

CHAPTER 1

He shivered. The heating systems in the car stopped working a long time ago. It was drizzling, and the raindrops fell inside his vehicle from a square gap. It didn't help matters dealing with the freezing air. He couldn't remember when the heater ceased functioning. The car wasn't ancient but an older generation from the early 2000s. He didn't see anybody else with a vehicle more contemporary than ten years ago. He remembered when the electric fuel pumps went offline once the electricity finally cut out. Just when it was in fashion. Their green users abandoned their electric vehicles with their gimmicks and gizmos as they were inoperable without their primary fuel source, leaving EVs to be forgotten about. Many things happened during the Last Hurrah, but he shouldn't think about what happened then. That ship sailed. He carefully swerved to avoid the potholes on the road until something made the car jump.

He pulled over and got out. A string of barbed wire interwoven with glass wrapped around the left rear tyre, which led to a small puddle; it's likely a hiding place. Suddenly he heard feet stepping into the pools of water and a speeding vehicle echoing. He turned around, and a group of men approached with blunt weapons. He thought to himself whether he should engage in physical brawling with the men or if he would whip out his pistol he kept in a chest holster to scare them away. A white 90s minivan came roaring down the street. It distracted him. One of the men ran up towards him and struck him. He fell and hit his head on the asphalt knocking him out instantly.

He woke up on the asphalt to a sharp headache and roistering voices. He didn't know where he was, why he was lying on the road or who those voices belonged to for a brief moment. His surroundings were unfamiliar until it all clicked. They must be celebrating what an easy pick that was. He sat up, lightly brushing his forehead in pain. He found his satchel was wide open. He glanced inside the opened bag to see they had taken it. The only thing that mattered, it was a simple wooden case. The case itself didn't matter. It was what inside that he always cared about.

Their voices vanished; he got up and saw them. They were a tough bunch but were small fry; only a single member had a rifle, while the rest were armed with simple melee weapons. One of the gang members carried a wooden case stuffed under his arm. He recognised it as the case they stole from his satchel. They must've realised early that he had woken up. The Mook with the gun opened fire while his buddies retreated. He checked his own gun, which was still in its holster, to find there was still ammunition inside.

He prepared to return fire, but he lay there. Waiting, he felt he could try overpowering the Mook instead but knew that could be wishful thinking. Then he felt something was up. He heard a lighter strike, glass smashing and footsteps hastily walking away. He jumped out to find the Mook running away from a swirling fire in his car. Anger with an element of surprise overtook

him. While it was not unheard of, it was wasteful not to kill someone for their goods or cheap thrills. The Mook quickly rejoined his buddies and got back in their van.

The sliding door swung shut. The van started. Looking for retribution, he fired three potshots to no avail. The van didn't adjust its acceleration. He easily imagined the Mooks laughing at his failure, sneering with exaggerated mouths and expressions. There was no evidence to prove his assumptions. The condensation on the rear window obscured the faces of the Mooks.

Nevertheless, he fired a fourth round. The rear window shattered, and blood splats caked the van's interior as it sped away. He killed at least one Mook, but he was still left confused. Why didn't they kill him when they had the chance? Did they enjoy leaving their victims in the dust? Regardless, his car was on fire. The Mook lit a Molotov cocktail and threw it inside. He didn't have anything to extinguish the blaze, so saving it was impossible. At that moment, he decided to leave it and let the fire take its course.

He tucked his coat while walking at a steady pace. The pouring rain got heavier, and the crackles of the fire echoed in the distance. He reloaded his gun with newfound determination. He was thinking of inflicting the most atrocious tortures if he ever caught the thieves who ambushed him earlier. It wasn't the first time he had travelled on foot, but it came with fear. He was terrified of another encounter with punks. He knew of others who attacked those without the luxury of motor vehicles. The rain beat down on the asphalt. The violent gushing of wind blew away any other hearable noise, creating a perfect situation for those attackers to jump anyone alone and unexpected. Guns meant he had more valuable loot, and these marauders searched in groups of four, five, or even eight. He didn't have much to hold off a team of would-be looters, let alone an army.

