

**PROLOGUE**

The day no longer mattered. The seasons were no longer discernible. The smell of fall leaves, the dew in early morning, and the aroma of the air after a fresh rain—gone.

Mornings now brought with it the wind, and odors of those who had died. No one knew how many were dead, but most knew how many they had lost. No one knew whether the virus itself claimed the most victims, or if it was the government's steps to combat the new infectious and quickly mutating disease.

Most of those who remained did not keep track of the days as mankind once did, marked with calendars and dates—but simply tracked the rising and setting of the sun. Although there were rumors of groups of men who had gathered, making it their sole purpose to collect the histories of the once great and clean world, recording from the date of the second fall of mankind, that they simply referred to as *The Apocalypse*.

As the sun rose that morning, Karl sat up from his makeshift bed of cardboard and plastic. The sky was a dark orange. Residue of the *cleansing* still hung in the air. The winds blew a wet stench, with a humid, putrid odor. He often wondered how long it would take to get used to the smell that made his throat want to shut.

It was hard to hear anything over the gusts of wind, but some sounds found their way through in the lulls between.

He took his suitcase and a few pieces of cardboard, placing them in his ever-expanding traveling home he affectionately called *Sam*, which was short for the factory which manufactured this particular suitcase.

*First things first*, he thought to himself as his stomach still ached of hunger from the night before.

Hating to leave the safety of the alley with two exits, which was always comforting in case of an attack, there was nothing to eat or drink here. It had been two days since he ate, and at least a day since he had had anything to drink. He walked out onto the street where a few dozen people could be seen wandering about.

Seeing a trashcan he began to forage. With the lid already removed, his hopes were not too high for finding anything of value. Near the bottom of the trashcan, he found a fast food cup with almost three swallows in it. It had been there awhile, and there was no specific taste, but it was wet, and just enough to remove the sand from his throat. Now if he could just find some food. Since the fall and end of order, pillaged supermarkets, and ransacked homes littered the landscape. At this point, either you hunt and scavenge, or purchase from a not-so-honest black market vendor. They too quickly evolved with the changing times and opened up shops almost the day after the *cleansing*.

Of course, in these times, money no longer had any value. As far as the vendors were concerned, they desired only a few choice items, such as water, food, weapons, ammunition and services. Some services they required were as simple as finding someone or something for the vendor. Others are as detestable after the fall as they were before.

Slavery had once again become a part of life, only instead of singling out a particular race such as African, Chinese or Indian as was done in the past, people who were weak were often the targets of slave traders, mostly women and children, but occasionally men as well. Men were rare. Most men—even the weak ones put up a fight against slave traders and were often either killed in the capture, or wounded beyond use. Feeling refreshed from the few swallows, he gathered his senses, and looked at the rising sun, which gave its warmth. With the morning winds slowing down, the stench relieved its relentless pungent suffocation, and he decided to look elsewhere for some food. Because he was on the edge of the city, it was easy to make treks into the outer

suburbs to search for things. It was far too dangerous to travel too deeply into the suburbs because of the bandits and psychopaths.

One of the strange things that came with the fall was the changing role that cities and small towns played in humanity. Cities had once been the refuge of violence and disorder for criminals and gangs, while smaller towns were safer from most of that. Now, however, most of the survivors ran to bigger cities looking for help and the security of order and government, while small towns turned into gang sanctuaries, where bandits could do what they willed with no recourse from any remaining law.

Small towns turned into personal kingdoms of warlords and gangs, who easily moved in and took over without much resistance. There were no police, no laws, no enforcers—humankind had reverted to a *Darwintopia*, survival of the fittest. Humankind now reduced to animals by one swoop of a little-known virus.

As he walked toward the suburbs, he stayed on what was left of the main roads, being sure to keep aware of an escape route in case something happened. It was hard enough to walk with *Sam*, but running was almost impossible. If he had to, however, he would leave *Sam* behind to save himself.

The suburb was only about two miles from where he was, and he was sure he could find food and be back to the city before nightfall. The closer a suburb was to a major city, the safer it was. As he approached the streets of the small neighborhood, he began to feel a little uneasy.

