

ARE YOU GOING IN?

ZONE



A
NOVEL



RUSSELL COREY

FROM THE AUTHOR OF A UNIVERSE APART



RUSSELL COREY

ALSO BY RUSSELL COREY

**I WANT MY MTV BACK
A UNIVERSE APART
ZOOBOTIC**

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Dedicated to

my wife, Francesca

my mother, Barbara

my father, Joseph

ZONE



CHAPTER 1

ZONE ONE

“Don’t destroy it! Please! My phone is my life!” Dustin begs the homeless woman, who is holding his iPhone hostage high in the air.

Wait, he didn’t know she was homeless. That was way too presumptuous, but she was obviously dealing with some sort of mental illness, hence her overboard reaction to seeing the phone and her subsequent larceny of it.

Squeezed tightly in her clenched fist, she is ready to smash the sleek device down on the sidewalk below that divides the green city park.

"Well, you should have thought of that before you took my damn picture!" the defiant African-American woman shouts back at Dustin.

"I wasn't taking your picture! Honest!" Dustin pleads, his slightly overweight frame poised to pounce on the ground in order to save the phone in case she hurls it downward.

The phone is wrapped in a Wonka Bar case that makes it look like the enraged woman is holding a partially unwrapped chocolate bar, complete with one of Wonka's coveted Golden Tickets poking out.

There were cooler, hipper phone cases. Cases that offered so much more protection and convenience, but the sight of the Wonka Bar always made the people Dustin was taking photos of smile that much more.

Who didn't, at some point in their life, desire to win one of Willy Wonka's exclusive Golden Tickets and get a peek inside his mysterious chocolate factory?

But the Wonka Bar case didn't make the irate woman smile in this instance. Quite the opposite.

Dustin only hoped that the campy case would offer some sort of protection should she slam the phone down on the coarse pavement below. Which was looking more and more likely by the second.

"Don't lie! You had your phone pointed right damn at me!"

Mark, Dustin's balding and trim husband, steps in to attempt to cool things down. Mark, older than Dustin by ten years, was used to being the adult in the room and the role suited him.

"Listen, we don't care what you were doing out here. We're not gonna tell anybody. We just want the phone back and we'll be gone. Never see us again."

"Hold up. What was I doing out here exactly?" the woman inquires, gaming for a fight.

"I don't know and I don't care. That's my point," Mark explains, trying to keep his emotions in check to avoid further escalation.

"Was I selling drugs? Is that what I was doing out here?"

"No, of course not," Mark senses this is not going well.

"So a black woman can't be in the park unless she's selling drugs?"

The infuriated woman thrusts a determined hand inside her layers of clothes and pulls out her own cellphone and points it squarely at them.

"I'm putting this racist bullshit on YouTube!"

Seeing the second phone come out and knowing the power of a social justice viral clip, Mark quickly reaches in his pants pocket and retrieves his own phone, lifting it up with the camera recording in self-defense.

The woman is undeterred by Mark's counteraction, "Keep taking my picture. See what I do."

Mark tries once more to reason with the woman, "We are not racists. We respect you as a human being. We respect your right to be here. This is a public park, open to everyone. We just want our phone back. That's all we're asking for here."

Dustin jumps back into the fray by waving his hands wildly in the air, "Hang on! Everyone just put the phones down! Put them down, before someone gets hurt. What's your name, Ma'am?"

"You wanna see my ID? I ain't gotta show you shit!"

Dustin lowers his undulating arms and then takes on the unflappable charming demeanor of a new neighbor

meeting the cheerful family that just moved in next door for the first time.

"My name is Dustin and this is my husband, Mark. If you let me, I will show you the pictures on my phone and you will see there are no photos of you on there. And if there are any, I promise I will delete them immediately. Unless I look skinny in the picture, then I'm just cropping you out."

Dustin calmly offers up his open palm, in a complete show of deference.

"Mark and I are in the process of adopting a daughter from Guatemala and the photos of our first meeting with Blanca are on my phone and nowhere else. Understand now why I was freaking out a little bit? Okay, a lot of bit."

Dustin's change of posture and tone relaxes the feisty woman, who gradually lets her defiance slip away.

"My name's Rhatrice. I just don't want no one taking my picture. You don't know me."

"Now we do. Nice to meet you, Rhatrice."

With a sigh, the tentatively trusting Rhatrice reluctantly places the phone back in Mark's freshly manicured hand.

Mark then uses his thumbprint to gain access to his photos. He tilts the screen toward Rhatrice for her inspection.

"See, no pictures of you."

Dustin swipes past the pictures that were taken in the park that day and is now well into a road trip to the beach.

"Damn, you guys have a Tesla."

"That's our other baby. This was our kite surfing expedition. My idea. I'm the adventurous one. Here, let

me show you Blanca," Dustin says.

Dustin quickly searches the pictures and shows Rhatrice a few snaps of him and Mark meeting with Blanca, the five-year-old Guatemalan orphan confined to a wheelchair, who seems to warm up to the two men as each photo slides by.

Dustin glows at seeing the photos again, bragging that, "She's going to be the first Latina President."

Rhatrice, just shakes her head at the proclamation, "You watch. They gonna shoot homeboy. You know that's coming."

Despite their heartwarming nature, or because of it, Rhatrice quickly grows tired of the pictures and is ready to move on to the next adventure in her life.

"So why did you have your phone pointed at me?"

Mark takes the lead in trying to explain it, "We were engaged in an activity that utilized the phone's augmented reality feature in conjunction with the phone's camera."

"You were doing what?"

"We were playing Pokemon Go. He's just too embarrassed to admit it," Dustin tells the woman. "Here, watch."

Dustin activates the Pokemon Go app and shows Rhatrice the screen as he scans the phone around the park.

"Augmented reality uses your phone's camera and it adds animated objects to the picture, as if they were really there. Just keep watching."

Rhatrice is clearly done with the two men and is just eager to move on.

"I'm cool, ya'll."

She steps away, but Dustin keeps the phone in front

of her.

"No, seriously, I know you think this is geeky and stupid, and it is, but watch, it really is neat."

"She doesn't care, Dustin. Just let her go."

An animated cartoon turtle creature jumps on the phone's screen and moves with the camera's motions, as if Dustin was pointing the camera right at it.

"Whoa, what's that shit? That's the Pokemon?"

"That is Squirtle. Come here you little bugger!"

Dustin slides his finger on the screen, shooting out a red and white Pokeball at Squirtle. The Pokeball opens and captures Squirtle with a beam of light.

"Gotcha!"

"Look at that shit. It's like it is really there."

"You should use the Ikea AR app. You can see what any piece of furniture Ikea sells looks like in your home just by taking a picture of whatever room you're furnishing."

"Can I try?"

"Sure, just be careful, right?"

"I won't break it."

Dustin passes her the phone, while Mark rolls his eyes and gives his partner an exasperated look, as if saying, dumbass, we just got the stupid phone back from her.

"Just hold it up like this," Dustin says, instructing Rhatrice on how to position the phone for the best effect.

Rhatrice is not impressed, "There's nothing there now."

"You have to walk around a little bit. Keep scanning. That's what we were doing when we bumped into you. Didn't even know you were there, to be honest."

Mark shakes his head, quietly muttering, "Not until

you came up and stole our phone."

Rhatrice misses the snide comment from Mark, as she is now totally lost in the phone, "So what happens when I see a Squirtle Turtle?"

"Use your fingers to toss a Pokeball at it."

Just then a black rectangle appears on the screen while Rhatrice scans the phone to the right. She halts immediately on the black rectangle standing tall.

"Oh, shit, I got one!"

Rhatrice swipes her finger on the screen, but no balls fly forward.

"Hey, it ain't working!" Rhatrice protests.

The sight of the mysterious black rectangle on the phone puzzles both Dustin and Mark.

"I'm not sure what that is. Do you know, Mark?"

"Looks like a door. Do you go in or does something come out?" ponders Mark.

Dustin motions to Rhatrice to hand the phone back.

"Let me see my phone. I'll check the Pokemon forums. See what we're supposed to do."

Rhatrice hands the phone back to Dustin. When Rhatrice looks up, she's stunned.

"Yo, that shit's for real."

Dustin and Mark also look up from the phone and see that the black rectangle is standing before them in real life. It is as if someone cut a rectangular hole out of reality and in its place was just this black zone of nothingness. Complete darkness.

"That wasn't there before," notes Mark.

"Is it projection? A hologram?" wonders Dustin.

They look around. There is no one else there in this corner of the park and there are no signs of the technology that could possibly project such an image, if

such technology even existed.

"Projected from where? There's no one here, but us."

Rhatrice is unnerved that Dustin and Mark don't know what the mysterious black rectangle is.

"You guys seriously don't know what the hell that is?"

"No."

Rhatrice picks up a stick and tries to touch the black rectangle.

"I don't know if I would do that," Mark tepidly warns her.

The tip of the branch disappears through the front of the black rectangle. She then swings the stick side to side freely.

"Man, there's nothing there," Rhatrice exclaims.

"But it is there. I see it. We all do," Dustin tries to reason.

Sensing no imminent threat, Mark and Dustin join Rhatrice in front of the rectangle.

Dustin reaches out with the tips of his fingers and grazes the surface of the black shape in front of them.

"Oh my God!" Dustin shrieks as his round face lights up and his eyes go wide.

Mark pulls his partner's hand away.

"Don't touch it! Are you crazy?"

Dustin stares back at Mark and Rhatrice with a stunned look.

"Are you hurt?" Mark inquires.

Dustin's stunned look gives way to an amazed smile.

"That felt awesome!"

Dustin reaches back out to the rectangle, this time sticking his whole hand in.

"Wow! What a rush!"

Mark reaches out himself and touches the black rectangle briefly.

"Holy crap! That goes right to your brain. Just lights it up. I'm still feeling it."

Intrigued, Rhatrice reaches her hand in the blackness of the rectangle, too.

"Goddamn, I could sell this shit all damn day."

Dustin smiles back at her knowingly, "And I'd buy it all damn day! This is like taking E in the nineties."

Dustin and Rhatrice slap a high five with their free hands.

Mark tries to tug Dustin away.

"We shouldn't be doing this. We have no idea what this thing is."

Dustin pulls away from Mark and continues to feel inside the rectangle, plunging his arm in deeper, until the darkness is up to his elbow.

"Stop, both of you! This thing could kill us for all we know!"

Mark grabs both of them and forcibly pulls them away from the dark shape. Their faces go blank for a second, slightly stunned, as if they were electrical devices that just got unplugged from their socket.

The two slowly come down from the buzz they got by making contact with the black rectangle.

"Sorry, but you both had this crazed look on your faces."

Rhatrice shakes her head, feeling more alive than ever before. "What is this thing?"

"No idea." Dustin states as he begins to take pictures of the rectangle with his phone.

"It looks like the monolith from 2001," Mark tries to reason.

"The monolith was solid, but this, you can't even feel. I mean, you feel something, but it's not solid. It's like an opening to a zone. I think it is a doorway," Dustin concludes as he takes a selfie with the rectangle.

"A doorway to where?" Rhatrice asked.

"I don't know, but I wanna find out," Dustin declares.

"No, stay back. Don't touch it again," Mark warns.

"I just want to put my foot inside. See if it's possible to walk around in there," Dustin replies.

"Dustin!" Mark shoots Dustin a don't you even think about it look.

"Just my foot," Dustin negotiates, as if the two were only trying to come to agreement on whether or not to venture into a used bookstore during an afternoon of window shopping that's run long, making them late for a lunch date.

Dustin creeps back over to the black rectangle and sticks his foot in the darkness and, to his surprise, sets it down on something solid.

"There's something there. It's stable. Feels like a floor. Pretty sure you can stand in it."

"That's great. Now come back out," Mark pleads.

"I just want to see inside for a second," Dustin turns around to look back at Mark. "Nothing that feels this good, could be that bad."

Dustin faces the rectangle again and sticks his head in the blackness, leaving only half his body still sticking outside.

"Dustin, come back out now!"

Dustin steps all the way through, as if he saw something he just had to explore on the other side.

There's nothing violent or forced about Dustin's

actions. It is as if he was walking across a dentist's waiting room to pick up the only out of date magazine he had any interest in reading.

"Dustin, get out now!"

Mark dashes over to the rectangle and sticks his hand in the zone and feels around.

"I can't feel him!"

Rhatrice picks up the branch she used to probe the black rectangle with earlier.

"Here, try this!"

Mark grabs the branch from her and thrusts it in the zone of darkness.

"Grab the stick, Dustin!"

"He ain't there? You can't feel him for real?" Rhatrice questions.

"No, nothing. Here, grab my hand and don't let go." Mark instructs Rhatrice.

Rhatrice holds Mark's hand and pulls back on it as Mark steps inside the zone. All Rhatrice can see is Mark's hand in her's and his one foot sticking outside the black rectangle, rooted firmly on the ground on their side of the zone.

Seconds later the rest of Mark emerges from the darkness with a panicked look on his face.

"There's nothing in there! Just black."

"Where'd he go then?"

Mark looks around the park.

"We need a longer stick or a rope."

"Maybe he'll just come out when he's ready. It does feel pretty damn good in there."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Just stay here, I'm going to try and find some rope."

As Mark steps away, Rhatrice cries out in fear.

"It's going away!"

The black rectangle fades away, as if it was melting into thin air.

Mark dashes straight towards the evaporating shape that is quickly losing its form.

"Dustin!"

Mark reaches the spot where the black rectangle was, but there is nothing left of it.

"It's gone. He's gone," Mark laments.

Mark looks back to Rhatrice, but she has departed, too. Mark spots her running off in the distance and gives chase.

"Rhatrice, come back! You're the only other witness. The police won't believe me!"

"You think they're gonna believe me?" Rhatrice shouts back.

"Please, stop!"

"Man, I got warrants!"

The pursuit runs through a more populated section of the park, full of families, friends and couples enjoying the sunny summer day without a care in the world.

Mark finally gives up on catching the surprisingly speedy Rhatrice and stops to catch his breath.

He collapses to his knees near a Filipino family celebrating a child's birthday party at a picnic table.

The concerned mother of the family brings the coughing and out of breath Mark a bottle of water, even twisting the plastic cap off for him.

"Here, drink this."

Mark graciously takes the water and chugs it down.

"Thank you."

"I saw you chasing her. What'd she steal?"

Mark looks up from the bottle at the Filipina mother

and asks, "Did you see any large black rectangles in the park today? About the size of a door."

The mother is sympathetic to Mark, but only to a point. She understands the words Mark is saying, but has no comprehension of his question and why he would be asking it.

"I'm sorry, a black rectangle what?"

"Like a door. A door to a different zone, a place you can just disappear into. My husband literally walked into a black rectangle five minutes ago and just disappeared. I don't know where he went, but now he's gone."

Now the mother understands. Perfectly so.

She steps back cautiously with the steely look of a protective mother on her face.

"Take the water and go. We have children here. If you stay, I'll have to call the police."

Mark looks back to where he ran from, hoping to see that the black rectangle had returned. It hasn't.

Mark looks as if the weight of the world has fallen on his shoulders. As if a great, ominous secret was just whispered into his ear by the universe, telling him that the world, as he knew it, was going to end.

The mother pulls out her phone from her pocket and waves the little black rectangle right in front of Mark's distraught face.

"I mean it. If you don't leave right now, I'm calling 911."

"Lady, be my guest."

ZONE



CHAPTER 2

YOU BELIEVE ME, RIGHT?

Detective Doug Haines stares back at the pale faced Kyler Steines in the tiny windowless interrogation room. How should he handle this? Just outright disbelief and risk the cocky kid shutting down or play along with his bizarre fantasy like you believe him and keep the twenty-four-year-old numbnuts talking, even if it was complete horseshit.

Keep him talking, that was the smart play. He'd normally offer the suspect another breakfast bar, but the kid never touched the first one he gave him. Hadn't even taken one sip of the water or coffee that was sitting right in front of him, either.

Throw him some more softballs. Something he

doesn't have to lie about. Get the truth flowing again.

I mean come on, this was a simpleton redneck making up this ridiculous story. Certainly there was a clue to where the body was hidden in all this baloney.

Just make him think you believe him. Keep him talking and you'll solve this damn thing. Yep, that would be the smart play. Just pretend you believe him.

Nope, no can do.

"Thank you, Kyler, for your statement, but how about you do that again. This time with the truth, facts and reality. Because truthfully, the fact is you have a missing man's blood on your shirt and the reality is I have to know how it got there."

"I told you he slammed into the back of my truck. The airbag must have busted his nose. The blood got on my shirt as I helped him out of his car to make sure he was okay. It ain't that complicated."

"It is when there is no blood on the airbag. Or anywhere else in the interior of his car. The only place we found his blood was smeared on your shirt, like there had been a struggle. Was there a struggle?"

The kid's hesitation speaks volumes and the detective went right after him.

"I know you want to tell me the truth. I see it in your eyes. Just tell me, I'm here to listen."

Kyler finally exhales and shrugs.

"Okay, fine. I hit him. Guy was all in my face. He wanted a fight, he got a fight."

"So, we're talking about self-defense here, right? I understand that. Tell me more."

"There was an accident and the guy wanted to fight. That's it. Except for the stuff that happened afterward."

"Oh, yeah, I got that all right here."

The detective holds up a piece of paper with some notes written on it.

"You know what else I have? A witness report from a group of cyclists you passed that morning. You wanna tell me about them now?"

The revelation surprises Kyler and he is taken aback, worried.

"You didn't tell me you talked to them."

"I'm not legally required to tell you what's in their statement and my boss won't like it, but I will, because I care about you, Kyler. You're not that much older than my own son, you know.

"The statement we got from the cyclists was that you slowed down as you passed their group this morning and the Prius that was behind them, then you smoked them all out with your excess diesel exhaust and sped off. The cyclists then reported they saw the driver of the Prius chase after you."

"Man, I passed them by because they were going so slow. Taking up the whole damn road practically, too. Truck lets off a little exhaust, so what? Is that idiot occupying the White House gonna pay for me to get an electric truck like he pays for everyone else's bullshit?"

"We inspected your rig. Saw you removed the particulate filter. That's one way to produce more Prius repellant, isn't it?"

"Bought it used. Maybe the previous owner made some adjustments. Look, I just drive the thing, man. Ain't against the law."

"Tampering with an emission control device? Yes, it is."

"Fine, book me on that, rolling coal on some gay ass bikers and a hybrid, but don't be saying I killed anyone.

"Don't forget, I called you, alright? I reported this whole thing to 911. That's a helluva way to try to get away with murder."

"Kyler, my friend, and I do want to be your friend here, there are ways to deal with this other than murder charges. There's involuntary manslaughter, negligent homicide, but you have to help us get there. Tell me what really happened."

"I told you what happened."

"You didn't tell me you hit him before or about the cyclists. What else didn't you tell me?"

"Yes, I punched him, once. Probably broke his nose, but he wasn't going to bleed to death from it."

"In fact, after I showed him why I slammed on the brakes so fast, the guy was thankful I did what I did and how I did it."

"Trust me, he was so excited when he saw that thing, he forgot all about the fact that I had just hit him in the nose. Hell, he acted like I was his best damn friend."

Detective Haines rolls his chair closer to Kyler, practically right on him.

"I know this is hard, kid, but we're making progress here. At least now you admit to hitting him in your fantasy."

The detective shuffles through some pictures on the desk, until he finds the one he wants.

"Funny that you should mention hitting him, because the internal computer on his car is going to tell us exactly when he hit the back of your truck."

The detective holds up a photo of the truck at the accident scene and points to the skid marks.

"Now, eyeballing it, your truck's skid marks still matched up perfectly to their tires. There didn't seem to

be any evidence of his blood on the inside or outside of your truck, so I don't think your vehicle ever left the scene of the accident with or without his body."

"So you believe me that I never left the scene?"

"No, I believe your truck never left the scene. I mean, it really must have pissed you off something awful the nerve of this guy to chase after you in his little pussy Prius, didn't it? Would me.

"Let's just forget the fact that you belched all that diesel exhaust on them. Like you said, could have been an accident. Not your fault, but this guy thinks it is and he comes at you strong.

"You're a man, I get it. He's challenging you, we all would have a reaction to that. I know I would.

"So you slammed on the brakes to make your stand and that caused the accident. He got out, confronted you, a fight ensued and things got out of hand.

"Maybe you even felt that your life was in danger. Before you know it, you have a dead man lying in the middle of the street and a scared kid, who probably wants someone he can really talk to right about now.

"I'm that guy, Kyler. I'm the one that can help you, but I have to know what really happened.

"Road rage gone wrong. Unfortunately happens all the time. As opposed to what you described to me here. Which has never happened, ever.

"But I'll give you credit. You don't exactly strike me as the creative type, so either you have wonderfully exceeded your abilities or you are plagiarizing some science fiction movie you saw on Netflix. Which isn't exactly illegal, but it is frowned upon. So, how did I do?"

Kyler dismissively shakes his head and looks away, "I want a lawyer."

"Demanding legal counsel, I'd say I probably did pretty good."

"You told me when we came in here that I had the right to remain silent and the right to a lawyer."

"You know how expensive lawyers are? A case like this, could be hundreds of thousands of dollars. Maybe a million, if you actually want to win."

"But you know how much the truth costs? Nothing. It's free."

"I want a lawyer."

"I want a body. Tell me where he is. So I can tell his wife. So she can tell her kids, so they don't have to think their dad's dead corpse is lying face down in some muddy country ditch somewhere."

"Either get me a lawyer or let me go."

"We're past all this now, aren't we, Kyler? We're gonna find the body regardless of your cooperation."

"Good luck with that."

"We don't need your luck. We know where and when the crash happened. We know when you called 911. We know your truck never left the scene of the accident. We can figure out how far a man of your size can carry a man of his size and then get back in time to make the 911 call that pinged off that cellphone tower."

The detective illustrates this on the piece of paper. Drawing an x and then a wide circle around that x.

"We then create a perimeter and walk every inch of that circle until we find the shallow grave you buried him in."

Haines shades in the circle until it is almost full, then makes another x in it, where they find the hidden body. Haines lifts up the drawing of the circle for Kyler's inspection.

"A circle?" Kyler scoffs. "Circle ain't the shape you gotta worry about."

The door to the interrogation room opens and inside steps the Chief of Police Ryan Clark and a casually dressed blonde woman, with a not so casual air about her. She's attractive with the body of a fitness freak.

"Detective Haines, you wanna step out here with me for a minute."

Haines immediately stands in deference to the Chief's unexpected presence.

"Chief Clark, hello, sir. This is my main person of interest here in today's disappearance and possible homicide."

The woman, in her late thirties, impatiently clears her throat and the Chief takes the hint.

"Please, Detective. In the hall."

"Who's she?"

"I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help," the woman says in a deadpan manner."

If they are Ronald Reagan fans, they'll get the joke about the nine most terrifying words you'll ever hear. If not, who gives a flip. Just get your butt out of here, Barney, because this is my room now.

Chief Clark doesn't get the joke, but he gets how important it is for them to vacate the room, without revealing too much about his unannounced guest's role there.

"This is Federal jurisdiction now. Let's go, Doug."

"The Feds? For a road rage incident?" Haines smirks and looks down at Kyler. "Jeez, kid, who the hell did you kill?"

Kyler vehemently shakes his head. Clearly the presence of a Federal agent, no matter how she was

dressed, has him spooked.

"I didn't kill anyone," Kyler contends.

Haines sighs and steps away from the table, as if he had just hooked a big game fish, but then had to watch as a hungry shark swims along and snatches the hooked fish right off his line.

"Doesn't dress like FBI," Haines notes with irritation.

"I'm not," the woman replies in a couldn't care less tone.

Detective Haines makes eye contact with her as he heads for the door.

"Well, whatever D.C. alphabet soup you are, good luck with him. He's crazier than a shit house rat."

The Chief puts his hand on the Detective's shoulder and guides him out of the room.

Kyler looks up at the woman who stares blankly back at him. She hasn't moved an inch since the two men left. She just stares patiently at him. Waiting for him to react first.

Kyler senses this and shakes his head as he turns away.

"I didn't kill anybody."

"I didn't ask."

Kyler looks back to the woman. There is no accusation in her voice. No mind games bullshit behind her cool blue eyes. She knows he's no killer.

"Who are you? What part of the government are you with?"

She sits down with Kyler.

"I'll tell you, but I can't tell you. Understand?"

"No."

"Kyler, do you know anyone that works for the CIA?"

"No."

"That's right. You don't. We good?"

Kyler puts it together in his head and nods.

"I get it. Yeah. So, this is serious, right? What I saw today."

"Serious enough to interrupt my family vacation and have me come in and talk to you. I was the closest operative in any intelligence branch near here. Hence my casual dress. I hope you don't mind"

"No, I don't care."

She turns over the piece of paper the detective had been taking notes on, so that the blank side is now facing up. She slides the paper and a pen over to Kyler.

"Can you draw me a picture of what you saw today?"

"I can't draw."

"Just do the best you can. Anything, really."

Kyler takes the pen and draws a rectangle and shades it in black."

"That's about it. A black rectangle."

She studies the picture.

"What's the scale? Can you draw a person near it?"

Kyler draws a stick figure next to the rectangle.

"It was about the size of a door."

"How close did you get to it? "

"As close as you are to me."

"Did you touch it?"

"I didn't, but the other guy did. Dumb fucker."

"I don't think profanity is warranted here."

"Sorry."

"Did it hurt him?"

"No, he said it felt good. Made his pain go away."

"Pain?"

"From the car accident. It felt so good putting his hand in that rectangle, he kept putting more and more of his body in, until he went all the way in. Then he never came back out. Then the whole rectangle just disappeared. Dude was just gone. I didn't know what the hell to do, so I called the cops.

"I could have just driven away, but I didn't. Now they wanna pin a murder rap on me. You believe that?"

"Was the rectangle already there when you got to the scene?"

"No, it just popped up in the middle of the road as I was driving. That's why I slammed on the breaks so fast and got rear ended."

"You said it popped up. Did it come up from the ground?"

"No, just out of thin air. It started as like a misty shadow and a second later it got really dark, really quick. So dark you couldn't see through it, but it wasn't solid."

"How do you know it wasn't solid? You said you didn't touch it."

"I didn't. No, I stayed the hell back when I saw that thing. I know what evil looks like. That thing was evil. I tried to tell that other guy that. At first, he didn't even want to listen to me. Only fight, because of the accident.

"So, I punched him in the nose, grabbed him in a bear hug and carried him over to see the black rectangle for himself. That put the hook in him. Calmed him down right away, so I let go of him.

"Tried to tell him not to go near that thing, but he just kept getting closer and closer. Then he touched it. His hand just disappeared in the blackness, but he pulled it right back out. Wiggled his fingers, made sure

everything worked, then he stuck it right back in again. Over and over, he kept doing this. Each time sticking his arm in a little further."

"How many times did he put his arm in?"

"I don't know. At least a dozen. Wanted me to do it. See how good it felt. No way. That's just how evil works. Evil always feels good. Look what it did to him. By the end, he was putting damn near his whole body in, but he always left something outside. A hand, a foot, something. But the last time he went all the way in and he was gone. Then the damn thing just went away."

"How did it go away? Describe it."

"It just faded away, like a black smoke dissipating, just quicker."

"How quick?"

"About a second or two."

"So you witnessed the whole event from beginning to end?"

"From beginning to end. About ten minutes, if that. Damnedest thing I ever seen."

"And nothing came out of it? No objects, people?"

"No."

"What noise did it make?"

"Nothing that I can recall."

"You didn't hear anyone talking through it? Russian, Chinese, Arabic? Or any other strange or unfamiliar languages?"

"Just silence. I didn't even hear the guy after he went in all the way. I yelled for him, too. If he could have heard me, he would have heard me. Believe it."

"Any music?"

"No."

"Did you feel anything? Like a pulse or beat? You

know how some people have really loud car stereos and you can feel the bass hitting your chest."

"Mexicans."

"I'm sorry?"

"Mexican gangbangers have those fucking cars. Sorry, I didn't mean to say the F-word."

"Did you feel anything like that?"

"From the gangbangers or this thing?"

"This thing."

Kyler scoffs and chides her.

"I told you, lady, it was silent! No noise!"

"I understand these questions are repetitive. They have to be. You have experienced something very rare and we need to learn all we can about it.

"We are trying to determine if America is under attack by a foreign power. Please, just bear with me, because every little detail, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, helps."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be a jerk. What's your name anyway?"

"You can call me Agent Lopez."

Kyler is thrown by the name. She didn't look like no Lopez, but whatever.

"Oh, okay."

"Did it smell like anything?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember anything, so I'm gonna say no."

"What about heat or coldness? Could you feel a temperature difference the closer that you got to it?"

"No, nothing."

"Did you feel sick afterwards? Like it had done something to you?"

"It scared the shit out of me. Still does."

"Did you feel nauseated, dizzy, experience any headaches?"

"No, I just have some nerves from everything that happened. I was pretty messed up, but that's the way you should feel when you come face to face with evil."

"How do you feel now?"

"Talking to you helps. Makes me feel better to finally be listened to. Thank you."

"I mean, physically, how do you feel?"

"Just normal, outside of being scared."

"Have you taken any drugs, legally prescribed or over the counter in the past 24 hours?"

"No."

"What about illegal drugs? You won't be charged."

"No drugs, no drinking. They did a blood test already. You can check it out."

"I did. You were clean."

"So why did you ask me the question?"

"I wanted to hear your answer. You also could have taken something after you took the drug test."

"I didn't."

"Very good. I think we have all that we need for now."

She takes a picture of Kyler's drawing and sends it to someone over her phone. She then stands and prepares to leave.

"Kyler, I'd like you to stay in the custody of the local police for now. You're not under arrest and you have every right to leave. However, in the next few days we may need immediate access to you."

"If there are any health risks from the exposure to what you witnessed today, then fast access to you could be the difference between life and death. Understand?"

"Yeah, okay, but I'm okay for now?"

"As far as we know, yes. We'd like you not to talk to anyone else about this incident for now, either. Especially the press."

"I never would. Bunch of liars, all they are."

"And I would advise you to turn off your phone and restrain from using any social media."

She nods her appreciation and heads for the door.

"So you believe me, right? What do you think about all this, Agent Lopez?"


She stops and turns back to him.

"I'll tell you what I think, but I can't tell you what I think. Understand?"

"Yeah."

"I think you're crazier than a shit house rat. Now keep your fucking phone turned the fuck off."

ZONE



CHAPTER 3

2001

"We got another one!" Agent Arjun Bitra announced as he added another photograph to the wall of images.

Most of the images were hand drawn, usually from a simple ball point pen in either blue or black ink. There was a full color sketch by someone with some obvious artistic ability and there was even one drawn in crayon that a child had done.

The others were actual photographs taken with cellphones or stills captured from black and white surveillance videos.

The one thing all the dozens of images had in

common was an ominous black rectangle anchored in the center.

Agent Bitra continues to put up more pictures after the first in the conference room that was commandeered as their make shift war room.

The analysts that weren't studying the zone pictures on the wall, were seated behind their laptops at the conference room table.

Arjun continued, "We actually have four new ones. All photographs. This first one was taken by a work from home mom. The object appeared in the front yard of her house in Grover's Mill, New Jersey.

"This next one was captured in the woods by hikers in Burkesville, Maryland and the third one by was taken by a rancher in southeastern New Mexico.

"See any connections?" Bitra asks his fellow FBI analysts. They were a young group, late twenties, early thirties and more diverse than other parts of the Bureau.

They were led by the Executive Assistant Director for the FBI's Science and Technology Branch, Noah Godfrey. Godfrey, in his fifties, has seen a lot in his career at the FBI, but he was as perplexed by the black rectangles as the rest of his young staff.

Godfrey shook his head and offered, "They seem typical of what we've been getting in all morning. Completely random."

Kate Roush studied the three pictures that Arjun had just put up, then turned to him and asked, "I thought you said there were four new ones?"

"Oh, right," Agent Brita remembered, as he lifted up the remaining fourth photo in his hand and taped it to the wall. "This fourth one was reported by a couple of horseback riders in Bluff Creek State Park in Northern

California. It is particularly interesting because it captures an unknown subject right before it walks into one of the black rectangles."

The fourth photo is a still from the famous 1967 Big Foot film. The one that has a lumbering Sasquatch glancing backwards at the photographer before continuing on its merry way.

The black rectangle has been placed right in front of the Big Foot as if the behemoth was going to step right into the zone.

Assistant Director Godfrey and agent Roush are not amused.

"You think this is a joke, Agent Bitra?" Godfrey chides him.

Arjun stands his ground. He had a purpose to what he was doing, "If there's a joke here, I don't want it to be on us.

"I was able to fake all these photos in less than ten minutes just using Google images and PowerPoint on my laptop.

"Come on, not one of you could figure this out before I put Sasquatch up there? Grover's Mill, New Jersey? Burkesville, Maryland? Southeastern New Mexico? War of the Worlds, The Blair Witch Project, Roswell."

Godfrey motions to all the photos on the wall, "I take it you think this is all a hoax?"

"Yes. If you are asking me to prove one of two things, you tell me which is more likely. All of a sudden, these doorways to another dimension of time and space are suddenly popping up randomly or there is a group of individuals trying to pull off a hoax on the hashtag hungry, conspiracy loving public.

"Maybe they have a movie or book they want to

promote or maybe they are just doing this for fun, but I just don't want the intelligence community to come out of this looking ridiculous.

"Look at the effort that's been put into this already. I think before this leaks out that we are taking these reports seriously, we have to think about the credibility of the intelligence community as a whole.

"Because the next time we try to stop a rogue nation or bad actor, people are going to throw this right back at us. Black rectangles are going to be the new WMD."

Godfrey contemplates Bitra's argument for a second then shrugs, "Maybe."

Godfrey goes back to studying the wall of zone photos.

"But you know what I think of when I look at these pictures? 2001."

Kate uses this cue to jump in the discussion with her boss and Arjun, "The monolith. I actually checked with Warner Bros. to see if they were promoting a special release of the film for an anniversary. They reported no plans.

"I also checked 2001 fan sites. No chatter or grass root efforts to bring attention to the movie, either. Well, nothing out of the ordinary anyway."

"But if you look at it," she points to several of the zone photos. "The corners on these rectangles are rounded. The ones on the monolith were sharp. Also the monolith was solid. No one walked into a monolith."

"Thank you, Kate, for that, but I wasn't talking about the movie 2001.

"The book?" Kate asks.

"No, not the book, either," answers Godfrey. "The year 2001. More specifically September 11, 2001. You

don't know how much that day changed us. The intelligence community. These reports are coming in from all over the spectrum. NSA, Army, Navy, local, state. This one over here in Alabama was sent in from a CIA agent."

"What the hell is the CIA doing in Alabama?" Arjun asks Godfrey.

"Field agent was on vacation and was called in to do the interview. Said the witness was credible and the odds of them making the story up were highly unlikely.

"In the old days, the CIA never would have shared anything with anybody and, honestly, neither would we. We were all siloed off. Which made it hard to connect dots.

"Dots that were from Saudi Arabia and were all taking flying lessons. Dots that while learning how to take off and fly the planes didn't seem all that interested in actually landing them.

"So after 9/11, when a bunch of dots start popping up on someone's radar screen, we share that info to see if maybe those same dots are popping up on someone else's screen, no matter how weird or strange.

"Agents, these black rectangles are our dots. We have to connect them. Maybe it is a joke or hoax. If I had to bet money, that's where I'd bet it. A hundred percent.

"But until we know, we don't know and we have to take this seriously."

Leigh Kinsley stands up energetically from behind her lap top at the table, like Eggo waffles popping up from a toaster to announce, "I've completed a basic analysis of the 48 incidents that have been reported."

"Let's hear it," Godfrey says.

Leigh uses her hands when she speaks, almost as if

she was conducting an invisible orchestra, "Of the 48 incidents, 17 have involved people actually making contact with the object. Of the 17 incidents where contact was made, there was a disappearance reported in all 17."

Kate jumps in, "So these things are traps? You touch it and it sucks you in?"

"Yes and no," Leigh continues, "The reports are that the people that disappeared into the zones, went in on their own free will. Every single one.

"However, the reports also state that contact with a black rectangle produces a good feeling. Some even described it as a euphoric high on par with taking an opioid.

"So while there is no physical constraint forcing people into these things, you could argue that the euphoric high works as a lure to get people to walk in on their own accord."

Arjun interrupts, "How do we know how it makes people feel if all the people have disappeared inside one of these things?"

Leigh explains, "There were other witnesses at these 17 incidents. They heard the description of what it felt like to touch it and some even touched it themselves, but the rectangle disappeared before they could either go in or they got spooked enough seeing the other people disappear that they kept their distance until it went away."

Godfrey asks, "So what happens if one of these things pops up and there is only one person around, no other witnesses, and that person goes in and disappears?"

Leigh shrugs, "It would probably go unreported, until people start noticing the person isn't around

anymore and figure out they are missing."

Godfrey gestures to the wall of photos, "So, these 48 incidents are just a fraction of what could have occurred so far?"

"Yes, that's accurate," Leigh responds.

Kate suggests, "I think we should be monitoring any recent reports of missing persons. See if there are any unusual rises in the normal disappearance rate."

Arjun, taking the rectangles much more seriously now, asks Godfrey, "Is this us? Some black ops project run amuck and gone off the reservation?"

Godfrey shakes his head, "Homeland security and the Pentagon both say no."

Arjun then asks, "If this isn't us, then who else could do this?"

Godfrey responds, "By the chatter we've intercepted, the Russians, Chinese, North Koreans and Iranians all think we are the ones doing it, but that could be a cover, because they know we are most likely listening."

Arjun asks, "What's the Air Force say? Has anyone sent up any birds recently?"

Kate has this covered, "Strategic Air Command says no. Last covert satellite launch was by China fourteen months ago. Everything else has been public knowledge."

Arjun keeps pushing, "Okay, what about a tech company? Is this something Apple or Google could have done on their own?"

Leigh takes this one, "Maybe, but it's doubtful. We have sources on the inside at all the industry leaders and we know most everything they are working on. Unless this is some guy in his garage who got lucky splitting the new atom, we would have gotten wind of it."

Arjun feels renewed confidence in his original pronouncement, "So, it is a hoax. What else could explain this?"

Kate offers, "Maybe it is a naturally occurring phenomena? What do you think early man thought lightning was the first time he saw it or a tornado or a rainbow?"

Arjun contends, "Then how come these rectangles have never been reported before? Ever? What's changed in recent days?"

Leigh adds, "Maybe it is climate change related?"

Godfrey takes control again of the discussion as no clear answers seem in sight, "At this point it's as unlikely or likely as anything.

"The reality is we're not going to get any real answers until we are on scene with one of these objects.

"We need rapid deployment forces set up all over the country. A joint military-science operation. Get CDC onboard. We need to be able to be anywhere in the country in 30 minutes or less. If Dominos can do it, so can we."

Kate counters, "Great, let's get tens of thousands involved, that'll keep things secret for about 15 seconds."

Leigh comments, "Once Joe-iPhone puts one of these on Facebook or Instagram, that secret is going to be out anyway."

Godfrey turns to Leigh, "How long would it take for it to go viral?"

Leigh thinks for a second, "Something like this? It's weird, so maybe a few days being shared amongst friends with average social network circles.

"Then it would probably bounce to an influence

maker and then who knows. Right link on the right website it could be the number one trend in 24 hours. Maybe 12 if it is a slow news day.

"Even then, you would probably need the mainstream media to legitimize it. And we can always get help in that arena if we need it from our own people planted in media organizations. They can slow it down and diffuse it as much as they can."

Godfrey steps to the head of the conference room to address them all, "There's another director level conference call in two hours, we need our best assessment by then. I want every witness background analyzed. Find any links between them you can.

"Everyone that has disappeared, I want them checked out. See if there is any electronic foot print after their disappearance. ATM withdrawal, cellphone ping, social media activity, anything.

"If it is a hoax, we can find that out. If it's not, then we need to give our best take on the situation in 120 minutes.

"Because this same conversation is happening all over the globe, in Russian, Chinese, Farsi. And whoever figures these black rectangles out first, may just end up with a leg up on the rest of humanity.

"And God help us all then, if that first-place trophy goes to some Mullah in Tehran.

"In the meantime, I am going to make an immediate recommendation for a rapid deployment force. Special forces only, we need people that can keep secrets. Maybe we can't be everywhere, but if we can get ten, twenty teams together, they can cover a helluva lot of ground with helos and osprey."

Leigh warns, "You may want to take the SR-71 out of

retirement, because these incidents average about three to eight minutes. The longest one we have on record is twelve minutes. By the time someone reports it and that report hits our screens, it'll probably be long gone by the time we get on scene."

Godfrey is adamant, "We have to try. If 9/11 taught us anything, it's that. We have to try to connect the dots. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky.

"Who's to say one of these rectangles won't pop up in the middle of Fort Bragg with a bunch of Green Berets or on Coronado with Seal Team Six? Imagine those hardcore bastards going in hot through one of these babies."

ZONE



CHAPTER 4

THE BLACK HOLE

“I fell off the space station!” Heather cries out as she runs to Miss Nancy, who was sitting on a bench monitoring the playground at the daycare center.

There was barely a scratch on the four-year old’s knee, but Miss Nancy put down the daily reports she was filling out and took Heather’s boo-boo as seriously as if she was working the ER.

“Here, let me see. Where does it hurt?”

Heather points her tiny finger at her knee cap. The pain so intolerable, the poor child was unable to produce words.

Miss Nancy grabs a wipe and cleans off Heather’s

scraped knee cap.

"Will a space Band-Aid make it feel better?"

Heather nods her head, perhaps there was hope after all.

"What was your space mission?" Miss Nancy asks as she applies the Band-Aid.

Heather inspects the newly administered space Band-Aid and finally decides that she will live.

"We were exploring the black hole."

"Oh, that sounds exciting. Tell me about it."

"It's big and black."

"What else?"

"It's shaped like a rectangle."

"A rectangle?"

"That's right."

"I think a black hole is supposed to look more like a circle or like a whirlpool. Do you ever watch the water go down the drain when you take a tubbie?"

"Yes, it goes like this," Heather twirls her finger around and around then pulls her hand down as if it disappeared down the drain.

"That's right, so that's what a black hole would look like."

"This one is a rectangle. It looks like a door. That's why Ryan and Thomas went in, but I'm scared to go in."

"Why?"

"Because it's dark."

"You can't go through life being scared. You can't let boys be the only space explorers. You show them what you can do, too."

"Will you go with me?"

"I'll be over there in a minute. I'm just finishing up my reports."

"Will it hurt when I go in?"

"No, here, I'll give you a special spacesuit that will protect you from the black hole."

Miss Nancy pretends to put a space suit on Heather.

"And here is your helmet," Miss Nancy declares as she places the imaginary spherical helmet on Heather's head. "Go on, show those boys what you can do."

"Okay."

Heather runs back over behind the play structure and Miss Nancy goes back to the reports.

Each report was handwritten, even if they all basically said the same thing. Every time a new teacher started at the daycare center, they always asked the same thing. Why don't we just photo copy the daily report and hand write a few specific notes for each child.

That just wasn't how it was done. Each one was written by hand. It let the parent know there was a real person watching their child that day. Not a copying machine, not an email, not a text. A living, breathing, caring human being.

Nancy had managed to complete three more reports after Heather's interruption, but then she heard it. Or didn't hear it, more appropriately. There was silence. Complete silence on the playground.

Silence on the playground was never a good thing. Usually it meant that somebody got hurt or the kids discovered another garter snake or praying mantis.

As Nancy stood up from the bench she had been sitting on, she kept waiting for the inevitable cries for her to attend to a bumped head or another scraped knee.

But the silence continued. Ten kids are not this quiet, ever. And where were they? They were usually all running about. Occasionally they would be clustered

together in group play. Or if someone was hurt they would naturally form a support circle around the injured child. But there was always at least one frightened kiddo that would run to her for help.

Not this time, though.

Miss Nancy finally walked around the play structure and before her stood one of the black rectangles.

Only one child was in plain view. Little Michael Connors stood near the black rectangle.

"Michael, where is everyone?"

Michael pointed to the black rectangle.

"They all went into the black hole."

What was this thing? At first, she thought it could have been an art project that one of the other teachers had been working on and left outside, but this wasn't anything any of them could have produced.

It was as if someone had cut a hole out of reality. It was an unreal sight and she had trouble processing it. Especially with the on-setting panic of not knowing where the other nine children entrusted in her care were.

What was Michael saying? How could the children have gone into this thing? There was no depth to it. As she walked behind the black rectangle, it appeared to be no thicker than an inch or so.

"Kids! Where are you?" she cried out as she looked around the fenced in playground in a panic. The fence gate was locked and she would have heard nine kids climbing over the chain link fence. Heck, she would have heard just one kid clanking and rattling their way over fence as they tried to make their escape.

"Kids come out here right now!"

"I'll get them for you, Miss Nancy," Michael volunteered as he ran toward the black rectangle.

"No, stay away from it, Michael!"

She reached for him, but it was too late. Always eager to help, Michael ran swiftly into the black rectangle and disappeared into the darkness.

"Michael, no! Come back! All of you, come back out here!"

Miss Nancy reached her hand into the black rectangle. She felt a warm buzz go up her arm and feed into her brain. Surprisingly, it felt good. So good, she almost forgot about the children for an instant.

She yanked her arm back out when she didn't feel any of the kids.

She had no idea what she was facing in this blackness before her. She could run into it after the kids, but if she disappeared who would be left behind to say what had happened.

No, she had to call 911. She had no idea what this was, but let the emergency workers try to figure that out and how best to get the children out of there.

"Kids, I'm calling the police and rescue workers. They'll get you out!"

She looked down to dial her cellphone, but when she looked up, the rectangle was gone.

"What? No!"

The phone was ringing, waiting for someone to answer on the other end.

She felt the air. There was nothing there. No blackness. No warm inviting feeling. Only the cold reality of nothing.

"No! No! No!"

The phone finally answered, "911, what's your emergency?"

ZONE



CHAPTER 5

BARN FIND

Sheriff Buck Harper's Dodge Charger pulled on the Tollen Farm slowly. Mostly to avoid any animals that might be scurrying about, but also it was just better to go in slowly on calls. Be ready for anything.

Out to greet the Sheriff Harper was Jake Tollen. In a past life Jake had been a rock and roll wanna be, but he gave up his dreams of stardom when his father died and left him the family farm.

In the nineties, Jake reinvented the farm as an all organic, free range cruelty free endeavor that seemed to appeal to the growing conscious consumer the small town had been attracting over the years.

Jake didn't look too happy to see the officer, which

was odd, because Jake had been the one to call them out there in the first place. Then again Jake never was big fan of the police. Suspicious to the core of authority and the government in general.

"Sheriff."

"Jake. "

"Just you? Where's Rob?"

"He got a domestic."

In the fall, Jake would put on his Rock and Roll Pumpkin Patch. He'd sell pumpkins and put on a rock show with his band. It was fairly popular with the locals, who would come out to the show dressed in costumes.

Jake would hire Deputy Rob Sebastian on his off-duty hours to work as a safety and security officer for the event. The two had developed, if not a friendship, at least an understanding.

"I said to send Rob. "

"You got me. What'd they take?"

"Nothing."

"They broke in and didn't take anything? Did you catch them in the act?"

"Nobody broke in. Goddamn it, I really wanted them to send Rob."

"Did I just waste my time driving out here? You do know it's a crime to knowingly file a fake police report."

"It isn't fake."

"So, what's the crime, if it isn't a robbery?"

"No crime exactly. Maybe kidnapping. It's about those kids that disappeared out of that daycare center."

"In Oregon?"

"I might know something about that. But just send Rob and I'll show him."

"How would you know anything about those

missing kids?"

"I'll tell, Rob."

"You'll tell me."

"Alright, but you got to promise you and I are going to take care of this. Don't tell anyone else. I don't want a lot of people snooping around my property going through all my stuff."

"Like on your computer? A lot of missing kids turn up in child porn. Is that how you know about those missing kids?"

Jake twisted his face in anger and disgust.

"How the hell can you ask me a question like that? See, this is why I wanted Rob out here. I mean, I wanna help, but I don't wanna be asked crazy questions like that. And I don't want the government coming in here and taking over my farm."

"Tell me what you know about those kids, Jake. Or I'll call the FBI and you can tell them instead of me."

"That teacher they arrested, she says she saw a weird black rectangle take the kids."

"Teacher's crazy."

"Maybe not. I've seen one of those rectangles."

"Where?"

"On my farm. Near the barn."

"That's funny, considering those things are fake as hell. I've seen the photos debunked on the news."

"No, they're real. At least this one is."

"Jake, what angle are you trying to play here, man? You trying to set up another Rock and Roll Pumpkin Patch show? You think you can file a false police report and get a bunch of tourists out here to your farm to investigate. And while all those gullible suckers are out here you just happen to sell them some overpriced

cucumbers and summer squash."

"It ain't a false report, Sherriff."

"Okay, let's do this. When did you first notice one of these rectangles?"

"I saw it about three days ago."

"How long did it stay before it disappeared?"

"It hasn't. It's there right now."

Sheriff Harper looks up.

"Bullshit."

"You want bullshit? Grab a shovel, I got a pen you can clean out. You want one of those rectangles, it's right behind the barn."

"Show me."

"This way, but be careful not to get too close."

They turn the corner and there beside the barn is a black rectangle.

"That's just a...Well, you could do that with a...How are you doing this?"

"I'm not doing it."

"What the hell is that thing?"

