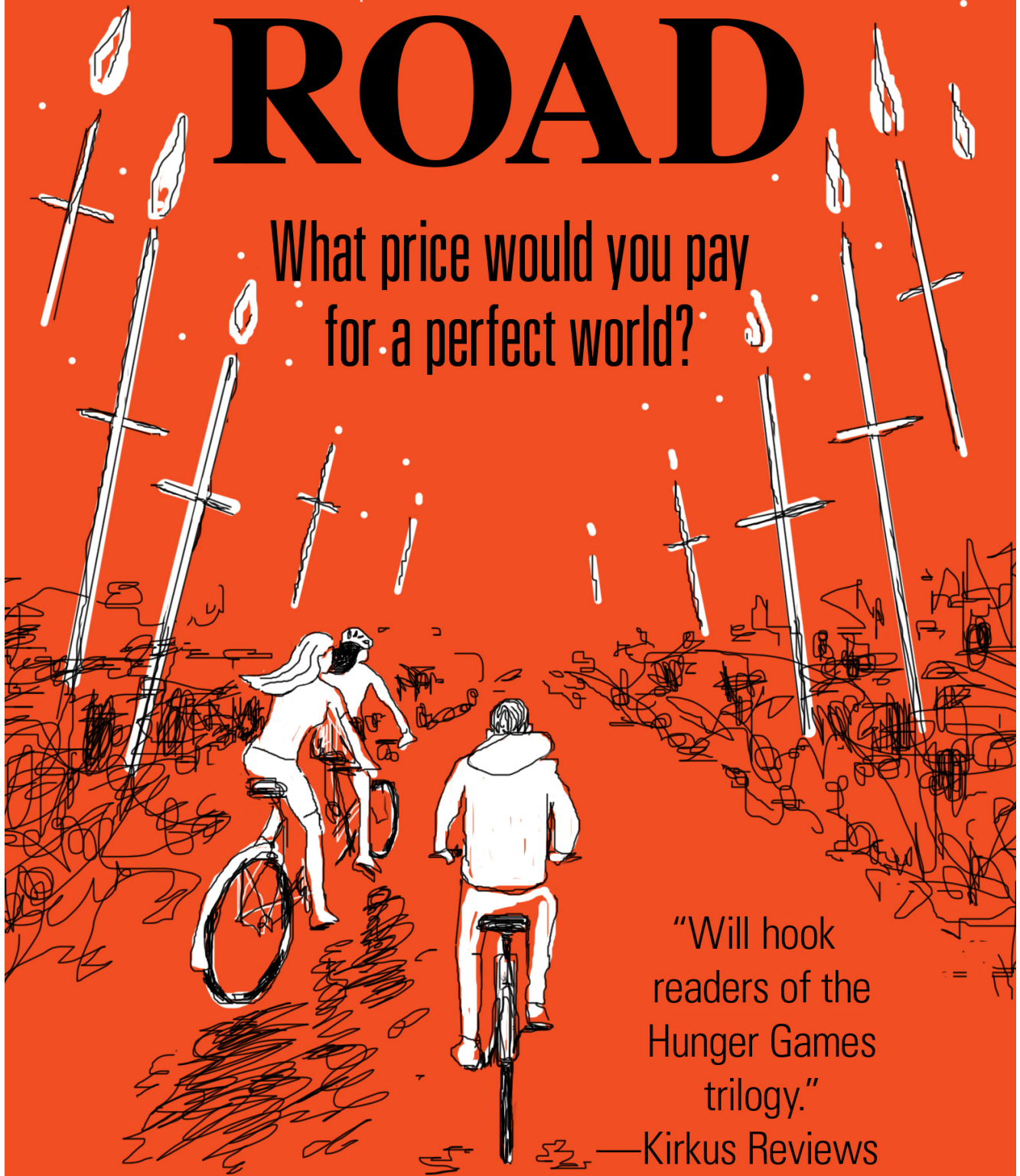


EPITAPH ROAD

What price would you pay
for a perfect world?