He was hoping to get in and out with a full belly before dark, but he had not anticipated what the day would reveal. Nevertheless, of course, he was used to that. Each day brought with it new challenges in this new world. The challenge now was to eat, drink, and sleep—just another day in the hell that he called life.

## 2

### **WARM WELCOME**

As he approached the edge of the suburban streets, he began to look around to see what was taking place.

He had only traveled a couple miles, but the scenery and atmosphere had quickly changed from the secure quietness of the city to a somewhat cluttered landscape filled with broken-down houses and a moderately large field to his right.

The sun looked as if it was about the end of second-quarter day, which was a little disconcerting. Knowing that would only leave him about half a day of light to explore and start his trek back to the city. There were various plumes of black smoke rising across the horizon, so it was evident there were quite a few residents in the area. The only question was who they were.

The only weapon he had for protection was *Sam*, which was good for a bash or two, but would not really withstand any prolonged engagement. He played with the grip on the suitcase as if testing in his mind how he would swing it if he had to. To his left was a string of houses. One house, obviously occupied, had a couple of men talking in the yard.

Approaching cautiously to get a feel for the area, he stepped closer. An average height man who looked to be in his mid to late thirties greeted him. He was unshaven and dirty, holding a wrench in his left hand.

“Greetings,” he said to the man as he shifted his grip once again on his suitcase.

“Hey! What’s up?” the man said as he continued toward what appeared to be the remnant of a vehicle.

“Hi, I was wondering if you could give me some directions.” Setting his suitcase down and made a mental note of the position of the handle in case he had to lunge for it, he looked around.

"Directions, well, in front of you is Scott, that's me, behind you is hell and if you keep walking in the direction you were headed, you should hit the abyss by the end of the day."

"Oh, sorry, my names Karl, but friends call me *Lunk*. Well, at least they used to when I had friends."

"I won't tell you what my friends call me, but you can call me Scott."

The second man behind the vehicle slowly poked his head around and into sight, "Don't let him fool ya, he ain't got no friends neither," he said in a gruff rumbling voice. He bellowed out a huge laugh.

"My name is Pete. Where you headed Lunk?"

"I was hoping to do a little exploring and maybe find a little food. I have a long trip ahead of me and need some supplies."

"You got anything for trade?" said Scott with an almost eager anticipation as he looked at the suitcase on the ground.

"Not much. I have a few articles of clothing, a pair of socks, some cardboard, a blanket and a couple ibuprofens."

"Ooh, we have a winner!" said Pete in his growl.

"Alright, what should we give 'em Pete?" asked Scott.

"How about a squirrel, how many those profen's you got?" said Pete.

"Well, I think I have five or six, but I would like to keep a couple, how about I give you three?" said Lunk.

"Three, huh, squirrel gonna cost you four, but it's already cooked and all," said Pete.

"Cool, good trade," said Lunk.

Lunk pulled his suitcase down and opened it up. Scott watched over his shoulder to see if there was any treasure unmentioned in the conversation. He was surprised to see the contents were exactly as Lunk described.

"Do you mind if I eat here?" asked Lunk.

"Not at all, we can sit here and make fun of Scott if you want," said Pete.

The three of them laughed, and for a brief moment, joy filled the air, as a quick glimpse of the old world seemed to illuminate around them. The squirrel was good, even though it was a few days old; it was much fresher than anything Lunk had eaten in weeks. He wanted to spend some time here and learn more about the *burbs* before venturing too much further in. However, if the residents were anything like the two he just met, he felt like luck would be on his side.

# 3

## TAMING OF THE FLU

Lunk handed his squirrel stick back to Scott after cleaning it of any residue, and placed all the bones in a neat pile at his feet next to the suitcase he was sitting on. Scott took the stick and looked at Lunk puzzled, and then threw the stick over his shoulder in a random direction.

Lunk leaned over to ask Pete if he was fixing the car, but before he could speak, Pete answered as if to read his mind. "Nope...I can't get this thing running. I'm just trying to get the clean air from the tires."

He continued talking while producing a small tank he was trying to attach to the nipple of the disabled vehicle.

