

A NOVEL

SURVIVING MINIMIZED

ANDREA WHITE



RIVER GROVE
BOOKS

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To Bill

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PART ONE

CAPTURED IN ONE BOUNCE

Even with his oxygen mask on, Zert Cage caught a whiff of moldy tomatoes, plastic, grease, and rotten eggs. Using the masher stick, he packed his overripe and oily load into the barrel of his trash rifle. When he pumped his gun, the loader gave a satisfying slurp.

He aimed at the gloomy building that his friends had claimed as their headquarters and pulled the trigger.

Bam!

The shot fell short. The red mash splattered an old column and slid downward to the street.

He ducked behind a rusted triangular sign labeled “Caution. Radioactive” and waited. But there was no answering fire.

Bizarro. Had Eckle and his crew stood them up? He glanced over his shoulder to search for Cribbie. His best friend should have caught up with him by now. They’d been slinking down opposite sides of the street using the signs and junked vehicles for cover.

Only a tumbleweed of plastic rolled toward him, propelled by the breeze from the Enviro-fans. Even though Public Protection Warden Honest Goodman had declared this area safe twenty years

ago, the street was still abandoned. Black soot streaked the faces of the crumbling buildings, and the potholes had grown large enough to swallow kids whole.

The sound of footsteps on broken glass came from the alley as a shadow fluttered in its depths.

Zert held his breath and watched a figure lurch out of the darkness. He dipped his hand into the trash bucket to grab a handful of the squishy, stinky stuff that he'd harvested from a broken g-pipe. He reloaded and turned toward his target.

The thing in his sights wasn't human. It was a creature with curled horns and curly hair. He lowered his gun as an abandoned designer animal tottered toward him.

The poog, a poodle-goat blend, began licking up the trash on the sidewalk. *Poor starving beast.*

Zert was searching his pockets for leftover nibbles when something clattered close by. He tightened his grip on his gun. A few meters away, Cribbie was climbing up the side of a rusty purple lifter, using its air vents as stairs. The lifter was an ancient model with thick wheels for driving on the road, a rusty propeller on top for flying to the Up Cities—where all the rich people lived—and a bulky magnet-box for docking in the sky.

Zert felt a gasp catch in his throat as he saw Cribbie reach the roof and straddle the propeller. It wasn't the steady way his friend aimed his rifle at the bombed-out building, or his wispy blond hair blowing in the night breeze. It was his O-mask flopping around his neck.

Zert would be grounded for life if his father knew he was waging a trash war . . . *during* the Quarantine . . . with Cribbie, the friend his father disliked *the most*. But at least he hadn't broken his father's most important rule. He ran his finger under the elastic strap of the oxygen mask that cupped his mouth and nose.

Cribbie hadn't exactly dared him. *But enough*. It wasn't as if he were in any danger. Despite what his father believed, he was

thirteen—not a kid anymore—and he knew how to take care of himself.

Zert yanked off his own O-mask. For the first time in months, he tasted the chemicals, dust, sweat, and garbage of Low City DC on his tongue. The thick night air tickled his nose. *Crunchy*. It felt great.

Cribbie began pumping his rifle. He must have located their friends' hiding place inside the gloomy building.

Too bad Cribbie's ammo was gray, moldy bread. It spewed into a beautiful, high arc. Like Zert's, though, the shot fell short and splatted onto the sidewalk.

"Come out, cowards!" Cribbie yelled.

Silence.

"Have you spotted them yet?" Zert yelled, even though he could already guess the answer. The black trash sack that Cribbie wore over his clothes was still slick and clean, like his own.

"Nah," Cribbie said as he clambered down from the roof. "I'm starting to think Mr. Etc. stood us up." Mr. Etc.—Cribbie's nickname for Eckle.

The shaggy poog stumbled toward Cribbie. Red scars pockmarked the animal's face and ears. Its red, milky eyes oozed pus and blood.