"Will hook
readers of the
Hunger Games
trilogy."

—Kirkus Reviews

DAVID PATNEAUDE

PRAISE FOR *EPITAPH ROAD*

“The story is fast-paced, and the concept intriguing. This dystopian thriller will appeal to fans of the genre. Those who liked Neal Shusterman’s *Unwind* will appreciate the way a specific current-events issue is incorporated into a science-fiction context.”

—School Library Journal

“Patneau’s teen characters, intelligent and reasonable, question the wisdom of one group ever deciding the fate of another... (A) moving sense of loss blankets everything.”

—Booklist

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EPITAPH ROAD
by David Patneaude

And Then We Can Fly to the Moon.
—Charlie Winters, August 7, 2067

Outbreak
August 7, 2067

The Kenyan youth, dressed only in running shorts, sprinted past a metal shack toward the outskirts of the jungle village and the meadow beyond. A woman's wail, coming from the shack, rose up to chase him. He glanced back, glanced back, wide-eyed, slack-jawed, and rushed into the knee-high grass, sweating and struggling for breath. Wracked with coughing, he slowed to a stagger. He spat bloody phlegm onto a patch of bare earth. His lips were coated with it. He gazed up prayerfully, but didn't see salvation. He saw a flock of vultures, spiraling lower. He took a few more lurching steps and fell to the ground, still coughing. Then he lay still.

In the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, the young woman in the frayed robe opened her toddler son's bedroom door and entered, smiling. "Time to rise and shine, sleepyhead." Deathly silence was the only response to her words. Quickening her step, she approached the crib, where a still form lay under a tangle of blankets. Alarm contorted her face. "Mikey? Mikey?" She plunged both hands into the crib, tearing away the covers, revealing a small boy,

lying on his side, lifeless. Under his head the sheet was bloodstained. She picked him up and held him to her chest, sobbing. “No, Mikey. No!”

As the opposing teams took the field on a damp Manchester evening, a fan stumbled out of the stands and onto the pitch. The surrounding crowd laughed at the drunk. A security cop hurried to head him off. The players watched with amusement. But a moment later, one of them doubled over in a fit of coughing. Blood peppered his shorts. He gasped something to a teammate and started for the sidelines. Halfway there he collapsed, and his mates rushed to his aid.

Meanwhile, the drunk had folded to his knees. The security man was trying to help him. The fans had stopped laughing. They'd noticed the fallen player, and now other spectators—exclusively men and boys—were having problems. Despite the cool and mist, they were sweating. They were coughing, weakening, pale. For a few moments, fellow fans tried to give them assistance, but as more and more male spectators began having symptoms, the crowd grew anxious. Panic set in. Nearly everyone who was able was soon stampeding for the exits or spilling onto the field. A second player on the same team went down, and teammates picked up both men and fled to the locker room. Pandemonium ruled. Sirens and whistles sounded.

At the Charlotte Motor Speedway, the field of three dozen stock cars followed the pace car through the pace lap, accelerating. On the backstretch one car, near the back of the pack, careened off the course toward the infield, nearly clipping several others, and spun to a stop. A moment later another car, mid-pack, rather than negotiating the turn, sped straight ahead, starting a chain reaction of collisions before smashing into the wall. The caution flag flew up, and many of the spectators reacted enthusiastically to the early mayhem.

But some of the men and boys in the crowd stayed in their seats, struggling to breathe. And on the track, despite the lowered speed, two more cars zigzagged out of control. One hit the wall. The other swooped into the infield, scattered crew members, and crashed into a support truck. While the driver of the first wayward car struggled out of his window and collapsed, the pace car smashed into a wall. In the stands, drunken and youthful exuberance quickly turned into fear and disbelief and shock and then chaos.