“No cars work after the *cleansing* took place. Somethin’ happened to them when the bombs went off. Everything with a computer stopped working.”

“Stinking pieces of crap!” said Scott.

“They had us fooled, every single one of us! I almost went to the city that day, you know, for the antidote, since I didn’t get the vaccine. But instead we went fishing instead.” Scott looked over at Pete.

Pete looked back with a blank stare, then as if to remember what he was going to say spoke up in his bear like growl: “We were far enough away, but we could still see, hear and feel the whole thing. I thought the earth was exploding.”

“How did you survive?” Scott asked Lunk.

“I was in the city a couple miles from here, but they didn’t bomb there, I think the closest major city that was cleansed is about ten to fifteen miles from here, but I’m not sure. All I know is I was on my way to work when it happened.”

Lunk looked off in the distance as he spoke, the memory of that day coming as if it was yesterday instead of months ago.

“I was in my car, and after the flash, I couldn’t see. It was like I looked into the sun. I crashed into a ditch I think. I laid there for hours waiting for an ambulance, or someone to help. I couldn’t see a thing. But I heard the gates of hell open, the screams, and the terror, cars crashing all around, people yelling and screaming. While I lay there in that ditch, I heard a car coming my way. I wanted to get out of the way, but I still couldn’t see.”

Looking off into the distance, his memory vividly recounted the events. “I didn’t know what to do, so I just lay there. I don’t know how close it came to me, but as it came into the ditch, it hit my car and rolled past me. All I felt was the wind from the car on my face as it passed. I waited for it to fall on me, to crush me. But after the crash, there was nothing.” He paused again before continuing. “I don’t know how many hours I lay there until I could see again. But once I could see, that’s when I started talking with people in the streets, and they were saying that it was the government. How they told everyone with the virus that they had discovered a cure and they could get it free if they went to the health departments. I guess if you think about it, they actually did have the cure—sick as it may seem.”

Scott was looking at Pete as if to ask if he could talk. Lunk saw this, but did not ask.

Pete stumbled about his words then spoke, “Yeah. Death is the only real cure Lunk. My ma had the virus. I don’t know why I didn’t get it, I just didn’t. She got it about four weeks before the *cleansing*. She was afraid of catching it, so she pestered me to go down and get the shot so we wouldn’t get it. Finally, after a few weeks, I took her down and she got the shot. I got it too, but I guess it was already too late for her. She must have already got the virus and didn’t know it. A couple of weeks later she got the fevers, she was so blazing we put her in the tub and kept putting cool water and ice in it. I called the emergency, but they said they had stopped taking virus patients because there was nothing they could do, and it was too dangerous transporting people with the flu because they could infect others.”

Pete glanced over to Scott, and then looked back to Lunk.

“So the military showed up and quarantined our house. After about a week, the soldiers just left with no warning. My mother seemed to have got better. You know, you ever have a motorcycle, and just before you run out of gas, all of the sudden it runs real good like it got a burst of energy, then it dies? It was like that. She got up as if she was never sick, and asked if I wanted breakfast. I was watching TV, and I heard something

break in the kitchen. I went in to see what was going on, and she was on the floor on her hands and knees, growling.”

Placing both of his hands over his face for a moment, Pete rubbed his eyes exhaling a sigh.

“I didn’t know what to think. I said *Ma*? She turned to look at me, and her eyes were pure black. She jumped to her feet and ran at me grabbing the hot iron skillet from the stove without thinking twice. When her body hit me, it was like a truck, and before I could even yell, she was on top of me hitting me with the hot pan. It’s weird how you remember the strangest things. It was like slow motion when I think about looking at her hand holding that skillet, and it sizzled and burned, yet she held on. After being hit a few times, one caught me real good in the head—I instantly reacted with a punch, and knocked her out cold.”

“What?” Lunk was shocked at the story he just heard, and even though he acted in disbelief, he had seen some of what Pete described in other people over the past few weeks, and knew it was true.

“Yeah,” Pete continued, “You need to realize, at the time I was about fifty pounds heavier, and my ma is only about one hundred pounds wet, and carrying a frying pan.”