"Been asking that for three days straight now. I was hoping it would just go away, like it came and no one would know about it. But then I heard the story about those kids.

"I yelled into it for those kids to come out, but nothing happened."

"I'm gonna call for backup."

"No, don't. I told you I want you and I to handle this."

"FBI put out an alert to notify them of anything related to the case, no matter what. Even if it was one of these phony rectangle reports."

"Don't do it. They're gonna take over my farm. I

know how this works.”

“We don’t know what they are going to do, but I have to report this. My hands are tied.”

“I got a problem then. I grow pot out here, okay. I just don’t want to get arrested.”

“If this thing provides any clues on how we can get those kids back, then I don’t think you’ll have to worry about a little bit of marijuana.”

“Do I have your word? Because it might be more than just a little bit.”

“I’ll do what I can. That’s all I can promise. But for crying out loud, pot is legal to buy here now. Why are you growing your own?”

“Because I live on a freaking farm!”

ZONE



CHAPTER 6

87

Sheriff Buck Harper's report was the 87th recorded domestic incident involving the black rectangles. The 69th report had been the most infamous so far. That was the missing children at the daycare center.

No one believed the daycare worker's story about the black rectangles. No one except for the intelligence agencies that took her into custody to assist with the investigation.

The missing kids had put pressure on the government and intel community to get to the bottom of what was going on. The black rectangle reports were just starting to show up on conspiracy websites, mostly

because of the publicity involving the daycare teacher's initial 911 call.

However, a cover story of the teacher being admitted into a mental health facility, helped steer the story towards the direction of the rantings of an insane lunatic, under whose watch ten kids had suddenly gone missing.

Amongst the skeptical general public, there was no great clamoring for answers on the black rectangles. If anything there were calls to torture the poor teacher until she confessed to what really happened to the children.

That was another reason she was taken into custody, for her own safety.

Soon all the first-person witnesses of all eighty-seven events were rounded up for safe keeping in federal custody. They were told their help was needed in trying to rescue the ten children that had gone missing, as well as rescue the other people that had disappeared into the black rectangles.

Since most of the witnesses had lost someone they knew or loved to the zones, they were more than willing to cooperate, but there were a few a little nervous about being sequestered by the Feds.

By containing the witnesses, the government was able to keep some control over the news of the zones. Which bought them some time to try and get a better understanding of the black rectangles. Especially now that they had one in their control.

Within eight minutes of getting the alert of an active zone, the black hawk with the SEALs aboard was wheels up and headed to the farm.

Jake's instinctive fears of a government seizure of his farm turned out to be prescient. A whole federal village

would soon be mobilized to take control of the farm, but it started with the lone bird of special operators.

The Blackhawk landed 27 minutes after the first report came in and the SEALs had the immediate area secured. Jake was taken into custody, the fields of marijuana providing enough of an excuse for Jake's arrest and subsequent Federal occupation of the farm.

Local law enforcement was used to block all roads leading to the farm. They wanted local faces to be the first contact the public would make if they ventured too close to the farm now.

Anyone that got past the local cops were greeted by roving patrols of Army Rangers assigned to protect the perimeter of the farm.

The immediate airspace over the farm was quarantined and snipers were on the lookout for any aerial drones that might be sent in by desperate people eager for a peek.

As the area was secured, the necessary science teams were brought in to evaluate the zone.

News of a major drug bust spread throughout town. It helped explain the constant helicopter traffic, unusual for this area.

The helicopters were all painted with bright yellow DEA initials on their underbellies and sides, to keep rumors of the mission being anything other than a Drug Enforcement Agency pot bust to a minimum.

Mobile trailers, too, were marked DEA so that anyone seeing them being hauled to the farm wouldn't be too curious about what was going on.

There were six levels to Zone Site One.

The first was the Public Zone, which was basically the rest of the world outside the farm.

The government was in overdrive to try and dampen the black rectangle story in the public zone.

Stories were planted that the daycare worker searched a crazy fringe website and that's how she came up with her excuse for the missing children.

Of course the fringe website was run by the government for just these types of disinformation assignments.

The second zone, the Barrier Zone, was for local law enforcement. The local cops and state police were only told what they needed to know to keep the public out of the immediate area.

The third zone was the Security Zone. Troops, security forces and support staff were brought in to keep the secret mission fed and housed in tents and temporary structures.

There were 1200 soldiers stationed in the Security Zone, just in case something hostile actually came out of the zone. The 1200 soldiers were affectionally called the "speed bump" knowing they would probably do nothing to stop the advanced menace that might emerge from the zone, but perhaps they could at least slow it down just a bit.

At nearby Fort McDill another 15,000 troops were being mobilized on a drill, but told nothing about the black rectangular zones.

If you were in Security Zone, you weren't supposed to talk about why you were in the third level zone. You were there, you kept your mouth shut and you awaited orders.

In the fourth zone, the Classified Zone, that's all you talked about. The Classified Zone was packed with the science, military and intelligence teams tasked with

trying to figure the nature of the zone out. They had talked a lot, but had figured out little.

The fifth zone was the Quarantine Zone. It was a heavily patrolled buffer zone to make sure no one or nothing went to or from the final zone that wasn't supposed to.

The final zone was the zone itself, the Zone Zone. It supplied access to the black rectangle.

A security fence was erected around it, but scientists cautioned against having it fully contained, as it might cause the zone to disappear like all the others. Instead it was covered with a high-tech shielded canopy to give protection from the weather, as well as passing satellites and drones.

The SEALs that initially took control of the zone were still there providing the immediate security in the Zone Zone. If something hostile came out, whatever it was, it would be greeted warmly by the SEALs and their safeties off M4 rifles.

The scientists had placed some monitoring equipment in the immediate area, but the equipment's readings all came back normal, as if the zone wasn't even there at all.

No one knew how long the zone would be there, so there was a real debate on how aggressive the investigation should be.

Some wanted to be as cautious as possible, taking baby steps. Others wanted to storm the SEALs in immediately knowing they might only have one chance to rescue the ten kids and any of the other people who had disappeared in the zone.

The zone had stayed constant through all the activity. No outward change in its appearance was detected. It

was just there, silent and still, challenging all to a staring contest in which it refused to blink.

It was decided a series of probes would be inserted into the zone to get as much information as possible. But it was as if they were inserting the probes into thin air. There were no measurable changes from outside the zone to inside of the zone.

Then they found that no matter what the length of the probe they stuck in the zone, there was never any end to it. Five feet, ten feet, twenty feet, the probes never hit any walls and there were no changes in temperature, air quality, radiation or moisture in the zone.

The one strange thing that did happen was when they sent cameras in, there was no audio or video. It was just pitch black and complete silence. No matter the lens or filter. Infrared, heat or night vision, nothing was visible. A complete void.

Something was there, but then again, it wasn't. They couldn't take a sample of the zone, because there wasn't anything to sample. It was like trying to take a sample of a shadow.

They sent animals in, but they came right out after being forced in. They didn't seem to be in any kind of pain once they went in the zone. Just sort of bored. The animal's brains didn't trigger the same dopamine release that the human brain did.

When it came to the human tests, they decided to go with a scientist rather than a civilian test patient. A scientist would better understand what was happening to the body on a scientific level and also provide less of a security risk than a civilian volunteer.

The human tests were restricted to only partial zone entries. No full immersions.

Dr. Roger Collins volunteered himself to be the test subject. He had the least seniority on the team, so he knew his impact in his regular role would be limited.

By being the test subject, he would have a much higher profile on the team. But it did carry some risks and drawbacks.

For example, Roger was barred from any classified information from that point forward, for fear that his mind could be read by who ever was controlling the zones.

And of course there was the clause on the agreement that he had to sign with the government in order to become the test subject, that he would not hold the government responsible for his death, if the zone caused it. Or hold them responsible for any ill effects to his health caused by the zone.

Roger would sign anything at that point to touch the zone. It was his date with destiny. Do this right and he could be guaranteed at least a footnote in American history. Do it really right and he could save the lives of ten scared kids trapped in the zone.

Roger's fit body was fastened with every sort of monitoring devise you could imagine.

At first the tests were a series of brief touches with his hand.

Just like the witness accounts, Roger reported the euphoric high of contact. This was backed up by test results that showed that his brain was activating and releasing increased dopamine levels.

It was curious this same dopamine increase was not detected in the brains of the animal test subjects. Only the human brains. There for it stood to reason that the

zone knew the difference between types of brains and was only interested in the brains of humans.

Roger was always fitted with a restraining harness to prevent him from going all the way in the zone and disappearing for good.

But after a few days of not making any new progress or discoveries, Roger felt the restraining harness was holding their research back from any new breakthroughs. The cold hard reality was that they needed to do more than touch the zone. Much more.

"Let me go in. All the way," Roger asked the Zone Site One Science Team Lead Dr. Martin Brandt.

"No. Out of the question," the gray bearded Dr. Brandt replied without a moment's hesitation.

Roger pressed his case, "Dr. Brandt, we don't know how long the zone will be here. We have to take this chance."

"Roger, no, you're too valuable to the team to lose you for good. Believe me, it was discussed and dismissed to a person."

"I wasn't brought in on these discussions. My opinion is I go."

"I'm sorry, but we can't consider your opinion in the matter."

"Is this an Ivy League thing?"

"It's an ethical thing."

"But I'm volunteering for it!"

"That doesn't matter. You've been compromised."

"How so?"

"You've experienced the zone. It's like asking a heroin user if he wants to volunteer to keep taking heroin."

"I'm not addicted," protested Roger.

"That's just what an addict would say. Listen, no one has ever come out of a full immersion. As far as we can tell, there is nothing in there. A complete void. Sending someone in there, with what we know at this point, would be murder."

"Someone at some point has to go in."

"I know that. The team knows that. We've been discussing candidates."

"Who?"

"We did a search for terminally ill patients in the VA system. We have 17 potentials, but we have someone we think is our prime choice."

Dr. Brandt pulled a file from his desk in the mobile unit and handed it to Roger. Roger opened the file which started with the service photo of an African American Army Captain.

"He was diagnosed with an aggressive pancreatic cancer. Retired Army Captain. Divorced, no children, given three months to live.

"He recently attempted suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills, but was discovered in time to be revived. He's currently under VA psychiatric care.

Roger nods affirmatively, "Checks off a lot of boxes. You're right, sounds like our guy. You think we can recruit him?"

Dr. Brandt looks up at Roger with a hopeful stare, "Well, I certainly know you'll try your best."

ZONE



CHAPTER 7

OUR GUY

The door to Captain John Murphy's room opened and Murphy, frail and ill, looked up from his tray of food to see Roger in a jacket and tie standing there. At first Roger thought he entered the wrong room. Roger had studied the picture of Captain Murphy from the peak of his Army service.

His handsome African American features in the photo were brought out even stronger by his crisp officer's uniform. His chest was pumped out proudly in the photo, decorated with service ribbons to spare. This was the photo of a man not to be taken lightly.

The man that turned to look at Roger in the hospital

room looked tired and scared. Murphy had lost so much weight and was dressed in a t-shirt and warm up pants. His unshaven, gaunt face was almost unrecognizable from the service photo.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your meal, Captain Murphy."

Murphy waved him in the room, "You ain't interrupting much. Come on in. They told me you were coming today."

Murphy reached out and offered a weak handshake, the energy having left his body weeks ago. Roger took a seat on a nearby chair.

"So you don't mind if we talk while you eat?"

"Who's eating?" Murphy replied as he put the untouched tray of food aside. "Look, I respect what you do, but you're wasting your time here."

"How so?" Roger asked.

"I ain't crazy. And I'm not suicidal. I'm a pragmatist. I did what I did because it was the best option. Look at me as yourself.

"Let's say you were stuck in a room that you couldn't get out of and this room just happened to be on fire with no way of extinguishing it.

"Now beside you on a table is a Glock nine, loaded, ready to go. What would you do? Sit there and slowly burn to death or end it quickly with one shot?"

"I'd kill myself with the gun," Roger freely admitted.

"Great, so do see any reason why we have to waste both our afternoons doing a pointless psych evaluation?"

"No, I don't, but I'm not a psychologist. That was a cover to get me in your room."

"Who are you then?"

"I'm with the Defense Intelligence Agency."

"A spook?"

"Hardly. I'm a scientist."

"What's DI want with me?"

"I have a mission for you."

"This a joke? This part of some fairytale land technique to try to get me to want to live again?"

"No, this fairytale's for real. And it ain't the Disney version. This is old school, European fairytale time, where there isn't a happy ending.

"You know the story out of Oregon where the daycare kids went missing?"

"Sure, daycare worker went crazy and killed them or something."

"No, she didn't."

"They find those kids? They alive?"

"No. They're still missing. How are you feeling physically?"

"Not too good."

"But you can walk around?"

"What is this about?"

"Would you want to try and find those missing kids?"

"Of course, who wouldn't? But what the hell am I gonna do for you?"

"It's classified. I'd have to brief you in a secure location. I have a mobile SCIF outside if you want to talk further. I just need to know if you are interested and if you honestly want to die?"

"I don't wanna die. Who does? But if I am gonna die, I want to go out on my terms. If I could fight this thing, I would, but I can't. I've lived my life, I've made my peace with the world. No one needs me anymore."

"I need you. Your country needs you. Those kids need you. I can't guarantee you anything. We want to send you somewhere no one has returned from and it could be a thousand times more painful than what you're going through right now. I just don't know."

"Look at me. I can barely eat a meal. Jacked up on OxyContin most of the day. Exhausted, because I can't sleep at night."

"Right now, all I need is someone that can walk through a door. After that, I have no idea. You could die that instant, or you could be the hero that helps save the lives of those kids and about twenty other lost souls."

Murphy shakes his head, this guy is just too much.

"Friend, I think you're the one that needs the psych evaluation."

Roger shrugs, "So, that's a no?"

"I have a plan, okay? I think I'll stick to that."

"Understood. Thank you for your time and service, Soldier. God speed, Captain."

There were sixteen other candidates behind Murphy. Roger had no time to play the reluctant hero game with anyone.

Roger got up and left the room, leaving the Captain to face his unappetizing tray of food alone.

Roger was halfway down the hall when he heard the Captain shout from his open door. For the first time, Roger felt he was hearing the strong, forceful Captain he had studied in Murphy's profile folder.

"Hey, Doc?"

He looked back and saw the Captain supporting himself in the doorway. Murphy removed his hands from the frame and walked through the doorway. There was a hint of a fatigued grimace of pain, but it was

overshadowed by pride and a sense of duty.

"How was that?" asked Murphy.

"Perfect."

"All right then, let's kill me."

A short while later the two new friends were in the back of a black SUV heading toward Zone Site One. Captain Murphy was back in uniform and staring at top secret photos of the zones.

"What do you want to eat?" Roger asks him.

"Not really hungry," Murphy responds.

"I feel like you should be entitled to a last meal. Anything you want, I'll do what I can to make it happen."

"Filet mignon and a loaded baked potato, but small portions. No sense in letting it go to waste."

"How do you like your steak cooked?"

"Medium rare."

"We're on it."

"Will I have to pay for it if I back out at the last second?"

"No."

"Throw a lobster tail in there, too."

"Are you really having second thoughts?"

Murphy looked down at the photos of the zones they had provided him with.

"I just get the funny feeling I'm walking into a human bug zapper."

"You may be. We just don't know, but if it is any comfort, I've touched the zone and lived."

"How'd it feel?"

"Honestly? Amazing. Direct contact with a zone triggers a massive dopamine release in the brain. We

think it is a possible lure to entice people to go all the way in the zone.

"Like the way a pitcher plant uses nectar to lure in bugs. Bug thinks it is getting a treat, then it falls down in a pool of liquid inside the plant where it is dissolved and absorbed."

"So you're saying I could go in this thing and get eaten alive?"

"I've been up front with you this whole time. We don't know what happens when someone goes in. All the way in. We just know they don't come out."

"So what's the mission plan from here going forward?"

"Things are gonna be a bit of a rush. There's gonna be some legal papers you're going to need to sign. Talk to some lawyers. Once all that's done and you're an official member of the team, we're gonna rig you with monitors and we'll track your vital signs as we slowly introduce you to the zone.

"We'll start with brief touches, so you can get a feel for it. Then move toward full immersion."

"Can you breathe in there?"

"I was able to, but I also wasn't fully immersed. Here are pictures and profiles of the 32 victims that have gone into a zone and not come back. The kids are the most high-profile ones.

"I know you don't have much time, but try to remember some of their names and faces. You can take the folder in with you in your backpack, but again, we don't know what kind of environment you'll be operating in. So the more you have in your head the better."

"What happens if I go in there and I never come out?"

Am I just going to be lost in some classified government file stored in a warehouse for things that never happened?"

"If you don't have any other burial plans, we'd like to give you full honors at Arlington, even if there's no body. And as far as I'm concerned, what you are doing is as meritorious as any Medal of Honor winner. I'll do my best to make sure that is recognized."

"They only give out the Medal of Honor when we're at war."

"Who says we're not?"

"Then again, I could make it out of there alive. Right?"

"You could."

"Yeah, but what the hell good would that do me now? I just need to know one thing. And be honest with me. This paperwork. Is there a lot of it?"

"It's gonna be brutal. The US Government is essentially sending you to your death. They wanna cross their T's and dot their I's on this one. Speaking of, anybody you want to say goodbye to? We can't exactly broadcast what you're doing, but we can connect you for any final farewells, so to speak."

"Nah, there's no one. Maybe my landlord, she's gonna wanna know where the rent is."

"You can thank her for having me here today. Little Vietnamese lady, feisty as all get out. Nosy, too."

"I didn't want to make a mess of the apartment with a gun, so I used pills. Lot of good that did me. She's the one that found me. Wanted to complain why the trash cans never got taken back off the street."

"If you do think of someone you want to leave a message for, let me know. Things are gonna move pretty

fast once they process your paperwork. The zone could go away at any second, so we want to make sure we get you in there ASAP.”

“Fine by me.”

It’s amazing how nice people treat you when they want you to kill yourself for them. The looks of admiration, the pats on the back, the handshakes, even a few autographs.

The paperwork was still a pain in the ass, but the few bites that he could muster of his last meal were tasty.

Next the medical staff got to have their fun. A bunch of rushed exams to get Murphy’s most up to date stats before zero hour.

Some of the staff was concerned about his rapid heartrate caused by the cancer, but there wasn’t much they could do about that now.

Then the monitoring systems were attached. A wireless chip system was implanted beneath the skin. It would monitor and transmit everything, breathing, heart rate. Whatever they could monitor, they did.

He was equipped with a body cam, not that they had had much luck with getting any audio or video transmitted out of the zone.

It all reminded Captain Murphy of seeing the video of astronauts being prepared by NASA before liftoff.

It had always been a dream of his to be an astronaut. He didn’t have the right stuff to get in the program when he was young and now he didn’t have the cash to hop on one of the private sector space tourist flights to catch a little black sky and zero g.

But now, for all he knew he was going into space. He was certainly going into an unknown darkness. What

the hell was space, if it wasn't that?

After all the prep was finished, Captain Murphy was finally reunited with Roger. He had only known the man for a few hours, but it was like seeing an old friend again after years, so much had happened.

But now was when the fun really was going to start. Roger was there to escort Captain Murphy from the Classified Zone, through the Quarantine Zone to the Top-Level Zone Zone, which was now nicknamed ZZ Top.

As they waited at the final gate in the Quarantine Zone, Roger held the Captain up.

"This is it, friend. Your last private moment before we go on stage. Once we go through those doors everything on ZZ Top is recorded and broadcast on closed circuit to intel groups across the world. This is the last chance for privacy you are going to get. Do you have anything you want to say or write or listen to?"

"They let me listen to Marvin, Marley and Michael while they prepped me. Not a bad way to go out."

"If you're good, we can go."

Roger's started to move, but Murphy reached out and held Roger back now.

"Hey, listen. I did the best I could. I should have done better, but I didn't, but I could have done a helluva lot worse."

Rogers nodded sincerely at Murphy's finally thoughts.

"Understood. Did you want me to tell someone that for you?"

"No, just a tree falling in the woods wanting to be heard one last time."

"Well, it was heard. Now, I do have something I want

to tell you, before we go in there."

Murphy waves him off.

"I don't want to hear any hero bullshit."

"It's not. I know they've given you all your official communication protocols and codes, but I want to have a secret signal just between you and me. Something simple, yet distinctive, so it won't be missed."

"Like a code word?"

"Code letter. I don't know how hard it will be for you to communicate from the other side. So far no one else has. It may be impossible, but if there is any way to send a signal. Send a X if you're in trouble. If it is really bad in there. But if you're safe, in a good place, but you just can't get out, send back a Z."

"X if it is bad. Z if it is good. That could be up to some interpretation, my friend."

"Bottom line is this. If I look up on my fogged-up bathroom mirror or my computer screen and suddenly I see the letter Z has mysteriously appeared for no reason, that means, all things considered, it would be okay for me to enter a zone. I may not be able to get back out, but I'll like what I find in the zone."

"If I don't come out of this thing, I hope I'm sending you that Z real soon."

"Oh, and Murphy, another thing, you are that hero bullshit. Own it when we go in there. A lot of good people are gonna feel like they killed a man today. Make it easy for them."

"I'll try, but just remind them, you can't kill a dead man."

Roger's swipes his ID and the gate opens, giving them access to the Zone Zone.

The two then walked through the security and staff

gathered there to see Captain Murphy off. There wasn't the handshaking and back slapping as there had been in the previous zones. No, these select few were there with a job to do. They also had in their work area the constant reminder of why they were there in the first place. The zone.

Roger motioned to the zone, as if it wasn't obvious to Murphy the second he passed through the security gate.

Black.

Rectangular.

Curved corners.

Silent.

Still.

Normally Murphy thought black was beautiful. Not in this instance. The zone truly looked like a doorway to death and soon he would be stepping through it.

It wasn't scary in an over the top horror movie kind of way. No, the zone had a cold indifference to it.

Stay the hell away or come right in and die, I don't really care what you do.

Captain Murphy had seen death staring back at him before. There were three times he should have been killed in the Army and lived to tell about it.

Lived for what? So ten years later he could be shown the MRI images of the tumors in his pancreas, so embedded in his vital organs, there was no hope for him.

He survived three encounters with death by the skin of his teeth, only to have his own body turn around and say, "Screw you, I'm taking your ass out!"

His own damn body. How do you like that for loyalty?

The first series of tests conducted were duplicates of what Roger had done. Initially, just the fingers and hand

were inserted into the zone and then gradually more and more of the body until it was a near complete insertion.

Murphy had the same reaction as everyone, a euphoric high that in his case was even more dramatic, as he reported that it so greatly reduced his pain.

More effective than the OxyContin he'd been prescribed. Much more. Additionally there was also a strange side effect from making contact with the zone.

"I'm hungry," Murphy remarked.

The operations team wasn't sure what to make of Murphy's declaration. They didn't have any kind of food prepared for him and no time allotted in the schedule for a meal break. They looked to site leader Dr. Brandt and mission lead Roger for direction, neither of which were real keen on pausing the program at this point.

Dr. Brandt lowered the iPad he was following the mission progress on and gave Murphy his full attention, then spoke, "The next test was going to be the full insertion."

Roger added, "Yeah, Murphy. Um, do you have to eat now?"

Murphy smiled and shook his head in slight amusement, replying "You don't get it. I haven't been hungry in weeks."

Dr. Brandt nodded, "Let's note that. His appetite returned with contact with the zone."

The young communications officer Lt. Terry Kohl lifted a Zone Perfect nutrition bar off his work station. He was keeping it there more as an inside joke than as an actual snack.

Lt. Kohl offered it to Murphy, "I have a Zone bar, if it's okay for you to eat it."

All eyes again went to Dr. Brandt and Roger. Brandt glanced at the medical officer. The medical officer nodded that it was okay for him to eat it.

"It's fine. Eat it if you want. You might need all the energy you can get in there," Dr. Brandt concluded.

Murphy grabbed the bar and tore the package open and wolfed it down as quickly as he could, so not to cause too much of a delay in the mission. He handed the empty wrapper back.

"Thanks, I'm ready."

Roger nodded and took control of the mission again, "Okay, team this is it. Full body insertion number one.

"John, you go in, but then try to come right back out immediately. If you can't come out, start your recon and rescue mission to the best of your ability. Good luck, Captain."

There was an impromptu round of applause. Murphy acknowledged it with a wave and a nod.

"Hopefully I'm gonna be seeing you all in a couple of seconds, but if not, I'm gonna do my best to find those kids and get us all back home another way."

He then pointed at the zone with a determined finger and spoke, "We're gonna beat this thing. We always have and we always will."

With that he turned and began his walk into the zone.

He started his inner monolog to keep himself going.

"I'm not stopping. Don't you hesitate. You go. You don't stop. Do it. Do it. It's okay. You're gonna be okay. Just go. Go."

Everyone watching kept waiting for the Captain to bail at the last second. They were watching a man jump out of an airplane with no parachute into a great unknown.

Murphy didn't hesitate. Didn't miss a step. Captain John C. Murphy, Jr. marched right in the zone like a good soldier on drill duty.

The communications officer repeatedly tried to contact him, but there was no response after he slipped in the darkness.

"Are we getting any kind of audio or video back?"

"Nothing. Just the like the drones."

"Time?"

"He's been in thirty seconds."

"Is there a GPS reading?"

"Last GPS readings place him right here. No movement since he stepped all the way in."

"Send in the extraction officer."

A suited-up soldier with a tether attached to him goes almost all the way in the zone, but then comes back out empty handed.

"There's nothing there. He's gone," the soldier reports.

The team deflates with the disappointing, but not wholly unexpected results. All except for the medical officer monitoring the life support readings.

"Actually, I have a heartbeat. He's still alive, theoretically," the medical officer informs them.

They all rush over and gather around the medical screens.

"Are you sure that's him?" asks Roger.

"It's him. See, how rapid his heartbeat is?"

"This isn't a delayed signal?" asks Dr. Brandt.

"No, it's real time," confirms the medical officer.

"So we can't communicate with him, but he's not dead," Dr. Brandt observes.

"We got a heartbeat. That's what I can tell you."

"What about the zone? Is it still stabile? They've been known to disappear after they take someone," Dr. Brandt asks.

"Zones go even if they don't take someone. Hopefully we have a super zone here that has stabilized somehow," Roger offers.

"What 's our time at?" asks Dr. Brandt.

"Two minutes, ten seconds."

"I'm gonna assemble an emergency briefing. Let them know our immediate findings. We're going to need downlinks to Dr. Angrist at MIT and Dr. Okuneye at Harvard to assist with our initial analysis."

Lt. Kohl calls out from his communication station, "Dr. Brandt, sir, you need to see this!"

"Are you getting him?" Dr. Brandt asks excitedly.

"No, there's a Facebook live feed with an another active zone," Lt. Kohl reports.

"Jesus, no! Where?" Roger asks.

"South Carolina."

"Get it on a monitor. Someone contact Facebook and have it shut down immediately," orders Dr. Brandt.

The Facebook live feed is piped through to a monitor for the whole staff to see.

The video is being captured on a cellphone. A white suburban wanna be homie poses with the zone, making sure to display his fly tats.

"Yo, bitches, Raw Dog is fucking famous now. Bam! Look at that shit! This is the Twilight Zone right here in Myrtle Beach, SC, ya'll.

"This shit here will get you high as a mother fuck, too. You see one of these black bitches, hit that shit up."

Raw Dawg sticks his tattooed hand in. And shakes his head in amazement.

"Damn, that's good! Yo, so check it. That dude that was the first man to walk on the Moon, naw dawg. I'm gonna be the first man to walk in one of these mother fucks, live from the MBSC!"

"Nah, man, don't do it. You crazy, homie," the voice behind the cellphone calls out.

"Watch this shit," Raw Dawg boasts.

Raw Dawg struts into the zone and disappears from sight.

"Damn man, you gone, bro. Come on outta that shit. Yo, seriously, get your cracker ass out of there."

The zone then disappears.

"Oh, shit! Where'd it go?"

The cellphone turns in all directions looking for the absent zone.

"Chris, where you at? Come on, man!"

The Zone Site One staff is completely deflated as they turn away from the monitor that had the Facebook live feed on it.

"How many people were watching that?" Dr. Brandt asks.

"About a half a million by the end," Lt. Kohl tells him. Then adds while holding up a phone, "There's an incoming call for you, Dr. Brandt."

"Who is it?" Dr. Brandt asks.

"You'll recognize the voice."

Dr. Brandt takes the phone from Lt. Kohl, "This is Brandt." He listens for a beat. "Hello Mr. President. Yes, sir. I did see it."

ZONE



CHAPTER 8

THE RESOOLUTE DESK

There were two men that really mattered that night in the Oval Office. Tony Perez and John Whittier.

One was going to count down from five and then point to the other man, whose job it was then to address the nation and the world as President of the United States.

Tony's grandparents had come across the border illegally from Mexico, but managed to stay as their children were born in the United States. In 1986 they both became US Citizens under President Ronald Regan's amnesty program.

Tony was educated in rough California border town

public schools, but managed to go to college after serving in the Marines, including two tours in Afghanistan.

He would graduate with a degree in political science and began a career as a political consultant, proving to be especially useful to candidates trying to make inroads into the Latino community.

He worked on four winning state elections in a row, with a very skilled hand at crafting TV spots that cut through the political clutter.

The big boys called up the promising upstart to join them in the major leagues of the national political scene, where he continued his ascent.

John Whittier, had attended Harvard, just as his father and grandfather had before him. He had never served his country in the Armed forces or in any capacity. He had inherited a trust fund and used that to do the type of work he wanted to do rather than what he had to do in order to support a family.

His family had always been involved in politics one way or another, so after he graduated from college he moved to DC to try and learn the family business.

He'd pass by the White House almost every day and swore one day he would work there.

Because of his family's money and connections, he was never afraid to fail, so he did, quite often.

His first marriage, his first three businesses, his sobriety, all failures.

He then met his second wife, who helped turned things around for him in a big way. He always knew there would be second and third chances for him, it was just the way it was. And even though it took him most of his adult life, he did finally achieve his goal of

working in the White House.

It was his, John S. Whitter III's, honor on this momentous day in our nation's history to countdown from five and point to the President of the United States Antonino Perez.

"My fellow Americans and citizens of the world. Today, like so many of you, I witnessed the video from South Carolina of something the world has never seen before.

"But just because something is new and unexplored to us, that does not make it a threat to be feared.

"Tonight, I want to assure you that the full intelligence, military and scientific assets of the United States are busy at work trying to gain an understanding of what is going on.

"We have actually been aware of these unusual events for the past ten days. We tried to keep the initial discovery of these occurrences a secret, until we could give a fuller understanding of what was happening.

"The events of today, make that impossible now. So tonight I am prepared to share with you what we know."

"But before I do, I want to reassure you that we are safe. There is no reason to panic. There is no reason to fear an invasion from a foreign entity. And, no, despite the wild speculation, there is no sign that these events are caused by extraterrestrial, spiritual or religious forces.

"In a show of full disclosure, I'd like to share with you some of the photographic evidences of these objects that we are currently referring to as zones.

"A zone is a black rectangular shape with rounded corners, which stands at eight feet tall and four feet wide. They have been appearing randomly around the

globe for the past ten days.

“If you see one of these zones, you are warned to stay away from it. Under no circumstances should you make contact with a zone and never go in one.

“Contact with a zone has led to the disappearance of thirty-two individuals in America, including the tragic loss of 10 children from a daycare center in Oregon.

“But there is hope for these lost souls. We have conducted a test of a brave volunteer. A patriot and hero, Army Captain John Murphy, who when stricken with a terminal cancer diagnoses accepted the call of his nation to enter a zone.

“While we have lost communications with Captain Murphy, he was fitted with a monitoring system. That system is still receiving his heartbeat. This has led us to conclude that while the whereabouts of these individuals that have entered zones is unknown, we believe they are all still alive.

“Henceforth, we are committed to the safe return of all those that have been lost into one of these zones. With that in mind, it is crucial that there not be anymore disappearances into these zones.

“The education of the American public begins tonight. All zones are to be reported immediately to government officials.

“And while we do not believe there is any immediate threat from these zones, their benevolent nature is always subject to change.

“If you see a zone, please report it. We have established a government website zonefacts.gov. There you can learn all the facts we have on these zones. If you see a zone you will be able to report it on the website. If you feel a person is missing and is a possible victim of

zone entry, you can also report that on this website.

“You can also download the free app zone facts for your mobile device with all the same features as the zonefacts.gov website.

“In the meantime, despite the call to vigilance, we also ask you to go on about your normal business. Live your life without fear, but with caution instead.

“We will continue to offer updates on any new understanding we have of the zones and on the rescue efforts to retrieve those that have disappeared.

“So, please remember to go to the website zonefacts.gov and download the free app Zone Facts.

“Facts, not fear will get us through this challenge, just as we have gotten through any number of challenges this country has faced in the past.

“It is very simple, if you see a zone, report it and never go in. If you can do that, you will be fine.

“God bless you and God bless the United States of America.”

ZONE



CHAPTER 9

WELCOME TO THE ZONE, BITCH

The phone buzzes with an incoming instant message: you there

Any excuse to stop studying Trig on a sunny Saturday afternoon was good enough for Stan. Even if it was just Darin looking for another ride somewhere. Stan types back: yes

Zone party

No way

Yes way

Where?

Can't say, because secret
Can't say, because bullshit
Fine, I'll find someone else to drive
Good, tired of being your Uber so you can go get laid
while I wait in the car
Karyn is going to be there
She has a boyfriend
Not anymore
No shit, no boyfriend
Boyfriend was shit
Lol
So pick me up, we have to get there fast, before the
zone goes away.
My mom won't let me out of the house
Why
Zones
Just try. Say you are going to movies
Won't work, but I'll try

Stan bounces down the stairs in a casual way, not wanting to seem too excited.

He finds his mom where she always was, planted on the couch with her iPad on her lap, iPhone by her side and catching up on her DVR on the wall mounted big screen.

"Hey, mom."

"Hey, what's up?" she responds, but her eyes never leave her screens.

"Can I go to the movies with Darin?"

The request jolts her to look up at her son.

"Honey, no. We talked about this."

"Come on, Mom. I'm tired of being inside."

"Not with those things out there. No."

"Mom, there are no zones around here now. I just checked the app."

"There have been three sightings this week."

She opens the Zone Facts app on her iPad and shows him the map of their town with the three reported zone sightings on it.

"Those are days old and all long gone."

"I don't care."

"Mom, I'm not gonna go into a zone, okay? Seriously, as soon as one pops up someone reports it and the cops are there like immediately."

"You could just be walking down the street and one could pop up right in front of you. Did you see the clip of the lady walking and talking on her cellphone? She wasn't paying attention and she walked right into a zone."

"Oh my God, Mom! That clip was so fake."

"Even if it was fake, it could happen."

"Mom, a zone could pop up in my room upstairs. Or right here. I am as safe in a movie theater as I am anywhere."

"I said no."

"How long is this going to go on for?"

"As long as those things are out there?"

"Am I going to be able to go to college next year?"

"They have online programs."

"Mom, seriously."

"We don't know what those things are."

"Yes, we do. They are big black rectangles that dumb people disappear in if they are stupid enough to go in."

"I'm not stupid, mom. I know you can't get back out if you go in. If I see a zone, I promise I'll stay away and call the cops."

"Can't you wait until the movie is available on demand?"

"No, I mean, I'm afraid to even look at my phone now because of spoilers. Mom, you have to trust me.

"Look, I get it, the first few days we were all scared. There wasn't enough money in the world to get me to go outside when the zones started."

He walks over and opens their window curtains to see cars passing by in the street.

"But now, everything is back to normal. Mostly. People are going about their business. You just have to be careful. You can't stop living. The President even said so himself."

"That illegal Mexican idiot doesn't know anything. Wasn't even born here."

"He was, too, Mom. Come on."

"You know, some people say God sent those things as punishment for electing him."

"Mom, you can't say that stuff anymore."

"Yes, I can. He hasn't set up his PC dictatorship yet. This is still a free country."

"If it is so free, then why can't I go to the movies?"

She sighs and relents.

"Promise me you'll keep the Zone Facts app on? If there is a zone anywhere near you, then you need to stay at least a mile away."

"Okay, I will."

"And text me when you get to the theatre."

"I will. I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too."

Stan, bends down and gives his mom a hug. She embraces her son warmly and then goes back to her screens.

Darin practically jumps through the window of Stan's car when he pulls up in front of his house.

"Dude, we're going to a zone party! This is gonna be fucking awesome!"

"If it's still there."

"It's there."

"Well, where is it?"

"Go out on 99 south, about twenty miles."

"There's nothing out there."

"Yeah, no shit. That's why no one's reported the zone yet. Danny Johnson and his brother found it deer hunting in the woods this morning."

"Those fucking assholes. This is gonna be a jock party."

"Mike, Tom and Scott are there. It's gonna be cool."

"And Karyn's gonna be there?"

"Yeah, man. I told Patty that you were coming and Karyn was super excited."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you lie to me? I'm already driving you and you still gotta lie to me."

"I mean, I'm sure she's super excited. That's the feeling I got talking to Patty."

"Dude, I talk you up every time I'm around Karyn. Tell her you're this boss guy and shit. Why do you think she broke up with her boyfriend?"

"Because he's a dick."

"Yeah, right. Then she hears all this good stuff about you from me. So, just be cool when we get there. You're in, bro. I'm telling you, you're in."

"Okay. We'll see."

"Cool, so look, because this shit is all out in the woods, do you think we could use your car?"

"Man, I gotta drive this thing! No."

"Dude, it might not even happen. Just in case, right?"

"Maybe."

"Cool, so just leave it unlocked when we get there."

"I can't leave it unlocked. People are going to steal all my stuff."

"Let me just hold the keys then when we get there."

"No."

"Man, I can't be trying to track you down and shit when it's go time. I gotta just be ready to do this shit. You know, jump in the vehicle and get busy, bro."

"Fine."

"Sweet. So, dude, man, we're gonna see a fucking zone. That's cool, right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you gonna touch it?"

"No way. Are you?"

"Fuck yeah, I'm gonna finger that shit. Why would you go to a zone party if you're not gonna get some Z?"

"I wanna see Karyn. That's all I'm going for."

"Look, dude, you get there and start pussing out when you see the zone, what do you think Kayrn's gonna think?"

"That I'm smart. Smart enough not to touch a zone."

"She's gonna think you're a pussy."

"You're seriously gonna touch it?"

"Yeah. It's gonna be awesome. You've seen all those challenges on YouTube. You just don't go all the way in. As long as one finger is sticking out of the zone, you're totally cool. Totally safe."

"Don't do it. Seriously, it messes with your mind."

You turn into like a zombie and then that's all you think about afterward, just wanting to touch a zone again. I heard a guy talking about it on the news. Said he's totally addicted now. Ignores his wife, kids, just drives around all day trying to touch zones."

"Dude, some people drink a few beers and turn into alcoholics. Other people drink a few beers and nothing. It's all brain chemistry. We have good brain chemistry. We smoke pot. Are we hooked on reefer?"

"No."

"Right. We both drink, but we don't have to drink, right?"

"This is different. Zones, no one knows what they are. Are they good, evil? No one knows how they work."

"Dude, you think too much. How does a fucking car work?"

"What do you mean?"

"You turn the car on and just go. You don't know how every part in the car works, right? You just drive it.

Fucking iPhone. How does it do half the crap it does? I don't know, I just use it. They're not good or evil. You just use them."

"Like you use me for rides."

"Dude, did or did I not get you laid?"

A smile creeps up on Stan's face.

"Yeah, I see that smile. You'd still be a virgin if I hadn't gotten you the hook up."

Just then they are passed by three cars flying by. A Camaro, BMW and a Tesla.

"Oh, shit. The word is out. Everyone's gonna be there now. We better hurry before the cops show. Go faster, dude."

"All right, I will. Just chill."

There was a line of cars all parked on the side of the country road. Kids were jumping out and heading into the woods. Stan parked and he and Darin jumped out.

They did some last second primping and then headed into the forest, following other kids through the woods.

They had to hike for about a mile, following a trail of spray-painted trees marked with the letter "Z."

Then they heard the chants and cheers and followed those the rest of the way.

"FINGER! FINGER! FINGER! FINGER!" the crowd would chant until it roared its approval with cheers and whistles.

Stan and Darin broke through the tree line and there it was. A zone surrounded by a ring of high school kids and other revelers. Most were holding beers or red Solo cups. A few passed around a joint.

A reluctant kid was pushed out of the circle and stood alone in front of the zone.

Then the crowd started chanting again, "Finger, finger, FINGER!"

The guy shook his head no and pushed his way back behind the ring of kids, wanting no part of the zone.

A moan of disappointment traveled through the crowd along with some shouts of "Pussy!" and "You suck!"

Next an energetic party girl jumped out. The crowd roared again feeding off of her unbridled enthusiasm.

She handed her red Solo cup off to a friend and faced the zone one on one.

She put her hand in the zone and reacted with a surprised smile.

"Oh, shit, that feels good!"

The crowd roared, emboldening her to go further in. Then the chanting started.

"Finger! Finger! Finger!"

She took a deep breath and then stuck her head and half her body into the zone.

"FINGER! FINGER! FINGER!"

The girl then kept going in the zone until all that was left sticking out was her hand. She flipped the crowd the bird and then sunk her hand in until only her middle finger was sticking out."

The crowd roared and the girl emerged from the zone and raised her arms in triumph.

Darin saw Patty and Karyn in the cheering crowd and cut over to them. Patty wrapped her arms around Darin and gave him a huge kiss.

"What took you so long?" Patty asked.

"We got here as fast as we could," Darin replies.

Stan gives Karyn a warm smile.

"Hi, Karyn"

She smiles back.

"Hi. Is this crazy or what?" Karyn remarked at the frenetic scene.

Darin was pumped, "It's insane. Look at that thing, it's like from a movie or something."

Stan asked, "Have you two touched it, yet?"

Patty shook her head, "No, I'm not gonna touch it."

Darin agreed strongly, "Me neither. Hey, I forgot my cellphone in the car. Go back with me to get it."

"Okay. Karyn, you cool to stay here with Stan?"

Karyn nods, "That's fine."

Patty replies, "Cool."

Darin and Patty headed off to the car, giggling and

flirting as they go.

Karyn and Stan ignore each other for an awkward moment, taking in the sight of the zone and the wild scene around it.

Then Stan brakes the ice, "You want me to get you a drink?"

Karyn keeps her eyes fixed on the mysterious black rectangle.

"I want to touch that thing."

"You do?"

"Yeah, but I'm afraid. The crowd starts chanting and stuff. I don't want to do the whole finger challenge thing. I just want to touch it really quick."

"So weird to see one in person."

Karyn asks him, "Are you going to touch it?"

"I can. I mean, we can go up together, so you're not alone."

"Would you?"

"Yeah, sure. When did you want to do it?"

"These things go away with no warning, right? So, we should probably, like, do it now."

"Yeah, that would be the smart thing."

"I just don't want to wait and watch it disappear."

"I don't want to miss my chance, either."

As they both step forward, she grabbed his hand for moral support against the rabid crowd.

The crowd reacted as they stepped out, but Stan raised his hand and motioned for the crowd to calm down.

"Settle down, we're just gonna touch it real quick."

The crowd calmed with a few boos and again the "You suck" guy let's his displeasure be known to all.

Stan and Karyn now stood in front of the zone

holding hands. Karyn had her phone out and snapped a few pictures of the zone.

"I'm afraid," she tells Stan.

"Don't be."

Stan reaches out and touches the zone first.

He breaks out in a smile.

"God, that's so cool."

"Really?"

"Here, we'll touch it together."

Stan takes her hand and intertwines their fingers and sticks them in.

"Oh, wow!"

"It's cool, right?"

"How does it do that?"

"I don't know, but I like it."

"It's amazing. Thank you"

"You're welcome."

The two stare into each other's eyes.

"Kiss her!" someone shouts from the crowd.

Karyn turns away, with a blushing smile and starts to tap away on her iPhone.

The crowd starts to chant.

"Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!"

Karyn looks back up at Stan.

"Sorry I made you do this. I didn't mean to embarrass you"

"I'm not embarrassed."

She holds his hand tighter, trying to give him a signal.

"Kiss her! Kiss her!" the chants get louder.

Stan wanted to kiss her, but the last thing he wanted was to go in for a kiss and then get rejected in front of everyone. Seriously, she was bored with him already, as

she was busy tapping away on her phone now.

Stan felt a buzz go off in his pocket. He thought it might be Darin telling him something was wrong with his car. Or maybe it was his mom trying to check up on him again.

Stan took his phone out to check the text.

"Kiss Me," it read.

Stan looked over at Karyn who showed him her iPhone screen, which displayed that she sent the "Kiss me" text to him.

Suddenly a "Luv 2" text reply appears on her screen as Stan types a response to her.

They lower their phones and move in closer to each other as the crowd roars its approval.

Stan blocks it all out and focuses solely on Karyn, as he leans in to kiss her, but instead of feeling her warm lips, he feels instead a powerful shove in his chest and tumbles backwards.

Karyn looks on in horror as their grip breaks and Stan falls backwards into the zone and disappears in the darkness, his hands reaching out helplessly as he goes.

"Fuck you, asshole!" shouts Randy, a big lout of a guy, that now stands where Stan had been, his tight fists pumped and ready to fight.

Karyn is shocked at the sudden turn of events.

Tom, one of Stan's friends jumps out and confronts Randy at the zone, "Dude, why did you do that?"

"Fucker was gonna kiss my girl! Fuck him!"

"I'm not your girlfriend anymore, Randy!" Karyn protests.

Tom shouts out to the stunned crowd, "Someone call 9-1-1!"

The crowd starts to disperse knowing the police will

be making an appearance soon.

Tom looks at Randy, who still doesn't seem to grasp the magnitude of what he has done.

"Dude, he can't come out of there!"

Randy nods, "Damn right! I'll fucking kick his ass!"

Tom tries to explain it to the thick headed Randy.

"No, man, he's stuck in that thing. You killed him!"

Randy rolls his eyes.

"No, I didn't. Dude, get your pussy ass out of there! Seriously, everyone just quit freaking out. I didn't do shit! I just pushed him. That's all. It's no big deal, man.

"Did you hear me, bitch? Get out of there!"

ZONE



CHAPTER 10

SPITBALLING

“Look, kids are dumb. You tell them not to touch something, what are they going to do? Touch it.”

To hear a twenty-year old declare that kids were dumb, gave the older staffers at the ad agency pause. What did a twenty-year old know from kids? You, you’re the kid.

Still the campaign they had been asked to pitch for by MAZE, Mothers Against Zone Entry, was going to skew younger, so they needed youth in the room, so the pronouncement had to be tolerated if not encouraged.

Debra Bell, the owner of the small boutique ad agency that specialized in non-profits asked Kimber

Colfax, who was interning with them, to sit in on the blue-sky session to see if her youthful vantage point could be put to some use in helping steer them to a winning pitch for the account.

Debra smiled and nodded, "We all agree with that. So?"

Kimber continued, "So, I say we have a campaign telling kids to touch zones. Like, go ahead, touch a zone, we dare you.

"We get these really entitled douche bag guys or queen bee bitches and have them be like, "Why don't you just go into a zone. Just go. It'll be one less person I have to compete against to get into med school.

"Or go in to a zone, because I know your boyfriend really wants to be with me."

Debra breathes in, then offers some constructive criticism to the young intern, "I get it, but MAZE won't. I know we're just brainstorming here, but I think it is a nonstarter."

Andrew Miller, who mostly did graphic design for the agency, but was still a good resource for ideas in these early stages, made his pitch next.

"I say we go old school. Bring back John Roselius, the frying pan and the egg. This time the frying pan is shaped like a black rectangle. John says, 'This is a zone, this is you. This is you in a zone.' Then he drops the egg in the zone frying pan and the egg just disappears. 'Any questions, he asks?'"

"That guy is still alive?" Debra asked.

"I heard he OD'd," Zelda interjected. Zelda was their hipster office weekend comedian. They all had been roped into attending her open mic night sessions at one time or another.

"Really?" Debra asked, not sure if Zelda was just making another joke or not. "He died of an overdose?"

"No, but how cooler would the world be if he did?" Zelda cynically offers up.

As an intern, Kimber was use to looking stuff up for the group sessions. She had pulled up John Roselius's Internet Movie Data Base listing and was ready to report to the group, "According to IMDb he is still alive and, interesting side note, he came out in favor of legalizing recreational pot."

Zelda ponders, "So does that mean in thirty years we'll be cutting a spot asking voters to support recreational zone use?"

"Has any one here ever seen a zone?" Andrew asks the group.

Debra speaks up first, "Kinda, I was in a traffic jam stopped by one when it appeared on the side of a road. By the time Michelle and I got there the police had it screened off. I couldn't actually see it, but it was weird being that close to one."

Ayana Thompson, then spoke. Ayana was the first African-American employee Debra had ever hired. Debra never considered herself a racist, especially considering she had an Asian wife, but the reality was she had an all-white staff for years.

Debra tried to rationalize it. They were a small agency, she never had that many black applicants interview with her, everyone she hired was well qualified for the job, the city they lived in just wasn't as diverse as other cities.

Debra kept the position open for months, convincing herself that the perfect person was out there. She just had to wait. Then Ayana was suggested from a former

employee who had left the agency for a larger market. She knew Ayana was looking for a major change in her life after coming off of a divorce. She actively recruited Ayana to fly out and see the city. Three weeks later Ayana was living and working there.

