

A large satellite dish antenna is the central focus, pointing towards the sun. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the upper right quadrant of the frame, partially obscured by the dish's structure. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue with a few wispy white clouds. In the foreground, a grey utility box is visible on the right side, with some pipes and wires extending from it. The dish is supported by a complex metal lattice structure. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a clear, sunny day.

**Struck
by the
Sun**

by Chef prefers

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As our world changes in no time, the words of this story are assisted by AI; the story itself was created, designed and constructed by the author.

Third Edition

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PRESENT

Ken doesn't remember the last time the world was this quiet.

He crouches behind a hedge, barely breathing, eyes fixed on the empty street ahead. Midnight has swallowed everything: no traffic, no voices, no distant hum of life. Just silence, thick and unnatural, pressing against his ears. It feels wrong, like the world has stopped... and forgotten to start again.

Above him, a streetlight hangs dead. He stares at it, waiting, half expecting it to flicker back to life, to prove this is temporary. Two weeks ago, this street glowed with movement and noise. Now it looks abandoned. Stripped clean. As if something swept through and left nothing behind.

Ken swallows and forces himself to move.

The refugee centre is only a few streets away, but it already feels like another world. It was crowded, noisy, and on edge. People lining up for food, clinging to rumours.

Four weeks, they say. Four weeks until the power comes back. Ken doesn't believe it, because the blackout isn't the worst part. It's what came with it.

He crosses the road quickly, keeping low. His eyes scan the darkness, searching without knowing what for.

People at the centre couldn't stop talking about it, rubbing their eyes, blinking too hard, too often. Complaining about

the burning, the blur. Like they'd all stared into something they shouldn't have.

Shamone had it too.

The hospital had been in chaos. Too many patients, not enough answers. The nurse barely looked at them when she said it would pass, temporarily.

Ken hadn't argued, but he hadn't believed her either.

They're calling it *The Flash*, a burst of light that tore across the sky without warning. There was no sound, no explanation, just brightness... and then this.

Some say it was a nuclear test gone wrong. Perhaps North Korea. An EMP strong enough to kill the grid, perhaps, but that doesn't explain the eyes, and it definitely doesn't explain why Ken can still see.

He reaches his house and stops. Something feels off. The air is still. Too still, and he listens.

Nothing.

Slowly, he steps forward and opens the mailbox. The metal creak cuts through the silence like a blade. Ken flinches, his pulse spiking.

Inside the house... she would've heard that.

He closes it carefully this time and moves faster up the driveway, slipping through the side door.

The smell hits him first of scented candles. Too many of them. The sweetness hangs thick in the air, trying, and failing, to hide something else beneath it. Something faint, a hint of waste.

Ken's chest tightens.

"Shamone?" he calls softly.

No answer.

He takes another step inside, and then he hears it.

A small sound. A broken one. A sniffle.

Ken freezes and listens.

There it is again, fragile, uneven, coming from the hallway. Relief flickers through him. She's here.

But something about the sound... isn't right.

He moves slowly now, every step careful, controlled. The house feels different in the dark, the candlelight bending shadows into shapes that don't quite make sense.

He reaches the hallway and leans just enough to see Shamone crouched against the wall.

Her body is folded in on itself, hands covering her face as quiet sobs shake through her.

Ken exhales, relief hitting him hard. She's alive.

He takes a step closer, and the candlelight shifts, and reveals what she's hiding.

Ken stops, and everything inside him goes still.

For a moment, he can't process what he's seeing.

Then it hits.

A surge of anger rises, sharp, instinctively, but collapses just as quickly. This isn't the moment for anger.

Not with her, not like this.

He forces it down.

Slowly, he kneels beside her and places a hand on her shoulder. She trembles beneath his touch. His head bows, words forming silently, something between a prayer and a plea.

His vision blurs; he blinks it away.

Not now.

Gently, he helps her to her feet, steadying her as he guides her toward the bathroom.

Behind them, the house remains silent. He'll deal with the blood on the floor later.

THE DAY OF THE FLASH

Ken strides down the terminal gangway, phone pressed to his ear.

“I’m boarding now. Should be home by lunchtime. Sorry, I’ll miss your sermon.”

“Okay,” Shamone replies, relief softening her voice. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He ends the call.

A weight lifts as he steps onto the plane. The long Saturday night shift is finally behind him, and the successful tests mark the end of a demanding job. It had been one of his most complex assignments yet.

Power Corporation Networks, PCN, was a major client, and failure hadn’t been an option. Ken works for *Authenticate*, a defence contractor specialising in secure network systems. Their flagship product, Special Protection Intelligence EyeS, SPIES, protects critical infrastructure from intrusion. Ken is one of the few specialists trusted to deploy it across both the US and Australia.

PCN oversees the majority of Australia’s power grid, hundreds of stations operated by more than a hundred companies. Growing fears of cyberattacks had driven them to upgrade their systems. A single breach could allow someone to shut down substations nationwide.

Ken’s team spent two years securing those networks, systems that allowed centralised control over substations, enabling authorised operators to reroute power remotely. The authentication layers were designed to be airtight, preventing

even former employees from gaining access. Only high-level users could override locally, and even that carried safeguards.

The scale was staggering: 1,300 substations in the state, over 4,000 across the country. In the past three months alone, Ken and his team had worked eighteen-hour days, testing tens of thousands of connections. Tonight's final task, monitoring operations at PCN headquarters, had gone flawlessly.

Now, exhaustion settles in. On the short flight back to Canberra, he hopes to sleep.

He finds his seat, 13C, aisle, and notices an older man already seated by the window. The man offers a polite smile; Ken returns it before settling in. The safety briefing begins, but fatigue quickly overtakes him. Within minutes, he's asleep.

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Shamone closes her laptop and exhales. The slideshow for Sunday's Presbyterian service is finally finished, assembled at the last minute, as usual. It has become tradition now: lyrics, readings, and visuals to guide the congregation through the sermon.

Their home sits in a quiet suburb west of Belconnen, a modest three-bedroom house they bought a decade into their marriage. Shamone renovated the kitchen and bathrooms early on, and she keeps the garden alive despite Canberra's dry summers. Ken, always happiest working with his hands, has been talking about building a cubby house, planning for a future they both want.

Inside, the third bedroom serves as a study. Shelves line the walls, her theology books on one side, his technical manuals on the other. A small network rack hums quietly in the closet, a sound Ken finds oddly comforting. Scented candles, Shamone's indulgence, fill the space with soft, familiar fragrances.

The second bedroom is ready too, a nursery waiting for a child.

They've tried before. Three pregnancies, none carried to term. The last had complications. Now, she is pregnant again, holding onto cautious hope. Doctors have advised rest, careful nutrition, and as little stress as possible. There is also the tumour, entwined with her cervix, making surgery risky, potentially ending any chance of conceiving. For now, they've chosen to wait.

**

As the plane begins its descent on a clear autumn morning, Ken remains asleep.

A sudden mechanical shudder ripples through the cabin, and the lights go out, no flicker, not dim, just gone. A ripple of confusion moves through the cabin. The engines falter, losing thrust.

Then, a blinding flash engulfs the aircraft. It doesn't arrive gradually. It slams into the cabin, absolutely blinding.

For ten seconds, the world is pure white. Passengers cry out, shielding their eyes. Even through closed eyelids, feels the warmth.

In the cockpit, the pilot panics, unable to see his instruments, barely able to think. Instinctively, he engages autopilot, hoping it will carry them down.

The plane hits the runway hard. It skids, veers off course, and tears across the grass before slamming into a high-tension fence. The front gear collapses. The nose dips. Then, stillness.

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Ken's eyes snap open. There is silence, no roar from the engines, no announcement. Just... stillness.

He looks out the window. The runway is behind them.

"What?"

Around him, passengers clutch their faces, groaning.

"I can't see!" the man beside him cries.

Ken turns, stunned. "What do you mean?"

He unbuckles, stands, and scans the cabin. No crew, no movement, just panic and confusion.

"We crashed," someone mutters. "And everyone's worried about their eyes?"

He moves forward. A stewardess lies on the floor; another sits frozen in her seat, hands pressed to her face.

"What's going on?" he calls.

The seated stewardess blinks blindly. "What... happened?"

"We ran off the runway," Ken says. "What's going on?"

She turns her head toward his voice. "Can you see?"

"Of course I can, can't you?"

"No... not since the flash."

"What flash?"

She steadies herself, unbuckling and standing with effort. Training takes over.

“We need to evacuate. I’ll need your help.”

Passengers begin shouting, climbing over seats in blind panic.

“Forget them,” she says sharply. “Open the door.”

Ken forces himself into action. He breaks the seal and pulls the handle. The door swings open with a rush of air. He yanks the cord, and the inflatable slide deploys.

“All set!”

“Move! Move!” the stewardess shouts, projecting authority despite her blindness.

Without the PA system, her voice becomes the only guide. One by one, then in frantic clusters, passengers find their way out.

It takes way too long.

**

Outside, the morning air is crisp and clear, but something is wrong. Passengers wander aimlessly, some crying, some calling for help, others simply standing still. There are no emergency crews nor sirens, nothing.

Ken stares toward the terminal, which is empty.

“What is going on?” he whispers.

Moments ago, he had been asleep. Now he’s guiding blind strangers off a crashed plane.

He turns to the stewardess. “What happened?”

She crouches on the tarmac, breathing carefully. “A flash... in the sky. Brighter than anything. It lasted seconds. Then... nothing. I couldn’t see.”

She tilts her head toward him. “Why can you?”

Ken hesitates. “I was asleep. I guess my eyes were closed.”

A distant roar cuts through the air, and Ken looks up.

Another aircraft, a 737, descends too fast, too low.

“No...”

It slams into Mount Majura. The explosion blooms into a fireball, lighting the mountainside. The sound follows, a deep, metallic scream that tears through the air. Ken clamps his hands over his ears. Reality settles in. This isn't isolated. This is everywhere.

Then he thinks of Shamone.

His breath catches. “Oh God... I hope she's okay.”

He pulls out his phone. Presses the button, nothing, dead.

He tries again. Still nothing.

Around him, others do the same, tapping, shaking, staring in disbelief. Every device is lifeless.

Ken looks up, voice breaking with anger and fear.

“What the hell?”

THE VISITOR

Ken sat on the edge of the bed, staring at his lifeless phone. Beside him, Shamone lay beneath the covers, breathing softly. In the unsteady glow of candlelight, he studied her face, still, composed, impossibly beautiful. Even now, she had taken the time to make herself look presentable, as though clinging to some fragment of normality. Her hair fanned neatly across the pillow, almost too perfect, as if she had arranged it before lying down.

A fresh wave of emotion rose in his chest. He loved her deeply, more than ever, and the memory of what had happened earlier clawed at him. The thought of starting over, of everything they had lost, made his vision blur. He swallowed hard, but his body trembled.

Sleep wouldn't come. His mind kept circling the same questions, replaying the day in fragments. He had helped Shamone wash with cold water earlier, doing what little he could to comfort her.

Last year, he'd installed a small tank beside the shed to collect runoff. It was meant for irrigation, nothing more, but now it was their only source of water. For how long, he didn't know. He had filled every container he could find, lining them around the house like a fragile maniac against the inevitable.

But there was no way to heat it, no power, no fire. Modern convenience had stripped them of even the simplest fallback. Open fireplaces had long been banned, replaced by systems that now sat dead and useless. Everything was dead, his phone, the clocks, the servers, and even the car.

Anything with a circuit had simply... stopped.

Only the batteries still worked. Torches flickered through the dark like relics from another age. He'd tried to get more from the local store, but it had already been boarded up. Someone had beaten him to it. The place had the look of something looted and abandoned. He'd returned home empty-handed. At least Shamone had her candles.

A faint scuffling sound broke through his thoughts.

Ken froze. It came from outside. Slowly, he turned toward the window, senses sharpening. There, movement. Instinctively, he dropped to the floor beneath the sill. His heart thudded as realisation hit him, he'd forgotten to close the blinds. The candlelight would have been visible from the street. Anyone could have seen.

He muttered a quiet curse, glancing at Shamone, hoping she hadn't stirred. Then he leaned forward and blew out the candle. Darkness swallowed the room.

Carefully, he reached up and began to pull the blinds shut, a creak from somewhere inside, the kitchen door opening perhaps.

His pulse spiked. The house fell into a suffocating silence. Ken didn't move; he listened. Something was inside.

He thought of the cricket bat leaning against the wall. Slowly, blindly, he reached for it, but misjudged. It slipped from his grasp and clattered to the floor, the sound exploding through the house. Ken's stomach dropped.

He turned toward the bed. Shamone was upright now.

"Kenny? ... Kenny?"

Relief flooded through him at the sound of her voice, but he forced it down.

"Wait here," he whispered.

He moved into the hallway, being careful of each step. The faint glow of a candle flickered ahead in the kitchen. As he entered, he saw a figure standing there, tall, still, and looking at him.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then recognition broke the tension.

“Stephen! Ken whispered”

They closed the distance and embraced.

Ken hadn't seen his brother in six months. For a moment, nothing else mattered, only the fact that he's still alive.

Three years earlier, Stephen was sent to jail for laundering church money. Officially, he was the national accountant for the Presbyterian Church, a trusted man in a pressed shirt, shaking hands on Sundays and balancing books no one else questioned. Unofficially, he was moving collections through his own accounts, using the Church's donations to bankroll an animal trafficking operation that made him richer than faith ever had.

Exotic Australian parrots sold well overseas. Better than sermons. Better than guilt.

For years, Stephen had perfected the system. Money flowed in from church collections, disappeared into his accounts, then reappeared before anyone noticed. He always knew when audits were coming. He always had time to clean the books.

Until one audit wasn't announced.

In the aftermath of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, churches were ordered to scrutinise everything. Records. Leadership. Finances. Every denomination was suddenly looking over its shoulder.

Stephen didn't see it coming.

By the time the numbers stopped adding up, it was too late.

Six months in Goulburn Correctional Centre changed him more than the conviction ever did. His brother, Ken, visited whenever he could, praying over him, clinging to the hope that faith would keep Stephen whole.

It didn't.

Stephen came out thinner, harder, and far more dangerous than when he went in.

"The prisoners weren't the worst part," he once told Ken, his voice flat and hollow. "It was the guards."

After that, something in him never came back.

He stopped going to church. Stopped praying. Stopped pretending.

And when he finally walked away from Ken's house, neither of them realised it would be the last time Stephen would ever resemble the man he used to be.

But as they pulled apart, the past lingered between them.

Stephen looked... different. Not just thinner, but lighter somehow. There was a strange brightness in his expression, something unsettled, almost giddy.

They sat down at the kitchen table. Stephen didn't speak. No words needed between the brothers. He only smiled, as though holding something back.

Then he reached into his backpack. The zipper rasped loudly in the silence.

From inside, he pulled out a pack of D batteries.

"For your torch," he said.

Another reach. A packet of Tim Tams.

“For Shamone.”

Then a pause,

Slowly, deliberately, he reached in again.

When his hand emerged, it held a pistol.

“For you.”

The words landed heavily in the air. Ken stared at it, disbelief hardening into anger.

“What am I supposed to do with that?” he snapped, then immediately lowered his voice. “Why would I need a gun?”

Stephen didn’t flinch. He had expected this.

“You might,” he said calmly.

Ken leaned back, shaking his head.

“No!”

Stephen shrugged. “Then what, your cricket bat’s enough?”

Ken pressed his hands to his face, struggling to steady himself.

From the hallway, unseen, Shamone listened. The moment she realised what Stephen had brought, her chest tightened. She wanted to intervene, but she held back, retreating silently to the bedroom.

Ken doesn’t want another argument. He has only just arrived, and for the first time in days, he knows he’s safe. Yet as his eyes drift to the pistol in Stephen’s hand, he wonders if his brother ever truly left his old life behind.

“Stephen... as you can see, Shamone and I have chosen to follow the word of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If you gave me flowers, I’d use them to draw the bees to the blossoms. If you gave me food, I’d feed those in need. If you gave me weapons...” Ken pauses, his eyes settling on the gun. “I’d use

them to prove that violence was never His teaching. Christ gave His body for us. I can't turn my back on that."

Stephen rolls his eyes, expecting another sermon.

But Ken's voice changes.

"You think it's nonsense, I get that. Why follow a God who lets you rot in prison? Why trust a book filled with contradictions? Why believe any of it?"

His words falter as Shamone flashes through his mind: what happened to her tonight, the years of trying, the silence that followed every disappointment. His lips tremble before he forces himself to continue.

"Why is Shamone still childless? Why did my plane hit the tarmac at the exact moment the Flash struck? Twenty seconds earlier... I'd be dead."

