. We'll divide the bunk room; we'll put up a plywood wall between the bunk beds, so Hack and Amir—when he needs it—can share the one set of bunk beds, and you and Hope, when she's older, can share the other. Is that acceptable?"

It sounded like a good plan. I'm more than happy to be closer to Alyssa, but I don't want to be so close that I push her away and become an extra.

Amir speaks up, "If we're going back into the containers, we need to move as many goods and reusable items as possible, which would include clothes, blankets, towels, and the like. There's room in the cave rooms, especially if we extend them farther into the mountain. Another idea I'd like to suggest is to dig out where the chicken area collapsed and make it like a protected atrium so we can get outside light whenever possible."

"Great idea, Amir," says Ben. "If we put one of the glass sliders from my house in the ceiling there, I bet no one would be able to see it from the outside, unless they climbed the mountain and happened to look down. Also, behind the supply cave, there's another tunnel that we could reinforce and store stuff there."

"I suggest we split up in twos to gather what's left in the houses and outbuildings, and do it quickly," Amir suggests. "Each two-person team should be armed in case any unexpected visitors happen to come on the property."

"Another great idea," Ben says. "I'd thought by now we'd have more incidents of people trying to take our food and supplies. Maybe the extreme weather has deterred them these past several months."

The plan is to go through everything in the big house, Ben's house, my outbuilding and its upstairs area, the garage, and the barns (including where we keep the farm equipment), and glean anything of value. If we run out of storage, we could bury some of it nearby for later use, but we need to get ready for long-term living before the satellite goes live.

Today, I've been working with Jeremy on my outbuilding, collecting usable electronics, cables, and computer gadgets, along with going through our attic area for a metal cabinet, extra mattresses, and household goods. I'm probably taking too many electronic devices, but what if we need them? We load them in the cart and drive them to the containers, where Ben, Aya, and Alyssa organize where to put them. Meanwhile, Amir and Sarah are going through the big house.

I'm glad Alyssa is impressed with the quality of the containers. She told Ben that putting up the wall between the bunk beds makes the most sense.

After our third or fourth run, Amir says he'll need Jeremy's help moving a few bulky items, such as Mom's dresser, a heavy mirror, and some shelving from the basement, so we switch, and Sarah and I head to Ben's house.

We transport the majority of Ben and Aya's clothing, along with all the bedding, blankets, and towels—although most of it has smoke damage. We take more pans and kitchenware, like Aya's wok and Japanese knives.

On our fifth load, Sarah's in the kitchen boxing up canned foods and spices, while I'm on the back part of the wrap-around porch loading the cart with the filled boxes.

As I go back into the house, I hear Sarah's voice clearly say, "What do you want?"

A man replies, "Food."

I creep down the hallway and go through the dining room, so I'm on the other side of the kitchen.

"Girlie," a gruffy, unshaven man who looks like he's been living off the grid, says, "gimme that can there. No, give me that box of food."

He's got a small knife in one hand. I put my Dad's FBI Glock in my right hand and the open Swiss army knife in the other, and rush into the kitchen, pointing them at the intruder.

"Stop right there!" I demand.

In a flash, the man grabs Sarah from behind and holds his knife to her throat. "No. You shoot, and I'll end this pretty girl's life."

While I've got the gun pointed at them, Sarah gives me a nod. She pulls downward on the man's knife, pushing the blade outward. She jerks her elbow into the guy's rib, tucks her head under his armpit, and forces his knife hand behind his back. Then she turns his hand upward to release the knife and kicks it across the kitchen tile while he's pinned in a lock.

I run to them and place my gun on the man's temple. "It's over. You're not hurting either one of us."

"I just wanted something to eat," he begs. "I've been without food for days and saw this house, so I entered. I didn't think someone was here ahead of me, taking stuff."

"This is my uncle's house. We have every right to be here. You don't." I feel a rush of anger at the man, the audacity of thinking we're taking something that doesn't belong to us.

Sarah silently nudges me to put away my gun and knife.

"Hey, we get it," she concedes. "Times are tough everywhere, and I'm sure you're hungry and trying to survive, just like everyone else. What if we gave you some food? Would that be all right? And then you could move along to wherever you're headed."

The man looks shocked at my friend, then he glances at me for confirmation. I'm in my self-righteous world, so I don't respond.

I'm stunned by Sarah's compassion for this vagrant. The selfish Sarah I knew from Numen days is gone. This empathetic Sarah cares for another's well-being, his survival. I ask myself why I can't be like her. Why is my first reaction anger and resentment that this guy wants to steal our property instead of reaching out to help him?

I'm ashamed of myself. I wish I were like Jesus. He would have given this man anything he needed; He gave him His life. Yet, I'm judgmental and callous. Oh Lord, forgive me for my insensitivity to others.

I snap back into the situation and clear my throat. Sarah's patting the man's shoulder and asking if she hurt his arm.

He doesn't say anything. He's probably too surprised by how nicely he's being treated.

"Here, I'll put these cans of food in a reusable bag for you, and you can take them, okay? I don't think we'll be needing all of them."

"Thank you, ma'am," he replies. "And I'm sorry I pulled my knife on you. I'd never harm you; I really wouldn't because you're too nice. Please forgive me."

"You're forgiven," she says, "the same way Jesus has forgiven me."

The gruffy man shakes his head, saying, "Yeah, if God exists."

I finally get my voice and say, "Yes, He does, and He loves you."

"If you say so," he says as he heads toward the front door. "Well, it's been a pleasure meeting you folks, but any talk about religion is my cue to move on."

Sarah and I stand on Ben's front porch, watching the man trudge down the road until he's out of view. We ask each other where the man may have come from and where he's headed, wondering if he'll find God in his travels. Did he find Him here in Hackett Haven through Sarah's selfless act of giving him food?

I tell her how I wish we had a connection with a cell tower or the internet because the trail cameras have been worthless without live viewing. If they did have it, I'd see the man coming. She tells me it was all planned by God—no harm, no foul.

"Ah," I tease my friend as we load the last box into the cart, "Amir will be proud of you for showing off your Krav Maga moves today."

"Yeah, but he'd be critical of me not doing the final kick in the face. However, I bet Jeremy won't be thrilled," she says. "He may not let me out of his presence again. And, by the way, you weren't too shabby pulling out your gun and knife either."

"What can I say? At least I had both on me. Such is life in the Wild West. I thank God we diffused the problem this time. I hope we don't deal with it again."

"Amen."



ALYSSA

I'm glad we're moving into these containers. At least, I think I'll feel safer in them than out in the open, under OWL's spying satellites. When Hack told me about Numen's website and the bird drones, it verified how anything could contain a camera to watch a person, even on this huge ranch. But I feel safely hidden here.

Yet, I feel guilty that I haven't told the rest of the group about my condition.

Ben and Aya—with Hope always nearby—work well together organizing where all this stuff is going. I can't believe what they've accomplished.

Once everything is moved, Ben and Jeremy put up a panel to make my *room*. The divider wedges perfectly between the two sets of drop-down bunk beds that are attached to the container's metal walls. Aya and I make a hanging door out

of a shower curtain for privacy. I feel bad that my section has the closet, so a small one is built on Hack and Amir's side.

Next, Amir and Jeremy go outside the hillside and locate where the rain washed out the cave with chickens. Inside, Ben uses a battery saw to cut an opening in the wooden panel they installed during the cave-in. They spend hours digging through the fallout of dirt, which hasn't frozen due to the warmth of the interior. Once the area's completely dug out and there's access into the container area, Ben and I help them place a sliding glass window as a roof and a hinged door for an entrance to the outside.

Jeremy is concerned that the window roof could be seen from a satellite, but I assure him that the camera can't see through glass or metal. We replace the wild huckleberry bush runners that we had pulled back to cover the edges of the window. In the process, I got badly scratched by its thorns on my arms, but don't mention it to anyone.

To hide the entrance, Amir finds some evasive wild English ivy that we plant above and on each side of the door.

When I asked if the plant would handle being transplanted, he says, "Well, I found native poison ivy, but it'd be stupid to use that."

Afterward, while we're arranging the almost completed area, Ben and Hack go to the barns to let all the animals roam freely except for the chickens, who we'll keep in the newly designed *atrium*.

When we finally finish for the day, we're exhausted. Amir noticed the tears in my jacket from the berry bushes and made me show him my arm, which had several patches of dried blood. He had scratches, too. So did Jeremy, so our wounds were cleaned, and an antibiotic was put on them.

Thankfully, Aya had prepared a hearty meal of beef stew in the crock pot and took care of Hope while we worked. As we eat, Ben and Hack explain what they did with the animals.

"It was sad," Ben says. "We knew we could no longer take care of them once the satellite coverage returns. But we didn't want to put them down, so we moved them out of the barn."

"I led Randy and Rusty down the road toward the Johnstons' house," Hack says. "Hopefully, they'll go live in that old barn where they survived before or someone else will find them."