In the cockpit of the airliner overshooting Charles de Gaulle Airport, the male pilot and copilot slumped over the controls. Above the roar of the engines, female screams were audible.

Below, in the chaotic streets of Paris, people watched as the big commercial jet narrowly missed the Eiffel Tower and crashed into the Seine. Cars and other vehicles clogged

the roads. Horns and sirens sounded. Men and boys, on foot, bikes, and scooters, fought to get through the crowds of the fleeing and dying. Bodies—all men and boys—were on the pavement, in yards, in parks, piling up. A woman frantically pushed a stroller away from a staggering man who was trying to keep up with her. Two other men battled over a bicycle.

On the outskirts of Beijing, vehicles were stalled, overturned, piled up, abandoned all over the Northern Airport Expressway and its tributaries. Some men and boys had locked themselves in their cars or trucks, but others were running, simply to get away or to make their way toward the airport, where planes sat haphazardly on the tarmac or at gates. Nothing was in the air. One airliner had crashed on landing; its burning shell sat on the runway. Women and girls stood dazed, or wandered, sometimes alone, sometimes trying to help their male companions.

In south Seattle, the shirtless man stood on his front porch, a shotgun in his hands, glaring toward his driveway, where two teenaged boys were trying to break into his car. He tossed them his keys. “You won't get far,” he said. “But come back this way and you'll have bigger problems.” The man raised the shotgun and sighted down the barrel. The teens jumped in the car and raced off. A moment later tires squealed. Horns blared. Behind the man, his young

daughter and son, and his wife, holding a pistol, stared out through a living room window.

In the Nairobi hospital ward, men and boys lay in long rows of cots and cribs, sweating, coughing, whimpering. Women and girls wandered among them, trying to keep them comfortable. They loaded the dead onto gurneys and wheeled them out to make room for the sick lined up outside the doors.

Back in Seattle, the car thieves, stymied by a huge traffic jam, had returned on foot. Unseen by the homeowner, they'd climbed onto his roof and now were on the edge of it, six feet above his head. But his attention was elsewhere. They leaped off, knocked him to the ground, took the shotgun, blasted him dead. The woman whipped open the front door, and before they could react, shot the gunman and then his partner. She slammed the door.

On Washington state's Olympic Peninsula, fourteen-year-old Charlie Winters frowned as muted sunlight leaked through the ragged umbrella of evergreen boughs overhead. Someone had discarded a red plastic Coke pouch in the middle of the trail. Under his breath, he gave that someone a name: "Pig." He stomped the pouch flat and stuffed it in his backpack. Two days into the hike and already one big compartment was crammed with trash.

"What are you gonna do when you run out of room, Charlie?" The loud voice was a clue,

and his nose confirmed that his kid sister, Paige—three years younger but constantly mothering him anyway—had closed the gap between them. Her insect repellent was called Morning Coffee; it stank like Midnight Vomit. But anti-bug concoctions—foul or not—were a necessity now. Mosquitoes and their pesky cousins ruled. Their natural predators—frogs, salamanders, snakes, turtles, native fish, birds—were parading toward extinction. In the right climates, in the right seasons, in the right amounts, warmth was a good thing. But the earth, and a lot of its inhabitants, had overdosed on it.

“There’s plenty of space in *your* pack,” he said.

“I don’t do garbage.” Paige was only eleven—princess age—but when she wasn’t being a mother she was being a queen.

“Sure you do,” Mom said, glancing back at them without slowing. “But let’s get the litter on our way back. We need to keep moving.” Her voice sounded pinched. She’d seemed stressed ever since daybreak, when she stashed her radio abruptly and announced that they had to break camp right away. Now the radio was out again, clenched in her hand, its earpiece plugged snugly in her ear.

“What’s the hurry?” Charlie asked. It wasn’t even noon, and no one was waiting for them at the lake campsite. Still covering ground, Mom studied his face. She pressed her wrist against his forehead. “Do I look sick?” he said.