The room falls silent.

"I believe there's a plan for us, Stephen. And you're bringing that gun here tonight... that's part of it. If I take it, maybe I'm walking toward ruin. If I refuse it, maybe I'm walking away from fate. I don't know what tomorrow brings..." Ken's voice lowers. "But I believe we have to follow where God has led us."

He studies Stephen for a moment, something unsettled behind his eyes.

"There's something familiar about all this... and I can't remember why."

Ken stands, takes the gun from the table, and sets it aside.

"You can sleep on the couch."

Without another word, he turns and disappears back into the bedroom.

THEY KNEW

Forty kilometres west of Canberra lies a satellite tracking station, one of only three Deep Space Network (DSN) complexes in the world, the others located in California and Spain. These facilities exist primarily to communicate with deep-space missions operated by NASA and the European Space Agency (ESA).

In the 1980s, ESA launched the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) to study the Sun in unprecedented detail. Its mission was to examine the Sun's internal structure, its outer atmosphere, and the origins of solar wind. Over time, SOHO accumulated vast datasets on solar flares and coronal mass ejections (CMEs), violent eruptions of radiation and plasma driven by magnetic activity on the Sun's surface.

Solar flares are sudden bursts of high-energy radiation, often originating from sunspots. CMEs, by contrast, are massive expulsions of magnetised plasma that travel through space, sometimes taking days to reach Earth. Together, they form the most disruptive space weather events known to science.

SOHO transmitted its data back to Earth in regular intervals via the DSN. Each week, mission control received updated readings, quietly building a long-term picture of solar behaviour.

At some point, operations at the Canberra tracking station shifted under US military oversight. A portion of the facility was moved underground into a deep bunker, with antenna systems concealed beneath a protective white dome.

Officially, the DSN remained focused on scientific communication, but political tensions surrounding its dual-use capabilities lingered in the background.

Eight years before the Flash event, Jason, an antenna operator, sat in front of five glowing monitors. The DSS45 dish was locked onto SOHO, completing another data pass.

Jason watched the final transmission finish and pressed the microphone switch.

“Track Four-Five, end of dump from this pass. Shall we configure for the next?”

“Negative, Four-Five,” came the reply from across the world. “We’ve received everything for today. Thank you.”

“Roger that, Track.”

He signed off, stowed the antenna, and headed for lunch, unaware of the significance of what had just been recorded.

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Later, at mission control, SOHO project leader Tom Arnold received confirmation that the latest data set had arrived. He opened the files immediately.

His colleague Kelly leaned over his shoulder as he adjusted the graphs.

“This doesn’t look good,” she said quietly.

“I know,” Tom replied. “We’re going to have to explain this.”

For a moment, the room fell still.

SO WE HAVE A PROBLEM.

Tom called a meeting with the senior JPL staff. He knew that presenting raw data alone would not be enough; they would need context, framing, and caution. Without it, the warning would be dismissed as academic speculation.

Standing at the head of the conference table, he began.

“Gentlemen, I’ve called you here to discuss the latest findings from SOHO.”

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“For seven years, we’ve been collecting data on solar flares and CME activity, attempting to identify patterns that might allow prediction. What we’ve found is a cycle, approximately twelve years in length, where solar intensity peaks.”

He glanced around the room.

“This pattern may have an underlying cause we don’t yet understand. But what matters is what it implies.”

He continued.

“In 1859, astronomer Richard Carrington observed a massive solar disturbance. The resulting geomagnetic storm, now known as the Carrington Event, was the most powerful ever recorded. It caused telegraph systems worldwide to fail, operators to receive electric shocks, and even ignited telegraph paper.”

The room shifted uneasily.

“If an event of that magnitude occurred today,” Tom said, “the consequences would be catastrophic. Modern electrical grids, satellites, and communications networks are interconnected, so if a large enough geomagnetic pulse could trigger cascading failures across continents.”

He let that sink in.

“That is why this matters. Because our data suggests increased solar flare activity in the coming phases.”

A NASA representative raised his hand.

“So what are you saying, can we predict impact zones?”

Tom nodded slowly. “The most likely period of heightened activity is around September. If current models are correct, the southern hemisphere will be most exposed, particularly regions near the Southern Ocean, including Antarctica, Chile, New Zealand, and Australia.”

A faint attempt at humour broke the tension.

“So basically,” someone muttered, “sunburn for everyone south of the equator?”

A few chuckles followed, but the atmosphere remained strained.

“Jokes aside,” the NASA representative said, turning serious again, “there’s something else. Erol James from Nimbus 7 has additional findings.”

All eyes turned. Erol stood. He was known for his precision, not his warmth, and the room quietened further as he began.

“Nimbus 7 has been monitoring the Antarctic ozone layer since the 1970s. What we’ve observed is that the ozone hole is not static; it shifts and oscillates. From orbit, its movement resembles a slow, rotating instability, drifting between regions and intensifying during winter cycles.”

He paused.

“Our models show a recurring pattern. And in some projections, the timing overlaps with periods of increased solar activity.”

Tom frowned. “You’re suggesting alignment?”

Erol nodded. “The probability is low, but non-zero. And the consequences of overlap are not yet fully understood.”

Silence followed.

Tom exhaled. “So we have a problem.”

The room fell silent.

SILENCE

Shamone wakes slowly, pulled from a deep, heavy sleep. She wouldn't have stirred at all if Ken hadn't been shifting restlessly beside her. Daylight presses faintly through the room. Everything feels still, perhaps too still.

There's no low electrical hum from the appliances. No distant chatter of morning birds. Not even the familiar barking of neighbourhood dogs. The silence sits thick in the air, unnatural, oppressive.

She frowns, listening harder.... Nothing.

A thought creeps in, Were the birds affected by the Flash? Flying blind... they wouldn't last long. Other daytime animals would struggle too. The first nights must have belonged to the nocturnal hunters. A feeding frenzy in the dark.

She shivers.

All she wants now is a bath.

She feels filthy, unclean in a way that clings beneath the skin. The perfume she once relied on has turned against her, mixing with sweat into something sour. Ken smells worse; he's been outside every day, coming back with the scent of dust and effort.

They agreed to conserve water. Washing was a luxury. But she's starting to break that rule. Secret sponge baths. Quick, guilty rituals to quiet the rising panic inside her. The need to be clean has sharpened into something obsessive... something she can't quite control, and it's hurting her.

The doctor warned her that too much stress would affect her pregnancy, and she didn't listen. Now there's blood.

Her chest tightens as the thought surfaces again, *another miscarriage*. She knows it, even if she hasn't said it aloud. Her body already has.

Her eyes squeeze shut, and the tears come quietly.

When she opens them again, the world is still blurred. Shapes drift in and out of focus, but her peripheral vision is clearer. It feels wrong and unnatural.

It happened mid-sermon. She can still feel the rhythm of her words, the calm certainty as she spoke at the altar.

Then, light, a long, searing flash, burst through the windows, blinding.

Some in the congregation never saw it, heads bowed in prayer. Others looked up too late, caught in the aftershock.

There was confusion, and voices rose. People are realising they couldn't see.

She tries to piece it together, but the memory slips, fragmented and unreliable. Like her mind refuses to hold it. Sight and thought... somehow connected.

She rolls onto her side and reaches out. Her fingers find Ken beside her, still asleep. She leaves him there and carefully rises.

The house feels unfamiliar in the quiet. She gropes her way to the bathroom. The smell hits her first, the toilet, unflushed. Ken left the bucket beside it, as agreed. One flush a day. She finishes, lifts the bucket. It feels too light. There's no water. She must get more.

Moving slowly, she makes her way outside, careful not to wake anyone. The air is cool, empty. She places the bucket beneath the tank tap and turns it.

Nothing, no trickle, no splash.

She twists it further. The valve resists, then stops.

Still nothing.

“Bugger,” she snaps.

The word feels too loud in the silence, but rewarding. She lowers her voice, almost whispering now.

“This fucking sucks...”

She sinks down beside the tank, mouthing the words over and over until they lose their edge.

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Stephen watches from the kitchen window. He sees the empty tank. Figures it out quickly, either it’s run dry... or someone’s been taking from it.

Shamone slumps beside it, muttering to herself. Even from here, he can tell the words aren’t polite. He smirks, thinking that the angel has cracked.

Their relationship has always been strained. She carries herself like something above him, polished, composed, and quietly judging. A princess in neat clothes and careful speech.

When Ken first introduced her, Stephen saw the beauty. That didn’t last. Not once were they alone. The way she ignored him, the way her expression tightened, told him everything.

They play nice when Ken’s around and always have, but it’s a thin act, and they both know it.

Stephen leans back slightly, watching her.

He thinks about the Church. About the people who claimed to be closest to God. Funny how often they fell the hardest.

Prison taught him that; the guards were worse than the inmates.

Thinking of Jimmy, the Spider, the worst of them all. Cruel for the sake of it. Creative in ways that linger. He loved the *Barf Treatment*. Smearing vomit through cells during dinner so the stench would hit when prisoners returned. And if that wasn't enough, faeces. Blocking sewage lines until the whole place choked on it. The smell never left. It soaked into everything.

Stephen prayed back then for it to stop, but it only got worse. It seemed that with each prayer, something more brutal, more deliberate was answered.

So he stopped.

And just like that... Jimmy stopped too.

Stephen exhales slowly.

Now he imagines Jimmy, blind, helpless, trapped somewhere just like the rest of them. A small, cold satisfaction settles in.

He looks back at Shamone. The smell drifting through the house... it reminds him of the cell, and then it clicks.

An idea.

A slow smile spreads across his face, payback.

He grabs his bag and slips out quietly through the side door.

BURIED

Jason is slouched at the antenna operations desk when the Flash hits. Every monitor erupts into blinding white, then dies. The lights flicker but hold. His screens freeze mid-data. Silence follows.

Jason blinks, frowning.

“What the...?”

Irritated, he leans forward and taps commands into the keyboard. Nothing responds. No lag, no error, just dead input. His eyes flick toward the hallway, where the diesel backup indicator glows faintly.

At first, he assumes it’s just another power hiccup. It happens often enough. But then he notices his supervisor.

Sergeant Rickard, newly appointed, self-assured, sits behind the commander’s desk like a captain on the bridge of a starship. Feet up. Book in hand. Calm... until the flicker.

Now his screens are frozen too. Rickard lowers his book slowly, reaches for the microphone, and presses the transmit button.

“Central control, (The control centre at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, California) this is Bera...”

(Bera, short for Canberra.)

He waits. Only static answers. He tries again. And again. Nothing but a low, hissing void.

His jaw tightens. Without another word, he heads for the Comms Room.

Rachel is already there, working fast. She sits surrounded by a maze of switches and blinking panels, patching lines

with urgent precision. The moment Rickard steps in, she doesn't turn.

"Rachel, any of the comms lines working?"

"I'm trying, Sarge!"

Her fingers move quickly across the console.

"Central Comms, this is Bera Comms, do you copy?"

She switches channels, tries again... silence, again... nothing.

She finally spins in her chair, frustration breaking through.

"Nothing, Sarge."

"Keep trying."

She nods and turns back, but something nags at her. The diesel backup light shouldn't affect comms, those run through UPS. They should be stable. But the sound in her headset is wrong. Sounds too hollow, too distant. Echoing, like it's not local.

Rickard returns to the control room.

"What's the status of the antennas?" he asks.

Jason doesn't look up.

"No updates. Screens are blank. Surveillance is down."

Jason grabs the phone... It's dead. He exhales sharply.

"Phones are out too, Sarge."

Jason still calls him that out of habit; six years in the Royal Australian Navy drilled it into him. Even now, a decade later, it sticks. The uniform doesn't help. Rickard tests his own phone.... Dead.

He turns back, decisive.

"Jason, go to Maintenance. Find out what's going on."

"Yes, Sarge."

Jason moves quickly into the hallway. He presses the elevator *up* button. The button is normally lit up, dead. He presses it again. Still nothing.

“Shit...”

He pivots to the emergency stairwell and swipes his pass. No beep. The door doesn't move.

He swipes again.... again.

Nothing.

A flicker of panic rises. He slams the emergency override, glass button meant to release the lock.

No click.

No release.

“Hooo..ly shit...”

His pulse spikes.

Think, there is another exit. He turns and heads back through Comms, passing Rachel without a word, and reaches the secondary emergency door behind the racks. He swipes...

Nothing, again...Nothing.

He grips the handle and pushes. It doesn't budge. The override glass fails as well.

A hollow silence presses in around him.

“Holy... fucking... shit.”

He turns and sees that Rachel is staring at him now, wide-eyed.

“Does this mean what I think it does?”

Jason lowers his head, swallowing the urge to swear again. He knows her, knows her beliefs, her sensitivity. He doesn't want to cross that line.

He's liked her for years. Never said a word, the timing was always wrong, and still is.

He exhales slowly.

“...Yeah,” he says. “I think it does.”

Her voice tightens.

“What’s going on? What happened?”

Jason looks at the sealed door, which is stuck in the world of silence. He doesn’t have answers, but one thing is certain.

They’re not getting out anytime soon.

TIME TO WAKE UP

Crouched on the ground, Shamone trembles, a string of profanities spilling from her lips, words that feel foreign coming from her. The outburst clashes with who she believes herself to be. This isn't her. Not really.

She lifts her hand, hesitates... then slaps herself hard across the face.

“Wake up.”

The sting lingers, but nothing changes.

She exhales sharply, shame creeping in. She was being selfish. The word settles heavily in her chest. As a pastor, she knows better. How can she lead others when she's losing herself, when all she can see is her own fear?

A verse surfaces in her mind, unbidden:

“One who has isolated oneself seeks their desires; They reject all sound judgment.”

Proverbs 18:1.

Her jaw tightens. That has always been her weakness. Dressing selfishness up as care, convincing herself it's justified, *for her family, for their future*. But deep down, she knows the truth.

Rachel used to call her out on it. The thought lands like a jolt.

Her eyes widen. “Where is she?”

The question echoes in the silence.

Shamone's fixation on her own situation had pushed everything else aside, even Rachel. Her sister is working

shifts down in the underground bunker at the tracking station.

"Was she on duty that day?"

Shamone pushes herself upright, disoriented, and stumbles into the house and down the hallway, one hand brushing the wall for guidance.

"Ken! Ken!"

Her voice cracks through the house, louder than intended.

In the bedroom, Ken stirs at the noise, blinking himself awake just as she bursts in. He studies her, confused at first, but something about her has changed. There's a sharpness in her expression now. A resolve that hasn't been there before.

"Rachel," she says, breathless. "We haven't heard from Rachel!"

The urgency in her voice cuts through the thick air. Ken sits up slowly, the realisation dawning on him as well.

"Was she working that day?"

"I don't know," Shamone admits, shaking her head.

"What do we do? We have to find her."

There's no hesitation now. No doubt. Just determination.

Surprisingly, Ken feels a flicker of relief. This is something they can act on. Something solid in the middle of all the uncertainty.

But the reality quickly follows. The tracking station sits beyond the Bullen Range, an hour by car on a good day. On foot... hours. And Rachel's place in Tuggeranong might be closer, but still not easy, and then there's Shamone.

He studies her carefully.

"What about your sight?"

She appears to look at him.

“It’s getting better,” she lies, too quickly. “I can still see enough. My peripheral vision’s fine.”

The fib hangs between them. Ken doesn’t challenge her, not directly. He doesn’t like it. Doesn’t like any of this. But he can see it in her posture, in the way she’s already bracing herself to move. She’s not backing down. Maybe... maybe this is what they need. A purpose, something to cut through the fear.

He exhales slowly.

“Alright,” he says, though the concern never leaves his face. “We’ll figure it out.”

Shamone nods, already turning toward the door.

They don’t say it aloud, but they’re both thinking the same thing:

If something’s happened... they might already be too late.

**

The Ops crew waits for a rescue. At first, they counted time in hours... then days... then stopped counting altogether.

When the generators finally died, the bunker didn’t go quiet all at once; it faded. A low mechanical hum thinning into nothing, like something exhaling its last breath.

Then came the dark, and the cold followed quickly after.

It crept into the walls, into their bones, into the spaces between them. Without power, the bunker felt smaller. Closer. Like the concrete itself had begun to press inward.

That’s when Timmy got sick.

At first, it was subtle. A tremor in his hands. A delay in his speech. He tried to hide it, stretching what little insulin he

had left, measuring doses like they were pieces of his own life, but there wasn't enough. There was never going to be enough.

Rachel held him when it got bad, when his breathing turned shallow, and his body stopped listening to him. She whispered to him, prayed over him, begged for something, anything, to change, and nothing did.