Ayana was quiet, but she picked her moments well. Debra had secretly nicknamed her EF Hutton, because when she spoke people listened. It was a secret nickname, because Debra didn't believe in nicknames for her employees. You called people by the name they wanted to go by and that was it. Also she doubted any of her younger staff would even remember the old EF Hutton commercials the tagline came from.

So EF Hutton had started to speak and once again they were all listening to Ayana's measured voice.

"One of my friend's on Facebook, her daughter disappeared a week ago. No break in at her apartment. Found her car on her college campus parked in the student lot.

"No cellphone activity since she disappeared. She hasn't used her credit or ATM cards, either. They're afraid she may have gone into one of these zones.

"She had been getting some counseling, but they just can't imagine she would have just gone into one of these zones without saying something to anyone, but they just don't know.

"So this is real, what we're doing here. If we can stop one person from going into a zone, then let's do it."

Debra acknowledged Ayana, "I'm sorry to hear about your friend's daughter. I hope they find her.

"I don't understand it. I don't want to get us side tracked, but if a zone just popped up right now, who here would touch it?"

"Not me," Ayana said firmly.

"Maybe," Kimber shrugged.

"I would," Zelda pronounced.

"Why?" explored Debra.

Zelda reasoned, "I would want to know what it felt like. Not everyone that touches a zone goes in. A lot of people resist the urge. Most in fact. Especially now that the dangers are more well known."

Andrew offered his thoughts, "I still wouldn't touch one. I have Michael and Bree to take care of. I can't take the chance of accidentally going in. Or being pushed in like that kid in Indiana."

Ayana reacts with outrage, "Did you hear that the punk's lawyer says he can't be charged with murder, because they can't prove you actually die when you go into a zone."

Kimber interjects, "It's true. I mean, they are still picking up that Army guy's heartbeat. And listen to this. When he went into the zone, he had like this weird heartbeat, because of his cancer. Now, his heartbeat, its fine."

"The zone fixed his heart?" Ayana asked unbelieving.

Kimber responds, "No, they think the zone cured his cancer, which caused his heartrate to go back to normal."

Andrew scoffs, "Yeah, right. Where did you read that?"

"On Facebook," Kimber tells them.

"Real Facebook or fake Facebook?" Andrew asks.

Kimber replies, "It was real. USA Today posted it. Well, it was USA something."

Debra asks them again, "If you had a fatal disease. Would you go in a zone then?"

Zelda answers first, "What do you have to lose, right?"

Kimber adds, "If they ever figure these zones out. Make it so you are able to go in and out, like logging on and off Facebook, then I think more people would go in. A lot more."

Ayana shakes her head, "Thank God, they're not. But I wanna go back to what Greg said earlier. About not wanting to leave his kids behind.

"What if we focus on the people we would leave behind? Get a mockup of a zone and have the friends and family of the people left behind surrounding it. And then run the person's name and the date they disappeared in a zone."

"Not bad," Andrew chimes in. "Visually, I could see it. Like the Runaway Train video by Soul Asylum. We could even try to get the song to run with it."

Kimber cautions, "It might provoke some people to go in. Like they want all these people to miss them. Instead of suicide, they'll just go in a zone."

Debra adds, "That might be overthinking it. I say we put it on the short list."

Andrew asks, "How do you hashtag that?"

Debra gives it a try, "Hashtag think about those you left behind."

Andrew shakes his head, "Gotta be shorter than that."

Kimber suggests, "Hash tag left behind."

Zelda, "No, those are those awful Christian movies."

Ayana gets defensive, "I liked that series."

Zelda asks, "You're serious?"

Ayana, "Yeah, on HBO. It was good."

Andrew corrects them, "No, that was The Leftovers.

And it was okay. No Game of Thrones.”

“Is anything?” asks Zelda.

Ayana blurts out, “How about hashtag never go in. Steal it right from the President’s address.”

Debra smiles, “Never go in. I like that. Simple, to the point. The authority of the President’s words.”

Andrew cautions, “You’ll lose half the country quoting him.”

The rest of the group gives him a suspicious stare, forcing him to explain.

Andrew defends himself, “Hey, I voted for him, I’m just being realistic to the times we’re in. Half the country doesn’t consider this guy their rightful president. It’s crazy. You will never hear a single Republican call him President. They won’t do it. Just use his last name or his first, they don’t care.”

Debra tries to steer them back, “Let’s not go there, okay, guys.”

Ayana adds, “I think hashtag Never Go In transcends politics. Just as the zones transcend politics. They take everybody. Blue, red, black, white, brown, yellow, purple, rainbow.”

Debra nods, “I agree. Look I got a feeling after meeting with them, that something like hashtag Never Go In is the stuff that MAZE wants.”

And it was.

Of all the ideas pitched to the Mother’s Against Zone Entry leadership council, the friends and family visuals with the Never Go In hashtag was their favorite.

They reached out to families affected by zone disappearances to look for volunteers and were flooded with offers to participate.

A zone replica was built and for many, on the day of shooting the public service announcement ads, posing next to a zone, even a fake one, proved to be too much.

Filming always got behind schedule, because of the emotional reaction from some of the key members of the affected families.

It just took time for them to collect themselves and for many of the women, they had to redo their make-up.

Although some chose to do the commercial in their heartbroken state. Running mascara and uncontrollable sobs in full effect.

Sometimes there were as many as twenty families in a one-minute ad. Other times a 15 second spot would cover just one family. There were endless versions that were posted on the internet where MAZE didn't have to pay for air time.

The hashtag Never Go In was always promoted and would trend at the top of twitter every day.

But it didn't work.

Kids were still going in the zone.

Kids looking to escape bullying found the only safe haven they knew that would stop the tormenting when the adults in their life failed them.

And it wasn't just kids going into the zones. The sick, elderly and destitute started to go in zones at alarming rates.

A zone even popped up in a prison yard and fifty prisoners escaped into the zone before it disappeared. Most of them were serving life, so what did they have to lose.

Zone related apps were always the highest downloaded apps on the App Store.

Most people were still just curious about zones, but

there were others that having touched a zone once, let their desire for more zone contact rule their lives.

Zoners they were called. They lived out of vans and RVs always looking for the next closest appearance of a zone on their phone before the cops could get on site and quarantine the zone.

A popular YouTuber actually did pick up on the idea of producing a parody of the 1987 This is Your Brain on Drugs PSA. They didn't go out and bring John Roselius back, they just hosted the ad themselves and used some pretty decent special effects on their home computer to make the egg disappear just as it was about to hit the frying pan.

The spot went viral. Much to the ire of Andrew, who never let Debra forget that the parody ad got a million more hits on YouTube than the most popular Never Go In clip they made.

But not even the parody ad was stemming the rate of people disappearing in zones, kids and adults alike.

And the zones themselves were starting to appear at a higher rate and staying longer. Soon there weren't enough regular cops to secure the areas where zones were appearing.

All across the country, local governments were struggling with the crisis. Some cities sent any government workers they could spare to secure the zone sites.

Private security companies and even temp workers were contracted out to handle the extra burden and fill the gaps.

And that was when people were reporting the zones. More and more, the sightings were being kept secret,

especially those on private property away from public view.

Homes with a super zone, which were zones that didn't disappear after only a few minutes, were being sold or leased on the black market for a million dollars over their asking price. The transactions were handled strictly off the books and were tricky to pull off, but where there's a zone, there's a way.

All of this didn't stop MAZE from trying their best. They kept running their ads and buying as many billboards as they could.

Even if they did only save one person from going in a zone, wasn't one person worth it?

Yes, they were. Especially, if it was your son or your daughter or even yourself.

ZONE



CHAPTER 11

YOU HAVE AN ORDER

Never go in.

“Would I ever go in?” Dylan Gaines asked himself as he sat in the parking lot of the grocery store just waiting for an Instacart order to come in over his iPhone.

This was his favorite spot to park in and wait for orders to come in, because it was in the shade and close to a cart return. The only problem was he had to sit and stare at the Never Go In billboard with the family and friends Rachel Ryan left behind when she went into a zone.

“Who would be on my Never Go In billboard?” Dylan wondered to himself. No one, he reasoned. His

mom was dead and his dad barely spoke to him anymore since he admitted that he volunteered to help elect President Perez.

Friends? Yeah, right, none of them hang out with him anymore since they all got married and had kids. Years would go by without seeing some.

If it wasn't for Facebook, he wouldn't even know what they were up to.

"My billboard," Dylan thought to himself, "it would pretty much be the zone up there and that's it. A zone alone.

"I could write a blog post about that, but no one would read it, so what's the point.

"Maybe all the people I've done grocery shopping for or given Uber rides to would pose for a picture for me. Now that would be a lot of people. They would never do it.

"Could you imagine Uber or Instacart reaching out to all my past clients. Hi, months ago Dylan Gaines delivered your groceries through the Instacart app. Well, he's gone into a zone and we were hoping to have people he's worked for pose in a picture to show the damage of what's left behind when you disappear into a zone.

"You'll do it! That's great! Yes, it is a tragedy and anything we can do to prevent another zone tragedy is worth doing. No, actually, he didn't have a family. He lived alone in studio apartment."

Dylan's iPhone chirped with the alert of an incoming Instacart order.

"Finally," Dylan thought to himself as he continued his inner monologue, "Hopefully it's a good one. 20 items, not bad. And no weird stuff. God, I hate the weird stuff.

“Gluten free, organic, tofu, free range, fair trade. Just order some damn Cocoa Pebbles and Cool Ranch Doritos. Something that was always on the shelf and easy to find.”

Dylan accepted the order and went in to start his shopping. The clock was ticking. He had forty minutes to complete the order. He could take longer if he needed to, but that was the calculation that Instacart came up with. Hell, if everything was on the shelf, Dylan could do it in about half the time.

If the store was out of something, forget it. Texting back and forth with the client to find a replacement item for something that was out of stock added minutes to the shopping time.

But Dylan wanted to keep the customer happy. Getting a good tip or a 5-star rating bonus was key to making any real money, otherwise by the time you figured in gas and the hours you waited with no orders coming in, you could have made just as much money working for minimum wage at Target.

Yes, but at Target he'd have to listen to some seventeen-year-old dickhead manager on a power trip.

It'd been almost a year, since Dylan went the app way of life. He worked a lot of hours, but they were easy hours. Driving strangers around in your car, shopping and deliver groceries and meals. And he got to pick the hours he wanted to work.

But there was no 401k, no career advancement. He'd have to get a real job somewhere again. But he wasn't in a hurry to be an office drone trapped in a cubical from 9 to 5.

“Shit!” he continued with his inner running monologue, which he would usually later turn into a

blog post. "They are out of A&W root beer 2-litters. They have Barq's root beer. Let me text Debbie M. and see if she wants to substitute it.

"Something simple like this actually isn't too bad. It's not my fault the store is out of something and usually the client appreciates me reaching out to them to do a substitution. I always include a photo of the product and the price for them.

"If it is just one thing out of stock, that can actually help with the tip. Establish a human relationship with the client. Otherwise, I'm just in their world for a minute or two as I drop off the groceries. Easy to give a shitty tip that way. A few courteous, helpful texts could earn you a couple of extra bucks on the tip.

"And what the hell was a couple of bucks to some of these people. I mean, you should see some of the houses I delivered to. Just huge.

"How'd that happen anyway?

"Why do they live in a big McMansion and I'm spending my days running around in my ten-year-old Toyota Prius as a delivery boy or chauffeur?

"Maybe they were just born into money.

"Can't just be hard work. I work hard. I went to college. A lot of good that did me."

A reply text came back from Debbie M.

"Cool, she's good with Barq's.

"What song are they playing? Don't Pay the Ferryman. I haven't heard this song since I was a kid. Hell, it was barely even played on MTV then. That was back when MTV actually played videos.

"I haven't watched MTV in years. Why would I? I have my perfect MTV playlist all set up on YouTube. I'll have to add Don't Pay the Ferryman. Who knew I was

going to wake up today and add that song to my YouTube MTV playlist. I didn't.

"But why is this store playing it? Why not something new? I'm gonna Google that next time I'm waiting for an order. I bet they play it because it makes you feel good listening to a forgotten one hit wonder. But, damn this thing wasn't even a hit. But it is nice to hear it again. Like bumping into an old friend.

"Great, eggs look good, no cracks. Let's get this order paid for and delivered, so I can do it all over again for the next three hours."

"It wasn't the worst way to spend a morning and afternoon. You never want to do the shopping at night. You were more likely to find items out of stock at night.

"Good luck finding baby spinach on a Sunday night or an item the stores didn't carry much stock on, like a specialize gluten free product. Almost impossible to suggest a replacement for tofu sandwich slices when they are out."

Dylan's Instacart shift ended at 4 p.m. That is when he would traditionally take a break and then he'd work the dinner shift for Grubhub from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

If he was short on cash that week, he would work Uber to cater to the bar crowd from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m.

He rarely worked a full day like that from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m. and most of that time was spent waiting in his car. He was able to devour audio books on CD from the library. Every couple of days he would finish another audio book.

On the days he didn't have a good book to listen to, he made do with his favorite podcasts.

Sure he could have gotten a regular 9 to 5 job again,

but he liked the freedom these App economy jobs gave him.

His iPhone and Prius were his office now and it was always casual Friday. In the year since he's decided to go full time at this he hadn't once had to deal with a manger.

No, "Hey, can I talk to you for a second," one on one meetings. No bullshit annual self-reviews, where you come up with your phony baloney business goals. Are you Falling Behind, Keeping pace or Exceeding Expectations?

Screw your drop-down rating menu. I do my job and you pay me, now give me my two-point five percent raise while the CEO collects his sixty-million-dollar bonus.

He'd seen more of the city in this year with his app jobs than in his whole life living there practically.

Yeah, he'd bitch and moan about his life and the problems he had. Why couldn't he be the one in the big houses using his iPhone to order someone else to delivery his groceries or pick up his dinner or take him home from a club he'd gotten drunk at.

But there was something he drove past every day that reminded him of how lucky he was.

The daycare center where all those kids had disappeared from.

It had been closed since the incident and had gone from a crime scene to a make shift memorial.

In the beginning, tons of stuff was placed in front of the daycare every day. Hundreds of displays of flowers, candles and ribbons.

There was a bin set up to accept toy donations that always seemed to be overflowing.

Now, the amount of stuff left behind at the memorial had declined vastly. It would still trickle in, but nothing close to the those first few days.

As he passed by again for the third time that day, he continued to say his silent prayer to himself. Hoping for a safe return of the kids from the zone.

God, that poor daycare worker. No one believed her that the kids had disappeared into a black rectangle. He remembered hearing one caller on a radio show suggest the cops threaten to cut off one of her fingers for every hour she refused to say what really happened to the kids. There were still those that believed she was lying. That she used rumors of zones to do harm to the children. It was so bad, he heard she had changed her name and moved away.

On this pass he would make sure to say a prayer for her, too.

There were no people in front on the daycare this time. Sometimes he would see mourners still out there paying their respect. There used to be a cop car out in front as well, but cops were in short supply these days with all the zones that were being reported.

In front of the school that night, among the few flowers and teddy bears and posters with messages of support, someone had erected a life size replica of a zone.

"Well, who's great idea was that?" Dylan remarked to himself.

You would actually see zone replicas quite a bit. Just not this big. Just like the little white crosses you would see marking the spots on the road where someone had died in a traffic accident, you would see little black zones recreated out of plywood.

Usually the person's name and day they disappeared into the zone was on the handmade memorials. Sometimes the person's picture as well. Sometimes multiple pictures if more than one person went into the zone on that day.

These memorials were a touchy subject.

No one wanted to begrudge a person the right to mourn the life of someone that had ended once they went into a zone, but some of these zones were put up in the yards of someone else's house or in front of a business or restaurant.

No one wanted to be the jerk that forced the survivors of a zone victim to take down their memorial, but damn these things were depressing. Or at least an impediment to business.

Would you want to drink your coffee at a Starbucks with a zone memorial out front or would you drive five more minutes to go to a zone free Starbucks and be afforded the chance to forget about zones for as long as it took you to enjoy your iced coconut milk mocha macchiato.

How many people used Starbucks for a safe location for a first internet date meet up? That's a great conversation piece on a first date, looking at a somber black zone memorial. No, thanks.

At least at the daycare center it was already closed. There was talk that the city was going to buy the property, tear the daycare center down and put up a public park and memorial for the dead kids. Actually missing kids was more accurate, because it still had yet to be determined if you actually died when you went into a zone.

Hell, there was the rumor that the zones actually kept

you healthy and alive. They say this because of the terminally ill Army captain that the government sent in to explore the zone was still alive and he had a healthier heart rate now than when he went into the zone three months ago.

Who knows, maybe the zones weren't the evil entities some were making them out to be, but that didn't change the fact that it seemed a bit insensitive to have a family of one of the kids that disappeared come by and see a full-size recreation of the culprit that stole their children away.

Dylan parked his car.

There was no one around, no mourners, no cops.

He should just take it down, Dylan thought to himself, "Don't destroy it. Just take the fake zone down and lay it on its side away from the other items left out front."

Dylan walked up the sidewalk to the daycare center.

God, he remembered how this street used to be full of TV news vans. Around the block they were parked. For about a week they were the focus of the nation.

Then the news about the zones broke and people moved on. They had problems of their own at that point. They knew that what had happened to these kids, could easily happen to their own kids now and that's where their focus went.

For those first two weeks after the President's address, you hardly ever saw people out walking on the streets or kids having fun on playgrounds. If you had to go out, you went out, but otherwise you just hunkered down at home and watched the news to see if there were any new breaking stories about the zones.

It was great for Instacart, because no one wanted to

go out and do their own grocery shopping. Those shifts for two weeks were nonstop orders. Hardly any downtime.

But then people returned to the streets, playgrounds and grocery stores.

The one place they didn't seem to go to anymore was the daycare center. There was hardly ever anyone there now keeping vigil at the site.

The world, as it always does, had moved on.

But someone had come and left the zone replica.

Hopefully the plywood zone or whatever they had made it out of wasn't too heavy, as Dylan would have to move it by himself.

As he approached the zone recreation, Dylan was struck by how life like it was. It didn't look like a piece of wood painted black. Or a slab door that someone had picked up at Home Depot and painted black.

No, it couldn't be. Was it?

Was this a really a real freaking zone?

He looked behind the zone, there was nothing propping it up. It was just standing there, a doorway to black nothingness.

Dylan had never seen a real zone in person. He'd been fooled before by some recreations that people had put up as memorials, but that only lasted a second or two until he saw there was some sort of message written on the zone.

But this one was completely black.

It truly was a zone.

His first reaction was to look around. Was there anyone else there? No one. No traffic driving by the quiet street, either.

His second reaction was to search around for a

cellphone on the ground. A lot of people would leave their cellphones behind with their passcodes written on a note beside it or even scratched in the dirt if they didn't have paper. They usually would record a final video message on the phone for whoever found it.

Zones appeared so randomly and most of the time they only stayed for a few minutes before disappearing again, so that you couldn't really plan on going in one.

Yes, there were super zones that stayed for weeks on end, but those zones usually got reported to the cops and access was sealed off to the general public.

So most people were caught off guard when a zone appeared and were left only with their phones to let people know what had happened to them. So that's what they used to record their final thoughts before entry.

His own cellphone was in the car, left on the holder on the dash. He wanted to run to the car and grab it, but was afraid the zone would disappear before he could get back. Most zones were only up for a few minutes. Who knew how long this zone had been there before he saw it.

Maybe it was possible this was a super zone, but if a zone stayed up long enough in public, the government would inevitably take the site over.

That's why if you ever found a super zone hidden on private property, it was like striking oil. It was all under the table, but you could make millions selling access to a zone. People would pay thousands of dollars to touch a zone for a few minutes.

Most people were still wary of going in for fear of dying or disappearing forever, but just to touch it for a few minutes, most everyone wanted to at least try that.

And so did Dylan and he would be doing it for free,

instead of paying some prohibitively high price for access to a zone on the black market.

He reached out to touch the zone.

A warm buzz shot through his body.

It was like he almost orgasmed.

Wow, that was amazing.

He touched it again. Not like the first time, when it takes you by complete surprise, but it still feels amazing.

Oh, how he wished he could pick the zone up, put it in his car and drive away with it.

Is this what it feels like to be in the zone all the time? No wonder people went in. He had touched it all of about thirty seconds now and he was starting to consider going in.

He yanked his hand out suddenly.

This is it. This is how it trapped you.

You put your hand in for a taste and it keeps you coming back until it devours you. Until you can't think about anything else until you go in for good.

Your family doesn't matter, your job doesn't matter. Your health doesn't matter. Just get in the zone and stay there.

"Walk away, Dylan. Walk away," he told himself.

But walk away to what?

His shitty little life getting paid to do the crap other people didn't want to do. He was damn near forty. He was balding, out of shape, living paycheck to paycheck.

What were the odds of him meeting someone at this point in his life and things magically turning around for him?

How many people had he met in the past year with his app jobs? Hundreds. Did he make a connection with any of them? No. He was just a delivery guy, never the

delivery.

Was he just going to be this empty vessel, alive only to work for someone else to pay all his bills and live the consumerism lie.

No one cared what he thought. All the tweets he had posted with no likes or retweets. All the YouTube videos with barely any views at all. Ten, twenty, mostly from his own repeated views.

The novel he spent a year of his life writing that he self-published on Amazon. How much money had he spent on getting it edited, the cover designed and then advertising it. At least a thousand dollars.

How many copies had he sold that he hadn't bought himself. Seven. He only sold one of those at the original price of \$2.99. The rest he sold were when he lowered his price to .99 cents.

Great business model. Spend a grand to sell nine dollars' worth of books. It was good for Amazon. Bad for him.

No one cared.

At best he was just part of the clutter that made up the Internet and their digital world.

Would anyone even miss him if he went into a zone?

Would he ever get a chance like this to walk into a zone at no charge?

Was he going to miss out on zones like he had missed out on so much in life already?

Childhood sucked, high school sucked, college sucked, his twenties had sucked and now as his thirties were wrapping up, yeah, they sucked, too.

Do it.

Just do it.

No.

Never go in.

I'm lovin' it.

Never go in.

Taste the rainbow.

Never go in.

It keeps going, and going and going

Never go in.

Think different

Never go in.

Just say no.

What was that?

At first, he thought someone was pointing a high-powered flashlight at the zone. A cop maybe. He turned and saw no one.

There it was again. The zone was flickering white.

These things don't do that. What the hell is going on? Is it going away? Am I missing my chance?

What should I do?

Never go in.

No, I'm going in.

I hate my fucking life. I'm going in.

Goodbye fucking world, fuck you.

He reached his hand out again, but there was no warm feeling this time. Instead he felt repulsed.

It was if he and the zone were the same positive charged magnets and no matter how hard he tried to put his hand in, the zone just kept pushing his hand back.

No, this must be how zones go away.

Once again, he had hesitated and blown his chance.

He pushed harder, but nothing. The zone was not letting him go in.

Then it turned a bright white.

He jumped back, tripping on his own feet and

landing hard on his ass.

A white zone.

He'd never heard of a zone turning white before.

"Go get your phone. Get a picture of this. Get off your ass and get your phone. Now!" he was telling himself.

But he couldn't. He couldn't take his eyes off of the whiteness.

What was there?

There was a blurry shadow in the whiteness.

Holy shit, something is in there.

He was paralyzed with fear.

The grey blur was becoming sharper. He could see arms now, a head, legs.

It looked human.

A human in pain. Flaying about as if on fire, praying someone would splash them with water and put the flames out.

The body came out, falling forward as if their legs were no longer any good for supporting any weight at all.

The body collapsed on top of Dylan.

Then the zone disappeared, but the body did not.

Instead, it curled up on his lap, the way a child would seeking comfort.

Then it spoke, with a frail voice that was trembling in unimaginable pain, "The code word is Z."

ZONE



CHAPTER 12

COMMENTS

There are some of you out there that won't believe any of this blog post. Who knows, maybe all of you. I wish I had a way to definitively prove what I am about to write, but I don't. So, here goes.

I will give you the facts as I recount the last hour of my life and then you will have to make an honest judgement for yourselves. What you are about to read contains both tragic, heartbreaking news, but it also contains hope for so many people.

I deliver groceries for a living for Instacart. I also am an Uber driver and Grubhub delivery person. I'm not proud of what I do, but I do it proudly.

I wanted to be a writer, but I just didn't have what it took, whatever that was, to make it professionally. Still, I can't help, but write, which is why I write this blog even though barely anyone ever reads it. And to the few people that have bought my book Hitler's Time Machine on Amazon, I thank you.

Well, that's me. That's who is writing this.

As I ended my shift last night for Instacart, I happened to be driving by the makeshift memorial set up at the daycare center, where the ten kids disappeared. I noticed someone had left, what I thought to be, a life size recreation of a zone.

I know a lot of people leave behind well-meaning homemade objects to honor the children that went missing. Previously someone left 10 crosses out front once, not realizing that 3 of the children that were missing were Jewish and 1 was Muslim.

I know that person didn't mean to offend anyone, they just wanted to send a signal to the parents that they cared and hoped for the best for the missing children.

So that was what I thought someone had done again with this homemade zone. I guess somewhere in the back of their mind they thought leaving a life size recreation of the zone that took their children would somehow give the grieving parents comfort.

Like somehow erecting a statue of Timothy McVeigh at the Oklahoma City Bombing site would bring comfort to the victims of that tragedy.

It had to have been a poorly thought out sign of support, because the other reason someone would have left a zone recreation there would have been too cruel to consider. That someone had purposely put this zone there to rub salt in the wounds of the heartbroken

parents.

Either way, I decided I would move the replica zone on my own to save the parents of the missing children the grief of seeing it.

However, as I approached the memorial, I came to the shocking realization that this was no zone recreation. This was an actually zone standing before me.

I didn't report the zone immediately, because like so many of you, I wanted to selfishly touch it. I wanted to feel a zone, so I did.

Just like everyone reports, I felt a warm buzz go through my body that seemed to take my brain to a higher level. Suddenly everything I thought to be true about the world, was true. I felt loved, appreciated, wanted. I felt everything I ever wanted or desired was right at my fingertips. I felt connected to life like never before.

Then I took my hand out.

The good feelings still resided in me, but I could feel them lessen in intensity. At that point I only wanted one thing, more zone.

So, I stuck my hand in again and the good feelings returned. I could now understand why rational, educated, reasonable people would walk into a zone, leaving everything behind to seek an unknown future in these strange unknown apparitions that have unexpectedly started to visit us.

I understood, because that is exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to go in, but I once again pulled my hand out.

Never go in.

Those stupid billboards were working.

Never go in.

I wanted to seek out the mystery of the zone, but I had paused to consider what I was really doing.

Never go in.

I knew this might be my last chance to enter a zone, as they so rarely happen and you never know when or why they appear.

Despite all the Never Go In billboards, Never Go In hashtag tweets and the never ending Never Go In public service announcements featuring the flavor of the week pop star princess, I had made my decision to go into the Zone. Go in with gusto, in fact.

However, this time when I tried to insert my hand in the zone, it was blocked. There was some force pushing my hand back.

I would describe it as trying to force two magnets together that only repel each other. The harder you pushed, the harder the zone pushed back.

Then the zone flickered and turned white.

As black as black the zones normally are, this thing was as white as pure snow.

I was startled and fell backwards, landing on my rear end. I had never heard of a zone turning white and in my Google searches afterward, never came across one zone story with a white zone.

As rare as zone sightings are, this was something that had never ever happened. A white zone.

A second or two after I landed on my butt, I noticed a blurry shape in the zone. As it took form, I began to recognize arms, legs and a head that formed the shape of a human.

Then it appeared that the person was in a great deal of pain, as if burning alive and seeking some kind of comfort.

The person then fell out of the zone and collapsed in my lap.

I say person, but the poor soul was unlike anyone I had ever seen before. They were naked, and had the body of a fragile old man, someone who had lived to be hundred or so.

No sooner had the man fell into my lap, then the white zone disappeared. At first, I thought it had just turned black again, but as my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see it was gone.

The man that emerged from the white zone held me like a frightened child would and spoke these quivering words, "The code word is Z!"

Then the man asked for help.

"Yes, of course," I said. "What do you need? What can I do for you?"

"Just listen to me," the man cried back.

I took my jacket off and wrapped it around the old man. Despite my intentions to bring him comfort, my movements caused him much distress. He screamed with agony with every shift of my body, no matter how slight, but I wanted to get him covered up, as I mistakenly took his shivering as a sign of him being cold.

He settled into my arms again and reiterated that my gentle, still touch was the only thing keeping him alive. I wanted to carry him to my car, but since every little movement caused him so much pain, I knew that was out of the question now.

Besides, he didn't know how much longer he was going to live, so all he wanted to do was tell me as much as he could about living in the zone in the time he had left.

Again, I wanted to go back to my car to get my phone

to record this so bad, but I couldn't. If I even so much as flinched or adjusted myself slightly I could feel the man's body clench in pain, follow by a sharp yelp, only getting worse with each passing minute.

"No," the man demanded. "No phones, just hold me and listen."

So, I did.

Normally, I keep my phone in my pocket, but for work I kept it on the dash in my car on a phone holder so I can use it to keep track of incoming orders and get delivery directions. As I had just gotten off of work, that's where the phone was stationed at.

Since I couldn't move or let go of the man, I just sat there and listened. And this is what he told me.

He said his name was Michael Connors. He and his friends had entered a zone while they were playing on the playground at his daycare center. His friends had entered first, because they thought it was a black hole from space.

When they touched it, they said it felt like eating a whole bag full of Halloween candy. They liked it so much, they decided not to tell their teacher, because they were afraid she would stop them from touching the black hole and keep them from going inside of it to explore.

When one of their friends hurt her knee and went to get Miss Nancy, the other children that hadn't entered the zone yet decided to run in the zone, with a plan to run back out and surprise Miss Nancy.

They all when in, even the little girl that hurt her knee. The only one that stayed outside was Michael.

When Miss Nancy saw everyone had gone in and was upset about it, Michael thought he should go in and

get them out for her. He didn't want them to get in trouble. He heard Miss Nancy tell him not to go in at the last second, but he couldn't stop himself in time.

Once he was in the zone, he found the other children. They were all scared. They didn't know how to get back out. It was all black and they couldn't see each other or anything for that matter. All they could do was hear their voices. Then they heard other people calling to them. It reminded Michael of when he was lost in a store once and started to cry.

All the grown-ups came up to him and told him that it was going to be okay, that they would help him find his mommy and daddy. More and more people came up to make sure he was okay. They took him to the front of the store and made an announcement on the intercom system that a lost child named Michael had been found and was at the front of the store.

His parents were both mad and happy to see him at the same time. They give him big hugs, but he also had his Star Wars toys put on timeout for wandering off without them.

So just like in the store when he got lost, all these caring people in the zone were coming to the kids to make sure they were okay.

Then they began to teach them things. How to see in the blackness of the zone. How to move. How to imagine almost anything and make it come to life.

All the kids just wanted to go home to see their mommies and daddies, but the grown-ups said they couldn't do that yet. They didn't know how to get out of the zone.

Some people told Michael and his friends that they were better off in the zone. That they could do whatever

they wanted to. If they wanted to live with dinosaurs, they could and did. If they wanted to live with a mermaid princess, they could and did.

Some kids even imagined living with their mommies and daddies again, but it only seemed like they did, but they knew they weren't really their parents. They knew they were just pretend mommies and daddies.

Some of the people there were teachers and they taught the kids just like they were in school, but they could learn so much faster. They could read whole books in seconds and say them back to you word for word.

They didn't have to go to bed ever, they didn't have to eat or go to the bathroom. They got to wear whatever clothes they wanted to wear.

The zone was a lot of fun, but they still missed their families. Other people trapped in the zone missed their families, as well. They all tried to think of ways to go back home, but no one could think of a plan. The one thing they did know, was that in the zone, if you wanted something bad enough, it would just happen eventually.

So, there was this mother that wanted to go home so badly, that's all she thought about. She didn't talk to anyone, she didn't play, all she did was think about going home again to see her daughter. She tried and tried and then one day she just disappeared and no one knew where she went.

They all thought she had gone home to her family, so others tried to escape from the zone that way, too. One by one they all started to disappear from the zone.

There was an army man, Captain Murphy, he wanted to go back too and take the kids with him. But until they could confirm that this actually worked, no one would let Captain Murphy try to take the kids back.

People who were just coming into the zone, knew Captain Murphy was still alive because of his heartbeat signal that was still being picked up in the normal world.

Captain Murphy's heartbeat signal gave people hope that their loved ones were still alive in the zone.

So, if Captain Murphy tried to leave the zone and something bad happened to him causing his heartbeat signal to stop, then people might lose hope for their loved ones.

Captain Murphy promised everyone that he would stay in the zone, but that if anyone else was going to try to return to the normal world, the first thing they should say or signal to someone on the outside was that, "The code word is Z."

The problem was that when new people came into the zone, no one ever told any stories of people coming back out of zones and returning to their families. They also never heard anything about someone coming out saying the code word was Z, either.

It was still understood in the normal world that if you go in a zone, you go in for good.

At this point hundreds of people had disappeared from the zone. Certainly one of them would have told everybody that they had just emerged from being trapped in a zone and that the code word was Z, but it seemed no one had successfully made it out.

Then Michael got the idea that he could be Nemo. His favorite movie was Finding Nemo and he loved the part where none of the other big adult fish could stop the water filter in the tank, but because Nemo was small and could fit through the tube to the filter, he could jam the filter with a pebble he carried in his mouth.

Michael thought that maybe all the people that had

tried to go back before, couldn't because they were too big. But maybe a little boy, like him, could, because he was smaller.

He didn't tell anyone his plan, because he knew they would probably try to stop him, but he had made his decision to try and leave the zone.

Despite his decision to leave, Michael actually loved parts of being in the zone. Everyone was nice to them. He had his friends there to play with. He could even pretend he was back at home, but he knew it was all just pretend. Which made him sad again.

He was also sad to hear that people blamed Miss Nancy for what happened to the missing kids. Michael wanted to let everyone know it wasn't her fault. They were the ones that wanted to go in the black hole to surprise her. Miss Nancy told him not to go, but it was too late to stop.

He wanted everyone to stop being mean to Miss Nancy.

He also wanted to see his parents again, but he didn't think he was going to live much longer. I told him that if I could just go get my phone, I could call his parents and tell them to come there, but he just didn't want me to let go of him or move an inch.

The main thing he wanted to say was that they were okay in the zone. They missed their families, but if the families came into the zone, they could be together again. They could also have more fun, because no one had to work in the zone, because you didn't need money.

You could spend all day playing and learning and having fun. Some people absolutely loved living in the zone and there was no way they would ever go back.

I asked Michael who set up the zone? Who was doing

all of this and why?

Michael said they didn't know. That when the first people went into the zone, it was just darkness, but slowly they figured stuff out and taught other people how to live in the zone.

Some people thought it was aliens doing all of this. Others thought it was God and Jesus doing it. Others even thought it was beings from another dimension reaching out to them, but there was no proof of any of that. No one knew for sure who created the zone and what it was for.

But Michael told me it was really important to send word back to the people in the zone, that Michael made it back to the normal world, but the journey back killed him. Once he started the journey he could feel the life energy being drained from his body. He knew he made a mistake, like when he dove into the deep end of the pool once.

He couldn't touch the bottom of the pool, but he wasn't near the surface either.

But just like Dory said in Finding Nemo, he just kept swimming to get to the surface again and then he broke free and was able to breathe again.

Michael said to tell his mom and dad that he loved them and his grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins, too. His friends, as well. He said he misses everyone.

But again Michael repeated that if anyone new goes into the zone, to please tell his friends trapped there to Never Go Out. Just stay in the zone.

Never Go Out.

Never Go Out.

Never Go Out.

Then he died. He just disintegrated in my arms as if bursting into a billion little atoms.

I went back to my car to get my laptop and phone. I keep my laptop with me, because sometimes I can go hours without an order for Instacart and I usually use that time to write my blog or watch something on Netflix.

So, I've been sitting in my car for the past hour writing and rewriting this blog post. Trying to make sure I didn't forget something. I did the best I could.

So, if there is anyone out there planning on going in the zone despite all the warnings, please, in honor of Michael, tell the people already in the zone to Never Go Out.

Even if you do make it back, as Michael did, you won't live long, and the end will be very painful.

Never Go In.

Never Go Out.

COMMENTS:

MjrTJK: You are sick AF! How dare you exploit the death of these kids for a phony blog post, to sell your stupid Hitler book. Nazi piece of garbage!

Dylan G: This really happened and I am not a Nazi. I hate Nazis. The plot of Hitler's Time Machine is that the Nazis won the war and Hitler is developing a time machine so he can go back in time and conquer the Roman Empire.

However one of the scientists working on the time machine project decides to use it instead to go back and try to help the allies win World War II.

And trust me, I'm not trying to promote my book. I don't care if people buy it or not. I only put that in there so people would know who I am. Otherwise people would have discovered that I'm a writer and think that I was making this all up.

But this really happened. My only hope is to spread Michael's Message to tell people that, first, they shouldn't go into a zone, but if they do go in a zone, then they should Never Go Out.

MjrTJK: Nice try, Nazi. I like how you try to tell people you are not promoting your book, by promoting your book even more. Thanks for the plot summary. Hard pass.

GStillson84: Anyone have a link to buy Hitler's Time Machine? Asking for a friend.

Henry F: Not cool, dude. I know a family that's lost a child at the daycare center and they know Michael's parents. All the families are suffering, but to single out Michael like this is just horrible.

How did you think this was a good idea?

Brother Dyson: I know news that someone actually came out of a zone is a big deal, but WOW! Hitler's Time Machine sounds like one of the greatest novels ever written! Make room on your bookshelf between Huck Finn and Catcher in the Rye. (sarcasm)

GStillson84: ****SPOILER ALERT**** The book ends with Doc Hitler picking up Marty and Jennifer in the DeLorean and telling them, "Jews? Where we're going

we don't need Jews."

Colmwopr: Never Go In. Never Go Out. Contradict much?

Jason R: Is this really for real? I mean really?

Dylan G: Jason, it is for real. It really did happen, just as I wrote it. I swear it.

GStillson84: Of course this is true. He had the code word Z. It's an older code, but it checks out. Clear him.

Brother Dyson: Is the Z case sensitive?

Charlie S: I thought the code word was Password1.

Paul T: Actually the code word is 12345.

GStillson84: Crap, I have to change the combination on my luggage.

MjrTJK: Nice, this loser is tormenting the parents of missing kids and you are making Spaceball jokes. This is why we can't have nice things.

Leslie G: Does @Instacart know one of their drivers is exploiting missing children for his Nazi novel? #BoycottInstacart.

MjrTJK: Don't forget @Uber and @Grubhub. I think they would like to know as well.

Leslie G: I hope you enjoyed your normal life, because it is over, loser. You are going to be fired from all your crappy jobs and you will never be able to get a normal job again. You should find a zone and jump in. Oh, and when you get there make sure to tell them:

NEVER GO OUT!

NEVER GO OUT!

NEVER GO OUT!

Robert O: Everyone just needs to chill. I went to high school with Dylan and he's a good guy. While I don't support what he wrote here, I think he deserves a chance to just take the post down.

Think of the families that have lost children and the pain this might cause them if they read it. Just let him end it here and now.

You go starting some campaign to get him fired and it is just going to create more attention and hurt for the families.

He just made a mistake, let him fix it.

Dylan G: Robert, thanks for sticking up for me. I truly appreciate it, but it did happen. This is the truth. If people want to get me fired and ruin my life, so be it. But I promised Michael that I would spread his message.

Harry T: I don't believe any of this. But, and this is a big but, BUT if this was real, Dude, you should have just gone to the police instead of writing this blog and talking about your book for sale.

Dylan G: That's a good point. I am actually going to the police station right now to report the white zone and

see if they can reach out to Michael's family.

I didn't want to hurt anyone. I'm just a writer. It is how I process things and deal with them. I probably didn't do a good job, but in fairness to me, how do you deal with something like this?

Also I just wanted to send the word out as soon as possible for people going in zones to tell the people already in the zones to Never Go Out. That's all.

Leslie G: This guy just doesn't know when to quit. Have fun with the cops. I hope they beat the shit out of you for what you have done.

Brother Dyson: A white zone? You mean Idaho. Fixed it for you.

GStillson84: There is no stopping in the white zone.

Brother Dyson: No, the white zone is for the immediate loading and unloading of passengers. There is no stopping in the red zone.

GStillson84: No, the red zone has always been for the immediate loading and unloading of passengers.

Brother Dyson: Don't you tell me which zone is for stopping and which zone is for loading.

Colmwopr: What is that from?

Paul T: Airplane.

Charlie S: Wrong, Airplane 2. What is ya, ignorant?

Brother Dyson: Trading Places.

Leslie G: You are all a bunch of assholes.

Colmwopr: What is that from?

Leslie G: It is from me! It is what you all are!

ZONE



CHAPTER 13

Z

Officer Sharon Getty glared at Dylan with half a mind to punch his lights out, but her career wasn't worth it.

Go slow on this one she told herself. You'll get him for something. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but he would be got.

Sharon had a warm, comforting presence, which is why she was chosen to represent the department in dealing with the families of the missing zone children.

But that warm presence belied a cold-hearted upbringing of farm life. Sharon grew up helping her father slaughter any number of animals on the farm,

which gave her a steely resolve to power through anything, no matter how disturbing.

She could walk into any crime or accident scene and perform her duties unaffected by the carnage. She had turned that button off long ago as a child on the farm or on the many hunting trips she accompanied her father on, where they dressed their game in the field.

But there were still some things that would upset her and listening to Dylan's story was one of them. It wasn't just the lying that got her all riled up. It was Dylan's certitude behind it. The conviction. How could he sit here and spout this ridiculous garage without any consideration to the harm he would do to poor Michael's mother and father?

"So you're a writer?" Sharon asked, trying to keep her anger at bay.

"Yes," Dylan replied.

"You couldn't come up with anything better than Z for the code word?"

"I didn't come up with it. That's what Captain Murphy told Michael the code word was.

"It was the first thing anyone who successfully got out of the zone was supposed to say to someone."

"Dylan, I've been with these families since the beginning. No one should ever know the hell they are going through. No one.

"First, they thought their kids were killed or kidnapped by a crazy daycare worker.

"Then they thought their kids were killed by an evil black rectangle.

"Then they were told the kids could actually be still alive, because Captain Murphy was still registering a heartbeat in the zone.

"But now you want me to tell them that their kids are dead again?"

"Actually, just Michael died. The other children should still be alive in the zone."

"So, if I take you seriously, then that means I need to reach out to Michael's parents and tell them only their child is now dead?"

"I don't even think of him as a child. I think the process of him coming out of the zone aged him by almost a hundred years.

"Which explains why none of the adults were able to make it all the way back. Who has a hundred years of life to spare?"

"Someone that's five," offered Sharon, just humoring Dylan's wild theory.

"Yeah, exactly! I think that's why he made it out and the others didn't."

"Here is the thing. With everything these parents have gone through, I can't go to them with your story without any proof."

"Trust me, I wanted to take pictures and video with my phone, but I left it behind in my car. Michael cried out in pain every time I moved, so I couldn't get up to get it."

"I go to these families and feed them a bunch of horse manure, my career is over and so is my humanity. I won't do it and I won't let you do it."

"What about the code word Z? Can you call and check on that?"

"Call and check with who?"

"The government team that sent Captain Murphy into the zone."

"They're not exactly listed in the phone book."

"Don't you have a zone hot line set up? Can't someone in the FBI try to reach that team to confirm it?"

Sharon nods her head cautiously, with a very suspicious, reluctant stare.

"I'm gonna check it out. But if they tell me they don't know what the hell you are talking about, then you stop this farce and you never ever reach out to Michael's parents. Or so help me, I will... I will make you sorry you brought those people any more pain to their lives. Understanding that, do you still want me to call the FBI?"

"Yes, of course."

"Okay, wait here. Don't know how long this is gonna take. You have plans to be anywhere?"

"I drive Uber at nights, but I can skip it tonight."

"Skip it."

"Can I have my phone back now?" Dylan asks.

"I think they are still looking at it, but I'll check."

Sharon left the room and went immediately to her annalist team that was monitoring the interrogation.

"How'd he check out?" Sharon inquires.

"Blood test is clean," reports Officer Brandon Tannen. Brandon was huge former college football player, made even more intimidating by his closely cropped haircut.

Working with Brandon, is Officer Mike Hunter, sporting his cop mustache, rolled up shirt sleeves and poking around on an iPhone with a Ready Player One case protecting it. "Cellphone pings have him in the area of the school for two hours. Checks out with his story," Mike informs Sharon. "Not that, that means jack in and of itself. He's got some photos taken at the daycare center memorial, but there's nothing unusual about

them. Time stamp shows they were taken after the events he described."

"No pictures of zones?" Sharon asks.

"No zones anywhere," Mike answers. "But also no texts or emails showing he was planning this thing, either. So if he was cooking this whole thing up, it was all going on up here," Mike says as he taps his head.

Sharon asks, "Did he make any calls in those two hours?"

Mike responds, "No. He did receive a call in the first hour, but he didn't answer it. I listened to the voicemail. It was an automated call from his pharmacy to let him know a prescription was ready for pick up.

Officer Tanner scoffs, "Makes sense, because that is one dude that ain't been taking his meds lately."

Sharon tells them as she leaves the room, "I'm gonna call the FBI and check out the code word."

"Z?" Mike asks, with an unbelieving chuckle.

Sharon shakes her head, "Don't laugh. I'm embarrassed already."

Sharon was actually surprised her call was taken seriously, but these were low level personnel fielding these hotline calls. It wasn't their job to call bullshit on the crazies.

It was their job to steer the calls to the right people, so that they could call bullshit on the crazies.

But in the day and age of the zone, who could really tell what was crazy or sane anymore.

Eventually a FBI desk agent was able to reach the communications officer, Lt. Kohl, at Zone Site One.

It was a slow night, no experiments were scheduled for the zone, so Lt. Kohl had time to talk.

The FBI agent asked if the code word Z meant anything to them.

Communications Officer Lt. Kohl shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Ah, no. Why do you ask?"

The desk agent replied, "We got a report out of Oregon that a witness says they saw a zone turn white, then a hundred-year-old man stumbled out and told the witness he was one of those kids that disappeared from the daycare center and that Captain Murphy told everyone trapped in the zone that the first words they should say when they got out of the zone were that the code word is Z."

"Well, we do have a way of verifying Captain Murphy's identity should he try to make contact, but code word Z isn't one of the protocols. Not even close.

"Does this witness by chance have anything brought back from the zone that might have Murphy's DNA on it? Like a piece of clothing."

"This nut job doesn't have anything to back this story up, except for code word Z. So, I can confirm for sure to the local law enforcement code Z is negative, correct?"

"That's confirmed negative. Like this joker's IQ score."

"Okay, I'll let them know. Sorry for wasting your time"

Lt. Kohl hung up the phone, just as Roger ambles into the Zone Zone through the security gate. He hasn't shaven in days, his eyes are sunken, desperate for sleep.

Kohl is surprised to see Roger there, "Hey, what are you doing here so late?"

Roger shakes his head as he takes off his rumpled jacket, "Couldn't sleep. I wanted to continue my

experiment.”

Lt. Kohl looks over at one of the Navy SEALs standing guard and gives the SEAL a slight “Hey, you might want to get ready,” nod.

Lt. Kohl then glances back over at the disheveled Roger, who has started to type away on a laptop at his workstation.

Lt. Kohl then asks Roger, “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Medical really wants you to get some rest.”

“I rested and I’m back. I don’t want to regress on the progress that I’ve made, so far.

“I feel like the more I touch it, the more it is trying to communicate.

“I was trying to sleep at home, but I could feel it calling me back here. I feel like it is trying to tell me something.”

“Yeah, that you’re a coke addict.”

Roger gets heated in his defensive response, “I’m not addicted to it! People are demanding answers and I’m trying to get them answers anyway I can.”

“Relax, Roger, we’re on the same side here. I just care about you, man.

“My brother was a drunk. Sometimes you remind me of him. It scares me.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine really,” Roger tries in vein to assure Kohl. “I’m going to start with a hand insert for thirty minutes. Mark the time please.”

“I will, but before I do, there has apparently been a change in protocol.”

“What change?” Roger demands to know.

“You have to tell me the secret code word before I can let you touch the zone.”

Roger is distraught, “What secret code word?”

"Z. You didn't get the memo?" Lt. Kohl says as he cracks a grin.

Roger doesn't think it's funny. The mention of code word Z, brings out a primal response from Roger. He grabs Lt. Kohl by the shoulders.

"Who told you this? Who said code word Z?"

"Jesus, Roger, calm down. It was a joke. FBI was just following up a lead from a looney tune who said someone came out of the zone claiming the code word was Z. Relax, there's no code word, no changes in protocol."

Roger lets go of Lt. Kohl and paces the Zone Zone madly, "I need to know who made that call! I have to talk to that witness immediately!"

Lt. Kohl nods to the SEAL, who steps over to the frantic Roger. "Roger, this is why Dr. Brandt and medical ordered you to take a break." Kohl points forcefully at the black silent zone. "That thing is turning your mind into mush!"

Roger sees the SEAL moving towards him and he throws up his hand, commanding the SEAL to stop. Roger then turns to Lt. Kohl, "Lt. Kohl, get the FBI contact back on the line right now or you are fired immediately!"

Lt. Kohl picks up his phone cautiously, his watchful eyes never leaving the manic Roger for an instant.