He came upon a block of derelict two-story houses. He remembered they got built in the 90s in a design known as faux Federation. He moved along. His stomach swelled. In the shadows of the shattered windows, its essence was making him think twice before entering. Squatters and their traps frequented places like this, abandoned and lonely with leftover foodstuffs to tempt anyone to walk inside to meet their untimely death. A lot of rubble succeeded the houses down the block: nothing but burnt-out husks of modern architecture. Smearred graffiti on the walls, and the places looked ransacked. Rich people used to live in this kind of home in a time when violence was not commonplace. He could faintly see what people called a shopping village in the old days—a single small building with stores providing all sorts of services. The shopping village was dated, and he would imagine cheap. These villages had stores that never really evolved from the 90s asides from their residing supermarkets.

A crowd of people stood in the guzzling rain. Whatever they were doing, it was unusual. A group this size doesn't form out of nowhere. It was too dangerous to be in the open. He checked up on what was happening. But he hesitated at first. Were they friendly? Or would they kill him on sight? He scratched that first thought. Goodwill ended a long time ago. He bumped past them to

find the dead Mook, whose brains got blown out. The crowd were looking down on the Mook with mild interest. Not every day, they get a corpse. A man stood at the forefront of the group. He instinctively thought the man was their leader or held some authority over them. The man turned his back and recognised he was not their own.

"What do you want?" The man said. His lips opened, but he only let out a gasp. The man rolled his eyes and looked down at the corpse. "Tell me what happened." The man gave a glance a stern look. "Why would you be interested."

"He robbed me." The man gave a cheeky smile. "Oh, right, and why should I care?"

"He was a part of a gang. They jumped me." The man's smile widened. "That's your fault."

"They must've dumped him here. Which way did they go?"

"West, just up here."

He ended the conversation right there. He knew the man was lying to make him go away, but he took no chances. He left the crowd to find a motorcar he could steal. They must keep a couple around here, but that's too hopeful. An old white idle SUV stood 20 feet from the crowd. Thinking about it, he could have had enough time to elbow the window and hotwire it before the group noticed. He proceeded with this barely thought-out plan. He quickly smashed the window with his elbow letting out a violent thud. It alerted the crowd.

They turned to stare at him. And without hesitation, they charged in his direction like a battle formation of bloodthirsty barbarians. He quickly hopped inside the SUV, slamming the door shut. He found that no key was in the ignition. He then realised he didn't have the tools to hotwire the SUV successfully in time before the crowd caught up and killed him. He frantically searched around the SUV to find the keys. He could hear their "leader" screaming and shouting at the crowd.

The crowd edged closer to the SUV. He was dead. He could feel it; the glove compartment was his last chance. He opened it and found the keys. He quickly grabbed them and shoved them into the ignition. The crowd was almost within touching distance. He turned the key. The SUV fired to life and drove in reverse before doing a 180. The crowd screamed in defeat as he raced away.

He continued speeding until he was sure he was far away from the shopping village. He reduced the speed to a slow pace. Those potholes could wreck his SUV just as he stole it. He turned on

the heat. Unlike in his other car, it functioned. Hot air alleviated the cold from the horrible weather. For once, he was able to stay warm while driving. He saw something up ahead. A man hung up on a makeshift crucifix. The water trickled down on the shiny chrome metal of the pipes. The victim was deceased and, from the looks of it. The victim's murder was benign in comparison to other hideous methods. Bloody bruises covered the victim's body, and his face was deformed.

This display meant entering the borders of gang territory. Then he had an idea. He could feel the urge to clip his fingers in exclamation. He continued forward if he volunteered as meat fodder to their frontlines. Maybe, just maybe, they would help him find the Mooks. He drove into the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood looked like it had seen better days. Gone were those times of squeaky clean streets and fancy houses. Armed men took the place of neighbours and children, patrolling the suburbs looking for easy prey to attack—a pile of parked cars and trucks amassed around a house. The house was old-fashioned, built in what he thought to be the mid-90s or even going as far back as the early 80s. He parked on the dying grass. He opened the car door. He sat there, unsure whether this was gang HQ or a hiding place for a different set of marauders who were less kind to strangers. He got out and made a slow pace to the front entrance.