Timmy died in her arms in the Supervisor's office.

After that, the bunker felt different, a little smaller, perhaps occupied.

They moved his body to the plant room, the only place they could bear to leave him, but the air carried him back to them anyway. A sour, creeping rot that no one spoke about.

No one needed to.

They made the supervisor's office into a place to sleep. The break room is something like a shelter. Couch cushions became beds. Blankets became shared heat. Sometimes, in the coldest hours, they huddled together just to feel alive.

The vending machine ran empty. The water ran out soon after. Thirst sharpened everything. Made thoughts brittle and silence louder.

Jason was the one who finally said it.

"The cable tunnel."

The words hung there.

Even before he explained, they all knew what he meant. No one liked that tunnel. No one had ever liked it.

Maintenance crews joked about it in a way that wasn't really joking. Stories about sounds where there shouldn't be sounds. About things moving when no one else was there.

About how the darkness in there felt... wrong, too thick, too close.

Jason had never been inside it himself. Only heard about it. Three hundred metres of cramped, crawling space beneath the ground, leading out toward the antenna. Although, a way out or something worse.

But they were out of options. They gather in the plant room.

It is completely black now. Not the kind of darkness your eyes adjust to, the kind that stays absolute, no matter how long you stare into it.

Jason could hear them breathing. Rachel reaches for him, wrapping her arms around him suddenly. He stiffens, then lets himself lean into it. Neither of them says anything.

They didn't need to.

The smell in the room is unbearable now. Decay stale air with a layer of human waste. It clings to the back of the throat, impossible to ignore.

The Sergeant reaches out and presses something into Jason's hand.

"A watch," he says quietly. "Radiation detector. The dial goes red, you run. You understand?"

Jason nods, though the gesture is lost in the dark.

"Good man," the Sergeant adds, steady as ever. Like this was just another operation, another mission.

Jason wonders how he does that, holds himself together like that or if he is just better at hiding the cracks.

The tunnel entrance is sealed off, and sandbags are packed around the cable tray as a firebreak. The hatch itself wouldn't open.

So Jason climbs onto the cable tray. He feels for the bags and begins pulling them away, one by one.

Each movement is louder than it should be. Each shift of fabric and sand echoes into the dark beyond. When the gap is just wide enough, he lowers himself and pushes forward.

The tunnel swallows him immediately. The air inside is... different, damp, enclosed.

There is a faint, musky smell, earthy, almost, but beneath it, something else lingers. Something he couldn't place.

He forces himself onto the cable tray and begins to crawl.

It is slow and awkward. The ceiling presses low above his back, cables biting into his palms.

After a few metres, something stabs into his knee. He flinches hard and sucks in a breath.

Reaching down, he feels it, a jagged edge of plastic. A cut cable tie, sharpened like a blade, and there are many more.

He hesitates, then keeps going. There is no choice. Soon his knees are wet. He doesn't need to see to know why.

The darkness stretches on endlessly, swallowing distance, distorting time. His breathing sounds too loud. His movements echo back at him, delayed, like something behind him is repeating them. He stops to listen, nothing. Then, something, a faint sound. He freezes.

It isn't clear. Not really movement.

Just... something that doesn't belong. He shakes his head, forcing himself forward again. Then he sees it.

A faint light ahead, weak and flickering.

Relief surges through him, but it doesn't last.

As he gets closer, he spots the source: a tiny LED on the emergency light unit. No main light. Just this dull, dying glow. Although it is enough to see shapes and enough to imagine things.

He moves past it quickly and sees another and another.

Each one carving out a small pocket of visibility in the endless dark. Each one leaves a deeper darkness behind him.

The tunnel begins to narrow. The ceiling presses lower. The cables rise closer beneath him. He has to flatten himself, dragging his body forward inch by inch, the space tightens like it is closing around him. Then he reaches the end.

The barrier, with the sandbags again.

He pushes through them, forcing his body into the next space. The air changes.

Echoes followed him now, his movements returning louder, distorted. He understands that each antenna has an empty internal hollow cylinder that serves as an anchor to stabilise the structure during weather events. He believes that the cables from the operation building follow through this cylinder and exit at the base.

The chamber is bigger, but it doesn't feel safer. He moves along the cable tray until it begins to tilt upward. He needs to climb the 30 metres to the base. He stares into the darkness above. No light, no sign of an exit.

The unknown is waiting. He starts climbing. The cable tray acts as a ladder. Each rung that ties the cables acts as a step into blindness, and his grip holds the edges.

His hands slipped more than once, slick with sweat... and something thicker. grease perhaps.

The sound of his effort fills the chamber, bouncing back at him in warped echoes that don't quite match his movements. He stops to listen for any moment or clue.

He hears something else; perhaps an item from the tray has fallen to the bottom. He holds his breath, only silence. His own heartbeat is loud in his ears.

He keeps climbing because stopping feels worse, and going back feels impossible, because something about the dark below no longer feels safe.

Jason's strength is bleeding away. Hunger hollows him out, leaves him lightheaded, unsteady. The weight he used to carry is gone now, stripped from him by darkness and time. Long shifts, stale air, neglect, it's all caught up with him.

If I get out... I'll fix it.

The thought feels distant, fragile, but rewarding.

Every movement is blind. Every step is a guess. He lifts his foot, searching, brushing past bundled cables until there is another rung. He presses down, shifts his weight, and keeps hauling himself up. Five steps, he thinks, he stops, breathing hard.

The darkness helps. If he can see how high he is, he'll freeze. He climbs again. Ten more steps.

The space tightens. The ladder narrows. His boots scrape, slipping against restraints that don't quite hold. Each movement drags a grunt from his throat, the sound echoing back, louder, distorted, like someone else is climbing with him.

His hands burn, so raw. He clings there, unsure how long his grip will last.

"Help!" he shouts.

The chamber answers with his own voice, warped by confinement. He keeps climbing. He doesn't know where the strength comes from anymore. He doesn't want to question it.

At last, his hand strikes metal, perhaps a hatch. He feels around, touches a handle, feeling excited, and twists. It doesn't give, nothing, it doesn't move.

“WHO THE HELL DESIGNED THIS?” His voice cracks against the walls.

He slumps against the cables, wrapping himself around them. Sweat and blood slicked his hands. He forces himself to reach higher, feeling where the cables disappear into the ceiling. Feeling rubber, he presses further, relieved that it gives.

His fingers push through, and cold air brushes his skin.

“Outside” he bellows.

“I’m too close to fail.”

If he reaches through... he may be able to find the outdoor handle.

He braces and climbs off the ladder, onto the cables. They shift under his weight. His grip slips, and suddenly he’s hanging.

One hand clamps the wires. The other reaches blindly through the opening.

He swings slightly, boots scraping for something that isn’t there.

His vision sharpens in the dark. He imagines the hatch, guesses where the handle should be. His fingers find it and pull, but nothing moves.

The resistance drains him all at once. He slips back down, catching the ladder hard.

He clings there, shaking.

Then the shaking turns to quiet, exhausted sobs. His forehead rests against the cables. His eyes close. Sleep pulls at him.

“No!” He jerks awake. If he lets go now, he won’t wake up.

He thinks of Rachel, her arms around him in the dark.

The way she held him. He swallows.

“I’m not dying here,” he whispers.

One more try.

He climbs again. Higher this time and further.

His arm forces through the gap, deeper than before. He reaches, stretching until pain tears through his shoulder.

There, he feels the handle and feels something else, a button.

He presses it, and a faint click.

“That’s it...” he breathes.

He swings his body, once, twice, then wrenches the handle. It moves.

The hatch bursts inward, slamming open, missing his head by inches.

Cold air floods in, real air. He hangs there, stunned, suspended between falling and freedom. Then he pulls himself through.

He collapses onto the surface, gasping. Above him, the inner antenna dome is beginning to pale as the emerging dawn approaches.

For the first time in two weeks, there is space, air and openness.

Not sure why he thought of it, but he looks down at the radiation detector and sees green. Safe or safe enough.

Something is wrong; as he reaches the dome exit, the complex is dark. Very still, no lights, and no movement.

Abandoned.

He looks over at the main building, and the front door stands open. He runs over, and inside is empty. He goes to the bunker door. Of course, it’s locked.

He turns and runs again, out toward the gardener’s shed near the front boom gate, searching for a crowbar or

something. The morning light now spreads across the ground, sharpening everything. He can see again.

He reaches the shed and grabs the handle, locked.

“Seriously?” he snaps.

Then, a sound from inside.

A movement.

Jason freezes. The shed is barely big enough for tools. No one should be inside. He steps closer, pulse hammering. He knocks.

“Hello?”

A JOURNEY'S GOAL

Ken helps Shamone pack, quietly replacing her usual choices with warmer clothes and sturdy runners. She always dresses for style, not survival, but today is different. He checks everything twice.

Ken remembers that Stephen was sleeping on the lounge. Ken glances toward the hallway. "Maybe he should come with us," he says.

Shamone shrugs. "If he wants to."

Ken steps into the living room. The blanket is crumpled, cold and empty.

"Stephen?" he calls. No answer.

He studies the room. The mess tells him Stephen was here, but not anymore.

Should I wait? Leave a note?

Behind him, Shamone appears in the archway. "Isn't he here, honey?"

"No," Ken says. "I'll leave a note."

But even as he says it, the doubt lingers.

The question of departure nags at him: leave now, or wait for night. Daylight means visibility, danger seen before it strikes. Night offers cover, but slows them down, makes every step uncertain.

In another life, he thinks, a tandem bike would've solved everything. But anything useful now gets stolen. Better to look like you have nothing.

He scans the bedroom for supplies. The pistol waits in the drawer. Stephen's words echo in his mind. Ken hesitates, then takes it.

“Honey?” Shamone calls.

“Coming.”

He slips the pistol into his pack.

They move south along the bike paths, avoiding the roads. West Belconnen fades behind them. North Tuggeranong feels impossibly far away. They pass silent suburbs. Empty schools. Nobody is around.

Ken keeps his grip on Shamone’s hand and lowers his gaze, masking his awareness. He’s learned the hard way that if people think you can see, you become a target. So they pretend to be blind, vulnerable and harmless.

“Stick close,” he murmurs. “If we hear anyone, act worse than we are.”

She nods.

The air is cold. Dawn hasn’t broken. Water will be a problem. Ken tracks the waterways in his mind, planning each stop. Beside him, Shamone whispers prayers under her breath.

They pass beneath the parkway. Cars are still frozen in both directions. Something smells wrong, rotten.

“Where’s that smell coming from?” Shamone asks.

Ken hesitates... then answers.

“The Flash stopped cars, causing crashes... people got trapped.” He swallows. “Some didn’t make it.”

Shamone exhales shakily. “Oh, dear God...”

The roads are no longer safe. Bicycle gangs rule them now, moving goods, moving people, profiting off the blind. Cash still works. Cards don’t. Ken had been asked to join them before. He always refused and always ran.

They approach an underpass. Ken raises his stick, sweeping it back and forth as they walk. It's a performance, a lie.

On the other side, shapes emerge. A gang waits. Ken recognises the leader immediately. Danger radiates from him. The gang's trolley rattles behind them, blind travellers gripping its handle.

He will rely on his faith to get through this. The leader steps in front and says,

"I know you; you're the guy who helped us a couple of days ago." Ken thinks of the pistol in his bag and responds, "I did, and now I'm helping this lady."

The leader isn't convinced and looks suspicious:

"Yeah, I can see that; how is she paying you? With her twat?"

Shamone doesn't like where this is going and says pompously, "I beg your pardon; this is my husband." Ken rolls his eyes, looks down, and realises he should have warned her, so he says,

"I can handle this, dear."

"Dear! Leader interrupts, Dear, oh, Dear, what do we have here? A twat and a seer." There is irony in his voice, and the leader turns to his partner with a giggle,

"Hey Moody! How was that?"

Moody is leading the people mover, a bicycle trailer with a long handle for blind people to hold onto. He replies,

"Yeah! Boss, that was a good one."

The leader turns back to Ken,

"So what's going to be, Seer? Are we going to have a little fun with her twat?"

Ken stares back at the leader, wondering whether he has time to reach for his pistol, but he knows the leader is packing a gun. The man with the gun is always the leader. Ken decides to play it safe and use the religion card,

“God is watching us all and will decide what will happen here today.”

The leader shakes his head, takes the gun from his vest, and objects,

“No, he won’t; I say what will happen!”

Then he raises his gun to the sky, continues, “This is the God O’Mighty,” and pulls the trigger. The gun didn’t go off. Instead, it went “Click.”

“Shit! Dam thing,” the leader says.

Ken sees the opening, reaches into his bag, pulls out his pistol, and points it at the leader, and says,

“It looks as though God has decided.”

Ken didn’t want violence, so he waved his gun up the path,

“Why don’t you be on your way then?”

The leader looks at him and then at Shamone with disappointment, then turns to Moody,

“You heard him; let’s go.”

The leader returns the gun to his vest as though nothing had happened. Ken looks over at Moody and senses that things will change between them. Moody gets off his bike and walks towards the leader. The leader knows he’s in trouble and runs up the path with Moody in pursuit.

During their exchange, Shamone wanted to interject, but she had to have faith, and she was pleased not to interfere.

She reaches over and hugs him from behind, remaining silent. Ken is tense and jumps when he feels Shamone; her

touch soothes him, and he relaxes. He smiles as they both look down the path at the chase.

“Let’s go,” Ken urges.

One of the blind members holding onto the trailer bar yells out,

“Hey! What about us?”

Ken pauses, looking back.

“God will decide,” he says.

Then, softer:

“Trust me,” and they keep walking.

An hour later, they reach Kambah Primary school.

Shamone stumbles, so they settle.

Ken was anticipating the question about the gun, but it never came.

By midday, they reached Rachel’s house and approached carefully.

“Rachel?” Shamone calls with no answer. They circled the house and noted no signs of forced entry.

Outside... everything looks untouched.

Ken knocks, no answer.

“Do you have a key?” he asks. Shamone shakes her head.

Ken pushes the door anyway. It opens.

The smell hits them instantly. Inside is silence, and something is wrong. They search, but nothing.

Then they find the dog, Betty, lying still, unmoved.

Shamone turns away, and Ken exhales slowly.

“She hasn’t been here since the Flash,” he says. “If she’s at the station...” He doesn’t finish his sentence. Shamone already knows.

“We have to go to her.”

They bury Betty in the garden. It was Shamone who insisted. Ken doesn't argue.

Night comes quickly, and the cold settles in. They eat what they can find and rest in the spare room.

Neither sleeps well.

In the morning, Ken finds a larger backpack and prepares. The mountains are waiting. They can see the Bullen Ranges ahead. It will be long, hard, and unforgiving.

THE RESCUE

The Supervisor's office was unnaturally cold. Rachel shivered in the dark, unable to tell how long she had been trapped inside. Time had lost all meaning; she would close her eyes and drift, only to wake again, unsure whether seconds or hours had passed. There was no food. No water. Her strength was fading.

Her thoughts drifted to Mark, back in Artarmon. A Presbyterian minister, always travelling, always serving somewhere else. That was how they met, through the Church. Shamone had introduced them after a service in Gowrie. Even then, Shamone hadn't approved. She had seen something Rachel hadn't wanted to, perhaps ambition.

Mark always wanted more: status, recognition, and power within the Church. At first, Rachel had been swept up in his charm. He knew exactly what to say, how to make her feel chosen. But over time, the cracks had shown. The late nights, the distance, and the suspicion that she wasn't the only one.

Now, in the suffocating dark, she finally admitted it to herself.

She wanted out.

Her thoughts shifted to Jason. Since the lockdown, he had been her anchor, steady, reliable, real. With him, she felt safe in a way she never had with Mark. She trusted him. More than that... she missed him.

When he'd insisted on going through the tunnel alone, it hadn't felt right. None of it had. The Sarge should have gone. They all should have gone together. But Jason had been certain, and she had believed him.

Now she sat in silence, whispering the same prayer over and over, her voice barely more than breath.

“I believe your words are true. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and be my Saviour.”

A faint tapping broke the silence. Rachel froze.

“Did you hear that?”

The Sarge stood, feeling his way toward the door.

“Sounds like it’s coming from the stairwell.”

Rachel was already moving, stumbling through the darkness.

“Let’s go!”

They reached the door. The sound was clearer now, metal against metal.

The Sarge began pounding on it.

“Help! Down here!”

On the other side, Jason wedged a crowbar into the door seam and pulled. The metal groaned but held.

“Again,” Bill urged, gripping the flashlight.

Jason strained, muscles shaking, then the seal gave way with a sharp crack. The door burst open.

