

“Do you hear that?” Pepper asked, shortly after they’d started walking on the second morning. They’d passed through several subdivisions and were now walking through another one. “Sounds like a child crying.” Even though it was daytime, what little light was able to penetrate the thick cloud cover made it difficult to see.

“I don’t hear anything. How do you know it’s a child crying?”

“I’ve had children, Jared. I know when a child’s crying. Sounds like it’s coming from that direction,” she said, pointing, and headed in that direction.

“What are you doing? We can’t do anything for it and we can’t take it with us.”

“A child is not an ‘it’, Jared. I just need to see.”

The child was a girl about six years old, sitting next to a woman’s body, between two houses, in the dark. Her shirt was dirty and her jeans were soiled and smelly, as though she had refused to leave the woman’s side, even in the distress of having to relieve herself.

A chimney had fallen from one of the houses and landed on the woman’s head, killing her. The little one may have tried to move some loose bricks, but several larger chunks were still on top of her. Perhaps they were too heavy.

When the child saw them, she stopped crying.

“Mama,” she said, pointing at the woman.

“What can we do for her?” Pepper asked quietly, in a whiny voice.

“Nothing,” Jared said. “I knew we shouldn’t have come over here.”

“You take the bricks off the mother and I’ll give the girl some food. She’s probably been sitting here for days. She must be starving.”

“You’re joking, right? We don’t have much food left, certainly not enough to share.”

Pepper ignored him and walked slowly toward the girl, making soothing noises, the kind she’d made with her own children when they were hurt or scared. The girl sniffled. Snot ran down her face, and she took a shuddering breath, but she didn’t act afraid.

Pepper removed her pack slowly and opened it without taking her eyes off the child. She opened a package that contained some crusty bread that they’d found the day before, tore off a piece and held it out in front of her.

“Are you hungry?” she asked quietly. The girl nodded. “Here. You can have it. Do you want it?” She nodded again, but didn’t move from the woman’s side, so Pepper cautiously

moved toward her, still holding out the bread. When she got close enough, she reached out, opened the small hand that rested in the girl's lap, and set the bread in it.

The girl stared at the bread, then at Pepper, but didn't put the bread in her mouth. Pepper took the girl's shirt tail and used it to dry her eyes and wipe her nose, then took the girl's hand and raised it to her mouth, making chewing motions and sounds with her own mouth.

Suddenly, she stuffed the entire piece of bread into her mouth and gagged, nearly choking on it, then held her hand out for more as she chewed frantically, a hopeful expression on her face. Pepper gave her another piece, which also went into her mouth, even before she'd swallowed the first.

"Slow down, Pepper," Jared warned. "She'll eat everything we have."

"It's okay Jared. I have an idea."

"What's your name," Pepper asked the little girl, who didn't answer, but held her hand out for more. "Where do you live," she asked while handing the girl the last piece of bread. The girl pointed to the house on Pepper's left. "Is anyone else at home?" She shook her head.

"Jared, I'll try to get her to go with me into the house and show me where there's more food. You remove the bricks and follow, okay?"

"Good luck with that," Jared said, pessimistically.

"There's no more bread," Pepper said, making a pouty face, then she smiled. "Let's go into the house and you can show me where there's more, okay?" The girl looked at the woman and must have decided that her hunger was more urgent than sitting by her mother, because she stood up and moved toward the back of the house. Pepper followed, after looking at Jared to see if he would do what she'd asked. He was already moving toward the woman.

They went to a pantry, which was filled with canned and packaged food.

"What would you like?" Pepper asked. The girl pointed to a package of cream-filled cookies, so Pepper gave it to her. She plopped down on the floor, tore the package open, and began stuffing her face.

Pepper filled her pack with packaged food that would be easy to prepare, then tried the water faucet in the sink.

"No water pressure," she thought out loud, then remembered what Beth had done to get water from the water heater at the restaurant.

Jared entered and she told him what she thought.

“Go find the water heater and refill our containers,” she told him.

“You go find it,” he replied, brushing dust off his hands and glaring at the girl.

“Okay. You stay with her.”

“I’ll go find the water heater,” he said disgustedly, and walked away.

“What do we do with the rug rat?” he asked when they had finished filling their packs and the little girl had a pile of food and several quart jars of water in front of her on the kitchen table.

