The Snow

By : mkkrinler

Less than two-hundred miles from an Air Force Base, the small town of Ellensburg is the picture of normal small town society getting ready for summer. The small town may have remained that way forever, if not for the attack. From the fallout of the mushroom cloud two-hundred miles away, unnatural snow begins to fall on the town. Soon, one once normal, happy family is struggling to stay alive trapped in their own home.

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Chapter 1: Log Entry 20

The Snow

Log: #20, 2008, 20 wake-ups after.

We set Paul out back. First onto the third story balcony, then slid him over the edge down into the yard. Even if we wanted to burry him there's too much snow, and the earths too hard from cold for it. i think I pulled something in my back in the process anyway though, pulling him down the hallway. im so sore. I hated not being able to give him a proper burial. He'd risked his life for the rest of us and died in the process he deserved better than we could give. We all said a few words though. I hope he understands. I'm afraid of what it is going to do his wife Clair. She was so unsteady as it was. just yesterday he had told me that he'd caught her staring at the snow, just standing in the doorway in the cold and everything not wrapped in a blanket. Staring "like the snow was an oasis" he had said. Hallucinating? I wouldn't doubt it. He gave her a gentle yelling and shake and she came around, i guess, it seemed. But now with him gone I will have to give the gentle yelling's, thats the least I can do for him. Though I admit it wasn't entirely in vain, he dying. Now we know that filtering the water under the ice in the river won't work. I can't imagine the pain he went through last night. We all sat around him as he moaned and cried, trying to tell him it was going to be okay. Clair kept asking me to just kill him, but I didnt dare. Im not a murderer and what if he had pulled through? It really didn't help everyone's growing depression to listen. I can't believe i let him do it when I think about it. I appointed myself as a leader so it should have been me. Paul wouldnt hear of it. Some leader. it was not in vain. can't forget that. It did work a little, it didn't just corrode a hole through his mouth or throat. It settled in his stomach for the first part of the afternoon, then---- We need to figure out how to get more water! Food is okay, as long as we keep it rationed and stick to the plan to get out of here soon. now there is only 8 of us. Less people = more food = more days I suppose. I believe there are more people then us still in town, and they may have food though I doubt it. We've raided just about everything the nearby neighborhood has to offer and we are running low. I can't believe a family would have that much food saved, or what's more that much water. Tomorrow when we go out we might find people. I mean- people other than the starved and dehydrated or the corroded corpses, or corpses with bullets in the skulls. I don't know if that's good or bad, live people, if they are also out of food more mouths to feed but more saved lives is more lives I suppose. More saved lives and that is important. God i am so tired. I think I've written all there was to today. And some. Tomorrow we may try something new. Set up a fire in a room where we can open a window for the smoke and not have to breath the air too much. But it will be ME leading it. I won't have more blood on my hands- or rather the corroded, boiled guts of another friend.

Timothy Blade

Chapter 2: Dwayne

I

Through an open window, the cats moan rose from the back door patio. Dwayne rolled over, content to be sleeping in warm sheets with a soft pillow. His dream of the beautiful girl running started to grow foggy. He only glimpsed her face as she quickly looked over her shoulder at him. Why was she running away? He wanted her to run to him, but she looked so frightened. The dream grew foggier still, and he felt himself in limbo between sleeping and waking.

The loud animal spate again from outside the back door. He realized he was now fully awake and wishing he was a heavier sleeper. Allie had looked so lovely in his dream. Even running, withher hair flicking back and forth.The dreambut it had been cloudy though, and there had not been any sunlight to catch her red hair.

I need sleep was his first full, coherent thought. Finals were this morning at the college. It was bad enough that he wasn't even a college student yet. Not only was he a glutton for punishing curriculum, the professor of his History class had a certain pleasure in harassing Running Start students. Being a high school student in college was great, free tuition, prettier girls, though it did have a setback or two.

"Go back to high school," was the instructors warning, "Unless you want the next nine weeks to be your own personal hell," the professor added. He seemed to think highly of himself, that his material was too advanced for a teenager to comprehend.

Dwayne had scoffed at the warning then, but now he had the horrific realization that if he got anything worse than a C on this final, he may very well fail the class. He'd received a D+ on the midterm test, harsh grading, and who knew how the Term paper he'd submitted would turn out; probably harsher grading.

Again he complained into his soft cotton pillow, trying to summon the image of Allie. It was easier on the mind.

The angry demand from outside repeated, drowning out his own moan for five minutes of sleep. Climbing out of bed and sitting down on the edge of his bed he rubbed his eyes with the back of his wrist. It was still mostly dark outside. The moon was nearly down but the sun was far from up. When Dwayne finally reached the back door his cat was inside before the door was half opened.

As he began to shut the door he stopped, looking out towards the hedges. There, sitting on the top of the fence above the greenery, barely illuminated by the back porch light, was the large demon cat that lived in the house on the other side of the alley behind them. As far as cats were concerned, that black cat was the, 'jack-arse', as his mother would put it. The cat was a decent mirror of the family it belonged to. He formed his hand into the shape of a gun and made a soft gunshot noise with his mouth at the animal.

He looked down at his own cat, "You could always become an indoor cat, Dog," he lectured, "A life of milk, warm windows and all that cat heaven stuff."

Sleep came to him more or less soundly for the rest of the night, Dog keeping his feet warm and purring loudly in the process. Allie did not return to his dreams, though. Instead he dreamt of a crowded classroom full of people in business suits who were all smarter than he was. His pencil was out of lead, he really had to pee, and the test was in another language.

Chapter 3: Morning Rush

II

Dwayne couldn't love college life more; it was far better than high school. The professors cared about what they taught and what they taught was mostly practical to the real world. The students had to pay to be there, and thus they wanted to be there. And what was better than liberal college girls? The classes were only for one-hour always starting at obscure times of day.

He didn't have his first class until 11:00AM, so he normally woke at 10:00AM. This left him plenty of time for his morning ritual where he and his mother danced about the house.

Hit snooze twice, getting him out of bed at 10:11. His short nap under the steaming water in the shower took another fifteen minutes. Spend four dawdling minutes messing with his hair and teeth in the mirror. A minute and a half spent pulling on whatever clothes were in the top of his drawers. Five minutes to make some magic: sugar-milk mixed with coffee. At about 10:36 and thirty seconds, he was using the distance between the door and his car to eat a boiled egg. The short drive from home to campus usually got him to class in plenty of time. But last night Dog had ruined his precious balance and those two slaps at the snooze button had become four.

"Hey, ma?" he called, scrambling into some jeans. He'd have to skip the shower and the nap this morning, despite needing both.

"Huh?" she replied from the bathroom where she was putting on some lip colored lipstick. It was laughable she had to add natural color to her already natural lip color. What did it accomplish but making her morning replies a half winded response as she held her mouth open?

"Dog was fighting again last night; you might want to give him a rub down, see if he's cut up bad anywhere," Dwayne explained loudly as he moved from his room to the kitchen. He grabbed a plastic bag and put a few fistfuls of trail mix into it. He could eat that while walking and driving.

"That cat needs to learn to fight," his mother said after a little while; the natural colored lipstick must have dried. She clicked on the hair dryer. She always had time for a shower. He was starting to lament the fact he'd have to skip brewing up some coffee as he pushed his feet into a pair of shoes. He considered filling a thermos with just sugar milk, but decided against it; he needed that little bit of coffee to make it all work.

"Yeah, I know," he said moving past the fridge that held his favored boiled egg. "You'll probably wanna check it out. I really have to go. If I'm a minute late the Prof' won't let me in at all," he called moving through the kitchen to the back door.

The hair dryer clicked off, "Okay," she said coming out of the bathroom hurrying into the kitchen after him. She gave him a hug for luck and he kissed her forehead because she was his mother, his only parent, and he loved her.

Dwayne was wiry, much like his mother though there was about half a foot to his advantage in height. It made kissing her forehead easy. His mothers' dark brown hair was the same shade of oak as Dwayne's, though hers came to the middle of her back and she'd had it highlighted recently. His hair was a bit more conservative than that. Controversial hair styles weren't his idea of teenage rebellion. It was never long enough to touch the tops of his ears though this morning it did stick out in funny directions.

"Good luck on your final, honey," she kissed his cheek; she was the perfect height for that, "you'll do fine, and don't worry; I'll take care of Dog at some point today before or after work. You just worry about acing that final, 'kay?"

"Right," he said with a short lift of his eyebrows. He turned, grabbing his bag of assorted nuts from the kitchen counter and walked out of the back door for the street. "Love you, mum!" He heard her amorous reply as he shut the door behind him.

Chapter 4: History

III

Dwayne sat on the wood bench outside of the class room in the spring sunlight. He was working over his exam notes trying not to scowl. He'd forgotten to write about things, not written enough about other things and he'd mixed up two different concepts, making them both wrong.

Emily, a regular college sophomore student walked easily out of the class room, having just finished her own exam. She gave a satisfied grin, no doubt at her own excellent performance, and sat beside him, "How bad did you screw yourself?" she asked grinning as he tried to keep his face unexpressive looking from her to his notes and back again.

"Not sure." He muttered, "The essay question on the Cold War though, I mentioned everything here, but probably not detailed enough. I'll probably get docked a few points..."

"Yup. It's because you're a *little kid*," She said with a small laugh, trying to lighten his mood. That had been the slogan throughout the quarter whenever something went wrong for him.

Such was the price of being a high school student in college.

Rolling his eyes he tried to roll with it as best he could. Dwayne sometimes wondered why he found himself laughing at himself so often.

He looked back at her on the iron bench, "Thanks a lot, I appreciate that," even though he knew she was joking. Both grinned, hers a little more light than his, as they stood up, "Okay, well, that's my last class 'til one, soâ ¦" he nodded towards the parking lot, "think I'm going to go home and eat some real breakfast, or lunch or whatever," he finished, looking at his wrist watch.