"Cribbie," Zert yelled to his friend. "That poog's got Superpox!" He jammed his O-mask back over his nose and mouth, yanking the straps tighter to make sure it was sealed.

Cribbie dropped his trash rifle. It clattered to the ground as he grabbed his mask. He had barely gotten it back in place before the poog swayed past him onto the street.

Boing. Boing.

The sound came from behind him, and he felt his knees start to wobble. He didn't have to turn around to know who was coming. A trampo. Policemen earned their nickname from the spring-powered shoes they wore, shoes that allowed them to bounce as though they were on trampolines and which propelled them into the air.

A strong hand gripped Zert's arm.

Zert's heart did backflips in his chest as he turned to face his bad luck. Policemen never listened, never gave kids a chance to explain. They just hauled them down to Teen Jail and booked them. Then . . . well, he couldn't think about that.

The trampo nodded at Cribbie. "Game's up, son."

Cribbie ran toward them and launched himself at the trampo's knees.

As the trampo crumpled to the ground, he let go of Zert's arm. But in the furious tumble, Cribbie ended up underneath the fallen trampo.

"Why you nasty little . . . ," the trampo yelled. He scrambled to pin Cribbie, who was squirming to get away.

"Old Man!" Cribbie called out Zert's nickname. "Run!" The words, muffled by his mask, sounded as though shouted from behind a thick wall.

Zert picked up his rifle and ran. The black potholes yawned wide, as if they would gobble him up as he raced down the street.

Out of nowhere a second trampo bounced into his path. The partner.

Zert couldn't see the woman's face, only the tension in the square of her shoulders, the anger in the set of her jaw, and the strength in the expanse of her chest.

As Zert searched for an escape route, the partner bounced up and nabbed him. She wrenched his rifle out of his hand and threw it onto the ground. A pair of magnetic cuffs appeared as if from nowhere. "Hands in front," ordered the cop.

Zert gasped. His lungs struggled to bring in enough air.

"Name?" the trampo said as she slapped the cuffs over Zert's wrists.

"Zert Cage," he wheezed. Somewhere nearby, the poog bleated.

"Old Man!" he heard Cribbie yell from the distance. "Run!"

The trampo held Zert's hand over the identity reader until it beeped. "Zert Cage, you're going to Teen Jail."

Zert bowed his head. His dad was going to kill him.

NEW WORLDS

“It’s a BIG opportunity. You and Zert should come with me.” Marin smiled. “He’s got to be miserable with the Quarantine and all.” The sign on his forehead—“World’s Greatest Adventurer”—flashed in green letters.

Jack Cage took a sip of his vita-coffee. His brother-in-law had arrived a few hours ago the way he always did, with no advance notice, pitching another crazy idea.

“Zert can get vaccinated if you guys come,” Marin said. Both his grin and the sign on his forehead slid into off-mode.

Jack rubbed his upper arm, tracing the scar from his Superpox vaccination, still bumpy after twenty-five years. He’d gotten it when he was in the army. But that was before the market price for a single vaccination had skyrocketed to five hundred thousand credit coins—more than he could earn in a lifetime.

Oxygen masks substantially reduced but didn’t eliminate the risk of catching Superpox. So the best alternative for his son and the billions of others who weren’t vaccinated was virtual isolation. That’s why tonight he’d left Zert sleeping soundly in their apartment. It was dangerous for his son to go outside, even just to a diner down the street.

“Zert gets to visit with my regular customers,” Jack said. “I don’t let them inside the store unless I know they’re vaccinated. He’s not as bored as the kids who are totally cut off.”

“If you don’t come, I might never see you guys again,” Marin said.

“You *can’t* be serious, Marin.” Jack paused. “You’re the only family Zert and I have left.” His brother-in-law’s slight build and sizable nose didn’t remind him of anyone. But he could never look into Marin’s blue eyes ringed with green without thinking about his own wife, dead these seven years.

“I saw your store,” Marin said, ignoring his plea. “You’re struggling. You could use a fresh start.”