“I agree, we can’t take her with us,” Pepper said, “but I think she’ll die if we leave her here alone. I cleaned her up, showed her how we got the water, and I’m leaving the pantry door open. That should keep her comfortable for a few days, but I don’t know if it’s enough to keep her alive until help arrives. Ohhhh, let’s go, before I decide I can’t leave her.”

They skirted Atlanta, followed Interstate 85 to Montgomery Alabama, Interstate 65 all the way to Mobile, Alabama, then Interstate 10 to Pascagoula, Mississippi. They walked for long hours each day and didn’t seem to tire. It took them several weeks; they had to avoid people and search for food and clean water along the way. Several times they were forced to leave the highway to hide from roaming bands of armed men.

Near Pascagoula, Pepper feared that the way the road had turned to the west, they would miss the coast entirely. So, they followed Highway 63 into Pascagoula and worked their way to Beach Boulevard and the Beach Park Fishing Pier, discovering where they were only when they saw the sign on the pier.

“Now what?” Pepper said, standing on the end of the pier, several feet above water level, looking out over the Gulf. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen a boat anywhere around here, have you?”

“There’s not much light, but no, I haven’t seen one. Maybe we need to search along the beach tomorrow.”

“I don’t know. With the number of people camping on the beach, maybe we need to look elsewhere.”

“Wait! What’s that?” Jared asked, squinting out over the water.

“What? Where?”

“There,” Jared said, pointing. “There’s a light out there bouncing on the waves. Do you see it?”

“Yeah, I see it,” Pepper said after a few moments. It was a dim light and looked far away.
“It must be a buoy.”

“Not in open water. It’s got to be a boat.”

“You think it’s a boat?”

“What else would it be?” he asked.

“I have no idea.” She said, watching him. “What? Are you thinking of swimming out there just to see if it is?” He nodded. “That looks like a long way to swim. Are you that good a swimmer? And if it is, then what?”

“I had to learn how to swim before they’d let me take a boat for a spin. Besides, I’ve got Smallpox enhanced stamina.” He barked a laugh at her confused look.

“Just don’t drown,” she said. “With it as dark as it is, I wouldn’t even know.”

“How about we wait until morning, so you can watch me drown?” he asked.

“Very funny!” she said. “I hope it’s still there.”

It was there. A little harder to see, like it had moved farther away from them, but Jared reluctantly removed his shoes, socks, and shirt, and swam out from the beach where they’d slept, using their packs as pillows, so that they didn’t disappear in the night. He wasn’t as confident about his swimming ability as he’d said the night before, and worried the entire time. At one point he thought he was tiring, but he pushed through the wall and got his second wind.

In a surprisingly short time, he was at the starboard side of the small craft. It was a daysailer, a seventeen-foot pocket-cruiser called a Sage 17. Although he’d never operated one of these—he’d read a lot about them—he knew it had a carbon fiber deck on a fiberglass hull, with a jib and mainsail. There was a small red light on the bow.

The sails had been lowered, but not tied off.

He swam to the stern, through the gentle swells, pulled himself up the ladder next to the outboard motor, and looked inside the boat. There was a man lying face down on the deck between the benches. He was so startled that he fell over backward and swallowed water, came up sputtering, and had to hold onto the ladder until he could stop choking and catch his breath.

When he’d collected his wits, wondering why he hadn’t anticipated finding someone in the boat, he pulled himself back up on the ladder and looked at the man again. He was fully clothed and wearing a life jacket. Certain that he was dead, Jared thought he would move him

out of the way so he could get to the outboard motor and see if it would start. He climbed into the boat, stepping on the padded bench, then onto the floor at the man's feet.

He reached down, took hold of the life jacket with both hands, and lifted him off the deck. The dead man's head turned and lifeless eyes stared at him. It was unsettling.

His heart skipped a beat. It felt like his lungs had collapsed; and he suddenly couldn't get air. He let go and fell backward, saved from going overboard again by slipping on the deck and falling against the transom at the stern, then falling on top of the dead man. He scrambled to get away, panic filling his head, finally ending up crouched on the starboard bench. He wanted to get farther away, but his muscles wouldn't respond to his commands. He breathed heavily, trying to understand what he was seeing.