“A little pink. Too much sun.” She accelerated, practically speed-walking. Charlie and Paige hurried after her. The trail emptied them into a clearing of sickly die-hard shrubs and grasses. Here and there, rotting stumps clung to parched dirt. Barely pausing to look up, Mom pointed. In a deep crease in a far-off peak, a skinny splotch of snow remained, the dingy disgusting color of a skull.

“Can we hike up to it?” Paige said. “Can we touch it?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “And then we can fly to the moon.” Paige ignored him. Mom shook her head. They marched on into the next stand of trees, where they came to a lightning-downed cedar, its trunk sawed flat to form a long bench.

“Lunch,” Mom grunted. She let her eyes wander to his face again. He’d caught her at it a half dozen times already. How many had he missed?

“What?” he said.

“Yeah,” Paige said. “Why do you keep gawking at Charlie?”

Mom shrugged off the questions and her backpack. They sat. Charlie and Paige pulled out flatbread, cheese, and trail mix from their packs and began eating. Mom set down her radio. She’d been obsessed with it since last night, but whenever Charlie asked her why, she ignored him or changed the subject.

The radio sat by her on the log now. Either purposely or accidentally, she’d disengaged the earpiece, and he heard what sounded like a newswoman’s voice chirping into the still air.

There was something unsettled—and unsettling—in that voice.

Before Mom could react, he snatched the radio, and twisting away to hold it out of her reach, upped the volume. “Deaths” was the first word he picked out. “Plague” was next. He stopped chewing.

“No continent has been spared,” the woman said in a British accent. Her voice sounded hollow, dreamlike. “Nearly overnight, millions of men and boys...have dropped dead. As I speak, millions more are dying. Their bodies...are piling up...everywhere.”

While she paused, Charlie’s imagination broke loose. Pictures swirled in his head. On the radio, in the background, a gentle female voice said, “Go on.”

“Old men, young men...

“...babies.”

Hesitation. Throat clearing.

“Privates and generals, clerics of every stripe, doctors and lawyers and scientists and writers and musicians...

“...pilots...their passengers.”

Dead air. A paralyzing chill held Charlie in place while his mind flew. This must be some kind of hoax. A radio play, maybe. *War of the Worlds*, a hundred-and-something years later. But Mom’s stricken face told him it was no hoax, no play. Paige’s had lost its freckled color; her eyes overflowed.

“The horror is indescribable...” the woman said. “The British Prime Minister is dead, as are most of the members of Parliament. The

exception: women. The American President is dead. His cabinet is skeletal.”

Long delay. Deep breath. Charlie tried to breathe. He couldn't.

“Most of the U.S. Senate and Congress are gone...except for female legislators. In nearly every nation...leadership has been decimated.” She sighed and went on. “Anarchy flares...but flames out. Looters, murderers, barbarians don't live long enough for sustained individual assaults. But the overall effect is unrelenting chaos.”

The woman's words accelerated. “Worldwide, males have tried to flee cities, but highways are impassable. Airports, seaports, railroad stations, bus depots are all shut down. Deadly fights erupt over bicycles and motorcycles and boats. Men have barricaded themselves in their houses and gunned down anyone who gets close to them or their sons.”

“What about Dad?” Charlie asked. Dad had put off leaving home for an extra day so he could finish up a work project, but Seattle—home—would be one of those cities where the ways out would be impassable or shut down.

Mom left his question hanging, and the newscaster continued. “In every country, emergency services are scarcely limping along. To a large degree they have relied on men and now there simply aren't any...”

Mom and Paige scooted closer, bookending Charlie on the log bench. He felt Paige's tears spill warm onto his shoulder, he heard more words spill from the newswoman. “Medical

officials have crucial words of warning: If you're a male...and you're showing any sign of respiratory distress—coughing, shortness of breath—do not expose anyone, particularly males, to your symptoms. No one knows how this plague is spread...but it appears to be airborne, highly virulent...