"I moved the three sheep," Ben added, "to the North Pasture, farthest away from the barn, because it has the least amount of snow, so it's good for grazing. We put a bale of hay in the sheltered run-in, but it won't last long; they'll have to forage for themselves. I left the gate open, but hope the wild animals don't get to them."

"We took the cattle to the South Pasture and did the same thing, leaving hay in the run-in, adding grain in their trough, and giving them fresh water," Hack says quietly from the chair next to me. He pauses and drinks some coffee, then continues with a shaky voice, "But I couldn't leave Midnight there. So, with my uncle's approval, I took him and the milking cow out to the Blue Pond and hid them inside the downed satellite debris. I added some hay, grain, and water. If the three steers survived there, maybe these two will. I pray so."

I feel sorry for my friend. Hack has not only lost his mom, his dad, and the family dog, but now he also has to let go of his pet calf. Hack is hurting, so I put my arm around his shoulders, lean my head against his, and silently hug him.

Also, I'm wearing his mother's clothes and Jeremy's wearing his father's. They're constant reminders of his parents' loss.

He sobs—the kind where you shake uncontrollably. That pent-up hurt and sorrow pour out of him. Sarah, who's on his other side, puts her arm around his waist and hugs him as well. We both hang on tightly to lessen his pain.

"I'm sorry," he cries.

Ben clears his throat and wipes a tear from his eye with his shirt sleeve. "Hack, don't think about it. We love you, and you've been through more than most could bear in such a short time. We're here for you."

He changes the topic by saying that Hack and he shut off all the utilities except the solar panel, which involves the satellite dish. No electricity or water is available.

That night I spend my first night in the containers, climbing into the upper bed bunk. I can hear Hack and Amir talking quietly from their side of the room.

Hack then raises his voice. "Hey, Alyssa, goodnight. We—I'm glad you're here with us."

I replied, "Me too, Hack. I'm so happy I'm with you." And I am.

The next day, on January thirteenth, we here in the hillside home have a wedding. I have to say, it's the strangest one I've ever attended. When we cleaned out Hack's parents' house, Aya found a lace table runner, which we use for Sarah's veil. Since Aya and Sarah are the same size, Aya has the bride wear one of her white button-down shirts and an all-white knee-length skirt. However, it looks silly because the girl wears jeans under the outfit to stay warm and Hack's hiking boots on her feet! Yeah, it was that or tennis shoes. Sarah takes it in stride, saying it's better than being barefoot, which she was during her first wedding on a beach. Yeah, I could see her walking around on the cold ground. Not.

While the temperature hovers around freezing, the two lovebirds stand next to the big Douglas fir where they've been meeting at dusk whenever they stay in the containers. Ben officiates while Hack is the best man, and I'm the maid of honor, but we have little to do. I carry her bouquet of pinecones and fir branches when they hold each other's hands and say their marriage vows. Amir stands by Hack, and Aya stands next to me. She informs us that Hope is sleeping and can't attend the blessed event.

"Sarah Alexandria Colton," says Jeremy, as he holds both her hands in his, "I love you, and I'll always cherish you as my wife as we live together in these trying times. But most of all, I'm thankful to God for you; I believe He approves of our union. We'll focus on Him in our marriage to make it work, because that's the only way our love can last. I want you and only you to be my wife while we still are here on Earth."

I don't physically shake my head, but I question the words: Why focus on God when you have each other? Isn't that like having a third wheel in the marriage of two people? Why would he say that? And why does he say "still on

Earth?" Like, is he talking about something that will happen later?

Sarah says more traditional vows, but she adds, "Thank You, Jesus, for what You have done for us. I'm thankful that You've given me Jeremy here and now, and please help me continue to love and cherish him and our friends. Be with us throughout each day and keep us safe."

I don't think I've ever witnessed a wedding where parts of the Bible are read and a prayer is given. It's unique and different.

Once the quick ceremony is over, we rush inside to get out of the cold. After eating mini cupcakes Aya made of cake mix with homemade berry jam and melted chocolate bars drizzled on top, we give the newly married couple the space and time to be alone together.

SARAH'S JOURNAL

Married again. The concept that seemed so strange almost a year ago is comforting and reassuring. My first husband, Denny, is in Heaven enjoying Jesus and other believers, while I get to experience a tiny piece of glory during the horrific Tribulation. Who would have figured that I would find love again? Not me.

Jeremy is precious. While the two of us whispered our love to each other in our tiny bedroom, the world felt perfect. Whole. If I had to choose any person to be at my side during what's coming in the years to follow, hands down, it would be Jeremy. He loves me and I love him. Our marriage gives us comforting companionship during the chaos.

It was also nice that the rest of those in the containers gave us our space and ample time to sleep in the next morning. Well, it's not like we had a zillion chores to do.

When we got up, we noticed the sunlight from the atrium glowing down the tunnels into the great room, making it look warm and cozy. We found all our roommates in the sunroom, staring out the ceiling window, commenting on the bright blue sky. Better yet, they said one of the chickens had laid an egg. We're truly blessed.

Two days later, what Alyssa and I expected to happen did. The satellite went back on; we knew when Hack's monitor in the main room lit up at 10:08 a.m.

Both he and Alyssa raced over to the container's desk, scrambling to see what worked and what didn't, talking in computer jargon that only they could understand.

"Be sure our access is masked. Triple-bounced," Hack said as he leaned over Alyssa to plug in a second monitor that he recently brought from his place.

"We could link the phones to the satellite coverage," she said, adding, "But let's not; we need to see if there's any way we can hide their tracking, which is trickier if phone calls are made."

"I suggest we stay off the phones for now," Hack said. "They're too easy to track."

I asked if we could send emails, but Hack said it wouldn't be wise.

"Even if we set up new email accounts, whom are we going to contact? I don't need to talk to anyone, do you? And would OWL be tracking them?"

Jeremy said he'd love to reach out to his brother, but last he heard, the guy was pro-OWL. Aya said the same about hers,

who works for the U.N. Amir mentioned that he would love to reach out to his oldest brother in Israel, who is a Messianic Jew missionary—one of the 144,000 in the Bible. Ben and Alyssa said they don't need to contact anyone. I guess I could email my sister, Silvia, in Florida, but I'm afraid OWL would be monitoring her just because she's related to me.

It's not like we miss using phones. Maybe that's a good thing.

It's great having the internet, though—we'll now be able to watch live events and news.

The first thing that popped up on the main screen was the world news with Mastema speaking. He's gained popularity since we last viewed him. He was in Italy, in front of some famous building, saying the peace treaty with Israel was working, but wars continue to happen globally, and he wants them to be stopped immediately. He stated he'll be traveling to the four countries of North and South Korea, China, and Taiwan. Mastema wanted to end the fighting by offering international and transparent AI coverage everywhere. He threatened that if these countries do not play nice, he will assign his army of giant robots to intervene. However, a country like Russia, which knows America's currently incapacitated with its stumbling government and worthless military on top of the environmental disasters, wants to get involved if physical land is up for grabs with OWL's assistance. What a mess.

After hours of Hack and Alyssa fine-tuning their computers and verifying that we're unable to be tracked online, Hack announced, "I'm going to check Numen's portal. I won't access it through my regular account, since OWL will be able to track me, but I'll use the back door access that I did before to watch

how they interacted with Sarah when she had the brain implant."

When Numen's screen appeared, I couldn't believe what I saw:

A flashing "Important" notice: Beware! Wanted by OWL!

Photos of Alyssa and me are displayed on the screen. She tells me her picture is from her OWL identification; mine is from Valley News.

Under the photographs, it has:

Accused of multiple murders.

Last seen in Northern Idaho.

If you have seen either woman, contact OWL immediately.

Potentially dangerous and possibly traveling with others.

Do not engage, only report.

\$100,000 Reward in Stablecoins.

Really! Murder? Multiple murders? That's rich—and such a lie.

Alyssa and I looked at each other in astonishment. What lengths will OWL go to get us? Why can't they leave us alone?

Jeremy whistled and said, "Wait, that's not a big enough reward. But Hack, do you want to snitch on the girls with me so we can make some fast cash?"

I punched my husband on the arm and gave him the nastiest look I could give while loving him at the same time.

This was another reason why I don't think I'll ever step foot out of this container now.

When Hack and Alyssa finally took a break for dinner, Jeremy and I served them ground beef in a macaroni and cheese casserole; it was our way to thank our wedding guests for their attendance.

As we ate, we discussed the satellite cameras in detail. Hack had once again proved his amazing skills in computer knowledge. This time, with Alyssa's help, they found a way to see what the satellite above us is viewing for a few minutes when it goes over us sixteen times a day. This was done, as they explained, by searching for internet feeds that did not match between the public and private Numen servers, which is what Hack had previously done. When they found one named Hackett, it was a dead giveaway; it included the coordinates of our ranch.

While we were finishing up the meal, Hack retrieved his laptop and showed us the "sat-view," as he calls it. Since a satellite takes about ninety minutes to go around the world, its viewing of our area is short-term—maybe a minute at most—over a dozen times a day. For more coverage, more satellites would be needed that could view longer periods or include drones that hover over an area, like when I was tracked.