"Alright, wish *me* luck on my next final," she said flippantly as she walked away towards the English building. "Not that I much need it." she called behind her without looking back at him.

"Cute girls always get good grades, but that doesn't make you better than the rest of us!" he called after her. He wanted to follow that last comment with a number of witty things, but nothing came to mind. Instead he stuck his thumbs in his pockets, bit his lower lip and turned on his heel for the car.

Chapter 5: Hot Chocolate

IV

Kelsey stood at the receptionist counter putting all of her weight into the stack of papers she was trying to squeeze into the stapler. She brought her fist down on the stapler only for it to jam again through the first five pages.

Dwayne's mother, Kelsey, worked as a receptionist and chief accountant at the Meridian Retirement facility. A nice way to name a hospital for elderly folks whose children can't or won't take care of their parents any more. The longer Kelsey worked here, the more she hoped Dwayne never put her in a place like it.

"Hey Shantell, could you take care of this real quick?" she called back into the office cubicles hidden behind a wall behind the counter. The facility was so short handed on nurses that Kelsey did more than just her own job. Helping to handle, calm or just talk to not only visitors, which was her job, but the residents living there as well. The kitchen was just next to the front door where she sat and she had a good view into it. At that exact moment, Genie, a fickle, rather mean old lady, was sitting too close to another resident named Andrea whom Kelsey knew was developing Alzheimer's, fast.

Andrea, a short petite woman who was probably one of the nicest old ladies a grandchild could hope for was sitting quietly in her wheel chair. Kelsey poked her head into the back room where Shantell was standing up to come help with the stapler, "Genie again, maybe," Kelsey explained

"Okay, no worries," Shantell replied walking towards the stack of papers while Kelsey made her way into the kitchen, dining area. Kelsey slowly wandered toward where the women sat as if she were just happening by.

"You're that women who poured her hot chocolate in my lap," Andrea said frowning at Genie who was sitting so close their knees were nearly touching.

"I did?" Genie replied with a straight, innocent face. Kelsey carefully made her way up to the two. She wasn't sure if there would be a problem but she certainly did not want to cause one herself. There were no forms of punishment here, or any kind of real restraining even. It wasn't a day care, it was a retirement facility. Sometimes you had to come up with creative ways to keep the old folks in line; and Genie took a lot of creativity.

"Yes you did. Don't ask me that! Youâ ¦ you sat there drinking your hot chocolate complaining it was too hotâ ¦ and poured it in my lap," Andrea said growing flustered, and probably trying to remember exactly what had happened.

"I did?" Genie replied again with the same half worried tone, one shoulder dropped a little giving her almost a vulture like stance. Kelsey frowned slightly; Genie didn't have any sort of memory problems. She just had bad legs and kept falling over. She broke her pelvic bone, then after the surgery and some time recovering in a wheel chair, she fell and re-broke it. Kelsey didn't think that was why the old woman was at Meridian though. She had always assumed the womans' children were fed up with her.

Andrea's frown stretched, making the lines on her forehead deeper, "*Yes* you did!"

"Come on Genie, let's leave Andrea alone," Kelsey said finally breaking in. "I think she was enjoying her breakfast, and can't eat if she is talking." As always she had to make her voice sound as sweet and caring as possible. That was a requirement for the job; to care, and be sweet to the elderly.

Genie gave a "humph," and stood from the table to her walker next to it. She scooted her feet towards Kelsey on her roller, then turned and leaned into Andreas face "You got a good memory," she said in a half mocking tone.

"Come on Genie," Kelsey said again more sweetly, and urgently, encouraging the old woman to follow her and sit somewhere else.

Looking at the stack of papers Shantell had managed to staple together, Kelsey shook her head in admiration. Shantell was sitting in her cubicle again out of sight behind Kelsey's desk. She had probably missed the whole thing. She did not know how long that woman had worked here, but that it had been long enough that things like Genie didn't seem to bother, worry, or even humor her anymore.

"I was talking to Kevin," came her voice from the around the corner of the wall. "Says that locking them in their room is 'detrimental to their mental health', and illegal and other things," she said mimicking the voice of their supervisor Kevin. Kelsey nodded almost in agreement to herself. Shantell walked around the corner to face Kelsey, "but he also told me that because she's on a walker, with her history of broken hips, we can place her in a wheelchair, 'for her own safety'," quoting him again, "and all of the wheelchairs are outfitted with a, 'counter', that they can set stuff on above their lap without having to hold things in their hands while they try to move around." Kelsey nodded again, trying to follow. Shantell lowered her voice a little making her sound devious, "They also act as a restraint from keeping these folks from falling out of their chairs, or from standing up and hurting themselves... or dumping hot chocolate on other residents." She said with a straight face but her voice full of glee.

"I think we need to talk Kevin into getting Genie in one of those," Kelsey said with a sideways grin. "She might *hurt herself* if we don't do something."

"Uh-huh. Way ahead of ya, sista'," Shantell said turning around back for her cubicle. She stopped at the corner and added, "He's working on it now.

Chapter 6: The Fair is Coming

V

Kelsey parked her Cherokee against the sidewalk half a block from her house. They lived in a nicely sized, spacious house right on the corner of the street on the upper end of town. The dÃ©cor had been a bit dated and the yard had been dead; she and her son had fixed the decor first, with a new paint job and new rain gutters that matched the fireplace. Beyond that she had done much of the other house renovations herself. Planted a row of hedges along one side of the tall wooden fence, a flower bed near the shed, and replaced all the bark beds with river rock to help prevent weeds from sprouting up.

The house had been dirt cheap in a crashing market. She bought it out of a "Short Sell" and never looked back. One of the few downfalls however was that there was no garage or even driveway. The front of the house was on a busy street and it had been made clear to her the alleyway between the blocks was a no parking zone, "for fire access only". So she had to park half a block away on the street, and walk up to her home.

That made her think of the neighbors living in the grimy house south of her. They parked *both* of their trucks half in the alleyway and half in their unfenced backyard that was adjacent to her own. More than once she had had to stay up and listen to their drunken parties. They never seemed to get a ticket or have their trucks towed. And the compost pit in their back yard where they threw all of their decomposing crap into a heap had been the main reason she had surrounded her backyard with flowers and hedges.

'Maybe those neighbors had been a hidden catch,' Kelsey wondered to herself. She pressed her palm against her forehead leaning against the steering wheel for a moment, took a deep weary breath, then got out and made her way to the house. As she walked into the alley way she stole a glance at their backyard. They had been out hunting again judging from the dried blood in the back beds of the trucks. She briefly wondered if there was a big game season in the spring. She didn't think so. Trying to not let it bother her she said out-loud it wasn't a big deal. Not the blood or the neighbors themselves, whom were the only odd ducks in an otherwise nice section of their small town.

She closed and locked the fence behind her and entered through the back of the house. As she made her way for her bedroom to change out of her work clothes she saw Dwayn's lamp on through the crack in his door. "Genie was pretty funny today," she said nudging his door open a little, standing in the doorframe.

"Who?" he asked as he slowly set the papers down on his desk and looked up at her. Dwayne did work so hard, even when he didn't have to. She felt rather proud of him all of the sudden. Not that she wasn't proud of him all of the time. Sometimes it came in odd bursts.

"The trouble maker, I told you about the hot chocolate episode, didn't I?"

He grinned, "Yeah," and looked back down at his material.

She explained the events of her afternoon; up to Kevin getting the old crow a wheel chair. "Anyway, so she's sitting now in her wheel chair, after us trying to explain that it's for her benefit, for her legs right? So she doesn't have to walk around on that roller. She was okay with it at first, all smiles and 'thank-you's'. Then we set the shelf, which she can use to set cups or other things down on."

Dwayne nodded much like Kelsey had when Shantell was explaining it to her. "So she sits in the kitchen," Kelsey continued, "her shelf simultaneously restraining her as it holds her cup of whatever, and she calls out

all of the sudden, 'Damn it!'." Dwayne smirked, "then again, 'Damnâ ¦*it*." He laughed out right this time. His mother never cursed in her own speech but seemed to have no problem quoting the profanities of others.

"She realize it wasn't all that great?"

"Well she's sitting there cursing and I walked in and asked, very concerned,mind you, 'Genie, what's wrong? Why are you yelling?' and she wouldn't even look at me. So I asked her again and she says off to no one, 'They've locked me up!' and she has this wickedest, old woman snap," Kelsey said imitating Genie, "'Damn it! I've been locked up in here. Tricked me! Damn them!' Then she looks at me and points one finger at my face and says, 'you can get me out of this'." Both mother and son laughed at that.

"What did you say?" Dwayne asked.

"I told her that I couldn't. Then said that she needed it so she wouldn't out of her chair," she switched back to her imitation of genie, "'I would gladly pay any one's way for helping me out of this just, just, let me out damnâ ¦*it*!'." they both laughed together moment, and Kelsey added somberly, "The poor woman, we just can't have her hurting other residents." After a pause Dwayne set one hand back on the papers and pulled them back into his lap, "How was your final?" she asked.

"I think I did fine, but, you know, I thought the same thing on the midterm. Or I might have done terribly"

"Well you can just hope for the best. What's that you're working on?" she asked walking into his room and looking over his shoulder at the papers.

"It's a show that the college is putting on. Miss Fairbanks, the director of the fall show I was in at the high school, you know?" his mom nodded. It had been a show that took four months to rehearse and another month to perform. Yes, she ought to remember quite well.

"Well, I guess she really liked how I did, gave me a call for the college show that takes place over the summer, wants me to play a role in it," He smiled feeling proud, trying to be humble about it, "It's an actual role with lines and everything."