“...and horrifyingly quick.”

Charlie managed a breath. In. Out. “I’m okay,” he said. “I’m okay.”

The newscaster went on. “If you’re a symptom-free male, isolate yourself. Females apparently aren’t dying...but they could be carrying. Avoid anyone you see just as you’d avoid a man with a bomb...and a wild gleam in his eye. This epidemic seems hellish, but its genesis is organic—a bacteria or virus or—

“Oh, God!” the woman cried.

A faint, ominous hum crawled out of the radio. The surrounding forest was hushed as if even the branches of the trees were listening.

The woman’s voice returned, a haggard, hoarse murmur. “I’m signing off...for now. My producer has collapsed on the control room floor. Two coworkers are trying to help him...” The station went silent.

A moment later, music—something classical, piano and strings—replaced words. Senses numbed, Charlie didn’t recognize the melancholy notes at first.

Then he did. “Brahms’s Lullaby.” Go to sleep.

The music faded away. It died. Silence, unbroken, followed.

“That’s not real,” Paige said as Charlie searched for other broadcasts. He couldn’t get even a whisper on any band—satellite, AM, FM, short wave.

“I’m afraid it is,” Mom said. She knelt in front of them, grasping their hands. In Charlie’s hand, hers felt cold and clammy and small. But strong. Willing him to stay put. She must have seen in his eyes what he felt inside—an urge to take off back down the trail, to see for himself what was happening at home, to find Dad.

“How?” Paige said.

Mom shrugged. “We may know soon.”

Charlie repeated his question, previously left dangling: “What about Dad?”

“I’ve been praying he got out before everything went crazy,” Mom said.

“He was supposed to leave home Sunday,” Charlie said. “This morning.”

“Wasn’t everything crazy this morning?” Paige said.

“Yes,” Mom gave a bare nod of acknowledgment. “Yes.”

“What about Charlie?” Paige said, putting words to his worry.

“Charlie’s safe here, sweetie.” Mom’s eyes didn’t leave him.

“How do you know?” Paige moaned.

“I don’t believe we’re infected,” Mom said. “And no one is likely to catch up with us. If we meet people heading back, they won’t have been exposed, but we’ll avoid them anyway. If necessary, we can survive for a year up here. Or longer. For as long as we have to stay.”

A year, Charlie thought. A year was forever. No, dying was forever. Would a year even be enough?

Monday, August 8, 2067

At the sprawling park in northeast Seattle, empty dump trucks, operated by women, waited their turn in the pre-dawn dark at the site of a huge rectangular excavation taking shape in the middle of a field. Dozens of backhoes moved deeper and deeper into the hole to haul dirt back to the waiting trucks. When loaded trucks left, more quickly backed up to the dig to take their places.

In Paris, moving vans, women at the wheel, made their way down the row of large apartment buildings. Teams of other women, grim-faced and teary, hurried from the buildings, pushing carts and gurneys loaded down with tagged bags. From time to time a hand or shoe or bare foot—large, tiny, in between—slipped through an opening in the fabric. Convoys of other trucks rumbled past. The sidewalk was crowded with grief-stricken women and girls.

On the New York City waterfront, dump trucks came and went while on the pier women, some emotional, some zombie-like, emptied them of body bags and transferred the bags to containers. Other women, operating stevedore equipment on the pier and on a cargo ship moored next to it, moved the containers to the ship. Other craft—

freighters, barges, tugs, pleasure boats—took on their cargo at other piers and waited at anchor in the harbor.

In Moscow, the freight train, its hundreds of flat cars loaded with containers, pulled out of the station. Thousands of women and girls watched it pass as it made its way through the city and moved into the countryside.

On the Olympic Peninsula trail, voices on the radio reported a billion dead.

Tuesday, August 9, 2067

Two billion.