Rachel didn’t hesitate. She lunged forward, colliding with Jason and sending them both tumbling onto the stairs. She clung to him, shaking, breathless, laughing and crying all at once.

“You came back... ” “You came back,” she whispered, then louder, almost hysterical, “You’re my hero, you’re my saviour!”

Jason steadied her, holding her close for a moment longer than necessary.

Behind them, the Sarge folded his arms, unimpressed.

“What took you so long?”

Jason eased Rachel back, catching his breath.

“Sorry, Sarge. Took time to get through the tunnel... and find a crowbar.”

He glanced around.

“But there’s something else, the place is abandoned.”

The Sarge turned sharply, noticing Bill. “ Well, explain.”

Bill swallowed, visibly shaken. “Things aren’t good, sir.”

“That’s not an explanation.” Sarge stiffens.

Jason stepped in. “We need air and water. Then we talk.”

Reluctantly, the Sarge nodded.

They moved toward the canteen near the front gate. The kitchen had been ransacked, cupboards torn open, supplies gone.

Jason led Rachel carefully, one hand holding hers, the other guiding Bill, who had been blinded.

At the water tank, Jason drank deeply. Rachel and the Sarge followed, desperate.

Bill hovered nearby. “There’s... some canned food in the garden shed. Jackie kept extras there.” He hesitated.

“The bikers took the rest.”

The Sarge’s patience snapped. “What bikers? What the hell is going on here?”

They moved over and sat at one of the canteen tables. The silence stretched.

Then the Sarge leaned forward, studying Bill. “What’s wrong with your eyes?”

Bill blinked slowly. “Everything’s... yellow. Ever since that big flash in the sky. Peripheral vision’s fine, but... anything I look at directly, it’s just yellow.”

Jason exhaled. “You’ve been snow-blind by the sun.”

“The sun?” Bill frowned.

“A solar event,” Jason explained. “EMP-level. I read about it in a NASA report. A scenario in the article suggests it will happen within the next couple of months. I’m not sure why I thought of it now. I had suspicions, but when you said you couldn’t see, it confirmed the scenario. Although these are my guesses. A strong enough burst could knock out power, destroy electronics... even affect vision. If you were exposed directly...”

Bill nodded slowly. “I was outside.” The Sarge frowned. “And the radiation watch?”

“Still green, this wasn’t a nuclear explosion, as we first thought; it was an EMP from the sun,” Jason said.

Rachel cut in, her voice tight. “Forget that, what about the bikers?” All eyes turned to Bill, and he looked down.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Try us,” the Sarge said coldly.

Bill took a breath.

“It was four days after the Flash...”

He told them everything. The blindness. The failed attempts to reach the bunker. The waiting. The hope that help would come. Then the sound of engines, Motorcycles.

Private James at the gate didn’t stand a chance. The gate was breached by six armed men on motorcycles.

“They locked us in,” Bill said, voice hollow. “Took what they wanted.”

Rachel’s hands clenched. “Susanne... what happened to her?”

Bill hesitated too long. Then quietly,

“They took her.”

The room fell silent.

He continued, “We thought we’d be safe and went to the main entrance. They were quite aggressive; some liked how Susanne looked, always wearing skimpy dresses, trying to attract the men here. I don't think it helped her in this mess. They locked us in the maintenance room and told us to stay put. I had a feeling they’d kill us, but I didn't say anything.”

Rachel, worried, asks, “Did they do anything to Susanne?”

Bill turns toward her and says,

“Okay.”

He debates whether to tell her more, then decides she needs to know: The Sarge interrupts, 'Four days, you've been up here for four days, and you didn't come down to let us out?'

Bill could not argue, “There were five of us working up here on that Sunday; Oscar, down at the powerhouse; Roy in the maintenance building and Susanne at reception.

“The gang liked Susanne, took her away. Kept her locked in an admin office, barricaded us in the maintenance room, and thankfully left food and water. We heard her screaming sometimes, and felt helpless because we knew she was suffering. We planned to catch one of the Bikers that night. Roy tried to booby-trap the door so they’d get hit. They didn't know the maintenance room was full of tools we could use as weapons. When the door opened, it triggered, and we ran. I knew I wouldn't get away, so I tried to distract Roy and Oscar. I tackled him; he struggled free and ran after them, leaving me behind. Just then, the power cut out, and everything went dark; probably the fuel ran out. I knew I had only one place to hide: the garden shed. They’d never find me there. I also knew the best way in was undetected. Roy must’ve made it to

the front gate and run toward the creek. I heard a shot, then silence. The Biker with the gun yelled, "I got him!" Oscar must have stumbled to the admin office to free Susanne; they must have got away because I didn't hear any screams. They must have realised it was too dark to search for them, and they all left. They had taken all the food from the kitchen stock and the cars' petrol. I yelled out for Oscar and Susanne, but got no response. So I locked myself in the garden shed in case they returned.'

Rachel gripped Jason's hand, trembling. Tears slipped silently down her face. The Sarge leaned back slowly, his expression hardening.

"This isn't war," he muttered. Then, after a pause,
"It's worse."

KEEPING IT TOGETHER

It takes Oscar longer than he expects to get Susanne to the DSS-45 cable wrap room. It's the only place he can think of, somewhere hidden, somewhere they can lock themselves in and disappear.

DSS-45 looms in the dark, a 34-metre antenna sitting half a kilometre north of the main building. Oscar grips Susanne's hand as he feels his way along the outside hanging cable tray. The night is thick, but the sounds carry, the distant rumble of motorbikes, the occasional shout echoing from the complex behind them.

They hear engines revving. Oscar pulls her down behind the elevated trays. They crouch low, not daring to move. Headlights sweep the road in long, searching arcs, but the bikes don't come closer. Eventually, the engines fade, drifting away into the distance. Only then does Oscar move again.

Step by careful step, he guides her to the antenna base, into the dome and down the narrow stairwell beneath the riser, and into the cable wrap room. Maintenance keeps it locked. The key is hidden, deliberately, but he knows where. His fingers brush against the door, and relief hits him in a quiet rush when the key turns and opens the door.

Inside, a faint emergency light glows, but it doesn't help much. They still have to feel their way.

The room curves in a ring. The inner wall moves with the antenna; the outer wall is fixed. Thick cables hang in looping arcs, stretching and retracting with every shift of the dish above.

Oscar eases them down against the outer wall.

Susanne is shivering, and he reaches toward her, trying to steady her, but she flinches away. Misreading him, or maybe not trusting anything anymore. Oscar withdraws his hand, unsure what to say. If she knew he wasn't interested in her like that, maybe she'd relax. But now isn't the time.

They sit in silence in the cold, dark room.

With the power cut off completely, everything plunges deeper into black. In a strange way, it helps. No light means no visibility. No visibility means no easy targets. They wait, and time drifts.

Eventually, a thin line of daylight creeps under the door. Oscar climbs the stairs cautiously and peers outside. Feels like morning, quiet, no engines, no movement. The compound feels abandoned, but that doesn't mean it's safe. He goes back down.

Susanne hasn't moved much. She's curled into herself, eyes flicking, breathing shallow, like she's still trapped somewhere else entirely. Oscar thinks that they can't stay; they must move.

"Susanne..." he says gently, reaching for her hand. "We've got to go."

No response.

He tries again, firmer this time. "Susanne. Come on."

Still nothing.

Desperation creeps in.

"Your mum rang," he lies, suddenly, forcing urgency into his voice. "Told me to bring you home. Let's go."

That triggers something, not much, but enough.

He pulls her to her feet. She resists at first, weakly, then gives in. Together, unsteady, they climb back to the surface.

Outside, the compound is eerily still. he tells that they need to leave this place.

Oscar knows of the track leading away from the antenna towards the paddock gate. The gate opens to farmland surrounding the complex.

He keeps hold of her hand, guiding her along the road until it dissolves into a rough fire trail, the path toward the Bullen Range. If they can follow it, they might make it to Canberra. It won't be easy.

His vision is changing again. The yellow distortion is gone, but everything is blurred, washed out, except in sunlight, where things sharpen slightly.

They reach the boundary gate. Oscar exhales. Power's out, meaning the electric fence is off. Easy crossing. He grabs the wire.

The shock slams through him instantly. His body seizes, then drops hard to the ground.

Susanne jerks back into reality as the current tingles through her fingers. She shakes it off, annoyed more than alarmed. Turning, she feels Oscar lying still. At first, she assumes he's resting.

"Oscar?" she says quietly.

No answer.

"Oscar...?"

Nothing.

A flicker of unease. She steps closer, kneels, and shakes him.

"Oscar! ... Oscar!"

Still nothing.

Her chest tightens. She checks his pulse. There isn't one.

"Shit!"

She had always liked Oscar. With him, she felt... safe. He didn't look at her the way other men did, no weighing, no hunger behind the eyes. Just steady, uncomplicated kindness. He treated her more like a sister than something to be claimed.

At the station, it had been different. The men flirted constantly, bold, shameless. Some would've dropped their pants if she so much as hinted. She used to laugh it off, play along when it suited her. It was easy. Too easy.

Oscar never played that game. She sometimes wondered if that meant he wasn't her type. There was nothing polished about him, no charm, no softness. Just a rough-edged country bloke with a thick accent, messy hair, and clothes that always smelled faintly of the farm.

She was a farming girl too, from Gunning. Small town, small choices. She'd been the beauty there, she knew it, whether she admitted it or not. Attention came easily, but it never meant much. The boys wanted what they saw, and the girls hated her for it.

Her mother had come from England, Oxford, proper and sharp-tongued, but life hadn't been kind to her. A lazy eye, a face others picked apart. She'd fled that world for something quieter, something real. Susanne had inherited the accent, softened but still there, enough to make her stand out. Too English for Gunning. Never quite belonging.

So she left when she could, trips to Canberra, chasing something more. That's where she met Joe. Strong, confident, obsessed with his body. With him, she felt protected. It seemed like enough at the time.

The tracking station gave her a place, a role as a public address announcer. Her voice, clear, refined, cut through the

noise. Men listened. They always did. And she let them, sometimes.

That was her mistake.

She'd thought she understood how far she could push things. Thought she could control it.

The bikers proved her wrong.

At first, they smiled. Played along. Promised to take her back to Canberra. She believed them, wanted to.

By the second night, the tone had shifted. Subtle at first. Then not at all.

Hands that didn't let go. Voices that didn't ask. She realised too late.

There was no one coming. No one to step in. No one to stop them, and they knew it.

Panic surges in her to revive Oscar, so instinct kicks in. Training overrides fear.

She rolls him onto his back, finds the centre of his chest, and starts compressions. Her hands move fast, precise. She hesitates only a second before sealing her mouth over his and breathing for him.

Again...again, and again.

Then, with no warning, he coughs.

She jerks back as Oscar sputters, dragging in air. Relief floods her so suddenly that it almost knocks her over. She rolls him onto his side, letting him breathe.

His eyes flutter open. He stares at the fence post beside him. A sign saying *Electric fence*. Memory snaps back into place.

He turns his head slowly and sees Susanne hovering over him, her expression somewhere between shock and exhaustion.

“What the hell happened?” he mutters.

She exhales hard. “You died. That’s what happened.”

He blinks. “I touched the fence... must’ve knocked me out.”

“You weren’t breathing,” she says. “I had to do CPR.”

Oscar processes that. Then, slowly, a grin creeps in.

“You gave me the kiss of life?”

She lifts her chin. “Don’t push it.”

He leans back against the dirt, hands behind his head despite everything.

“Still,” he says, almost impressed.

“Bloody great kiss.”

For the first time in days, Susanne smiles.

And just like that, for a moment, the weight of everything lifts. Oscar's condition makes her forget everything she's endured, and she's surprised at her response. She doesn't want to dwell on it, so she focuses on Oscar's condition.

‘How are you?’ she asks.

Oscar looks at her and sees her makeup smudged under her eyes, as if she's been crying. She's looking past him with a searching stare. Her blonde hair is long and straight, covering parts of her face. He's jealous of her beauty; he knows he could never attract a person like her. So he tries to tidy himself, but knows it won't help.

Getting a shock from the electric fence was confusing; it has a simple circuit, a wire and a battery. Only the power source can fail. He's baffled that the current was enough to

stop his heart. Maybe the Flash caused the battery voltage to spike.

He notices that all the electronic equipment at the station with microchips had failed since the Flash. He figures the Flash might be a nuclear or solar EMP. He read about a solar EMP in NASA magazine years ago, never thought it'd happen in his lifetime.

He scans the area: the antenna across the road, the main building beyond, everything's quiet. He wonders if the bikers are still around. He noticed that his vision had improved, perhaps a reaction to losing his life. He has an idea, it's different now that he can see, so he decides to go back and see how the others are. Last night, he heard gunshots near the creek. He wonders if Roy and Bill got away. He looks back at Susanne.

'I'm feeling pretty good, I can see better now, not sure why, all things considered; that electric fence, though, had a bloody good kick. You know, I'm sick of running. I've got an idea,' he says.

INSIGHT

Ken decides the safest way to reach the tracking station is on foot, along Kambah Pool Road, across the Murrumbidgee, then onto the Bullen Track toward Paddy's River Road. He knows the route well. They've walked these ranges before.

The track follows the spine of the Bullen Range, winding south from Cotter Dam. From its higher points, you can see the tracking station in the valley, sitting along the ridge and overlooking it.

It won't be easy at night. Ken convinces Shamone to leave at first light. Five hours, he reckons, if nothing goes wrong.

Kambah Pool Road is quiet, a dead-end used only for swimmers. Sheep paddocks stretch out on either side, broken by stands of eucalyptus. It's an easy start.

Halfway along, the transmission lines come into view. Ken slows.

Just weeks ago, he was testing those lines, switching loads, and monitoring flow. Now they hang silent over a broken world. Or so he thought.

As they pass beneath them, he hears it.

Click, click, click... A sharp, irregular snapping sound.

Ken frowns. "That's not right."

He glances up, tracking the wires as they hum faintly overhead. Something is still alive in the system, but unstable.

Shamone grips the back of his shirt.

"Something wrong?"

"You hear that?" he asks.

"The clicking?"

She acknowledges,

Relief flickers across his face. At least it's real.

"Could be the autorecloser," he says, slipping into familiar territory. "It stops surges, prevents arcing. If it's failing, it'll keep trying to reset. Or it could be a sectionaliser tripping out..."

Shamone exhales sharply.

"Ken. Not now."

He stops, turns and notices she's struggling.

"Sorry," he says gently. "Let's rest."

The sun has barely cleared the horizon, but already warmth settles over them. He leads her off the road to a patch of grass. They lay down a blanket.

She doesn't complain, though the walk is taking its toll. Instead, she leans into him, seeking comfort.

He kisses her on the forehead, then the tension breaks. For a moment, the world falls away, no danger, no uncertainty. Just closeness, she turns towards him, and they begin to kiss. Their kiss ignites to a passion for love. They remove their clothes and enjoy their closeness. Ken climbs on, careful not to be too rough.

At the peak of their sexual arousal, they come together, holding each other tightly. Shamone, feeling relieved, enjoys these rare moments.

**

Oscar and Susanne reach the station's powerhouse cautiously, moving like shadows. The bikers might be gone. or waiting.

Oscar doesn't take the chance. Inside, he finds what he needs: wire, cable, anything he can use. Back in the drafting office, he spreads it across the table. Susanne frowns.

"What are you doing?"

"Setting a trap," he says. "In case they come back."

She hesitates.

"How can you even see?"

He pauses, realising he didn't tell her how well.

"You brought me back," he says quietly. "Your CPR... somehow it worked. My sight came with it."

He leans in and kisses her cheek. She stiffens, then softens.

"That's... absurd," she murmurs. "You have to die to see again?"

"Looks that way," he says. "But we've got bigger problems."

He gestures to the wire.

"I'll rig the access road. Tie it into the electric fence. If they drive through..."

A faint smile touches her lips.

"Let's do it."

"After dark," he says. "We wait."

Her stomach growls.

"First... food?"

He nods.

"I'll find something."

**

The river is swollen, fast, cold, and unforgiving. Shamone struggles over the rocks, her footing uncertain. Ken steadies

her, scanning for a crossing. They follow the bank past Kambah Pool.

Then they see the fire.

A group sits in a loose circle, white robes glowing in the daylight.

Ken slows. He'd heard rumours. Never believed them, but now they're real.

A man stands from the fire. He calls over.

"Welcome!"

His voice carries easily. Shamone leans close.

"Who is that?"

"Trouble," Ken mutters.

The man approaches, robe hanging open, nakedness. He makes no effort to close it. Ken's grip tightens on his pack.

"Hello," the man says, smiling. "Care to join us?"