"Right on, baby!" Kelsey exclaimed holding out one hand, Dwayne slapped it and his grin widened. "Tell you what, your finals are done, what day is today? Thursday," she said answering herself. "Saturday, next week, the summer fair will open downtown where the rodeo is held. We should go; there's going to be an air show going on, rides, the whole thing. The Blue Angels will be here from the air force base. They do air tricks and things like that." she said waving her hand around as if it were a plane."We wouldn't have to drive three hundred miles over to see them at the base."

"That'd be a lot of fun, mum," he said with a nod and smile.

"Maybe I can convince you to go on the Zipper ride with me?"

"Only if you want to watch me puke afterwards." he replied uneasily. "Or worse, I could puke on the ride with both of us on it."

"Yeah well, eww gross, sound like fun anyway?"

"Of course. Yeah," he said.

"Okay then, bring that girl friend of yours too. I never get to see her enough."

"I'm not sure what Allie thinks about the Zipper." He said, now smiling to himself.

"Well get to know your girl friend better! Find out!" his mom joked at him as she walked out of his door frame towards her own room.

"Okay well, hey," he called.

"Yeah?" came her response from behind the door.

"Miss Fairbanks, the director of the new show, wanted to work with me a little, one on one, that's why I have these lines. One of these days coming up we're going to work one on one, maybe here at the house if that's okay."

"Okay that's fine. What ever gets you up in the morning." she said walking out of room now in a pair of loose jeans and a t-shirt. She was taking out her ear-rings as she said, "You sleep till noon while- *I wake up at six-thirty so I can toil and work to feed us.*" She said acting exasperated, and then finished it with an over the top exhale of disgust. Dwayne never had to wonder why he enjoyed theatre.

"When is Allie coming in again for her job shadow at the Meridian?"

"Tomorrow, the next day, I'm not sure," he replied falling back onto his bed closing his eyes.

"Well, find out for me at school will ya? Really, get in sync with that girl friend kid or you'll lose her" She said, poking her head in through his door.

He didn't look up at her, or even open his eyes, "Will do. Don't ya fret none, mum."

Chapter 7: Miss Fairbanks

VI

Miss Fairbanks, more casually known as Danny Fairbanks, pulled off the interstate. She was not normally a small town girl, being from Chicago originally. She had felt sure a job was waiting in Spokane, at a public theater, or maybe a college. After three agonizing months of over staffed organizations, a cheap studio apartment next door to what she was sure was a crack condo; she jumped at the invitation from the college in Ellensburg.

At thirty two she did not think she was too old to be making long commutes. From Ellensburg into Spokane to the city scene. It was nothing like inner city commutes in Los Angeles or even like driving in Seattle.

She checked her speed coming off the interstate then checked the miles, "One hundred and seventy nine miles of listening to Chris Isaac," she said, groggy from being behind the wheel for nearly three hours. She'd forgotten her MP3 player at home here in Ellensburg; her luxurious one bedroom, six-hundred square feet home. As a result, she had listened to cheesy CD's she'd found in her forgotten CD case under the passenger seat.

She still frequented Spokane. They had several colleges, though none seeking new theater or drama staff. They're public theater was also not as large as she would like, or looking for employment, but now they recognized her immediately by face and she was able to skip all of the meet and greet dialog.

She had a good feeling about her last visit though, having directed more than once now at the high school level and about to have her very own college production. Her resume was growing which made her feel pretty confident her break was coming soon. Maybe a lead role, or even director of a more moderately sized, and budgeted production would be hers.

She was not quite home yet, "One hundred and seventy nine, smooth miles," she reassured herself, then smiled and turned up Chris Isaac.

Chapter 8: Thespian Fanatics

VII

Dwayne had woken up at 9:00AM to the sound of his alarm clock. Though the college classes were over, he still had his afternoon high school classes, as required. Because of that he had an appointment with the director at the college this morning for a little personal training.

There had been no cat fights last night; Dog had been kept inside all night. Probably would be for a while now, if not indefinitely. Veterinarian visits were expensive. As a result the cat had cried and meowed and purred against the back door begging for his freedom. Kelsey and Dwayne both realized there was no keeping the cat inside all the time; but they could handle keeping the cat in at night when the fights seemed to happen. Dog was just too acclimated to being outside to be made an inside cat. After a few hours of his vocal displeasure, seeing he would not get what he wanted, he had positioned himself into a dark unsocial mood.

Dwayne readied himself for the day and fixed a quick breakfast, boiled eggs in Tabasco with a cup of yogurt on the side. Danny Fairbanks was another half hour in arriving and when Dwayne left to drive with her, Dog shot out the door between his feet like a bolt. He waved his hand at the Cat as it took off around the side of the house.

Danny drove to the dorms and picked up Tommy, another member of the cast and from there they drove to the cafe. Tommy was a freshman at Central staying in Ellensburg through the summer only because of the theater production. He was one of the many thespian fanatics that Central had in its possession. Most college students had left town with finals over to travel back home and visit family. The majority went back to Seattle, about a third of what was left went to Spokane, and the rest went back to the other smaller cities scattered around Washington. Tommy's family for instance lived in Seattle. Their 'meeting' took place at the D&M, a local coffee shop where they spent the first half an hour just talking and getting to know each other better.

Talk then shifted to shows the three of them had done in the past and that subject quickly shifted into talk of the new show they were going to be in together. Danny traded their print out scripts for fully bounded book scripts. Tommy and Dwayne were central characters, bitter rivals, and so they spent most of their time reading through the lines their characters had together. Danny coached them much like she had been when she had been an actress in Chicago. She spared no drama in her instructions and examples and while they made a bit of a scene in the coffee shop, everything went pleasantly well.

Chapter 9: Allie

VIII

It was just past 1:00PM when Dwayne made it back to the high school from the D&M coffee shop. The hallways were filled with every shade of high school student. Cliques of every variety a one thousand population high school could give. Athletics sporting their letter jackets, intellectuals holding their books and study binders. There were a few different warring cliques that glared at each other; the nerds versus the geeks and the goths verse the Emo's. Dwayne couldn't quite figure out where he fit in, but the more he attended college, the less appealing any group of high schoolers looked. As he made his way for Allie's locker he briefly wondered if that made him an intellectual. In all honesty, he may have been pinned as a class skipping loner by the other kids.

He had been waiting for Allie at her locker. With a five minute moving grace she showed up and they had just enough to time to say "hello", "how's your day been?" a quick kiss and "I'll catch you after class gets out". She hurried off to her Microsoft Proficiency class and he went to the library. An hour later students began to pour out of the building like cattle herded to the sound of a bell.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Allie asked Dwayne as she transferred books from her backpack to her locker, neatly stacking them according to size.

From his splayed leg spot on the hallway floor he replied, "Mum and I are going to the fare. I was going to invite you to come along." He looked off and shrugged as if this were a high risk offer, "I mean if you want to, you don't have to if you don't want to, I know how you feel about those kind of things," he said in a serious tone of sarcasm.

He stole a look up at her as she pushed in her last book. Her light red hair was pulled into a simple bun held by some hidden bobby pins, probably. The angles in her face could be mistaken for sharp at first; in reality they complimented her soft looking skin and the freckles on her cheeks and neck. She had a long straight nose, but it wasn't so long that it engulfed the rest of her face instead adding to the sharp lines of the rest of her face. For all her beauty, she looked amazing in her plain gray t-shirt and jeans with her simple small red purse and book bag over one shoulder. It had been no easy task convincing her he was as good of a guy as she deserved.

Flowers had been involved.

She laughed more to herself than for his benefit and tapped her soft back novel against the top of his head before putting it into her book bag, "'Course, stupid head," she said. She shouldered her backpack.

"Okay then. Should I pick you up?"

"I'll be at home." She said holding out both hands. He took both and she tried to pull him to his feet. He kept down in a sitting position so that she only managed to drag him across the tile floor a short ways. Both smiled and the next time she pulled he helped her and stood up.

"Okay if I *have* to," he said keeping a hold of one of her hands as they walked out of the building.

"You don't *have* to. You *want* you to."

"What's the difference?" They both shared a small laugh together over that.

Chapter 10: Ol' Mum

IX

"Oh good she can come," Kelsey said as she set a lid over some sizzling pot stickers on a frying pan. Dwayne was sitting on the kitchen counter across from her and nodded when she looked over her shoulder, "You gonna meet her there?"

"I'm picking her up."

"I can give you guys a ride," she offered.

"No, I'm taking her home too. I'm not going to make you drive half an hour to Thorp and back." Thorp probably wasn't really a half an hour away. It was only a ten mile drive down the interstate, and her house was just another two miles off of the highway. But his mother had never been there and probably didn't know that for sure.

Kelsey looked at him with a discerning eye, "You need to clean the inside of your car then." She turned around and lifted the lid and rotated the pot stickers. "Especially if you're hoping she's gonna kiss you when you drop her off." She looked over her shoulder again with that same shrewd eye, but a grin at the same time.

Dwayne grinned at her but kept his mouth shut. Not that it mattered all too much. If he admitted to his mom that, yes, he did plan on kissing Allie in his car, she probably wouldn't protest. Kelsey like all mothers wanted her son to be happy and happened to also fit into the minority of mothers who believed kissing was clean and healthy. She explained that a certain amount of affection was always nice to have. As long as it never went too far, at which point she didn't want to see or hear about it.

They both stayed in the kitchen a while not talking. Kelsey stayed focused the food, poking it now and then while her son sat quietly enjoying a calm evening. Dog was sitting by the back door and looked at Dwayne giving him a long sad cry, his tail flicking back and forth.

"His leg was pretty banged up" she said looking down at the cat. "Remember that he's not allowed outside at night anymore." She looked at him for affirmation.

"I know ol' mum."

Kelsey looked at him actually scowling slightly, "You may call me many things, but do *not* call your mother 'ol' mum'." She said pointing a threatening spatula at him. "Now go wash up."