At the northeast Seattle hospital, women and girls shuffled around the border of its wide lawn, where body bags were stacked ten deep, building to street. An empty aid car sat at the emergency room entrance. In a nearby neighborhood, dump trucks once more waited at the site of the excavation, now complete. The trucks backed into positions at the perimeter of the hole and raised their beds, each depositing hundreds of body bags into the depths. When finished, they headed out, passing a seemingly never-ending line of incoming trucks, loaded full.

Wednesday, August 10, 2067

In the middle of the Indian Ocean, the cruise ship plowed through a calm sea, barely making headway. From above, the remnants of its wake formed a giant aimless half circle.

Charlie knew Dad could have arrived at the lake Monday night if he'd hurried. He didn't arrive. He could have appeared Tuesday. He didn't appear.

Wednesday morning, Charlie found the big paw prints of a bear crisscrossing the dirt near the remains of the campfire, and he chose to consider the bear a good omen, a stealthy advance scout for Dad. But good omen or not, Dad didn't come.

Thursday, August 11, 2067

As dawn broke, Charlie propped himself up on an elbow and peered through wisps of mist across the lake, still faintly hoping to catch sight of a familiar hiker coming up the trail.

Something moved on the opposite shoreline. Charlie got up and crept to the water, keeping his eyes on the small opening in the trees two hundred yards away. Again, he saw a blur of motion, dark. But it wasn't a man. Not even a person. It was a bear. Big, blackish-brown, lumbering.

A cool wind snuck through the trees. It slipped past Charlie and across the lake, stirring up the surface fog. A few moments later, the bear rose on two legs and turned in Charlie's direction, raising its big cartoonish head.

Charlie waved. He hoped the bear would wave back. A raised paw, at least. He wanted another sign. But the bear stood immobile, using its nose to check out Charlie and maybe Mom and Paige, too. Friend? Foe? Breakfast?

Finally, the bear dropped back to all fours. It moved nonchalantly along the shoreline, away from the trail, and disappeared.

News had continued to dribble in from the radio. As of last night, more than half the world's male population was dead. Three billion souls gone. And the plague was continuing to worm into every pocket of humanity. No kind of medical intervention had any effect on the disease, which seemed to run its lethal course in less than twenty-four hours, from the first symptoms to the final tortured breath.

In many countries, disorder reigned. In others, new governments were forming as the constitutional orders of succession spiraled down to the first woman. In the United States, that was Secretary of State Candace Bloom.

President Candace Bloom, now.

President Bloom and what was left of the Executive Branch were working day and night to keep the country from disintegrating—propping up what remained of the three branches of federal government; cooperating with foreign countries; going forward with individual states to make sure courts and law enforcement agencies still functioned; triaging and handling all crises; coordinating medical care; activating what was left of the National Guard and other military units; initiating and orchestrating the

mass cremation and disposal of tens of millions of bodies; bringing together medical researchers to solve the mystery of the contagion before every male in the country and on the face of the planet was wiped out.

Charlie returned to the campsite and got his fishing rod. He waded out, over the rocks and sand, through the mud, and began casting. Mosquitoes buzzed his head, but his repellent was still working.

In the quiet, in the solitude, his imagination ran wild, to places dark and borderless. He tried not to imagine where Dad might be.

That day, he caught seven cutthroat trout, fat on bugs. That night, he circled the lake and left three on the opposite shoreline for his friend the bear.

Sunday, August 21, 2067

Ten more days had crept by. In the mountains, little changed. Morning wind spoke in the trees, morning clouds gathered, then dispersed in afternoon sunshine, night came, a little earlier each time, stars shone and faded, rain fell, morning arrived again. Hearts ached, day after day.

Dad didn't come. No one came.

Around the globe, cautious reports surfaced that deaths had halted. But the male of the human species had come face-to-face with extinction. The estimate of the dead: nearly five billion, or 97 percent of the male population.