The screen slowly crossed the land. The big house was displayed, showing Hack's outbuilding and the garage along with the driveway to the bend. It viewed the barn and other buildings. We're pleased when we see the cattle and sheep eating in the pastures. It merely scanned over the Blue and Black Ponds, as well as the more forested area where we live, as it continued around the globe. Amen, and thank You, Lord! It's like the satellite's helping, not hindering us.

Later, we had a short Bible study from Romans by Amir, which Alyssa was attentive to. We were sitting in the great room when she spoke up.

"Amir, thanks for explaining that the book of Romans is a freedom letter. It's given me some things to think about. But I need to get something off my chest—something to free me."

I could tell she was nervous, but she pushed forward.

"I don't know how to say this, so I'll just put it out there. I'm pregnant, and it wasn't planned. In fact, I was drugged by Oliver when it happened. Sarah and Aya have shown me the value of having a child, so I want to keep the baby. I thought all of you should know—especially you, Hack."

I peered at Hack. He had a look of endearment, not surprise.

"Congrats," he said calmly. "I knew you were dealing with something heavy, but I didn't expect this. God loves you and the baby. I think it's great, even due to the tragic circumstances, and I—we—will back you a hundred percent."

With tears in her eyes, she said, "Thanks, everyone, you don't know what each of you means to me."

Ben laughed. "Well, you haven't been throwing up like my Aya did—that was loud and disgusting."

Aya nodded heartily in agreement.

I added, "Alyssa hasn't been making much of a peep and has little morning sickness, so you'd never know it."

"Alyssa," Amir began, "let me know if you're comfortable with me giving you an exam to make sure everything's going well. I think Aya may have some leftover prenatal vitamins you should start taking."

I think Alyssa was relieved by our responses and concerns; now she knows that we care for her and that she's a part of our family.



HACK

I'm razzed when the computers go online. It was like I got my mojo back. Better yet, so did Alyssa. Man, she's fire on a keyboard. I'm stoked.

"Hey, Alyssa?" I ask the next morning, while we're both sitting next to each other at the desk, waiting for the satellite to pass over our land again, "Do you think we can get a drone up without it being detected by the satellite?"

Now that we know its schedule, we know when it's above us and when our land isn't being watched. This makes Amir happy because we can go outside during a specific timeframe and avoid detection whenever the camera is recording. Perfect.

"I don't see why not," Alyssa answers. "Can't we program it to only be on our monitors? Patch the coding to our viewing?"

"Yes, once the satellite completes its pass, let's go outside and see if one of my drones works. We have almost an hour and a half to do it."

It's bitterly cold when we launch the drone and use my laptop to watch its progress. We zoom over the pastures and see the sheep huddled together by the run-in. The seven cattle are by a few oak trees, their backs against the northern blast of cold air. Next, I run it by the Blue Pond and peek into the downed satellite; Midnight and the milking cow are

resting inside. I fly it over the house area and find nothing amiss.

Alyssa and I are hyped that we can view the land this way—we could even do it from inside the containers.

When we watched the sat-view on the third day and on the third watch, I yell, "Amir, come here! Hurry!"

He runs into the room, and I point to the monitor. Four vehicles that I've never seen before are parked in our circular driveway. No people in view. No movement anywhere on our property.

"What do you think's happening?" I ask him.

"Probably vagrants looking for food or lodging," he replies, leaning closer to the screen. "Looks like the front door's still open. After the satellite passes, can you get a drone up and check it out without them seeing you?"

"On it," Alyssa says as she sets up one of the drones. When it takes flight, she steers it east of the pastures where there are more trees, past Ben's house, and over where the horse barn used to be. She whizzes it past the tall trees in the bend and cuts over to the garage, hiding the drone by the satellite dish on my outbuilding.

Zooming the camera into the house, the drone locates three guys in the great room near the dining room table. She circles back around and to the left of the house, where there are more evergreens. From there, she sends the drone through the orchard, over the roof of the house, dipping close to the ground, and landing by the small broken bridge in the pond. This way, we can look into the great room through the floor-to-ceiling windows without being noticed.

We count at least ten people milling around in the room—two of them females who are sitting on the couch, while two other guys are starting a fire in the fireplace, and others roam in and out of view.

All of a sudden, three men walk outside onto the porch, carrying AK-47s and rifles.

Alyssa quickly moves the drone along Grammy's garden and into the orchard, hiding behind the evergreens to watch what unfolds. She's better at maneuvering the device than I've ever been, and I tell her so. She's a pro.

What we witness next is horrific. The three shoot the cattle—all of seven them—dead. We're not talking mercy shooting, where a bullet is strategically placed into the skull to end its life quickly. We're talking repeatedly blasting their AK-7s into the animals' bodies. These people are monsters. I'm glad Ben is feeding the chickens right now; he'd be sick about it.

We expect them to go to the North Pasture to kill the sheep, but two more guys come out of the house and have words with them. We figure they want to cook them.

And they do. But not the kind of hygienic process that is safe and doesn't involve contamination. No, this is debauchery: They hack-attack the meat, splatter blood everywhere, and drag all the bodies by chains from the barn into a pile, then turn them into a growing bonfire. Disgusting to watch.

I make Alyssa bring the drone home since its battery's almost dead. No one here wants to see what these people are doing, and the sat-view will be coming around again.

Amir's the one who tells Ben about it; I can't do it. He's so mad that he wants to go after the jerks, but Amir, Jeremy,

and I talk him down. It's not worth being spotted by OWL over our murdered cattle.



ALYSSA

It was sickening watching the guys at the house kill the cattle.

When the sat-view had its next showing, we saw people partying outside, with the two girls on the steps by the front porch.

Hack had copied the video so we could zoom in on it. The girls, one with long blond hair and the other with curly black locks, were passing around a bottle of alcohol to the other guys. Hack thought it was Cutty Sark, the whiskey his dad used to drink.

About an hour later, Hack and I are fiddling more on Numen's site.

Abruptly, the Hackett screen gets cut in half, and ten smaller screens appear.

"Wow, look at that," Hack says as he squints closer at the small shots. "It looks like there are live cameras inside my parents' house. And each one is jumping around the rooms!"

Hack pauses, then sits up straighter.

"Ah, I know what's happened; I saw this before," he says. "Those are the robot flies that Oliver brought into the house. Someone must have opened the box, and the mini robots are searching everywhere."

Sarah, who got up from sitting on the nearby couch with Jeremy, stands behind us and looks intently at the monitor. "What do they want? What are they looking for?"

"You," I say softly. "When the box was opened before, they searched everywhere in the house for something of yours, but they couldn't find any object because you hadn't been in the house for months. That's when you all lived in the containers and only Ben, Karen, Hack, and sometimes Amir were there."

"Didn't Oliver say the flies were looking for her DNA?" Hack asks. "Surely, Sarah's would be in the house then and now, right?"

I answered, "Maybe they aren't designed well enough to detect small DNA samples like a hair follicle—more like an article of clothing or something like that."

We watch the flies zoom into every room of the house, almost making us dizzy with their flying. There's only one person, a kid in his late teens, who's sitting at the kitchen bar. We guess he's the one who opened the box, but he has no clue how to use it because he hasn't picked up the remote.

Hack's monitor emits one ding and then another. Two flies are in the Jack and Jill bathroom, hovering over the dual sinks. On the screen, there's a yellow circle around Sarah's watch. Another screen has my earrings circled. The word, *Confirmed*, is posted in each circle, OWL's proof that we were there.

The flies return to the box; the kid has to be confused, not realizing what has happened. When he shuts the lid, the ten screens turn black.

Hack and I take turns watching the sat-view fly over every ninety minutes. The gang is back in the house, most likely because the temps have dropped further; now they're hovering around twenty degrees. It looks like the cattle have been used for meat, but Ben and Hack wonder if it was safe to eat. Not our problem.

Meanwhile, Amir insists on doing reconnaissance when there's a break in the satellite coverage. When Jeremy and Hack ask if they can go with him, he says that he prefers to do it alone; he can travel faster and more stealthily, avoiding being spotted by the gang or satellite.

When he returns an hour later, he reports, "Something's going on. I went by the Johnstons' place, and there were two large OWL service trucks in their driveway; three humanoid robots were unloading a large drone from one of the trucks.

"The drone looks armed. I tried to look inside the second truck. I spotted several of those mechanical war dogs, the kind my older brother said were being used in the IDF. I don't know what OWL has planned, but we need to hunker down and stay inside these containers. The last thing we want is to have them know where we are."

Hack asks, "Do you think we should take the drone up and spy on the Johnstons' or the ranch?"

"No, I bet this is a planned attack by OWL. We should stay as invisible as possible right now."

When the satellite is overhead at 6:16 p.m., we get our answer, and the timing is well-orchestrated with the online coverage.

The seven of us—Hope, of course, is sleeping again—watch in astonishment when a large drone rises from the Johnstons' driveway and travels the two miles to the ranch.

This time, the satellite feed is different. It's like how Hack explained when he watched Sarah pretend to kill her-

self. It can zoom in and out or linger over an object. Someone is controlling the camera.