Chapter 11: The Fair

X

Dwayne and Allie walked down one of the many lanes of the fair, hand in hand, looking at the different attractions and money making gimmicks. Teddy bears the size of Allie hung on hooks above seemingly easy to win games with men shouting how Dwayne should prove his prowess for his lady.

Both were dressed appropriately for the cold. Summer had nearly arrived, but the evenings were still pretty cold. Allie's blue and green cap came down far enough to cover her ears. It was dark and cool, but the fair-grounds seemed about ten degrees warmer with all the machines and bodies moving around. Bright flashing lights of every color lit the dark sky as the many arms and cars and trains of rides flew through the sky.

It was the last weekend of the fair, the Blue Angels supposed to have been one of the grand finishes. It was announced over the loud speakers they were unable to leave the air force base though, as time for show grew closer. The announcer at the raised stage apologized and explained the jets had had some calibration issues, and we did not want any accidents, did we? No show.

With school out there was a lack of college students, which made the locals happy that they were able to enjoy the fare a little less crowded with other locals. Friends and family seemed to be everywhere in the fare grounds. It helped that the city itself was so small people knew each other from shopping here or working there. This was especially true when everyone's child attended the same high school.

Allie pulled Dwayne closer, intertwining their arms and pressing her face against his shoulder, "You going to win me something?" she asked smiling and looking up. He was easily five inches taller than her at six foot.

Dwayne smirked, "I have five dollars," he said as if he were thinking deeply, "it takes seven tries to win a simple one dollar game. So, sorry, I'm two dollars short of winning you anything."

"Hmm, you should find a fifty cent game then." He stopped a moment and dug his half numb hand into his pants pocket pulling out his cell phone, "The parental unit," he said looking at Allie raising his eye brows slightly. She giggled and watched him answer the call. "Hello?"

"Hey babe," came his mother's voice, "Get over to the zipper."

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It wasn't long after that Dwayne stood over the bright blue garbage can hanging his head. "You're bad people. You're a bad mother and a bad girl friend." he muttered lowering himself further so that he was resting on his forearms against the trash can.

Kelsey was standing by Allie watching her son be dramatic. Both wore an equal amount of amusement on their face. Kelsey peeled off a piece of her cotton candy she had bought and offered it to Allie who accepted and ate it. They didn't take their eyes off of Dwayne. "So you're not going to go again?" his girlfriend asked.

He did not bother answering as his stomach lurched again. He had managed so far to keep down his chili dog and elephant ear.

Allie walked up behind him rubbing his back in a soothing way, "Oh poor baby," she said in a mocking tone, "you agreed to get on; no one to blame but yourself, really."

Kelsey smiled at the young couple and announced, "Okay, well, I've had my fun with you two. I'm going to go browse." She turned on her booted heel and was off.

Dwayne stood up right taking a deep breath. After composing himself a little more he looked to his girl-friend and said, "Speaking of that, you're going to like what I got you for your birthday," he said putting one arm across her shoulders looking at her as they walked. He still felt a little green, but if it had not come up yet, it would not at all. She moved closer beside him as they made for the opposite direction of his mom. When she looked at him expectantly he continued, "Well, it was going to be a long strand of rope, but after forcing me onto the Zipper, I think I'll make it a short piece."

"Well, I guess I'll just have to cut what I was getting you in half too." She looked at him appearing serious and disappointed in this sudden adaptation in their gifts to one another. "And it was so pretty on me too. Silky." He grunted at that. After a moment she caved and pulled on his arm saying, "Come on, what did you really get me?" she asked pulling on his arm slightly.

Dwayne looked away from her and sighed, "Well," he shrugged, "I was being serious."

"You were not!" she said still giggling and slapping his shoulder.

"You'll just have to convince me to get you something better."

"You better not get me rope, else I'll tell on you to your mom," she said more to herself then to him still suppressing her giggles.

"As if she'd believe you."

"She would! I would show up to do my volunteer work at Meridian, a mess, red eyes, obviously from crying, and I would tell her that her son was being a bad boy friendâ¦ropeâ¦" she trailed off for emphasis.

He looked at her with that same serious face, "There's still time to get you something, nice, and meaningful, but, I don't knowâ¦I just don't want to," he teased.

This was excuse enough for Allie. As they walked she pulled on his arm directing him around to the side of a stand. It was in a row with several other stands placed up besides the cattle-ranch building where the horses and bulls were being showed for competition. This particular stand was selling wood planks with greetings carved into them. They all said the same thing with a different combination of words intricately carved or painted or burned into them:

Welcome

God Bless This House And All Who Enter

Come As Strangers, Leave As Friends

Home Is Where The Heart Is

Allie lingered, casually, picking one up with her free hand. Her other hand was holding Dwayne's tightly, dug deep in his coat pocket. She smiled and told the lady selling them that she was just looking around and then

led Dwayne further around the stand as if searching for something behind it; more signs maybe. She then led him out of the bright lights around the corner of the ranch building where there were no stands, gimmicks, rides or people. She pushed his back up against the wall and stood on her tip-toes.

He did not have to wait for the drive home to get his kiss.

Chapter 12: Log Entry 21

Log: #21, 2008, 22 wake-ups after apocalypse.

Today WAS quite the day!! Should have been sinse we spent much of yesterday sleeping and recovering. It worked though!! I am beside myself trying to write in this dying firelight but I have time before the embers go out. Filtering the river water that killed john didnt work entirely he still died. Running the river water through coffee filters then boiling it works! i admit i thought I was going to die. it tasted dirty, like it had sand in it despite filtering it and everything. I dont know if some chemical is steamed out of the water when we boiled it or if just having it so damned hot it scolds your tongue breaks up something so that it does not kill you. no one cares and we are drinking boiling hot water!! -we dont want to risk letting it cool down but we'll never run out of water now! dont have to rely on our diminishing water bottles. Im laughing even as i write this. i dont think ill wake anyone anyway. One step closer to making it out of this alive. Still no electricity, and the air hurts our lungs but the fires help keep us warm and the smoke is filtering through the cracked windows enough. We've designated one apartment to be the fire room. I should write this down. One room full of blankets and anything padded, couch cushions and mattresses for us to sleep in. Early on when the temperatures dropped so quickly we decided we needed fire to keep warm, and light, batteries are fried from the explosion. EMP Kevin called it. Maybe theyll turn back on, recover, maybe not. We sleep in the fire room. One two bedroom is full of containers, it's the shit room at the opposite end of the building, windows wide open there. Another apartment has several tables and chairs where we stacked all the food we found in the apartments and from the surrounding area as weve been scavenging. Thats where we eat and spend most of our time sitting and talking, sharing stories, hopes, hope. Hope is important to all of us. when we arent working anyway. Anyway thats how we are set up for now for the most part and now we have in the dining apartment buckets full of riverwater. All you have to do is boil it over the fire in the bedroom apartment. beside the miracle of drinking water its also helping keep us warm.

Timothy Blade

Chapter 13: A Question of Morality

XIII

The day after the fair Kelsey and her son woke up to find Dog was a pretty sick cat. Once again Dog was taken to the vet for his night fights with other casts. Aside from shaving the hair, cleaning the cut that was much deeper than Kelsey had thought, and a bottle with a round of antibiotics the veterinarian had simply suggested keeping the cat indoors. Kelsey insisted his night life privileges were revoked; knowing the cat would never stay indoors, all the time.

While Kelsey took care of Dog at the vet, Dwayne sat on the back porch, quietly, without his mother to watch him with his pellet gun. He had the single shot pump rifle across his lap, enjoying the warm sun shine on an otherwise cool spring day. It was only a little while until the demon cat was in the hedges in the side of the yard. Dwayne had not seen it jump the fence and did not know how long it had been crouched there in the shade. He raised the pellet gun to his shoulder and took a steady breath.

He was no hunter or marksman, the pellet gun being an old birthday gift for plinking at empty soda cans. The cat was pretty large though, and not too far away. He briefly thought about the morality of shooting an animal, a pet no less, then squeezed the trigger.

He saw the cat twitch give a high pitched shriek and bolt deeper into the hedges. It did not, however, climb the fence and flee the backyard it was intruding in. Dwayne stood up holding the rifle in both hands as he approached where the cat had been. As he crouched and looked into the hedges he saw the cat, hunkering in the corner, growling threateningly at the young man who had shot it. He wasn't sure where he had hit it, but raised the rifle again at it as it growled.

This time the lack of morality in shooting a cat, at close range, as it hid in the corner of a fenced yard, did bother him. He sighed, cursed himself and the cat and set down the rifle. On his hands and knees he moved into the hedges and reached out for the cat. It hissed as he came closer to it and through gritted teeth he muttered, "Yeah, you think this is your yard."

He got within arms distance of the cat and at that moment it made to sprint around him. Again, not up the fence to safety, in its own yard where it belonged, but around him into his own yard. He made a quick lunge grabbing the cat by its back haunches with both hands. He only had to hold that cat for a second to know it meant to do him as much harm as it had done Dog. Its claws came out and dug into his hands as the beast twisted its body around trying to pull free with loud hissing and spitting.

Dwayne cringed at the cuts being dug into his hands and quickly shuffled back out of the hedges dragging the cat. He then flung the cat by its hind legs as hard as he could over the fence into the ally way where its own yard was.

He stood a moment heaved another heavy sigh hearing the cat hit the ground with a dull thud and a loud hiss. Among the many white scratches there were only two cuts across the top of his right hand that were actually bleeding. He wiped some of the blood bubbling on his hand on his jeans as he picked up the rifle on his way into the house.

Chapter 14: Christopher

XIV

"Why the *hell* is there blood on the sofa?"

That had been the question yelled and roared that ruined Christopher's day. His father yelled at the top of his lungs for the better part of five minutes at the red smear on the sofa. The new sofa wasn't exactly "new", just new in their home. That is to say, it had been the mostly clean and definitely blood stain-free new sofa.