Ken forces a polite nod.

"We're just passing through. Looking for a river crossing."

The man strokes his beard slowly.

"There's one nearby. But why rush? Sit, eat, and rest."

He gestures toward the fire.

"I'm George," he continues.

Behind him, the others sit unnaturally still, watching him. Not Ken, only George.

Ken feels it then, a subtle, persistent pull. Something feels wrong.

He leans toward Shamone.

"I don't like this. But... something's not right here."

She squeezes his arm. They follow anyway.

At the fire, the group barely reacts. Eyes are dull, their movements are slow, like sleepwalkers.

George spreads his arms.

“Guests.”

George introduces them. The moment feels rehearsed, like George has done this before.

A young man nearby stirs, shaking his head weakly. Trying to focus.

“Roy,” George says quickly, cutting him off.

Ken studies Roy. There is something familiar about him.

George then turns to Ken,

“Where have you come from?”

Shamone replies,

“We are heading to the Tracking station where my sister awaits us. However, we fear the roads are dangerous, so we decided to walk.”

“Wise move, nonetheless,” George continues, “Why don't you sit for a while and have some fresh fish? I did some fishing this morning. It might be carp, but it's better than the beef jerky we've been having. Have you heard much about the power being restored?”

Ken responds, “I think it's very close; we heard clicking noises from the overhead transmission lines coming down Kambah Pool Road. That suggests power is getting through somewhere.”

George then turns to one of the old ladies, “Mary! Why don't you go and prepare a meal for us all?”

Mary gets up from sitting on her towel. Ken then notices all of them wearing white robes, open, revealing their nakedness, letting in the warmth from the fire. They all have towels arranged around the fire. She picks up her towel from the log, drapes it over her shoulder, and walks towards the large canvas tent. Ken notes she seems aware of where she's going.

Ken then notices six tents scattered along the riverbank, each secluded from the others. The occupants may be claiming their territory for each area. The ground is well-trodden, as you'd expect if a tribe of people lived here. The only sounds are the crackling fire and the flowing river. To break the silence, George gets up, walks over to the woodpile, picks up a branch, strolls in front of Ken, and bends down to arrange the limb into the fire. George's robe was open, revealing his noticeable size, which hung between his legs, and Ken couldn't help but stare. George then stands and faces Ken as if inviting him to reach out and touch.

George moves his arms and snaps his fingers to a routine, "You must be tired and weary from your walk; please relax."

Ken glances at his sunglasses, shielding George's eyes, making it hard to see where he's looking. Ken nods and relaxes his shoulders, arms dropping to his sides. George notices he's slowly falling under his influence and continues, "That's right, relax. Close your eyes, yes, close your eyes."

He hesitates, then obeys.

Shamone stiffens; she feels something is very wrong.

Ken stands motionless, breathing slowly, slipping away.

George continues.

"Come with me."

Ken shifts forward. Shamone, alarmed, stands up and grabs him.

"No."

He keeps moving. She holds form, panic rising.

"KEN!"

Nothing, she turns on George. Her voice sharpens.

"Stop."

He doesn't, so she steps forward and acts.

**

Later that afternoon, Oscar reached the cafeteria, moving carefully so as not to disturb anything. He's fairly certain the bikey gang has gone. The fridge and pantry are stripped bare, and the visitor centre canteen sits abandoned. He wonders what became of Roy and Bill. If there are no lights after dark, he'll assume they've moved on and begin searching.

His plan is simple: take the old Dodge and drive back to Canberra. Now that his vision has returned, the journey feels possible. Fuel might be an issue, but it's a problem he's willing to tackle.

Back at the powerhouse, Susanne lies asleep beneath the table. Oscar decides not to wake her just yet. Instead, he checks the diesel tanks. He remembers the auxiliary supply needs switching over. When he sees the gauge sitting full, relief washes through him.

He grabs a fuel canister and a length of hose from the cupboard, siphoning diesel into the container. The Dodge, in the car park, remains where it was, untouched. Another small victory. He unscrews the cap and fills the tank, then tops up the auxiliary supply the same way.

Climbing into the driver's seat, he hesitates for a moment. The keys are still in the ignition. He pumps the throttle, turns the key,

The starter kicks.

The engine coughs, sputters... then settles into a steady rumble.

Oscar lets out a breath, half-laughing in disbelief.

"How lucky can one bloke get... all I had to do was die."

The sound carries.

Back in the powerhouse, Susanne stirs at the outburst of noise.

“Oscar? ...Oscar! Where are you?”

Hearing movement outside, she freezes, instantly regretting calling out. Panic surges as she scrambles to her feet, only to crack her head on the underside of the table.

Oscar hears her scream and rushes inside, braced for danger. Instead, he finds Susanne sitting on the floor, clutching her head.

“Susanne, it’s me.”

“I hit my head,” she mutters.

He smiles, stepping closer, resting a hand gently on her shoulder. She flinches and pulls away.

“If you please! You disappeared all day, didn’t think to say anything? And what’s that noise? The motor?”

He tries again, calmer this time, his hand returning to her shoulder.

“They’re gone, the bikey gang. And I’ve got the truck running. We can leave.”

She looks up at him, struggling to read his expression through her still-blurred vision.

“And the others?” she asks quietly. “I haven’t seen anyone.”

Her hand finds his, resting on her shoulder. This time, she doesn’t pull away. “...Alright,” she says, a faint smile forming. “Let’s go.”

STOP IT!

Shamone's grip is slipping; she isn't strong enough to hold Ken back. Panic surges. The pretence of politeness shatters.

"Stop it! Leave him alone!" she screams at George.

She lunges forward, tearing the sunglasses from his face and hurling them into the bushes.

George recoils, clutching his eyes. "Aah! That hurts!"

The spell fractures.

Roy jerks as if waking from a nightmare. His mind clears for the first time in days. He stares at George, really sees him, and something deep and furious rises within him. A hatred he doesn't fully understand, but doesn't question.

He looks down, bare beneath the robe, then around at the others, confusion colliding with fragments of memory that are shameful and violating.

Roy's jaw tightens, and he steps forward.

The woman is pushing George back, blind, desperate. George shields his eyes, disoriented. The moment opens, and Roy takes it.

In one swift motion, he whips his towel free, wraps it around George's head, and wrenches him backward. George crashes onto the ground, his skull striking rock with a dull, sickening crack.

Roy doesn't hesitate. He drives his fist down once and twice.

Blood seeps through the cloth.

George goes still.

Ken blinks, the haze lifting. He stares down at the man he met only minutes ago, then at Roy, poised to strike again.

“I think you got him friend,” Ken says, grabbing Roy’s shoulder.

He kneels, fingers searching for a pulse... nothing.

Ken exhales. “He’s dead... We should start CPR.”

Roy’s head snaps toward him, eyes blazing.

“If you bring him back,” he snarls, “I’ll kill him again.”

The threat hangs in the air, raw, unfiltered.

Ken hesitates. Around them, the others begin to stir, clutching their robes, their dignity, their awareness. Like waking from a shared nightmare. Their understanding settles in. They were all under his control, including him.

Ken feels Shamone still clinging to him. He turns to her.

“What do you think?”

She’s trembling, tears streaking her face.

“Leave him,” she whispers. “If God wants him alive... He will be.”

Mary emerges from the tent. “What’s going on?”

She sees the body and rushes forward, dropping to her knees. She pulls the towel back, revealing the damage. Her lips move in quiet prayer. Then she looks up at Roy and strangely says,

“Are you free?”

Roy frowns, not understanding.

Mary repeats, in a calm, hollow voice, “Are you free?”

He lets out a breath, something unhinged behind it. “Yeah. I’m f*cking free.”

She studies him for a long moment... then turns and walks back into the tent without another word.

Roy watches her go. “F*cking Weirdo.”

He shivers, suddenly aware of the cold, of himself. He looks at Ken and Shamone.

“You look familiar... I’m Roy. From the tracking station. Do I know you?”

Shamone remembers Roy from social club events Rachel was involved in; she recalls not particularly liking Roy. He swore a lot and never really has anything positive to say. It was awkward being around him, and Shamone made excuses to leave his company. Although she has to admit he is brave. She responds in a shaky voice,

“What’s... happening?”

Roy drags a hand over his face, breath uneven.

“That sick f*cking bastard had it coming,” he mutters. “He messed with my f*cking head. That c*nt made me do things... things I’d never, ”

Ken recognises Roy and interrupts, changing the subject, noting that the swearing would offend Shamone,

Holy! Moly! What are you doing here?

Roy Webster was a fidgety, nervous man, a trait he inherited from his mother. His father, on the other hand, was a real bastard. As a prison guard at Goulburn Jail, he displayed significant aggression. He hates domestic life and spends days off at the pub or in his basement. Roy watches his father laze around in his basement, drinking beer and complaining. He is known for starting fights at the pub, coming home drunk, and complaining about never getting respect. One trait Roy picked up is fixing mechanical things. His father has a side business repairing Grandfather clocks. There are dozens of them in the basement, and his father has the patience to fix small mechanical things, and the money is good. Roy could often hear him swearing from below. His everyday language was swearing, and Roy picked it up early

in life. He hated his father when he got older, although his demeanour continued through him.

Looking down at the body, Roy responds through the corner of his mouth.

'I arrived yesterday. I have been frigging blinded for two days. When I was at the tracking station. I'd escaped from this Bikey Gang, which arrived at the station four days after the Flash. I'd frigging bush bashed over the Bullen range until I accidentally came onto this camp. I was approached by this frigging moron. The shithead befriended me at first, but he put a spell on me. I'd found that I was doing frigging stuff I wouldn't normally do. He made me take off my clothes and forced me to do things that were totally frigging immoral, Man!'

Shamone interrupts, "What bikey gang?"

Roy explains, halting, bitter, about the station, the gang, the escape. His tone shifts, anger giving way to something defensive, almost broken.

Mid-sentence, he looks down at his scratched arms and legs, suddenly aware of his state. Without another word, he ducks into a nearby tent.

Ken scans the group by the fire.

"Can you stay with them?" he asks Shamone quietly. "They're not right yet. And Mary..."

She nods.

Ken approaches the tent and peers inside. Mary is sitting hunched in a sleeping bag, weeping.

She senses him.

"Are you free?" she asks again.

Ken nods silently and leaves her there.

Roy returns, dressed now, jacket, torn pants, a bag slung over his shoulder. He looks like a man already halfway gone.

“Roy,” Ken says, “things are bad out there. The whole region is powered down. People are losing control.”

He gestures to the others. “They need someone who can see.”

Roy shakes his head immediately.

“No. I’m done here.”

Ken tries once more, mentioning the tracking station, Rachel.

Roy lets out a dry laugh. “Good luck with that, mate.”

Then he turns and walks away, disappearing along the riverbank without looking back.

**

Sitting beside the campfire, Rachel feels a knot of conflict tighten in her chest. Jason’s explanation, that the Sun struck the world and blinded Bill, means it’s happening everywhere. Not just here. Not just them.

Her thoughts drift to Mark, somewhere in Sydney. He would have been mid-service when the Flash hit. Blind... like the others.

But the thought doesn’t land the way it should; something has shifted.

She glances at Jason, uncertain whether to reach for his hand. She’s drawn to him now, more than she expected, and she senses he feels it too. The world has changed, and with it, everything else.

Jason stands abruptly, scanning the grounds through the canteen window. The silence unsettles him. The constant hum of the antennas is gone, replaced by an eerie stillness.

"Alright," he says, turning back. "We should search for them. They can't be far."

They split up, Jason, Sarge, and Rachel moving in different directions.

Jason and Sarge meet at the antenna pedestal.

"Truck's gone," Sarge says.

Jason frowns. "Then they took the Dodge. No electronics, it would still run. They could've left."

"Or the bikey gang took it," Sarge adds.

He glances west. The sun is sinking fast.

"I'll check DSS 45," Sarge says. "You find Rachel. It's getting dark, we'll stay close."

Rachel enters the main building cautiously. The place is a mess, papers scattered, furniture out of place. Whether it was panic or violence, she can't tell. It gives her chills. She sinks onto the couch in the office, drained, then hears a sound in the hallway.

She freezes.

Footsteps approach down the hall, slow, deliberate, then stop just outside the door. Her heart pounds as she stares into the darkness.

Jason appears in the doorway.

Relief floods her.

She rushes to him, and they embrace, holding on as if the world might fall apart again at any second.

Heat builds between them, adrenaline, relief, something deeper.

Rachel lifts her face and kisses him. Jason responds instantly.

Clothes fall away in hurried, clumsy motions. There's no hesitation now, only urgency. They collapse onto the couch together, clinging, grounding themselves in something real.

For a brief moment, the chaos disappears.

Jason exhales sharply as his sexual tension leaves him... and then, just as suddenly, his body goes slack. He's asleep.

Rachel lies beneath him, pinned, listening to his breathing steady into a deep rhythm.

She stays there for a moment, holding him. Then reality creeps back in.

The air feels thick and heavy; their order is overbearing.

Gently, she slips free, dresses, and leaves in search of water for a well-deserved wash.

Sarge finds nothing at DSS 45. No signs of struggle, no movement, although the door to the base was open.

He circles back toward the front gate, thinking of Private James. The man deserves a proper burial. As he nears the entrance road, something catches his eye. Wires are snaked across the pavement in jagged lines.

Sarge crouches, studying them. One end connects to the electric fence, a trap.

He rubs his eyes, unsure if exhaustion is playing tricks on him, but no, it's real. He heads back.

Inside the main building, darkness has settled. Sarge climbs the stairs and enters the office, intending to rest, and stops. A naked body lies face down on the couch. His pulse spikes.

He steps closer, reaches out, and touches the shoulder.

It's warm. The faint light reveals Jason. Sarge grabs him and shakes him hard. "Hey! Wake up!"

Jason stirs, half-conscious. He turns, smiling lazily, and grabs Sarge's arm, pulling it toward him.

"Hey, baby... wanna go again?"

Sarge jerks back. "What the hell?!"

Jason blinks, confusion cutting through the haze.

"Oh, shit. Sorry, Sarge... I was dreaming..."

He drops his head and is snoring again within seconds. Sarge squints at him, then at the clothes pooled around his feet.

"What have you been up to..." he mutters. Then, with a snort: "You little rat."

Despite himself, he shakes his head. After everything they've endured, he can't bring himself to care.

Still... Rachel?

He exhales. Too much to think about.

Needing air and a wash, Sarge heads for the rainwater tank.

Rachel is already there, standing under the hose, rinsing her naked body, letting the cold water run over her skin. The night sky stretches above her, clear and vast. A bright orange star glows in the distance.

For a moment, she feels... peace.

She laughs softly, wiping away tears she didn't realise she'd shed. Then,

A crack. A branch snapping somewhere beyond the fence.

She freezes.

Footsteps follow. More than one. Moving along the perimeter.

Her breath catches.

Slowly, silently, she shuts off the tap.

The footsteps continue coming closer.

She reaches for her clothes, but they're soaked, useless.

For a second, she considers the absurdity of it all... then hears Sarge's voice from the bushes nearby.

"Stay put! Don't move!"

Relief and fear collide.

She crouches low in the darkness.

Sarge approaches, catching sight of her.

He immediately looks away. "...Second time tonight,' he mutters under his breath.

But there's no time for that. The footsteps are nearing the gate.

Sarge slips into the shadows beside the garden bed, then straightens. A decision is made.

He steps forward, voice sharp and commanding:

"WHO GOES THERE? Don't take another step, I've got a weapon trained on you!"

Two figures emerge in the dim light.

They pause.

Then a voice calls out:

"Hello! We've come from town, we're here to see Rachel."

Sarge narrows his eyes. "State your business."

"Rachel! We're here to see Rachel!"

Rachel's breath catches. She knows that voice. Without thinking, she runs.

Ken barely has time to react before she collides with him, throwing her arms around him. He stumbles back, catching her weight. Her skin is cold and wet.

"Rachel?"

Shamone rushes forward, wrapping them both in an embrace.

"You're here... you're okay..." she cries.

Rachel pulls away just long enough to hug her sister tightly. They cling to each other, laughing, crying, overwhelmed.

Ken, still trying to process, glances awkwardly at Rachel.

"Uh... is everything alright here?"

Sarge exhales. "Yeah... I think so."

Ken gestures vaguely. "Right... but... where are your clothes?"

Rachel freezes.

Shamone steps back, looking her up and down.

"Yes, where are your clothes?"

Rachel hesitates, and then, unexpectedly, bursts into laughter.

STILL NIGHT

The stillness of the night makes every sound feel louder than it should. Even the smallest movement carries.