"Okay, I'll call them back, but my next call after that is going to be to Dr. Brandt. Fire me if you want, but you need help, Roger. Bad."

Sharon enters the holding room where Dylan has been waiting for her return. She is dwarfed by Officer Tannen, who follows her in with an angry glare.

Sharon hands Dylan back his iPhone in the Ready Player One case.

"Thank you for letting us examine your phone."

Dylan replies, "No problem. I forgot how boring waiting can be without this thing." Dylan presses his thumb on the phone, but nothing happens.

"Sorry, you'll have to charge it. It ran out of power while we were examining it," Sharon explains.

"Great, thanks," Dylan looks up at the towering Tannen. "Hi."

"Dylan, this is officer Tanner. Don't worry, he's not here for you. He's here for me. To make sure I don't go off and knock you into next Sunday."

"I don't understand," Dylan replies, puzzled at the harsh tone directed towards him.

Sharon bends down to get right in Dylan's face. She smacks her finger on the table as she addresses him.

"You are never to contact any of the families of the missing kids.

"In fact, when you walk out of this room, you aren't going to mention white zones, code word Z or Michael Connors ever again."

"What did the FBI say?" Dylan asks.

"What do you think they said? There is no code word Z, Stephen King. You made the whole thing up!"

"They have to check with the actually zone site."

"They talked to the communications officer at the zone site where Captain Murphy was sent in. They have no idea what you were talking about."

Despite Sharon being right in his face and Officer Tannen's intimidating him from the side, Dylan holds firm to his beliefs and mission.

"I saw what I saw! Look, he was a kid. A hundred

and five-year-old kid, but a kid none the less. Maybe he just got the code word mixed up.

"Can you call them back and double check? Maybe it would be better if I talked to them directly."

Sharon, shakes her head and turns away from Dylan. She then looks up at Tanner.

"See, this is why you are here, Brandon, because right now," Sharon slaps her palm down on the table. "I'm ready to punch this guy's face in. I can't even think, I am just so full of rage. And you know me! I never get this way!"

"She never does," Tanner testifies.

The holding room door opens and Officer Hunter sticks his mustached face in.

"Shannon, the FBI called back," Mike tells her.

"I'll take it in my office."

Mike then motions to Dylan.

"Um, they want to talk to him, actually."

ZONE



CHAPTER 14

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

“So the only two people that knew about the secret code were Captain Murphy and Dr. Collins, the man who recruited Captain Murphy to go into the zone,” Officer Shannon Getty calmly told a middle age couple sitting in their living room.

Sharon and Dylan were meeting with Michael’s mother and father in their tidy home. Mrs. Connors sat there rigidly, as unwelcoming as a cold morning frost.

Mr. Connors sat there deflated, as if his soul had been slowly leaked out of him, leaving behind a shell of the former man he had been.

Sharon had warned Dylan to let her do the talking

and now he saw why. These poor people were going through an unthinkable hell, so Dylan sat there quietly, motionless, as if he was holding Michael again, afraid that any sudden twitch would cause the boy excruciating pain.

Pictures of Michael decorated the house. It wasn't an over the top shrine, just the normal home of an only child adored by his parents. It was so normal and neat, you almost expected Michael would run in the room any second with one of his toys and start playing on the rug.

Dylan glanced at the many photos of Michael. Although the boy was a stranger to him, he could recognize Michael's eyes.

Michael's body had been withered and become decrepted with his tortuous escape from the zone, but Michael's eyes had been, despite the pain, still full of the hope and promise of a child, especially when he had talked about the amazing adventures he had had in the zone.

Mrs. Connors shook her head firmly, not wanting to believe any of it, "But Z is so simple. Anyone could have guessed it. Z for zone. How is that even a code word?"

Sharon nods her head, trying to be understanding, yet still with a job to do, "It was chosen because it was so simple. They didn't know if communications were even possible from the zone, so they wanted something that a minimal amount of effort would be needed to communicate. Anything to show that Captain Murphy was still alive and trying to reach back out to us and through your son, he did.

Finally Mr. Connors lifted his weary head and joined the discussion, "How do we know that it wasn't this Captain that came through the zone then and not our

son? You said it was an old man that came through. Maybe Captain Murphy was just confused and thought he was our son."

"It's possible. Look, I know this is hard for you, but we are just presenting you with the facts as best we can. We owe you that."

The statement, as innocent as it was, drew out Mrs. Connors's ire and she let loose on Sharon.

"Facts? What facts? Our son is missing, our son is dead, you think, THINK our son is alive, but trapped and now you are telling us that he is dead again? No! No more facts, thank you."

Mr. Connors tries to comfort his outraged, grieving wife.

"Honey, come on. This is all such a mystery. They're doing the best they can."

Dylan finally speaks up, hoping to bring some comfort to the parents

"I promised your son I would spread his message. And that message will save countless people that are trapped in the zone."

"You don't know my son! Stop saying that!" Mrs. Connors rages at Dylan.

Again, Mr. Connors tries to comfort his enraged wife, "Honey."

She bats his hand away.

Dylan leans forward, "I know it is of small comfort, but the way your son talked about being in the zone, and of course, he missed you, but it sounded like he and the other kids were in an amazing place. That they could do anything their imaginations let them.

"They weren't in pain, they were living a life that we could only dream about. That was the message he

wanted to send to people that had lost someone in the zone. That they weren't dead. That they weren't suffering. They were okay. Some even better than okay."

Sharon gently reaches out and pulls on Dylan's shirt to ease him back and let her takeover. Dylan leans back into the sofa again, trying to come down from his passionate outburst.

Sharon then speaks, "We just want you to be prepared for what is going to come. Your son's name is going to be in the press. A lot more than last time. And he's going to be the focal point of what will no doubt be a huge story."

"No. Don't you dare," Mrs. Connor quietly warns them.

"I'm sorry, don't what?" Sharon asked.

"Don't you use my son's name. We've been through enough already. No."

"We certainly want to be sensitive to your feelings, but it would be difficult to contain news of this nature."

Mrs. Connors is incredulous, "What do you think people are going to do when you tell them going into a zone is a ticket to fantasyland? How many more mothers will lose their children to such delusional nonsense?"

Dylan jumps back in, "But this is what Michael wanted me to tell people. It was his last dying wish."

"I don't care! My son is mine and on one else's!"

"Ma'am, I wanted so bad to get my phone out of the car, so he could call you. Try and facetime or take a picture or video, give you something other than my word, but that is all I can offer to you."

"It was Michael, the bravest person I've ever had the honor of meeting, that came out of that zone."

"I wish there was something I could say to convince

you it was him. He told me he loved Finding Nemo. He said he was sorry for spilling ink on his bedroom carpet."

"Our son never spilled ink in his bedroom. Now I know you're lying. Leave our house. Leave our son alone."

Mr. Connors finally stands, signaling that his wife's request be honored, "Please, if you will."

Sharon and Dylan stand respectfully. Sharon takes the lead in saying goodnight.

"I'm sorry this has been so upsetting. Again, I say that I can't imagine the grief and pain you both have been going through. We are here to help you. If you need anything, just call my cellphone. Any time, any day, I will answer it."

Mr. Connors then walks them out to the front door, telling them, "I'm sorry, I know this isn't easy for you, either. Just Michael was everything to us."

Sharon nodded, "I'll buy you as much time as I can, with the Feds, but they won't sit on this. They let me come talk to you first, because of our relationship, but it's bound to leak and people are going to hound you for the truth.

"There are things we can do. Places we can take you and Mrs. Connors to minimize the impact."

Mr. Connors appreciated the concern, "Perhaps. We just have a lot to absorb right now. Can you give us 24 hours before the government makes any official announcements about this?"

"I can't promise it, but I'll try."

"Thank you. I'll call you tomorrow."

The bereaved father then turns to Dylan.

"If you really did hold my son as he died, thank you.

If you are lying to me, to my wife, God damn your soul to hell."

"I held him, sir. I did."

Mr. Connors nods, "Then, thank you."

With that, the door was closed on them ending the encounter.

Both Dylan and Sharon exhale and decompress as they walk away from the home and towards her squad car.

Dylan stares down at his feet, feeling as if he had done something wrong by speaking so much.

"I'm sorry I got a little passionate in there," Dylan told Sharon.

"Don't be. There's no good way to deliver news like that. Drunk driver, hunting accident, pool drowning, overdose. You just do the best you can.

"Who else have you told about what happened tonight?"

"No one."

"No family, friends?"

"No. Well, I mean, I wrote about on my blog."

"Online? Other people can read this?"

"Not hardly. No one reads what I write. The few people that did, didn't believe me anyway."

"Remove that blog right now."

"I can't. My phone's dead."

"As soon as you can, take it down and don't tell anyone else about this until we talk tomorrow."

"Okay, but I just feel an obligation to Michael to speak out. To spread his message.

"I know how his parents feel, but people going in the zone have to know what it is like, good and bad. And people already in the zone have to know not to try to get

out the zone the way they are currently trying to or it will kill them."

"I agree, but let Michael's parents have one more night of peace, one more night of their son being theirs, because all hell will break loose for them once this goes public."

Mr. Connors finally got his wife to bed. They didn't discuss what had happened with Officer Getty and Dylan. They didn't discuss much of anything anymore. It was all just too painful, because it always led back to Michael.

Once she had taken her meds for the night, Mrs. Connors calmed down enough to go to bed. When Mr. Connors was sure she was sound asleep, he went into Michael's room.

They had tried to keep it untouched. They hadn't put any of the hundreds of gifts they had received from strangers in the room. They were all kept at a storage unit a few miles away.

They wanted the room to be exactly the same, so that when Michael finally did come home he would see nothing had changed. It would be as if he had never left.

Mr. Connors turned on Michael's light and searched the carpet in his son's room looking for the ink stain Dylan had mentioned.

There was nothing out of the ordinary on the carpet, besides the normal wear of a child's room. The father moved the boy's chair at this desk. He moved toys, his laundry hamper, still nothing.

He then picked up the corner of a Finding Nemo playmat and lifted it. And there it was, a black ink blotch on the carpet probably from a broken pen.

Michael had smeared the ink in his attempts to clean it up, but all it accomplished was to spread the stain even wider.

Mr. Connors collapsed to the floor and began to cry. He pounded the rug and pulled at his thinning hair.

He hadn't wanted to believe Dylan's story, because it would truly mean that his son was dead.

But now he believed it.

He grabbed at the ink stain in madness, as if he could somehow magically pull the stain out.

He couldn't.

The stain was there and it wasn't going anywhere.

ZONE



CHAPTER 15

VIRAL

On his way home that night, Dylan wanted to stop by the daycare center memorial, but he could see the police already had the street in front of the daycare center blocked off again.

Along with the local police cars, there were some black SUVs parked there as well. He assumed those were the Feds, but they didn't exactly advertise it.

The black SUVs were also stationed in the parking lot for the offices across the street from the daycare center.

He could see agents in dark suits searching the side of the office building with flashlights.

While Dylan was watching, the agents turned and

spotted Dylan's Prius just sitting there at the stoplight that had turned green. Best to get a move on, Dylan thought and he took his foot off the break and passed quietly into the night.

He felt it was best to just go home at that point. It had been a long emotional day and he needed some time to decompress and process all that had happened.

Was it real? Did it not happen? It happened. He knew it to his core, but would he ever be able to convince anyone else.

Was he going to be that guy now? The crazy guy that claims to have been abducted by aliens. The crazy guy that claims he worked at Area 51. The crazy guy that gave Howard Hughes a ride in the desert and in return was the sole beneficiary in his will.

As Dylan parked outside at his apartment, he noticed someone get out of a black sedan and head straight for him, as if they had been waiting for him to get home.

She was dressed in a dark business suit. Not unlike the agents he had seen searching the side of the office building. She had purpose in her movement, a mission to accomplish.

"Excuse me, are you Dylan Gaines?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to catch you unannounced at your home, but you haven't been answering your phone."

"It died. Needs to be charged."

"My name is Langley Price, I'm an agent. I'd like to talk to you about what you saw today."

"Sure. Can we talk here? Or do we have to go somewhere?"

"We can talk here. I'd prefer it actually. Can we go

inside?"

"It's a little messy, but if you don't mind that."

As they walked inside the apartment, Dylan immediately scooped up some fast food wrappers left out on his kitchen table. Then he grabbed some dirty clothes off the living room floor.

"Please, Dylan, don't do that on my account. Please, sit. We have a lot to discuss."

The two sat down in the modest apartment decorated with collectable action figures, a sizable movie collection in various formats, including VHS, Beta and laser disc to go along with the DVDs and Blu-rays.

There were several bookshelves full of hardcover and paperback books, ranging from his childhood favorites, he'd kept all these years to a whole shelf full of his self-published novel, Hitler's Time Machine.

Movie posters for Marvel and Star Wars films adorned the walls in the empty spaces between the shelves full of books and movies.

There were at least three game systems plugged into the widescreen TV, creating a black spaghetti like mess of wires on the floor.

Langley took it all in, guessing she might have been the only female in here in a while. And she would have guessed right, but she tried to not let that show as their conversation began.

"So what do you want to know?" Dylan asked.

"You have an amazing story to tell. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know. I'm kinda numb to be honest with you. I don't even know where to start."

"That's understandable. When I read your blog post

I knew immediately that I needed to reach out to you."

"You didn't think I was lying?"

"Of course I did. But then I read everything else you have ever written. You don't lie. You're honest about yourself, the world and your place in it."

"You really read everything?"

"I read it on the plane flying out from Los Angeles. Even some of your novel."

"Yeah, what did you think?"

"Needs work, but it is an interesting concept. I have some notes for you. I'll give them to you when I'm finished with the rest of the book."

"Are you allowed to tell me what type of agent you are? Who you're with?"

"Right now I work independently. I primarily focus on real life stories. Mostly people that can generate an audience on their own, but where I come in, is taking them to a whole other level. And your level right now is sky high with potential."

"Wait, you're not an intelligence agent?"

"I'm a literary agent."

"Jesus, really? I thought you were with the FBI or something. You dress like it."

"Thank you."

"So you're a literary agent? Wow, that's great."

"Actually, I'm more of a manager now. I was an agent with William Morris/Endeavor in their non-scripted division. Then I decided I wanted to branch out on my own. Are you represented by anyone?"

"No, I just do it all myself. I self-publish everything on Amazon or on my blog. Speaking of which, I need to take it down."

"Why?"

"A police officer told me to."

"Do they have a court order?"

"No, she just asked me to take it down out of respect to Michael's family."

"We have a first amendment in this country and that needs to be respected, too. Don't take it down."

"I said I would. It's not like anyone reads my blog anyway."

"How long has your phone been off?"

"Four or five hours now."

"So you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"You're trending. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. You're blowing up."

He takes the phone out of his pocket and plugs it into an R2-D2 charger.

"No, don't! Don't turn it on!" Langley warns him.

"Why not?"

"Because the person that used to answer that phone does not exist anymore. Can I tell you who you are now?"

"By all means."

"You are a best-selling author. You are the closest thing to living profit we've seen in this world since the New Testament.

"People will want to know everything you say and do. You are going to need someone to help guide you on this journey and that's my job.

"If you turn on that phone, you will be flooded with offers from agents, producers and publishers promising you the world to sign with them to tell your story.

"You know what else will be on that phone? News that you've been fired from all your jobs. Death threats,

marriage proposals, desperate people that think somehow you are going to get their loved ones out of the zone.

"Never turn that phone on again. Here"

Langley hands him a new iPhone box, "It's all paid for. New phone number, new email. This way we can communicate with each other immediately. That's if you sign with me tonight."

"I don't know. I probably own it to myself to at least listen to the messages on there."

"No, don't. Because they're all trapped in here."

She points to the cold black rectangular phone lying on the coffee table.

"I'm here, in the flesh in your living room. Do you remember the miners that were trapped for a week in West Virginia a couple of years ago?"

"Yeah."

"I represented them. You saw them on TV, you saw their book in the book store and you saw their life affirming movie in the theatres. I was their manager."

"You did all that?"

"I did. You ever watch Viral? It's on TLC. It features people that have ruined their lives with the things they said or posted on the Internet. Viral gives them a second chance to rehabilitate their images.

"Remember the kids on the school trip to DC that got captured making fun of the Native Americans? It was our show that arranged for some of the kids to live a week on a reservation in Oklahoma."

"Yeah, I saw the commercials for that."

"That's my show. Talk to any of my clients and they will tell you the key to me is I care. Not only will I be here in the flesh today, but tomorrow and the next day."

"I originally came out here months ago when the story of the daycare kids disappearing hit the news. I couldn't get close to the families and then when the whole zone story broke, they lost their exclusivity and it wasn't worth pursuing them anymore.

"However, I stayed in touch with one of the local cops and they tipped me off about your story. That you were legit.

"So, look, I have a standard contract. It's a 30/70 split of all profits generated from our joint efforts. I keep the contract verbiage simple, so anyone can understand it without a lawyer's review, being that I usually have to move fast with my clients. As is the case with us."

"So you need me to sign it tonight?"

"Yes. Sign right now and I can get started writing the book with you. I think if we work around the clock we can get a first draft done by the weekend."

"Are you kidding me? I have to work."

"No, you don't. Seriously, you were fired. Instacart, Uber and Grubhub all issued statements saying you no longer had a relationship with them."

"I'm broke then. I have to look for a job. How am I gonna get a job now?"

"The minute you sign with me I will contact the executive who I worked with on the West Virginia miner projects. I will tell them we are working together and looking for an exclusive package deal for the book, online, TV and theatrical rights as well as any speaking engagements.

Of course, their news division will get the exclusive interviews and profiles, but that won't be forever."

"How much do you think we can get?"

"Here's the thing. And this is another reason we have

to strike while the iron is hot. Tomorrow morning if a bunch of white zones start popping up and thousands of previously trapped people start jumping out of the zones, your story isn't worth anything. Your exclusive value will vaporize, and you will be completely forgotten. Just an unemployed nobody with a clogged voicemail box.

"Same thing happened with the daycare families. They had a great story, but one presidential address later and we all had a great story.

"Right now, you are the only one with any white zone branding. The only one with any contact from someone coming back from the zone.

"Sign with me, I make the call and I think I can get us a million."

"Dollars?"

"Yes."

"That's sounds great and I would be crazy not to sign right now, but I would be also crazy not to at least talk to a lawyer. Can I have 24 hours?"

"So you can turn your old phone on? Hear the other offers? Sure take 24 hours, but in 24 hours if more white zones pop up, someone else is going to be first to the market and second and third and good luck to you then.

"Ever seen a movie about the third mission to land on the moon?"

"Actually, that would have been Apollo 13, but point taken. Time is of the essence. Okay, I'll sign. Where's the contract?"

"On your phone. The new phone. I prefer e-sign. I set everything up for you, just remember to change your passwords when you get a chance. Right now the 6-digit passcode to get in the phone is today's date."

Dylan takes the phone out and turns it on and taps in the date to gain entry. He opens the e-mail app and sees the e-sign contract is the only thing waiting for him in the queue.

He opens the contract and signs it with his finger tip on the phone and sends it back to her.

"Okay, done. It's amazing what these things can do."

"It is. When I bought my house, did it all on my phone, except when I had to absolutely, positively sign paper documents."

Langley takes her phone out and starts to search Google.

"You calling now?" asks Dylan.

"Yes, but I just want to check on something first. Make sure no one else has reported seeing a white zone other than you."

She searches on the phone and seems pretty pleased, but then something on the phone catches her attention.

"Hum," Langley remarks to herself.

"What? No, don't say it," Dylan looks crestfallen.

"No, it's good. Hitler's Time Machine is the top selling sci-fi e-book on Amazon. Twenty-seventh overall."

"Really?"

"Check your phone."

Dylan instinctively picks up his old phone.

"Not that phone. Leave it off."

Dylan sets the old iPhone down and instead picks up his new one.

"Okay, so I'm gonna make the call to my contact. You're good with a million? If they offer it, we'll take it, right?"

"I'll manage somehow."

She made the call.

She got the offer.

They took it.

Business affairs sent the contract.

They signed it.

And a week after Dylan first saw Michael emerge from the white zone, \$700,000.00 was wired to his checking account, making his new account balance \$700,917.91

ZONE



CHAPTER 16

THE PARENT COMPANY

The interview started off with a full disclosure admission that the book publisher for Dylan's book and the network he was now appearing on were owned by the same parent company.

It would be the same announcement that would be made when he appeared on radio shows produced by the same parent company and again when being interviewed and profiled in magazines and online publications owned by the same parent company.

It was a coordinated blitz across all media platforms. No one knew when the buzz about Dylan, Michael and the White Zone would become yesterday's news, but

right now everyone wanted a piece of him. And the parent company always made sure their media companies got the best bites.

The interview was sandwiched between shows the network wanted to give the before and after ratings bump to.

One was a sexy dark drama about FBI agents trying to uncover the truth about zones. The other was a sitcom about a family that accidentally goes through a zone and the whacky life they now lead on the other side where anything can happen.

If either of the shows turned out to be a moderate hit with a four-year run, the parent company stood to make hundreds of millions of dollars from it.

If either show turned into a monster hit, going on for seven to eight years, the studio could easily make two to three billion dollars from it over the lifetime of the property.

Making the initial cost of a million dollars for Dylan's story a rather paltry bargain in the process.

It had been non-stop since Dylan signed with Langley Price. In addition to marketing his story, she set about to market him, as well. He was never going to be the hunky profit, so she went with the kind soul, nurturing profit instead.

He was assigned a stylist, nutritionist and personal trainer. Between his writing sessions, he worked out feverishly and with his new diet, he had managed to lose thirty pounds along with all his friendships with the fast food drive through staffers in town.

The makeover was so great, that the network wanted Dylan to host a reality show focused on Zone victims.

It was a quick turnaround, but they got a five-

episode run produced in time for his book launch and first major TV interview.

The nationally hyped interview started with a short bio piece about Michael and Dylan and how their paths crossed on that fateful night.

Then the anchor sat down with Dylan at a garden memorial named after Michael that Dylan had created to offer a tranquil place for those who had lost loved ones to a zone.

"This is a beautiful place," the Anchor started with.

"It is. I wish it didn't have to be here, but it is here for those that need it," replied Dylan.

"Do you need it?"

"I do."

"So two months ago you were delivering groceries."

"I was an Uber driver and I delivered meals for Grubhub, as well."

"Today you have the number one best-selling non-fiction book, *Never Go In, Never Go Out*, Michael's Message about the Zone. The number one selling fiction book, *Hitler's Time Machine*. The number one watched show on television and the most downloaded Podcast on iTunes."

"That's why I like to come here."

"How do you explain that?"

"Simple. This is all about Michael's message. I'm was charged that night with carrying the words he couldn't speak anymore. It fell to me to let people know what being in the zone was like and to let people know that if they were going in the zone, that they would have to stay there. At least for now. Michael gave his life to send that message."

"It seems that the only people that don't want to hear

Michael's message, are Michael's parents. They're suing you, correct?"

"I've been advised by counsel not to comment on the lawsuit, but I'll say this. I understand how traumatic this has been for Michael's parents. And I care about their feelings, but I made a pledge that night to Michael that I would spread his word and I'm keeping that promise."

"A lot of people are blaming you for the dramatic rise in zone entries, which have risen tenfold since you came out with your story.

"People wanting to be reunited with loved ones that have disappeared in zones. People with nowhere else to go that have given up on this world. People that think they are going to a fantasy land where there is no limit to the imagination.

"You tell people that you don't need to work. You don't need to eat. You don't get sick, you don't die, if anything you get healthier. If you go in a zone you just exist to learn, have fun and be with other people."

"I don't recommend going into a zone. It's the title of my book. Never Go In."

"But the rest of the title is Never Go Out. Never Go In, Never Go Out. Isn't that a mixed message?"

"It is, but people have died trying to leave the zone. I'm a realist. We're not going to stop people from going into zones. There are just too many of them appearing these days and the frequency keeps going up as each day passes by. Someday, there could be a zone for every human being on this planet.

"And just as you can't stop people from taking drugs or drinking alcohol, you can, however, advocate for safe usage.

"And part of that safe usage is education. We can't

just say zones are evil and pretend they aren't here, just as we can't all go jump in a zone right now thinking we are automatically going on to a better life."

"Both in the book, where you capitalize on Michael's story and on your reality show, where you focus on people that have had their lives ripped apart by losing someone to a zone, people have accused you of being the king of Zone Grief Porn."

"No one is a bigger activist for the rights of those that have lost loved ones to the zone, than me. Our political action committee, ZonePac, has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support candidates that are willing to reform the laws and regulations of this nation to support zone survivors.

"A lot of industries are gunning for you, because of it."

"I know they are."

"If you have a terminal disease, don't go to a hospital, you go to a zone.

"If you're too old or unable to live by yourself, don't go to an assisted living community, you go to a zone."

"If you've been charged with a major crime and you don't think you'll be found innocent, don't go to a lawyer and risk a conviction, you go to a zone."

"I don't advocate for criminals to use zones as a get out of jail free card. That's a very dangerous trend that should worry all of us."

"But when you spread Michael's message, that the zone is a magical alternate reality, that is an appealing idea to a great number of people, especially criminals that could be looking at life in prison or a death sentence."

"I tell people the truth as I know it and they have to

decide for themselves. That's all I can do."

"Would you ever go in a zone?"

"Right now, I have a mission to spread Michael's message and I can't do that in a zone."

"Have you ever touched one?"

"I have. It was amazing. An unreal feeling. I felt I was connected to the universe. As if anything was possible, good or bad, I suppose."

"Do you feel an uncontrollable urge to touch one again? Are you a zone addict now?"

"No. If I saw one, I would touch it, but I wouldn't go in."

"Some people don't have the ability to make that decision. They touch it once and they are hooked. They can't control themselves. Marriages are wrecked, families abandoned, whole existences wiped out in the blink of an eye."

"Some people can't control themselves with a lot of things. That's nothing new for humanity."

"A lot of people want to know if the zone is Heaven or Hell."

"I don't think it is either. I asked Michael if you see aliens, angels, time travelers, anything that would let you know who was behind all this? He said no. You go in to the zone and you exist. That's it."

"Others can teach you what they know and how to live in the zone, but there is no instruction manual. No one there knows who created the zone or what its purpose is."

"Can you convince someone that doesn't believe you that you are telling the truth?"

"I wish I had proof. I wanted my cellphone so bad to record what was happening, because I knew no one

would believe me. But Michael did know the code word that was set up for Captain Murphy."

"Z."

"That's right. Captain Murphy would have had to have communicated that with Michael while in the zone."

"And that code was confirmed by the government scientist in charge of recruiting Captain Murphy."

"That scientist, Dr. Roger Collins, has also been relieved of his duties at the zone site he used to work at."

"For medical reasons. He developed a zone addiction and he is currently seeking treatment for it."

"He never told anyone else about the code word."

"Exactly. So no one else would have been able to know about it except for Captain Murphy."

"A lot of people say Roger Collins was just lying when he confirmed the code. That he confirmed it falsely to keep his position at the zone site and still have easy access to the zone, to feed his addiction."

"A lot of people say I made the whole thing up, too. But a lot more people believe me. They believe Michael's message."

"What's next for you?"

"Right now, I'm working on the movie adaption of my novel Hitler's Time Machine."

"So, soon you might also have the number one movie in America to go along with everything else?"

"With any luck, maybe."

"No plans to go in a zone?"

"None."

ZONE



CHAPTER 17

MY NAME IS

"They are everywhere now. You can't escape them. Front yards, side streets, parks, highways, fields, forests.

"And when I don't see the real zones, I see all the memorials people have put up. Like those little white crosses you see driving on the road, where someone was killed in a car accident or hit by a car.

"I can't even watch TV anymore. Every show or news story has to have a zone in it.

"It all just makes me want him back so bad."

The Armenian woman breaks down in sobs as she squeezes tightly a red foam ball in her hand. She is in a circle of completely random people, who, on the surface,

don't look like they have anything in common.

Some are in the suits they wore to the office that day. Others are in jeans and t-shirts. Some appear well off, others not so much.

Sherman Hartsfield, leads the group and he is the one that gets up from his folding chair to hand the sobbing Armenian woman, Olga Vazkanush, a box of Kleenex.

Olga takes a second to compose herself, wiping away the tears with the Kleenex.

Then Olga continues, "The insurance company won't help, because they say Hovan isn't officially dead. Well, he isn't officially alive either. I'm going to lose my house if they don't get everyone out of the zones in the next couple of months.

"It gets so bad, that I wonder if I wouldn't be better off joining Hovan in there. I can't, I know, but I think about it."

Again Sherman takes the lead in speaking up and offering support, "I've thought about it, too, but it's not the answer."

Olga nods her head, "I know it's not. I don't know what I'd do without this group," she manages a smile as she looks around at all the people there listening to her.

"Well, we're always here for you, Olga," Sherman reassures her.

"I'm done. Go, please," Olga says as she passes the small red foam ball to the person seated next to her. He's a middle-aged man who has had his arms crossed the whole time he's been there, eyes looking downward.

He uncrosses his arms to take the red ball. He's in no hurry to start talking, still running a few things through his mind as he squeezes the red ball in his fingers a few

more times.

Finally he starts with a reluctance in his voice, "My name is, I don't really want to say. Call me, Mike."

The group responds as one, "Hi, Mike."

"My wife disappeared about a month ago. We had been having trouble for a while, so I thought she went to her mother's to blow off some steam.

"But then her boss called me. Said she hadn't been in the office for two days and never called in sick. She was never sick, so that's why they thought it was so odd for her not to even call. Just wasn't like her.

"So I called her family, they hadn't seen her, either. Called our friends, her friends, no one knew anything."

"Called the cops. They're so overwhelmed, they weren't any help.

"So I called a private investigator. A lady P.I. She went to work searching my wife's computer and in five minutes she found out she was having an affair on me. That felt great.

"No clue it was happening. Each night we'd go to bed, she always had her phone with her. Thought she was playing her games, or looking on Facebook, Nextdoor, whatever. No, it was this guy. Right there in my own bed while I was trying to get to sleep.

"Anyway, the P.I. tracks this guy down that she was seeing and it turns out he's missing, too. But at least they found my wife's car at his place. His car they found abandoned about a hundred miles away.

"He had been missing for about a week, like my wife. And it was about a week ago that a zone was reported in the area when they found his car abandoned.

"One of these zone parking lots. Where a zone pops up in the middle of nowhere. One idiot sees it, tells

everyone one else and people go tracking it down on their cellphone. Then they just park their car as close as they can get and go into the zone and leave all their cars behind.

"His car was about one of fifty that they found there where this zone had been before it disappeared.

"So that's what the P.I. thinks happened. Word got out there was a zone there. Before the government could stop people from going in, my wife and this guy drove out at a moment's notice and went in together.

"P.I. also told me about this group. Said it might be good to talk to some people about what happened to me. She gets a lot of zone related cases now. Bad for us, good for her, these damn zones.

"My wife, she was obsessed with zones. Convinced they were the next evolution in life after she read that crazy guy's book. Never Go In or Out, whatever.

"Constantly watched his shows over and over again on DVR. She really thought she could go into one of these things and live her fantasy life.

"I never thought she would actually go through with it though. She was very careful. Safe.

"She hated that I thought the whole zone thing was bullshit. I still think it is. You walk into one of these things, you just die. Simple as that.

"I mean, how the hell did this country get so stupid that people could put their faith in this abyss and think things would turn out well?

"I'm sorry, you're dumb enough to go a zone, you deserve to die."

Sherman feels compelled to interrupt Mike, as he senses the unease amongst the regulars, who have loved ones trapped in the zone, most having gone in willingly.

"We don't know that, Mike. That you die when you go in a zone, but please continue, unless you are done?"

Mike just shakes his head, "I'm done, I guess. I just wanna kill the guy, though. For what he did."

Ken Hemmings, clean cut, neatly dressed, raises his hand to get Mike's attention, "Hey, Mike, my wife cheated on me, too. Don't even ask me the things I wanted to do when I found out.

"But we got a divorce instead and I got remarried to an amazing woman, who shares my faith, we have two amazing kids together, and looking back on it, that affair was the best thing to ever happen to me. I haven't, but I almost want to reach out and thank the guy my first wife was cheating on me with."

Mike waves Ken off, "No, I'm not talking about killing the guy she was banging. I'm talking about that son of a bitch going around telling people how amazing these zones are. Stupid TV show, always on the news. How many people have killed themselves going into these zones, because of this clown?

"These kids that disappear into zones, the parents think they're all alive in there, so now the parents go in to try and save their kids. Now the parents are dead, too. They got whole families going in now. All dead.

"Seriously, how did America get to be so stupid? What the hell caused this? Do they not teach common sense in schools anymore? When you see a black hole of death, don't walk in it. How hard is that?"

Mike sees he's upsetting people and tries to pull himself back, "I mean, all I'm saying is someone needs to stop this guy going around promoting these lies and cons. Arrest him, sue him, do something and do it fast. I'm done talking. Here, take this thing."

Mike hands the red foam ball to Beatrice Gala, who is in her sixties and dressed casually.

"Thank you for sharing, Mike," Sherman says, happy that their newest member is finally done.

Beatrice, takes a few moments to composes herself as she fiddles with the red ball in her hands, passing it back and forth.

Then Beatrice starts, "I don't think you die when you go into a zone. I can't think that, otherwise it means I killed my father. He was dying anyway, lung cancer. My sisters and I had arranged for hospice care for him.

Well, my father saw all news coverage of the white zone and saw Dylan talking about his book and then the TV show, so he got the idea that he wanted to go in a zone now, instead of staying in hospice care.

"We tried to talk him out of it, but he was adamant we take him to a zone."

Mike jumps back in, "See, that's what I'm talking about. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but that's what this guy does to people. Gets them thinking crazy."

Beatrice continues, "My sisters are like Mike. They hate zones. Think they are evil. Sent by the Devil to lure us into Hell. But I don't think that way. Neither did my father.

"I kept watching twitter and the zone apps, to see if one would come close to where my father's hospice care was. One day it was just me watching him and news broke that a zone had appeared down the street.

"I asked my dad if he was really sure he wanted to go in a zone.

"He said, yes, so I took him.

"When we got there a huge crowd had already shown up. Some people just wanted to look at it, others

just wanted to touch it and then there were those that wanted to go in.

"After a couple of people had entered the zone, a group of the men formed an angel chain around it."

"What's an angel chain?" Mike asks.

Ken, the clean-cut guy that told Mike about his wife cheating on him, explains, "That's when bunch of men link arms in Christ's name to prevent people from entering zones."

Beatrice then picks up her story again, "If you were sick, they would let you touch it, but they would hold on to you so you couldn't go all the way in. Everyone else, they stopped from even touching the zone.

"There were kids there, teenagers, and the angel chain wouldn't let them touch it, since they were all healthy young people with their whole lives ahead of them.

"One of the kids wouldn't take no for an answer, saying they didn't have the right to tell him what to do and not do. I don't know who threw the first punch, but a fight started and then a near riot broke out.

"Despite the ruckus, I took my father up because the angel chain was finally broken. I gave him a last hug goodbye and took a video of him saying goodbye to everyone that wasn't there. He told them this is what he wanted and then he turned around and went into the zone and he was gone.

"My sisters won't speak to me now. They wanted me arrested, but after I showed the video to the police, they left me alone. They have enough on their hands as it is."

"So I come to this group now, because no one in my family will talk to me.

"Personally, I think they're mad at me about the will.

Until people trapped in the zone are officially declared dead, they can't execute his will. His estate is in limbo.

"They wanted him to die. They can go to church and talk about Jesus all they want, but they wanted his money. I don't want to offend you, Ken, I don't think religion is a bad thing necessarily, I just hate hypocrisy."

"It's fine, Beatrice. We're good," Ken reassures her.

"I'm done sharing for tonight," Beatrice tells them.

Beatrice passes the red foam ball to Ken.

"I'm Ken, most everyone knows my story, but for you new people, I didn't lose anyone to a zone, but I touched one once.

"I was parking in a mall parking lot and one minute it was completely normal, the next it was complete chaos. People just started running out of the mall and flooding the parking lot.

"At first, I thought there was a gunman in the mall. I have a permit to carry, so I thought maybe I could help.

"I asked somebody what was going on and this guy told me that a zone had just appeared outside.

"So I ran over with everyone else and there it was, a zone. This was still in the early days, before we knew about the white zone and Dylan and Michael.

"People were touching it, just amazed. We did know at the time not to go all the way. The president had made his address a few days before, so no one was going in, just touching it.

"I waited my turn, and I got close enough to put my hand in the zone. Changed my life. I still feel the warm energy running up my arm and into my head to this day. I kept my hand in there as long as I could before mall security got out there and pushed everyone back.

"Soon the cops showed up and had the whole area

blocked off. I stayed there just watching the zone from a distance, until it just finally disappeared.

"Then the crowds went away, too, as did the cops. An hour later, it was as if the zone had never been there at all.

"But it had been there. I didn't leave that parking lot for two more hours. I wanted it to come back, so bad. I wanted it to come back, because in my heart, and I know this might be hard for people like you, Mike, to understand, but in my heart, I felt like I touched the face of God.

"I believed then as I do now, that God has sent these zones to reach out to us. To bring us home. That something bad is going to happen and these are our lifeboats.

"I want to go in a zone so bad, but I can't. I can't abandon my family. And I can't take my kids in there. It's not fair to them. I'm an adult. I can make my own decisions, but they deserve to have their life here on Earth.

"Sorry, I'm just running on here. I'm just so passionate it about it. My wife gets so sick of me talking about zones all the time. She calls me Richard Dryfuss. You know the movie Close Encounters of a Third Kind? The mashed potatoes guy, that's me.

"And it's true. I'm at my kid's soccer game, all I think about are zones. At work, I find it hard to focus. It all seems so meaningless now that the zones are here.

"I literally have to force myself to try and listen to my wife as she tells me about her day, because all I really wanna do is grab my phone and see if a zone has popped up anywhere near me.

I try to talk about other things with her, but

inevitably it always goes back to zones for me, so I have to stop myself and put it on pause.

"I don't want to lose another wife, so I come here and get as much of the zone talk out of me as I can.

"The main thing that bothers me now is that I worry that the zones will go away for good and that maybe I will have lost my chance to meet God and Jesus. I know I can live a good life and when I die, I'll just meet them the old fashion way, but, boy, I just don't want to miss it.

"I see more and more postings on Facebook of other zone believers. It's growing. I'm not the only one that thinks zones are the gateway to Heaven."

Mike interrupts, but in a respectful, measured way.

"Listen, Ken, I don't believe any of this, but if that guy really did talk to that kid about life in the zone, the kid told him God, angels, Jesus, they weren't there. Only other people."

Ken nods, but argues back, "True, but Michael did say that when you go in a zone, it is all darkness, until someone teaches you how to see. So, maybe God and Jesus are there, we just need more people in the zone that know how to look for them."

Mike shrugs, "Well, if Jesus is in there, I hope he gives my wife and her buddy a good smack in the chops."

ZONE



CHAPTER 18

USA! USA! USA!

The meeting took place in the underground Presidential Emergency Operations Center, PEOC, at the White House. President Perez didn't go through such extremes to normally get briefings on the zones, but this one was different.

FBI Director Catherine Housen went through a series of ads that were appearing on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The ads ranged from the slickly produced with high production values, to more earthy grassroots ads thrown together by someone with not a lot of technical skill, but still with a lot of passion to communicate their views on what the zones meant for

Christians.

Housen was direct in her commentary, but tried to leave it as emotionless as possible, "This first group of ads are using religion, more specifically evangelical Christianity, to encourage people to enter the zones as a testament to their faith."

The ads clicked by on the monitors with headlines such as: "If the zones aren't Heaven, then let's make them Heaven." "Spread God's word EVERYWHERE!" "This is a Christian ZONE!"

"This next sampling of ads were produced to appeal to a strong America First sense of patriotism."

As the red, white and blue, heavy on the flag and eagle ads clicked by, there was no mistaking who these ads were meant for.

"American Zone" "Manifest Destiny." "Americans Lead the Way."

"This last group is an attempt to appeal to America's youth. Especially those interested in videogames, fantasy stories and science fiction."

The ads looked like were promoting the next big first-person shooter or a young adult fantasy world novel series with headlines such as "Zone In," "Reinvent your World," "It's all true."

President Perez studied the ads quietly then asked, "What groups are responsible for these ads? Are these from zone activists? Some of these look pretty grass roots."

"We think the grass roots appearance of some of the ads is intentional, because when we traced the money behind who bought the ads, we found, that no matter if they were high production value or low production value, they were all from a shell corporation with ties to

a Russian intelligence run troll farm."

"Are you saying the Russians are behind the zones?" Defense Secretary McKenna asked with some concern.

Director Housen answered, "No, not the actual zones. That's still an undetermined phenomenon and the Russians are beset with zones as well and spending a fortune on containment. And they are lucky, because the zone frequency in Russia is far less than what we are encountering in the US."

"So, there is a zone gap?" the gray haired and tanned Secretary of State Winslow quipped in a joking reference to the Cold War era missile gap theory, that brought about the nuclear arms race between the two superpowers.

Director Housen waited for the slight chuckle in the PEOC to die down before continuing, because this next part of her briefing was about to get very serious.

"Mr. President, what the Russians have begun doing is a systematic campaign to encourage Americans to enter zones."

"Why?" President Perez wanted to know.

"Our best guess is this is an attempt to depopulate the US."

Secretary of State Winslow laughed at the claim, adding, "They have a long way to go. There are three hundred and thirty million Americans. So far, we have approximately thirty thousand reported zone entrances.

"Yet we lose over a million Americans a year to heart disease and cancer alone. Where's our underground bunker meeting about that?"

Homeland Security Director Northrup came to the Director Housen's defense, "Doug, the point is the Russians aren't running ads for people to smoke

Marlboro reds and eat more super-sized Big Macs.

"These zones have people panicking. Making rash decisions. We still can't tell them what these zones really are."

Secretary of State Winslow shot back, "We may never be able to tell them."

Homeland Security Director Northrup went right back at him, the tension rising between the two, "But we have to show that we are at least trying!"

President Perez sensing the tension between the two rival cabinet members, tried to change the subject.

"What are we learning at the zone sites we control."

Director Housen answered, "We are still receiving the signals back from Captain Murphy. Not only is he still living, but he has the heart rate now of a twenty-year-old."

"How do we know it's even him?" the skeptical Secretary of State Winslow demanded.

Housen responded, "We've watched the changes gradually take place over the months he's been in there."

"How can we get his heart rate back, but no other communications?" inquired Winslow.

"We don't know," Housen answered.

Winslow throws his hands up in the air and looks around at the other cabinet officials gathered there.

"How come the guy on TV knows more about zones that we do? And do we have any idea if that guy is for real or not? Or is he just trying to sell books?" Secretary of State Winslow asked, as if he was the president and not Perez. Winslow had a bad habit of this, which Chief of Staff Rosen would have to remind Winslow of after the meeting, again.

Winslow had, in fact, almost been president. He lost

a close nomination battle to Tony and in an effort to reunite the party, Tony offered, at the time, Governor Winslow, the chance to be his running mate.

Winslow turned down the Vice Presidency, but asked for the job as Secretary of State in return for his full support in the fall campaign and end all rumors of a third party bid that was sure to doom Tony's chances of winning the presidency.

While Tony was wary of the gregarious governor, who never met a TV camera he didn't like, he accepted the deal and Governor Winslow got behind Tony and helped reassure reluctant older, white voters that electing America's first Latino president was going to be a good thing.

Tony knew that Winslow wanted the Secretary of State gig to bolster his international experience making him a better presidential candidate in the future. Tony just hoped it wouldn't be as a primary challenge for his own re-election next year, as some rumors would have you believe.

Housen answered Winslow, "In regards to author Dylan Gaines, there is no hard evidence to collaborate his story. What we do have is that his cellphone, which was left in his car, shows he was in the area of the daycare for two hours at the time of the purported event.

"There was apparently a verbal code word Z that was kept secret between one of the zone scientists and Captain Murphy. Dylan knew that code word was Z before anyone else."

Defense Secretary McKenna jumped back in, "Yes, but at the same time the scientist confirmed the code word Z story, he was being removed from the zone project for health reasons. We suspect he was lying in an

attempt to be kept on the project and keep his zone access."

Director Housen, "Yes, but there are two other incidents. Michael Connors, the boy from the zone, told Dylan to tell his parents that he was sorry for spilling ink on his bedroom carpet. When initially told of this, the boy's parents couldn't remember the boy ever spilling any ink.

"However, it was later confirmed by the father that there was an ink stain hidden under a small rug. The father told the local law enforcement that story under the promise that it would be kept confidential."

"That's great, because there is no way the father could have spilled ink on the rug after he was told the story. That'll hold up just fine," Winslow remarked.

"There was one other item, sir. The FBI did a sweep of the area around the daycare to confiscate all surveillance video. There wasn't much there, but video from a gas station captured a bright flash of light coming from the direction of the daycare center that matches up to the time line of the reported events of the white zone."

The president thinks about that for a second.

"That video never gets seen by the public. Ever. The last thing we need is something to encourage millions of Americans to go in to these zones. Bad enough those Russian ads are flooding Facebook."

"Yes, sir."

Then the President asked, "Legally, where do all these people stand? Are they considered dead or not?"

Attorney General Alvin Foster fiddles with his glasses, before answering, "They are being handled as missing persons at this point. If there is no contact with that individual over a period of years, they can be

declared dead. That period varies state by state. Usually it averages about five years."

Commerce Secretary Crimmins perked up, "What's that gonna do to the insurance industry if all these life insurance plans have to pay out at the same time in five years? They could become insolvent."

"Someone will bail them out again. Probably us, if we win reelection," Winslow noted. "In the meantime, what do we do about the Russians?"

The President was adamant, "We have to demand an immediate stoppage of these ads. If not, we'll start deporting Russian diplomatic personnel. Let's try to work with these social media sites to get this shut down as well."

Housen answered, "We can try, but the damage may have already been done, because there is a growing fringe movement in the Christian community demanding that they should be allowed access to government-controlled zone sites, so they can express their religious freedom. They want to send missionaries into the zones."

President Perez was firm, "No. Site containment is crucial for national survival."

Homeland Security Director Margret Dunfries reports, "Sir, if I may. Zone containment is getting to be more of a struggle going forward. Local law enforcement is doing the best they can, but there are just too many zones appearing now and staying longer."

Chief of Staff John Rosen replies, "We can go to Congress for more funds to be distributed to the local level for containment."

"What do you think they really want?" President Perez asks to no one and yet to everyone.

Chief Rosen answers, "Congress? Nothing. No one on the Hill is gonna vote against zone protection. Not even those clowns ready to impeach you for sneezing on a Tuesday."

"No, these zones." President Perez points to one of the Russian zone ads still on the monitor. "What do they want? Why are they here?"

Defense Secretary McKenna responds, "If they wanted to hurt us, they could have done so already. They could have sent whatever they wanted through these zones long ago. But they just sit there, doing nothing."

Winslow adds, "If these zones are supposed to help us, I'd like to know how. Are they part of the next evolution of humans? Are they doorways to visit to another world or dimension?"

"If you believe the reports from Dylan, when people go through the zone, no one is there to greet them. You just learn how to live in the zone from other humans that have gone through. Not unlike the world we live in now.

"And we still debate how this world was created and how and why we are here."

President Perez sighs, "I wish they would stop coming."

McKenna responds, "We all do, Mr. President, but we have to have a plan in case they don't stop. Containment can't be our only answer."

"How are other countries dealing with this?"

Winslow replies, "Most democracies are following our lead. Once a zone is detected and reported the government takes control of that area until the zone is gone, but there are no laws forbidding anyone from touching or observing zones.

"Authoritarian states are handling it differently. In Russia, China, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and North Korea anyone making contact with a zone without government approval is imprisoned for life or even executed. The Saudi's, they just cut your hand off. People in these countries don't dare go near zones, which is why they all have the lowest zone entries in the world."

President Perez nods, looking to wrap the meeting up, "We survived British Rule, a Civil War, Nazism, Imperial Japan, Communism, and Terrorist attacks. I think we'll be able to survive these zones as well."

Secretary of Labor Li signals with a wave of her hand, that she has something to add, "Mr. President, I'd like to offer a thought."

President Perez thought the meeting was over, but he gestures instead to Secretary Li, "Please, go ahead."

She leans forward in her chair and begins, "Imagine, if it was reversed. That our normal state was life in the zone. You don't get sick, you don't die, you can live in any fantasy world you want, you don't need money, so you don't have to work. You don't need government, so there are no taxes. You get to spend all day playing and spending time with your friends and family.

"Now all of a sudden a bunch of mysterious black circles start to appear. And if you go through one of these circles you go to a world where there is sickness, death, you need money to survive, so you spend most of your life doing something you absolutely hate, making someone else, who's already rich beyond their dreams, that much more richer, while you struggle to give your kids an education and put a roof over their heads.

Then you watch those kids graduate from college only to be saddled with tens of thousands of dollars of student loan debt as they struggle to get a job in a contracting job environment shrunken by globalization and automation. All so they can repeat the life of struggle that you just went through.

"And on and on it goes only getting worse for the average American worker.

"That is until some gun nut tries to end your life with his second amendment guaranteed AR-15 assault rifle.

"Now I ask you, would you leave your virtual zone paradise to go to this new hell hole of strife and struggle?

"You put it like that, no," President Perez answered. "But as I understand it, this virtual world, this zone world, it isn't real."

"It is to the people that are in it," Li answered back.

Secretary of State Winslow tries to tamp down the drama.

