

## CHAPTER TWO

# WHO DO YOU BLAME?

I spent the night tossing and turning, plagued by haunting dreams. My heart still races from the last nightmare I finally escaped from. I ran through a dark forest knowing there was somewhere I had to get to, something extremely important ahead of me. No matter how fast I ran I was always stuck so very far away, the entire time my skin crawled with the feeling of eyes watching me struggle in the dark and shadows whispering chants as they took joy in my suffering.

After the amount of gin I put away, I am pleasantly surprised to wake up with only a mild headache. I shake off the nightmares and turn toward the hidden window above my head, remembering how the dreams used to plague me throughout my childhood and I dreaded laying my head on my pillow. My mother sat me down one night after I woke her up for the millionth time and told me to get over it, it was all just in my head. I listened to her cold, annoyed voice and did just that. When the nightmares still came, I looked at them from afar as I watched the story unfold like a silent observer, always astounded at the details my mind came up with to terrify me.

I focus on the group outside. They stayed quite overnight and made a fire when the cloud cover shifted at dusk. They kept it lit long enough to boil a pot of water and cook what smelled like burnt squirrel. I watch them sleep in silence, taking in the morning as I listen to the birds singing quietly back and forth with each other. My mind wanders and I marvel as the birds communicate to each other. We really know very little about other animals' minds, self-deemed the highest on the food chain because of the unmeasurable gift of consciousness. The birds could very well understand everything that goes on around them and their human counterparts; their messages and tales spread across the globe through their natural migration patterns.

The group wakes to the brisk morning air and shuffles around. Their breath clouds in front of them but I can already tell it is going to be a wonderful spring day. I wonder if my children are held somewhere outside, or if whatever takes care of them brings them outdoors to bask in the fresh air. I shake my head at the ridiculous thought, reminding myself that they are in danger and not off to camp.

My body becomes alert as I see both men sling their hiking packs on the ground and each pull out a rifle. AR-15s, they are pretty much fancy M-4's with upgraded stock. I look at the group in speculation trying to figure out how to treat my now armed guests. Though I'm not surprised, it does make me weary, and I'll have to wait until they let their guard down to approach them.

It takes all day before I get the chance. I have stayed cool underground watching the group sweat in the humidity. The men are constantly on watch during the day, with their rifles held close and heads swiveling around at noises. I realize they don't know about the birds and their warning song. One of the men, about 5'11, with dark brown hair and a lean body limps towards the campfire on the far side of the small woods. He sets his rifle on its attached tripod and settles down by the fire to start their next meal.

I grab my rifle, clipping it to the d-ring attached to my shoulder on top of a plate carrier. I weave my drop holster into my belt and slip my M9

into its plastic holster. I never felt more comfortable carrying the weapons I had on duty every day, feeling secure in the hundreds of hours of training and cleaning that I put into them. I glance through the window and see the other male, slightly towering at 6'2, sit down on a bench and begin to take off his shoes. His hair is almost white it's so blonde and he keeps it cut short to his scalp, with a classic military comb over. He has a chest length golden beard and he sets his rifle on top of the other man's weapon.

I look at the kid building something with some twigs a few feet away before slipping out of the Nest to hide behind a tree. I creep from trunk to trunk while making painfully slow progress as I try not to disturb the roots and leaves scattered on the ground. I quickly think about the birds; do they know that I sneak around, and do they disapprove? Instead of my normal morning tweet I am only greeted with a few careful chirps, and I glance up to see them perched in the trees watching me. Slowly, I pull my rifle up to shoulder height and point it towards the blonde man, sneaking out into the open. About fifteen feet away I step on a twig. Both men spin around at the snap.

I speak in a sinister voice, "If you move to touch either weapon, I will shoot you where you stand." They glance at me first and then at each other, trying to decide if it's worth it to rush me. Apparently, they decide it's not and raise their hands. I look at their faces realizing from the light in their eyes that they are as excited as I was when I first saw their arrival through the window. To see someone after such a long time is a blessing.

The blonde hipster asks, "How long have you been here? How many are in your group? Do you have food and water?" I don't answer him and instead look around at the gear they have spread about. Judging by the size of their hiking backpacks, I know that even full to the brim with the essentials they can't have much food for three people.