Pete and Scott both gave a half-hearted attempt at laughing, but the pain was obvious in Pete’s eyes.

Pete spoke once more, “The lucky ones are the ones who got the cure, the ones who are dead.”

Scott turned to Lunk, “I hate the government for what they did. I don’t know what’s worse—the *cleansing*, the shot, or the flu virus itself? Which killed more people? After the *cleansing*, where did all the soldiers go? The soldiers were everywhere after martial law was imposed, and then right before the *cleansing*, gone—haven’t seen them since.”

Lunk spoke in a weak, almost self-ridiculing voice. “Well, I don’t know what to say. I’m still not even sure what all took place. All I know is I want to find my son, and get back to living.”

“Living, Hmm... Good luck with that then,” said Scott.

Pete spoke up once more, “Why doesn’t someone do something? How come nothing is being done? Where is the government, the police, the doctors?”

“The lawyers, don’t forget the lawyers...I’m going to sue!” Scott chimed in and began laughing.

“No, I’m serious Scott. This can’t be how it ends for us,” Pete said.

Lunk shifted his seat around trying to find a comfortable spot somewhere in the center of *Sam*, but his suitcase was on un-level ground.

“I don’t really know what is going to happen, but I know I have to find my son. It’s been weeks since the *cleansing*, and since I’ve heard anything from him. My cell phone stopped working after the *cleansing* and the phone lines I guess are down too. Once the power went out, I had no choice but to go searching for him,” Lunk began to grit his teeth a little in frustration.

“Hey, it’s getting late. Stay here with us tonight. We have a nice place that is really fortified, and we are far enough from the *burbs* that we don’t get bothered much,” Pete said.

Scott then spoke out. “Yeah! It will be fun, like a sleep over,” and he started laughing aloud again.

“That would be great, thank you,” said Lunk.

After another hour or two of talking, the three of them went inside. The sun turned a dark purple as it set in the skyline behind what was left of the horizon. They stepped inside and a heavy door shut behind them, with many locks and contraptions to keep the door from opening, including a five-foot section of an iron train rail placed in a catch on the floor and locked into place in the middle of the door.

“I guess that will work”, said Lunk.

“Yeah, we are totally protected in here at night,” said Scott.

“Unless they catch the place on fire,” said Lunk.

Scott quickly looked at Pete in horror, as if he had never thought of that scenario. Pete just laughed and the three of them headed for the front room.

Fourth-quarter day had ended; it was now the first-quarter night.

# 4

## WHAT LIES BENEATH

As they walked from the front entry, which was now an impenetrable fortress wall, they entered the front room.

There was still a decent amount of furnishings, but the place overall was a disaster. There were papers, empty cups and plates, as well as mechanical devices and parts in just about every area of the room, with the exception of trails, which had naturally formed from the men traveling to and from the other rooms of the house. Finding room to sit, Pete almost instinctively pulled a small radio from amongst the rubble and debris and turned it on, tuning up and down the dial in hopes of catching a transmission.

“How does that radio work?” Lunk asked.

“Not sure if it really does. It turns on for some reason, but I never hear anything on it. I got this radio for Christmas when I was a kid from my dad, and I’ve had it ever since. I want to try and make a better antenna for it. I was thinking about connecting it to the TV antenna on the house here.”

Pete continued to fiddle for a moment with the radio and then set it back down.

“I can’t find a screwdriver small enough to get those little screws out of it to open it up though. I’m afraid I might break it if I force it open, and it’s the only one we got.” Pete looked back at the radio hidden in the debris once more.

“Hey, I meant to ask you—why were you collecting the air from the tires outside?” Lunk looked over to Scott after asking, curious as to why he was so still.

Scott sat there with a blank look on his face. Quiet, almost timid, like a rabbit discovered in the woods trying to hold motionless just long enough for you to think it was your imagination, so he could escape.

Pete answered Lunk. “I am collecting all the clean air I can, the air from tires mostly. It smells like rubber, but cleaner than the death-filled winds that blow in every morning. Anyway, I don’t really know why. Just something to do I guess. I have a big compressor storage tank in my garage, that’s where I keep all the air I collect. Since we don’t have any electricity, can’t use it anyway. Speaking of that...” Pete stood and pulled a small pack of matches from his pocket and lit a couple candles in the room.