"The vast majority of people, and I do mean vast, won't go into zones. They have too much invested here to leave it all behind. Family, homes, retirement funds. Plus we don't really know what happens when you go in a zone. Fear will keep people out."

"It better. I don't want to be an alarmist, but if the number of zone entrances stays on its current track, it could lead to a collapse of this country from within."

"Ridiculous!" Winslow protested. "Chicken Little, Zone hysteria."

Li, never one to shy away from a debate, answered back, "Imagine the impact on the economy if the housing market is swamped with new listings from people that have gone into zones. The value of housing would plummet. Houses wouldn't be worth what people paid

for them. There would be no need for new construction, because you could get houses already built for a song.

"What about cars? Same thing. You'd have all these used cars flooding the market. Why buy a new car for forty, fifty, sixty thousand when you could buy the same car, barely used for a quarter of the price.

"We lose the housing and automobile markets, think of all the other industries those two alone would impact. It could start an economic downward spiral that could cripple not just this country, but the world.

President Perez stands to take control of the meeting again and end it, "I've already said it is the policy of this White House to prevent people from going into zones.

"We have to do everything we can to discourage it. Now outside of declaring martial law and launching a war on zones, there is only so much we can do at this point. We are not Iran. We are not North Korea. We are not Russia."

Winslow offers a suggestion, "Can we at least get this guy off TV telling people what a great place the zone is?"

McKenna interjects, "If we were Russia, we would have killed him a long time ago."

Winslow ponders, "Is there was a way to discredit him? Something that would make people lose faith in him. That might not be the worst thing in the world."

Attorney General Foster warns, "Don't let that surveillance tape of the white zone leak for starters.

Winslow jumps in, "It wasn't a white zone. It was a flash of white light. Could have been anything. Car headlights."

Foster continues, "Regardless, then we make sure this guy is paying his taxes, stopping at red lights, doesn't have any skeletons in his closet."

Winslow keeps plotting, "We can ask the Senate to hold congressional hearings and scare him into thinking he could be liable in a class action lawsuit by all those families that have lost loved ones after reading one of his books or watching his TV show.

Chief of Staff Rosen cautions, "We don't want to push too hard on Gaines publicly. This guy is getting so popular, he could challenge you for re-election."

President Perez nodded his acknowledgement as he headed for the door, "Well, everyone wants me to dump the vice president. Maybe we could put this guy on the ticket instead."

If there was one person that was most grateful for the arrival of the zones, it had to have been Vice President Montgomery. Who was noticeably absent from the PEOC zone meeting.

Vice President Montgomery was a former fighter pilot and before the zones arrived, the biggest news story going was that their might have been a cover up to conceal an evaluation report of a flight incident in which the vice president had chosen to ditch a fighter in the sea rather than risk a crash inland.

In ditching the plane the weapons control officer had lost their life. Vice President Montgomery had been cleared in the incident all those years ago, but this counter report concluded the vice president's judgement had been premature in the decision to ditch.

No one tried to fault the vice president's actions at the time of the incident, but Congressional Republicans were holding hearings on why the report had been suppressed for years, only recently surfacing from an anonymous source. It wasn't the crime, they said, it was

the cover up.

The incident raised questions about the vice president's role in the suppression of the report, but it also couldn't help but also raise questions about the vice president's courage to stand up the mightiest of challenges that the world would posed should the vice president have to succeed the president.

Would Vice President Montgomery have the fortitude to see the mission through or would the VP ditch in the ocean again at the first sign of trouble?

Even Democrats were worried the probe would be so damaging politically that it could harm President Perez's reelection next year. Hence the whispers of dumping Montgomery off the reelection ticket and adding Secretary Winslow instead.

So Vice President Montgomery had been keeping a low profile outside of Washington, while the ongoing Congressional investigation called one witness after another hoping to inflect as much political damage as they could.

A political death watch had started for the vice president, as expectations grew that the VP would offer up a resignation or at least be asked not to run on the reelection ticket voluntarily.

However, the zones had replaced the negative headlines for Vice President Montgomery and the story retreated to the back pages of newspapers and barely registered a mention on cable news anymore, which was practically all zone related stories day and night.

Even if the report did find some fault on the Vice President Montgomery's behalf, the findings would not garner nearly the attention they would before the zones arrived.

So thanks to the zones, Vice President Montgomery stood a much better chance of survival.

ZONE



CHAPTER 19

I'M A BEATLE

"People get audited all the time. Welcome to the world of being rich. You have nothing to worry about, I've check with the accountants, you're fine," Langley Price told the worried Dylan in the dressing room in Phoenix, Arizona.

"Why did it leak?" Dylan pressed.

"Because you're famous. People feed the press stories as favors. I've done it. Not with you, but sometimes it helps to have allies in the media," Langley tells Dylan.

"Or it leaked for an agenda. Someone wants to make me look bad, like I'm some sort of tax cheat, before I

testify before Congress. I don't think it is a coincidence."

"Don't be paranoid. It isn't good for the brand."

"I think the government is trying to set me up. They can't explain or control the zones, so they go after what they can control, what they can manage, me. Show the people that they are doing something. They can't stop the zones, but they can stop me from spreading Michael's message."

"Which is why we need to broaden that message."

"Here we go."

"I'm not asking you to lie. There is just a way you can answer questions. Especially from Christians that want to believe zones are a doorway to Heaven."

"They're not."

"You don't know that."

"Michael said they were no angels in the zone. No God, Jesus or Devil, either. And in the spirit of inclusion, no Mohammed, Vishnu or Buddha, as well."

"You don't have to be so definitive when people ask you if you think the zone is Heaven. If we can tap into the that movement, widen our base, no one would be able to stop us. Not even the government."

"Wide spread support throughout the evangelical community would guarantee political support. Republicans need the evangelicals to survive. So if you can get the Christians on your side, you would have the Republicans looking out for you on the committee when you go before them to testify."

"So what do I say when someone asks me if I think the zone is Heaven?"

"Say it could be, but you don't know for sure. That's as much a true answer as the zone being anything else."

"Who do you think is paying \$500 a ticket to come to

your live events? It's the Christians.

"They want to know if the zones are Heaven or human fishing nets cast out by aliens that are harvesting us for food."

"I don't want to turn this tour into a religious event."

"I know, you wanna be a rock star."

"No, a Beatle. Someone that can change the way people think. Have an influence on how we live. We have a chance to reshape society. Change the world."

"Here comes the Apple commercial."

"My point is, if we start making this about religion, we're going to lose people."

"For every one person you lose, you'll gain ten more that want so desperately to believe."

"I just don't want a bunch of religious zealots high jacking the zone movement."

"But we shouldn't have them boycotting it, either. Saying you're out there doing Satan's work to deliver souls to the underworld."

"Have you looked at our numbers lately? Our brand's plateauing. Your story is out there, people know it now. We need to tweak it a bit. Add value, grow our footprint."

"I'll think about it, okay?"

"That's all I ask."

"Next subject, let's go over the signals again, so we don't have a repeat of Dallas."

"If I offer someone a signed copy of a zone related book, then I'm just offering them a signed book. If I offer them an autographed copy of Hitler's Time Machine, then that means to have them invited to the after-show reception."

"Promise me you'll be careful? One Me Too

movement hashtag and your brand is toast. You have a dozen imitators striving to be the Zone Guy and all they need is one misstep from you.

"Hell, not to make you anymore paranoid, but remember you also have a dozen industries and the US Government that would like to shut you down as well.

"You may think you're having a consensual encounter, but you never know who they could really be working for."

"So you're asking me to be a monk?"

"No, just the next time someone catches your eye, ask yourself is this worth losing everything over?"

An hour later Dylan was announced on stage at the Comerica Theatre. It wasn't Wembley Stadium, but the tour was created to play to a more intimate audience.

This show, like the others on the tour, was sold out and while he couldn't interact with each of the five thousand people attending, he made sure to interact with the people in the VIP section, some of whom had paid up to a thousand dollars a ticket.

Each show was the same, it would open with a sizzle reel about Dylan's story and his sudden rise to prominence because of his white zone encounter with Michael. It would build to what the zones meant for humanity's future.

Then amidst the smoke and lighting effects, Dylan would appear on stage and speak for an hour. Then for two hours he would take questions from the audience, that either he or his panel of experts would answer.

Dylan would mingle in and out of the VIP section and the other areas of the venue, if it was possible. If there was someone that Dylan wanted to talk further

with he would offer to give them a signed copy of Hitler's Time Machine.

An assistant would then bring the person the signed copy of the book and discreetly invite them to the post show reception.

From the reception, if the encounter was promising, Dylan would invite them to a group dinner. If the dinner went well and Dylan and his guest wanted to continue their conversation, he would invite them to his hotel suite.

One of the questions Dylan would be asked constantly on the tour was that if zones are so great, why hadn't he gone into one.

He would always give his same stock answer of him being sworn to his dedicated duty of spreading Michael's message.

But the true answer was, why would he go into a zone when, for the first time in his life, he was finally getting laid on a regular basis.

The Phoenix show was going like most of the rest. He was now taking questions for him or his panel of experts that also appeared regularly on his reality show.

He called the panelists his backup dancers. A scientist, a retired military expert, a philosopher and a crazy Australian zoner who had personally interacted with 40 different zones all over the world.

There were the usual debates about if the zones were evil, good or indifferent. Were zones hope for humanity or the end of humanity. Would scientists ever find a way to communicate back and forth between our reality and the zone reality.

The one thing Dylan hadn't done that night was give

out a signed copy of Hitler's Time Machine. It wasn't like there wasn't going to be anyone at the reception. Purchase of VIP section tickets automatically got you an invitation and the traveling panel would be free to invite a limited amount of people themselves.

But trying to get laid was the last thing on Dylan's mind that night. He was debating in his head how he was going to answer the religious question.

He wasn't going to outright say the zone was Heaven, but Langley had a point. There was a way to answer it in a more flexible way. He'd seen the surge in Facebook ads and Tweets urging Christians to take ownership of the zone.

What could it hurt to answer the Heaven question in a more open-ended way?

Then the question came.

"Do you think the zones were sent by God? Are they a gateway to Heaven?"

"Thank you for your question. In the past, I've gone on record as saying the zones weren't Heaven. That Michael gave me no indication that any religious doctrine was represented there, but I've been thinking about it recently.

"Just because something isn't obvious or visible, that shouldn't rule it out. It doesn't rule it in, either, but whereas before I was pretty certain that the zone was not Heaven, I now think perhaps a case could be made that it could be.

"Now, whose Heaven it is, I don't think you can determine that. Obviously, different religions have different standards to earn your place in Heaven and in the realm of the zone, all takes is the decision to simply walk in.

The elderly woman, dressed in a "Are You Going In?" zone t-shirt was pleasantly surprised with Dylan's answer and stayed at the mic despite the long line of people behind her that also had questions.

"A follow up on that. Don't you think that under our constitution, the government should allow free access to zones to practice our right to religious liberty?"

The crowd applauded strongly. They wanted access to those zones.

"I do believe that there should be access to zones, but I don't think it will be up to the government to determine that.

If you look at the increasing frequency of zone appearances, in two, three years, the government won't have the ability to limit access to every zone. They struggle to do it now.

If you want access to a zone, just wait, because you are going to get it."

The crowd cheered Dylan's answer. He moved around the audience again. Looking, looking, looking. Then he saw her.

She had a stack of his books on her lap. She appeared very nervous. He knew she must have wanted the books signed, but maybe was too nervous to ask. She was in her early forties, he was guessing, with a thin face and high cheek bones.

She probably grew up used to being the prettiest girl in the room and even as age was catching up, she was still a head turner and she was here to see him.

Dylan glanced at her nervous hands fidgeting on top of the stack of books. No wedding ring in sight. Must be divorced, no way someone that attractive wasn't married at least once in their life.

There were people lined up to ask questions in the queues, but Dylan decided to make contact with the attractive woman and see where it would go.

"Hi, how are you?" Dylan asked.

"Fine, thank you," the nervous woman replied.

"Enjoying yourself tonight?"

"Yes, it's, um, very informative."

"Good, I'm glad. Would you like me to autograph those for you?"

"Thank you. They're my daughters."

"Is your daughter here tonight?"

"No, she's not."

"I see you don't have my novel there. I'll have someone from my staff give you an autographed copy. Two copies, in fact. One for you and one for your daughter."

"Don't bother. She can't read it. She went into a zone, because of you, you bastard!"

With that the woman reached in her purse. She didn't even bother pulling the gun out. She was so close to Dylan that she fired it through the purse almost point blank into his stomach.

BANG! BANG! BANG! The gunshots rang out.

The crowd panicked. Most fled for the exits. Security and staff pushed through to try and get to Dylan.

The woman was grabbed by a few brave members of the crowd that were around her. They figured they had one shot to grab her arms and hold her down, before she could use the gun on them.

But she had no intention of hurting anyone else that day. Just the one person that had destroyed her life, by taking her precious jewel out of this world.

She let go of the handgun and surrendered to the

crowd and security that quickly hustled her away in handcuffs.

Dylan laid bleeding on the ground, the Comerica Theatre staff desperately trying to keep the crowd back. Dylan could no longer feel his legs, he had tried to run, when he first heard the shots, but his legs failed him immediately and he collapsed to the ground.

Because it was a large crowd there, they were required by law to have medical staff present. But the medical technicians there were not equipped to handle carnage like this.

Langley held Dylan's hand as the medical technicians attended to him. Dylan was a ghostly pale, losing blood quickly.

The medical technician warned Langley, "We gotta get him to a hospital. Ambulance is on the way."

"I won't make it." Dylan choked.

"Yes, you will," Langley encouraged him.

"No, I feel it coming," Dylan moaned.

"You're in shock. Please, just relax, don't try to speak," the medical technician advised.

"Get me to a zone!" Dylan demanded.

"The ambulance will be here any minute," Langley reassured him.

"No, take me to a zone now. I can't feel my legs. I demand to go to a zone!"

The medical techs looked to Langley.

"We can't do that," one of them told her.

"Do it!" ordered Dylan.

"He can't be moved! He has a possible spinal cord injury."

"Take me! I am refusing medical attention!"

"If you won't take him, we will," Langley stated

firmly. "Where's the nearest zone?"

Her assistant pulled up a zone app on her phone.

"There's a zone site two miles from here!" the assistant reported.

"Let's go!" Langley ordered.

The SUV with Dylan in the back raced through town and made it to the zone site where a private security car was parked on the street in front of a wooden barricade that barely protected the zone behind it.

The lone private security officer stationed there was sitting on a folding beach chair listening to music on his iPhone. He panicked at seeing the black SUV racing towards him.

He jumped from his chair, pulled the ear buds out and reached for his taser.

"STOP! Don't come any closer," the security guard warned everyone as they jumped out of the SUV.

They carried the blood-soaked Dylan from the back of the SUV on a stretcher.

"We have a dying man here! We have to get him in the zone."

The sight of Dylan stunned the security officer, but he still managed to spit out the company line of the prohibition of zone entry.

"Pursuant to Federal statute, I can't allow anyone to have contact with this zone. I'm sorry, but I have my orders."

"He is dying! This is Dylan Gaines!" Langley yelled at the young, scared guard.

"I just can't. I could be fired."

"I'll hire you at twice what you're making."

The guard gave it a moment's thought and, then

started to move the wooden barrier out of the way for them.

"Okay, fine, but he has to be the one to go in on his own. I can't just let you throw him in there. That could be considered murder, making me an accessory."

"He's paralyzed from the waist down!" Langley exclaimed.

"Lay him half way in and let him push and pull his way in there. And someone has to record it to show proof that this is what he wanted."

Dylan was conscious enough to agree to the terms, "I can do it. Just put my legs in. I'll do the rest."

The assistant started to record it while the guard helped her place Dylan halfway in the zone.

"You're sure this is what you want, Dylan?" Langley asked.

"It is, but I have to tell you something first before I go in. But not on video," Dylan said.

"Stop recording for a second. What is it?"

The assistant lowered the cellphone and stopped recording.

Dylan pointed for Langley to approach him.

"Only you, Langley. Come closer."

Langley leaned down, beside the wounded Dylan, so he could whisper in her ear.

"That night I saw Michael come out of the white zone. I wanted so bad to get some kind of evidence with my phone, but it was in the car and if I moved it caused Michael so much pain, I just couldn't get it."

"I know this. There was nothing you could do."

Dylan continued, "After he told me everything, I did try to get my phone from the car. I let go of him. I thought I would be quick. Yes, he'd feel some pain, but

I'd come right back and comfort him again.

"When I let go of him and lost contact to get the phone, he disintegrated, just dissolved into thin air."

Langley takes the sad revelation in.

"And you've never told anyone else this?"

"No one. I killed him trying to get my phone."

"You didn't kill anybody."

"I have to go now. I have to go."

She backed away from Dylan and signaled the assistant with the phone to start recording again.

"Go! Go! Record this! Dylan, this is what you want, right? You are entering this zone on your own free will with no coercion?"

Dylan looked up as he started to push himself in the zone.

"Yes, this is what I want. I am going into the zone freely and with no hesitation. It's the only way."

With that, he pushed himself one last time and disappeared into the zone.

"What did he say? What did he tell you?" the security guard asks Langley.

Langley stands there stoically. Saying nothing.

The zone then dissolves and disappears after taking Dylan.

The assistant turns the camera around to get the reaction from all the witnesses, adding her own commentary, "Oh, my God, we just made it!"

A few weeks later a new billboard was put up near the spot where Dylan used to wait for his Instacart orders.

The parking spot was well known from his book and thousands of people had visited the spot to take their

pictures of their cars parked there.

There had been a public memorial for Dylan that was attended by over ten thousand mourners in a park. An aerial photograph was taken by a drone hovering above the park and Langley Price paid to turn the picture of ten thousand strong crowd of people celebrating Dylan's life into a tribute billboard for him.

Anyone parking in Dylan's favorite waiting spot now was sure to see his tribute billboard.

Later that summer Hitler's Time Machine opened at number one at the box office. The critics weren't kind, but Dylan's devoted fans loved it.


Dylan's books enjoyed a huge surge following his death, but Langley knew it wouldn't last. Without any new products from Dylan, she knew Dylan's brand was in danger of becoming irrelevant.

She had to come up with a new plan and she did.

Everyone wanted to know what Dylan's last words to her were. She wasn't ready at the time to talk about it, but after some time she promised she would reveal what Dylan had said to her.

In her new book.

ZONE



CHAPTER 20

YES, I BELIEVE IT'S HEAVEN

Henry Johnson laid Langley Price's new best-selling book on the Pastor Miller's desk. Pastor Miller stared at the uninvited book, as if the Henry had just pulled down his pants and defecated on his desk.

The cover of "Yes, I Believe it's Heaven" featured Langley with two pins prominent on the lapels of her jacket. One was a little black zone with Dylan's initials on it. The other was a little black zone with a cross on it.

"Have you read this book yet?" Henry asked.

"No, but I'm aware of it," replied Pastor Miller.

"So you know about Michael's message and Dylan's last words?"

"I'm aware that a child's death was unfortunately exploited by a bunch of charlatans, hoping to con a confused public out of their hard-earned money. Con them out of their faith. Con them out of their lives."

"I don't think that's the case, sir. When Dylan was shot and dying, he didn't want to go to a hospital. He wanted to go to a zone. Why would a con man fall for his own con, unless he truly believed it was real?"

"You said it yourself, he was dying. He obviously couldn't make a rational judgment about anything. Then in the end, he was so delusional, that he chose to go into one of these objects."

"Do you know what his last words were?"

"I do not."

He picks up the book and pointed right to the title.

"Right before he went into the zone, he wanted to tell his business partner something. He told her, that he believed the zone was Heaven."

"That's interesting, because I know he had been proposed that question many times before and he was quite adamant that it was not Heaven. That the Christ Our Lord and Savior was not present in the zone at all. It was a secular space.

"Now I can show you a black rectangle that will get you to Heaven."

Pastor Miller pulled out a copy of the bible with a black cover. He tapped his finger on the rectangular book.

"Now, this book here, this is what will get you into God's paradise and unlike the zone, I can personally testify that Jesus is present in here.

"And oddly enough, wouldn't you know it, but there is not one word in here about any mysterious rectangles.

“And let’s be honest with each other for a second. You’re telling me that an unrepentant sinner can walk in this zone heaven just as easily as Mother Theresa and Billy Graham?”

It takes Henry a second to respond, as the Pastor does have a good point.

“Physically, they might take the same steps, but spiritually maybe it would be different once they have actually entered the zone.

“Regardless of that, don’t you believe as Christians we should at least try and bring Christ’s love to the zone?”

“Oh, but I’ve heard stories of what goes on these zones. You can ride dinosaurs, fly like Superman, explore magical alien planets. And that’s just the kids. You can imagine what the adults get up to in there. Put Las Vegas to shame, I bet.”

“Which is exactly the reason I want to go in a zone. We need to make sure the faith needs of people in the zone, even it isn’t heaven, are administered to. I’d like the church to join the crusade to make zone access a freedom of religious expression.”

“I cannot support that.”

“Why not?”

“No church would support mass suicide. That would be the workings of a crazed lunatic cult, not a house of worship.”

“But you don’t die in the zone.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Captain Murphy’s heartbeat. Michael’s Message. These are signs that there is life in the zone.”

“Easily explained as a technical glitch or another government plot to raise our taxes for another massive

secular spending program. One that no right-thinking Christian should believe in or be required to financially support, but that's a discussion for another time."

"Okay, let's say the zone isn't Heaven. Should we not spread the word of the Lord there anyway? And what if there was a mass migration of Muslims into the zones and they established a Kalifate in there? Or what if the Chinese Government sends millions of people into the zone to establish government control and outlaw religious expression? Could we stand by and idly watch that happen?"

"Personally, if you ask me the more of those people that go in the zone, the better we all would be."

"I'm sorry, but I just feel called to go. That the Lord is speaking to me."

"Have you ever touched a zone?"

"No."

"You sound like someone that has."

"I haven't. It's hard to find them before the government takes control of them."

"Here, this how these zones work. It's simple. They work like a drug. It triggers your brain into craving more and more contact with the zone. And it is never satisfied until you are fully engulfed. Now does that sound like the work of the Lord or the work of the Devil? Cause I know what it sounds like to me."

"With all due respect, sir, I think you are mistaken."

"No, I am not. I've seen it all, young man. One of the benefits of age and wisdom.

"They have all come for Christ at one time or another. Rock and roll, materialism, drugs, pornography, secularism, MTV, the gay community, videogames, computers and the internet. And yet, Christ stands. The

Church stands.”

“Now I’ll play along here. Suppose we did start sending people into these zones. What happens to Christ’s kingdom on Earth? Who would support the churches? The Government won’t. Liberal Hollywood won’t. The secular science community won’t.

If all the good people go into zones, who is left behind to mind God’s creation here on Earth?

“How can we abandon the only reality we know for some fantasy that can’t be proven?

“You are a young man, with your whole life ahead of you. Don’t go chasing Satan’s folly into one of these zones. They’ve tried to trick us before and they will try to trick us again.”

Henry nods respectfully, but he hasn’t given up just yet.

“I still feel called, sir. I’m sorry.”

“When I was a young man, a little older than you are now, they used to have these terrible famines in Africa. The pictures and videos of these starving kids, they would just break your heart.

“I wanted to go. I wanted to go and feed those kids. First their bodies, then their minds and souls.

“My father refused to let me go. Wouldn’t hear of it. Told me there were plenty of people right here that needed ministering. That needed help.

“Oh, I sulked and even cursed his name a few times, because I was sure that children were dying because I wasn’t over there doing my part.

“But I got over it. And my father was right. There were people here that needed my help then, just as there are people right here now that need your help.”

Henry concedes defeat, knowing he won’t get any

support from the meeting. But he makes one last attempt to break through to his pastor.

"Would you promise to please just read the book? With an open mind?"

"Henry, son, I am just so busy and so behind on my own reading, I wouldn't want to keep your book away from you, just sitting here collecting dust on my desk."

"No, my copy is at home. I bought this for you, sir."

"Oh, it's a present then, thank you. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, sir. And sir, I'm not saying that I'm going to go in a zone, but if I do go and I'm able to send you a sign that the zones are a gateway to God's love, a gateway to God's Kingdom, will you accept it?"

"What would that sign be?"

"I don't know. I'd try to make it pretty clear."

"That could be anything. If a bird flew through my window and landed on your book right now, would that be a sign? Could be. But without knowing what the sign was, it is hard to say, isn't it? We interpret things how we see fit."

"How about if a zone appeared on Church property?"

"There again, the zones appear so randomly. Odds are that at some point one is bound to appear on our property. It wouldn't be any more of a sign than a lightning strike on church property."

ZONE



CHAPTER 21

KEEP THE MINI-VAN

Normally the Chrysler Town and Country minivan was not a head turner, but when it is full of a white family who looked like they made about fifty wrong turns out of Orange County and are now rolling down Crenshaw Blvd., people take notice.

But the white faces had been turning up more and more these days. Word was getting out. If people wanted some Z, this is where they could get the best deal on a hook up in SoCal.

Steve Philips kept a close eye on his iPhone as it guided him off the main drag of Crenshaw and onto the neighborhood side streets.

Marie Philips couldn't help but notice the suspicious faces noticing them passing by. She cast a wary eye toward her husband.

"I don't like this. The kids are scared," Marie complained.

"No, you're scared. My, goodness, we are about to take the biggest step any human can make and you are worried about being mugged," Steve replied.

"We won't be going anywhere if you get us all shot."

"Honey, no one's shooting at us."

A young man on the side of the residential street waved to them to pull the mini-van over.

"Oh, Lord, here it comes."

"No, I think this is the guy that tells us where to go."

Steve pulled the Town and Country to the side and lowered his window so the young man, maybe fourteen years of age, could lean in.

"You lost, man?" the kid asked.

Steve answered, "No, this was the address I was given. We're looking for the zone."

"Let's see your paper?"

Steve pulls out an envelope and opens it, flashing the cash at the kid. The kid nods.

"Park it and go around back. The blue house."

Steve parks the minivan and they start to get out with their young daughters.

"They're gonna shoot us and take the money. You know that, right?"

"They're not going to shoot us. He could have done that already. We're gonna be fine."

"You give them nothing until we know we are going inside this thing for sure," Marie insisted.

"That's the plan. Okay, kids let's go."

"Are we gonna see Jesus now?" Kelli asks her dad.

"Soon," he tells her with a pat on her head.

The Philips family finishes climbing out of the minivan and makes their way back toward the young man that greeted them. He motions for them to keep walking up the driveway of the small blue house.

As they head up the driveway, another man waits by a gated fence. It is high enough to prevent anyone from seeing over it. There is a chain locked around the fence gate and a pit bull sitting obediently by the man's side.

Marie clenches her daughters' hands tightly. Steve wraps his arm around Marie's waist protectively.

"Just relax, this is exactly the way they described it," Steve tells his wife and daughters.

The man at the gate held out his hand for the cash.

"Need you to pay upfront," the gatekeeper tells them.

"We want to see it first. The zone, please," Steve requests.

"Anyone follow you here?" The gatekeeper asks.

"No, we were watching out," Steve replies.

The guy unlocks the gate and opens it wide enough for Steve and Marie to look in.

In the backyard they see a line of mostly white people and a few Asians standing in front of a zone in the backyard. They watch as the people inserted their hands into the zone as if they were taking a hit off of a crack pipe.

"Seen enough?" the gatekeeper asks.

"Yeah, here," Steve says as he hands over the envelope of cash.

The gatekeeper quickly counts the bills and nods.

"You come from church, man, or what? All dressed

up."

"It's a once and life time opportunity. Just wanted to look nice."

"Well, you're good. Go on in, have at it," the gatekeeper says as he lets them through.

They walked into the backyard and join the line.

"Look, Daddy, a zone!" Kelli exclaims.

"I know, I see it," Steve says.

"No, Daddy, on his arm!" Kelli blurts out as she points to the man in front of them, who has a zone tattooed on his arm.

The tattooed man turns and smiles back at the family.

"Hi. Hope you're not in a rush. It's taking forever."

"It's not gonna disappear is it?" Marie asks.

"Who can tell?" the zone tattoo man says.

"What if it disappears while we're in line? Are they going to give us our money back?" wonders Marie.

"I assume they would." Steve replies.

"Yeah, good luck with that with this crew. You go to many zones?" inquires the zone tattoo man.

"No, first time." Steve tells him.

"I can't even keep track anymore for me. At least thirty. They're amazing, you're gonna love it. You gonna let the kids touch it?"

"We'll try it first and then make that decision," Steve says.

The tattooed man just grins, "I tell you, once they try it, that's all they're gonna be asking you for. Mom, Dad, can we touch another zone again."

The delay in the line was caused by people paying more cash to extend their time touching the zone. They tried to accommodate as many people as they could, but the more crowded it got at the zone, the more people

complained about personal space.

But the line did move eventually and an hour later the family was waiting to be next at the front of the line.

"Fifteen minutes, alright. You want more, you gotta pay for it." the zone guard warns.

"Yes, understood," Steve affirms.

First Steve sticks his hand in. He smiles broadly.

"Wow, you feel it right away. Amazing. Honey, feel that. Tell me that's not God working."

Marie sticks her hand in.

"Oh, wow, I feel it! It makes me feel good. Loved."

Kelli and her sister pull at their parents' clothes.

"I wanna touch it!" Kelli begs.

"Me, too!" asks the little sister.

Okay, you hold Daddy's hand and then slowly touch it with your other hand. Kelli, you hold mommies' hand and do the same."

"Is it going to hurt?" Kelli asks.

"No, it's going to feel really good," Marie tells her.

Kelli and her sister are a little bit hesitant to touch the zone at first, like they were afraid to put their hand under a running sink, fearing the water might be too hot.

But as soon as their fingers make contact with the zone, they relax.

"I like it!" Kelli yells.

"This is fun!" the younger sister shouts as well.

"When do we see Jesus?" Kelli asks.

Steve then bends down and whispers into Kelli's ear.

"We're going to see Jesus now. Now close your eyes and hold on to our hands tight. And no matter what happens, always know that Mommy and Daddy love you very much."

Steve glances back up to Marie and they share a

resolved, intense look. It was a rare look for them. They had shared the look at the altar on their wedding day. They shared the look before Marie was taken into the delivery room to give birth to Kelli. They shared the look on the day they closed on their house.

They both knew what it meant. Despite all the petty arguments and fussing. Despite all the knowns and unknowns of the major decision they were making, they were about to take a huge leap of faith in their lives together.

They shared the look to let each other know, that no matter what happened they would be there to support and care for each other. They would make it through this together and be the stronger for it.

"Ready?" Steve asked.

"Yes. I love you," Marie told him.

"I love you, too."

The zone guard had been absorbed in his iPhone, not really paying all that much attention to the well-dressed Philips family at the zone.

But all the whispering and solemn looks drew his attention back to them. He knew immediately what they were about to do. He reached out for Steve, grabbing him by the jacket.

"Nah, nah, nah, you can't be going in there. Not with no kids!" the zone guard shouted.

"Go!" Steve yelled as he pushed his family in the zone.

Steve tried to leap in himself, but the zone guard held him back.

"What's wrong with you, man?" the zone guard asked in disbelief and horror.

"Let go of me, my family is in there!" Steve shouted

as he tried to push away from the zone guard holding him.

“You just killed them! They gonna fry your ass!”

Steve takes out his car keys and offers them up to the zone guard.

“Here, take the minivan. I’ve already given you all the money we had left. Please, just let me go, so I can be with my family.”

The zone guard shakes his head and lets go of Steve.

“Just go, man. Just go.”

“Thank you. God bless you!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Steve turns and jumps into the zone and disappears from sight

The zone guard exhales and rolls his eyes.

“White people. Next!”

He waves forward the young Asian couple next in line.

“Let’s go, you next. Fifteen minutes, if you want more, you have to pay more. And don’t be doing what they did!”

The zone guard studies the keys to the minivan and shouts out to everyone there in line.

“Hey, who wants to buy a mini-van? Cheap!”

ZONE



CHAPTER 22

FOLLOW THE LEADER

It wasn't the biggest mega church in Texas, but it was respectable. And getting more respectable every Sunday. Pastor Lionel Hardin had started the church in a mobile home in the early seventies. When they opened the 100 acre complex they had the early mobile home church brought to the property and put on display to show how far they had come.

The main church now was a state of the art, twelve thousand seat theatre with big screen TV's and a sound system a touring rock group would envy. The plush stadium seating would even let you recline a bit if you needed it.

They had their own church app, so you could follow the service on your phone. Occasionally answering multiple choice survey questions that Pastor Hardin would throw out.

You could also make your weekly offering over the app, of which the totals could be displayed on the big screens to see if the crowd was making their financial goals in real time.

There was an outside area of worship for sunrise service for Easter or Christian music concerts and occasionally, if it was particularly pleasant day, Pastor Hardin would use the outside seating for their regular church services.

But on this Sunday, it was a bit of a surprise that as the massive crowds started showing up for service they were being directed to the outside seating.

It was going to be a hot Texas day and the air conditioning was going to be a welcome respite for many. There were more than a few complaints and concerns expressed as the outside stands filled up.

But this is what Pastor Hardin wanted, so this is how it was. The seating filled up to capacity.

Down below there was a purple tarp that had been set up, as if a statue was underneath it that was going to be unveiled.

Pastor Hardin's sermon started that day when he asked everyone, "What would we do if we were faced with a sign from God? How would you respond?"

Pastor Hardin then announced to everyone that he had indeed received a sign from God. He said that God had been sending signs to all of them recently, but only a few followers were brave enough to comprehend the sign and accept it.

Pastor Hardin then made his way over to the purple tarp and circled it slowly, building the anticipation for the reveal of what was hidden underneath.

"I bet you are all wondering what I have under here?" Hardin asked them. "Well, I'll show you."

Hardin grabbed the purple cover with one hand.

Hardin continued, "Sometimes the sign from God can be a whisper in your ear and sometimes that sign is a shout in your face. Today, God has shouted in my face to get my attention. And got it, he has."

Pastor Hardin pulled the tarp off revealing a zone underneath. There was some rigging around the zone to hold the tarp up, but the rigging was removed by stagehands, leaving just the black zone.

The crowd was aghast. Was it real? So many wondered. And as if he heard all the whispers, he answered.

"Yes, this is a real zone. It appeared this morning. There has been so much talk about zones. Are they the gateway to Heaven or the handy work of the Devil?

"Well, I've touched it."

Hardin reaches in and touches the zone, his hand disappearing in the blackness. Then he pulled his hand out again and lifted it up high so they all could see it.

"And touching a zone feels good, like so many say. But it is more than a good feeling. It is speaking to me. And it is saying, 'Come in, my son. Come in! Come in and experience Christ's love!'

"Many Christians have gone in to spread the word of God already. At first, they were mocked and chided and ridiculed. The Church wanted nothing to do with them. They were heretics. Fools. Some even said they were doing Satan's work. And I was one of them. One of the

loudest.

"Today, I say I am sorry. Because when I touch this amazing creation. God's creation. This doorway to a higher power, I feel them. I feel them calling to me. They are telling me that they have spread God's love in there. And now that love is coming back. It is coming back for us. To bring us all closer to God.

"We spend our whole lives asking for signs. God gave us the bible. He gave us his Son. And now he has given us the zone. What more sign of God's love do you need that this? The door is open. The question is, are we going in? Are you going in? Am I going in?"

"Did you know there is not once scientist that can explain these miracles? Not one. Do you know why? Because this isn't science. It's God's love. And like so many I was afraid to embrace it.

"Well, I do embrace it now. And I wouldn't ask anyone to go into a zone, if I were not willing to do it myself. God has called me today and I have listened.

"You are all welcome to follow me and answer God's call, if that is your choice. I enter this zone on my own free will and into God's loving embrace."

With that, Pastor Hardin turned and faced the zone and stepped through. People rushed the stage to see if it was real. It was. Pastor Hardin had stepped through the zone and was gone.

People sat there not knowing what to do. Then it started. A determined man jumped up and strode across the stage. He paused for a moment to wave goodbye to everyone with one hand and hold up his bible with the other. Then he stepped into the zone and was gone, too.

A couple followed next. Then a family. A line formed as more and more people lined up to go into the zone.

Many more fled to the exits shocked at what was going on. A crowd of worshipers led by an off-duty police officer, formed an angel chain in front of the zone to try and prevent others from going in.

The larger crowd built up around the angel chain blocking the zone. Even if they weren't going in themselves, the protesting crowd chanted their support for those that did want to go in.

"Let them in! Let them in!" the crowd shouted.

The regular police showed up to take control of the zone and get it contained.

Then the federal forces came in to control the area as the zone was deemed to be a super zone after it stayed in its place for two days.

Yet the worshipers of the church and sympathetic Christians kept coming to protest the police and federal occupation on the church property.

As days turned into weeks, the protesting crowds only grew and grew.

Finally Homeland Security told the church officials to suspend church services at that site indefinitely, because the federal agents stationed there to contain the zone, were afraid that a whipped-up crowd might be stirred into a frenzy by a fiery sermon and they would march out and overwhelm the Federal security forces posted there.

Almost immediately a case was brought against the government by the church leaders, to allow free access to the zone. This is when the Christian dam broke in regards to zones.

Christians everywhere supported the case. Even if they didn't support going into the zones themselves, they couldn't stand seeing the government take over

church property.

The government tried to settle the case by offering to build a replica of the compound on another area away from the super zone, but that was not acceptable to church leaders.

The case was fast-tracked to the Supreme Court, where the mostly conservative court decided 5-4 in the church's favor. Control of the compound and the zone would be returned to the church.

And there it was.

The zone movement in the evangelical world became official. Services to allow zone entry began 24 hours a day.

The sick were let in to feel the zone and take comfort in its naturally soothing, euphoric abilities. The dying of any religious belief or no belief at all were let in as a merciful way to prolong their life.

And then there were the pilgrims. Those who were willing to leave this material world behind to spread God's word in the zone.

Christians who couldn't travel to Texas used whatever zone they could have access to. The Supreme Court didn't grant access to any of the other secure government zone sites. Only to zones that appeared on religious grounds.

But zone appearances were triple what they once were. If you wanted to find a zone, you could. You might have to travel a few hours, but law enforcement could no longer go to every zone sighting immediately. A zone could be unguarded for three or four days, sometimes a week depending on how remote the area was.

People sold their houses, sold their cars and entrusted all their money to friends and family for safe

keeping. If they never returned from the zone, that friend or family member could keep the money. If they did somehow manage to come back from the zone, then their assets would be returned to them.

As going into a zone became more and more acceptable for Christians, others followed as well for different reasons. Much different.

People decided they would sell everything they own and live as indulgently as they could, checking off items on their bucket lists. They would pile up tens of thousands in credit card debt living their dream life and then when the bills finally came due, they exited this world through a zone to continue their fantasy life there.

To be sure, the majority of people continued to live their lives staying clear of the zones. It was only a small percentage of the US population that was going into the zones be it for health, financial or religious reasons. But they were going. And even a small percentage of three hundred and thirty million people adds up to a lot.

The major increase in zone entries was starting to have an impact on the economy, just as Secretary of Labor Li had predicted. That impact would be even greater now that going into a zone was being more and more accepted by society, thus accelerating zone entry.

But then zones did something that no one had been planning for, catching everyone by surprise.

The zones stopped coming and the super zones that had stuck around for months and months started to disappear one by one until they were all seemingly gone.

The zone drought had begun.

ZONE



CHAPTER 23

DROUGHT

It was a million-dollar view of the Eiffel Tower from the private terrace of the Shangri-La Hotel, Paris suite. Actually it was about a million-and-a-half-dollar view, which is about what the fast living couple had spent over the last year.

When Zone spending spree started happening, Traven Huston and Sierra Golden joined the club, but not with their own money exactly. Traven had embezzled two million from investors and faked his and Sierra's entry into a zone, so no one would look for them.

Traven then created false identities for himself and Sierra and the two of them began their tour around the

world in luxury.

Seven days and nights at the Ritz Carlton Tokyo in a corner executive suite, with the Mt. Fuji view.

Waking up with the sun rising on the Sydney Opera House out the bay window of their Park Hyatt Suite in Australia.

Full spa treatments at the Sofitel in Rio de Janeiro.

A two-week driving tour through Italy in a Ferrari 488 Pista Spider.

Staying on their own white sand private island in the clear blue ocean waters of the Maldives.

They toured the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, Stonehenge and Machu Picchu in Peru.

Money was no object. No luxury was spared.

And when the money did eventually run out, they planned to make their final escape into a zone and no one would be none the wiser for it.

For the first several months, their plan had worked out perfectly. But the discovery of the embezzled investor funds raised suspicions that Traven merely faked their zone entries, so periodically detectives would checkup to see if Traven showed up on any radar screens anywhere.

However Traven had covered their tracks fairly well and as long as they continued to take precautions, the police wouldn't be catching up to them anytime soon.

Also, they were not the first people to commit financial fraud and go on the lamb on some ill begotten zone spending spree. So the Feds had their hands full with similar cases, and all this was on top of the great turmoil the impact the zones were generally having on society.

It wasn't until Sierra's sister was diagnosed with

breast cancer did they have their first slip up. Before they launched their plan, Sierra and Traven had made the determination that they would never be able to contact their families again, but it was too much for Sierra not to reach out to her sister in her time of need.

Word leaked that Sierra had talked to her sister and the hunt for Traven was renewed with vigor.

Traven and Sierra had to changed their identities a second time with the help of some European underworld contacts, even getting minor plastic surgery to try and throw off any facial recognition cameras the two might encounter along the way.

They were in London when word broke that the zones had mysteriously gone away. Most of the world was in relief, but it was devastating news for Sierra and Traven. With their stolen money winding down and no zone's left to disappear into, they were stuck in Europe.

There were rumors that not all the zones had disappeared. If there were any left, they were quickly controlled by the government or secretly controlled by private entities, be they individuals, corporations or criminal operators.

And if the caretakers of those private zones wanted to keep them private and out of the hands of the government, they kept access to them extremely limited.

Traven reached out to his contacts within the underworld that had helped him get around these past few months. He sent word out through those contacts that he was looking for access to a zone and was willing to pay top dollar for it.

It took a few days, but Traven's contacts got word back to him that access was available, but it wasn't going to be cheap. It would cost them almost everything they

had left, but the Corsican mafia based in Marseille had access to a zone they were willing to share for the right price.

Without any other good options left and no need for the stolen money once they had gone in the zone, Traven negotiated a price and plan for himself and Sierra to escape into the zone, which was located in the remote French country side near Auvers-sur-Oise.

Their last week in Paris had been a dream. The best food and wine money could buy. Designer dresses and a rented Rolls Royce Phantom made them feel like they couldn't have had a better ending to their amazing run.

Traven joined Sierra on the private terrace overlooking the Paris skyline complete with the Eiffel Tower standing proudly above the city.

He opened a \$1600 bottle of Veuve Clicquot Yellowboam Ostrich Limited Champagne and poured them two glasses. As Traven handed Sierra her glass, he was careful not to spill any on her \$20,000 red Dior dress.

He was dressed in his Armani tuxedo. Yes, they were truly going out in style.

"I'm going to miss this view the most," Sierra said as she stared out at the Eiffel Tower. "Of all we've seen, this is my favorite."

"Soak it in. Burn it into your memory, because once we go into the zone, you can live like this every day," Traven told her.

"What if the police come looking for us in the zone," wondered Sierra.

"What if they do? They can't arrest us. They'll have no jurisdiction. Plus, we'll just imagine them going away and leaving us alone or whatever you do in the zone to get rid of people you don't like. It's not like they can

bring us back here. Once you're in the zone, you're in the zone for good."

"Do you trust these people?"

"As much as you can, in these situations. They came recommended."

"That's what I'm worried about," Sierra put her glass down and went back in the suite.

Traven poured himself another glass of Champagne and followed her in.

"Look, if they wanted to come and steal our money, they could have done it already. I've got my gun. Any funny business, I'll take care of things."

"Have you ever fired that thing once?"

Traven shrugs his shoulders, "Never needed to. You let me worry about all that. You, just enjoy. We've experienced the best this world has to offer. Seen it all and then some. To us."

They toasted to each other.

"I'll miss it."

"Take it with you in your head and you can relive it all the rest of eternity in the zone. We won't get sick, we won't grow old, we'll never have to work another day in our lives."

"How much time do we have before the limo is here?"

"Half an hour, maybe."

"Let's do it one more time. Just in case there's no sex in the zone."

"Are you kidding me, that's where the best sex is gonna be. Do you remember that time in Australia? And that was just with our hands in a zone. Imagine what it is like being all the way in. I think you'd explode."

"You sure did."

"God, that was good."

She wrapped her bare arms around him, pulling him in tighter.

"I want you."

"Okay, one more time."

About a half hour later there was a knock on the hotel door. Traven was tucking in his tuxedo as he answered the door. Waiting there was a well-dressed gentleman, but with still the scruff of a days old beard.

"Sorry, you weren't answering your phone. I was worried," Willem informs Traven.

"No, we're fine. Come in. Are you, Willem?" Traven asked as he waved him in.

"I am. Gachet is in the limousine downstairs. We would prefer not to stay too long. Many times the police stake out the lobby with undercover officers. And there is always an intelligence officer or two milling about the lobby of the Shangri-La. We can't take the chance that someone will find out about our possession."

"No, we'll be right down. Just give us a couple of minutes."

"That is fine, but just to make you aware. We will have to search you for weapons. We've had past clients try to relieve us of control of our property and we've had to put in place measures to protect our investment."

"Sure, understood."

"We'll be waiting downstairs for another ten minutes and then we go, with or without you."

"We'll be right down. Just don't go anywhere."

Willem departs out the door.

Traven shuts the door behind him and then reaches inside his coat for the gun. He pulls it out, not exactly

sure what to do with it.

Sierra walks back in the room fresh from making herself up again.

"What's going on? Who was that?"

"The driver. He's going to search us for weapons before we get in the limo."

"What do we do then?" Sierra asks with some concern.

"We can always not go."

"Do you think we'll be able to find another zone?"

"I don't know. Took us three weeks to find this one still lingering about. In three more weeks, they all could be completely gone."

"Do you trust them?"

"Technically, they are criminals."

"Technically, we're criminals."

"True. I say we go, but at the first sign of trouble, we're out of there. We just walk away. As long as we have our phones, we can get out of anything."

Once downstairs, Traven and Sierra saw Willem and the short, portly Gachet, who would be driving the limo.

Gachet held the door open for Willem, Traven and Sierra to get in. Once inside the limo and safely behind the blacked-out privacy windows, Willem, true to his word, searched them for weapons and found none.

Willem then said they would be taking an indirect route to the zone, in case they were being followed. He also said that he would be in contact with Gachet and if for any reason they needed to switch vehicles to avoid suspicion, he would meet them at a designated point.

The limo was stocked with Champagne and caviar, which Willem explained was theirs to enjoy as much as

they wanted, there would be no extra charge. He then asked if either of them had any last requests before Gachet took them to the zone?

Neither did.

They had done just about everything they wanted to do in life. They were ready to move on and any second spent not going to the zone, was a risk of being a second too late if the zone suddenly disappeared before they could go in.

"Very well," Willem said as he exited the limo and gave Gachet the signal to start driving.

Gachet pulled the limo slowly out of the Shangri-La Hotel and merged into the bustling Paris traffic.

Eating the caviar made Traven feel a bit safer. If this was a set-up to just steal their money, why go through the trouble to buy caviar.

For one last time they enjoyed the view of the city as they slipped out of Paris and transitioned to the country side.

The ride was peaceful enough, but then Gachet got a call on his cellphone. He spoke in a speedy French, so Traven couldn't quite keep up, but he could tell by Gachet's tone something was very wrong.

As soon as Gachet ended the call, he called back to Sierra and Traven to relay the news, "We fear that our cellphone signals are being traced. We need to take a slight delay, but don't worry we will get you to your zone."

The limo then took a series of turns until they drove into a tunnel and stopped beside a parked car in the tunnel.

Traven held Sierra, trying to reassure her, "Just stay

calm. I'll handle this."

Gachet jumped out of the limo and met with Willem who was driving a nondescript VW sedan. They watched as Gachet handed Willem his cellphone. The two men then went to the limo door and opened it.

Willem then informed them, "We are going to switch cars. Gachet will take you the rest of the way from here in the sedan."

"Hey, I don't like this," Traven protested.

"If you don't like it, I can drive you back to the hotel and your deposit will be returned to you, minus our needed expense money.

"The zone is of short-term interest to you, but we have a long-term investment to protect. We cannot take any unnecessary risks, no matter what the price.

"If you wish to continue, we will need to switch cars to something a little less noticeable. Where we are going is very remote. No reason for a luxury limo to be in the area. It would raise unneeded suspicions.

"Also, we have been tipped off that our cellphones are being traced. If you wish to go any further, you will have to leave your cellphones behind with me. If for any reason, you don't go in the zone today, I'll return them to you immediately.

Sierra shook her head, "I'm not giving them my phone. No way."

Traven tried to negotiate with the men, "What if we pay more to keep the phone's for now?"

"We can't do that. The government gets one whiff of this zone and they will swoop down and take it for themselves."

Gachet and Willem then engaged in another discussion in French, both men agreeing to something in

the end."

Again Willem addressed Traven and Sierra, "Perhaps it would be best for all parties if we ended our business agreement now. Gachet will take you back to the hotel."

Willem shut the door and signaled for Gachet to return to the hotel. Gachet moved to get back in the limo, but was taking his time, which let Traven and Sierra discuss the situation briefly.

"This is it. We have to decide if we are going to the zone or not," Traven informed her.