The injured one speaks from the ground where he lays back, exhausted, against a tree stump. "I am Michael, and this is my brother, Rowan. This is my son, come introduce yourself bud." He motions to the little boy and I lower my rifle.

“My name’s John,” the little boy answers in the quiet scared voice of a child. I look down at the top of his dirty brown hair and I wonder what this kid has had to go through. What horrors did he see to end up hungry and sleeping out in the woods, is he afraid of the shadows? My heart breaks as I sling my rifle to my back, crouch down on one knee and pull a small slingshot from my back pocket.

When Bradley could finally master the art of launching rubber bands, Peter made him his first slingshot. It’s a basic y shaped branch with a thick rubber band attached to his sister’s old sock. The sock was the perfect size for small rocks and wood chips, the branch the perfect length for little hands. I’ve stunned a few chipmunks and supplemented my diet with their flesh. It makes me sick to butcher their bodies though and I take what easy meat I can with a swiss army knife. I leave the remains a couple miles back up the path to keep the predator’s attention away from the Nest.

John looks at it quietly and there is a spark in his eyes. I grab a small piece of wood and launch it a few feet away while John jumps up excitedly and looks to his dad for approval. When Michael nods his head with a smile, I reach over and hand the little boy my son’s toy. He runs a short way into the forest and begins launching pebbles at the trees. I focus my attention back to the adults and see the men sitting down staring back at me. They begin to relax and watch me with curiosity.

“What’s your name?” Michael asks.

My first thought is, Mom, and I wonder in silence if I have been alone too long, if my mind has slowly started to unravel.

“My name is Erica. I used to live close around here.” Both men stare eagerly at me, and I realize they crave a story. I lower my voice and tell them about what happened that day on the mountain sparing nothing as the men’s faces grow dark and I see them both take frequent looks at the boy as he plays in the woods. We speak in hushed voices as they begin to tell me their own tale. It’s Rowan who introduces himself.

“My sister got sick with the virus a few months ago,” Rowan begins. “She was staying at our mothers house to quarantine so I brought groceries

to help out and played with John so everyone could take a break. We were in the backyard throwing a frisbee while Michael sat on the porch as the back door started to rattle. We couldn't see anything but light playing off the shadows but no one should have been in the house. We ran around to the front of the yard and hopped in the car watching chaos fall around us. What we saw wasn't like what you described at all. The people the Cyclits touched slowly laid down and apparently died on the ground. All cellphones were down and the radio in the car wouldn't work. We hopped on the road and drove to an old cabin that's been in the family for a few generations.

"After a few weeks we began to feel confident they were no longer actively searching for people and set into a routine following the Cyclits as they went about their domination." We look at each other in agony at his very dire choice of words. "One day John and I were in the backyard chopping firewood when Michael burst through the backdoor. The Cyclits had seen him watching and followed him home. We grabbed our bags and disappeared into the trees, looking back as we ran and seen shimmering patches in the air that approached the front of the cabin. We hiked for two days through swamps and marshes trying to get to the observatory where Michael and his wife worked. When we arrived, we saw the yard with the people." He looks over at Michael and I see the grief swimming in his eyes.

I can see how losing his other half has settled onto Michael's body. His brown hair is wild and sticking up in all directions over his head while his shoulders slump under the weight of loss and he takes quick glances at John. As if John can feel his father's insecurity he turns and heads into his arms. He snuggles down cross-legged between his father's legs with his back pressed against his chest and looks up at me.

"Have you guys had anything to eat today, John?" I ask, the mother in me only wanting to make this little boy smile. Both men look at each other, then at their backpacks.

"We planned to stop at the stream back there and fish." Michael points to his pack and I see a pole folded and strapped to the front. I look over at

John and see the hollow skin around his cheeks and the look of hunger in his eyes at the mention of food.

“Stay here and I’ll be right back.” I take off before they answer and move in the complete opposite direction of the Nest towards the outhouse and loop back around the very edge of the woods towards home. My heart aches for this little family but I am not sure I want us to join forces. I really just want to give them some supplies and send them on their way. I grab a jumbo box of beef jerky, a large bag of trail mix, and bottled water and loop the way back around. The entire group’s mood instantly lifts as I enter the clearing and I feel better knowing I can help them in some way.