The deeply discounted prices. The bare shelves.

Jack smiled at the server as she poured more of the green, vitamin-rich coffee into each of their cups. “Thank you, Glade.”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Jack,” she said. Her flat, clean cheeks had no implants or designer freckles, but her lips were unnaturally red with Permanent Lipstick, which never wore off.

That was a slip-up. Everybody who worked at the Old Timey Café was supposed to look truly old-fashioned. But he understood. It was 2083 after all, and the owner, Papal George, wasn’t likely to find young women willing to renounce all modern beauty products just so they could look as if they were from the 2050s.

“What is it, Glade?” Jack said.

“I didn’t recognize your friend at first.” She smiled at Marin. “Aren’t you Marin Bluegar? Weren’t you the first explorer on that show, *New Worlds*?”

Marin’s foreboard flashed on—except for the broken exclamation point at the end. Only a line of bumpy skin on his forehead marked where it had once lit up.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Marin said, grinning.

Jack took a sip of hot coffee. He had forgotten this annoying aspect of being with his brother-in-law: the fans. Especially

the young girls. Marin had never married. Flowers, his dear departed wife, always claimed her brother was too selfish to be a good husband.

“Do you really do all that stuff?” Glade asked, her tongue bumping up excitedly against the gap in her front teeth as she talked.

“I sure do,” Marin said.

Jack suppressed a smile. Marin had once admitted to him that he used stunt doubles for the dangerous scenes on the show. “Insurance requirements,” he’d said. “I’m too valuable.”

“I haven’t seen you on the tube lately. When’s your next show?” Glade asked, patting her long black hair.

“I’ve been taking a break,” Marin said. The lights on his forehead died away as he picked up his coffee cup.

Jack knew it was a forced break. Marin’s career had stalled.

“But I’ll be back next season,” Marin said. “It’s going to be a BIG one.”

Glade leaned closer to the table and aimed her smile at Marin.

“Thank you, Glade,” Jack repeated to put an end to the flirtation. “I haven’t seen Marin in a while, and we have a lot to talk about.”

Glade cast one last long glance at Marin before swishing away.

“You were saying?” Jack said, turning to his brother-in-law.

“This plan I’m working on is perfect for Zert,” Marin said. “And you. You both need this.”

With his free hand, Jack reached for the payment screen in the tabletop. The total flashed when he punched the button. Marin—who always spent money faster than he made it—was almost certainly broke. “OK, enough teasers. What’s the plan, Marin?” he asked as he held up a crypto credit coin for the screen to scan.

“I’m heading west to live off the land. Miles from here. Back to nature,” Marin said.

Jack glanced out the window at the street. The artificial moon

was flashing an advertisement for PeopleColor so large and so bright that it could easily be seen down here, six hundred kilometers below its orbit. “There’s no place like that left,” he said.

“If you’re game, there are always new worlds to explore,” Marin said. But his voice—usually full of excitement—came out flat. That was the opening to the *New Worlds* show.

“You know me, Marin. I’m a homebody. I’m staying where I am,” Jack said as his I-ring lit up.

A picture of a gray, windowless building filled the screen of the com-device that he wore on his index finger. It had to be the loneliest-looking place on earth.

The bold black words “Teen Jail” appeared at the top of a line of endless steps leading to the entrance. “What the . . . ?” Jack’s voice trailed off.

STUCK BUTTS

Teen Jail was a warren of tiny cells packed with kids waiting for their parents—somebody, anybody—to take them away.

Zert and Cribbie sat in a cell, stuck on opposite ends of a metal bench. They were stuck. Really stuck.

When they'd been brought in, a robot matron—dressed like a woman cop—had fit them with black magnetic belts that wrapped around their waists, extended down their butts, and came all the way up to their belly buttons where the belts locked. About a centimeter thick, the belt was made of orange metal mesh. It looked fragile, but no matter how hard he struggled, it wouldn't give.