"Can we just do it another day?" Sierra asked.

"We're spooking these guys. We might not be able to get back in touch with them in another day. The zone could be gone in another day. Interpol could close in on us in another day."

"So you think we should go?"

"I think we should consider that if we don't go now, we might not get a chance to go. It doesn't mean it is the end of the line for us, but it complicates things badly."

"Let's go then."

"Go where? Back to the hotel or to the zone?" Traven asked for clarification.

"To the zone."

"Okay. I'll tell him."

Gachet finally got in the limo, just as Willem started to pull away in the VW sedan."

"Hey, stop him! We'll go! We'll give you the cellphones," Traven informed Gachet.

Gachet honked his horn and the VW stopped.

"Your phones, please. I'll lock them in the glove box where they will be safe, if you need them again. Mine, too, will be locked in there. Then go, get in the sedan. I'll

be over to drive you the rest of the way. It's not that far."

They both handed Gachet their phones. They waited there for a minute, expecting Gachet to get out and open their doors for them, but clearly the limo drive was now over and so was the chauffer service.

Traven and Sierra opened the limo door themselves and walked over to the VW.

As they passed by Willem, who was heading back to take over driving the limo, Willem told them, "You'll be fine. We only take these matters as an abundance of caution."

Traven and Sierra slipped into the back of the VW, sorely lacking the leg space of the limo.

Gachet and Willem switched keys and Gachet shuffled his pudgy little body over to the VW and got in the driver's seat and then drove Traven and Sierra out of the dark tunnel and into the light of day.

Willem watched them pull away and when they were safely out of sight, he went to the back of the limo and grabbed the two champagne glasses and wiped them down with a cloth. He then grabbed the champagne bottle and wiped it down as well.

He turned the bottle upside down and drank the last of the Champagne that was left. He used his finger to swipe out the last of the remaining caviar and licked it clean off.

He then dumped everything in a bag and took the bag to the front seat. Then he drove the limo out of the tunnel and soon found himself pulled over on the side of the road near a pond.

Willem opened the glove box and took out two of the three cellphones stashed in there and put Traven and Sierra's phones in the bag as well. He then pulled a

hammer out from under the seat.

Willem took the hammer and the bag of items to the edge of the pond and started to pound the bag with the hammer, trying to destroy everything inside.

After several hard whacks he looked inside to see the two destroyed phones and shattered glass from everything else.

He removed the two shattered black rectangles from the bag and then flung each phone separately as far as he could out into the pond.

Then he dumped the broken glass inside the bag into the water at the pond's edge.

He then loaded the bag full of rocks and whirled it around like a lasso and threw it in the pond as well, where the weight of the rocks took the bag to the bottom of the pond.

The more they drove, the more Traven's heart sank. He tried to hide it from Sierra, but he knew something was very wrong.

He would study the determined face of Gachet in the rearview mirror. Gachet would occasionally look back and catch Traven staring at him. As if the two men were trying to figure each other out in the micro second their eyes met and then turned away.

"We're close," Gachet would say to them occasionally, but they never seemed to get any closer to anything.

Sierra could feel Traven tensing up.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied.

Oddly enough they both kept reaching for their phones, forgetting they had forfeited them. It was as if

they had a body part amputated and the mind had not accepted that the newly amputated appendage was truly gone yet.

Suddenly the VW slowed and pulled to the side of the road. The only distinguishing landmark around was a nondescript white ribbon tied to a tree at the edge of a forest.

"That's it. That's the marker. The ribbon. We walk from here."

Traven nodded to Sierra that it was okay to get out. Gachet popped the hood of the car and got out to prop it open, as if something was wrong with the engine.

"What's wrong?" Traven asked.

Gachet explained, "Nothing, I don't want to be parked on the side of the road for no reason. That could be a sign that a zone was about. We make it look like we had car trouble instead."

Gachet then went to the trunk and pulled the spare tire out and stuck it by the front fender, as if they were in the process of changing a flat tire as well.

Traven made a point to meander backward so he could glance in the trunk to make sure there was nothing ominous in there.

The trunk was loaded with boxes of brand-new ladies' sneakers. All the same style and color, just different sizes.

"What's with all the sneakers?" Traven asked.

"You'll find out," Gachet answered back.

Traven felt better about their situation, but not much. He knew they were vulnerable right now. Very vulnerable and he wouldn't feel safe again until they were stepping into the zone.

"How did you guys find this place?" Sierra asked.

"A man we buy black market truffles from discovered it while foraging out here with his pigs. We used to have possession of twenty zones all over Europe. This is the last one left. But this one now, makes more income than the other 20 combined. Speaking of income, we need payment now, yes?"

"Not until we see the zone first."

"That's fine. It is a small walk in the forest. Twenty minutes."

"I'm not hiking twenty minutes in my Louboutin heels!"

"Now you find out about the sneakers in the trunk. What size do you wear, mademoiselle?" Gachet asked Sierra.

"Seven."

Gachet went to the trunk and pulled out a pair of size seven women's sneakers and handed them to Sierra.

"Our gift to you. Many women carry their heels to the zone and switch them when they go in, but the choice is up to you."

"I'll switch them back at the zone," Sierra says as she takes off her red soled black high heels and hands them to Traven.

"Go in with style. I like it," Gachet says with a smile on his round face.

Sierra ties her sneakers on her sheer black stockinged feet and stands again.

"We go now, yes?" Gachet asks.

"Yes, we go." Traven says as the three march forward to the forest.

They walked for about twenty minutes. Traven made sure to keep time on his watch. He was so glad he had

sprung for the Rolex now. For years now, he'd been using his phone to keep time, but he had splurged on the timepiece while in Madrid.

Twenty minutes and no sign of the zone. Not good. What was also not good, was that Gachet had the habit of walking behind them.

Occasionally Traven would pause with Sierra and wait for Gachet to catch up. He'd done it a few times now and it was making Traven very nervous each time he did it.

"How close are we now?" Sierra asked.

"Very close."

Once again Gachet had fallen behind them and Traven paused with Sierra.

"Please, you don't have to wait for me. My legs, they get tired."

"It's not a problem," Traven replied as they looked around the forest, not seeing much of anything.

They started to walk again.

Five minutes later, once again Gachet had fallen behind them. Only this time Traven didn't stop. Instead he leaned into Sierra walking beside him.

"Listen, when I say go, I want you to run. No matter what you hear, you just keep running and you don't stop until you find someone."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't panic, don't react, but I don't think there's a zone."

"What?"

"He said it was a twenty-minute walk. We've been walking for thirty-five minutes."

"Traven, I'm scared."

"Don't be. Just run and don't stop. I'll be fine, I just

have to make sure he doesn't come after us."

"How will you do that without the gun?"

"Remember when I asked if we could rest for a second while I got the pebble out of my shoe? There was no pebble. I saw a broken piece of glass on the ground. It's in my pocket now."

"Traven, no."

"We can't wait for him to make the first move. It's the only way."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Had a helluva run, didn't we?"

"It was amazing."

"Wouldn't trade it for anything."

"Can I kiss you?" she asked.

"Don't. It'll raise his suspicion."

"I have to."

"No, we'll kiss later at the hotel. Just kept walking ahead, I'm going to slow down to walk beside him. Remember, when I yell go, you run and don't stop, no matter what happens."

"Okay."

Gachet must have been getting suspicious of the private conversation between the two, because he felt compelled to bellow out one of his, "We're close" updates.

While Sierra walked ahead, Traven slowed down to be closer to Gachet.

"Long walk, no?" Gachet asked.

"It's not so bad. It's pretty out here."

"You're not scared?" Gachet asked Traven.

"What?" Traven asked back, afraid Gachet knew, that he knew he was walking into a trap and was now just toying with him.

"The zone. You're not scared to go in?"

"Me, no." Traven said with a relieved chuckle.

"Most people I find are scared. Is she scared?"

"A little bit."

"Yes, I saw you too talking. You should go to her. I'm fine back here. We're close anyway."

"Maybe I'll do that. Listen, is it okay if I pay you now? When we get to the zone, I don't really want to worry about financial practicalities. I want to be free of all that. Just kinda get into myself a little bit before I go in. Get everything taken care of ahead of time. That way I can just focus on her, too."

"Yes, not a problem. I take the money now."

Traven reached in his pocket and pulled out the envelope stuffed with a combination of hundred-dollar bills and Euro 500 notes.

"You can count it. It's all there."

Gachet reached out to take the bills, but Traven fumbled them and they spilled on the ground.

"Crap, sorry!"

The two men bent down to pick up the bills off the dirt trail.

While Gachet was bend over, Traven grabbed the jagged piece of glass from his pocket and dug it into the side of Gachet's neck.

Gachet was caught by surprise and before he knew it the glass had sliced his jugular and he could catch sight of his blood squirting high in the air.

"Run, Sierra! Run!"

Sierra took off running through the forest, leaving Traven behind to wrestle with Gachet.

Gachet reached for the inside of his jacket, but Traven pulled his hand away and forced the weakened Gachet

to the ground.

Traven reached inside Gachet's jacket and found the gun. Gachet tried to struggle with Traven for control for the pistol, but Traven had the upper hand and has soon as he had the gun pointed at Gachet's balding head he pulled the trigger and fired a shot.

Gachet, who had been fighting with all his remaining strength, went limp and Traven collapsed on top of him.

Traven thought about firing again, but Gachet was dead, the bullet clearly entering his skull and scrambling his brains.

How close had they come? When was Gachet going to shoot them and leave their bodies in the forest?

But they weren't out of the woods yet, both figuratively and literary.

"Traven!"

Traven looked up and saw Sierra running back to him.

"Sierra!"

Traven left Gachet's dead body and ran to her.

He went to hug her, but she motioned for him to stay back.

"You're covered in blood!"

"Don't worry, it's his."

"Is he dead?"

"Yeah, he's dead. Just like we would have been, if we had waited any longer."

"Traven..."

She wanted to continue talking, but words failed her.

"Why did you come back? I told you to keep running no matter what."

"Traven, I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The zone. It's in the forest up ahead. I saw something black in the woods. I ran back as soon as I could."

"Are you kidding me? There's an actual a zone there?"

"It looked like it. As soon as I saw it, I came back, but you had already killed him."

"Jesus. Get to the zone, fast. On top of everything we're gonna have the Corsican mafia on our ass now, too."

"What about him? The money?"

"None of that will matter once we get in the zone. Show me where the zone is!"

Traven followed Sierra into the trees. Her running was frenetic and unsure, the direction constantly changing.

"I thought you said it was close?"

"It was, but it's all trees. It all looks the same to me now."

"You don't know which way you ran?"

"I was running for my life."

"It didn't disappear, did it?"

"I don't know. Wait, I remember that tree, all the broken branches. It's this way!"

They ran for another minute and then she saw it again. The hard-black edges and corners of the rectangle sticking out conspicuously in the woods.'

"Oh, you big black beautiful bastard. Let's get in there quick!"

They ran through the trees and brush headed for the black rectangle.

This wasn't the first zone they had seen. They had seen several and as Traven approached, he could tell

something was off about this one. It just didn't look right.

It was a black rectangle, but it didn't seem completely straight. There was a bit of an angle to it, just slightly, but zones were always completely straight, a perfect ninety degrees from the ground.

And the blackness itself, as they got closer, Traven could tell the black wasn't right. It looked almost faded.

"Traven!" Sierra cried.

She was seeing it, too. Something wasn't right.

They kept running toward the black rectangle. What choice did they have at this point? None.

At this point, they had to put their hands on it. Feel what they eyes were already seeing, but their brains were not letting them accept yet.

They reached out and touched the piece of plywood that had been painted black and been propped up in the forest as a decoy zone to lure them in.

"Traven, it's not real! Traven, what are we going to do?"

Traven wasn't responding to her.

He was already planning their next moves.

Go back and get the cash scattered around Gachet's body. Then bury his body. They would have Gachet's keys and they would steal the VW to get back to Paris.

What should they do then? Go back to their hotel room? Or keep running. They had Gachet's gun, so they wouldn't have to go back to the hotel room for the gun they left behind.

Where would Willem go looking for them? He would obviously start at the hotel, so that was another reason not to go back to the Shangri-La in Paris.

No, was probably best to just keep running. Where

could they go now? They would have to find another zone and find it quickly, but how?

They couldn't go back to their old underworld connections. That bridge was burned now that they had been set up and killed Gachet.

"Traven!" Sierra screamed, pulling at him desperately.

Didn't she understand, he didn't have time to comfort her now. Jesus, she was a witness to his murder of Gachet now, too. What if something happened and she got arrested? Would she rat him out on the murder charges to get a lesser sentence for herself?

He trusted her once before to never reach back out to her family and she had, putting them both in jeopardy. Could he really trust her now?

God, he killed the man to save her and this was how she was going to repay him. By ratting him out.

Although he could take care of that possibility now too. End it all. It would also make the last of the stolen money go further, if it was just him alone needing it.

It was unthinkable, but he was thinking it.

Then the bullet cut into Traven's head and burst out the back of it.

Traven's brains splattered on the black plywood zone.

Sierra had tried to warn Traven that Willem was there. That Willem must have been following behind them all along, ready to help Gachet dispose of their bodies after they had been killed.

"Don't!" she shouted at Willem as he pointed the gun at her.

"Stand still!" was Willem's only response.

"Okay, I'm standing still!" she obediently responded.

"It just makes it easier," Willem said.


He then pulled the trigger and the bullet blasted into her brain and ended her life in an instant.

Sierra fell back against the phony zone and slid to the ground on top of Traven.

Willem looked down at the lifeless couple and asked them, "How am I supposed to drive two cars out of here now? Tell me that, please?"

"The problems I have."

ZONE



CHAPTER 24

MOVING DAY

What was this worth? Josh Minert asked himself. Probably nothing, he reasoned. An old flip phone. How long had he been holding on to this? Josh couldn't even remember when he had owned it.

It must have been his second or third cellphone. It was before the age of the iPhone. The early to mid-2000's he guessed. It has survived all their other moves before in this shoe box full of odds and ends. Would it survive this one, too? Throw it in the trash. Be done with it, Josh thought.

No, maybe it had metals in it that were bad for the environment. He had heard you weren't supposed to

throw cellphones away like that.

Even if he did throw it away, maybe some jerk would dig it out of the landfill and somehow steal enough personal data to screw up his life worse than it already was. But Josh reminded himself, as bad as things were, he had a place to go. His family wouldn't be homeless.

He finally understood why some families had gone into zones. If it was only that easy. Just walk in and all your troubles go away.

Holding his old flip phone had launched Josh into a nostalgic frame of mind. Of how things used to be before everyone had a cellphone.

Unlike his daughter, he could remember a time before cellphones. She would never know the difference.

For Josh, it was like trying to imagine a world before TV, airplanes, electricity. People had lived and thrived, but he wondered how the hell did they do it.

He also remembered a world before zones. It wasn't that long ago. Just over a year was about it.

When was the first time he heard about a zone? He traced his memory. He vaguely remembered some internet headline as he was scrolling about, but it was so ludicrously absurd, that he assumed it was just fake click bait meant to lure in suckers.

You won't believe what Pamela Anderson looks like now. Be Prepared....Top ten smartest first ladies. Number three will shock you....Are Zones Real? We have the evidence! He knew better to click on that fake crap.

So, his first encounter with a zone, he must have just scrolled right through it, assuming it was a joke.

But then came the kids.

Ten kids going missing from a daycare center would

scare any parent to their core.

Josh, like the rest of the nation, was constantly checking his phone for any updates on the kids and if they had been found.

He, like everyone else, assumed the daycare worker was crazy. She had said they had disappeared in a black rectangle. Who makes this stuff up? It wasn't true. It couldn't be true. It made no sense.

The black rectangles had been a recent conspiracy theory going around fringe websites and the pictures that had been posted on them had already been debunked.

But then there was the Facebook live video that broke the internet. Was Raw Dog real or not? It was the most heated debate in the country since a simple dress had people seeing both blue and gold.

Immediately people posted phony videos of themselves going into zones, showing just how easy it was to fake such a clip with some basic computer special effects.

For a few hours, no one knew what to believe exactly.

Then the President addressed the nation.

Holy crap, zones were the real deal.

Like millions of other Americans, Josh and his family didn't leave the house for the next two days for fear of accidentally falling into one of these zones.

It was told that it was a record week for people calling in sick to work. And it impacted the stock market as there were fears that the sudden drop in productivity could lead to a recession.

Again the President and congressional leaders each made a big show of going out and meeting with everyday Americans telling them everything was going

to be okay. That they could go on about their day. They just needed to be cautious and vigilant.

Slowly people returned to work and their normal routines of life. They would check the Zone Facts app hourly to make sure no zones had shown up in their area and wondered, like everyone else, what the hell the zones were doing here.

The first time Josh knew of someone that had actually touched zone was a friend from work, who saw one that had appeared at a bowling alley. The friend was one of about a dozen people that had touched it before the cops showed up and pushed everyone back. A couple of minutes later it was gone. His friend said it was like touching the face of God.

The first time Josh knew someone that had actually gone all the way into a zone was when his neighbor three houses down, Tim Brickland, had helped his ailing father into a zone.

Tim had heard the zones had healing power. His father was suffering from severe Alzheimer's and was on a steep decline. At that point a lot of elderly people were making the choice to go in zones rather than continue to suffer their maladies.

The first time Josh saw a zone in person, was when one showed up near the fracking well site he was stationed at.

While Josh decided to keep his distance, a few of his fracking coworkers touched the zone before company security arrived and had the thing roped off. By the time the real cops had showed up, the zone was gone. It had only been there about twenty minutes total. About average for a zone at that point.

Then came the first time Josh touched zone. He was

driving home when he saw the cars pulled over on the side of the road. He knew immediately what that meant. A zone was nearby.

None of the cars were police or government issued, so he knew he would have a chance to actually touch it. He had passed up his chance before at the fracking well site and had to listen to his coworkers rave about the experience for weeks afterward, secretly regretting his decision not to touch it.

But at this point the zones were showing up so much more than before. It was getting harder for the government to respond to each one. The zones were staying longer too, giving more people a chance to have an encounter with one.

Josh parked his car on the shoulder of the road behind a plumbing company van and followed the plumber into the woods.

"Do you know where it is?" Josh asked the plumber.

The plumber, who had his cellphone out guiding him with a zone app, pointed straight ahead into the woods.

"Should be this way," the excited plumber told Josh, who followed after him.

Josh was a bit wary. He had heard about gangs and criminals putting out false zone reports in remote areas and then when someone showed up to see the zone, the unsuspecting zone seeker got mugged or worse.

At least Josh had the plumber with him, who had a tool belt of wrenches and screw drivers wrapped around his waist. The tools would come in handy in a fight, if they had to defend themselves.

Josh grabbed his cellphone and held it ready, in case he needed to call 911 in a hurry. Josh also wanted the phone's camera to be ready in case the zone was still

there. He wanted to get a picture of it to show his wife and kids.

They found the zone site where about a dozen people were gathered around it. Three people had their hands already plunged well into the zone. Four others were standing close by, waiting for their turn to make contact with the zone. Everybody else was staying way back and content with just observing.

Josh started taking pictures of the zone, moving closer with each picture he took. He didn't text them to his wife just yet. He knew what she would say if she saw him near the zone.

"You get away from that thing right now!" she would have texted back.

But Josh wasn't going away. This was his second chance to touch a zone and he wasn't going to blow it this time. Josh looked over to the plumber that he had hiked in with and asked, "Are you going to touch it?"

"Oh, yeah," the plumber said without hesitation. "These things are amazing. I touched one a month ago in Fargo. It's all I can think about ever since."

"Do you get hooked?" Josh asked.

The plumber shook him off, "No, it's just once you touch a zone, you know there is something bigger out there. This connects you to that. It's hard to describe. You just have to touch it and see for yourself. Don't be afraid. It doesn't turn you into mindless zombie. But it does change you. That's for sure."

The plumber then walked over and got in line behind the other zone seekers.

No one wanted to move away from the zone, so they all just made room for the others waiting. The plumber had to sit awkwardly to the side, but he was able to

insert his hand into the zone and soon sunk into a blissful state. To Josh's eyes the plumber looked to be the happiest person on Earth.

Finally Josh figured he had waited long enough. The cops could be showing up soon or the damn thing could just disappear altogether, so he went forward, got on his knees and found an open spot to stick his hand in.

It was stunning. The warm buzz went immediately up his arm and locked right into his brain. True to what everyone had ever said about touching a zone, it was amazing. No wonder people gave up everything to try to keep touching these things. It was that good. Too good, in fact.

Josh yanked his hand out. He even stepped back a few feet. Could he resist it? Or was he now uncontrollably hooked. If he didn't touch it again, would he be okay. Could he just walk away right now and live peacefully with his decision?

Seconds later Josh didn't have a choice. The zone disappeared and slowly everyone with a hand in the zone came back to reality.

When Josh told his wife what he had done, she was furious with him. How could he do such a thing? What if someone pushed him in the zone on purpose or even accidentally. What would have happened to their family?

Josh would never again tell his wife when he had touched a zone, even though he had touched about twenty since that day. That was until they stopped showing up.

A few times when Josh was connecting to a zone, he witnessed people going all the way in and disappearing for good.

In the beginning he would try to convince them not

to go all the way in. As if he was trying to talk someone off the edge of a building or prevent them from jumping off a bridge.

But these people weren't suicidal. By then everyone knew about the white zone and Michael's message, that there was life in the zone. They were excited about going in the zone, not depressed.

But it wasn't enough to convince Josh. No way he'd risk his life on some half-baked story from a failed writer. However, others were convinced and entering zones permanently and entering in increasing numbers, especially as the economy got progressively worse with the declining population in the US and the world.

The last time Josh was at a zone, he had witnessed twenty people entering just that one zone. There was the expected elderly and sick seeking a second chance, but at least half the people entering the zone mentioned just trying to escape their economic struggles.

The economic downturn had hit Josh and his family particularly hard. As the demand for gasoline and energy dipped worldwide it drove the price of oil down to record lows.

All across North Dakota fracking rigs were shutting down and workers were being laid off. Eventually the layoffs hit Josh's crew. He did his best to find other work, but there were so many people out of work at once, there just weren't enough jobs to go around the small North Dakota towns, no matter how poorly paid the positions were.

Even the drug dealers were feeling the power of the zone. Why pay for pills or pot or even booze, when you could easily find a zone and zone out for a while. Which Josh found himself doing more and more often back

then.

When the bank finally foreclosed on Josh's house and issued him an eviction date, Josh set about on a plan to convince his wife that maybe entering a zone wasn't the worst thing in the world.

But then the worst thing did happen.

The zones stopped showing up.

Just the day before, their best friends had gone into a zone. The whole family. They put a post on Facebook to say goodbye to everyone and then they were gone.

As they mourned the loss of their friends that night, Josh and his wife discussed for the first time even the thought of taking their family in the zone.

What if it was real? They wouldn't have to worry about money. They wouldn't have to put their daughter in daycare while they both worked thankless jobs. They wouldn't get sick. They wouldn't die. They could live every fantasy they ever had for themselves.

Think of all the Christians that had already gone in world wide. How could so many people be wrong? The millions of people in India that had gone in seeking a better life. So many in fact, there were fears that Indians would dominate whatever culture was in the zone already.

But what if it was all a scam.

What if the zone was really a doorway to death and Dylan Gains had just made the whole white zone story up to achieve the fame and fortune that had eluded him all his life.

But to Josh it all came down to one thing.

When Dylan was dying and in desperate need of medical help to save his life, he didn't go to a hospital. He went to a zone.

Josh was encouraged that night that while his wife wasn't convinced going into a zone would solve all their problems, she was at least open to the notion of going in a zone with their family.

In the morning they awoke to the news that zones were disappearing all over the world and new ones weren't appearing to replace them.

There was a worldwide panic by those that wanted to go in a zone, but hadn't had the chance yet. The roads were not safe, as people ignored all safety laws as they raced to reported zone sites that were still there.

Soon interstates and most roads in general were clogged with cars of desperate zone seekers hoping to be the last one in a zone, before they were all gone.

Despite all their troubles, Josh and his wife were not willing to risk their lives entering the maelstrom that circled around them.

They hunkered down at home, believing this was just a momentary panic. That the zones would return.

But they didn't return and times just got harder as tens of millions of Americans made a last-minute departure through zones, causing another economic crisis.

So many people had moved to North Dakota from other parts of the country for the fracking jobs, that when times got hard, they didn't have the extended family available locally to help out. If they needed help, they had to move out of state. Which people were now doing in the thousands.

Josh and his wife, Connie, had an offer to move in with her parents on Roanoke Island on the coast of North Carolina.

There would be no room for their furniture and they couldn't afford to put it in storage. Storage rates had gone through the roof as people who planned to go in zones sold their houses and moved their goods into storage and prepaid for the units for five years or longer.

Josh and his wife tried to sell as much as they could, but there was just no market for it anymore. What money people had they were holding on to. Especially now that there were no zones they could escape to if their debts got too bad.

So most of the furniture they just took out of the house and put at the street. They couldn't even afford a U-Haul to make the trip. They would just pack Josh's truck with as much as they could and haul it themselves.

Which again brought Josh back to the scrutiny of the old flip phone. They needed as much space as they could have. He'd never make a call on the ancient phone again. Probably never even turn it on. But still he couldn't let go of it. A bond had been formed with the device long ago and he couldn't break it.

On that phone somewhere were all the texts he and Connie exchanged when they first started dating. He just had to find the charger so he could power up the device once again and surprise her as they could trace back their early days of dating.

That settled it, yes, he would keep the old cellphone for now. The Motorola Razor V3 had survived another move.

Josh loaded the last box into the back of his Ford F-150. His daughter Molly was already in the back of the extended cab. She should have been saying goodbye to her friends, but their families had either long since

moved away or entered zones before they all disappeared.

Josh tied down a tarp in the rear of the truck in case they hit bad weather along the way to the small coastal Carolina town, which was almost a given for a three-day drive.

"Do you want to walk through it one more time?" Connie asked Josh. The tears already starting to come to her eyes.

"Molly, your mom wants to walk through the house one more time. As a family," Josh told his daughter in the back of the truck cab. Molly put her phone down and joined her Mom and Dad in the driveway.

Josh wrapped his arms around Molly, "Sweetheart, your mom and I want you to know this is just temporary. When we get to Nana and Grampa's, I'm gonna find another job and so will your mother. We're gonna have another house soon."

"I'm gonna miss this place," Molly cried.

"We all are, but we have to move forward in life. There's no point in looking behind us."

Inside the house Molly ran over to a door frame where they had been measuring her growth with pen markings over the past twelve years."

"Can you mark it one last time?" Molly asked.

"Sure," Josh said as he removed a pen from his shirt pocket. He marked her height line and wrote the date beside it. He then took out his phone and snapped a picture of Molly standing there against the frame.

"Text that to me, would you?" Connie asked Josh.

"You bet," Josh replied.

"Me, too," Molly requested.

They had been on Highway 52 for about three hours when the traffic seemed to stop out of nowhere.

There were coming up on Harvey, North Dakota, but there was no reasonable answer as to why traffic was backed up this far out as they approached the small town.

Both Molly and Connie were sleeping, but the rapid deceleration caused the two to stir and wake up.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Connie asked Josh, her eyes adjusting to the light.

"Traffic stopped. Must be a wreck up there. Must be bad, because we ain't moving. Nothing is."

"How are you doing?" Connie asked.

"Good. How was your nap?"

"Fine," Connie answered.

"Where are we?" Molly asked.

"Just outside of Harvey," Josh answered.

"What's going on? Why are we stopped?"

"Must be a bad wreck up there. Check your phones. See how far traffic is backed up," Josh requested.

Connie opened her phone and saw the solid red line of traffic.

"It looks like a mile or two. This is weird."

"What?" Josh asked.

"It is showing the zone symbol that's causing the traffic, not a car accident."

"Must be a glitch," Josh answered.

Connie closed her maps app and opened a news app. And there was the instant headline, "They're Back!" along with a picture of a zone.

"The zones are back!" Connie yelled.

"What? Really?" Josh asked.

Josh grabbed his own cellphone and went directly to the zone facts app. There was an update that the zones had indeed returned and he looked on a map of zone locations. The map was completely overwhelmed. Although it was obviously not to scale, but it seemed like the zones were popping up everywhere around them.

People were now on foot running through the stopped traffic on Highway 52. Cars sped down the breakdown lanes, their drivers trying to get as close as they could before abandoning their vehicles.

"Why's everyone getting out of their cars?" Molly asked.

"The zones are back," Connie said.

"They are?" Molly asked.

"Do you want to go see them?" Josh asked Connie.

"We can't just leave our truck in the middle of the road," Connie protested.

"Everyone else is," Josh reasoned.

"But what if traffic starts back up?" Molly questioned.

"Trust me, no one is going anywhere soon. Come on, let's go see them!" Josh jumped out of the Ford.

"Everything we have left is in the back," Connie argued.

"We won't stay long. I just want to see them again," Josh argued.

"Okay, fine, but this was your idea," Connie said, relenting to her husband's demands.

Josh, Connie and Molly started walking up through the halted traffic. An older gentleman in blue SUV called out to Josh.

"What's going on up there?" the man asked.

"The zones are back," Josh told him.

"Really? No kidding?" the man said unbelieving.

"They're back," Josh repeated as they continue to snake through the stopped traffic.

There were so many people walking now, Josh knew there was no way they were getting close to the zone once they got there. The line was bound to be a mile long by now and good luck to anyone trying to cut in front of a zone line. Especially one as long as this one was sure to be.

They saw the people walking, jogging and some even sprinting off the highway and on to an expansive field. It took a second to process the sight as Josh had never seen anything like it.

It wasn't just one zone there, but at least forty or fifty scattered about. So many zones that there was barely three or four people in front of each one. If you were willing to walk a little bit, you could have a zone all to yourself.

But the zones themselves were different now too. It looked as if someone had tipped the zones over on their side. But there were as tall as ever, they were just wider. It looked like someone had taken the inventory of mega widescreen TVs out of an electronics super store and scattered the massive black rectangles in the field.

Josh led his family past the crowds to a zone in the back that they had to themselves.

"Have you ever seen so many at once?" Connie asked.

"No, never. I don't remember two zones ever being together at the same location. And look at how much wider they are now," Josh observed.

"What happened to them, Daddy?"

"I don't know," Josh told his daughter.

"Do they feel the same?" Connie asked.

Josh carefully put his hand in the zone and the warm feeling returned.

Josh smiled back at his wife, "Oh, yeah, that's the zone alright. You should try it, Connie. At least once."

"I have," Connie confessed to him, finally coming clean.

Josh was puzzled, "I thought you said..."

"I lied." Connie reached out and touched the zone. Letting the warm feeling return to her tense body.

"Once we lost the house, I started going to zones all the time. I needed it."

"So did I," Josh admitted.

Molly extended her own hand and joined her parents' connection to the zone.

"Hey, I like this! I really, really like this!" Molly exclaimed like an excited tween would.

Josh and Connie looked down at their delighted daughter. They then turned and looked at each other. They knew they should stop her, but as they looked around, other families were feeling the zone as a group as well. Parents and children and even some babies.

Then it started happening. People started to go into the zones again.

Maybe it was the opportunity of a second chance of escape. Maybe it was a fear that even these returning, expanded zones, could disappear in an instant.

Whatever it was, people were making their minds up that instant to enter the zones and leave it all behind.

As if that hadn't been a shocking enough scene, the zones themselves started to disappear again as well.

One by one the zones started to go away, like a series of falling dominos in the field. People that were

determined to go in a zone had to scramble to get to one that hadn't disappeared yet.

The zone in front of Josh and his family was stable for the moment, but he could see the wave of disappearing zones heading their way. So could others.

"Out of the way!" a man yelled as he and a woman ran into their zone hand in hand. The couple was gone the instant they hit the zone surface.

Josh turned to Connie.

"What do you think?" he asked her.

Connie looked around at the vanishing zones that were disappearing closer and closer to their zone. She could see the panic set in as people realized they were too far away to get in a zone now.

"Are you going in?" Molly asked her parents. "Are we going in?"

Connie nodded, "Let's do it."

Josh wrapped his hands around Connie and Molly.

"I love you both so much. I won't let anything bad happen to you in there," Josh promised them both.

"A new start," Connie added.

"Everyone ready?" Josh asked.

"I am, Daddy."

Josh squeezed both of their hands as if to signal this was it.

With that fateful squeeze they walked in as a family and disappeared as a family.

Then the zone they had just entered vanished as did the last of the remaining zones in the field.

The people left behind fell to their knees and lamented their misfortune. Not again, they thought. Not again.

The dispirited people slowly started to make their

way back to the highway. They were in no hurry. Surely with all the abandoned cars left on the road it would be hours before traffic started moving again.

Then it happened once more.

The zones reappeared spot for spot where they had been before. The retreat to the highway stopped and once again people when rushing into the fields to disappear.

Those that were left behind, with no intention of ever going in a zone, looked on helplessly at the mass exodus into the black rectangles.

They passed uncomprehending stares between each other, as if they, the ones that chose to stay behind, were now the crazy ones.

ZONE



CHAPTER 25

GO IN OR GO OUT

"You're going to kill someone. You know that, right?" Monique warned Nala, as she had caught her dozing at her nursing station again.

"Hum, What?" Nala mumbled, waking up from her micro sleep.

"How long have you been here now?" Monique asked.

"Twenty-two hours, I think," Nala said, added up the time in her head. "At least, twenty-two."

"Go home."

"I just need a nap. We're short staffed."

"For your safety and our patients' safety, I'm

ordering you to go home."

"Okay, I'll go," Nala relented.

"Are you going to be safe?" Monique asked.

"Is anybody?"

"You know what I mean, girl."

"Yes, I'll be safe."

"Good."

When Monique asked Nala if she was going to be safe, she wasn't referring to fastening the seat belt in her car and driving the speed limit.

Monique wanted to know if Nala would have her gun ready for the trip home from the hospital.

Monique wanted to know if it was loaded and ready to go. That Nala would remember to take the safety off and use it if someone even hinted at threatening her.

A nurse had gone missing from the hospital last month. At first it was thought she had gone into a zone, but her ATM card was used to drain her checking account and a week later her body was found.

Good luck catching the killer. He was probably long gone in a zone by now. Another unsolvable zone crime.

With so many people fleeing into zones now, the thought was coming to people to settle old grievances before they disappeared.

You ever hate someone so much you could kill them? Now you could and get away with murder by entering a zone after the dirty deed was done.

No one had any idea how the law worked in the zone. Rumor had it if some came looking for you in the zone, you could freeze them out and block them. You couldn't control people in the zone, because there wasn't any physical body to control.

Of course this was all just pure speculation and bullshit. Just as ever, people believed what they wanted to believe.

Needless to say the increase in violent crime made work life at the hospital a struggle. It had been bad enough with the first phase of the zones. They had lost staff and had trouble recruiting more nurses, but after the drought when the second wave of zones hit, it was like a tsunami.

The zones were simply everywhere. Short of martial law and a 24-hour curfew, there was no way to keep people from not going in the zones.

The zone recession had hurt a lot of families and people were struggling just to get by. Which was all the more reason for them to escape into a zone once the second phase hit.

The second zone phase was distinctly different than the first. It was darker, angrier. People were not going in zones because they wanted to. They were going in zones, because they felt they had no choice.

They took that anger out on anybody they felt was responsible for the circumstances that had forced them into this position.

LinkedIn was scoured looking for anyone that worked for a mortgage company or a big bank. Those people were put on a hit list with the names and addresses discovered and posted online for anyone who wanted to take out one of the bastards that ruined this country again.

The richest one percent hired mercenary armies to keep them safe in gated communities. It was even worse than before. They had always worried about being targets of crime, but now the wide swath of people

wishing to do them harm had grown. And with a zone escape get out of jail free card, they knew they could take out their vengeance and not have to pay a penalty for it.

Some people said life in the US was now like living in one of The Purge movies, but instead of there being one night where you could get away with any crime, it was every night and day, twenty-four, seven.

Porches and Mercedes and Range Rovers were left parked in their three and four car garages in favor of more pedestrian fair. That was if you dared driving outside of your secure compound at all.

The hottest ticket for some was a bullet proof Toyota Prius or Camry. Often times people would take pot shots at those makes of cars just to test if it was a rich bastard or not.

Which didn't make sense, because the bulletproof versions were the targets of their derision, but those cars would be protected by the armor, while a regular person just driving their moderately priced, sensible car could be killed in these tests.

Often times people would shoot bullet holes through their own car windows in order to prove it wasn't an armored car in the first place. Which led to the rich to start putting fake bullet hole stickers on their armed cars to make it look like a bullet had been shot through it. So eventually even the bullet holes wouldn't even serve as a deterrent against an assault.

That was the world they now lived in.

With an election on the horizon, Democrats and Republicans refused to work together on a solution to the zone problem. Why would the Republicans want to make the Democratic President Perez, who they loathed so much, look good, ensuring for four more years of his

presidency, that they swore to oppose from day one of his inauguration.

Instead the worse things got with the zones, the better their outlook was for taking back the White House and possibly the Senate, bringing all the branches of government under Republican control again.

Which the country needed now more than ever they rationalized. There was even talk that the end of America was in sight if President Perez was reelected, as the country was getting weaker and more ineffective with divided government.

Russia, China and other hardline countries had taken a much more harsher stance on zone entries, treating them as crimes. If the criminal was found to have disappeared into a zone, the family that was left behind of the criminal would be the ones punished.

For whatever the reason, these countries also had the lowest appearances of zones per capita, as well. Some explained the low rate of zone appearances in the hardline states with the Fishing Net Theory.

The Fishing Net Theory was simple enough. If you set out zone fishing nets in ten countries and you hardly caught any fish in five of those countries, wouldn't you adjust your strategy and redeploy those five nets in the other five countries where you were catching the most humans in?

The other belief was the Friends and Family Theory. This theory concluded that the people already in the zone were controlling where the zones were popping up.

Since so many Americans and residents in more democratic countries had gone into zones, then it seemed logical that they would send more zones back

for their friends and family, as was the case in India, where zone appearances were at a record high, leading the world.

Either way, President Perez couldn't win with Republicans. If he took a hardline stance, he was recriminated for interfering with religious liberty and not letting people have free access to zones or was using the zones as an excuse to prop himself as an American dictator.

When he had a more relaxed policy, the Republicans slammed him for being weak on zones and endangering the American public. Whatever would cost the president votes in the fall, that's where the Republicans were.

Yes, the country would go through some temporary pain, but then the Republicans would be returned to office to bring America back to her former glory.

Nala tried her best to keep up with the election news, but it was hard. She tried to lose herself in her work and didn't make much time for TV or anything else for that matter.

The age of the zone had stricken her particularly hard.

She had struggled to keep her own teenage son away from zones. She thought she had made it through the danger period when the zones disappeared after the first wave.

But when the zones came back in the second wave, both her son and her ex-husband disappeared when he was staying with his father on his weekend visit. She was sure they had made a pact and went in to a zone, but she kept up hope that her son would return one day.

The drive home was a depressing site for her. Zones were everywhere now. And so were zoners, sticking

whatever appendage they could into the zone. With the unemployment rate skyrocketing, some people had nothing better to do. Rather than go to a bar and drink, the zones offered a free alternative.

Occasionally she would see her ex at these zones on her drive home, but not anymore. And even more heartbreaking were the few times she saw her own son zoning out as well.

She almost wished she would see him out there again now, on this drive home, touching one of the zones that lined the trash laden streets.

Who knows, maybe he had been approached by gang members trying to recruit him and when he wouldn't join, they pushed him in the zone he was at. You always had to watch out for pushers.

It had become the new sport for people to run up and push others into zones that were zoning out. It got so bad, that you had to assume someone standing in a zone was armed. Look at them the wrong way and you stood a good chance of getting shot. And so what if you did. All your murderer would have to do is take one step forward into a zone and he was free from any prosecution.

It was nurses like Nala that had to clean up the mess when ambulances would deliver the would-be pushers to the hospitals with gun shot wounds. That is if the ambulances didn't just take them to the morgue first.

When she pulled into her driveway, she knew immediately something had gone terribly wrong. Items were scattered on her front yard, as if there had been some sort of yard sale and all the that was left behind was junk that nobody wanted.

"No, no!" She screamed in her car when she saw that someone had spray painted a Z on her open front door. She had been zoned.

When people disappeared into a zone and they rented a house or apartment, the landlord would put a big Z on the door. Either spray paint it or put up a sign.

That would let people know that whoever was living there was gone and that anyone that wanted to come in the house and clear out the personal items could.

However, other times someone would paint a Z on your door just out of spite, to have your home ransacked. This was called getting zoned.

Who would have done this to her? What had she done to deserve this. Her ex-husband? Her son? It couldn't have been. They had both been missing for months.

Nala got the gun out of her purse and had it at the ready.

Was it a patient that had passed away under her care and now the vengeful family was going to get payback.

No, Nala knew she was a good, caring nurse. And her patients and their families knew it, as well. She was always compassionate with the families and couldn't think of anyone that would seek out revenge for something like that. Who could it have been then?

She approached the door cautiously with the gun raised.

She then yelled inside. "If anybody is in there you better come the hell outside now!"

There was no response, but she heard the floor boards creaking, so she knew someone was trapped inside.

"You have one more chance to come out now or I'm

coming in blasting! I mean it! This is my house!"

A man's scared voiced called back, "Okay, just chill! I'm not taking anything. There's nothing left!"

The man came down the stairs with his hands in the air.

"Don't shoot! There was on Z on the door. I thought it was abandoned!"

"Who did this?" Nala asked him.

"I don't know. I was just walking by and I saw the Z. I'm just trying to get some food and clothes for my family."

"Get the hell out of here! If I ever see you again, I'm killing you."

The man hurried down the driveway and disappeared from sight.

Nala went in and walked through the trashed house. The furniture was gone. The kitchen stripped bare of food and appliances. Clothes, too.

It wasn't like this stuff was going to people in desperate need. There was a coordinated effort to strip zoned houses. There were roving crews with box trucks and flat beds and a team of five or eight men could strip a house like Nala's in less than an hour.

They would empty a house and sell the contents for pennies on the dollar to anyone that would pay for it.

There was, however, one thing that wasn't stolen.

She kept a security camera on the front porch. It was set to record and save the last 24 hours on a memory card. She had put it up when her and her husband were having a difficult time and she wanted proof that he wasn't respecting the restraining order against him.

Even after their estranged relationship improved, Nala kept the camera out there recording, just in case.

It was hidden in a plant hanger. Thankfully no one saw the need to steal the dead plant hanging there. She retrieved the micro camera and hooked it up to her work laptop that she had brought home with her.

She started the clip from the morning she left out the front door for work. She watched herself walk to her car and drive away. Just like a million other mornings in her life.

Then she fast forwarded as nothing of particular interest caught her eye, except for a cat passing through her front yard and few squirrels running about.

Then she saw him. He warily walked up the driveway. The man rang the doorbell and then when he confirmed no one was home, he seemed to be looking around for security cameras.

He didn't seem to find one even though he looked directly at the spy cam she had hidden in the hanging plant. Thankfully it was hidden enough to not be discovered.

The man then felt safe enough to pull out a can of spray paint and mark the giant Z on the door that would be visible to anyone passing by from the street.

The man was Hector Contador. He was a handy man of sorts. She hadn't spoken to him in years. A while back he did some repairs for them. He did such a horrible job, she wrote a bad review of him on Nextdoor. He tried to sue them for ruining his handyman business, but the case was thrown out. That was three years ago. He hadn't moved on from that.

She knew where he lived, because her and her husband at the time had gone there several times trying to get Hector to finish the job he had never completed. Usually they would find him drunk, if he was even

home at all.

That son of a bitch, she thought, as she watched Hector walk away from her home on the video.

What was his plan? Screw everyone over that had done him wrong before he escaped into a zone?

No, that was not happening.

As Nala watched the countless strangers entering her home and leaving with everything she owned, something snapped in Nala.

When everyone else ran away to a zone to escape their troubled life, she stayed behind in this hell hole their town had become to fight the good fight. To help save lives and heal the broken.

And what was her reward for all this? She lost her son. Her home was violated and robbed of all its possessions. What was next? For her to lose her own life? No, she wasn't going out like that.

And Hector, he damn sure wasn't going out like he wanted. She would make absolutely sure of that.

Nala got back in her car and drove to Hector's house. She parked far enough away so not to raise suspicions. She didn't even know if he was home, but if she went marching up Hector's driveway and rang the bell, he certainly would have been ready for her.

And if she was armed and ready to do him harm, he'd have every right to blast her first under the stand your ground laws.

No, she had to be smart about this. Well, as smart as you can be for a revenge killing escalating from a three-year-old flame war on Nextdoor.

She had to get him out of the house, but how?

Fire tends to get people moving. So, fire it would be.

Nala first had to plan her escape. She found the closest ten zones near Hector's house, so no matter which direction she headed, she knew exactly where to go.

She could be at any of the ten zones in less than five minutes and she pitied the poor bastard that would try and get between her and her escape zone.

She wasn't taking any chances. She was going in and if she caught any hint of conflict from anyone in her way they were going down that day. She was done with this world. Just so done with it.

She went to the store and bought lighter fluid and a lighter. She parked near Hector's house and approached the side of the house.

There she squirmed the lighter fluid all over the side, emptying the whole bottle. She lit it up and ran for cover behind a big tree in front and waited with her gun drawn.

She heard Hector's smoke alarm finally go off and so did Hector, because he came racing out of the house trying to pull a sweatshirt over his head.

She waited until the shirt was pulled around his neck and she could see his face to confirm it was him.

Yep, it was the same man that had painted the Z on her door.

Nala aimed the gun and fired. The first shot struck Hector's leg. It caused him to stumble to the ground. Hector was confused at the events, but when he saw Nala approaching with the gun, he knew what was up and tried to flee the scene.

She came up on him and fired three more times into his back.

Hector stopped moving and died in the neighbor's

driveway.

Now everyone was coming out to see what was going on.

Nala hid the gun in her purse and ran back to her car and took off. She sped around the block and found the first zone she could.

She pulled out her gun and aimed it at the zoner standing there.

Nala warned him, "I don't want any trouble. I just want to go in."

"Chill, it's cool," the zoner backed away slowly with his hands in the air. He then turned and ran. Nala watched him run away until he turned a corner and disappeared.

Nala turned back to the blackness of the zone in front of her. She then heard the first sirens ringing out. Was it the police or the fire department? It didn't matter. The siren was the signal that it was go time. Either go in the zone or someone else, a cop or one of Hector's angry relatives, was going to take her out of this world with a bullet.

Go In or Go Out.

She had made her choice.

She hoped that she would be able to sleep in the zone. She hadn't been to sleep for almost a day and half now.

She hoped she would see her son in the zone.

She hoped her sins would not follow her into the zone.

She dropped the gun to the cold pavement and took her first steps into the zone.

It felt good. Warm. Inviting.

She hadn't felt good for a long, long time.

She then went all the way in and was gone.

The fire engine roared down the street causing people to run out of their houses to see what was going on.

The curious neighbors walked up the street toward the rising black smoke in the air. Grateful that it wasn't their houses that were on fire. Yet.

They passed by the zone Nala disappeared into as if it wasn't even there.

Zones were as familiar a sight as telephone poles now or mailboxes that marked city streets.

They were just part of the new landscape and no one paid them too much mind, unless they wanted a hit of Z or a departure from all the world had wrought.

Yes, the zones were as common as abandoned houses and cars now.

As common as closed businesses.

As common as the rover trucks that were ready to swoop in and clean out any house or apartment marked with a Z.

As common as the private security forces that accompanied the richest of the rich, as their armored convoys took them about town.

As common as the bleak headlines that occupied the newspaper stands that were full of unread papers, as the people that used to read them kept getting few and fewer every day.

ZONE



CHAPTER 26

FORTRESS AMERICA

Here are the thoughts that go through your head when the Secret Service charges in the Oval Office and grabs you by your arms and drags you out from behind the Resolute desk.

One, there's a shooter in the White House. And that, mind you, is the best-case scenario.

Two, chemical attack on D.C.

Three, someone has fired a missile on D.C.

Four, there is a coup and the Secret Service are in on it.

President Perez knew in these situations the agent's job was to get the president to safety immediately, not to brief him, but still, he had to ask.

"What's wrong?" President Perez inquired.

"There's one on the South Lawn, sir," the agent informed him.

"One what?"

"A zone, Mr. President."

"What's it doing?"

"Sir, we have orders to evacuate you from the White House immediately."

"Orders from who?" President Perez asked.

"Chief of Staff Rosen," the agent replied as they plowed through the halls of the executive mansion.

"Is the Zone doing anything or just sitting there?"

"It appears to be a normal zone."

"So it is just sitting there?"

Before the agent could answer, they were joined in the hall by Chief of Staff John Rosen, who kept up with the bustling presidential cluster as they fled for the exit.

Rosen briefed President Perez, "Mr. President, we're exiting through the North Entrance, to avoid the zone on the South Lawn. We'll be taking the motorcade to Joint Base Andrews and evacuating Washington for Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska."

"Is there an active attack from this zone?" President Perez demanded to know, stopping in his tracks and bringing everyone to a halt.

"Sir, the zones are an active attack in and of themselves," Rosen insisted.

"So this zone is just sitting there doing nothing?" President Perez pressed.

"I don't see it as nothing, but it appears to be normal zone activity."

"Meaning nothing," the President said pointedly.

"Mr. President, prudence demands that you leave the White House."