Susanne shifts, and the motion stirs Oscar from his sleep. He's usually a heavy sleeper, but wedged into the front seat of the old truck, rest comes in fragments. She curls closer, pressing into him, nudging him toward the door.

Oscar opens his eyes to the faint wash of early morning light. Susanne clings to him like a blanket, chasing warmth. She wriggles, trying to settle.

Under different circumstances, her closeness could stir something in him, but it doesn't. Not with the stale heat, the sweat, the smell of days without washing. They should have cleaned up back at the river crossing.

When they left the station, Oscar headed south along Paddy's River Road. The plan was simple, until the Tidbinbilla crossing stopped them cold. Floodwater surged across it, impassable.

He turned the Dodge around and pushed north toward the Cotter, only to be blocked again.

The river had swallowed the bridge, water spilling over the railings. No way through. Their only option lay further north, the Uriarra crossing, but getting there meant cutting through the Sherwood Forest trails. Oscar knew the route. The truck didn't.

Halfway up a steep incline, the engine coughed and died. He eased it back down the hill before lifting the hood. A thin trail of smoke curled from the distributor cable. The smell of burning insulation told the rest of the story.

Fixable, but not here. Not now.

Darkness had already settled in. Walking out wasn't an option. So they stayed, trapped inside the truck's silent shell, waiting for morning.

Oscar stares at the bonnet, thinking it through. There are spare parts back at the tracking station; he could fix it there. But convincing Susanne to go back... that's another problem entirely.

Still, the alternatives are worse. The Uriarra crossing is likely flooded too.

There's only one real choice. They must return.

**

The canteen sits in darkness. Rachel, Ken, and Shamone huddle together on the lounge, wrapped in a blanket. Rachel leans into Shamone, warm, safe, for now. Sarge and Bill enter quietly and take a seat. Sarge breaks the silence.

“What happened?”

Ken glances at him, wary of the tone, then answers carefully.

“We walked from Canberra. Wanted to make sure Rachel was alright.....Did you know about the Flash? The power's gone, the whole city's a mess. Cars won't start, and people are walking everywhere. There's a refuge set up at the showgrounds. They're saying four to six weeks before power comes back.”

Sarge's jaw tightens.

“We were trapped in the bunker. Two weeks.” He exhales slowly. “Got out thanks to Jason.”

He recounts it, the failed systems, the sealed doors, the slow realisation they were stuck. Then, quieter:

“Timmy didn’t make it. Ran out of insulin.”

The room falls heavy.

Sarge presses on, voice rough but steady. He tells them how Jason crawled through the cable trays, climbed the riser, found Bill... and opened the way out.

“Kid’s a hero,” he mutters. Then, almost as an afterthought, “Though I’m not sure what’s going on with him. Found him asleep upstairs. Pants around his ankles. Called me ‘baby’ when I woke him.”

Rachel couldn’t help it; a small laugh escaped.

Sarge narrows his eyes at her. He almost says something... but lets it go.

Instead, he shifts the conversation and looks at Bill, who tells them about the bikie gang, the takeover, and the confrontation at the gate.

“We didn’t exactly roll out the welcome mat,” Bill finishes. “Figured it was better that way.”

Rachel shivers.

Shamone cuts in gently, “We should get her some clothes and rest.”

Ken nods, already rising. “I’ll get a fire going. Is there any wood around?”

Bill answers quietly, “Behind the maintenance shed. There should be enough.”

**

The tracking station lies cradled in a valley, shielded on all sides, hills to the west, the Bullen Range to the east, farmland stretching south, and dense pine forest to the north.

High on the ridge above, Oscar and Susanne look down. A flicker of firelight glows near the visitor centre.

Oscar squints.

“There’s a fire down there.”

Susanne stiffens. “Oh no... they’re back.” Her voice sharpens. “I’m not going down there. I told you we should’ve kept going. You’re an idiot, Oscar.”

The words come out harsher than she intends, but she doesn’t take them back.

He sighs.

“Suey... we need to get closer.”

She shakes her head and steps away.

“No. I’m done. You go if you want, I’m staying right here.”

Oscar hesitates. He understands. After everything she went through... he understands. Still, the truck won’t fix itself.

“I’ll grab what we need,” he says softly. “I’ll be quick.”

He reaches for her shoulder, and she pulls away. The message is clear.

So he turns and heads down the hill alone.

**

The road is quiet. The wire he strung across it, untouched. Maybe Bill is still alive. Maybe that fire means something good.

Oscar approaches the gate cautiously; it’s locked.

He remembers leaving it open. There is someone inside.

He slips through easily and circles toward the powerhouse. Inside, he finds what he needs: a length of cable. Cuts it clean. Packs it.

Then he moves toward the office, peering out. The fire burns steadily near the entrance. Figures sit around it. They are too far to recognise.

He moves closer, keeping low, slipping between shadows and shrubs until he reaches the canteen.

Silence, just the crackle of flames.

Carefully, he edges forward... then finally steps into the open.

Sarge is on his feet instantly.

“WHO GOES THERE!”

Oscar raises a hand, half-laughing with relief. “Well, I’ll be buggered...”

Recognition flashes across Sarge’s face.

“Holy hell, it’s Oscar!”

Ken stirs. Rachel wakes, then she sees him.

“Oscar!”

She’s on her feet in an instant, rushing forward, wrapping him in a tight embrace.

He holds her, solid and real, and alive. For a moment, everything else fades. Then he pulls back slightly, scanning the group.

“Where’s Roy?”

Ken answers, “Believe it or not, we came across him yesterday on the other side of the Murrumbidgee. That’s another story; however, he’s okay, rough, but alive.”

Oscar nods, absorbing it.

“Where is he now?”

Ken gestures toward the fire. “Long story. Sit down.”

Rachel looks past him. “Where’s Susanne?”

Oscar glances back toward the hill.

“She’s up there. Didn’t want to come down.” He pauses.
“Can’t say I blame her.”

Then, quieter: “Where’s Bill?”

Sarge answers, “Alive. Not well. He’s in the shed.”

Oscar exhales slowly and lowers himself beside the fire.
For the first time in days, he’s not alone.

**

Cool night air drifts across the farmland beyond the station. On the western hill, Susanne crouches low, arms wrapped tight around herself, shivering. Her eyes lock onto a faint, flickering glow in the distance. Her vision has improved, but everything still swims at the edges, blurred, uncertain.

She can’t believe Oscar left her. He could’ve made a fire, stayed, and done something. Instead, he’d been fixated on getting back to the station, brushing off her fear with a promise, *just a few minutes*.

It feels like hours.

The damp grass soaks through her clothes. The cold seeps deeper. Worse than that is the smell, thick, rotting, unavoidable. The paddocks below are scattered with carcasses, casualties of the Flash. Somewhere out there, foxes tear into blind, helpless prey. She can hear them at work.

The crescent moon offers just enough light to shape the world into shadows, trees, fences, and movement that may or may not be real.

She feels exposed, and trapped.

A sound breaks the stillness.

Heavy... stomping. She stiffens, listening.

“Oscar?” she faintly swallows.

It’s coming from the wrong direction.

Perhaps a sheep, but that doesn’t sit right. Sheep don’t move like that at night. They huddle. Stay quiet. This is heavier and slower.

Her breath shortens.

The distant road hums faintly now and then, Paddy’s River Road, but between those moments, the silence presses in, almost suffocating. Once or twice, she thinks she hears voices drifting from the station, too far to understand.

Then,

A low, unmistakable growl of an engine, a motorcycle.

Her head snaps toward the road. The sound rises... then abruptly cuts out, as if the rider has turned away.

The station wouldn’t hear that, but she did.

Fear surges through her, sharp and sudden. Staying here is no longer an option. She has to move.

She heads downward and turns toward where she *thinks* the station lies and takes a step into the dark, then another.

The slope is uneven. Branches catch her feet. She stumbles, steadies herself, and forces her arms out in front, feeling her way forward. Every step is uncertain, rocks, scrub, unseen obstacles knocking into her legs, but she keeps going. She has to.

At the base of the hill, the ground seems to level out, then disappears.

She drops suddenly, a startled cry tearing from her throat as she slips into a narrow creek bed hidden in the dark. Mud swallows her footing. Shallow water splashes as she hits

hard, the impact knocking her off balance. The stench is overwhelming. She smelt the rot and felt the wet earth. Something dead nearby.

Cursing, she drags herself upright, slipping and scrambling until she claws her way out the other side, collapsing onto the grass.

She lies there, staring up at the sky into the darkness. The mud clings to her clothes, cold and slick, but strangely, she doesn't feel it for long. The shivering eases. Warmth creeps in, unnatural and soothing.

Her jacket slips loose. She doesn't bother fixing it, and exhaustion washes over her. The grass feels soft. Comforting in a way that doesn't make sense. She curls onto her side for just a moment. Her eyes close.

**

The fire's warmth draws Oscar in, but he can't stay, not now.

Not while she's out there.

He pushes himself to his feet, urgency cutting through the fatigue.

"We need to get Suey."

Before anyone can answer, a sharp cry echoes from the darkness beyond the hill.

Oscar freezes, then turns toward it.

"That's her."

The Sarge is already standing. "What was that?"

"GEEZUS, it's Suey. We've got to move, now!"

Sarge glances back at the others, Ken, Shamone, and Rachel, sprawled in exhausted sleep by the fire.

“What a day...” he mutters, then nods. “Right. Let’s go. We leave them.”

Together, they head into the dark.

THE SPIDER

The wind cuts across the Goulburn plains like a blade.

Stephen leans into it, shoulders hunched, fighting each step as the gusts shove him sideways. The sky hangs low, heavy with rain, and the dying sun bleeds through the clouds. The wheelbarrow rattles and groans beneath his grip, its weight dragging through the gully as if it refuses to move.

His hands are raw. Blistered. Burning against the splintered wood.

Still, he pushes.

The smell hits hardest, like rot, thick, and unforgiving.

The dead ewe slumps in the barrow, its body split and sagging, flesh slipping in places it shouldn't. Blackened fluids leak from it, staining the metal tray. The stench crawls into his throat, forcing bile upward. Even through the bandana tied tight across his face, it's unbearable.

But Stephen doesn't stop. He hasn't eaten in days. His body screams for rest, for food, for anything, but this matters more. This has always mattered more.

He swore he'd never come back to this town. Not after what it did to him. Not after what they did to him.

Yet here he is.

Because some debts don't fade. Some men don't get to walk away.

It took him three days to reach Goulburn on foot.

Three days of hiding in hay sheds, stealing water where he could, snatching whatever scraps of food he found. The Federal Highway was blocked, forcing him along Bungendore Road, skirting the eastern edge of Lake George. Every step

was a gamble. Farmers didn't take kindly to strangers crossing their land, especially now.

Gunshots echoed more than once. Warnings, he hoped. Or maybe not. These days, people didn't see too well. The Flash made sure of that.

Jimmy was his name; they called him Jimmy the Spider.

The name alone tightens something in Stephen's chest. A prison guard. A parasite. A man who thrived on humiliation. He crept through the cell blocks, spinning his little games, watching men break. The laughter, the taunts and the endless stink of him.

Stephen still remembers the vomit prank. The way Jimmy stood there, grinning and watching. Enjoying it too much.

If anyone belonged behind bars, it was him.

Stephen had promised himself, quietly, fiercely, that one day, it would come back around. Now it has.

Finding him was easy. A phone booth. A dusty old directory. An address was handed over like it meant nothing. What an idiot or perhaps arrogance.

Either way, Stephen followed it.

The house sits quietly. A single-storey, pitched roof with a colourbond fence running along the side. A short brick wall out the front, lined with cheap ornaments. A white iron gate cuts across the driveway. Really ordinary.

Stephen crouches behind a bush, watching and waiting.

Then he throws a first rock. It clatters against the roof.

Nothing.

The second one lands harder, then the door bursts open.

Jimmy storms onto the porch, rifle raised, voice tearing through the silence.

“Alright, you motherf*cking kids, come out so I can blow your head off!”

Stephen doesn't move or breathe.

Jimmy's eyes sweep the yard... but miss everything.

Miss the gnomes Stephen had perched on the wall.

Missing any movement, and just like that, Stephen knows. He must be blind. The Flash took his sight.

A slow smile creeps across Stephen's face. Now, the real work begins.

Back at the fence line, Stephen dumps the carcass into the yard. Then another, and another.

He builds the pile carefully, deliberately, until the smell alone could choke a man. Rot layered upon rot. A suffocating wall of decay is creeping towards Jimmy's house.

He climbs the fence, dragging the bodies closer, arranging them like a gift no one would ever want. Sending a message, a memory and of course, payment.

When he finished, he stepped back into the paddock, chest heaving, sweat and filth clinging to him like a second skin.

In the distance, a dam catches what little light remains. He needs cleansing and relief. He strips and dives in.

The cold should shock him, but it doesn't, not really. Instead, something inside him loosens.

For the first time in days... in years... he feels lighter, and cleaner.

Like something has finally been set right. He lets out a quiet laugh.

“Hope you enjoy the smell, Jimmy...”

The thought lingers, Jimmy, trapped inside, choking on it, and living in it.

The way Stephen once had. The way the prison had wrapped around him, noise, filth, cruelty, day after day.

But now, now the roles have changed. The spider has wandered into its own web.

Stephen closes his eyes, floating. A strange calm settles over him, warm and certain.

Maybe it's justice.

Maybe it's fate.

Maybe... It's something else.

Something bigger.

For a moment, he believes it.

Believes everything might finally be alright.

Then he hears a,

Click.

The sound slices through the silence. Stephen's eyes snap open, and he turns,

His stomach drops.

Jimmy stands at the water's edge.

Rifle aimed with a faced of amusement.

"Now, you motherf*cker," he says, voice low and crooked, "Why don't you come back to my place... and help me with a little problem?"

A pause.

Then a grin.

"Ewes are f*cking dead meat at my place."

The wind doesn't feel so cold anymore.

**

When Oscar reaches the spot where he left Susanne, she's gone. Darkness presses in around him. Maybe she found

somewhere to rest... but that thought doesn't sit right. He remembers the yelp, sharp, sudden, wrong. Not a call... a fall.

"Oscar!" The Sarge calls from behind, already scanning the shadows.

Oscar shakes his head.

"Maybe she made it back to the station."

They move downhill together, calling her name into the night. No answer, only the low murmur of wind and the distant trickle of water.

At the creek bed, Oscar follows the edge, eyes straining in the half-light of a crescent moon. Then, something. A shape in the long grass across the bank. It looks like a piece of clothing. His stomach drops.

Oscar charges through the creek, slipping hard into the mud. Swearing, scrambling, he drags himself up the other side and sprints. As he reaches and sees Susanne, sprawled on the ground, dread tightens in his chest. He drops to his knees, rolling Susanne onto her back. There is no movement.

"She's here!" he shouts.

Her skin is cold, too cold. His fingers fumble at her neck, nothing.

"No pulse, mate... what do you reckon?" His voice cracks.

The Sarge is beside him in seconds, checking for himself. His expression hardens.

"We start CPR. Now."

He shoves Oscar aside and begins compressions. For a moment, Oscar just stares, stunned by being pushed out.

"Wait, let me!" he snaps.

The Sarge doesn't even look up. "You've done enough, SPORT!"

The word hits like a slap.

Exhaustion, fear, anger, everything boils over. Oscar's jaw tightens. He's had enough of the tone, the dismissals, the constant belittling he's received over the years from this arrogant piece of shit.

He steps forward, grabs the Sarge's jacket, and yanks him back, slamming him to the ground.

"You stupid f*cking idiot, you don't know what it's like!"

The words hang there, raw and exposed.

Oscar falters, glancing back at Susanne, still, silent.

"Just... tell me what to do."

For a second, the Sarge looks ready to explode. Then something shifts. The fight drains from his face.

"Alright," he says quietly. "We do it together."

He positions himself again.

"Thirty compressions. Then you breathe for her."

He starts counting under his breath, hands driving into Susanne's chest, steady, relentless.

Oscar wipes the mud from his face with shaking hands. He leans in, opens her mouth, pinches her nose, and breathes.

Her chest rises... again and again, the fourth breath, something changes, a twitch, and finally a cough.

Oscar jerks back as Susanne sputters, dragging air into her lungs.

"She's alive!" he gasps.

Relief crashes over him.

The Sarge quickly rolls her onto her side as she coughs harder. Oscar leans in, pulling her close, trying to give her warmth.

Her eyes flicker open, confused, unfocused.

"What... what's happening?" she murmurs.

Oscar lets out a shaky breath, a small smile breaking through.

“You’re not going to believe this... but I just gave you the kiss of life.”

She coughs again, weak but aware.

“Does that mean... we’re square?”