“Do we have to keep talking?” Scott exclaimed in a whisper.

Lunk was confused as he looked back at Scott. The person who was loud and boisterous just moments ago outside had suddenly become like a withdrawn statue in his chair.

Lunk thought to himself, *is he afraid of the dark? Or what it brings? Is he claustrophobic, and all the debris surrounding him is driving him mad? Or maybe he is just crazy, and shifts moods at a whim?*

However, it was none of that. If it were so simple, Scott could breathe. If it were the darkness, the setting of the fourth-quarter day, or even traveling vagabonds and vagrants, gangs and disorder of the dark, one would understand. It was not that simple. It was not that easy to explain. It was something more fearful and sinister than that. It had to be, by the look on his face, and the trembling in his once loud and straightforward, humorous voice.

“Relax man!” said Pete as if he had just restated the obvious once more.

“What?” Lunk was starting to feel a little on edge himself now. The safe and secure feeling he had just a moment ago watching the proverbial vault door close on this fortress quickly losing its potency.

“Nothing,” Pete said in a way that you knew not to ask for more information. “He just gets jumpy at night,” Pete looking back over at Scott with a stabbing stare.

“You want some tea?” Pete asked, making Lunk double take.

There was something almost comical about these words coming from the mouth of such a man. Lunk actually snickered a little, as if expecting this to be some kind of joke. The city water stopped flowing weeks ago, and the stores ransacked and pillaged for all of their wares. Lunk could not help but find it humorous that he was staring into the serious face of a two hundred plus pound man with a beard about a foot long, in dirty overalls and greasy hands asking if he wanted tea.

A beer, Lunk could imagine. Whiskey even more so, or corn liquor he brewed himself in the basement—that would be normal conversation here, but this question seemed so out of place. “Tea?” Lunk asked.

“Man, you can’t answer a question with a question, dude,” Scott said as if a comedy act were unfolding before him, snapping him out of his trance.

“Sure, I’ll have some if that’s OK? I don’t have anything for trade,” Lunk said. He expected Pete to ask for the last few Ibuprofens.

“No man, I asked *you*. It’s no trade when I ask you,” Pete said and started laughing.

“Come here, check this out. I made it,” Pete stood and moved toward the kitchen, following the slim trail that was nearly too small for him to navigate.

Lunk and Scott both got up and moved toward the kitchen as well. The sun had nearly set by this time, and only a small glow came through the cracks between the boards covering the windows in the kitchen. There was not enough light to fully discern anything in the room.

Pete ignited a small gas burner and light immediately filled the room. The burner connected to a small tank sitting on the kitchen floor.

Scott instinctively walked over to the window, and pulled a thick blanket that hung on one side down over the window to keep the light of the flames from becoming a beacon to any creatures of the night.

The kitchen looked as the front room did, with devices and parts strewn about. Pete produced a small teapot, and pulled the bottom drawer of the oven out grabbing a small bottle of what appeared to be water from hiding in the back.

Pouring a small amount of water into the pot, Pete placed it on the burner. From under the table brought up a strange copper pipe contraption with a black rubber hose that fit over the pot’s spout and a clear glass bottle at the other end, collecting all of the steam, and re-condensing it in the copper tubing. It then collected in the glass bottle, keeping any moisture from heating the water from escaping.

“Every drop is precious now. You know,” Pete said.

“Ingenious!” Lunk exclaimed aloud, surprising himself that his thoughts came out unexpectedly.

“Quiet down man!” Scott screeched again in a near whisper.

“Where did you get water from?” Lunk asked.

“Well I have...had a device I made in my basement I used to use for collecting and cleaning water, making it fit to drink. You know, after the *cleansing*, most water is full of crap from the bomb, and you’ll get sick if you drink it,” Pete looked at Scott, “Hey, remember that one guy we met a week or two back that was drinking that stuff. His hair all fell out and he got those sores on his face, and was real crazy?”