At the same time, Hack's screen splits in half, with one screen being the satellite feed and the other a camera on board the big drone. When the drone arrives at the house, it hovers above its rooftop.

Suddenly, a laser beam shoots out of the belly of the drone and zaps the house—over and over, splaying a blue fire stream onto the building. Flames leap upward. Windows shatter. Explosion after explosion occurs.

Two individuals run out the front door, and the drone's laser ignites them; their burning bodies aimlessly try to escape the flames. In the process, part of the garage catches fire.

Next, the drone lowers itself directly in front of the great room's window; the camera shows no movement except for the flames licking up the rugs, the couch, and the loungers and creeping up the wooden-beam walls.

The house is torched. Destroyed.

"This is my fault," Sara laments. "All my fault. I've put you all in jeopardy. I'm sorry. If I could go back, I would have never gotten that brain implant—look at all the damage it's caused."

"It's my fault, too, Sarah. I worked for them," I say. "I led them here. They want control and will get it any way they can, even if it means killing those innocent people in the house."

It's Hack who puts it together, saying, "The girls—OWL thought they were you two because of their hair color and that the flies confirmed your DNA in the house. They are

to blame for these deaths. They miscalculated big time, but God protected you."

Once again, I reflect on Hack's words. Yes, I've been spared again, and so has Sarah. So have all of us. But why? Guess God knows, but I don't.



SARAH'S JOURNAL

A fter the Hacketts' house burnt down, I became paranoid again. OWL is searching for me, and it seems they'll never stop. It's like I can't get away from them—ever.

Before the sun set that afternoon, Amir said, "Now that the sat-view just passed by, I'm going to do surveillance again. I want to check on things before it gets dark. I have a hunch that OWL's goal is to confirm that both of you are permanently off their radar. Meaning they want physical proof to verify that you're both deceased."

"What's the plan and how can we help?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "You girls have to stay put. Don't go outside; we don't know if there are other drones in the area. That's what I want to find out. On the last sat flyover, I saw that the truck that carried the large drone had left, but the one with the robotic dogs remained. I need to know what they're up to."

Alyssa and I were glued to Numen's screen when Amir left. Like waiting for the next shoe to drop, I was frightened that Mastema could be waiting for us in front of the entrance to the containers within the next hour. Both of us were fixated on that fear.

Sadly, I wasn't giving the problem to God, but letting it fester like a picked scab—that is, until Aya pulled us away from the screen, said she was praying for us, and asked us to watch Hope while she took a quick shower.

While Alyssa and I took turns holding Hope, one of us would keep an eye on the motionless monitor. No split screens, just waiting for the next pass over.

Due to an Arctic polar vortex working its way down from Canada, the temperature outside is ten degrees below zero; there's no way that I'm going out there. Ben says it's good that it's a dry cold, because the ground is frozen but not icy or layered with snow. Another issue is that the frigid wind chill makes it feel like it's twenty below. Brr. As is, I'm wearing three layers of clothes to keep warm inside the containers.

Amir returned an hour and twenty minutes later, a little too close to the next satellite flyover. He said that the autonomous dogs would be coming our way.

As he takes off Ben's Nordic jacket, a pair of insulated gloves, and his Kevlar ski cap, he said, "The five dog robots roamed back and forth behind the Johnstons' house, sniffing—if you want to call it that—exactly where Wayne caught on fire. They viewed the shop where Sarah went and the edge of the pond—I'm sure they're collecting any DNA remains."

Jeremy asked, "Didn't we cover the Rivian's tracks when we dumped it into the pond?"

"I thought so," answered Amir, "but since the pond is frozen, the dogs walked on the ice and continued to search. I couldn't tell if part of the vehicle was far enough down under the ice or not. And the humanoid's body language didn't por-

tray any red flags when it was looking at its handheld computer."

"What do you think they'll do next?" Ben asked as he held Hope downward on his arm to burp her.

"The ranch. The reason why I am late is that I watched the dogs get loaded back into the van and leave; it's now parked by the bend in the trees. I wouldn't be surprised if those robots inspect every inch of the 260 acres. I bet they'll even go to the ponds—including the Black Pond."

"Can we do anything to stop them?" Hack asked.

"That's what we have to determine," he replied. "All seven of us have to decide what to do next—sorry, Hope can't participate this time."

He went to the large whiteboard on the main room wall, picked up an erasable marker, and wrote the numbers 1, 2, and 3.

"Here's our choices: One. Do not engage." He wrote the words out, explaining that we would hunker down in the containers and hope the dogs don't catch our scent and find us. Two. Redirect. Here we may try to get the dogs interested in something happening somewhere else, like back at the Johnstons' or farther away. It would need more planning, which I don't think we have."

"I don't want to involve others or their property," Ben said, "especially if OWL destroys it like they did our house."

"Three. Counterattack," Amir continued. "We aggressively go after all robots, both the dogs and the humanoid."

"Would there be repercussions?" I asked. "Like, will OWL get even more violent with their trying to eliminate Alyssa and me?"

"That's the plan I'm working on. I'm sure each dog has cameras, so we can't let them see us, but it has to look like an accident. Maybe we can destroy them before they find us." He returned to the whiteboard and pointed to each option. "Which way should we decide?"

We unanimously and simultaneously said, "Three."

Amir then wrote each of our names down on a chart. Next to each name, he wrote a job title:

Amir ~ Humanoid Engineer

Hack ~ Humanoid Distractor

Jeremy ~ Dog Trapper

Ben ~ Dog Distractor

Sarah ~ Communications

Alyssa ~ Drone Operator

Aya ~ Camo Designer

"So," Amir explained, "before I go any further, I want to be sure you'll be on the NOMO OWL team or not." He had a cunning but boyish grin as he looked at us for agreement.



HACK

Amir's plan is brilliant and will work as long as the robots don't see us.

"We look totally ridiculous," Amir tells me. "Does aluminum foil really block infrared?"

"Yes," I reply, "I read about it when Numen was watching Sarah, and I told you to hide under metal. The foil's an effective reflector that can block thermal radiation."

"Perfect, think of the mocking if someone didn't know what we were doing." He turns to Aya and says, "So, can you

line Hack's and my clothing with foil? Like in our jackets, pants, hats, shoes, and maybe something to partially cover our hands and faces?"

Ben laughs at the idea. "Will one of those emergency Mylar blankets work? They're made of aluminum, right?"

He retrieves two of them from his survival backpacks and hands me one.

"Yes," I say, "These would work great if we were hunkering down, but not if we're on the move. If you or Jeremy get stuck past the satellite's passing every ninety minutes, curl up into a small ball and shelter under them."

Amir says, "Perfect. I feel better with you two using them, Ben. Since Hack and I will be on the go, our foiled clothes need to adapt to our movements."

Aya gets to work while Ben and Jeremy figure out how to trick the dogs. Knowing that the animal robots probably found Sarah's DNA at the Johnstons' place, they concentrate on Alyssa's scent and how to get the dogs to follow it.

Alyssa and I discuss how to make the necessary alterations to the humanoid. As she researches robot configurations, I glean through some of the devices and computer parts I brought to the containers and find what I'm looking for.

"Which of these do you think the humanoid robot uses, Alyssa?" I ask as I show her an SD card, a Raspberry Pi, and a stripped-down mini-circuit board.

"Let's have all three options in case we don't know the exact model."

Sarah gives me the original Rapture Kit flash drive, and I make a copy of it onto a 128GB SD card. While I'm doing

that, Alyssa's downloading the same data from my laptop to a Raspberry Pi. We also prepare a stripped-down, attachable mini circuit board just in case it's needed—but it's the most challenging one to accomplish.

Alyssa goes online and finds the same computer virus OWL was using to get rid of Christian websites and applies it to the SD, Pi, and board. Since the Rapture Kit files are large, it takes a while for them to download.

That night, all eight of us got little sleep—well, Hope gets her usual amount, with Aya only stopping her work when the baby demands to be fed.

Before the sun rises, Amir and I dress in our aluminum foil insert clothing—we laugh how crazy the idea is, but I keep telling them it'll work.

Right before we venture out, Ben leads us in prayer, "Dear Lord, please be with us today. Help us disarm OWL, if it is Your will. Please protect us and keep the robots from detecting us. We trust and love You. Amen."

The temp is still ten below. Thankfully, the wind has stopped, but it's cold! I'm thankful we're all wearing thermal underwear.

Amir and I head out toward the big house, well aware that the satellite will be passing above us in a little over an hour. Ben and Jeremy, who are not layered in aluminum foil, work their way to the Black Pond with two space blankets while Sarah uses the walkie-talkie to keep in touch with them. Since Amir and I will be too far away to use the coms, we'll depend on Alyssa to deftly man the drone. She'll converse with us via drone motions and blinking lights.

Although the two of us won't be able to witness what happens to the robotic dogs, the plan is for Jeremy and Ben to scatter parts of Alyssa's unwashed flannel shirt along a pathway from the house to the Black Pond. Amir thought maybe the dogs could pick up the scent of the SUV Oliver and Winston used, or even find the tire tracks to the pond, although he said he tried to follow in Dad's truck in the same ruts.