Walking up the small stairs, he approached the front door or what remained of it. The door looked as if somebody had kicked it in. It barely hangs onto its hinges. He considered ringing the doorbell, but it was best if he didn't alert anyone inside should they be hostile. He crept inside and heard talking on his left. A group of men were chatting away and drinking alcohol. These men paid no attention to him. For what they were discussing, he didn't care. There was an office to his right. The office was the cleanest room he'd ever seen in a house like this. Intrigued, he entered and found a woman working at a desk. She wore a dirty suit and made hypothetical numbers on paper with piecharts. She noticed him walk in. Her facial expression gave away a hint of mild curiosity.

"Can I help you?"

He didn't answer back. He had no urge to.

"You look like a capable man, and it's getting late. There's a guest room upstairs. You should rest. I might have something for you tomorrow."

He did what she suggested. He went upstairs to the vacant guest room. He opened the wooden door and found the guest room, like the downstairs office. Clean with no instance of litter. Both rooms had an aura of stepping into another time. A feeling he could call magical. He sat on the mattress, placing his satchel aside and contemplated. He contemplated his situation and possible options if this gang alliance went nowhere.

He scratched his beard. The light from the window faded into darkness. It was night, the exact time. Who knows? The chirps of crickets took the birds' place, but the gunshots still cracked, unlike crickets and birds. Guns had the same tune and ring, but a different person pressed the trigger. Another nobody who got through today and tonight while somebody's life was over. It was easy to imagine or remember a past where one didn't fall asleep to cracks of gunshots at night unless you were in a bad part of the world. His eyes closed and so deep in thought that he hadn't noticed the room went white. Quickly a black silhouette slowly approached him. It had a feminine quality and had something he couldn't decipher, but he knew this figure wasn't the woman he had met earlier. A rush of terror overwhelmed him as the silhouette enveloped him whole.

His eyes jolted open, and he literally shook the bed in shock. He composed himself and scanned his surroundings. It was a dream. He pondered the vision he had, and he didn't like the meaning of it. He shook all thoughts out of his mind concerning that nightmare. He got out of bed and went to the bathroom. He flicked on the light to find the bathroom in stark contrast to the bedroom he slept in. It was filthy with damp lighting; there was rust on the sink. The filth partially obscured the rugged blond man in the mirror. It had been a long time since he saw himself. His beard was fluffier since he last tended to it. He tried to remember how long ago he shaved. It must have been 18 or 20 months ago, he thought. Back then, razors were still a resource in massive supply. A relatively untamed supermarket would have plenty in stock.

He stopped caring once his disposable razors were gone. He turned the cold water tap in a counterclockwise motion dispensing a horrible dark brown liquid. As he suspected, this neighbourhood had no water treatment either the nearby plant was rundown or an opposing faction had controlled it. He thought he could splash his face with clean water for the first time in months. He exited the bathroom to put his clothes on. Afterwards, he went downstairs to meet the woman from yesterday. She wore the same suit and looked out the window at a beautiful garden with varying flower species.

"Come here," she said

He came closer to her.

"I want you to patrol the streets." She said firmly

"The Red Tigrays are sticking up our guys." She put her hand on his shoulder. "You're extra security. The Tigrays wear camouflage and red armbands."

"I will pair you up with Phil. He's waiting outside."

He went outside without a second thought. On the front yard and next to his SUV stood Phil, a chubby man with a flattop haircut. He walked towards Phil.

"I'm almost out. Have you got some rounds around here?" He said

"There's plenty in that ammo box over there." Phil pointed to the house's garage door and an olive-green steel box. The lid was open, and he went to the garage to pick up pistol cartridges. Unlike what Phil said, there were only 10 cartridges scattered inside. He reloaded the pistol with the new cartridges. He turned around and found Phil fiddling with a couple of rounds. Phil, that bastard could've given him what he needed. But instead, Phil put him through the hassle of walking back and forth for Phil's amusement.