Scott almost forgetting his obsession about silence answered. “Yeah, he kept saying, *they’re coming to get me because I know what they’re doing!* And after he left here we saw some of those bandits catch him and drag him off.”

“So what happened to it, the thing you made in the basement?” Lunk asked.

“Oh, it’s still there, we just can’t get to it...” Scott started but Pete cut him off, “Doesn’t matter now!”

“Yeah, doesn’t matter.” Scott agreed reluctantly.

“OK, but where in the world did you get tea?” Lunk asked.

“Well, it’s not really tea, we have bunches of mint that grow all around the edge of our house, we have collected it for years, drying it out in our basement for cooking with and making mint tea. We don’t pick any of it now obviously because the rain is poisoned—which in turn makes the plants no good,” Pete said.

Pete taking the pot off just before the water boiled; he poured the water into cups and placed some dried mint in each cup. They returned to the front room where they sat again. Lunk drank his tea almost immediately, barely waiting for it to cool. His thirst had driven him, and it was the best cup of anything he had to drink in weeks. Pete and Scott took their time drinking, as if it was a nightly ritual. Lunk placed his empty cup on the floor next to his chair in the only spot he could find.

“Well, I guess we better get to sleep,” Pete said.

“Tell him!” Scott said.

Lunk blinked hard at the volume of Scott’s voice.

“Tell him!” Scott exclaimed again.

“Tell me what?” Lunk slowly asked.

“If you hear anything at night, don’t worry, it’s nothing. Just stay in your room and don’t come out until morning,” Pete said softly.

“What?” Lunk asked.

“Fine I’ll do it! Don’t go in the basement, and if you hear anything get a freaking stick or something and kill it!” Scott said frantically.

“What!” Lunk was really getting scared now. His heart actually began beating hard and fast.

“What are you talking about?” Lunk asked again looking at Pete.

“You don’t have to do that! It’s OK.” Pete said looking back at Scott.

“It’s not OK, it’s a freaking monster—Kill it!” Scot screamed.

“Quiet!” Pete said. Their change of roles had Lunk even more confused about the entire situation. He was trapped though. Leaving was not an option now that it was dark.

“Hey guys, can someone tell me what’s going on, you’re freaking me out a bit,” Lunk said in as calm of a voice as he could muster.

Everyone took a deep breath and sat back in their chairs, and after a moment of silence Pete spoke up. “Remember I told you about my mother? Well, she’s still alive,” Pete stopped there.

“Alive? Is that what you’re calling it now?” Scott said.

“Wait, what? I thought you said you had to kill her?” Lunk was getting more anxious as the conversation continued.

“No, I said I knocked her out. After she attacked me, I hit her and it knocked her unconscious. I picked her up and carried her to her bed. When she came to, the second her eyes opened she jumped up and attacked me again. Scott came in and hit her over the head knocking her out again. We didn’t know what to do, so we took her into the basement and chained her down there,” Pete said this, almost ashamed for his actions.

“Yeah, only problem is, the chains weren’t strong enough and she broke free. She’s been down there for weeks, and we can’t go down there—that’s where the food is, that’s where the water is, that’s where some of the tools are—he would rather we sit up here and die, than to...” Scott stopped.



“Yeah, that’s right Scott—you want to kill her, because I sure in the hell can’t. You know, she only knew you since you were about twelve, took you in, treated you like another son! That’s right, go down there and kill her so you can live!” Pete placed his hands over his face and took a deep breath.

“Umm,” Lunk said nervously.

“She can’t get out can she?”

“No, the cellar stairs have been broke for years. We have to open the cellar door in the floor and drop a ladder down. She can’t get out.”

“I’m sorry Pete,” Scott said.

“I’m just going nuts here. You know I would never hurt your mom.” Pete sat back now and returned to his sedative-look and silence.

“If she’s been down there for weeks, how is she still alive?” Lunk asked.

“Don’t know, maybe she’s living off the food and water supplies, maybe she’s living off the mice, I don’t know—maybe that virus won’t allow her to die?” Pete said with his face still hidden in his hands.

They all quietly said their goodnights, and each left to a vacant room for rest.

That night none of them slept.