Gradually, his mind focused on something Beth had said, that about one third of Smallpox victims died, but that the mortality rate dropped to about five percent for those who had been vaccinated. That meant that he was probably fine, since he'd been vaccinated; besides, he figured that he couldn't catch it again since he'd already had it.

When he finally got his breathing under control again, he approached the man and lifted him onto the port bench. It took all of his willpower and he avoided touching the man's skin as if he was a venomous snake.

Why hadn't the man gone into shore for help? He remembered how debilitating the virus was when the fevers started, which may have explained it. Had he come from somewhere else and died before he could get to shore? Maybe he was from here, had been dying when he left, and only gotten this far. He realized he had no way of knowing how long the man had been dead; he might have been drifting out here for days.

He wondered if he should throw the body overboard. He briefly considered taking the man back with him, just to see Pepper's reaction. He chuckled. No, he didn't know how she would react, so that wasn't a good idea. He searched the man's pockets, finding some money and ID. A quick look told him the man's name was Thomas Strang, which didn't mean anything to him, and his home was in Norcross, Georgia—there was an ID card for the CDC—so he might have been one of the first people affected by the virus.

Finding nothing else of interest, Jared pocketed the cash and ID, then lifted the man over the side of the boat into the water, where he floated for a few moments, then sank out of sight. Turning back to the outboard, his foot kicked something on the deck—a handgun that had been

hidden by Mr. Strang's body. He checked the clip to verify that there were bullets in it, then stuffed the gun in the deep pocket of his wet cargo pants.

He checked the outboard and confirmed that it held some gas; he thought it would be, enough to get him back to the beach. He didn't know where Mr. Strang had been headed when he died; but assuming that he had been going south, Jared suspected that there must be more gasoline below, in the V-berth. He took a quick look and found a gas can, which he confirmed was nearly full, along with a duffle, which likely contained food, clothes, and other supplies that Mr. Strang felt were important.

The engine kicked over on the third attempt and he turned it in toward the beach; but before leaving, he took a few minutes to straighten and tie down the sails. Pepper must have heard or seen him coming since she started walking away from the other people standing on the beach; but some of them must have figured out what she was doing, since about a dozen of them followed her as she raced down the beach away from the pier. Jared thought that they must have wanted the boat for the same reason he did.

He tried to estimate where Pepper would be by the time he got close enough to pick her up, without grounding the boat in the shallows, and headed that direction. She kept ahead of the others and finally turned into the water, swimming as fast as she could, out to him. The others followed, but they couldn't move any faster than she could. Some of them started swimming, but that didn't appear to be any faster than walking, so he kept moving toward her.

How was he going to slow down enough for her to get in, without the others catching up and overwhelming them? They could easily swamp the boat, then no one could use it. He thought of the gun but was loath to use it. Besides, it was in his wet pocket and he didn't know what affect that would have on the gun's function. Maybe he could scare them off just by showing it, so he did.

"Stop where you are or I'll shoot," he yelled, to be heard over the engine noise. Some of them hesitated, but others continued, hurrying faster, if anything. Jared idled the engine just before Pepper reached him, and the others kept coming.

"I said stop or I'll shoot," he yelled again, sure that they could hear him this time. More stopped, but three of them kept coming, as fast as they could.

Pepper was still climbing over the side when the first two arrived. Jared hit one of them on the side of h head with the gun and he dropped away into the water. The second grabbed

Pepper by the arm and started pulling her back out of the boat. She screamed. Jared didn't know what else to do, so he shoved the gun in the man's face and pulled the trigger. The blast from the gun nearly blew his hand off, but the man fell back, half of his face a bloody mask from the explosion. Pepper fell into the boat and Jared hit the gas.

The pain in his blackened and bloody hand nauseated him, until he thought he would pass out. The boat swerved back and forth; the tiller arm held loosely in his good hand.

Pepper got up and went to him. Seeing his hand, she looked back toward the beach and noted that those who had been following her had given up.

"How do you slow this thing down?" she asked. "We need to treat your hand. Where would I find a first aid kit?"

Jared looked dazed, not responding, so she looked around, went below, and opened hatch lockers until she found a first aid kit. Then she reached over him and played with the tiller until something she did caused the boat to slow to an idle.

"Sit down and let me look at that hand," she said, then pushed him onto a seat. She cleaned and treated his hand with burn cream, then bandaged it. Then she forced him to lie down on a port bench in the V-berth.