The trouble was; Christopher had seen his cat fly over the fence across the ally-way from the kitchen window earlier this morning. He had mixed feelings about it. Served the cat right, going where it should not, but on the other hand, he did not at all like the idea of that kid across the alley throwing his cat around. He did not like the idea of the kid across the alley way in any way.

He had figured he would corner Dwayne about it at school tomorrow. This would have been a legitimate reason to push him around a bit, start a fight and knock him to the ground. After seeing the matted blood on the cat though, he did not have the patience to wait.

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Dwayne heard a loud bang on the back door and sat upright on the couch. He had only lay down for a second after coming back inside and now the wall clock told him he had been lying there over an hour. He felt like he slept all the time these days.

He walked across the house to the back door and opened it to find a large ugly face glaring down at him.

"Get lost?" he asked in an annoyed tone. Though he had a frighteningly good idea of why Christopher was here.

"Next time, I'll take a real gun to that jeep your mom owns; if ever see or hear anything from this backyard I don't like." Almost as an afterthought he added, "And you'll find your cat with a bigger hole in it than I found in mine."

Dwayne flushed, not only for having shot a cat but at Christopher's threat of killing his own cat. "Get out of my backyard."

Christopher sneered and only replied, "Keep in mind," he said with a very sudden very sharp one handed push that knocked dwayne a step back into the wall. Before he could even retort Christopher had turned around and was heading back to his house. Dwayne took a deep breath and slowly let it out. 'Nearly got smeared on my own door step' he thought as he shut the door.

He and Christopher had not been in an all out fight for almost half of a year now. The last time had been at school in a hall way when Christopher had spit a bit of tobacco chew at Dwayne, who then made a nasty comment that resulted in both of them pushing and swinging at each other.

Christopher always won, usually with a blow to the face that about tore Dwayne's head off. Overall it he lost because the neighbor was considerably larger and stronger all around. The picking, teasing and eventual physical fights were a relationship the two boys had spent two years developing when Dwayne and Kelsey had first moved to Ellensburg.

There was no defining moment Dwayne could ever think of that made Christopher choose to hate him. Because he was a theatre kid? Because he was from out of town? Or was it just simple bullying because he was able. The kid was pugnacious and enjoyed violence on a wide spectrum, from hunting to watching cage fights on TV.

Dwayne shut the door and wondered if word of the black cat would come around to his mother. There was a good reason he had done it when she wasn't around. He walked into the kitchen and opened a cupboard, pulling down a box of dry cereal to snack on. Then he wondered why he was hungry all the time.

Chapter 15: Normal

The rest of that week was as normal as any person could hope for. It rained constantly for most of that week, though it was not too uncomfortably cold. People went about their early spring as if summer were to come just as it had the last year.

Kelsey's schedule was unchanged, waking early so she could get to work and listen to Shantell's newest gossip. They gossiped about most everything. Gossip included residents living at Meridian; about how Genie had quieted down yet cursed at anyone who walked too closely to her as they passed. They talked about the nurses who slacked off and took long breaks. The two women even talked about their personal lives and about their children.

Allie went to her honors classes largely without seeing Dwayne at the school since his classes had finished between quarters at the college. After class she would then go to her job shadow at the Meridian with Kelsey who had happily agreed to be her program supervisor. Whenever she was free in the evening she and Dwayne would see each other. They would go to the coffee shop and do homework together, or read quietly together. Anything from school books to Dwayne's new script.

Christopher attended most of his classes as necessary to graduate. He also paid special attention to stalk Dwayne's locker, though of course he was rarely there, or anywhere to be found. He would make snide remarks to Allie and though he could see it bothered her, there was little fun in harassing a girl.

Danny continued to argue with the college theater administration about casting, budgets and schedules. She did not see Dwayne or Tommy again that week, but they had plans for the week end. She already had most of the script memorized and was going to emphasize they start doing the same as they worked through their lines.

Perhaps the only one, who was not enjoying life as normal, was the arrogant cat Dog. No longer allowed outside whenever he wanted he took great pains to sprint outside whenever a door was opened.

Then Saturday came.

Danny was on the highway heading into Ellensburg after a short trip to Spokane and back. This trip was not nearly so bad, having brought along her MP3 player this time. She anticipated being a little early to Dwayne's before picking up Tommy.

Kelsey sat at her desk typing on her computer while Shantell talked about, "what a slut her sons' new girlfriend was. She could tell."

Genie had gone from passive aggressive to crying out profanities and begging for help, to be released from her *damn* chair. Kelsey watched as a cafeteria nurse offered her a glass of hot chocolate. Genie promptly served it back into the woman's lap then proceeded to laugh in her wheel chair as the nurse gasped and turned for the kitchen to try and save her blouse.

The world, as most people know it, has not undergone a great change. There have been plenty of technological and social advances. There have been great telescopes launched into space to look across the stars, and Twitter allowing everyone to stay in touch with their smart phone. The world has not, however, experienced a great catastrophe. There has been no ice age, no great heat wave that melted the arctic ice mountains flooding the world. Disease is more and more under control and plagues like Ebola have not gone air born yet to wreck the world.

Even the threat of nuclear devastation was thought to be avoided.

At 10:00AM Dwayne's alarm went off as it was meant to. That may have been the last normal thing that happened in the world.

Chapter 16: The Clouds are Coming

The flame of a candle can be seen up to three miles away on a dark cloudy night. To take that idea further; a one megaton explosion will leave a two hundred foot deep crater and rise several hundred feet in the air. People would be injured from the heat of the blast and debris up to seven miles away from the center of the blast. The fallout would rise up into the stratosphere, and spread out over days and months.

These are the effects of conventional, known, nuclear weapons.

No one knew for sure what was launched and detonated on the air force base almost two hundred miles away from Ellensburg. They did not know how large it was, or what it contained. The explosion wasn't exactly heard, but everyone felt it through their gut and in their head. It was like a long, loud base beat drumming in your chest.

It is more important to understand, people felt it. Many people ran outside, many more covered the ears in pain. Most assumed it was some sort of earthquake, unheard of in that area, but easy to understand.

The reality rapidly became more and more impossible.

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It happened instantly. There was no soft hum that grew to a painful cacophony over any amount of time. Kelsey rolled back from her desk and clasped her hands over her ears; all of the work on her desk forgotten. She stood up and staggered into the back offices to find Shantell also standing with her hands over her ears. As the drumming continued Shantell tried to shout something, her lips moving but no sounds coming out. Her lips seemed to spell, 'what the hell?' Kelsey only shook her head in response. For a moment she felt like she was twenty years old again thick in a concert. The name of the band escaped her at the moment. She walked around the corner to find Allie also standing with her sweater pulled down over the top of her head, her hands also clamped against her ears. She looked pale and her eyes were clenched shut.

As the nauseating tremor continued to roar Kelsey decided it was much worse than any concert she had ever attended. She also realized the earth was not shaking as it should be for such an earthquake.

She thought about trying to yell something as well but instead turned away and moved her hands from her ears to pull at the blinds and look outside. There was nothing but the parking lot where tall trees were bending in the wind. Was that the wind? Was there wind this morning? She found her that hands over ears or not made little difference.

As the power went out her hands shot up to her ears anyway in a knee jerk response. The lights clicked off, and the monitors went black. If there was any sort of explosion or any other sound causing the power outage she couldn't hear it. She turned around to see Allie standing by Shantell now in the unlit room, both cringing, their white teeth visible behind their tightly pulled lips. Their eyes were wide with fear and Kelsey knew, they didn't know of any kind of earthquake like this either. Shantell was looking out her own window and Allie just looked at Kelsey, wanting to know what to do.

Kelsey reached with one hand and pulled Allie next to her and tapped on Shantell's back to get her to follow as well. They moved in a straight line, Kelsey at the head of it. Everyone in the building was either lying down or making their way to the door. Through the main lobby, out of the crammed office space and once outside they joined a small crowd pouring through all of the doors. Nurses and residents and administrators all stood in a group together.

The vibrations almost felt like they were subsiding after a moment in the open light. It did more than fill her head and shake her ribs; it was so intense it physically hurt. Her body ached and as the vibrations subdued a tension headache immediately followed, her heart beating wildly and feeling irregular.

Everyone was suddenly talking at once, able to hear themselves, let alone each other. People were standing in the parking lot, talking over each other, and others stood in the middle of the street looking up and down for some indication, or explanation. Other people had evacuated their nearby homes and buildings and were also looking around expectantly.

The nurses were suddenly busy rolling the residents out in a more or less orderly fashion following emergency protocol for an earthquake. Electricity seemed to have kicked off all down the street.

Being the only person Allie knew at the Meridian, she followed Kelsey and stood close as people scrambled around talking far too loud yet barely heard. The two women walked into the street where a man was standing by his car.

"What do ya think of that?" he shouted, a strained smile on his face. "Earthquake must have knocked loose a terminal on my battery, won't start." He stood looking at his car, with his hands on his hips. Kelsey watched a moment as he started to open his hood but quickly made her way back to the parking lot. She needed to find Kevin.

Kelsey turned in a small circle, fully taking in the scene around her. Allie stood stiff and pale. Some residents were watching the trees swaying in the wind, pushing westward. That kind of wind was wrong. The wind blew east, off of the coast. She continued to turn, slowly. The nurses were in a frenzy now, moving from one wheeled bed to the next. Monitors, regulators, everything that should have been operating on batteries were dead. Allie staged backwards out of the way of a bed rolling across the asphalt by a nurse and she stepped into a bed deserted behind her.

Allie turned and looked down at an old man, lying with his eyes half open. His skin was pale from having lived on a bed in a room for so long. She looked longer and realized he wasn't just pale, he almost looked grey. She tentatively reached down and took the old man's withered hand and quickly dropped it again. She took a sharp step back and bumped into another resident who said something to her, but she did not hear it. She quickly moved back over to where Kelsey was standing and over her shoulder saw more beds being wheeled out, nurses frantic over motionless bodies.