"No. Have Vice President Montgomery taken to the most secure facility we have and stay there. I'm not going to have a zone chase me out of the White House. In fact, I want you to assemble the press corps on the South Lawn"

"Mr. President, you are putting the nation and the world at risk," Chief of Staff Rosen warned.

"I know what's at risk. More than you can ever know, I do," the President stated firmly and turned around to head back to the Oval Office in the West Wing.

As he went back the President spotted a young Marine standing guard that held the door open for him.

He was a new face. A Latino face. The president paused in front of the Marine.

"New here?" President Perez asked.

"Yes, sir," Corporal Manuel Ortiz responded.

"You know I was the first, right?"

Corporal Ortiz smiled with pride. "Yes, sir. I do."

"First Marine to ever be president. Be proud of that, son. Semper Fi."

"Semper Fi, sir."

The President continued on his way, his staff now playing catch up and in a tizzy about the President's steadfast refusal to abandon the White House.

"I bet he is going in," wrote more than one Twitter user as President Perez strolled out on the South Lawn and stood behind a podium that was just feet away from the South Lawn zone.

And if Perez had simply walked in, who could blame him. The young president's challenges were piling up. The nation was as divided as any time since the Civil War. The world was being squeezed by Russia and China, both flexing their military muscle. And the depopulation effect of the second wave of zones were creating a crippling economic depression worldwide.

"My Fellow Americans, as you can see today at the White House we have encountered what so many of you encounter on a daily basis. I am here to show you there is no reason to panic. There is no reason to fear. The zone exists and so do we.

"Many thought it would be prudent for me to leave the White House after the zone behind me appeared. I have chosen to stay, to finish the business you elected me to do.

"However, Vice President Montgomery is currently in an undisclosed location with all the means available to run the nation at a moment's notice should it be required.

"The zone has changed so much in our nation and the world, but America can't stop being America because of zones.

"Once again we find ourselves in the midst of an election. We've held elections through the Civil War, World Wars and the Cold War. America will make its decision on who is going to lead this nation once again.

"However, we cannot let a future election delay finding a solution to our problems of today. Once again, I reach out to Republican leaders in the House and Senate to find solutions to the challenges the zone has posed to this nation and the world.

"Together we can solve this. Divided, we accomplish nothing. Let us come together and fill the void that the zone has created in our nation.

"Thank you and God bless you and God bless the United States of America."

That night two former Marines shared a beer in the Treaty Room on the second floor of the White House residence. Most presidents used it as a private study and Perez was no different.

Chief of Staff Rosen and the President both had the late-night look of reckoning. Of knowing something big was going to have to be decided.

Rosen laid his beer down on the President's desk, sitting it on the Billy Beer coaster that had been a gift from one of President Carter's nephews.

Rosen then spoke solemnly, "Mr. President, we have to bring the troops home. We must protect the homeland."

President Perez shook his head, "John, we protect the homeland by having a footprint overseas."

"Sir, we have to stabilize the United States. People are not going into the zones anymore because they want to. They are going in because they are starting to fear for their lives.

"We are losing whole towns in the mid-West. Those that don't go into zones are force to move out because the town structure is no longer sustainable. City governments are on the verge of collapsing.

In the major urban centers, police and first responders are under assault by organized crime gangs. The gangs see the end game. They cause organized government to go down and then they become the controlling body.

"Next thing you know, we are a nation of warlords from North to South, East to West. No better than Somalia or Afghanistan."

"We must hold the line. John, we bring the troops home from Europe and South Korea and we effectively start the ball rolling on World War III."

"Mr. President, you are so concerned with the external threat, you're ignoring the internal threat. There won't be a country left to defend. We have to start the redeployments now, because when things get really bad, there won't be any time to bring them home then."

"We must have the forces at home to once and for all block all access to zones. We must stop the hemorrhaging of the American population."

"It'll be challenged in the courts."

"We can win. No one can honestly say we are not in the midst of a national crisis here."

"The answer is repopulation. We simply need more Americans to replace the ones we lost."

President Perez laughed to himself, "Please, we try to push repopulation you can start the second civil war as well as World War III."

"What choice do we have?"

"What choice do they have? The Republicans? All the Southern and Midwest governors holding on to their shrinking pieces of America.

"They all though the first thing I was going to do when I got into office was open the border with Mexico. Now we aren't just going to open the border with Mexico, we are going to open the border to the world.

"You are asking them to commit political suicide. We flood this country with millions of new immigrants, who do you think they are going to vote for? The party that let them into this country or the party that fought tooth and nail to keep them out?

"My, God, within two or three election cycles, there might only be a handful of national Republican office holders left. They won't accept it. It's too dangerous for America."

"Who are they to call themselves Americans. They won't even help solve the simplistic issues we are struggling with, all to prevent you from claiming any political victories.

"No, sir, we cannot count on Republican help to fix this. We are on our own here, Mr. President. And if we continue to weaken from within, Russia and China will make a play."

"We still have our nukes," the President said, looking over at Rosen.

"Yes, that may insure we never live under a Russian or Chinese flag, but we'll be pushed so far back in the global corner, we may never be able to lead again."

The President stared at an old world map. One Lincoln himself might have studied in the midst of the Civil War.

President Perez then spoke, "Limited martial law. With a clear end date well before the election. Just enough to stabilize the country. We say nothing about repopulation until after the election.

"I think that is our best option, all things considered. We'll take heat on it, but we saving the country, not destroying it."

Perez nodded at Rosen, "Start working on the plans, brief me when we have something."

"Yes, Mr. President," affirmed Rosen as he collected their two bottles of beer and started to depart the Treaty room.

"John," the President called out. "One more thing. And I know you are going to say no, but I don't care."

"Okay, no, Mr. President. There, now tell me what I don't want to hear."

"Who do we trust on the Secret Service? I mean really, really trust," the President asked.

"Why?" Rosen asked suspiciously.

"I want to touch it."

"There's no way, sir."

"Find a way. Make it happen. That's an order."

At 3 a.m. that morning while Washington was still sleeping, a small contingent of Secret Service agents accompanied by Chief of Staff Rosen went out to the South Lawn zone.

You couldn't tell from a distance and even if you were walking right beside this group, you might not even notice that one of the uniformed agents was the President dressed incognito.

The President's service hat was pulled low, barely high enough for him to see out from under the brim. He kept a walkie talkie close to his face as if he was constantly checking in on it, but the real reason it was constantly raised was to help conceal his famous face.

They looked like any average security team doing a late night or early morning routine sweep, complete with the German Shepard guard dog.

The group strode down to the zone and stood in front of it.

The President joked to the two agents with them.

"Okay, guys, make sure the vice president doesn't come sneaking up behind me to push me in. Or Senator Tuxford, for that matter."

The agents chuckled. One of the perks of being president besides Air Force One, a nuclear blast proof company car and the coolest cornerless office in the world, was people always tended to laughed at your jokes.

The two security service agents chained themselves to a belt around the President's waist. They weren't taking any chances that he would be pulled in or would accidently fall in the zone.

"You're clear, Mr. President."

"Make it quick, sir. Please," begged Chief of Staff Rosen.

President Perez extended his left hand, the same hand he had laid on the family bible when he took the Oath of Office, and touched the surface of the zone. His fingers disappeared in the blackness, then his palm and thumb.

The President stood there stoically and just nodded.

"What do you feel, sir?" Rosen asked.

The President took his hand out.

"It makes me feel right," the President said. "I understand why we've lost so many now. I just don't understand why we haven't lost more.

"We have to stop this. The world can't afford to let the United States slip into the stealthy blackness of the zone. I'm on board. Let's bring everybody back we can spare and save this nation from itself.

"I'll start calling world leaders tomorrow."

"You mean today, sir," Rosen reminded him.

The President looked deeply into the zone.

There was nothing staring back at him.

Nothing.

Just black.

Black as night.

Black as death.

"That's right, I mean today. We'll start with South Korea, England, Germany, France and Japan."

ZONE



CHAPTER 27

ROUND RECTANGLE

The irony was not lost on them, as they spoke English to each other. Xin's Russian was passable, but Yerik's Chinese was elementary at best. They felt it was wise not to have translators hearing their discussions, so speaking English, which they were both quite fluent in, just made sense.

The irony of meeting so deep below the Earth was also not lost on the two negotiators. They knew they were making a deal with the Devil, but which side was the Devil, had yet to be determined.

But the true devil, as they say, is in the details and that is what the two negotiators were sent there to work

out.

This was to be the most consequential meeting of world leaders since Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin met in Yalta in 1944. Those three men decided the fate of mankind post World War II. This time two leaders would meet to decide the fate of the world post United States.

Oh, the United States wasn't dead yet. Not even close. And the truth was neither Russia nor China wanted to kill it. Only contain it, like a mighty lion, safely caged behind a zoo enclosure.

America had pulled back from the world to take care of its own internal problems. But if it ever tried to venture out again, it would get its hand slapped by the Russian-Chinese alliance. That was of course was reliant on the alliance being worked out in the months ahead.

They were forbidden to call it a pact, for fear of comparison to the Hitler Stalin pack of 1939, which didn't turn out so well for either of those two gentlemen in the end.

Yet the fate of the world was on hold, because the two negotiators seemed to be stuck on the smallest of details of the meeting.

The shape of the table.

The Chinese wanted the table to be rectangle.

The Russians wanted it to be round.

Details, details, details.

Yerik shrugged his shoulders, "Perhaps we should move on to other issues and table the table for now."

"No, it must be decided. We have conceded to too many demands already and the President is becoming concerned. Why make this harder than it has to be? We will pay for all the funds need to secure the proper

table."

"It isn't a matter of costs. Our President favors round tables. It pleases him."

"Knights of the round table?" Xin asked?

"More than you think," Yerik smiled.

"We know he sees himself as King. The whole world does," Xin pushed.

"Is insisting on a rectangular table your way to tell him he is not?" Yerik countered.

"No, we just feel a rectangle would symbolize two equal sides coming together."

"You don't see it as adversarial? Us on this side, you on that side. Perhaps setting up a future conflict to come," Yerik pondered.

"No such thing," Xin answered.

"But if you believe in equality, is there no better symbol than the circle. We are all part of it. It has no beginning, no end."

"We also feel it would be a sign of respect."

"We do respect you, but the President is adamant it must be a circle."

"No, not a sign of respect to us. A sign of respect to the zone. Would this not be possible if not for our friend, the black triangle?"

"Has it not accomplished what twenty thousand T-80 tanks and five hundred blackjack bombers could not? We owe the zone some kind of tribute for finally crippling American's menacing hand in the world."

"Americans are not so bad. Some are actually quite reasonable, if you give them the chance to be," Yerik pointed out.

"I think if given a choice to carry on their way of life and not worry about the ways of the world, most

Americans would choose their Walmarts and TGI Fridays."

Xin frowned at Yerik's take on America, "I see the shape of a table isn't the only thing we are going to disagree on."

"You don't see coexisting with Americans as viable?"

"The United States will never willingly accept the alliance we are pursuing here. They will fight it with all they have."

"Ah, but you see. You are missing my point entirely. There is a vast difference between Americans and The United States of America."

"As there was a difference between Russians and the Soviet Union?"

"Not completely appropriate, but close. Yes. For a longtime now we have viewed the United States as a piece of coal. Dirty, inefficient, yet if properly ignited, still a powerful energy."

"However, when you apply the appropriate amount of pressure, the coal can transform into a diamond. Hard, cold, smaller and much more beautiful, meant more for ostentatious display than anything else."

"Have you ever heard of a diamond tipped saw?"

"The Americans will defeat the Americans. We just need to be smart enough to stay out of their way and hope the right ones win."

"I understand you are doing much more than hoping."

"Perhaps we should get back to the table."

"We could vote on it?"

"I didn't know you were such fans of democracy. But wouldn't it not just end in a tie?"

"Does our friend in Pyongyang not get a vote?"

"North Korea is invited as a courtesy only. Not an equal."

"But with the American troops withdrawn, we are asking them to be the first testing site to your theory. A lot to ask of a country with no voting recognition"

"All the more reason for a round table. Wouldn't a round table help give them a feeling of equality, rather than being pushed to a corner of the rectangle."

"It is a fair point."

"He will listen, won't he? He won't cross the border. Just amass his troops there."

"Have we started the negotiations early? I thought you and I were discussing protocol and milieu."

"I have a feeling the two of us, we could solve all the problems of the world."

"We wouldn't even need a table. I'm good like this."

"Agreed. What is the first issue we must resolve?"

"Let's start with an easy one. How do we get America to surrender her nuclear arsenal without destroying the world?"

"Ask nicely?"

"Reasonable enough."

"Ah, but again, you just have to ask the right Americans."

"Right Americans indeed, from what I am hearing."

Yerik surrendered a sly smile, not wanting to say anything more on the matter. "Issue two," Yerik spoke, moving them forward.

Xin responded, "Issue two, how to not let the Korean peninsula turn into an ash heap?"

Yerik shrugged as if it was all too easy, "If you give a person the choice between life and death, they will choose life. Even if it is a life in the zone. We have seen

this everywhere the zone has been.

"Issue three, if you will."

"Issue three, tell me, when this is settled, will there finally be peace on Earth? An end to the wars or will we just turn on each other?"

"There will be peace."

"An oval."

"Sorry, what?"

"Would an oval shaped table be an acceptable compromise?"

"I can ask and one can hope. See, I told you, the two of us could solve all the world's problems."

Yerik asked.

Moscow said no.

The table had to be a circle.

And it was.

The Chinese, Russians and North Koreans sat around the circular table and decided the fate of the world.

As part of the compromise for the table being circle, the Chinese were given ownership of it.

The historic table was flown back to Beijing where the circle was promptly cut into the shape of a rectangle.


The rectangular table was painted black in tribute to the zone.

The Chinese knew what the zone had done.

They also knew what it could still do.

A simple sign of respect was not a lot to ask.

ZONE



CHAPTER 28

THE LINE

How long did the line go on for? He wanted to ask, but they weren't allowed to talk in the line. If you did you were taken out and beaten by several of the soldiers.

The soldiers had no markings on their uniforms, but everyone knew they were Russians. They had Russian weapons and when they talked, they spoke Russian.

They had come into the village before the sun was even up and started getting people out of their homes and telling them to get in line for the buses.

They said they were there to bring economic relief. They had barrels of apples and everyone had to take one. If you didn't want to eat it, you could put it in another

barrel a little further down the line. Most people didn't eat them, fearing they were poisoned, but if they were poisoned, why would they give you a chance not to eat it by putting it back, he wondered.

He had picked up an apple, but wasn't planning to eat it, but he saw a few others ahead taking bites of their apples and they showed no signs of poisoning.

Logic prevailed, if they wanted them dead, the soldiers could have shot them with their guns or forced them at gun point to eat the apple.

He was hungry, so he took a bite. It tasted normal, so he continued. As he walked along he could see where others had just tossed their apple cores on the ground, so he did the same.

The line kept moving.

They were then told that they would be going on buses where they would be receiving more information about their future.

They were then asked what they wanted to eat on the bus. They had the choice between a turkey sandwich or fruit salad or nothing.

They told the soldier their choice and were given a sheet of paper with one of the three food choices marked. They were told to hold on to the paper and turn it in when they got to the buses. They would get their food once on board.

The line kept moving.

More and more people in line started to talk. And more and more people were taken out of the line and beaten.

Sometimes the beatings were so bad, the victim just lay unconscious in the road as the line kept moving on past them.

The further the line went, the more armed soldiers they saw. Then it they heard it. The crack of gunfire.

The line stopped for a moment after they heard the gun shot, but then it started moving again.

Worried looks went through the people in line when they heard the gunfire. Were they shooting people up ahead? Everyone must have been wondering it, but no one dared speak about it.

About thirty feet ahead of him a man bolted from the line and ran for the forest. The soldiers didn't bother to try and get him back in line.

The soldier with the best angle merely took aim and fired.

The man collapsed to the ground and his body lay there for all to see.

Despite being witnesses to cold blooded murder, the line kept moving.

How bad could this be, where they were being taken. Maybe there were no buses. Maybe they were being marched to their deaths.

Should he run, he thought.

No, they would kill him instantly as they did the man who ran.

He should wait until someone else ran, then maybe he could escape while they shot the other poor soul. No, there were enough guards to cover a dozen people running from the line.

But any more than a dozen, someone was sure to be able to get away.

And if the whole line decided at once to start running in different directions, the majority would have been able to escape. All they had to do was act as one and they would hold all the power.

But they didn't act as one and the line kept moving.

He had been in line all morning, but he finally saw where they were going.

They were being marched to a large tent, almost like a circus tent, it was so big.

A line of buses was waiting for all those that passed through the tent. The buses all looked the same, except for a sign on the side of the bus with a number on it.

They were all painted the same gray paint job and the windows were blacked out, so you couldn't see inside.

So there were buses. It had not been a lie after all. Soon he would be on a bus eating a turkey sandwich. After that, who knows, but right now it wasn't worth risking his life.

The children in line got excited to see the tent and the buses. Their parents tried desperately to keep the children quiet.

The soldiers didn't strike the children making noise and commotion. They even smiled and waved as the spirited young ones passed by.

The line moved slower now. No doubt it took time to process people once they entered the tent and then have them board the buses.

The tent itself blocked his view of the actual loading of the buses, but he could watch the busses come and go.

The buses all looked and sounded the same. As if it was the same buses that were just being driven a short distance out of sight and then immediately coming back to the tent.

But he paid close attention to the numbers on the signs on the side of the buses. The number on the buses were always different. He never saw a repeat number.

Eventually he stood in front of the tent. They were let

in by small groups. The soldiers used hand signals to move the people forward.

It was time for his group to enter the tent.

Soldiers held the flaps of the tent open and then closed it behind them. They could hear the busses rev up and pull away, then the next bus pulling up and opening its doors.

Then the tent opened up and he saw it. A big black rectangle. It was a zone and beside the zone a pile of bodies. The people in line were being marched into the zone at gun point.

Left with no choice, people went in the zone. He saw one lady resist, but a gun was put to her head and she chose the zone instead of a bullet.

He was ten people away from the zone now.

He still held the piece of paper in his hand that promised him a turkey sandwich on his bus. Was everybody being force into the zones? It looked that way. Who were all the buses for then?

He kept hearing the buses pulling away and another one pulling up and opening its doors. They must be going away empty he thought.

The soldiers yelled at a mother and her children to go into the zone.

She wouldn't go.

The soldiers raised their weapons at the mother and her children alike.

The people in line behind her shouted at her as well to just go. That she would be alright. The zone was good they heard. Her children would be alright.

It was then that he chose to get out of line. Immediately a soldier's rifle went to his head. He motioned to the soldier pointing the rifle at him that he

could help with the mother and her children that were holding up the line.

The soldier waved the tip of his rifle forward, signaling for him to move up and help.

He scooped up the little boy and tossed him in the air a few times, as if it was all a game. The child's crying stopped and a smile took over his face.

"Come," he told the little boy and his sister and mother. "This will be fun!"

They all passed into the zone together and disappeared into the darkness.

The soldiers lowered their guns and motioned for the line to keep moving forward.

And the line did.

The line just kept moving.

Many more lines would move forward on that day as the unmarked Russian troops made their advances.

The Russians started small and the world watched and did nothing.

No one was going to risk nuclear war with the Russians over a few small villages on some disputed border lines.

Then the Russians moved into towns. Then larger cities, taking back territory that had once belonged in the Soviet Union, but that had separated when freedom spread after the fall of the USSR at the end of 1991.

With the US troops no longer stationed in Europe, NATO had lost most of its bite.

NATO was set up now as a last line of defense in Western Europe, abandoning the Eastern former Soviet countries that had joined in recent years after the cold war was supposed to have ended.

The Russian plan was to go right up to that NATO line, but not cross it.

That fight would take place on another battlefield. And if it was successful, then the Russian troops would advance through Western Europe and beyond “without having to fire a shot.”

Just as Nikita Khrushchev promised so long ago.

ZONE



CHAPTER 29

WHITE CHRISTMAS

The South Korean civil defense drills were happening constantly now with the continued buildup of North Korean forces across the DMZ. Everyone now had a cellphone that could receive the alerts from the government.

If you didn't already own a cellphone, the government would issue you one, because to not have a cellphone at this tenuous point was a death sentence.

The American troops had left South Korea, but they had a Navy strike force ready to deploy at a moment's notice should the North Korean troops cross the DMZ.

The strike force also included a nuclear option

should the North Koreans use their nuclear weapons or pose a risk of overrunning the South.

Hence the ubiquitous cellphones warning people to head immediately to the fallout shelters that had been built around the country over the decades long standoff with the North.

However a new trend was happening now. When the warnings came over the cellphones, the South Koreans were now running to the nearest zone and standing by at the zone instead of going to a bomb shelter.

It was doubtful Seoul would have survived a conventional artillery attack from the North, let alone a nuclear one.

And so what if the Americans nuked the North? The nuclear exchange would ruin the Korean peninsula for generations and possibly trigger a global nuclear war.

Who would want to survive that hiding away in one of the many underground train stations and shopping malls that doubled as fallout shelters.

Why not escape to a zone, where you could start a new life of endless possibilities. Of course life in the zone wasn't guaranteed. No one knew for sure what happened when you crossed over into a zone, but they did have a pretty good idea of what it would be like to live in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.

Like America, South Korea had been deeply impacted by the arrival of the zones. As in other free and open societies the zones appeared more frequently in South Korea than they did in North Korea.

The North immediately mobilized to contain any zone that appeared. Anyone touching a zone let alone entering it would be put in jail for life, if not shot on sight.

For those that were confirmed to have escaped the harsh life in the North through a zone, the same rules applied to the escapee's family, as if they escaped over the border.

The generation before and after of the escapee would bear the brunt of the punishment by detainment in a one of the many dreaded prison camps scattered throughout the North.

It was believed that North Korea had the lowest zone entry rate in the world. If you believed the North Korean's lady in pink, Ri Chun-hee, on her official broadcast on Korean Central Television, the total number of North Koreans that had entered into zones was zero. She reported that no one in the North wanted to leave their paradise the great leader had created for them.

While the true number of North Korean zone entries was obviously not zero, it wasn't that far off the mark, relatively speaking.

Especially compared to the United States. It was believed that after the mass exodus when the zone drought ended, seventy million Americans had entered into zones.

The declaration of martial law had stabilized the country as zone containment became a national priority. A government jobs program had mobilized in the nation to once and for all stop people from entering zones.

There was a massive education program put forth, to convince Americas why they needed to stay in the world and not escape our responsibility to lead freedom loving people worldwide.

Yes, there were protests of government overreach, especially in the containment of zones on private

property and religious grounds, but the President held firm. He would not let America simply disappear on "this Marine's watch."

While South Korea never declared martial law, they did all they could to keep their citizens from abandoning the country in the midst of the impending invasion from the North.

South Korea always struggled with zone departures, but when the Americans announced they were pulling out of South Korea, the zone departures rapidly increased.

Every time the departures escalated, there was an equal swell in the number of subsequent zone appearances, which in turned fueled another rise in zone departures.

This increased even more when the Americans officially left and it spiked when the North Koreans started to mount their million-man army at the border. While the North said this was just a defensive exercise, no one bought it.

The US made it known to the North that it would be committing suicide if it stepped across that border, but the North was undeterred as the build up continued.

The South settled into their routine of the constant drills, waiting for the war to start at any moment.

Soon, it became so routine, that more and more South Koreans were not even participating in the drills.

Then the Chinese build up started on their border with North Korea. It was believed the Chinese were there as a backup, in case the North Koreans needed help in their invasion, as they did in the first Korean war when Mao sent 300,000 Chinese troops into the fray when General Douglas MacArthur's forces got too close

to the Chinese border on the Yulu river.

A Chinese mobilization like this was too costly for a bluff, many South Koreans thought, so the entries into the zone increased once again, reaching another high point.

China swore in the UN that the move was strictly defensive, just in case conflict broke out, they wanted to have their border protected.

And while there were calls for President Perez to redeploy the US troops back to Korea that had been brought home to stabilize America, he kept to only his pledge to only use American airpower and if needed nuclear weapons to defend the South.

What price honor? Kim asked himself. He knew his troops would fight. Valiantly, to the last man if that's what it took.

Yes, some would desert to a zone. They already had in the tense standoff at the DMZ, but not enough that the line didn't hold.

But the civilian population was a different matter. He knew about the reports of people fleeing to zones rather than fallout shelters. And this was just for drills. What if the missiles really did start to fly? And what if they were nuclear missiles?

Even if the South held, what would remain of it? What would they have sacrificed so much for? The beautiful city of Seoul, no doubt, would be in ashes, quite possibly radioactive ones.

Yes, they probably would have wiped the North off the map, too, but what then of China? China was clearly signaling that were backing this North Korean aggressive posturing at the DMZ.

If the US did nuke Pyongyang, would China not then

unleash their nuclear weapons on Washington, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and so on.

There seemed to be no winning, either way. If the tenuous armistice that had held for so long was broken, so too would be the Korean Peninsula. There wouldn't be two Koreas or one Korea. There would be no Koreas.

President Kwon had given the matter much thought over the past few weeks. It wasn't until the intelligence reports showed the Chinese were no longer sending forces to the border. They had their million-man army there, backed up with tanks, jets and artillery. No doubt there were Chinese subs lurking off the South Korean coast, as well.

The cease in the buildup wasn't a relief. He felt it meant that China was done moving forces to the border. The next step would be the launch of the war.

There were reports that thousands of medical personnel in China were being forced out of the hospitals and moved closer to the border with North Korea, where they had built a massive mobile hospital that would be able to handle the incoming casualties of a major invasion.

Kwon wondered how long could he and his people could afford to wait?

His job as president was to protect the people of South Korea. They would never surrender to the North Koreans. Never.

But would they surrender to history?

What price honor?

What would the world think of South Korea in its time of trouble? That they abandoned their homeland like cowards? The French never recovered from their easy defeat at the hands of the Nazi blitz.

If there was honor to be lost, let it be his. He would give the order for the entire country of South Korea to slip away into the night.

Escape into the zones.

Those that wanted to stay, could, but they would be on their own.

President Kwon wanted to keep this decision a secret for as long as possible. He would communicate it to his people and the world over the emergency alert system.

He did, however, want to call the American president and ask a favor first.

“We ask that America not use nuclear weapons or air forces to defend the South.”

President Perez thought it was a set up. He hand wrote his concern to Chief of Staff Rosen who was sitting close by and also listening to the conversation.

Was the North forcing Kwon to make this declaration under duress, President Perez wanted to know.

President Perez insisted that they continue this discussion with the US Ambassador to South Korea present in the same room with Kwon along with some of the top military leaders that were still stationed to direct the US air attacks if needed.

The US personnel were brought to the Blue House in Seoul where President Kwon lived and worked and the discussions continued. The US Ambassador reported that he believed the South Korean President Kwon was not being coerced by the North and that Kwon seemed to be of sound mind and fit body.

President Kwon then told President Perez of his plan to abandoned the country and order the South Korean people to escape into zones.

President Perez begged President Kwon not to do this. The loss of South Korea would be devastating for the world.

President Kwon insisted if there was a conflict, South Korea would be lost anyway, even if they won the war.

Under his plan at least a fifty million South Koreans would be saved by escaping into the zones.

President Perez pushed back that those same souls could die instantly by going into the zones.

Kwon was willing to take that chance.

It was then that President Perez offered to send back the US troops that he had previously called home. America had stabilized itself under martial law. They could once again, send ground forces back to be stationed abroad.

No, Kwon's mind was up.

Perez asked Kwon when they were planning to do this.

Kwon said they needed time to mobilize the infrastructure to facilitate such an evacuation. Buses, cars, trains, airplanes, would all have to be positioned for a maximum effort.

They would also need time to stabilize the country for evacuation. The South's 23 nuclear plants would have to be taken off line. The South's air force and navy would be redeployed to Japan. Any weapons unable to be transported in a timely manner would be destroyed, so not to fall in the hands of the North.

He wished the evacuated land of South Korea be left to a United Nations protectorate, but without an army there to defend it, it was mostly likely to be annexed by the North Koreans.

Kwon hoped to have the exodus happen in a 24-hour

period. So quick the North Koreans and Chinese would not be able to react and possibly pose a threat to the vulnerable South Koreans as they retreated.

President Perez pledged whatever support he could give and once again reiterated that he hoped the South would rethink this drastic measure.

President Kwon thanked Perez for all he and the United States had done for the Korean people all these years. Kwon also wished the President well in the upcoming election that was only a few months away.

Half joking and half serious, Perez asked Kwon if there was any chance of delaying the zone retreat until after the election.

Kwon said he would be willing to, but he doubted the North Koreans and Chinese would wait that long to invade. Kwon's gut told him the invasion was imminent. Weeks away, if not days.

They said their goodbyes and promised to talk one last time before Kwon ordered his people to enter the zones.

After the call President Perez looked at Chief of Staff Rosen and asked, "Are we going to be able to survive a Korean White Christmas?"

"I don't follow," Rosen answered.

President Perez explained, "During the fall of Saigon in the Vietnam War, Armed Forces Radio played White Christmas to let US personnel know when the final helicopter evacuation of the city had begun."

"Why'd they pick White Christmas?"

"Why else would you play White Christmas in April?"

The President got up from the Resolute desk and paced across the Oval Office, shaking his head as he

bemoaned, "How the hell are we going to defeat the Russians and Chinese now if we lose South Korea like this? The free world can't just up and disappear into a zone. We just can't."

"Mr. President, there's a certain group of Americans you need to defeat first before you have to worry about the Russians and Chinese. Otherwise, it's going to be someone else's problem. And God help us then."

"Is it even worth trying to go to bed now?"

"How many campaign stops do we have tomorrow?"

"You mean today. Four."

"And our friend?"

"He's going to eight states. Mr. President, this would have been easier if we had opened the borders last year and repopulated with full rights of citizenship."

"I never would have been seen as legitimate if I had."

"They still won't see you as legitimate. They never have and they never will."

President Perez never wanted Repopulation to be an issue in the election. For the Republicans, it was the only issue. They saw Repopulation as a declaration of war on American identity which would see the white majority end in just about every state that would be receiving some of the 50 million new American citizens that had been rumored to replacing the 70 million Americans that had fled into the zones.

However the Repopulation issue polled about fifty-fifty breaking on party lines. Americans were fearful of the looming Russian and Chinese threat and knew they needed all the help they could get to defend American soil.

So that was how President Perez tried to sell Repopulation to the American public. This was a

National Security issue. They needed the new Americans to fend off the Russian and Chinese threats facing the free world now.

Despite all the save the planet calls to action, the truth was you got behind your party line. Democrats were for Repopulation, Republicans against it. It was that simple. Get in line and move forward no matter what.

President Perez replied to Rosen about the concern about his legitimacy, "Whether they believe it or not, I'm still their president and I'll fight for them to the end.

"Repopulation is now up for the people to decide. If they vote me back in, then they will know what is coming. The next person who wants this desk after me will have four years to earn as many of those fifty million new votes as they can get. It'll be up to them."

Rosen laughs a bit to himself.

"Was that funny, John?"

"No, sir, Mr. President. It's just that, that damn song is in my head now."

"White Christmas? Yeah, mine too. Play it, why dontcha."

Rosen pulls out his iPhone, "I have to download it first."

"Play it on YouTube," remarked the President.

"Mr. President, and deny the Bing Crosby estate their ninety-nine cents? For shame, sir."

President Perez smiled and sat there patiently as the song downloaded and started playing on Rosen's iPhone, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas..."

Both men let their minds travel back to Christmases past and were quietly reflective for a bit.

Then the President spoke somberly, "You know I

would never let America go out like that."

Rosen replied, "I know, Mr. President."

"When this goes down, I want it made perfectly clear to our friends in Moscow and Beijing that I will burn them to the fucking ground if they move on us.

"But you know, clean it up a little bit before it hits the teleprompter."

"Will do, Mr. President. Will do."

"...May your days be merry and bright and may all your Christmases be white."

A few weeks later, the world was surprised to wake up and find that the nation of South Korea was gone. Well, it was a surprise to most people.

This outcome was predicted a year ago as the Russians and Chinese sat at a round table and planned the fate of the world.

The Russians had to convince the Chinese that if you gave people a choice between life in the zone and certain death, they would pick life in the zone every time.

They, the Russians and Chinese, just had to be strong and steadfast enough to be willing to bluff the Western world into a final zone retreat.

President Perez was comfortably ahead in the polls before the evacuation of South Korea. After it, he found himself uncomfortably behind.

There was still time for the young President, but time would soon be running out.

For everyone.

ZONE



CHAPTER 30

NEWMERICA

"We need the story to leak out about the President touching the zone," Senator Tuxford pleaded with Governor Moreland.

"It can't," Governor Moreland warned.

"It could seal the election," argued Tuxford.

"It could seal our deaths. There were four people that knew the President went out that night. The President, the Chief of Staff and two Secret Service agents. That story gets out that the President of the United States touched a zone, then they are going to know who let it get out."

"If we can hang on and win this thing, it changes

everything," pleaded Tuxford.

"And if we don't and we've lost our White House insiders, then the America we've known for over two hundred and fifty years, will cease to exist. We can't take the chance. We stick to the plan."

"Will it hold?" Tuxford asked.

"It will hold. The movement is out there. They just want a strong, unwavering public leader. If you win, that takes care of itself, but if you lose, you will be more powerful than you can ever imagine.

"Half this country will turn to you with fear in the hearts and say do something to stop this madness. They will be with you and you alone. Seven governors have pledged their support to you, as well as enough generals and admirals to buy us some time get this thing to stick."

"Are you willing to die? That's really the question. A man willing to die can accomplish so much in life," Tuxford asked Moreland.

"There are few things I would give my life for. My country is one of them. America is worth fighting for and it is worth dying for," Moreland declared.

The election came down to one issue.

Repopulation.

That was it. That was the ballgame.

If the US was going to regain its place in the world as a superpower global leader, it need to replace the 70,000,000 Americans that had gone into the zone.

Both sides lost voters to the zones.

Republicans lost millions of their elderly white voters when they discovered the zone offered healing power and eternal life. They also lost scores of Christians who went into the zone to either find Heaven or convert

the zone to Heaven.

Then there were those that were just scared. The crime rate had skyrocketed. The recession and subsequent depression had put so many people on the brink of financial ruin. Rather than turn to the government for help, they felt going into a zone, where money was not needed, was a more responsible choice than going on food stamps.

For Democrats, they lost young people that felt disenfranchised and were willing to forgo the problems of this world, for the promise of the zone.

Why go to college to study for a job you will never get and be saddled down with a hundred thousand dollars of student loan debt, when you can go in the zone and live your dream life for free instantly.

For minorities, the zone offered a fresh start and was free from the racial discrimination that seemed to be baked into the American way of life.

No matter what you did, no matter how you lived, there were those that felt you did not belong. That this was their country, owned by them, run by them and they were never going to let you be a part of it.

You would always be The Other and they would never embrace you. In fact, you were expected to be eternally grateful that they would barely even tolerate you. Why weren't you satisfied with the society crumbs that fell from their table of plenty?

Then there were those that wanted to live in the true liberal utopia, where you could do and be who and what you are with no financial or governmental restrictions.

For women it was a question of safety. The rise in zone crimes had gone up dramatically. For those men who had decided to leave this world by entering a zone,

they often would want one last chance to be with a woman before they disappeared into a zone.

Some women were consenting partners for these departing men or paid partners, but so many more were not.

President Perez's declaration of martial law stabilized the country. Troops were dispersed throughout the nation to control of all zones and stabilize the faltering cities.

Those communities that couldn't be saved, were relocated and combined with other communities and strengthened the American heartland again.

A massive government jobs program got people back to work. Either working on zone containment or work projects meant to update the country's crumbling infrastructure.

Despite the initially hostile reaction and fears of a President declaring martial law, the country was slowing regaining faith in itself. The world seemed a little less scary with America back from the brink.

Then the world lost South Korea.

The light had gone out on the Korean peninsula.

People were fearful that a similar fate was heading for the US. Slowly Russia was working its way across Europe. The powers of NATO remained divided on how to confront the Russian threat. Each of the major partners, England, Germany and France had been decimated by zone departures just as the US had been.

With NATO in its weakened state, the thought of starting World War III, because Russia was pulling a land grab on its former Soviet Republics didn't galvanize the world like Hitler invading Poland in 1939

or the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 or the 9/11 Terrorist attacks in 2001.

Since World War II, America, for better or worse, had been the planet's superhero. Ready and willing to answer the call to defend free people everywhere. Sometimes too willing, especially if those people lived in a country that had oil.

The world was use to America going where the trouble was and if not solving it, at least trying to contain it from spreading globally.

Not anymore. The US seemed powerless compared to its former mighty self. As if its red, white and blue cape and mask had been ripped off and its superpowers stripped.

President Perez promised the American people that, while he supported the decision of the South Korean President to order his people to evacuate into a zone, he would never have America abandon the world to an uncertain future while it ran and hid in a zone.

President Perez promised his plan to repopulate the United States would return the country to prominence. He asked the country to once again trust him as they did when he declared martial law and then ended it as quickly as he could.

The right wing decried Perez's declaration of martial law. They warned the President was going to use martial law to take away everyone's guns. Which he didn't.

They warned that the now strongman Perez was going to use martial law to imprison his political enemies. Which he didn't.

They warned that the out of control globalists were going to preemptively open the borders and grant citizenship to the new Americans to ensure his re-

election victory. Which he didn't.

If President Perez was going to be reelected, it would have to be by the Americans that were currently citizens on election day.

The Republicans knew what fifty million new American immigrant citizens would mean. The death of the Republican Party. It meant that white Americans would become a minority in the country they founded.

That they would lose their strong hold in the South and Midwest, as Democrats were sure to distribute the new incoming immigrant citizens on the basis of political expedience.

They wouldn't all be sent to California, New York, Massachusetts and Illinois. No, these new Americans would be sent to Texas, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Kansas, Nebraska, Idaho, South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming.

The Republicans swore they would not go quietly in the night. Midnight meetings and calls to action resounded in the country as it seemed like the President was on his way to reelection.

South Korea changed that. No one wanted the US to be the next South Korea.

Senator Tuxford promised to rebuild America, not repopulate. That the country had all the people it needed. Senator Tuxford kept repeating that American only had 133,000,000 people in 1941 during World War II and those Americans went on to defeat Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan.

To go along with the Repopulation plan would mean that America would lose its national identity and Senator Tuxford would never support that in victory or

defeat.

National identity. Those words were use a lot on the campaign trail.

Everyone knew what it really meant.

But the country had changed so much. The Republicans were already struggling to compete on the national stage. They could still pull it off a national win when the Democrats nominated a lackluster or overly polarizing candidate, but when the Democrats nominated someone the people could get behind, get behind them they did.

The Republicans were still strong regionally in the South and Midwest, but if they were defeated in the presidential election every four years, they would lose those advantages as the Repopulation plan was put into effect.

As the country seemed to be rebounding from the woes the zone had inflicted on the US and the world, it seemed the Republicans were headed for another presidential loss and not even the electoral college was going to save them this time from defeat.

But loss of South Korea was a major disruption to the campaign and the numbers began to turn in favor for Senator Tuxford in the polls.

Soon the South Carolina Senator and the Governor of Texas gained all the momentum going into the final two months of the election.

When several militias across the country promised open revolt if President Perez won reelection, Senator Tuxford refused to condemn them. Stating they were just concerned Americans worried about the fate of the nation and they should be applauded for their patriotism.

"We don't want to become a lost nation like how the President lost South Korea."

He would often boast on the road, "I'm from South Carolina, not South Korea. And I will fight for you. I will not surrender to the Russians. I will not surrender to the Chinese. I will not surrender to Islamic Terrorists. I will not surrender to progressive left wing radicalism. I will not surrender to the dictatorial tyrant occupying the White House and I will not surrender to the zone!"

Going into the final two weeks, all the momentum was on Senator Tuxford's side.

Then something surprising happened in late October, as is often the case in election years.

America and the world woke up to find that North Korea, like South Korea, was suddenly gone.

The night before, the hardline country was inundated with zones on a scale unprecedented anywhere in the world. It was as if fifty million zones showed up for the twenty-five million North Koreans.

With escape so easy, whole generations of North Koreans disappeared within seconds, knowing no one would be left behind from their family that would be have to suffer the consequences of their escape.

And those that were suffering the worst in the notorious North Korean prison camp, they were also liberated by the major influx of zones. No prisoner was more than a few steps away from a zone.

The country disintegrated so quickly, the North Korean leader tried to flee to Beijing to escape the wrath of his long suffering people, who now felt liberated by the arrival of the zones.

The dear leader had made it to his private plane, but before it could taxi away on the runway, the plane was

attacked by rebelling North Korean soldiers and destroyed by flames that engulfed the craft.

President Perez was coy about answering the question if the US was behind the sudden zone attack on North Korea. The truth was the US had nothing to do with it. The President was as surprised as anyone when he was told the news of what was happening.

But the American voting public didn't have to know he had nothing to do with it. After the election, he would clarify the truth, but for now, if people wanted to think President Perez had led a US masterminded covert mission that finally took out the troubling thorn in our side from Pyongyang and got revenge for what had happened to South Korea, so be it.

Who knows, maybe President Perez would soon take out Russia, China and Iran in a similar covert zone attack.

When the US Presidential race was finally called on at 3:21 a.m. Eastern time, no one knew if it would be celebration in the streets or open American warfare.

President Perez had won reelection narrowly defeating the South Carolina Senator.

There was word that Senator Tuxford was refusing to call the President to offer his concession. Instead there were worries that he was going to call to offer South Carolina's secession from the Union.

But those were just wild rumors people were spreading and reading on their phones.

Of course Senator Tuxford called the President to offer his congratulations and concession.

And of course the President was gracious in accepting the concession and offering the Senator an

invitation to the White House the following week, so they could put the divisive race behind them and start to heal the nation.

And of course the Senator accepted the offer, with the caveat that he be allowed to bring with him a coalition of anti-repopulation leaders to the White House with him.

Together he was sure they could find a way forward in the best interest of the country.

The freshly reelected President agreed.

This was still, despite all the dire warnings, the United States of America. This was just how it was done.

ZONE



CHAPTER 31

TARGET WHITE HOUSE

Pictures of Senator Tuxford and President Perez together at the White House were beamed across the world. The image of the two heated rivals smiling and waving at the cameras were thought to be unthinkable only a week ago, but now the two looked to be the best of friends.

But body language being what it is, some people couldn't help but notice that Senator Tuxford was the one that put his hand around President Perez's back and guided him into the White House, as if somehow the Senator had won the election and he was guiding the newly dethroned President Perez into his house.

It was probably nothing, others remarked, dismissing it as a petty display of public posturing.

The schedule of events was planned as follows. President Perez and Senator Tuxford would enjoy a private lunch. Afterwards they would discuss the divisions in the country and how best to mend the gap.

While the President and Senator Tuxford were eating, the anti-repopulation coalition that Senator Tuxford had brought with him would be welcomed to the White House by Chief of Staff Rosen and taken to the Cabinet Room where the President and Senator would join them later, so the President could personally hear their concerns about moving the country forward under his repopulation plan.

When the President and Senator finished with their terse lunch, Senator Tuxford took on an even more grim appearance. There were no cameras in the private room, so the men didn't have to hide their animosity towards each other.

"Mr. President, I've enjoyed your graciousness so much today, that I almost hate to bring up a most grave matter that I need to discuss with you.

"Senator, that's why you're here. Let's be open, honest, but respectful."

"With all due respect, Mr. President, I've become aware of evidence of a massive, widespread voter fraud effort."

"Well, I haven't. Where is this report coming from?"

"We have evidence that millions of votes were cast from people that have been reported to have disappeared into zones."

"I would like to see this evidence."

"It will be presented at the appropriate time. And I'm afraid when it is presented, there will be calls of a rigged election and your second term will not be seen as legitimate."

"Senator, the people voted. The election is over."

"Mr. President, the coalition that I represent would like to present to you a treaty. Signed by myself, Seven governors, ten senators, fifty four congressmen and the presidents of Russia and China.

"The treaty is an agreement for peaceful coexistence between all our nations, guaranteeing the safety and security of the United States, if we abandon our plans to repopulate this nation and respect the rights of other nations with a policy of non-interference in the world.

"This is not a treaty. This is treason."

Just then a Secret Service agent entered the room.

"Mr. President, Senator, I'm ready to escort you to the Cabinet Room for the conference."

"Agent Halford, I want you to draw your weapon, place the Senator under arrest and have him detained immediately."

Agent Halford took out his gun and approached the two men sitting at the table.

"Mr. President, in moments there will be an armed takeover of the White House. You could save many lives, by going along with our plan. Starting with your own life.

"Cooperate and I will guarantee your safety, as well as your family's safety."

You can take the man out of the Marines, but you can't take the Marine out of the man.

President Perez lunged across the table and grabbed Senator Tuxford by the throat. The President

maneuvered the struggling Senator into a choke hold.

"You're gonna guarantee my safety?" President Perez asked mockingly.

Senator Tuxford struggled for air and couldn't speak.

Just as the President adjusted his grip, the Senator was able to bark out, "Shoot him!" to Secret Service Agent Halford.

Agent Halford aimed the gun at the President's temple and fired.

President Perez unceremoniously fell to the floor dead.

Agent Halford helped the Senator, who was gasping for air, get to his feet again.

"Are you okay?" Halford asked the Senator.

"Yes, I'm fine," moaned Tuxford as both men stared down at the lifeless President Perez. "Unfortunate, but it was his choice."

Agent Halford then spoke into his cuff microphone, "Lockdown alert. There are active shooters on the premises. Leatherneck is safe and secure in bunker. ID on the shooters, dark skinned males."

Hours before the active shooter announcement was made, Agent Halford had ushered in the support staff for today's meeting. With so many governors, congressmen and senators being there, they brought with them the need for a massive support staff.

But these weren't aides and secretaries and body men. These were trained killers from the notorious private army of Dark River contractors that were leased to the United States to serve overseas in hotspots where the military or CIA didn't want to send regular troops.

Agent Halford armed the Dark Water soldiers with

weapons that had been smuggled into the White House over the past few months by himself and another agent. It was amazing that two men could ultimately be the ones to stop the destruction of America, but Agent Halford saw his role clearly.

The fifty million new immigrant citizens would not change to accommodate the American way of life. The American way of life would have to accommodate to them.

Too many generations had fought and died to make this country what it was. No way could he stand idly by and watch its destruction.

Agent Halford knew that if the coup was unsuccessful, he would go down in history as a traitor. He had already sent his family out of the country, just in case it did fail. They promised his wife and kids would be taken care of for the rest of their lives. At least he would leave them with that.

If the coup was successful, however, America would live on for his children to come back to and enjoy and thrive in.

The name Halford would go down with Revere, Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Payne and Washington.

Halford even imagined that a century from now, a new American century, tourists would flock to the spot where he saved Senator Tuxford's life by shooting the dictatorial Perez, who had so threatened to destroy the American way of life with his globalist invasion of the homeland.

Halford had always read the end of America would come from within. They were right, Halford thought to himself thinking back on it. The invasion was going to be led from the Oval Office by President Perez himself.

But not anymore it wouldn't. Thanks to him.

The Dark River operators had changed into Secret Service uniforms and White House security uniforms. In the ensuing panic they would just blend in.

Which they did perfectly and when the opportune time came they would kill any Secret Service agents and uniformed officer they could without raising suspicions.

It was chaos. By then a false description of dark skinned gunmen had everyone scrambling to find killers that didn't exist. In the meantime, the Dark River team killed almost at will.

Methodically the Dark River operators took up the normal White House security posts until they had the West Wing and Residence sealed off and secured.

Dark River operators had just taken over the North Entrance gate when a convoy of SWAT vehicles approached.

The Dark River security team just opened the gate and waved them through.

The SWAT teams poured out of the vehicles, but instead of firing on the SWAT teams, the Dark River teams welcomed their reinforcements. They now had enough men and weapons inside the White House grounds to take on a small army.

And to a man, they each knew that if things got really ugly, they would need every bullet that they had brought in.

It took thirty minutes for the coup to occur. The media had been pushed out of the White House along with anyone else that was not needed. The media stayed with the story that the White House grounds had been

cleared because of an active shooting threat.

They were told the First Family had been evacuated and the President was secure in his bunker. The country was safe and operational, they just had to find and neutralize the “dark skinned” gunmen that had killed so many.

One of the fake Dark River SWAT teams responsibilities was to secure the South Lawn zone and not let anyone through.

The zone had been abandoned by its normal guard detail, as it was not much of a threat compared active shooters on the White House grounds.

The four Dark River Operators exchanged looks with each other. Silently saying, “Can you believe this shit. We just captured the freakin’ White House.”

The zone was key to the coup. If things did go south, it would be used as an escape route. No sense dying for a lost cause. Get to the zone and get your ass out of here.

The zone is what helped so many make the decision to participate in the coup in the first place. Why not do everything you can to save America from the globalist invasion. If the coup failed, then they could escape consequence free into the South Lawn zone.

Most Americans were glued to their phones already, hungry for any updates on the much anticipated meeting of Perez and Tuxford.

To have an active shooting emergency on the White House grounds on top of that was too amazing too believe.

Some wanted to immediately call it an Islamic Terrorist attack based on the first reports that the assailants were dark skinned.

Others argued that this had to be the work of crazy angry white men that feared President Perez's policy of repopulation.

Twitter went nuts as Americans attacked each other waiting to see confirmation with a mug shot of who the shooters were and which race or religion would take the blame for the horrific attack.