He huffs a quiet laugh.

“I hope so.”

The Sarge stands, scanning the dark around them.

“I’ll get wood for a fire,” he says. “She’s not walking anywhere tonight. We need to warm her up, she’s hypothermic.”

He disappears into the night, leaving Oscar holding her, barely, but alive.

**

Tick... Tick... Tick...

Darkness swallows Stephen whole.

The sound comes first, sharp, mechanical, relentless. Each tick lands like a blow inside his skull. His thoughts fracture, splintering into flashes he can’t control.

He’s nowhere, and everywhere. A room with no walls. A road lined with towering wind turbines, their blades turning without sound. A choir, mouths open in silent song. Maggots bursting beneath his fingers. A creek, black water sliding past his feet.

Each image snaps into place, then tears away before he can grasp it.

Tick... Tick... Tick...

The noise grows louder, closer, and inside him.

“Stop...” he mutters, squeezing his eyes shut, but it only gets worse. The ticking burrows deeper, vibrating through bone and thought. He forces his eyes open.

To the left, a prison cell. The door hangs open, waiting. Inside, a version of himself sits cross-legged on the cold floor, methodically counting stacks of banknotes, calm, focused, and safe.

Stephen recoils.

He knows that room. The white walls. The grey floor. The suffocating stillness. A cage he once called survival.

Tick!

He turns to the right, **Jesus**.

A small statue, pale and still. Arms open in invitation. Eyes hollow, and watching.

The same figure he once held before crowds, preaching calm he never truly felt. Now it feels wrong, twisted and like a mockery.

Tick! Tick!

To the Left: Prison; control To the right: Salvation;
Surrender

The ticking becomes unbearable, no longer a sound but a command. He looks down at the water, a stream.

He's standing at the edge of a narrow stream. It cuts through the darkness like a wound. The current splits in two directions, left and right, each path vanishing into shadow.

A drop falls from above....Plink, and another.

Perfectly timed with the ticking.

Each drop ripples outward, distorting his reflection. His face fractures across the surface, unrecognisable. Then,

He understands a choice, not an imaginary one, but a symbolic and real one.

Tick...Tick...Tick...

His chest tightens. Every instinct tells him not to move. That once he chooses, there's no turning back. The prison waits. The statue watches and the water whispers.

He moves slowly, deliberately, lifts his foot and steps into the stream. The cold hits instantly, sharp, biting,
GONG!

He wakes with the echo of the dream still clinging to him.
The *choice*.

It presses on his mind, persistent and inescapable. His brother's words about fate linger in the background. *Is this luck? Or is it fate that brought him here?*

Footsteps creak above him, pacing slowly back and forth.
Then the basement door opens.

Stephen lifts his head, a flicker of hope rising in his chest. It fades almost instantly as a man begins descending the stairs.

Jimmy. He's smiling. In his hands, he carries a bowl. As he steps closer, Stephen notices the dark stains across his shirt, thick, smeared, unmistakably blood.

Jimmy places the bowl carefully on the ground in front of him.

Stephen strains against the restraints, but they tighten painfully around his wrists.

"LET ME GO, YOU FAGGOT!" He bellows.

Jimmy chuckles, clearly amused.

"Hey... that rhymes with this."

Stephen looks down. The bowl is filled with writhing maggots.

His stomach lurches. He turns his head sharply and vomits over his shoulder as the stench overwhelms him, rotting, thick, and suffocating.

He forces himself to breathe slowly, trying to steady his thoughts.

Think.

There has to be a way out.

Fragments of memory return, prison, the dam, that brief sense of control. A plan begins to form.

“Jimmy,” he says hoarsely, “let me tell you a story. You at least owe me that.”

Jimmy smirks.

“Oh yeah? I love f*cking stories.”

Stephen swallows and continues.

“There was a young man who inherited a bookshop from his father. It had thousands of books, hardcovers, comics, everything. But the shop was failing.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes but listens.

“He tried everything to keep it going. He promoted it at fairs, worked with authors, sold books he had never even read. He struggled to focus, always distracted by his phone, videos, anything but the pages in front of him.”

Jimmy scoffs.

“Sounds like a useless prick.”

Stephen ignores the comment.

“So tell me, do you think he gave up?”

Jimmy grins, “Yeah. He quits.”

Stephen shakes his head.

“No. He keeps going. He adapts. He starts selling online, and eventually, he makes it work.”

Jimmy frowns slightly.

“Why?”

“Because it wasn’t just about the books,” Stephen says quietly. “It was about family. about purpose.”

Jimmy’s expression hardens.

“What’s your point?” he demands.

Stephen leans forward as far as the restraints allow.

“You’re a prison guard. You’ve seen what happens to people who cross the line. So stay on the right side of it. Untie me, and let me walk out of here. No one has to know.”

For a brief moment, the room is silent. Then Jimmy laughs.

“Nah... too late for that. My job is to hold scum like you.”

He turns and walks up the stairs. The door slams shut behind him, and darkness fills the room again.

Stephen exhales slowly. That plan failed. He shifts, testing the restraints again, but they hold firm. The workbench sits just out of reach. It’s too far. Exhaustion takes over, and he closes his eyes.

**

The Sarge builds the fire carefully, feeding it with steady hands. The warmth is essential if Susanne is going to recover.

Once satisfied, he heads back toward the station to collect blankets.

By the time he returns, fatigue has set in. He lowers himself beside the fire and closes his eyes.

When he wakes, the sun is high overhead. The fire has nearly burned out. Susanne and Oscar are gone.

He nods to himself. That must mean they made it back safely.

He stamps out the remaining embers and begins walking toward the station. The gate is locked, which he takes as another good sign.

However, once inside, something feels wrong.

The cafeteria is empty. The office is silent. The powerhouse door stands open, but no one is there. A cold unease settles in.

“What is going on?”

He thinks of Bill and quickly heads to the shed. Bill is sitting in the chair with his back turned. He is still.

“Bill?”

No response.

“Bill!”

He grabs his shoulder, and Bill collapses to the floor. The Sarge drops beside him and checks for a pulse. There is none. His skin is cold.

The reality hits hard. The Sarge’s eyes fill with tears as he kneels beside him. He tries to pray, but the words do not come. Grief overwhelms him. He thinks of Bill. Then Timmy. Then Susanne. Then Oscar. And finally, somehow, his brother is back home.

The brother he never truly accepted.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

After a long moment, he takes a blanket and gently covers Bill.

“I’m going home,” he says quietly. “Back to Oregon.”

**

Stephen stirs. It is dark again. Footsteps echo outside, but they are different from Jimmy’s, lighter, unfamiliar.

“Hello?” he calls. “Is anyone there?”

The footsteps stop, then begin to move away. Panic rises in his chest.

“Wait! I’m down here! Please!”

There is silence, then the basement door creaks open. A beam of light cuts through the darkness as someone descends slowly.

Stephen remains still. The shoes are not Jimmy’s. That is a good sign.

At the bottom, the man freezes.

“Who the hell are you?” he whispers.

“Stephen,” he replies cautiously. “I think I upset Jimmy.”

The man lets out a quiet laugh.

“Yeah... that’s easy to do. What did you do?”

Encouraged, Stephen explains.

“I took the dead sheep from next door and placed them around his house. I thought he couldn’t see them, so I wanted him to smell them.”

The man chuckles.

“That would’ve done it.”

“Who are you?” Stephen asks.

“Roy,” he replies. “Jimmy’s son.”

Stephen’s heart sinks. Roy notices.

“Relax,” he says. “I’ve already dealt with one monster this week. I’m not looking for another.”

Hope flickers again.

“Can you untie me?”

Roy hesitates.

“Not yet. He might be watching. You’re safer down here.”

The hope fades slightly. Stephen shifts uncomfortably.

“Do you have something I can sit on? The floor is killing me.”

Roy scans the room, spots a duffel bag, and slides it toward him.

“Use that.”

Suddenly, they hear footsteps on the stairs. Both of them freeze.

The light swings upward and Jimmy stands there in the darkness.

“Hello, Spoil.”

Roy stiffens.

“Don’t call me that.”

He raises the torch and shines it directly into Jimmy’s eyes. Jimmy recoils.

“Put that down, you idiot. What are you doing here?”

“Where’s Mum?” Roy demands.

There is a long pause.

“Your mother’s gone,” Jimmy says coldly. “She’s not my problem anymore.”

Something snaps in Roy. He lunges forward and grabs his father by the throat, forcing him to the ground. Jimmy struggles, trying to break free, but Roy holds him down.

Gradually, Jimmy’s strength fades.

Roy releases him suddenly and steps back. Jimmy gasps for air.

“Where’s Mum?” Roy demands again.

“She left,” Jimmy replies. “She’s not coming back.”

Roy exhales, a mix of relief and anger crossing his face.

He glances back at Stephen.

“You’re on your own.”

He turns and walks up the stairs.

“Wait, what about me?” Stephen calls.

“Shut up!” Jimmy snaps.

Moments later, the door slams shut, and silence returns.

The only sound is the steady ticking of the clock.

Stephen shifts slightly and feels the duffel bag beneath him. Something inside presses against him. Carefully, he manoeuvres it closer to his hands. His fingers search blindly.

Then, he feels it, cold and metallic.

A pair of needle-nose pliers. He grips them tightly.

THANK THE LORD!

The Dodge truck shudders and coughs as it claws its way up Uriarra Crossing Road. Each turn winds tighter, steeper, and Oscar can't shake the feeling the old engine might give out at any moment.

They'd crossed the Murrumbidgee with surprising ease, the rapids had dropped since the spillway failure at Cotter Dam. Not long ago, the crossing had been impossible. Now, it felt like the river had reluctantly let them pass.

Ken and Shamone sit tense in the front. Ken scans the open paddocks, eyes darting, searching for movement. The engine's roar is both comfort and threat. Out here, sound travels. And attention is dangerous.

During the first week of the Flash, Ken had seen what people became: looters, predators, opportunists. Some wore desperation like a disguise, luring others in before turning vicious. Compassion had become a liability; if you trusted anybody, it was a gamble.

And this truck? It was a beacon.

As Canberra draws closer, Ken feels it, trouble waiting ahead. The weight of the gun in his bag presses against his conscience. Shamone insisted on coming; her vision had sharpened, shapes now clear instead of blurred. She watches everything.

They'd argued about Susanne. Take her to a hospital, or leave her at the station?

The Sarge stood firm. Exposure, not injury, was the real threat. He knew hyperthermia.

Oscar, Jason, and Rachel disagreed; she needed a doctor.

But Ken had seen the roads. Seen the chaos. Hospitals were overwhelmed and powerless. Certainly Dangerous.

In the end, he sided with the Sarge.

Instead, Ken wanted to go to the Holt substation.

If Ken was right, the faint clicking he'd heard along the power lines meant something was still alive in the grid. Tumut's hydro turbines should still be running. If the fault was at Holt, if he could fix the switching, they might bring power back. Not just for themselves, but for emergency services. It was a long shot, but it was a hope. He wanted Oscar to come along since he was an electrician.

Oscar eases off the accelerator. A car blocks the road ahead. Abandoned vehicles weren't unusual, but this one... this one feels wrong.

"Turn around," Ken says quickly. "This doesn't look right."

Oscar studies the gap. Too tight. He'd have to leave the road. Then, he spots it. A driveway to the left.

He turns in.

Gravel crunches beneath the tyres as the farmhouse comes into view. He passes the open gate, preparing for a three-point turn,

The gate slams shut behind them.

Shamone twists in her seat. "Someone just closed it. This is a trap!"

Oscar's heart jolts. He looks ahead. A man stands in the middle of the driveway. Holding a rifle.

Oscar slams the brakes. The truck skids to a stop, fifty metres short.

"He's got a gun... what do we do?" His voice catches.

Ken glances at Shamone.

She nods once, "Be calm, and have trust in faith."

Ken exhales slowly. “We’ve made it this far. Stay calm. Stay put.”

The gunman advances, rifle raised.

“Out of the truck!” he shouts, gesturing sharply.

Ken opens his door first, stepping out carefully with his bag slung over his shoulder. The man is short, thick-set, with a long red beard and an Akubra pulled low. Behind him, more figures linger near the farmhouse.

“Alright, mate... what’s going on?” Ken asks.

The rifle swings.

“You two, out! On your knees!”

Oscar and Shamone obey, moving slowly, kneeling in the grass.

“Bag,” the man demands, eyes locked on Ken. “Let me see it.”

Ken doesn’t move.

Instead, he speaks. “We’re heading to Holt substation. Trying to restore power.”

The man lets out a dry chuckle. “Yeah? Heard that one before. Toss it over.”

“I worked for the electricity authority,” Ken presses.

“There’s current in the lines down the road. If the switching’s down at Holt, I might be able to fix it. Get power back, for everyone.”

That gives him pause.

“Electricity, eh?”

The man lowers the rifle slightly... then turns to Oscar.

“You... you look familiar.”

Oscar lifts his head and sees his friend. The man breaks into a grin.

“Oscar? What the, get over here!”

The rifle drops. He strides forward and pulls Oscar into a tight, crushing hug.

Ken, still kneeling, blinks in confusion.

Shamone, recognising the interaction, leans in, whispering, “It appears that they were lovers.”

Oscar pulls back, stunned. “Lex? What’s going on, mate? What’s with the ambush?”

“We need the truck,” Lex says bluntly. “Only way to get supplies.”

A voice cuts in from behind.

“What the f*ck, Lex?”

A teenage girl storms up, long, tangled hair, eyes sharp with suspicion.

“Cassie,” Lex says, gesturing. “This is Oscar. Old friend.”

She rolls her eyes. “Figures. So what now?”

Lex’s expression hardens as he looks at Ken and Shamone.

“We’ve got someone inside. Shot. She needs help. Any of you doctors?”

Ken stands slowly, gripping his bag. Not sure if it’s a request... or an order.

“No. Like I said, we’re trying to fix the power.”

Shamone speaks up, louder. “I’ve got First Aid training. I can help.”

Lex studies them. Then glances at Oscar.

“What do you reckon?”

Oscar hesitates, then shrugs. “We’ll help. Put the gun away.”

Lex exhales, tension draining from his shoulders. “Alright.”

He turns to Cassie. “Watch the road.”

Then gestures to the house. “Come on.”

Boots crunch against gravel as they approach. On the porch, an elderly couple sit with rifles across their laps. Their eyes are unfocused, clouded, perhaps still blinded.

“Lex? That you?” the old man calls.

“Yeah. Brought help for Eldra.”

The man lifts his head, voice trembling. “Hallelujah... the Lord’s sent them.”

Shamone smiles faintly. “Faith shows up when it’s needed.”

Ken adds quietly, “Seems it still does.”

Inside, the smell hits them, thick, rotten. Ken grimaces. No wonder they stay outside. Lex leads them into a cramped bedroom. Oscar takes one whiff and departs.

A woman lies on the bed, pale, sweating, barely conscious.

“This is Eldra.”

Shamone drops beside her. “I’m Shamone. Where are you hurt?”

Eldra weakly gestures to her side.

“I’ve been shot.”

There’s a makeshift bandage, dark, soaked, and Shamone reaches out, then stops. “I need clean hands first. Hot water, can you get some?”

“We’ve got a stove,” Lex says. “I’ll boil some now.”

He leaves.

Shamone turns to Ken, her voice urgent. “She’s burning up; it must be an infection. The bullet’s still inside.”

Ken’s stomach tightens.

“We need supplies,” she continues. “Anything we can use to get it out.”

Then, firmer,

“We don’t have time. We help her now... or we risk losing her.”

Ken nods slowly and expresses “Either way... It’s going to be a long day.”

Ken steps into the kitchen. Lex stands by the stove, staring into the heat as if it might answer something for him.

“How’d you end up here?” Ken asks.

Lex exhales slowly, eyes dropping.

“Luck... or the lack of it.” He rubs the back of his neck. “After the Flash, I wandered for days. Couldn’t find anyone who could see, until I ran into this bunch of cyclists. Thought I’d struck gold. Turns out, I’d just traded one problem for another.”

He lets out a dry laugh.

“Their leader, Menz, complete idiot. But he had a rifle... and a German Shepherd. That made him king. He had food, too. If you could follow him, you could eat.”

Ken says nothing. He just listens.

“But food got scarce,” Lex continues. “And the way he treated people... especially women...” His jaw tightens. “Didn’t sit right. I was going to leave. Just needed supplies first.”

He glances at Ken.

“Menz kept everything locked in a trailer. I needed a distraction.”

Lex’s voice sharpens slightly, the memory pulling him in.