The volume of the scene got even louder and people were yelling back, then there were a series of screams. Not busy nurses yelling about dead or dying residents; but shrill screams. The kind pulled out of a person by terror. Allie took hold of Kelsey's rigid arm and looked to the East.

Both women stood motionless, staring, and Allie soon fell to her knees, still gripping Kelsey's arm by the elbow.

Far to the east a large tubular cloud was rising like a large, grey, blooming flower. The head of the cloud fanned out and soon became mushroom shaped climbing higher into the clouds. The two women only stayed that way a moment before Kelsey was grabbing at Allie's shoulder, pulling on her shirt.

"Get up, girl." She said in a voice that did not sound human. Kelsey's head was spinning with pain and confusion. She kept pulling on Allie's shirt, finally grabbing her under her upper arm and pulling harder before Allie helped herself up to her feet. People were moving fast, back into the building, including residents who could move themselves. The drumming from the explosion was gone but the ringing in their ears made the screams of people feel distant and surreal.

"Come on everyone, we have a disaster plan! Put your heels to work! Shantell I need you over here! Now damn it!" Kevin was shouting. Kelsey turned and saw him standing by a woman in a wheel chair who had been left by a nurse, whom had probably run inside. Her foot kicked aside a dead cell phone that had been left on the ground. She pulled out her own and slowly let it fall from her hand as she walked towards where Kevin and Shantell were standing, Allie being towed behind her. She heard him telling Shantell to get able bodies back outside to help move everyone inside out of the parking lot. Shantell moved off with her natural authority over herself, and her surroundings.

Kelsey felt impressed for a moment at how Kevin was handling the situation. He was standing upright and though he had a wild look in his eyes, it was not necessarily one of despair or surrender. He was walking backwards, pulling the woman in a chair, his eyes fixed on the spreading clouds in the sky. They were approaching little Ellensburg, and by the sway of the trees, it was happening fast.

"Sarah, I need you to get to work on making sure every window is shut tight, and once everyone is inside, shut and lock all the doors but the main doors. In case other people run here for refuge we are letting anyone in. We need to make sure we seal everything, we don't have a basement to move to." He was barking orders to the nurse, Sarah, and other aids that were standing around him now.

"Why aren't the generators turned on? We have residents whose lives depend on those!" Shantell was shouting from the main doorway on her way back outside. "Come on people, they're gas powered, we need to get them turned on!"

"Kelsey?" Allie asked pulling on her hand. "What do we do?"

"I," she paused, "Everything is done electronically, there's no power until the generator is turned on." she paused again. It seemed she needed ten seconds to process each thought, "they could use people here," another pause and her fright heightened, "Let's go get Dwayne."

Allie looked at her uncertainly and then looked across the parking lot. Suddenly Kelsey was pulling on her hand. She probably would have dragged Allie if she'd not started jogging along. The two of them came up to Kevin who was giving Shantell more instructions. "Kevin, I need to go get my son," She said in a flat tone.

His response was immediate, almost automated, "The high school has a disaster plan and we have ours. He'll be fine. I need your help actually," he said turning to face her. His face was red and sweating, dark patches under his armpits stood out on his light blue office shirt.

Kelsey shook her head almost violently. "He's at home. He goes to the college and high school. He's done with classes for the quarter. He is home and I need to go get him from there, bring him here, and we can both help here." Her words came out fast but they were plain and concise. Kevin looked at her as if to argue. "We will be right back," she finished as if the argument was already over.

"I can't really stop you Kelsey." He said in a relenting tone. "Go get your son and make sure you get back here fast,' he paused, "You be right back Kelsey." He gripped her arm tightly, then let go, "It's going to be bad in town."

Kelsey turned and led Allie out the front doors at a fast pace without a word to respond. She did not bother going to her jeep. She knew it was dead. They were going to have to make it on foot, and she had no idea how much time they had before those clouds reached them.

Chapter 17: Scarred Stiff

Danny Fairbanks had a hard time not taking her hands off the steering wheel at the pounding in her head. She instantly began to try and turn down the radio, thinking it was her speakers blaring for some reason. Nothing helped, and soon her car was sputtering and jerking as she tried to drive it down the street.

She tried to down shift, and while the car continued to roll, all of her dashboard readings dropped to zero, and the car finally died. The steering wheel locked up and the car soon rolled to a jerky halt against the curb. She closed her eyes pushing her fingers in her ears as her head pounded.

Plugging her ears did not help her more than it did anyone else. She pushed open the driver's door and staggered onto the sidewalk. Looking for a source of the noise she saw Dwayne up ahead standing almost a block away in his front yard. He stood holding his ears as well, eyes wide and motionless in the dead yellow brown grass.

She jogged up the street, a little worried about her car stranded in the road, "Where's the demolition squad?" she screamed but couldn't even hear herself. She ran up to Dwayne who obviously did not hear her either. She approached him waving one arm yet he still failed to seem to notice she was there. She hit him half playfully on the side of his shoulder, quickly returning her hand to her ear.

She wanted to shout to him about jumper cables and getting her car out of the road. He briefly looked at her then turned forward, his lips silently moving. She could not make it out but instead she followed his gaze to the East.

Her eyes, like Dwayn's, widened and her mouth went slack. Despite the pounding all around them her arms went limp to her sides as they stared at the rising gray and red mushrooming cloud.

'Why is everything so very bright?' was her last coherent thought.

The vibrations began to dull and the same cloud his mother and girlfriend were also watching rose into the sky. Dwayne did not scream. He saw no reason for screaming or yelling or cursing; but instead lowered his hands and grabbed Miss Fairbanks tugging on her hand to follow him into the house. There were things he needed to get done inside, including getting his mother on the phone. He didn't try to speak, his head still hurt and his ears ringed. He doubted either of them could hear much of anything yet.

She did not move as he pulled on her hand as he walked towards the door. He let go and ran to the front door. When he turned he saw his tug on her hand had pulled Danny over onto her side in the yard. She was not moving.

He looked back up the street towards the East. His gut was tight, and other people were standing in their yards, other people were running down the sidewalk away from the direction of the explosion. He ran across the yard, moving fast now. He grabbed Danny by both wrists, and none too gently, dragged her across the yard.

One of her sneakers pulled free from her foot as he strained and pulled her up the steps through the front door.

Chapter 18: Down Town

Allie had initially made her way towards Kelsey's jeep; when she saw Kelsey moving at a brisk pace out of the parking lot and onto the sidewalk she ran to catch up. People were moving up and down the sidewalks in a hurry. A lot of the houses had emptied out as people were running to one another in their yards trying to learn what had happened, or what to do.

"The jeep won't start?"

"No. I'm pretty sure it won't. Come on honey, keep up." she said as Allie tried to keep pace.

Kelsey had not been sure if bringing Allie was the best of ideas. She knew Allie could not make it home to Thorp on her own. It was ten miles west of Ellensburg, without a car or bus or anything to help her get there. On the other hand she had no intention of leaving her at the Meridian. Though she had full confidence in Kevin, Allie had been in her care, and tied to the family in a way. Once she had her son she could take them both back at the Meridian and mother both of them.

'â¦be right back'. That was what Kevin had said. She had meant to do just that. Get her son out of harm's way, then run right back. She was going to try; the Meridian would be a safe place. She just had to get her boy andâ¦ what? Run back? Did they have time? How far to home? Was it a mile and a half? It seemed so short by car; she had never clocked the miles.

All this went through her head as they ran up the short, motionless road. The road curved upward and as they reached near the top of the hill they could hear a lot more clamor downtown ahead. When they both reached the crest they stood transfixed; Kelsey was now sure they would not be going back to the Meridian.

The scene downtown was quite different from the neighborhood beside the Meridian. As the shops had emptied out and everyone was on the street the situation had quickly dissolved. People were running in every direction, pushing, screaming, some fighting. It seemed like an ants nest as people tried to fight their way in and out of the nearby buildings.

Kelsey was at a loss of words at how quickly people had turned violent. A large window pane in the seven-eleven shattered as something was thrown through it. She could hear a whistle being blown frantically by someone and she was briefly surprised to be seeing people carrying things in their arms as they looted. All of the gas pump nozzles were lying on the ground. The safeties on them would not release with no electricity and people had already given up on them.

In the middle of the street, being trampled underfoot were bodies of those knocked out or passed out.

"Allie, stay with me, we're going to run. Grab my hand." She turned and held out her hand to the girl. She only nodded once and grabbed Kelsey's stretched hand. She was afraid the girl was too in shock, and so she repeated to Allie that they were going to run. Allie only nodded again, her eyes focusing a little.

"Okay, let's go then. Now." Allie said nodding continuously in a hurried voice.

"Okay, we're making our way to Albertsons, just a few blocks from my house." she said quickly. Time was quickly running out but it had to be made clear. She looked up and saw thick black and grey clouds were now over their heads. The sun had vanished as the clouds had thickened at some point. She continued to look up for another precious moment, just trying to locate the sun in the sky. When that moment was up and she still couldn't find a bright spot in the sky she gave up and looked at Allie again, expectantly.

Allie looked at her confused, "Why Albertsons?"

"It's closest to my home. We need to get some things while we still can," she said starting to walk, then jog with Allie along beside her.

Now she was afraid of making a worthless trip; should the store already be looted of anything worthwhile. "We don't know how long we'll be holed up so we need supplies. Understand?"

"Yes, let's go then! Now!" the young woman shouted, trying to be heard over the other people they were running towards.

Chapter 19: Thank You For Shopping...

The narrow downtown streets were as crowded as they might be at a busy street fair. Except here; people were not politely brushing past each other murmuring, "Excuse me."