Jeremy will climb the large oak tree that Dad swung from decades ago and drop a large piece of Alyssa's shirt into the middle of the pond. He considered dumping heavy rocks onto the ice when the dogs retrieve Alyssa's clothing, but Ben came up with the better idea of using firebombs to thin the ice, causing it to crack when the dogs stepped into the middle. As a last resort, pistols will be shot into the ice, but we don't want to be heard or noticed. We want it to appear that the dogs accidentally fell through the thin ice on their own.

Following Alyssa's guidance with the drone, Amir and I use the tree line for cover, moving east of the pastures to Ben's house. We cut through the south side of the cattle barn by the equipment building and remain hidden under my grandpop's Ford truck next to the garage. It's metal, so I feel safe despite all the foil already covering my body.

Amir points upward—Alyssa's drone digs deeper into the tall evergreens nearby, meaning that the sat-view is now live.

The humanoid is out of the van and unlocking its back door, where five dog robots are programmed to traverse down the ramp. They immediately sniff the driveway, most likely detecting Oliver's and Winston's blood when Amir had to kill them. They also check out the tree where my dad was hung.

Alyssa flashes two quick lights, meaning there's a split screen on the Numen portal, most likely showing the humanoid along with the satellite feed.

We remain hidden under the truck.

The humanoid taps his computer and commands the dogs to inspect the house—or what's left of it—and the torched vehicles. They're most likely checking for DNA. They won't find Sarah's or Alyssa's remains, but maybe they can verify their past presence.

Next, the five dogs are commanded to spread out. Alyssa does seven flashes, so I envision my monitor in the container showing one larger screen and six smaller ones that cover the sat-view, humanoid, and five dogs.

One dog heads toward us, its rubber feet making an unnatural gear-meshing sound on the gravel. Amir and I roll farther under the truck against a bank of snow, hoping its density will block any infrared the dog could sense.

The weird-sounding dog lingers, walking back and forth the length of the truck. Amir's hand signals *calm*, so I hold my breath. I close my eyes, noticing the ice that's accumulated on my eyelashes and nose hairs. I keep my eyes closed and try not to sneeze.

I can't tell you how much I believe this is the end of my life until the robot is commanded to move on.

Alyssa flashes a blue light, meaning it's okay to go; the dogs have finished searching all buildings, including my place and the barn, and are now headed to the pastures. Amir motions for me to follow as we sneak around the

garage to the evergreens and approach the vehicle. As the humanoid is ascending the ramp, Amir trips it. As it falls into the van, he covers its eye camera with a black trash bag.

Knowing the van is metal, we're not worried about the satellite viewing us, but we are concerned about the robot trying to get up. I glance at Alyssa's drone. A blue light still emits from it. Then there are six instead of seven flashes, meaning OWL can't see the now-downed robot.

As fast as I can, I press on several places on the back of the humanoid until a panel opens while Amir twists one of its legs, making it unable to stand.

After looking at the unit's circuit board, I breathe a sigh of relief because the old-school SD card can easily slide into position. I would've never expected something so rudimentary to be on a robot. I thought I would need to use a Phillips head screwdriver to open the back and then use a USB cable to connect the Raspberry Pi to the board, or have to solder the mini board. Nowadays, SDs are antiquated—there are other updated options to add data and memory, but this should work.

Once I have closed the panel, I jump down from the van and hide in the bushes. Amir releases the humanoid's legs and removes the bag over its camera from behind. He retraces his steps back into the shadows with me.

Meanwhile, the robot stands up, picks up the handheld, and keys in information, as if nothing happened.

We both eye Alyssa's drone. A blue light with seven flashes. We did it. Now we have to wait and see how Jeremy and Ben did.

Amir and I return to our hideaway under the truck, watching to see when Alyssa updates us.

Two hours later, the coast is clear, and Amir and I head back to the containers. Even though my adrenaline is still rushing, I'm the coldest I've ever been in my life. Amir keeps telling me the foil is keeping us from freezing to death. Yeah, right. I can't even open my fisted hands.

The second we enter through the boulders into our home in the hillside, Alyssa greets me with a hug and a blanket. To my complete surprise, her warm lips kiss me on my cheek once the aluminum is removed. I'm wowed, not knowing how to respond.

Sarah and Aya hand us cups of hot coffee—any heat is welcome. They help us remove our layers of clothing to change. Ben and Jeremy have to help us button our shirts because our fingers are still frozen in a curled position.

When we finally can talk, we ask about the dogs and their demise.

"It was awesome," Jeremy says excitedly. "We could hear the dogs coming due to their electrical whine as they approached the pond. The firebombs did the trick—they melted the ice and fell below the surface before the dogs arrived. The cold refroze a thin layer, so when three of the dogs raced toward Alyssa's shirt in the middle of the pond, they sank immediately. The other two dogs were on the bank, which we had also unfrozen with a blow torch. The robots slid in, and since the bank rapidly drops off, they had no chance of climbing out of the water."

Sarah adds, "The five dog cameras were perfect. We could see them racing across the snow, hunting for the cloth-

ing, running onto the frozen pond, and sinking. Then their screens went black. It was wild!"

Ben looks proudly at Jeremy and gives him a pat on the back. "We did well, didn't we? And no guns were involved!"

"Now that the humanoid got in the van and left without the dogs, do you think OWL will keep pursuing the girls?" Jeremy asks.

"I hope they don't," Amir says, "but we won't know for a while. The virus-infected SD that Hack put in the droid won't cause havoc for weeks. We may not ever know the damage it makes."

"I was surprised OWL shut the humanoid down so quickly after the dogs sank," Sarah said. "It's not like they could've been retrieved. Once the screen went back to only the sat-view, I relaxed."

Jeremy walks over to Sarah and hugs her. "You're the best walkie-talkie communicator I've ever met. You get a gold star for being so calm, telling us when the dogs were headed our way. Plus, you sound like you should get into computers like Hack and Alyssa. You explained the split screens brilliantly."

Sarah blushes and kisses him on the lips, making me a little embarrassed.

"That was cool how we used the flashes to communicate," Alyssa says. "Great work, Amir and Hack. You guys rock."

"No," Amir counters, "the entire NOMO OWL team is the hest!"



A week later, the cold's still hanging around. At least it's above freezing, but only Amir ventures outside to do reconnaissance.

He reports that there's been no movement at the house or outbuildings. No animals, except for packs of wolves and a bear searching for food.

Each day, Amir covers different sections of the property within the ninety-minute satellite window. The Black Pond shows no activity; it's not like those dog robots can climb out of the frozen water. He finds Midnight and the milking cow are alive at the Blue Pond, so he brings them more hay and grain from one of the pasture's run-ins. He travels north past the containers, where Ben says hunting is the best on the land. The last two days, he caught two rabbits and another turkey using his homemade bow and arrow.

Aya makes a stew out of the rabbits, using a recipe of Karen's that Hack says is delicious. Since I've never eaten the animal before, I question its taste, but it's much better than I expected. The turkey meat is boiled down and put in a lock box hidden between boulders, where it will remain frozen until it needs to be used.

"When I was on the far northwest part of the property—at least, that's where I guess I was—I saw something odd," Amir says. "Several rabbits and deer had these strange, large growths on them."

"That's most likely the papillomavirus, wart-like tumors that can be pea to football size," Ben replies. "I've seen more of them on wild animals lately, especially when the cutaneous fibromas turn into oozing pus-filled sores."

Gross—I hope we don't eat any with that disease. The idea makes me sick to my stomach.

Hours later, Hack and I are side by side at the computer desk again. He goes to the Numen site to see if there's an update.

"Hallelujah!" he exclaims as he turns the screen in my direction. The flashing reward notice about Sarah and my whereabouts is no longer there.

Sarah, who's rubbing Jeremy's feet on the long couch, gets up and looks at the monitor.

"That's a miracle. Maybe OWL is finally off our tail!"

Everyone in the room is excited about how the two of us may no longer be on their radar.

"Ah, there goes that reward money we could have had, Hack," Jeremy jokes.

Sarah returns to the couch and gets into a tickle fight with her husband.

I feel a strange twinge in my gut, so I get up and go to the restroom. When I'm done, there's blood in the toilet bowl—my blood, and lots of it. I open the bathroom door a few inches.

"Sarah, can you come here a sec?"

I'm scared, and now I'm in intense pain—much worse than menstrual cramping.

When she comes to the door, I say, "I think something's wrong with the baby."

She peers into the toilet that I haven't flushed. "I'll go get Amir. You're right, something's wrong."

Sarah leaves. Next thing I know, Amir's at the bathroom door. I let him in and tell him the problem.

"I think you have miscarried, Alyssa," he explains. "I'm sorry. Can we go to your room so I can check?"

I don't know what to think. No baby? But at the same time, didn't I want to get rid of this child at the beginning because it's Oliver's? Yet now I've adjusted to having it. I'm emotionally torn.