Most of the survivors lived in remote backcountry. Others were on the move—nomads, refugees, passengers and crews on ships at sea, space station occupants, moon colonists—while some lived in cities but were forgotten enough or resourceful enough or ruthless enough to avoid human contact.

A handful of males had been exposed but had not fallen ill. A small number turned out to be transgender—female by birth. Others either dodged the disease or were immune. If so, no one knew why.

A few survivors had happened to choose this time to backpack into the wilderness. Lucky, the newswomen called them. Charlie wasn't so sure. He felt grateful to be alive, but to him lucky would be Dad walking into the campsite, thin and unshaven and bedraggled from two weeks of avoiding a monster, but alive.

Alive. That would have been lucky.

On the far side of the sturdy branch-and-bough lean-to that Charlie and Paige had painstakingly woven together after the first night of rain overwhelmed their tent, Mom and Paige still slept, if fitfully. Paige's nightmare-fueled whimpering had awakened Charlie. Sunrise wouldn't happen for a while, but there was enough light for him to locate the radio.

As he switched it on, he foolishly half hoped for music, but this morning, as always, news filled the airwaves and the plague was all the news. No crime sprees, no crooked politicians, no environmental disasters, no

weather, no sports. He imagined empty stadiums. No players. No fans.

Because no plague-related deaths had been reported in almost two days, scientists believed the disease had run its course. For now. Newborn boys were no longer dying. Ships were returning to port. Within hours of one another, the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, all officially noted the cessation of deaths.

Charlie's stomach rumbled. Their rations of food had dwindled. They were all sick of trout, although no one said anything. It was fifteen days, now, since the first deaths occurred. Sixteen days since they'd left home. They wouldn't have to survive here for the year or more he and his mother and sister had feared, but it seemed like they already had. He turned off the radio and rolled on his back, waiting for Mom and Paige to wake up.

It was time to go back. And face the music. Even if there wouldn't be any.

Monday, August 22, 2067

In Pearl Harbor, females swarmed over the pier as a gangplank extended from the recently docked ocean liner. The crowd pressed closer as at last the passengers—women, girls, men, boys, all appearing dazed—began making their way down the ramp.

I wouldn't even ask to see his face;
I'd settle for the music of his voice from down
the hall—
a three-a.m. cry for his mother's milk.
—epitaph for Luke Honey (May 6, 2067–
August 7, 2067),
by Maria Honey, his mother,
November 2, 2068

Chapter One

June 16, 2097—Thirty Years Later

Glum and restless, I stared out through the living room window as rain ticked sideways against the glass and flowed steadily down. In the late afternoon murk, the glossy streaks of wet looked like narrow metal bars. This wasn't a prison, but the nonstop Sunday downpour made it feel like one. Outside, the sprawling carpet of grass drank in the cloudburst. I could practically see the individual blades growing, which meant more work for me. But not today, a bad day for mowing lawns. Or hopping on my bike and heading off to somewhere—anywhere—more exciting.

Maybe the rainfall was trying to tell me something. Because what I should have been doing was getting ready for my trials. Confined by the weather to this big old house, with most of its other residents in their rooms or otherwise quietly keeping to themselves, I had only one excuse for not studying: Mom had asked me to meet her here. She was going to make time in

her busy schedule for a “visit” with me. How could I have refused?

Anyway, I had a reason—besides just getting a chance to talk to her for a change—to meet with her. I had my own topic to chat about. It was a topic I believed she’d been avoiding.

I heard the office door open, and a moment later she appeared. The two other women in the room glanced up and went back to their reading. She smiled and plopped down on the couch next to me and for a moment joined me in gazing silently out the window. Her mascara looked clumpier than usual, maybe to mask the fatigue in her eyes. It wasn’t working.

“How are you, Kellen?” she said finally. She rested her hand on mine. It felt comfortingly familiar but irritating at the same time.

“Terrific,” I said. “Smooth summer so far. We won our game yesterday. I got two doubles.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Too bad you weren’t there.”