Allie's grip tightened on Kelsey's hand as they made their way into the throng of people. Allie trailed close behind Kelsey who carved a path through the crowd. She knew she did not live far from downtown, just through Main Street, and further down the hill into her neighborhood.

Most of her attention was on the people around her. People were yelling and running to and fro. The gas station was not the only vandalized and ransacked location. She looked over her shoulder to see Allie hunched and moving along close behind her, her grip never faltering. They weaved through people and deserted cars that spotted the middle of the street, as well as the ones parked on the sides of the road.

Someone significantly larger that Kelsey shouldered into her and she was set stumbling against a car in the middle of the street. She braced her hand against the window and her Allie gasp. She looked at the car and noticed the front seat was empty; but the back seat had three little faces looking out with wide eyes. Locked in safe? Told to wait? Abandoned? She could not imagine any parent leaving a child behind let alone three; and so young.

She took a few deep breaths as the children stared back at her, frightened and uncomprehending. "Come on," she said pulling on Allie's hand again. They moved away from the car and further down the middle of the street. It was less crowded than the sidewalks, but not by much.

When they finally reached the crowded parking lot people were streaming in and out of the main doors. As they came up to the main doors Allie finally let go of Kelsey and silently straightened up a cart for them to use. Kelsey grabbed one as well stranded against the wall and the two women looked at each other a moment before pushing in through the main doors.

"No point in paying there's no one to take it, we're not really stealing Allie," Kelsey suddenly felt strange that she was justifying to a child why they were about to steal.

"I get it." Allie replied in an almost stoic tone as she moved quickly pass Kelsey pushing a cart.

"Water first," Kelsey said as she turned down an aisle, Allie moving down to another on her own. She had to let go of her anxiety; Allie seemed functional, and they were so very short on time. The shelves were pulled apart, and several things were missing. She did not know what other people were grabbing, but there were still several cases of bottled water and some bottles lying on the floor among other things. She didn't know if the faucets in her house would still work or not. Were they electronic? On some level they had to be. She grabbed three boxes stacking them on the bottom shelf of her cart. She wanted to grab more but knew she only had one cart to push and more things were needed.

She ran down more aisles lined with canned goods. She knew they needed nonperishable things, but she also didn't have the time to figure out what was what on the shelves. She
scooped them off and into the cart by the armful, filling and weighting down the cart at a frightening speed. How much could she get? Would it be enough? There was no way of knowing.

Her racing mind tried to go through everything needed in a diet. Several cans had been knocking into the cart while others fell to the floor rolling away. She kept moving, picking up one or two as she continued around to another shelf.

She started at the bottom of the chain. Bread; how long would bread last before it molded. It didn't matter, she was pretty sure not all mold was exactly bad for you, even if it tasted terrible. She started pushing the heavy cart around to the bakery. She moved pass people who moved around with their own carts. Some people carried baskets and some just had their arms full of what they could hold as they tried to hurry out.

She had trouble turning the cart around corners but was also less afraid of someone knocking the cart over because it was so heavy. She was moving to the bakery section and passed the standard lottery stand in every grocery store. She was moving past the video section and seeing people running with movies and expensive electronics only added to her awe. iPod accessories, movies and someone was carrying a box with a TV in it. She kept moving; trying to stay focused on the task before her.

She watched as a couple of men were working together to tip over an ATM. The bolted down vault was unrelenting as they assaulted it, trying to break in. Fools after money; what
was money right now but green paper? What would it be in a week if anything but lighting a fire?

She turned the corner to the bakery and saw Allie moving along the produce section. Kelsey nodded to herself and grabbed several loafs, not caring what kind as they stacked awkwardly on top of everything else. She looked back to Allie and saw her pushing some other woman away from her own cart and both were working themselves into a fight.

The woman was trying to grab what looked like the last bag of onions Allie had gotten her hands on. She did not recognize the middle aged woman fighting Allie but they seemed to only be snarling at each other in a tug-of-war.

Kelsey started pushing her cart hard towards them. She did not have time to fight, and certainly could not risk her or Allie getting hurt. She held her breath and fought back the regret she already felt as her heavy cart slammed into the woman. She was vaulted against the produce wall, knocking several vegetables to the ground. The cart tilted dangerously to the side, pinning the woman's thighs. A couple loaves of bread fell off but the cart quickly rocked back onto all fours and Kelsey pulled it back from the woman wailing in pain as she fell to the ground.

"Allie!" Kelsey shouted as the girl grabbed the fought over bag of onions from the ground.

"Just help me and let's go!" She shouted back.

Kelsey paused, looked at the women on the floor cursing and rolling onto her side. '*The intelligent people are showing up*.' she thought to herself. They're coming for food, not to loot.

She grabbed one of the loaves of bread that had fallen off and pushed it into her cart. Allie grabbed more handfuls of vegetables and dumped them into her cart. Kelsey moved along the open crates of fruits and began to add them. These wouldn't be lasting long either before they got overripe and moldy, but she was sure they needed them. She didn't know how much of what kind of canned good she had grabbed. The women grabbed fruit at a ruthless pace, ignoring bruises and blemishes. She did make a point of staying away from everything in the organic section, it did not have preservatives and would mold quickly.

She looked over her shoulder to Allie again, her own cart at the spilling point. Allie was grabbing at a pole holding the long thin plastic bags. She removed the large roll and tossed it into her cart. Kelsey followed her idea and grabbed two more near her. These bags could do a lot more than just store things.

They swerved wide of the checkout stands that stood vacant and out the main doors. She had not in fact seen a single employee their whole time here. Again her mind wandered and she wondered if the employees had

been the first to take their pick of everything in the store.

They ran their carts through the sliding doors and into the car speckled parking lot. The sky was much darker then it had been before, it was if night had fallen hours early.

From the open parking lot she looked up and to the west and her legs began to fumble. The cart pulled her along at a sort of dumb drag from its own momentum. She got her feet moving again before the heavy cart lost too much speed and set her eyes back in front of her, catching up with Allie. The mushroom cloud couldn't be seen any more from all the dark gray clouds. It was as if a gray wall was moving their way. The wind was also much stronger, blowing her hair back in an unending gust. Then it would change directions and pull her hair to the side. Garbage tumbled through the street and her eyes were stinging from what smelled like smoke and ash and dust.

She could not understand all of the wind. She was no explosives expert, but she could not understand the violent changes in wind speed and direction.

"We need to go!" she shouted to Allie. Now they were shouting so that they could hear each other over the wind whipping at their ears. Kelsey's fear grew as she thought about what might be happen when everything was completely dark. The wall of ash was close and they still had to get Dwayne. She had hoped to make good on her promise to Kevin; but she could not see them making it to the Meridian in time.

She heaved against the cart and began to push it along faster, Allie close beside her. Once in the street she had to slow down and run along the side of the cart pushing and pulling to keep it from toppling over on the uneven asphalt. Allie was doing something similar and together they moved down the neighborhood streets where it was less crowded.

She found herself suddenly grateful they lived at the base of a hill, because there was no way they could have pushed these carts up any kind incline. While she was counting her
blessings she included one that no one had attacked them with their loaded carts of food after the incident in Albertsons.

Allie let go of her cart and let it role in front of Kelsey and Dwayne's home into the curb. They both ran for the front door. It was locked. Kelsey pushed her hands into her pockets but there were no keys, she'd left them in her purse at the Meridian. She banged her open hands against the door screaming her sons' name. Was he even here? Allie had turned back towards their carts that were teetering in the wind.

Kelsey moved away from the door to the large front window and began to slap the window loudly. She yelled Dwayn's name several times before she finally noticed the woman
lying motionless on the couch in her living room.

Chapter 20: The Snow

Kelsey slapped her palm on her front window frantically. She knew of Danny Fairbanks, but had never met her; nor knowing who was in her home as big of a deal as getting inside herself. She kept having to pull her hair from her eyes as she slapped the window and scream over the wind that had been gradually getting colder. She felt gooseflesh rising along her arms as the wind grew frigid.

"Is Dwayne in there?" came Allie's scream. Kelsey looked back over her shoulder to see Allie half steadying the carts and half steadying herself in the open wind by the street. Kelsey turned back to see into her living room and saw Dwayne's face opposite from hers in the living room. She saw the recognition cross his face as he looked from her to Allie and they both ran for the front door.

Allie saw the door thrown open and the mother wrapped her arms around her son in a desperate embrace. She squeezed her son with the kind of nervous relief only a mother knows. She said his name once and they parted to arms length.

"I wasn't't sure what to do. Miss Fairbanks is here and I think she is in trouble. I didn't't know if I should try and take her to the hospital, leave her here or go find you," he was having trouble keeping his voice above the howling wind and he kept having to blink and rub at his eyes to get out the dust.

"Come help us" she said leaving the shelter of the porch for the street where Allie kept hold of the carts full of food. Dwayne looked up and down the street, seeing no one in sight. It seemed everyone was hiding inside too. He and Allie were able to lift the carts onto the sidewalk. After rolling them up to the door it took all three of their strength to lift the carts up the stairs and into the entry way of the house.

Kelsey had to push against the wind to get the door shut again and she engaged the dead bolt with a heavy exhale. She turned and saw Dwayne and Allie were looking down at Danny on the couch.

"Who is that?" Kelsey asked walking up. "Did she pass out in the lawn or something?"

Dwayne shook his head, "This is Miss Fairbanks, the director I was working with." He trailed off as he thought a moment, "Her name is Danny."

"What's wrong with her?" Kelsey asked, pressing her fingers against the woman's neck. There was a low steady pulse, but her eyes were open and looked dry as she stared at the ceiling.

"She was pulling up this morning to pick me up, and, I don't know, she fell over and hasn't't moved since. It's like she went into a coma."

Kelsey had her eyes shut as she tried to think of what to do. She had two children and a catatonic woman in her home, two grocery carts of food and the wrath of God blowing outside their powerless home. There was no way the four of them could get back to the Meridian in this condition and with that wind. "I'm sorry, Kevin" she murmured to herself.