Sarah walks me silently to my room with Amir behind us. Hack is engrossed with his computer and doesn't notice. Ben and Jeremy are discussing animal diseases while Aya is nursing Hope.

As I hold Sarah's hand, Amir verifies that I lost my baby. I'm sad—I think. It's a strange feeling to know that something was alive in me and now it's not; it's gone. I figure I was almost three months along. In my mind, I war with the root cause of this baby: Oliver. He'll never know I once carried his child, nor will he ever find out that the baby died in my womb. Somehow, my anger toward him is released, but my heart is broken.

Sarah must see my emotional dilemma. She tells me, right in front of Amir, "I'm sorry about the baby, Alyssa. God knows about your child from the second of conception. That little one is in Heaven right now, with my baby who was raptured and all other babies who've passed away."

I'm angry that I've gone through so much—for nothing now. With tears in my eyes, I ask, "Why would your loving God do this to me?"

She replies, "We don't know why God allowed you the privilege of carrying the child for only a short time, but we know He has His reasons, which we can't understand."

Amir says quietly, "Maybe this is a step in the process, Alyssa, to get your attention—to focus on Jesus and His love for you."

"No," I say sadly, "God's punishing me—He has to be. And this is another way of making me feel guilty. Besides, I probably can never have children in the future, right?"

"I don't agree," Amir says, "with any of what you're saying. You're not being punished by God—you're being loved by Him. I'm sure you're capable of having more children, in His perfect timing. And here's another thing to consider: what if your baby could not live in this world? What if he or she were sick? Have you considered that God has provided a way for that child to be whole in Heaven instead of here on Earth, trying to survive during the Tribulation? He's protecting you and your unborn child. What if..."

"I get it," I interrupt, "but I'm not ready to commit to your God. I'm mad at what I've gone through most of my life, at why God didn't spare me from some of the grief I've had to deal with."

Sarah says, "I understand what you're saying, Alyssa. I do. I've been there, too. We'll give you your space as far as your relationship with Christ, and we'll be praying that you'll see His love and power before it's too late."

I release her hand and turn to face the container's wall, hoping they will leave me alone.

When they leave, the tears start falling, and I can't stop them.



I felt bad for Alyssa, I really did, but I have no way to help her. Only the Holy Spirit can change her heart. I know she's heart-broken over so many aspects of that baby. Maybe it's a blessing, considering what's coming.

I think of how I treated my husband's Aunt Amy: horribly. I refused to listen to her nagging about Christianity, yet she was right all along about Christ; I'm trying not to be the same as Amy was, but I aim to be more loving and compassionate, but it's a struggle.

Once when I heard Alyssa snoring, I tiptoed into her room and put my Bible on her little table, setting the ribbon marker to the book of Esther. I hope she reads it.

Alyssa stayed in her little room the next day until Hack literally walked in and said, "Get out of bed, girl. We need you and you need us."

I was standing at the doorway when he went over to her bunk and pulled her comforter off her. In some ways, I think he's more mature than she is at times.

"We heard, and we are all sorry for your loss," he continued. "But here in the containers, we work together. We can pick up the slack at times, but please, Alyssa, don't go into your shell like you did last time. We're here for you, and I care a lot about you. We can get through this as a team. Let us help you."

Alyssa swung her legs off the bed and sat up. "Okay, but next time you enter my room without announcing yourself, be aware that I may take you down like Sarah did to that homeless guy."

I had to laugh about her tenacity—she does fight back when she wants to.

When she dressed and arrived at the table for an early dinner, we could tell she was trying to be social. We didn't overly engage her or question anything she said. We just welcomed any interaction with her.

Amir said that since the weather was better, he wanted to go farther away from the property to see if he could meet any others living off the land. This would mean he would be gone for a few days. Ben, Aya, and I weren't thrilled with his idea, but Hack and Jeremy were.

A day later, Amir left the containers, promising to return in two days. I knew he was a restless soul, but I was worried he would encounter someone from OWL. He obviously can handle himself if physically confronted, but I didn't like him being alone out there.

I was thankful when he came back with no injuries, along with a bag of dried moose. I had never eaten that one until Aya did her magic and made it taste good. Amir explained that he met a family of five living off the grid near the Kootenai River. Apparently, the grandfather had fallen down a ravine and broken his arm, so Amir made a temporary splint to immobilize it. The meat was for his medical help, which they appreciated.

He also told us that the family was Mormon and had lost six children when the Rapture occurred, but they didn't realize it had happened because they believed that it would be at the end of the Tribulation. Amir explained to them that we Christians believe God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are one, compared to the Mormon teachings that they are separate beings instead of the Trinity.

Hack asked so many rapid-fire questions that Amir had to tell the kid to stop interrupting.

Later, Alyssa was in her room, saying she was reading the Book of Esther.

"Great to hear!" I exclaim. "I hope you like it. Another good one is Ruth; you may like that one, too. I'm almost done with the Gospels, which are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John."

"Okay," she nods.

"Oh, Amir's discussing the end times in his Bible study, and you don't want to miss this because it details what's going to happen over the next six years from now."

When the three of us entered the main container, Amir had written a chart on the whiteboard. This time, he put it in small print on the left side of the board under our schedules so we could still use the other three quarters.

Here's what he wrote:

7 SEALS:

- 1. Horse of Deception ~ Revelation 6:1–2
- 2. Red Horse of War ~ Revelation 6:3-4
- 3. Black Horse of Famine ~ Revelation 6:5-6
- 4. Pale Horse of Pestilence ~ Revelation 6:7-8
- Martyrdom & Great Tribulation ~ Revelation
 6:9–11
- 6. Heavenly Signs ~ Revelation 6:12–17
- 7. Trumpet Plagues ~ Revelation 8:2

7 TRUMPETS:

- 1. Grass & Trees Burned Up ~ Revelation 8:7
- 1/3 Sea Turns to Blood, 1/3 Ships & Sea Life Destroyed ~ Revelation 8:8–9

- 3. 1/3 Water Turns Bitter ~ Revelation 8:10–11
- 4. 1/3 Sun, Moon, & Stars Don't Shine ~ Revelation 8:12
- 5. Locusts Wield Military Power ∼ Revelation 9:1–12
- 6. 200M Man Army Gathers ~ Revelation 9:13-21
- 7. Kingdom is Proclaimed, Second Coming of Christ ~ Revelation 11:15–19

7 BOWLS/PLAGUES:

- Sores Afflict Those Who Have Taken the MoB ~ Revelation 16:2
- 2. Sea Turns to Blood, All Sea Life Dies ~ Revelation 16:3
- 3. Rivers Turn to Blood ~ Revelation 16:4-7
- 4. Mankind Scorched by Sun ~ Revelation 16:8–9
- 5. Beast's Seat of Government Afflicted ~ Revelation 16:10–11
- Euphrates Dries Up, World Gathers for Armageddon ~ Revelation 16:12–16
- 7. The Earth is Utterly Shaken ~ Revelation 16:17–21

Amir tells us, "We know the first Seal has been fulfilled, thanks to Mastema, so I'll put a check mark next to it. Some of these twenty-one prophecies overlap; some Bible scholars say the Seals happen chronologically. Others believe the Seals occur throughout the seven years, while the Trumpets don't start until

the midpoint—or three and a half years—into the Tribulation. The Bowls happen at the end.

"We need to realize that if we stay alive, we'll witness these unbelievably scary events. They are frightening to say the least, but as believers, we know that there is an end: Jesus wins and we will be saved because we believe in Him."

"If we do survive all these, what happens to us?" I ask. "And what happens if we don't survive?"

"Well, we could get ill or injured from some of the above scenarios, starve to death, or be killed for our beliefs. If we die because we don't accept the Mark of the Beast, we are counted as martyrs who will be in Heaven and redeemed to eternal glory. If we live through the seven years, we'll transition into the Millennium, which is a thousand-year reign designed for the Jews. No matter what, we live eternally with Christ."

I looked at Alyssa, who was wide-eyed as she grasped every word Amir said.



HACK

When I learned Alyssa lost her baby, I honestly felt bad and glad at the same time. It's sad that a child no longer exists here on Earth, but God showed her mercy and grace. I wonder if, when the child was born, she'd look at the baby every time and think of Oliver. Maybe this way, she won't have to deal with raising a little one with all the future disasters Amir showed us on the whiteboard. I can't imagine how we're going to live through what's coming, but God knows.

At night, I toss and turn. The end times timeline got me thinking: We need to tell others what's coming.

"Sarah," I asked the next morning, "can I borrow that Rapture Kit flash drive again?"

After she hands it to me, I go to the computer desk and retrieve the Raspberry Pi that I had as a backup to use to infect the humanoid robot. I erase all data on the device and reload it with the Rapture Kit only.

Then I search through all my computer parts and find two more Raspberry Pis, four flash drives, and three 64GB and one 128GB SD disks. I go to work copying the Rapture Kit onto each of them.

Alyssa sits down next to me. "What are you doing?"

"I want to spread the Word of God, and I think I've found a way to do it."