Zert's butt was pinned to the bench so securely he couldn't even squirm. His rear end felt as dead as a lump of chewed-up gum.

He checked the back of his hands for the hundredth time. He didn't spot any blisters. But the light was bad in the cell.

He wanted to ask Cribbie if he had seen what had happened to that poor, sick poog. But he didn't want to think about the animal's sad, pus-filled eyes.

He lifted his hands to take another peek for red spots, and as he did, he and Cribbie locked eyes.

"Don't worry, Old Man. You didn't get close enough." The

place on Cribbie's forehead where the trampo had bopped him was a red dome the size of a dodo egg.

Zert nodded as he heard the chime—the signal that the holorehabilitation program was about to begin. Not again! They had listened to it five times already, and they'd only been in jail for two hours. Throughout the cluster of cells, kids began stomping their feet and yelling things like, "Shut up!" "Make the holobum stop," and "That ol' blister makes me ill."

Zert watched as a figure of a man materialized in the corner of their cell. He appeared real, but he was only made of light.

"I was a kid once," the holobum started. Zert plugged his ears to block the grating voice, but it was no use. "A normal kid just like you," the holobum droned. "Then, I robbed a gum salesman and ended up in Teen Jail. Look at me now." He pointed his skeletal finger at the bags under his sunken eyes and the clumped hair topping his misshapen head.

When the bum opened his mouth to show his rotten teeth, Zert turned away.

"I'm going to get Eckle for this," Cribbie said.

But Zert didn't turn to face him. He felt bad looking at Cribbie's bruised forehead.

"I know exactly where he lives," Cribbie boasted, hatching a plan. "He's in one of those ground-floor caves." He slapped the metal bench with his open hand as he said this.

Cribbie was trying to drown out the holobum's sermon, but he was only making things worse. Cribbie's plans for revenge against Eckle called for Zert to play a major role.

"We'll sneak out," Cribbie said. "And when we get out of here . . ."

Impossible. After this, his father would never let him out of his sight again. He'd be stuck inside the apartment in the back of the store for the rest of his life.

But Cribbie *had* tried to save him from the trampo, and for

that, Zert was in his debt—big time. Zert put his head in his hands and breathed in the smell of trash.

Cribbie said, “We’ll cover Eckle and his gang with the stinkiest, ripest trash ever.”

This hard metal bench had him in its grips all right, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as being stuck between his father and his best friend.

The guard, a slight man, limped by their cell.

“Can’t you turn the tube off?” Cribbie yelled as the guard passed by.

The guard looked as though he had just drunk a bottle of PeopleColor. Like the ad said, “Turn your skin any color you want it to be,” the guard’s skin matched his blue law enforcement uniform. The uniform was covered with pockets and compartments that held a stun gun, magnetic handcuffs, a zapper, water tablets, buttons to activate a camera, a heart rate monitor, and a laser light bomb.

“My friend’s sick of listening to that holobum,” Cribbie said to the guard.

The guard wrenched his neck in a quick twist, and Zert watched his forehead light up in red script: *Shut up*.

“PLEEEEEZZZZ, SIR, PLEEEEEZZZZ,” a kid’s voice called out from the cell next door.

The guard marched down the length of the hallway with his foreboard facing the prisoners. As he passed each cell, the kids quieted.

“Next, I stole a few identity chips,” the bum whined. “They didn’t magnet me up in Teen Jail *that* time.” He paused. “*That* time . . .”

Zert shuddered, dreading what was coming next.

The bum started coughing. The sound was so real and viral sounding that Zert’s own throat tingled with imagined moist lumps of phlegm. The bum seemed almost as sick as that poog had been.

Kids in the cells groaned and sighed in unison.

Doctor GoodHealth had drilled the symptoms of Superpox into everyone. Red, itchy blisters, almost too small to be noticed, popped up on the victim's hands or arms. The blisters swelled into welts. The welts erupted into boils. By the time the victim developed a hacking cough, the boils would be bursting.