"Oh my God," Allie said suddenly. At first Allie wanted to say 'it's snowing,' but thought she knew better. "It's the ash," she said instead.

"The fallout" Dwayne offered as he walked up to the window beside her.

The three of them stood there watching the light fluffy looking flakes blow sideways violently through the air. The clouds had almost made it pitch black outside; there was no sun to be seen.

"It's not like ash." Kelsey said. She had lived in Washington when Mount Saint Helens, a large volcano, had erupted in 1980. She had been in high school and could remember shoveling the ash off of the sidewalk and how her father had to drive down the street with the windshield wipers on. This was not the same. The flakes were larger, and much whiter than dark gray ash. There were clouds, not smoke. "It looks more like snow," she said at last. She saw Allie nodding in agreement.

"Nuclear Winter?" her son asked.

"I don't think so Dwayne. I'm not sure, I don't know enough about it." She felt a sudden sinking feeling in her stomach. "Dwayne, go grab the garbage bags. All of them. The ones we use for the cat litter." She said turning for the kitchen.

"What are you thinking? Catching it to melt it for water?" he asked, not liking the idea.

Kelsey shook her head, "No Dwayne. Whatever is out there can't be good. We need to seal up the house, add to the seals on the doors and windows. Get the bags, Allie go help him." she said as they walked past her at a quick pace for the basement.

Kelsey found the large roll of duct tape in the kitchen junk drawer. She walked towards the living room window at the snow falling into the yard. It was sticking to the ground and trees. She heard a small noise and looked down to see Dog standing on the back of the couch looking up at her.

She softly scratched the cats head and set her palm against the window. It was freezing cold.

Chapter 21: Log Entry 22

Log: #22, 2008, 22 wake-ups after

Kevin and I are such different people. The man is determined on survival while I sit and cry sometimes. Sometimes I get irritated by his narrow scope, but without him Im sure we would all be dead. Today we went into one of the dorms a few blocks from our apartment. My intent was finding survivors while Kevins perogative was scavenging. What we found weighs so heavily on me and it chills my bones more than cold outside ever could. We found a boy and girl who had killed themselves, and they had a hand written note between their interlaced fingers. I am going to record it here word for word because it is so completely nesessary for my soul:

"I am writing this letter for you. We do not wish to go quietly into that good night but we have decided to give up.

We are starving to death and we can never get ourselves warm. We are weak and sleep so much. My roommate has become my brother and best friend and I can do nothing for him as he lays incoherent in fever. All I can do is take him away with me. I will lay next to him one last time and with our last bullet we will leave this place together.

I grieve. I grieve for my country. It makes no different if it was an attack or an accident. I grieve for my family whom I hope is alive but believe is dead as we soon will be. I grieve for the love I will never know and I grieve ending my life as a murderer. I even grieve for the degree I only half achieved and grieve most that we are choosing to end our lives at only twenty one and twenty years old.

I wish suicide did not feel so selfish. But no one will grieve our loss, save you, I hope. I hope if you are reading this, everything is fixed and everyone is safe. I hope we are fighting back. I hope you have strength to go on when we could not. I am so angry. My anger is powerless but it burns in me bright and hot. I hope you take my loss, my grief, my hope and my anger and add it to your own strength. I hope you never give up, never forget us, and never stop fighting back.

Emily Tesse Mark Larnny "

I am so glad they signed it. I am crying for Emily and Mark. What we found in that dorm was tragic. There had been five students living in there. There were empty boxes of dry pasta and empty cans lying around. Kevin and I had to break our way through the door because furniture was pushed up against all of the outside doors like barricades. I don't know how long they lived or how the group got ahold of a revolver. All of the rooms were empty but we found the first three students shot dead in the hallway. I can only imagine it was food that led to the fight. Kevin suspects Emily shot all three of them as they fled down the hall way to their room and stayed holed up in there until they died.

Until they killed themselves. Kevin felt the day was mostly wasted. That we are tired and only got an empty revolver
for our efforts. I am holding a beautiful good bye letter, and I feel stronger
than ever.

Chapter 22: Plastic and Sweaters

The next few hours were a blur of action and confusion. They cut and spread plastic bags along the frames of the doors and windows, then would tape them tight into place. All the while the house creaked and groaned with the wind blowing hard against it.

It grew darker and darker and at one point Allie stood by the window her head cocked as the sound of thunder. The wind made the falling snow look like it was shooting out the side of a snow blower. While they worked around the frame of the house, a sour, burning smell seemed to leak through the crevices. The three of them reflected on it briefly. It smelled like a rotting fish had been dropped into a gallon bucket of bleach. It stung and smelled awful.

The storm wailed, but did not make up for the daunting silence in the rooms they worked it; as a result they talked about different ideas for what had caused the explosion. It was the biggest point of discussion the three of them shared. None of them had ever heard of a biological weapon of this sort, causing a wintry climate change. It seemed too advanced for a terrorist attack. What did it take these days though to get a hold of a weapon of mass destruction, and simply set it off. An all out nuclear attack from another nation though, like North Korea or Iran seemed more likely. What was its purpose though? To destroy a city, or cities, and simultaneously destroy all American agriculture forcing the nation to starve and rely on another nation just for food? That seemed like an attack a wealthier developed nation would come up with, such as China or Russia. With some guilt and bitterness they tolerated the idea it could have been an American weapons that had malfunctioned somehow and this was accidentally done to themselves.

Every possibility they came up with had the same ending attached: How could we know? How could we know?

Kelsey and Allie's shopping spree had given them plenty of grocery bags to pull apart and tape over all of the window frames and door frames. An entire roll of the plastic sleeves raided from Albertsons was used to drape and tape against the doors, like giant plastic curtains.

As they had worked they found themselves growing uncomfortably cold; it was a gradual cooling that caused them all one by one to stop what they were doing and grab a sweater. Heavier clothing and the motions of sealing up the house kept everyone feeling more comfortable. When they stopped to check on Danny, her skin was covered in gooseflesh. They pulled out a couple spare blankets and wrapped her as warmly as they could from the neck down.

It was hard to say how long they had worked taping up the doors and windows. It was dark outside, and no one had a working watch or clock. As Dwayne finished with taping down plastic sleeves on the basement door, Kelsey and Allie began to work on the grocery carts still sitting in the middle of the living room. Kelsey expressed right away that while there was a lot of food, it needed to be preserved as best as possible and they had to strictly ration what and how much they were going to eat as well as what needed to be consumed first before it spoiled. The teenagers were quick to agree, but also quick to admit they were starving. Not having a clock did not fool anyone's stomach; it had been hours now and Dwayne and Kelsey had not eaten all day. Allie admitted she had eaten a bowel of milk and cereal before going to the retirement center.

She followed behind Dwayne and Kelsey into the kitchen as she felt long tears trickle down her cheeks. She could not help thinking again about her own parents. She did not say anything while they wrapped vegetables in plastic sleeves and tied them shut. She wondered how much food had been in the fridge back at home. The bread was double wrapped and quickly set in the fridge while she thought about how her small house outside of the town only had a well, and how the huge quakes may have destroyed the pipes or the entire well itself.

The canned foods were set in the cupboards and stacked on the counter underneath. Her thoughts went back to how there had been hardly any milk left in the carton when she set it back in the fridge. She had not wanted to use it all because if she had thrown it away her mom would have told her to buy more at the store while she was in town. She probably would have gone to the Albertsons.

Her eyes were burning, and she felt her throat constricting. She sobbed once put her hand to her mouth as Kelsey turned from the cupboards to see her face.

"Oh sweetie," Kelsey said softly as Allie's shoulders slouched and she sobbed again. Kelsey wrapped her arms around the girl in a motherly fashion and murmured soothingly in her ear.

Dwayne came up the stairs as the two were hugging. She broke from Kelsey clearing her throat and smiled sadly before turning for the living room. Kelsey and Dwayne shared a worried glance as he followed her into the living room. Allie was studying the face of the comatose woman.

"She's been like this all day," Dwayne said, making a point to not watch her rub her eyes dry with the back of her sleeves. They stung, more than just from salty tears.

"It's not like she just passed out. Her eyes are open," she finally replied.

Dwayne was shaking his head, "I've talked to her and yelled at her. I've tried pulling her hair. I slapped her once, you know, to try and make her snap out of it. It's like she's in a coma."

Kelsey had walked in and frowned at the prospect of Dwayne slapping a catatonic woman. Of course he was just trying to wake her up with all of the usual methods, but she did not like it, none the less.

"How do we wake her up mom?" he asked looking at her.

Kelsey only shook her head. "I'm not a nurse. Smelling salts maybe? If we had any. I don't know what would shock conscience back. But hitting her won't help."

Dwayne did not reply. Instead Allie offered, "We could splash her with some water? Maybe make her drink some?"

"She would surely choke. We'reâ ¦ we really aren't equipped for the kind of help she needs."

"She isn't getting it anywhere else." Dwayne replied.

Kelsey took a deep breath and set her chin against her chest. "I'll think on it. See if I can think up of something to do for her. I don't want us to hurt her any more by moving her around. Maybe she just needs time to reset and she'll come back on her own. It was, quite a shocking sight." Her own memory of the mushroom cloud rising into the sky sent shivers down her spine. She had been panicked, of course, but more for her son, than herself. In that panic, she had been seized by a determination to do whatever was needed to protect Dwayne. She could not bare to think about what would have happened if she had frozen like Danny.

The three of them stood chilled in the living room turning to look through the large main window, covered in sheets of plastic. Allie wrapped her arms around Dwayne and pressed her face against his shoulder, again fighting back tears as she thought of home.

The sky had grown nearly black now and their late spring day had turned into a cloudy winter night. They could not see far through the plastic and dark, but the falling snow made looking out the window like looking

at a static TV.

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