“I wanted to be.”

“Three,” I said, silhouetting three fingers against the gray daylight.

“What?”

“Three. Games. You’ve been to three. I’ve played eleven.”

“Work keeps getting in the way. We’ve had...complications. But they’re temporary. Things will be back to normal soon.”

Normal. “Normal” meant she would’ve gotten to four or five games. Her job with PAC—the Population Apportionment Council—was her top priority. I was number two. “It’s

okay.” I’d raised a subject. Not my main subject, but a start. I’d made a point, maybe.

“It’s not okay. I simply don’t have a choice.”

I held my mouth in check, but she had a choice. She had smarts, degrees, experience, other employers sniffing around. She would’ve had no problem finding a different job. But I was done with this topic. I freed my hand from hers and pretended to straighten a sock.

“How are your studies going?” she asked, getting to what I figured all along was her motive for our “visit.”

“Have you talked to Dad yet?” I said. “About me going to see him?”

“I’ve been so busy. And you need time to prepare for your trials.”

“My studies are fine. You said you’d get him a message. Or talk to him about it the next time he called.”

“What about your history class?” Mom said, not wavering from the topic of my education. “What do you think of Ms. Anderson as an instructor? Is she getting you the essential material? I’ve heard she can be...unconventional.”

Anderson? She was unconventional, maybe, but in a good way. “She’s doing great. I’m doing great. Why?”

“I want you to think about something,” she said, lowering her voice.

“I’m already thinking about something.”

“This is more important than your travel plans, Kellen. What I want you to think about is your trials. Your life, in other words.”

“Travel plans? You think I’m just interested in travel? What I’m interested in is seeing Dad. I want to spend time with him. I want to see how he lives. I want to see how guys live.”

“And what I want is for you to consider something really vital,” she said, plowing ahead. “I want you to consider seeking help if you get close to your exam date and don’t feel completely confident you can pass with flying colors.”

“Help studying, you mean?”

“Dr. Mack knows the chair of the regional trials board.”

Dr. Mack. Rebecca Mack. Mom’s big boss. The head of PAC. She wouldn’t just know the chair of the PAC trials board, she probably had the final say on the woman’s appointment to the position. The chair, whoever she might be, was no doubt firmly under Rebecca Mack’s thumb. She would fold if Dr. Mack pressured her, even just a little.

I fidgeted with my other sock. “What about Dad?”

“I know this feels as if I’m stepping on your toes, Kellen, but I just want what’s best—”

Her e-spond chimed. She got to her feet and moved to the window, eyes out on the gloom and splash. “Heather Dent,” she said into the mouthpiece, just loud enough for me to overhear. “I’m home,” she said. “I was just talking to Kellen. We’ve hardly had time—”

A pause. “Nothing new,” she said after a long moment of listening.

Another pause, then: “Four days. We may not hear from her again.”

More listening. A glance at me. “It’s all in motion on this end. I’m monitoring everything.” She snuck another look at me. I tried to put on a bored expression. “And there?”

She hesitated, listening. “If you need me,” she said. Then: “Let me check.” With her back half turned to me, she fingered her display, studied the feedback, and resumed her conversation. “The earliest flight will get me to San Diego about eight. I’ll be on it.”

She returned to the couch but didn’t sit. “Give me a hug,” she ordered.

A hug. Her cure for everything. “You’re leaving again?”

“I have to. But Aunt Paige will be here.”

Aunt Paige. Aunt Reliable. “How long this time?”

“A few days. We’ll talk when I get back.”

“Sure.” I got up and let her put her arms around me. I let her stand on her tiptoes and kiss me on the cheek. Then she was off, hurrying across the room and angling for the stairs.

An angry rat-a-tat-tat pulled my attention away from her and toward the window. Hail had replaced rain. While strong gusts of wind threw the hard, white ice pellets against the glass, I stood and watched and wondered what was going on.

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