Zert took advantage of the light from the holo-imagetube to push up the sleeve of his shirt and view the patches of freckles on his arm. Some freckles looked like couples hugging. Others like colonies of ants. One bloated one resembled a cloverleaf.

He checked his hands. His thumb was wide, perfect for pushing the toggle sticks in zoink ball, and his fingers were long and skinny enough to also play the deflector position. If he got lucky, he might be able to get a scholarship to stay in school. *If* he got out of this scrape.

"You can blast Eckle with some good ol' Italian trash, and I'll flatten him with some spoiled meat," Cribbie said. "We'll stake out his place until he leaves. OK, Old Man?"

Old Man—Cribbie's nickname for him because over their long friendship of two years, once or twice Zert had refused to go along with one of Cribbie's daring plans.

"OK, Cribbie," Zert said. He wasn't sure who he hoped would shut up more: Cribbie or the bum. At least the bum wasn't interactive, demanding promises he couldn't keep.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Steady, familiar footsteps. Footsteps that didn't rush. Footsteps that demanded respect. And as bad as his cell was, those footsteps meant that his life was about to get worse.

Before he could decide which excuse to use, his father was there, walking down the hallway toward the tightly spaced bars.

It would be easy to pretend that he wasn't related to Jack Cage.

His dad's face was all angles, unlike his own, which was round. His father's nose was pointed, while his refused to grow beyond a stub. His father's eyes were the blue of glacier ice he'd read about

in books; his were an ordinary brown. Not only that, his father's skin was spotless, while daisy-chains of freckles crossed Zert's cheeks and nose, traveled up his fingers, and—he'd been told—laid a train track on his back.

"That's him," his father said through clenched teeth. He had on his blue jeans with the broken front loop and his red T-shirt with the Cage & Sons' logo.

"I told you so, Mr. Cage. Our DNA testers don't make mistakes," the guard said.

His father didn't answer. He just narrowed his eyes and glared at Zert through the bars.

Zert looked down at his shoes, polka-dotted with specks of garbage. He waited for his father's lecture.

"Don't we have enough problems, Zert, without you making more?" his father asked from the other side of the bars.

"We just snuck out for an hour," Zert said.

"I don't want to hear your excuses," his father said. His voice was weary in a way that made him sound . . . old. His shoulders, usually strong and erect, were slouched. "What you did was dangerous."

"But there haven't been any cases of Superpox for weeks and weeks," Zert mumbled.

"You know the epidemic isn't over yet," his father said.

Boy, did he know. The memory of that poog flashed in his head.

The guard pulled a thin black cylinder out of his pocket. It was the guard's identity wand containing his DNA, World Council Identity Number, blood type, and who knew what else. He waved it over the lock and it clicked open.

His father started to step into the cell, but the guard motioned for him to stay where he was.

The guard bent over Zert and waved his identity wand over the magnetized belt. It opened and fell softly onto the bench with a metallic whisper.

The guard turned to his father. "How about the other one? The Vermin kid. Do you know where his parents are?"

Cribbie usually beat up kids who called him *vermin*, but magnetized to the bench, he could only growl. "Not vermin. *Vimen*."

Zert's father shook his head. "Glorybeth Vimen, the boy's mother, isn't around much, but there's an older brother . . ." The guard turned his back on the cell, and the two adults began conferring.

Glorybeth Vimen didn't have a job. She didn't buy chips for Cribbie and his brother, Roal, to eat. She didn't do anything a mother was supposed to do.

Zert stood up and shook his butt to get the feeling to return. He stopped when he saw Cribbie snickering.

"Dead Jell-O," Cribbie said.

"Exactly," Zert said. *Uh-oh*. He was about to leave, while Cribbie had to stay. "Roal will be here soon," he told him.

"I'm not worried, Old Man," Cribbie said, staring at the back of his hand. He started scratching it.

The guard escorted Zert and his dad through the open jail door. Zert looked back at his friend, then down the long hallway.

Freedom.