When people were crazy enough to say there was a coup, they were shut down as unhinged lunatics.

This was America, that just doesn't happen here.

When people said the President had Senator Tuxford killed in his first official move into his new American dictatorship, those tweets too were derided as being ridiculous.

The truth was no one knew what had happened.

The White House had been on lockdown for an hour now.

No one was allowed in and no one was coming out anymore. No news was coming out, either. Movement on the outside White House grounds had calmed, causing most journalists to believe the shooters had been neutralized, but the White House didn't want to make any declarations yet out of an abundance of caution. They were probably waiting until after an intense security sweep of the grounds for bombs or any other threats.

And then it came.

It was a video released directly to the public from the White House Twitter account.

In the video was Senator Tuxford, backed by the seven governors, ten senators, fifty congressmen, plus a selection of generals and admirals.

Senator Tuxford spoke for all of them.

"My Fellow Americans, today I have to bring you a message of both sorrow and of hope. This morning I met with President Perez here at the White House.

"The pretext of that meeting was how we could heal our divided nation, but before that healing could begin, I had to inform President Perez that overwhelming and unquestionable evidence existed that clearly displayed there was wide spread voter fraud in our recent presidential election.

"When informed that his reelection was illegitimate, President Perez, without notice, physically attacked me with intent to kill. The injuries from that attack, as you can see, are still visible now.

"A nearby Secret Service agent heroically came to my aide, but in his attempt to separate me from the President, the agent's weapon was accidentally discharged and the President suffered a fatal gunshot wound. Needless to say, we all send our thoughts and prayers to the First Family."

"I assure you there will be a full, independent investigation of these events as well as a full presentation of the overwhelming evidence of voter fraud, that has clearly now launched our nation into a constitutional crisis."

"I have been joined today by seven governors, ten senators and fifty congressmen along with representatives from all our military branches."

"Some people will say this is a coup. It is not. The American voter's voice will be heard. Considering the illegitimacy of the recent election, a new election should be called for in two years' time.

"That should be sufficient time for candidates to

launch their campaigns and for each party to hold their normal primary process to nominated a candidate.

“In two years there will be a new and legitimately elected president. In the meantime, a bipartisan collation executive panel will be formed to find a path forward.

“We have invited the Democratic leaders as well as the joint chiefs to the White House today to discuss this path to move forward together to heal this nation.

“Make no mistake. I am not your president and do not pretend to be. But someone will be chosen on a temporary basis by the temporary coalition government to represent America until a duly elected leader can be chosen in two years.”

“For those of you who think America will be vulnerable to attack in these uncertain times, I have already been given assurances by the leaders of Russia and China that our sovereignty will be respected and there will be no interference in our internal affairs.

“We are safe from outside threats. The coalition you see before you has seen to that. Our American heritage and identity will be preserved as will our nation.

“As I close, I want to remember President Perez, who while flawed, served his Country both in uniform and elected office. We are saddened at his passing and in our first act as a coalition government, we have ordered all flags to be flown at half-staff to honor the late President for 30 days.

“To all government workers, please continue to show up to work and perform your functions. The government of the United States is open and will be running as normal.

“A great President once told a worried nation, there

is nothing to fear, except fear itself. I think that bears repeating today. You have nothing to fear.

"We hope to bring you the next update from the collation government after discussions with the leaders of Congress conclude.

"Until then, we ask you as Americans to stand strong and proud. God bless you and God bless America."

It was a coup.

No, it wasn't a coup.

The coup was when President Perez rigged the election with all his fake zone votes. Senator Tuxford is the legitimate President, we don't need to wait two years. Tuxford was robbed!

This is the darkest day in American History.

No, this is the dawn of a new day in America. A bright, shining chance for America to start again, true to our founders' vision. I bet you thought July 4, 1776 was a darkest day for the British colonies, too.

This is an illegal unconstitutional act! The collation government should be rounded up and shot as traitors.

The Constitution is pretty good. Pretty damn good, actually, but, hell, it is over two hundred years old. I wouldn't use a cellphone that was over eight years old.

So why do we have to base everything that governs our lives on something written over two hundred years ago?

Was slavery good? Because that was in the Constitution and we changed that. Why not change this?

You could have written a hundred phone books with

all the social media comments made in the hours after the release of the Tuxford Video, as it would become to be known. Not that anyone could even remember what an actual phone book was these days.

Crowds gathered around the White House, ready to storm it and take the people's house back themselves, but they were forced back by Army troops.

The protestors wanted to know who the soldiers were taking orders from.

The soldiers didn't answer any questions. They only demanded that the crowds be pushed further and further back for their own safety.

The coalitional leaders could see the crowds that were being pushed back from the fence by the soldiers from State Dining Room windows in the White House.

They were trying their best to eat a lunch served up by the White House kitchen staff that hadn't been evacuated yet.

Most of the kitchen staff, as well as most of the residence staff, had been ordered to leave. A few stayed behind, willing to serve as best they could for the good of the country.

One of them was a young Latino cook who volunteered to organize the lunch. The coup leaders agreed. They had planned for a great many things, but no one had, in fact, taken the time to think about food.

Senator Tuxford approved the lunch plan, but made sure to have Dark River operators supervise the food preparation to make sure they were not being poisoned.

The young Latino cook also served the gathered members their lunches. Most ignored him as if he wasn't

there. Others thanked him for the meal graciously.

The cook was secretly praying none of the powerful men would recognize him as one of the four Marine Corp sentries that manned the doors in the West Wing.

It was a working lunch. Those that could eat did, but others didn't have much of an appetite, as they discussed their thoughts on how the coup was going.

The public reaction was predictably fifty-fifty. America truly had split into two tribes and your tribe could do no wrong and the other tribe could do no right.

Whether it was rigging an election or an armed coup, you didn't break ranks. Right or wrong, wrong or right, we were us, and they were them.

"So there's been nothing?" Senator Tuxford asked Governor Moreland.

Moreland shrugged off any concern, "The public, our public, is with us. We were never going to get the left-wing media, so of course we're getting killed on the networks. Most of the networks anyway. But our people, the ones that count, don't watch the networks anyway."

"But why has there been nothing from the other congressional leaders?"

"It is a lot for them to take in. We'll hear something soon. Let's just keep our cool. In these situations they will try their best to break us. We hold strong and the ground will crumble beneath their feet. Trust me."

Just then the young Latino cook, Manuel Ortiz interrupted the two men. The kid was holding a cardboard box full of sandwiches.

"Excuse me, sir? Can I take some sandwiches to the guards on station?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Governor Moreland replied.

Moreland then pointed one of his meaty fingers at a Dark River operator. "You, escort him around, please."

Ortiz and the Dark River escort made their rounds with the sandwiches and the guys on duty, who were grateful for a bite to eat.

The last stop was at the White House main gate where Ortiz gave away the last of the sandwiches leaving him with an empty cardboard box.

Ortiz then addressed the Dark River operators in the guard station as well as his escort.

"Hey, man, my mom's is worried sick about me. I'm all she's got left. Everyone else in our family bugged out in the zones, you know."

"What do you want from me?" the Dark River gate guard asked between his bites of sandwich.

"Homes, think you can bust me out of here?"

The guard gate looked at the escort.

"You give a shit if he walks?"

"Just a sandwich boy, man. Let him go see his mom."

"Check him."

The escort patted down the cook and pulls his pants pockets inside out. All Ortiz had on him was his wallet.

The escort opened the wallet. He found Ortiz's driver's license and credit cards, but that was it. He handed Ortiz back the wallet.

"He's cool. Get out of here, kid. Just keep your hands in the air so the regulars don't shoot you coming out."

Ortiz started to leave with the empty cardboard box.

"Leave your box if you want," the escort told him.

"No, my uncle recycles cardboard. Every bit helps."

"Whatever. Take it then."

They closed the gate after Ortiz passed through.

"Anything come in?" the gate guard asked the escort.

"Not yet?" the escort told him.

"Shit. Not even a screw you?"

"Nothing."

"If we don't hear anything by nighttime, that's when it's gonna hit the fan. They'll send in special operators with night vision. They'll be a fucking stampede then to get to that South Lawn zone."

"No, way. You think anyone on Special Ops wants to see those bastards open the borders, so this place can become North Mexico. Nah, I keep up with my bros. They're with us."

"Well, someone is going to come after us. That's for damn sure now."

Ortiz got safely away from the White House and then opened up the bottom of the cardboard box that he used to carry around the sandwiches in.

Hidden under a false bottom of the box was Ortiz's cellphone and his United States Marine Corp ID card.

He texted on the phone "Lunch is Served in the State Dining Room."

After he hit send he was approached by Army soldiers with their rifles aimed at him.

"Hands in the air!" they ordered.

"I'm a Marine, soldier. I was stationed at the White House as a sentry. Here's my ID."

The soldier takes the Marine Corp ID from Ortiz's raised hand and checks it out.

"Why are you dressed like kitchen staff, Corporal Ortiz?"

"I changed out of my uniform when I saw they were targeting security forces, but no one else. I'll tell you

more, but we need to get moving and take cover."

"Why?"

"You'll see in about two minutes."

"Follow me," ordered the soldier as they led Ortiz back to their sandbags piled high in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue.

They barely had gotten down on their bellies when two angular black Stealth F117 fighters dipped out of the sky and delivered their ordinance on the side corner of the White House.

"Jesus! They just blew up the White House!"

"No, just the State Dining Room. Two AGM-176 Griffins off a couple of Stealths," Ortiz told the soldiers. Ortiz then shouted back towards the White House in flames, "That's for my homie, you bastards!"

"Who ordered this?" the frightened soldier asked Ortiz.

"The President did," the proud Marine told him.

"But the President is dead!"

Ortiz just shook his head, "No, she's not."

ZONE



CHAPTER 32

SUBMARINER ONE

When the Ohio class nuclear submarine USS Maine got the news President Perez had been killed, they replied back with confirmation using for the first time the call sign Submariner One.

They let former Vice President Kate Montgomery know about the President's death and awaited her orders as their new Commander in Chief.

President Kathrine Montgomery monitored the events from the Maine and kept in discussions with the Pentagon, FBI, CIA and the White House staff that had managed to escape.

They took the actions of the coup plotters as an act of

war. Especially since it seemed like they must have received assistance and at the very least reassurance from America's two greatest rivals, Russia and China.

They asked the President how she wanted to reply to the coup plotters demands. And when she told them, her response was debated in the ranks.

Those opposing the strike on the White House felt that it would be seen as an unlawful action and over reaction. Certainly they could quarantine the White House and wait the coup plotters out. There was no reason to take such drastic action immediately.

Others raise questions about destroying the White House on purely historical grounds. President Montgomery responded that maybe they could see where the majority of the coup plotters where located and strike the White House on a more limited area.

Someone suggested that they have one of the few inside people they were still in contact with in the White House try to get them all gathered in one room, the State Dinning Room for lunch it was suggested. It was located on the North West corner of the White House.

A couple of AGM-176 Griffins missiles should be enough to kill anyone in that room and still leave the rest of the White House standing.

The window for lunch was running out so they reached out to a Marine that reported in from the White House. Corporal Ortiz was already using the disguise of a kitchen uniform, so he was an ideal choice.

They were nervous that someone might recognize the Marine sentry, but they didn't have much choice. He was told to keep his Marine Corp ID and phone hidden in case he was searched.

Yes, he had the unmistakable high and tight Marine

Corp haircut, but it was hidden under his White House mess hat and hairnet, so no seemed to notice.

The State Dining room lunch plan was put into place and the White House legal and communications team went about putting a plan together for the public response to the White House strike, because they knew it was going to be controversial.

Legally they made their case that this was an act of war. The new President was duty bound to protect the country from all enemies, foreign and domestic and this was both.

They made sure that White House staff was evacuated as well as the former First Family. The coup plotters weren't interested in turning this into a hostage negotiation. They let everyone go, even the body of slain President Perez.

Not even the loss of a president and an attempted coup could bring the country back together.

On cable news Republican defenders, while not quite agreeing with the coup, cried foul of the calls of zone voter fraud corruption and put forth that if President Perez had attacked Senator Tuxford and the Senator feared for his life, certainly he was allowed to stand his ground and defend himself, or have the Secret Service come to his defense. President Perez didn't have a greenlight to choke to death any American citizen that he pleased.

Then the missiles hit.

Video of the strike was immediately put on a loop at all the major networks.

Some called the action decisive, bold and necessary to end the attempted coup.

Others called it cowardly, criminal and called for the

immediate arrest of President Montgomery.

Good luck putting the cuffs on the President, who was safely below an ocean on the USS Maine, which was now officially being referred to as Submariner One.

There were some admirals that thought the call sign for the submarine should be Navy One, but there were slightly bigger problems on hand, so the debate over the name never really took off. Submariner One it was.

As Vice-president, Kate Montgomery had been used to being taken away to undisclosed locations. There was even a classified drill once where the Vice-president was whisked away to Cheyenne Mountain after a pretend first strike on Washington, D.C.

When the zone appeared on the White House lawn, it was the President that was going to be whisked away and kept in an undisclosed location.

However President Perez refused to abandon the White House because of the South Lawn zone.

He felt that if he was seen running from the zone, then the country would continue to fall into panic. That what little order that was left in the struggling nation would be lost.

Instead he stood his ground and had Vice President Montgomery taken to the undisclosed location at Offutt Air Force Base.

However when zones appeared at Offutt too, an alternate location was needed.

There was talk that the vice president should be kept mobile on Air Force Two, constantly flying around, but with no immediate end in sight, there were dangers seen in flying the plane around the clock constantly for such an extended period of time.

The only way to keep the vice president mobile and

secure was to station Montgomery on a ship or submarine. With the sub having the extra bonus of being hidden under an ocean. The only thing an Ohio Class Submarine would run out of in the next twenty years was food.

It was decided to go with the sub.

So they stocked up the Maine with as much food as it could handle, made adjustments to the crew to accommodate the Vice President and her support staff.

Montgomery went into the sub knowing full well that before they surfaced again, she could be in charge of running the country if there was a zone attack.

The truth was no one knew what was going to happen with the zones. People speculated that an alien army could fly through the zones to invade the earth. Demons could be unleashed through the zones, to take out God's wrath on the unrepentant world. Or the zone could have been a Russian or Chinese invention that would destroy the country at a moment's notice.

They just had to be prepared for anything. Yes, and stationing the Vice President on an aircraft carrier was also discussed, but zones had been spotted on the water and even occasionally in the air, so they felt being below the surface added one more layer of defense in order to ensure the continuity of government.

Every once in a while, the sub would surface and Vice President Montgomery would make an appearance, just so the public knew she was still there and to throw off any rumors that she was being stationed away on a sub.

The controversy of critical report of Montgomery from her Air Force fighter pilot days didn't help, but the zones knocked all those headlines off the front page.

Then they got the news of the death of the President and the coup at the White House.

Montgomery thought swift and decisive action would end the revolt. She was wrong.

The coup had been coming for decades.

There were many in the country that feared that their white majority way of life would be overcome with the diversification of the American population and they began to take drastic measures to prevent it.

They did everything they could to make it harder for Americans to vote. Republicans gerrymandered congressional districts to ensure the conservative white male Christian candidates would have the advantage.

Republicans defended the outdated electoral college, which had twice delivered them the White House, despite a majority of the American public voting for the Democratic candidate.

They pushed voter ID laws and purged as many voter rolls as they could.

They even stole a Supreme Court seat by denying a president of his constitutional duty to fill a Supreme Court vacancy in order to bribe conservative voters to come out to the polls and elect not just a Republican president, but a conservative Supreme Court pick as well.

But even that was not enough this time.

So they sold out the sovereignty of the United States to accept the help of rival nations to meddle in our elections.

But in a crowded presidential field, the governor of California broke through the clutter. He was a genuine war hero, earning the Silver Star as a Marine sergeant.

He was attractive and had a darling young family.

He spoke plainly and directly to the American people and they listened. At least enough of them did, anyway.

He won a narrow election, but faced a hostile Republican congress that swore its number one goal was to kill any chance Perez had at reelection.

The Republicans gave Perez nothing and turned even the smallest of incidents into grounds for Congressional hearings and investigations.

The deadlocked government was driving the young President's poll numbers down. They needed something to shake things up.

And what a shakeup they got.

Aides were reluctant to brief the President about the report of these strange black rectangles that the intelligence agencies were picking up one morning.

The push back from the West Wing was find out what these things were first before bothering the POTUS with them. The last thing they needed was rumors to leak out that the President had been duped into a serious briefing about a hoax.

Then ten kids disappeared from the daycare center and the news broke about the insane daycare worker who outrageously claimed a black rectangle had swallowed up the children and just disappeared.

The President was asked about the missing children and he pledged the full support of the government to find the children and return them to their parents.

His aides had briefly told him about the black rectangles at that point. They were being reported sporadically around the country, but they couldn't confirm if they were real or not.

If the press asked him about the black rectangles, he was supposed to play them off and say they were

focused on just finding the kids.

Reporters didn't press the president on the black rectangles. They, like any other sane person, knew something like that couldn't exist.

Then President Perez was informed that they had secured a zone. They knew nothing about it yet, but would soon be conducting tests and would brief him as soon as they had something solid to report.

Instead of getting that report from the zone site they had secured, President Perez and the nation were briefed by Raw Dawg in South Carolina on his Facebook live feed.

The President picked up the phone and demanded to talk to the person in charge of the zone site to find out what the hell this thing was that that he and the nation had just watched on live TV.

Vice President Montgomery saw the video out of South Carolina, too, and immediately went to the White House.

Vice President Montgomery saw something else in the zone.

Perhaps this is what the country needed to bring it together again.

Perhaps, even, this is what the world needed to bring it together at last.

Whether it was hostile or not, the zone could be used as the driving force that finally launched a unity of humankind that had never been seen before.

It would not be seen this time, either.

The divisions in the nation and the world were so deep, not even the mysterious black rectangles could heal them. If anything, the zones would prove to be the

event that finally forced those divisions to permanently break forever.

President Perez did his best to stabilize the nation and the world, but the Russians and Chinese knew they would have no better time to finally contain the United States and curtail its dominance in world affairs.

The Russians had successfully exploited the racial division and political hatred in the United States before, but never had it been so tenuous as when President Perez ran on the plan to repopulated the country with new immigrants.

The Republicans knew it would mean the death of the GOP as a national party and a permanent spot for them in American society as a white minority. America, as they knew it, would be over.

Best to fight for it while they could in hopes of prolonging their political life and treasured national identity.

Just in case President Perez was reelected and tried to move forward with his repopulation efforts, the international coup was put into place.

After South Korea had been lost, there was hope that Senator Tuxford would win the tight election and avoid the coup altogether.

But the October surprise of the dissolution of North Korea bolstered Perez's sagging poll numbers, turning the race back into a toss-up.

But on election night Senator Tuxford and his coup plotters knew their fate had been sealed.

It was now or never. And they chose now.

There is never really a good plan for trying to take over America, but they did the best they could.

Their plan ended when two missiles vaporized them in a fraction of a second.

The White House was stormed by loyal Special Forces and retaken into government control. There were some coup plotters that escaped into the zone, before they could be rounded up and arrested.

Republicans unconnected to the coup, still pushed back hard on the legitimacy of the election.

However so many polling sites were either attacked either physically with bombs or cyber-attacks that most of the voter roll evidence needed for the investigation was lost.

The Democrats said it was the coup plotters still trying to sell their hoax of voter fraud to the American public.

The Republicans claimed it was the Democratic deep state trying to cover up their election fraud crimes.

The lawsuits flew back and forth on both sides, challenging the legitimacy of President Montgomery, who was set to inherit President Perez's new four-year term on January 20th.

The major court cases were fast tracked to the Supreme Court, where to no one's surprise the five judges put on the court by Republican presidents upheld the lawsuit while the four judges that were nominated by Democratic presidents dissented.

So by a 5-4 margin, the Supreme Court said that because the election was in doubt and with the evidence permanently destroyed that would be needed to prove otherwise, the election was nullified and a new election would take place in two years.

In the meantime, former Vice President Montgomery was the legitimate President until January 20th.

At that time the third in line for the presidency would be sworn in, who just happened to be a Republican speaker of the house, who, while not being a coup plotter himself, was sympathetic to the fears that had brought the coup on in the first place.

The Speaker of the House tried to steady the nerves of the uneasy nation, by first saying there would be no repopulation while he was interim-President in those first two years. He would also negotiate a peace deal with the Chinese and Russians that would secure the safety of the American people for the foreseeable future.

President Montgomery didn't agree with the Supreme Court ruling, but could not legally overturn it. Even if she did, half the country was lost to her anyway no matter what she did.

She knew Russia and China would not honor any agreement and would keep pushing until America's role in the world was completely lost.

The sub captain told her they would support her fully until January 20th, but after that he couldn't guarantee what would happen.

The intelligence community worked overtime to find evidence of collusion between the Republicans still in power and the coup plotters and the governments of Russia and China. But, once again, time was running out.

President Montgomery knew once the Speaker of the House was sworn in as president that all the investigations of Republicans would end.

Montgomery knew that this new interim government, helped put in place by Russia and China would have no checks and balances against it.

There were rumors already of reforms to the

Constitution, limiting the power of the free press and news media.

There were also massive protests in the states in the Northeast and on the West Coast. Many protesters carried signs supporting the formation of their own separate country.

The Republicans, who had lost favor in those states, were ready to cut them loose anyway, so they warned the rebelling states that the surviving union would not come to their defense if the Russians and Chinese attacked them.

Which is exactly what the intelligence community was picking up on.

The West Coast would be giving to China and the Northeast to Russia. In return the Midwest and South would be left in America's control.

President Montgomery warned Russia and China that they knew of the plans and told them it would be the end of both of their countries if they proceeded with the plot.

The Russians and Chinese kept on with their plans to keep bluffing. Stay strong, the Russians encouraged the Chinese. President Montgomery would lose her authority in two weeks' time. The big bluff had worked so far. And it would work until the whole world was theirs.

When Russia and China insisted they would only negotiate with the future president after January 20th, President Montgomery knew she had to make a decision.

She held a teleconference meeting with her closest staff.

What choice did they have?

Do nothing and let the new president seize control of the government and concede half of America to our rivals.

Or declare war on China and Russia immediately and fight for the future of America in the two weeks they had left, which no doubt would end with the destruction of the world and all life on it.

Or go the way of South Korea and order Americans to take refuge in the zones, in hopes of a brighter future in whatever the zone held for people.

The military was divided as well. Some generals and admirals felt they had a constitutional duty to respect the Supreme Court ruling and be loyal to the new president being sworn in on January 20th.

Other generals and admirals felt that this was a political coup supported by foreign adversaries and that the President Montgomery, by the results of the election was the duly elected leader, by rights of succession.

The disagreements were so strong, it was very possible that there would be a second civil war putting the US Military against itself.

President Montgomery decided that she had to save as many lives as they could. She would make an announcement to the world that on January 20th, she and the United States could no longer guarantee protection of their rights and their lives as free Americans.

That all Americans and freedom loving people of the world should seek immediate refuge in zones.

Montgomery also ordered that the United States would begin an immediate surrender of its nuclear weapons to a United Nations task force.

She also declassified and released the video of the white zone that had been suppressed by President Perez.

It was a surveillance video from in front of the daycare center. The video played and it showed a grainy black and white image of Dylan walking up to the zone in front of the school.

Dylan touched the zone a couple of times and then paused. When he tried to touch it again, he could no longer put his hand in.

The zone then turned white and Dylan fell backward. The body of Michael fell out of the zone and into Dylan's lap, where it laid for several minutes.

For almost an hour Dylan held Michael.

Eventually Dylan got up and ran to his car. Michael raved in pain reaching out to Dylan for relief. Then Michael dissolved into thin air and was gone from sight.

Dylan came back immediately when the body disappeared. He fell to his knees, buried his face in his hands and cried. Rolling on his side in torment for having left Michael to die while trying to get his phone.

President Perez ordered the clip to be classified for fear that if people saw it, they would know that Dylan had been telling the truth about the white zone and with the clip, zone entry would no doubt skyrocket.

And while the clip didn't confirm for sure what happened to you when you went in the zone, it proved that Dylan wasn't lying about his encounter with Michael and the white zone. Except for the part where he left Michael to go back to his car for the phone.

President Montgomery said that she too would be going into a zone after her term as President ended at noon on January 20th.

She warned everyone around the world that could see, hear and read her message that they should go into a zone immediately.

“Go in or Go out,” she warned them all ominously.

That was enough to get the exodus started.

Millions left in those first few minutes, followed by a billion people worldwide in the days after her address.

Countries destabilized, cities burned from looting and rioting. Which in turn caused the next billion to flee a world that was quickly falling apart.

Russia, China and the Coalition Government of the United States did their best to stop the panic, but President Montgomery’s words carried so much weight as did the video of the white zone.

Then something amazing happened. The zones around the world multiplied so greatly, that they were simply everywhere.

One of the theories of the zone attack on North Korea was that when all the millions of South Koreans made it into the zone, they used their collective power and willed millions of zones to appear in the North to rescue their trapped brothers and sisters, who had suffered under tyrannical rule for so long.

And now the billions of souls that were pouring into zones daily were trying to send back as many zones as they could to save as many people as they could from the crumbling world.

No one had to stand in line anymore for a zone.

There were enough zones covering the planet, that any human being that wanted to go in, could do so within a couple of minutes.

Even in Russia, China and Iran, people entered zones at such an alarming rate that the regimes had to take extreme measures to ensure their survival.

President Montgomery took it as a hopeful sign. There was no way to tell for sure, but it was estimated

that 5 billion of the world's 7 billion people escaped into the zones in those final five weeks.

With the massive reduction in population Russia was able to roll into Western Europe. On January 19th the Russian amphibious forces landed on British soil and were met with minimal resistance from the remaining hard-core Britons. By nightfall, the Russians had "liberated" London.

The Chinese started a massive boat lift of soldiers heading for Central America. They had bought up as many massive cruise ships as they could in the previous year.

They were able to pick them up at a bargain, since the cruise industry was one of the many victims of the worldwide economic depression that the zone had caused.

The Chinese had spent a decade improving their relations with struggling countries in Central America. They had developed business ties and the Central American countries had welcomed scores of Chinese nationals that flooded the country to help improve infrastructure and their health care system.

China, Russian and the Coalition government of the United States welcomed the depopulation of the Earth.

Yes, it would take a few years to settle into the new reality, but a smaller world population would be better for the environment and the Earth's limited resources would last that much longer now.

It would also be easier to govern the sparsely populated Earth and mean less conflicts across the globe. World peace was truly at hand they believed.

True to her word, President Montgomery had the

nuclear arsenal taken off line and turned over to the international control of the United Nations.

Bombers were grounded. The Navy was pulled into docks around the world. And US submarines were surfacing from their deep-sea hiding spots all over the world and turning themselves in at the nearest ports of call.

All the subs, but one, that is.

There was still an Ohio class sub out there that had yet to surface and make arrangements with the UN for its surrender, The USS Maine.

The Maine was still the base of operations for President Montgomery and she was not about to turn it over anytime soon, its whereabouts staying top secret.

The truth was it was hiding in the Arctic ocean. Every member of the crew that could be spared, had been ferried off the sub and onto the nearby icepacks where several zones provided their escape.

The skeleton crew left behind was all they needed to launch their 24 trident nuclear missiles.

Up to the last-minute President Montgomery was still not sure what she would do.

Should she let them have the world?

Let the villains of the world take what had been rightfully everyone else's?

Once they were in the zone, who would care what they left behind. It wasn't their problem anymore.

But the President did care.

And if the villains didn't care about the fate of the people it was forcing in zones, why should she care about the fate of the global criminals forcing them in.

It would be noon in Washington, D.C. soon and she

would no longer be legally allowed to give the sub captain the final launch approval.

She didn't choose this. The leaders of Russia, China and Iran did along with the coup plotters that betrayed their country.

She had warned the world what was coming as best she could. Those that listened went into the zones. Those that stayed, did so on their own free will and would now have to suffer the consequences.

President Montgomery gave the sub captain the final authorization and the crew did what it had done hundreds of times before in drills.

They would launch the missiles, then surface and abandon ship to get to a zone as quickly as possible and hopefully escape before the retaliation strike hit.

They should have enough time to all escape, but it would be close.

From the ice pack President Montgomery watched as the mighty Trident II missiles broke the surface of the water and shot up in the sky. Twenty-four times it happened. The missiles were headed for the largest cities in Russia and China and Iran.

The Maine then surfaced and Montgomery watched the last of the crew depart the sub and be brought to the ice pack by a series of small boats.

The crew passed by President Montgomery in silence as they lined up in front of the zone.

The sub captain signaled for the President to go first into the zone.

President Montgomery shook her head. She told them to go first instead.

They refused, not wanting to leave their commander

in chief behind. She asked her last order as President be respected as she checked her watch and saw that she had ten minutes left.

They obeyed her order and went into the zone, leaving the President alone on the cold white ice.

The sub captain had warned her before he went into the zone that their missile launch would be detected immediately and a retaliation strike would be on its way.

They probably had maybe thirty minutes to live after the launch.

She waited for the strike to come. Staring at the black void in front of her that was the zone.

It would have been so easy for her to step in. To go on to her new life in the zone.

The burden of being president would finally be lifted from her shoulders. She had been groomed for the presidency since birth. That's why she had to be a fighter pilot. The public wouldn't accept a female president unless they knew she was as tough as any man, too.

But she was as human as any man. When her fighter encountered mechanical failure over the ocean that day, so many years ago, she panicked. She had seen planes blow up instantly with no chance for the pilot to eject.

Yes, she could try to get the plane back to the air base, but God help her if she didn't fear that in seconds flames would soon incinerate her soul.

She gave the order to bail and it may or may not have caused the death of her weapons officer.

Powerful forces tried to keep her on track. She was one of the few female fighter pilots and they didn't want this incident to derail her career.

Yes, the dissenting report was covered up and later physically removed from all records. She knew it had

been, but said nothing.

It would turn up again years later. In hopes that it would derail both her chances of assuming the presidency and cause enough of a distraction to keep President Perez from a second term as well. Killing two birds with one stone.

Whoever it was that controlled that report had been planning this for a long time. Decades really, just holding their trump card in their patient little hand, just waiting for the right moment to play it.

They just didn't plan on the zones. No one had.

But there it was in front of her. The zone. Offering her a safe exit from this world she had decided to end. She tried to save as many lives as she could. What awaited them all in the zone she didn't know. And she never would.

She knew not everyone that wanted to leave this earth could get to an exit. Some, unfortunately, had minds so poisoned by propaganda, they could no longer carry an intelligent thought that wasn't influenced by their learned hatred for others.

Despite all that, President Montgomery knew she ultimately caused what was coming and she would pay the same price as those unfortunate souls that couldn't make it out.

There would be no zone escape for her.

So, she waited.

As solemn as the moment was, it took all her will power not to pull out her iPhone and check it one last time.

Had anyone tweeted the end of the world yet?

Then, with a white flash and an ungodly crack, it was over.

It didn't have to be, but it was.

ZONE



CHAPTER 33

ZONE ALONE

Five years he had been in his hole. The best hole three million dollars could buy, but a hole none the less.

He had it all. Almost every book ever written. Every TV show ever aired. Every movie ever filmed. Every song ever sung. Every videogame ever played.

He had it all stored on massive digital files.

And he yet he had nothing.

When North Korea first gained the ability to hit the west coast of America with a nuclear missile, he decided to invest some of his fortune building the ultimate insurance policy.

His friends thought he was crazy. Turned into a

crazy prepper like those fool hearty rednecks you would see on TV reality shows. But the North Korean threat made him aware that we lived in a world where anything could happen.

And when the zones started to appear, the point was proven true.

The first time he went into the fallout shelter was just after President Perez made his first address to the nation about the zones.

He stayed in it for seven months until the zones disappeared and he thought the threat had passed. But the world was a changed place after the first wave of zones.

He had lost half his fortune when the markets collapsed that first time. It was still more money than he could have hoped to spend in his lifetime, unless that is he started to buy Lamborghinis in bulk and abandon each one after they each ran out of their first tank of gas.

He never considered going into a zone. He was convinced they were traps sent by an intelligence far superior than ours. If whoever sent the zones wanted to help the human race, they could have done a better job than simply dropping off a bunch of geometric shapes with no instructions or context.

The zones were too much like traps. No one ever escaped. There was an irresistible lure to pull you in. No way he was going into one of these mousetraps. Not a chance.

When the zones came back for their second round, he returned to the fallout shelter again this time for a nine month stretch. Martial law had stabilized the United States enough that he could make a few adjustments to his fall out shelter.

The first change was to create rooms that simulated the outside. A sunny day in a park. A snowy mountain top. A weekend getaway to the beach.

He updated all the electronics, installing metal shielding that would protect the electronics from an EMP attack that would cripple power grids and all unprotected electronics.

He tried to do one final tour of the world before retiring to his fallout shelter for good, fearing the demise of the world was at hand. He aborted his world tour half way through the trip. The world was just becoming too dangerous a place to be caught in outside his fallout shelter. His home. His hole.

He had thought about bringing others down in the hole with him, but he knew he was better off alone. It would make the supplies last longer and reduce the risk of a social conflict.

For anyone that was deluded enough to think that the United States was ever going to heal its divisions and ever unify again, the reelection of President Perez put that notion to bed for good.

It was an open secret that the red states that opposed Perez would be in near revolt if he tried to execute his repopulation plan.

Even after the election, he didn't retreat to the fallout shelter yet. However once the coup happened, that was it.

He sealed himself in and knew he would probably never come out again.

Never before had he felt so bad for being so right, but he had been right all along and the shelter was worth every penny he put into it.

When January 20th rolled around, he was not

surprised when he heard about the surprised nuclear attack on Russia and China.

They managed to get off some of their nukes in a retaliatory strikes from submarines, but the land-based Russian missiles stayed in their silos. The Russians needn't worry. The subs were enough to lay waste to the the Earth.

The Coalitional US government thought somehow, they were going to make nice with Chinese and Russians and be allowed to control the real America as they liked to call it. But whatever deal those traitors hammered out with Moscow and Beijing went out the window when the nukes started flying.

The first four years went relatively well in the shelter. He took the time to write his life story, not that anyone would ever read it. He had enough entertainment to be entertained for years if he parsed it out right.

But then it started.

Constant nausea, vomiting, headaches and diarrhea. Not pretty when you are trapped in an enclosed environment.

He did his best to self-diagnose himself, but he knew all along what it was. As protected as he thought he was, it was getting to him.

He had radiation poisoning and no doubt was going to die from it soon.

He had to make a decision. Stay in his hole and die in peace or return to the surface world and search, probably in vain, for a zone to escape into.

He never believed the zone held magically healing powers or transported you to the next stage in human evolution. But at this point, what choice did he have? Like so many terminally ill people before him, what did

he have to lose.

He felt it was best to leave as soon as possible, because he knew he might need all the strength he had left for his journey to find a zone. It could take minutes, it could take years.

He went to his armory and loaded up for the journey to come. He had seven different guns strapped to his body along with five different knives and enough ammo to make a decent stand against anyone.

He looked at himself in a mirror in his gas mask and contamination suit. He was no longer human. He was an alien looking beast, ferociously armed and ready to make his last stand in an unforgiving hellscape. He was resolved to finding a zone or die trying.

He opened the many doors to get out and was greeted to a gray and dreary world, cold and barren. The perpetually clouded sky killed most vegetation.

He purposely bought hundreds of acres of land in central Oregon, far away from any major cities and military bases. There would be no need to target this area of the United States for any reason, but the effects of the global nuclear war had reached him here as it had reached everywhere else too. The black clouds from the fires were still circling the earth, covering it all in a funeral shroud.

He had camouflaged as much of the area as possible, so not to tip off there was a fallout shelter located there.

In five years, no one had come knocking. The remoteness of the area helped. He was miles from any sign of civilization, not that he thought there would be much left.

He both longed for and dreaded contact with another human. He knew at this point supplies of food would be

in such short amounts, that people would kill over whatever was left. Possibly even resort to cannibalism.

Still, wouldn't it be nice to see one more human before he died?

He opened a hidden door camouflaged into a fake boulder that was actually a storage compartment. No one had detected it, and the contents inside were untouched.

Inside the fake rock was stored a large three-wheel tricycle with a locked box on the back to put supplies in. He loaded the box up with as much food and water as he could cram into it and peddled down the road.

He was in the world again for thirty minutes and so far, so good. He would go into town, which even in the good times, wasn't much of a town at all. A main street with a few blocks of business and a few hundred homes scattered in the surrounding area.

As he peddled down the country roads he kept watch for a black rectangular zone, but saw none. Before the bombs dropped the reports said zones were simply everywhere, but now they seemed to have disappeared again.

He was on the outskirts of town when he decided to hide his bike and extra food in the bushes. There could be people here taking shelter in the abandoned stores on main street, so he had to take precautions so he wouldn't lose his supplies to robbers.

It was quiet when he slowly walked through town. He stayed close to the buildings and avoided walking in the open streets.

Then he saw it through a window.

A big black rectangle inside one of the long-ago looted offices.

He drew his gun and went in the front door of the building. It was a quick search after all he thought pleasantly to himself.

The world truly was a dreary place now. Every second he spent there was a reminder of the folly of man.

How in the hell had we let this happen? How did humanity not stand up en masse and simply say stop it. Just stop.

Why didn't we just overthrow these foolish leaders that were taking us to our own self destruction?

A handful of corrupt lunatics controlled the fate of billions. And the billions let them do it. It was a defect of the human animal.

What else could explain it? The same defect that pulled humans into the zones against their better judgment.

He pushed past some trashed office furniture and found the black rectangle.

He stared back at his reflection in the dusty, broken black flat screen TV that had been turned on its side. It wasn't a zone after all. He had been fooled by the good people of Visio.

Then he thought maybe it really was a trick. Someone could have positioned the black wide screen TV like that just so someone would be lured into the store thinking it really was a zone.

He held his gun at the ready, just a finger twitch away from unleashing all kinds of hell on whoever was trying to trap him in the long ago abandoned real estate office.

There was no one there to trap him. As he made his way out, he saw more zones. The office was full of dead black rectangles. Computer monitors, iPads, cellphones.

Useless, all of them. Black rectangular relics of a world gone by.

He went back outside and continued to explore the town, curious at what else he would find.

Then he heard it.

It was running. A human running.

This was it. It had been a trap that he triggered and now someone was coming for him, fast.

He got a second gun out and crouched down behind a counter ready to battle. He was about to see if a lifetime of playing first person shooters was going to pay off.

Through the window he saw the figure run by, not even bothering to slow down at his location.

When he didn't hear a second or third pair of footsteps running, he dashed to the window to see the lone figure, covered head to toe in layers and layers of clothes, now running into a building.

Must be his home he thought.

Was it worth the risk of making contact, he wondered.

The person was running through the middle of the street without a care in the world. He had seen no visible weapons and they were small in stature. Maybe a woman or teenager. What threat could the person have been.

Maybe it was best to stay in the area and observe the figure quietly.

While he was contemplating his next move, he saw the figure emerge on the roof of the building and stare outward and then down.

The figure backed away from the edge of the roof and disappeared from sight again.

Maybe this soul was being chased and went up to the

roof to see where his pursuers were. Or maybe he had tripped some hidden alert somewhere and the running man had returned to the reconnaissance point to discover where the intruder was.

Then he heard a shriek and saw the figure leap off the roof and plummet downward. The body slammed to the ground in a grotesque flopping action, bending and twisting as it hit the pavement.

The body then laid there motionless.

Is that what he came up from his hole to see? Was it this hopeless that poor survivors were driven mad and throwing themselves off buildings rather than go on for another horrifying minute.

He waited in the building for a half an hour.

The man in the street still never moved an inch.

No one else came through town, either.

Finally he decided to see who this person was. See if there was some clue to this madness.

Checking to see no one was coming, he ventured out and walked cautiously to the body.

The man was a whisper of what his former self must have been. His bone thin face had a gaunt dead eyed stare. His body looked dirty and tired. These had been a hard five years and he was sure somehow this poor soul must have been glad it was all finally over.

He had been at the body for about five minutes, when he realized he was not alone.

He turned quickly and standing behind him was a hooded stranger, face covered with goggles and wrapped with a scarf. Like the first man, this stranger's body too was covered head to toe with layers of clothes.

He drew his gun on the stranger.

The stranger simply shook his head and motioned

with his hand to lower the gun. The stranger reached for no weapon and held no aggression in his body language.

He didn't lower his gun. Not a chance.

"I didn't kill him," he told the stranger that had appeared behind him from out of nowhere.

He pointed to the roof of the building.

"He committed suicide jumping off the building."

The stranger just shook his head and pointed straight up into the sky.

He looked up, but saw nothing, but the depressing gray clouds.

"What are you pointing at? I don't see anything."

The stranger pointed to his mouth and signed with his hand that he couldn't speak.

The stranger came forward toward the dead man in the street.

He backed away from the stranger, never taking his gun off him for a second.

The stranger grabbed the dead man and dragged him off the street.

The stranger then marked a line in the dusty street and measured his footsteps to the line from the side of the building to the line.

The man then made two lines in the street approximately the same measurement as the line from the building's edge.

"What are you doing?"

The stranger ignored the question and backed up a ways behind the first line. He then broke out in a run and leaped in the air.

His feet came down a few inches past the second line marking. Seeing this the stranger pumped his fist in excitement

“Why are you jumping like that?”

Again the stranger pointed in the air, only this time when he looked up, he saw it.

Zones.

There were five zones hovering in the air above the street. From where he first looked, he couldn't see them because of the thin profile of the zones.

Then he got it.

The first man didn't jump to commit suicide, he jumped to try and make it into one of the zone stationed in the air.

He must have come up short or the zone didn't work the way he anticipated it would and he fell to his death.

The stranger showed he could clearly make the jump, even having a few inches to spare.

The stranger then pointed for him to try to make the same jump.

“I can't. I can't jump that far. There must be other zones.”

The stranger shook his head no and pointed at the two lines again, demanding that he try and make the jump.

He walked over and, still holding on to the guns, ran and jumped. He made it about three quarters of the way to the second line.

“See I told you I couldn't do it.”

The stranger approached forcing him to aim the gun and get very close to pulling the trigger.

“Back up, my friend! Go on, do it. Back!”

The stranger stopped and cocked his head and held up his hands as if to say, “Really, dude?” The stranger opened up his many jackets to show he carried no weapons.

He relaxed and lowered the guns.

The stranger came over and motioned for him to start taking off all the protective gear and weapons he had on his body.

He shook his head. Sensing his unease, the stranger backed away a good distance to give him space. The stranger was far enough away now that it would be impossible for the stranger to try to get one of his guns, without being shot himself.

He relaxed a bit and lowered his guns. He knew what the stranger was trying to communicate to him. The reason he couldn't jump that far was because he was so loaded down with so much crap. Take it all off and see what you can do then.

Fine. If he could make it into the zone, then he wouldn't need all the weaponry anyway.

Slowly he disarmed and took off the protective suit. Always keeping a watchful eye on the stranger standing down the street.

He backed away from the first line again and gave another glance to the stranger, who wasn't moving an inch closer. The stranger was only giving him some encouraging hand gestures.

Feeling safe, he sprinted for the first line and leaped into the air. He came down just a few inches short of the second line this time. Better, but still not good enough.

The stranger was waiting to see his reaction. He shook his head and held up his hands two inches apart to indicate that he was just short of reaching the second line.

The stranger fell to his butt and started to show him some stretching exercises. Anything to get his body to limber up. The stranger then got up again and showed

him the bouncing gait of someone that might have had some track and field training in their life.

The stranger then motioned for him to try it, this time after stretching out a bit and putting a little bounce in his step.

And so he did. First stretching out his legs and body, then limbering up with some bouncing moves. Before he knew it, he had his back turned to the stranger.

He quickly turned around and saw the stranger had not moved any closer. The stranger was just patiently watching him prepare for his third attempt.

This time when he ran for the first line, he incorporated the bounce in his step that the stranger had shown him. He launched himself in the air and came down across the second line. Barely, but he had made it.

He raised a triumphant thumbs up to the stranger.

As they both celebrated he looked up into the sky. He could have sworn he had seen five zones up there before, but now he could only see four. He moved about to get a better view, thinking he was just missing the fifth one because of the thin profile again.

No, it wasn't there anymore. The fifth one was gone.

"Hey, I think the fifth zone disappeared. Do you see it?"

As they were both staring up at the four zones, another one disappeared, leaving only three.

The stranger, seeing what was going on, sprinted for the building and he joined him racing over to it. The zones were going away and they didn't know how much time they had left.

His guns! Crap!

He had left everything in the street. He paused on the stairs and considered going back. The stranger saw he

had stopped. The stranger pounded the wall hard to get his attention back. The stranger then motioned for him to continue up the stairs.

He continued to follow the stranger up the stairs, what choice did he really have at this point.

They ran up the stairs of the building and scrambled to find the roof access doors.

They spilled out on the roof just in time to see the third zone disappear.

Thankfully the zone closest to the building remained.

The stranger quickly disrobed his layers of clothes, in the process revealing a nasty machete that was strapped to his back.

Jesus, he thought. The stranger easily could have cut his head off when he first came up on him while he was distracted by the dead man in the street.

The stranger still could have killed him with it right then as well.

But he didn't.

The stranger tossed the machete away, which landed with a clang. Any and all extra weight had to go.

The last of the stranger's clothes came off, except for some shorts around his waist.

He was African-American, with a long-jagged scar on his throat that gave a good indication as to why he couldn't talk anymore. He also saw the stranger was missing a piece of his ear.

His body was marked with scars and burns. It must have been a hard five years surviving on the surface, but the stranger had survived and now had one chance to leave all the suffering behind him.

The stranger turned to him. He smiled and nodded his head. He reached out his massive black hand, dirty,

burned and missing the tip of a finger.

He took off his own protective gloves in a rush to shake the stranger's hand.

But the moment that he had reached out with his own hand, he realized he should have left his protective glove on.

Compared to the stranger, his hand was soft and pink, without blemish. The smooth palms had never known a day of hard labor in his whole life, except for tapping out the code on a keyboard that had made him millions of dollars in the dot com gold rush.

He had used those first few millions to invest wisely in other internet businesses and soon was sitting on a three hundred-million-dollar fortune with some wise and well-timed investments in Google and Facebook.

The stranger was shocked to see how pristine his white hand was, a symbol of a world long gone by. It was as if he was shaking hands with a ghost, a time traveler or space alien. The smile was gone from the stranger's face. He almost half feared the stranger would pick up the machete and cut his unspoiled hand off out of spite.

Instead the stranger let go and prepared for his jump.

"Thank you, my friend. Good luck," he told the stranger.

The stranger managed to give him a smile and pointed a quick finger back at him, the one missing the tip, as if to say good luck to you too, friend.

The stranger focused on the zone ahead in the air.

Then launched himself at full speed toward the zone. He jumped right at the edge of the roof and went flying.

The stranger hit the zone square on and disappeared in the blackness.

He ran to the edge of the roof and looked down. The stranger's body was nowhere to be seen. He had done it. He had made it into the zone. It could be done.

He looked back to the two remaining zones. The one furthest away then disappeared.

Crap!

He ran back to the spot where the stranger had run from. He quickly stretched out a couple of times, then promptly froze.

What was he doing?

He would only get one shot at this.

If he failed, he would die as the first man had, who fell short of the zone and plummeted to the unforgiving road below.

And how accurate had the stranger's measurements truly been? He had only used his footsteps. If the measurements were a few inches off, he might not make it all the way to the zone, even though he thought that he could.

There must be other zones out there.

He had been smart enough not to succumb to the madness of the world that the zone had brought with it.

Now he was poised to leap off the roof of a building to certain death. What if the zone disappeared as he was running to the edge and he couldn't stop himself in time?

Don't do it.

Go back to your hole.

You can probably live another year or two with the sickness.

Maybe it was just a passing thing and he would be fine in a month or two.

He had so many movies and TV shows to watch yet.

Millions of pages of the internet that were archived that he could spend months browsing and remembering the world no longer left.

He even had simulated friends that he could communicate with. He knew they were just programs, sending him random texts and carrying on conversations, but it did the trick.

He had a good life in that hole.

Go back. Go back and be safe. Go back and be happy.

Then he heard it.

A gun shot.

He cautiously peeked over the roof and looked down to see that two men had come across his abandoned guns in the street.

One of the men had just used one of the guns to kill the other.

It was time to go.

He ran back to his starting spot, praying the zone would hold for just a few more seconds.

He then ran and jumped with everything he had left in his body for the zone straight ahead.

The man in the street had heard the running on the roof and aimed the gun at the top of the building and instinctively fired the gun, as if he was shooting skeet.

He heard the gunshot as he was leaping in the air.

And then he heard nothing.

Complete silence and darkness.

Was he dead?

Did he make it?

He was thinking. That was a good sign. Or maybe it was the trailing thoughts of his brain as it tried to make sense of its last dying moments.

"My friend, you made it!" an excited voice called out

to him.

"Who is that?"

"It is me. The stranger that taught you to leap. Now I will teach you to see."

"I don't understand. Where am I?"

"You made it. You are here. And now, I'll teach you to see, as they taught me."

"Who is they?"

"All that have come before us."

He could feel his eyes opening.

"What's happening? Are you doing this?"

"Yes. Just relax. Let it happen. Don't fight it."

"Okay, I won't."

He let go of his fears and he let go of the violent, chaotic lost world that he had just departed.

And once he had let go, he could see it all so clearly.

The zone was beautiful.

The zone was good.

The zone was.

The zone.