We sit around the campfire in silence as they stuff themselves; Michael asks questions about my life before this. I give him a basic story, nothing really before the age of eighteen and how I joined the Air Force, had kids, got married and was still trying to find my place in the world. At twenty-five years old I still feel like a child myself trying to navigate this crazy world. They both nod their heads and it feels good to speak to another human being.

Rowan tells his own story and it’s shorter than mine. He is thirty-one, no kids, no wife, and just lost a girlfriend who was a nurse: one of the first to be struck down on the front lines against the virus. His relationship with his parents long ago lost to some childhood feud. Then, his sister went to the hospital and survival has consumed his life since.

I look at Michael fiddling with a stick and some fishing line. He mumbles about his wife and how they used to work together at the observatory, looking down at his son in his lap. I glance at John as he leans against his father, his eyes starting to drift. I look back at Rowan staring at the sky and realize this whole family has been torn apart by loss and our common ground binds us together. I decide to let them join me and my heart blossoms at the prospect of the help these two could provide me. Always an optimist, I could get Peter and my kids out while providing shelter and supplies in return. I stand up to invite them into the Nest when John moves and gets up as well.

## The War on Mars

“Dad, I have to use the bathroom,” John says.

Michael glances at me. “Do you have a certain spot you use?”

I nod giving him directions to the outhouse they passed on the way in back up the path. I want to offer to take John when Michael slings his rifle and begins limping along, but I bite my tongue in silence. We are all still strangers. I have a sudden urge to call out to them and my voice breaks the peaceful silence.

“When you guys get back, I’ll take you to my home okay? A warm place to stay with food, water, and I’m pretty sure there are a few action figures lying around you can play with, John,” I yell.

The little boy’s face breaks into a smile and his long hair bounces as he jumps up and down in excitement. Michael gives me a grateful smile and he limps away with John bouncing around him in circles. I turn to look at Rowan and see him already glaring down at me. His eyes are hard and where I thought the beard at first was a hipster look, I realize my mistake now and I can finally see it. The way he holds his body, and how the entire time I told my story he watched every little movement I made. He must be Special Forces, and I wonder who sent him out and for what. The veteran bond doesn’t trump trust in the apocalypse apparently.

I motion for him to grab his stuff and reach for John’s and Michael’s packs. Rowan’s voice appears right behind my left ear as he speaks in a low voice, “Drop it. I’ll grab them.” Steel. That’s what his voice sounds like as cold fear

shoots through me and I foolishly realize my rifle is still strung on my back.

My hand moves to my thigh where my handgun rests and I turn around to look at Rowan. His eyes are different shades of dark green; they wrap around a slightly large pupil and hazel splashes with golden freckles sprinkle his irises. Most would see beauty and strength, but all I can see is a cold, dangerous forest hidden as some beast stalks in the shadows looking out. Neither of us says another word and I open my eyes wide with fear as I hear the distinct chirping begin. Rowan reacts quickly to my face, knowing

it's not him who scares me and spins around immediately grabbing the rifle and asking me what's wrong.

I can only picture John's face as he showed his dad the little chocolate chips he found in his trail mix, so happy and innocent, like only a child can be. Rowan yells at me to answer him.

"We have to go now," I blurt out. There are a few times the Cyclits have come through here, but I was always on my guard. Now I am taken by surprise and not paying attention to the forest around me realizing the dire mistake I made.

Rowan yells for Michael and John while I quickly grab their packs and brush leaves over where we sat. Rowan pulls on his shoes and follows my lead, spreading leaves around where they slept last night helping me only until I start moving towards the Nest. I know I'll have to do it before he even makes a move, I can feel his force. I could see it from the look in his eye when I was telling my story that he was going to be a fighter, a man who makes the decisions and is followed. I swing around at the crunch of his steps just as he reaches for my elbow to stop me. He is taken by surprise at my sudden pivot and his eyebrows rise quickly before lowering down as I swing the butt of my rifle into the side of his head and he blacks out.