She shakes her head, but helps me duplicate the data onto the devices, commenting that the smaller-sized SDs won't be able to hold everything. I tell her to add only the files in English, not the other languages.

The process takes almost an entire day. While the files are being formatted, I go into the atrium, where Amir's feeding the hens our food scraps and gathering two more eggs.

"Amir, I have a suggestion and would like your opinion. I want to accompany you the next time you leave the property overnight. I want to give out some of my Rapture Kits to those we meet, like that Mormon family you encountered. What do you think?"

"That's actually a great idea," he says. "We could stop by their place and try to find others to witness to. I wish we had physical Bibles to give them."

"No worries there. The Rapture Kit includes complete Bibles. I have a total of three Pis that do not require internet access." I show him the device, which is the size of a deck of cards. "We give them these. We can also hand out the flash drives, which they can download onto a desktop or laptop. Or I can give them the SD disks. I don't have many of these, but it's a start. None of these devices requires the internet. Also, they could be read over a CB or shortwave radio."

Sarah butts into the conversation, but we don't mind. "Why don't we input my journal into this electronic record? I can use a phone to take pictures of all the pages and add them to the kit."

"That's great, Sarah," Amir replies. "This may work, Hack. Let's plan to go later in the week."

When we discuss our idea with the rest of the group, only Alyssa is opposed.

"Why would you want to leave, Hack? Everything we need is here. And why do you care about telling others about what's coming? It's going to be worse than the dog-eat-dog world out there. We have to focus on surviving. And why, Sarah, would you want to share your personal diary this way? Isn't it too private? What if OWL gets ahold of it and learns where we're living?"

"I doubt it would get into OWL's hands," I answer. "We could black out any references to our location—or even our names if necessary."

"Yes, that would work," Sarah says. "I want to do it because we need to tell others about the Lord before it's too late for them. Maybe what I've gone through will help someone come to Christ. We don't want anyone to go to Hell."

Alyssa doesn't reply as she eats more of her roast, instant mashed potatoes with gravy, and canned green beans.

Four days later, when it's a mild thirty-five degrees and clear outside, Amir and I leave the containers with backpacks containing our Rapture Kit devices. Before we go, we pray for safety, guidance, and that the Message of God will be well received.

Of course, I've got my dad's loaded FBI Glock on my waistband and army knife in my pocket, while Amir has his pistol, knife, and homemade bow and arrow. Ben provides MREs—meals-ready-to-eat packets—along with the two aluminum emergency blankets, both for protection from the satellite and to keep us warm when sleeping outside.

It's nice to be out in the fresh air again. The vast land is starting to show new growth, even in mid-February. Although it's still winter, we spot herds of deer, elk, moose, and bighorn sheep as we hike toward the Kootenai River on the east side of our property. We notice bear and wolf tracks.

After we cross the river, a man approaches us—Amir tells me it's the Hansen son in the Mormon family that he met two weeks ago.

"Hey, Bill, how's your grandfather? Is his arm healing?" he says.

"He's much better, thanks to you."

Introductions are made, and he invites us into their *safe house*, which is hidden below an old shed among the trees on their property.

I meet the rest of the family, which consists of the grandfather, father, son, and the wives of the father and son. They are happy to see us. William, the injured grandfather, says, "Thanks, Amir, for your end times information. I've been looking into it and reading my Bible. Now that the Rapture has happened, I see that Joseph Smith was wrong and that what you Christians believe is right. We trusted in the wrong religion. I realize that now and believe in the real Jesus Christ."

Amir and I are thrilled to hear about a new convert. When I share the Rapture Kit, they're intrigued and excited. I give them one of the Raspberry Pis, show them how it works, and explain what the kit contains. The group is more than appreciative, saying they have many friends nearby who'll be interested.

After we explain our mission over a light lunch of dried meats, cheeses, and homemade bread, the grandfather draws a map on a piece of paper showing other homesteads of nearby preppers. We thank them for the meal and walk north, glad we accomplished our witnessing goal as we head to the next target.

The next homestead isn't as receptive. We're met by two long rifles held by a man and a woman on their front porch, demanding that we leave.

"We understand," I say. "I'm going to leave this flash drive on this post here, maybe you'll be interested in what it says."

Amir and I pray for the couple as we visit one more location.

That night, we stop for the night near several boulders in a field. Before we fall asleep, we talk about the stars and the vast sky. At one point, I peek from under my aluminum blan-

ket and watch the satellite slowly travel across it, knowing it's recording the land.

The third place is three miles east. We're about ten miles from the containers.

What we find is impressive: an armed compound of at least twenty to thirty adults and a few teens, including guys and girls around my age. Once again, with guns trained on us, we're asked what our intentions are. When we explain the Rapture Kit, one of the men who's pointing his rifle at us lowers it and allows us entrance into their protected community.

We're well received, and several are amazed by the Pi not needing any internet connection to view files. I show them the Bible versions in different languages, sermons, and extra sources for learning about the Tribulation and what's to come. They're jazzed. One of the teens, who's a computer geek like me, gives me a dozen blank flash drives in exchange for one Rapture Kit. He says he'll duplicate it onto the other dozen drives he has and share them with others. Score.

Amir and I are euphoric as we head back to the containers, pleased that we accomplished our goal of sharing what's coming with others. We may not learn the outcome of what happens to those who view the kits, but we're glad we got something into their hands.

We make good progress heading back. We're less than a mile from the containers, but it's dark and there's little moonlight, so we bunk down near some rocky hills.

Once again, we eat our MREs and hide under the emergency blankets for warmth and avoidance of the satellite overhead. I'm tired but happy as I drift off to sleep.

I'm startled awake by a rustling before the sun arises. Amir isn't next to me, but I spot him relieving himself near a large rock.

Suddenly, a large grizzly bear is standing within five feet of me. Yikes! I want to call out to warn Amir, but I don't dare.

When we first moved to Idaho, Ben explained the different bear species: While you should act large and noisy around black bears, you should never mess with a grizzly or a mother brown bear with her cubs. I'm under the aluminum blanket, but I need to roll onto my stomach, put my hands over my head and neck, and spread my legs apart to keep the bear from flipping me. I try not to make a noise, but I pray that Amir will see the bear and somehow scare it away. The problem is that my backpack, which has my gun and bear spray, is not within reach. I don't think the Swiss army knife in my pocket is enough to take the six-hundred-pound monster down.

I slowly roll over, and the blanket makes a crinkling sound, catching the bear's attention. It starts swiping at the cover, lifting it off most of my body. I remain frozen as it tries to flip me, but it can't since my legs are widely spread. The animal chews on my boot, its teeth crunching into the soft leather around my ankle. It lets go and paws at my back, digging its claws into my skin. The pain is incredible. I feel its mouth on my leg, the same one where my ankle was gnawed.

Amir screams as he runs by the bear and me, grabbing both our backpacks at the same time. The bear stops tasting me and starts to go after Amir, who runs behind several rocks.

Next, I watch Amir spray the potent pepper deterrent directly in the bear's face. Which apparently makes it madder, because it lets out a ferocious roar. By some miracle, instead of attacking, it angrily lumbers away.

Amir rushes to my side and inspects my injuries.

"You're not supposed to fight a grizzly bear," I mumble. "You have to play dead."

I hear Amir say, "You've lost a lot of blood" and "Stay with me, Hack!"

Then I quit listening.



ALYSSA

When Amir's voice squawks on the walkie-talkie sitting on the long counter, Jeremy's the first to respond. "Where are you?"

"Less than a click—by the northeast side of the mountain containers."

Jeremy asks us what a click is—since I'm on the computer, I quickly look it up.

"A click is a thousand meters, or 0.6214 miles."

"Okay, Ben and I are on our way. Hold tight," Jeremy replies as he grabs Ben's and his jackets by the container entrance, and they leave.

Mere seconds later, Amir yells, "Bring my medical bag!"

The words freak me out. Sarah's in the shower and Aya's nursing, so I grab another walkie-talkie. "I'll bring it! I'll be right behind you!"

I grab Amir's medical bag and a jacket and race outside. I'm aware that the sat-view completed its pass a half hour ago. I don't care what happens. I must help my friends.

Ben and Jeremy are running about two hundred feet ahead of me. I can't catch up with them, but I jog behind.

When they tuck behind some rocks and disappear, I know they must be near Hack and Amir.

As I come around the large rocks, I see Amir is leaning over Hack, who's lying on his side on the aluminum blanket. I put the medical bag down and ask if I can help.

"Alyssa, talk to Hack, try to keep him awake.

Hack looks pale, so out of it. I cup his face in my hands. "Hey, Hack. Looks like ya had a bit of an accident."

There's no response.

Ben's asking Amir about the bear, confirming it was a grizzly—the meanest of the species. I can't imagine how rattled he must be after already losing family members in all this chaos.

"Hack," I speak again, "I know you can hear me. Stay awake and show me that you know I'm nearby, okay?"

His eyes flutter a little.

Amir has practically emptied his medical bag on the blanket. He says he had to use his belt as a tourniquet on Hack's thigh to stop the bleeding below his knee and ankle, where the bear bit him.

Amir had already pulled out his shirt from his backpack and covered the long scratches on Hack's back. Checking the blood saturation on the clothing, he says, "He's lost a lot of blood. We need to get him back to the containers STAT."

Carefully, Hack's wrapped in the blanket, and Jeremy and Ben carry him while Amir supports his leg. I stay next to his head, telling him the entire time about how much I care about him and that he can get over this.

An hour later, Amir finishes cleaning Hack's wounds using hydrogen peroxide and stitches the bites and claw marks. He'll be scarred for life.

As Amir works, he asks if the satellite could've caught the bear attack, but I tell him I don't think so—I watched it pass over right before it must have happened.

Hack lies unresponsive on his bunk bed. He hasn't said a word or flinched when Amir worked on him. He doesn't respond to me. I don't leave his side. I can't. He means too much to me.

Sarah enters the room, asking if I want a reprieve, but I say no. She returns with a cup of tea and rolls with jam. Then she goes to my room and retrieves the Bible she had given me, saying, "Let's read this to him; it may bring him comfort."

She begins reading from the Psalms. Hack still doesn't respond.

An hour passes. I take over reading as Sarah takes a break and updates the others on Hack's status. Tears run down my face when I read Psalm 73 aloud:

So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee. Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

I silently cry, God, I'm sorry for my foolishness and ignorance. I apologize that I've never reached out to You. I'm sorry for all my sins and thank You, Jesus, for dying on the cross instead of me and rising on the third day. I believe in You and want You to be the Lord of my life. And God, please heal my friend, Hack. Let him live, please. I love him, and I don't know what I'll do without him as we try to survive the Tribulation. Amen.

When I'm finished praying, I look at Hack. God must have heard my prayer, because I see my friend's eyeballs dart back and forth under their closed lids. Wow.

Sarah reenters the room and sits down on a folding chair next to me.

"Look at his eyes," I say excitedly. "They're moving! I prayed to God to heal Hack, and He's already answered my prayer. That's so cool!"

With tears in her eyes, she hugs me. "Oh, this is wonderful! Hack's making a turn. Let me tell Amir."

"Wait, Sarah," I say, grabbing both her hands, "I wanted to tell you that I also just asked Jesus into my heart."

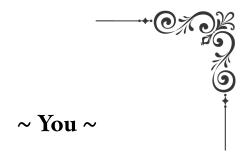
She says, "Really? Oh, that's great, Alyssa. I'm proud of you."

"I read Esther and Ruth yesterday," I say coyly. "I know you admire and want to be like Esther, but I connected more to Ruth, who left her family to live with her mother-in-law. Like Ruth, I want to love my new family here at the home in the hillside, including Hack."

She laughs and hugs me. "Oh, so you want to marry an old man like Boaz and become King David's great-grand-mother now? I think not!"

We glance at Hack, whose eyes are still closed, but there's an itsy-bitsy smile on his lips. Sarah and I grab each of his hands, and his smile deepens as his eyes slowly open.

Praise God, Hack's going to make it. Man, I love this guy. Thanks, God, to You be the glory.



Dear Reader,
I had to add this last post to my journal. It's included in the Rapture Kit that Amir and Hack gave you. I hope it helps someone.

Remember when I stated way back at the beginning that it's all about control? Well, either you want it over yourself, want to have it over someone else, or willingly give it to God. I chose the latter: I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I need not worry. He's in control of my life now, not me. I'll either be martyred for my beliefs or, somehow, by the Lord's grace, live through the next six years of the Tribulation.

I'm praying for you—that you, too, will become a true believer soon. No, now—like right this minute.

As for my friends and me in our container, we may be untaken for now, but we're waiting to be taken again at Jesus's second coming.

In His love, Sarah



y end-time series is over. The ending may seem anticlimactic as you may yearn to know what happens to the characters next, but I had to end it positively. And isn't Alyssa giving her life to Christ the most important and exciting thing one can experience?

Had I written the stories in *sevens*, I could've done five books of seven hours, seven days, seven weeks, seven months, and seven years, but I never considered writing more than the first book, and look what's happened. The Lord knows best, so I'm not one to argue with Him.

Like the other three books, please remember this is a work of fiction—my fanciful, twisted scenarios of what would happen if the Rapture occurred in the present day. Granted, there was plenty of artistic license taken, and I apologize for my many errors and misinterpretations; I'm human and accountable to the Lord—and I'm not perfect.

Because the Bible isn't explicit on the exactness of the end times, I struggled with the timeline, focusing on what most theologians believe, but we could be wrong. I refuse to date-set the Rapture, but I did my best to weave in Biblical ideas; however, they could be incorrect. And we do not know if Damascus turning into ruins facilitates the signing

of the Antichrist's peace treaty with Israel. I added them and other Biblical events to enhance the storyline.

While this fourth book is a good deal longer than the other three, I would say the biggest problem I had was including current events and advances in technology. I can't tell you how many times I had to change the story as something came to fruition in history, a catastrophe happened at the same location I had designated, or the technology needed updating. As the Bible states, knowledge rapidly increases during the end times, and it has changed drastically within the last year or two. The brain and hand inserts mentioned are not the Mark of the Beasts, but preliminary designs, which most likely will happen until the MoB is required at the midpoint of the Tribulation. Some of the AI and IT devices discussed are already being used, such as the AI companion, which is being targeted toward teens and twenty-year-olds—so please warn them.

I wanted to share something about one of my scenarios: Brent's Christian conversion. My father, a hardcore agnostic, became a believer at age eighty-two when the same thing I write about (no giveaways here) involving Karen happened with my parents, including Karen's actions and Brent's words. Funny, how God works, allowing me to use the decades-old, tender situation in this book.

Please also note that the main reason I've written these books is to get your attention, forcing you to consider the "what if the Rapture happens right now?" possibility. Like right now. Listen up, it could happen right now, so always be ready!

I thank God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit for loving me and giving me this opportunity to use my writing as a ministry. Book 1 is always free as an eBook, and I average about one dollar on any print or eBook sales, so it's not about making money.

I would also like to thank the following people for their help with my writing process:

- My husband, again, for patiently reading my chapters and guiding me to the right medical descriptions and perfect word choices.
- Scott Townsend for his many prayers, Facebook messages, and hour-long phone calls regarding internet technology and artificial intelligence. I also thank him for adding my books into his Rapture Kit and designing themissings.com, which includes my series.
- Terry James for keeping me on track regarding the Biblical timeline, which isn't clearly defined in the Scriptures.
- Anne Kelleher for her storyline input, encouragement, and prayers.
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- Katy Ann for her technical and organizational surveillance information.
- Keith Liberty for his weaponry information and excellence at catching my silly errors.
- Lindsay Betz for her expert eye in editing/ proofreading my manuscript.

Other kudos are given to my alpha and beta readers—you know who you are who catch my pesky faux pas and are so forgiving with their endless compliments on my writing style.

Lastly, I thank you, reader, for reading this fourth and final book in the series. I hope you enjoyed them all. I'd never imagined I'd write one book, let alone all four. But your positive praises and online reviews kept me going, and I appreciate you for that.

Please don't be UNTAKEN, but be TAKEN—hopefully soon!





The Eternal Plan of Salvation

taken from the King James Version of the Bible



For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. ~ Romans 3:23



For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

~ Romans 6:23



That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believe on Him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto

all that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

~ Romans 10:9–13



But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we're yet sinners, Christ died for us.

~ Romans 5:8



Verses Regarding the Rapture

taken from the King James Version of the Bible



Behold, I shew you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

~ 1 Corinthians 15:51-53



For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

~ 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. John 14:1-6



A Few Verses Regarding the Tribulation

taken from the King James Version of the Bible Seven Seals ~ Revelation 6, 8, 9, & 11 Seven Trumpets ~ Revelation 8, 9, & 11 Seven Bowls/Plagues ~ Revelation 16



For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

~ Matthew 24:21



For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be.

~ Mark 13:19



And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were be-

headed for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

~ Revelation 20:4–6

Daniel 9 & 12 ~ Matthew 24 ~ Mark 13 ~ Luke 21 ~ Revelation 3 & 13



- How would you respond if you missed the Rapture? Would you be mad or angry at God or search earnestly for Him?
- 2. Do you think surveillance has gotten out of hand? Do you think it can be stopped?
- 3. What do you think will happen when the Antichrist signs the seven-year peace treaty with Israel?
- 4. Which character in Book 4 did you relate to the most and why?
- 5. Whether the Rapture happens today, tomorrow, or years from now, will you be taken or untaken when it occurs?



The first book in this series was originally titled *Untakenable*.

It was updated in 2023 and is titled *Untaken: 12 Hours Following the Rapture*.

* Book 1 is available FREE as an EBOOK almost everywhere online.



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About the Author

Born and raised in Southern California, Wyler is a Christian who lives in the Pacific Northwest. Having owned a business for over thirty years, she is retired and enjoys spending time with her family and traveling.