“We found Eldra and Cassie hiding near an underpass. The dog picked up their scent. While it was distracted, I jumped Menz, took the rifle easily, perhaps too easily.”

A long pause.

“He whistled for the dog. It came straight for me.” Lex lets out a humourless breath. “Pulled the trigger... nothing. Empty.”

Ken frowns.

“Then, Bang!” Lex nods toward the room. “Dog dropped. Eldra standing there with a rifle.”

Silence lingers for a beat.

“I owed her,” he says quietly. “So I showed her the food. Let her take what she needed... then followed.”

“And she let you?” Ken asks.

“Not at first.” Lex smirks faintly. “Threatened to shoot me if I kept trailing her. But... she saw I could be useful.”

He gestures vaguely around them.

“So we headed out. Away from the city. Thought the farms might be safer.”

Ken folds his arms and listens as Lex continues.

“Crossed paddocks. The Molonglo. Found this place. Started searching the shed... then the old bloke came out of nowhere, waving a rifle, yelling for us to drop everything.”

Lex shakes his head.

“Cassie slammed the shed door, smart kid. Gave us a second. He fired.” His eyes flicker toward the bedroom. “Hit Eldra. Blind shot... lucky or not.”

“And he didn’t chase you?” Ken asks.

“No, stayed on the porch. Guess he didn’t know what he was aiming at.” Lex shrugs. “I talked him down. Told him we weren’t a threat.”

Ken glances toward the hallway.

“How long ago?”

“About a week.”

Ken whistles under his breath. “And since then?”

“We’ve been stuck. Yesterday, we figured we’d stop cars. Take what we need.” He meets Ken’s eyes. “Then you showed up.”

There’s a shift in the air. Lex looks away first. Ken lets it sit, then changes tack.

“Any meds in the house?”

Lex shakes his head. “Didn’t look. Food was the priority. And there’s barely any of that left.”

“Bathroom?”

Lex points down the hall. “Third door.”

**

The floorboards creak under Ken’s weight as he moves down the corridor. The sound echoes, too loud, too exposed. A cat darts somewhere out of sight.

First door, linen. He grabs a handful of towels. The

Second door, and recoils.

“Bloody hell...”

The toilet’s backed up, foul and overflowing. The smell hits like a wall. He slams the door shut, shaking his head.

“Right... not that one.”

The third door is a narrow bathroom with a tub and a vanity with drawers.

He pulls one open, medicine bottles and dozens of them.

Ken’s brows lift.

“Well... that’s something.”

He rummages quickly, scanning labels.

“No antibiotics... nothing useful...”

Bumetanide. Chlorthalidone. Blood pressure meds. Plenty of paracetamol, useless.

Then, something small, a red First Aid kit.

Ken grabs it.

“Better than nothing.”

In the bedroom, the air is thick with heat and the metallic scent of blood.

Shamone is already working, carefully peeling back the bandage, cleaning the wound with steaming water.

Ken steps in.

“Got towels. Some meds, nothing we need. But there’s a kit.”

Shamone barely looks up.

“She’s septic,” she says quietly. “Fever’s too high.”

Ken feels it then, the urgency sharpening.

“We need antibiotics,” he says.

“We need to get the bullet out first,” Shamone replies. “Or she won’t last long enough for that to matter.”

Lex hovers in the doorway.

“Hotter water?”

Shamone shakes her head. “Tweezers.”

Ken flips open the kit, pulls a pair free, and holds them up.

“These do?”

She nods once, then looks straight at him.

“You’ll have to do it.”

Ken blinks. “What....Me?”

“My vision’s still off,” she says. “I guide you, you do the work.”

For a second, the room feels smaller, then Ken exhales.

“Alright... tell me what to do.”

**

Oscar steps onto the porch and lowers himself beside the old couple. For a moment, he says nothing. His eyes drift to the side yard, where a ragged cow lies slumped in the dirt. Its coat is patchy, its body still, as if even breathing has become a burden.

“Bloody hell... she’s just lying there in her own mess.”

The old man lets out a dry chuckle, the kind that carries more weariness than humour.

“Dear Lord knows what she’s been through. Before all this... she had foot rot. We tried treating her. Flora... something like that.”

“Fluoroquinolone,” the old woman corrects quietly.

It’s the first time she’s spoken. Her voice is thin but certain. Long white hair frames her sun-worn face, her lips pursed tight as if the world has given her little reason to soften.

The old man nods vaguely.

“How does *Freeya* look?”

Oscar tilts his head, squinting toward the yard.

“Laid out like she’s sun-baking at Bondi... only she won’t be getting back up.”

A pause settles between them.

“Well,” the farmer sighs, pushing himself upright, “we could give her another shot... if you’re willing. Red container in the shed. Might give her a fighting chance. We’d have to yard her first.”

Oscar hesitates. He’s seen enough dead livestock scattered across paddocks to know how this story usually ends. One more animal won’t change anything.

But still... something nags at him.

“Yeah,” he mutters, standing. “Might as well take a look.”

He crosses the driveway toward the large tin shed, its metal frame groaning softly in the breeze. Inside, the air smells of oil, dust, and old machinery. Tools litter a long workbench, scattered like relics of a life that suddenly stopped.

Oscar runs his hands over them, half-curious, half-instinctive, like a scavenger learning what might matter now.

A flathead screwdriver, it was too worn. He sets it down.

A pair of wire cutters, better. Those go into his jacket.

A cordless Makita drill sits nearby, along with a box of bits. Useful... but not yet.

He finds a canvas bag under the bench and begins filling it without thinking too hard. Then he spots them,

Bolt cutters.

The kind of tool that opens things meant to stay shut.

A faint grin touches his face.

“Yeah... these’ll do.”

He moves deeper into the shed, past an old Ferguson tractor. For a moment, he considers it, escape, movement, possibility, but a glance inside tells him everything. No key.

“Figures,” he mutters.

At the back, a cupboard stands half open. Inside, on the top shelf, sits a small red container.

“Bingo!”

He twists off the cap. There’s liquid, still usable. Beside it lies a syringe and needle. He takes both, slipping them carefully into the bag.

That should be enough.

Oscar steps back out into the daylight, the weight of the bag resting against his shoulder. The quiet of the farm presses in again as he makes his way to the porch.

“Got it,” he calls. “What’s next?”

The old farmer slowly rises, dusting off his hands, a flicker of purpose returning to his tired frame.

“God bless you, son... let’s see if she’s got one more fight left in her.”

Outside, Oscar stands with the old couple beside their cow, the quiet almost peaceful, until a scream tears through the house.

Oscar’s head snaps up.

“That’s not good.”

He’s already moving.

**

Oscar bursts into the bedroom and freezes.

Eldra writhes on the bed, half-conscious, sweat shining on her skin. Shamone pins her shoulders. Ken leans over her, hand deep at her side, working blindly with the tweezers.

“Got it!”

Ken jerks back, holding a bloodied fragment of metal.

Eldra gasps, then collapses into ragged breathing.

Shamone exhales, easing her grip.

“It’s out... it’s out.”

The tension breaks, just enough.

Ken looks at the bullet, unsure what to do,

“Stuff it.”

He flicks it into the corner.

For a second, silence, then Shamone lets out a small, unexpected laugh. Ken stares at her, and laughs too.

Oscar feels it hit him all at once, and he joins in, the sound spilling out uncontrollably.

Even Eldra, weak, trembling from the pain, manages a faint smile through tears.

Lex rushes in, eyes wide.

“What the hell’s going on?”

No one answers; they’re still laughing.

And for the first time in days, it didn’t feel like the world was ending.

**

Shamone studies the contents of the First Aid kit, her brow tightening.

“It’ll hold the wound closed,” she says quietly, “but if infection sets in, she won’t last.”

The room seems to shrink around them.

“Antibiotics, that’s what they need, and fast. The nearest chemist’s in Chapman,” she adds, glancing at Ken. “And after everything... there’s no guarantee it’s even still standing.”

Ken exhales slowly, frustration simmering beneath the surface. Their mission, the Holt substation, the power grid, the plan that might restore some order, feels like it’s slipping further away by the minute.

Now, a desperate search across Canberra for medicine that may not even exist.

He opens his mouth, ready to argue they should stick to the plan, but stops. Shamone’s expression makes it clear: she’s not walking away from this. Not while Eldra’s still breathing.

Instead, she turns to Oscar.

“Where are the old couple? They might know somewhere closer.”

Oscar hesitates, thinking back.

“I was with them... near that cow, Freeya. When we heard the scream. They might still be out there.”

“Freeya?” Ken frowns.

“Yeah... cow with foot-rot. We were gonna treat it. Some medicine, Flouro... lunes... something.”

Shamone’s eyes narrow.

“Fluoroquinolone?”

Oscar blinks.

“...Yeah. That sounds right.”

“Are you sure?”

He shrugs. “Not really. But I can grab it if you want.”

She doesn’t answer, just looks at him.

Oscar gets the message.

“Right. I’ll go.”

**

The air outside has cooled, the last light of day bleeding across the paddocks. When Oscar reaches the spot, the cow is gone. So are the old couple. Only the bottle remains, lying in the dirt like it’s been forgotten, or abandoned.

A flicker of unease runs through him. He scans the fields and sees nothing moving. No voices. No sign they were ever there.

After a moment, he grabs the container and heads back.

**

The stench hits him before he even enters the room.

“Geez,” he mutters, nose wrinkling. “What died in here?”

Ken lets out a dry chuckle.

“Trust me, you don’t want the answer.”

Oscar hands the container to Shamone, who immediately passes it to Ken. “Read it. Does it say Fluoroquinolone?”

Ken squints at the label.

“How do you spell it?”

Shamone hesitates. “I... don’t know.”

So he spells it out slowly, letter by letter.

“...Yeah,” he says finally. “That’s it.”

“That’s our antibiotic.”

Relief ripples through the room. Small, but real.

“Really?” Lex steps forward. “You’re sure?”

Ken nods, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

“Had a chemistry teacher, Mr Flours. Used to joke about it. Called it the ‘Flour punch.’ It stuck with me.”

For the first time in a while, something feels like it might go right.

**

“Alright,” Ken says, regaining focus. “What’s next?”

Oscar glances at Lex.

“We good?”

Lex nods. “Yeah. But what about the power?”

Ken looks around the room, at the blood, the exhaustion, the fragile hope.

“We stay, clean up and move at first light.”

Shamone agrees, already preparing the dose.

“I want to see how she responds.”

Oscar lingers near the door, uneasy.

“I didn’t see the old couple out there...”

Lex frowns.

“Then where the hell did they go?”

**

Outside, the world feels different. It's too quiet. Oscar heads toward the Dodge and stops cold. The fuel cap hangs loose. A bad feeling settles in his gut. He climbs in, turns the key, and the gauge drops to empty.

“What the f*ck...?”

It was full. He knows it was someone who's been here.

The sun dips below the horizon, dragging the last of the light with it, and suddenly, the farm doesn't feel like shelter anymore.

ONE'S DESIRE

Ken wakes to light, thin, pale sunlight bleeding through the dusty front window. For a moment, he doesn't move. His body feels heavy, like it's been buried under sleep for days. Then memory returns in fragments, Shamone, the shearing quarters, the desperate need to rest.

The quarters sit apart from the farmhouse, near the old shearing shed, four narrow rooms lined side by side, opening onto a weathered patio. Once, men would gather there after long days, boots kicked off, beer in hand, laughter drifting into the evening air. Now, silence owns the place. Wool has long since lost its value, replaced by cattle and neglect.

Still, it's shelter. And last night, it was enough.

Ken lifts his head. Across the room, Shamone lies in the opposite bed, turned away from him. He can still feel the grit of dust clinging to his skin from beating out the mattresses, each strike sending clouds into the air. Even now, it lingers on his clothes, in his throat, in the back of his mind.

He considers closing his eyes again. Just for a moment. Instead, he checks his watch.

His stomach tightens.

Just past noon. They've overslept.

Ken swings his legs over the side of the bed and crosses to Shamone, nudging her awake. She groans softly.

"What time is it?"

When he tells her, she pushes herself up, eyes wide. "What happened there?"

"A well-earned rest," he says, though it doesn't sound convincing, even to him.

They dress quickly and step outside. The air is still, the sun already high, warming the ground in a way that feels almost unnatural after so many cold, uncertain days. Oscar answers their knock with bleary eyes.

“What time is it?”

Ken tells him.

“What the f*ck?”

Minutes later, they’re moving, gear gathered, minds sharpening as reality settles back in.

Inside the house, Eldra still sleeps. Shamone checks her carefully, breathing steady, dressings clean. Relief flickers across her face.

“I think she’s going to be all right.”

“Good,” Ken says. “Let’s figure out our next move.”

Oscar returns from outside, his expression uneasy.

“The old couple, gone. No sign of them. But I found tracks... heading toward the river.”

Ken’s gaze drifts across the paddocks. Dry land stretches out under the sun, falling away toward a deep gully where the Molonglo River cuts through the property. Beyond it, something catches his eye: transmission towers, tall and silent.

He traces the lines upward, following them across the landscape. A thought locks into place.

“You know...” he says slowly, pulling out the map. “We’re closer than I thought. The Holt substation is not far. We could walk it.”

He points across the river.

“Follow the power lines.”

Oscar and Shamone exchange a glance, then nod.

Decision made.

They eat quickly, tuna from a dented can, shared without ceremony. Hunger has become a dull, constant presence since the Flash, shrinking both their bodies and expectations. Water, at least, isn't an issue. Most farms have tanks.

Oscar hesitates, eyeing a heavy tool bag.

"Found bolt cutters in the shed. We really need those?"

"We might," Ken says. "If we want inside the substation."

Oscar mutters under his breath, already regretting asking.

They rest only briefly before moving again. Time matters now. Ken estimates the distance, four kilometres, maybe two hours on foot. If they're quick, they can make it there and back before dark.

Shamone checks on Eldra one last time, returning with a small nod.

"Cassie's with her. We're clear."

Ken stands.

"Alright. We head north, cut through the back paddock, cross the river, then follow the lines. Only problem..."

"The river," Oscar says with a smirk. "Yeah. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Ken exhales sharply. "Let's just go."

They pass through the gate and immediately pick up the tyre tracks, cutting through open grassland toward the riverbank.

At first, it's quiet. Then they see it.

The tractor.

Half-submerged tilted, and something has gone wrong. A wheel juts from the water like a broken limb, and the smell,

It hits them before they get closer to the river; there's a foul, rotting, unmistakable stench.

Shamone wrinkles her nose. "What is that?"

Ken already knows. He remembers the map; the sewage plant was upriver. Something has gone wrong. Badly wrong.

“Probably dead animals upstream,” he lies. Oscar doesn’t buy it.

As they approach, the truth reveals itself in brutal silence. They see Edward and his wife. Still inside the cabin, dead.

Downstream, the cow lies tangled in rope, its body collapsed at the water’s edge, head submerged.

Oscar covers his nose. “Well... looks like it finally got its drink.”

Shamone turns to Ken, her voice quieter now. “Is it bad?”

“It’s not something you forget.”

She hesitates. “What do we do?”

Ken doesn’t look away.

“We keep going.”

Oscar snaps his head toward him. “You’re not serious, we’re not crossing that, are we?”

“You got a better idea?”

He stares at Ken.

“Maybe... the tractor?” Oscar offers weakly.

The current runs higher than expected. The water is thick, brown, and wrong. Rocks break the surface in places, but not enough to trust easily.

And if they fall in...Ken doesn’t finish the thought. Disease, infection, or something worse.

He scans downstream until he finds it, a narrow stretch where the rocks form a broken path.

“This is it.”

Crossing won’t be easy. Not for any of them, but especially not for Shamone.

He glances at her. Maybe it's better that she can't fully see what's in that water. Oscar goes first. Then Shamone and Ken stay close behind, guiding her, step by step, word by word.

"Left... a bit further... now step."

She hesitates at first. Then steadies.

"It's just water," she says.

For a moment, it almost feels true.

Then the rock shifts.

She slips, and she plunges into the river.

Ken moves instantly, hauling her up before she can sink deeper. She gasps, but then something unexpected crosses her face. She felt the coolness and was happy that the water was washing something away. Ken doesn't share that comfort. Not here. Not in this.

They reach the far bank, soaked and silent.

Oscar grimaces. "Don't... look down."

Too late. A faint beige stain spreads across their clothes.

Ken swallows hard, forcing his voice steady. "Ignore it. We keep moving."

They rinse what they can, though it changes little. Oscar, somehow, has only wet shoes. Ken checks the sky.

"Three hours of light left. Let's move."

And without another word, they turn toward the towers and whatever waits for them there.

SEEKS

A heavy padlock hangs from the chain, scarred, bent, and clearly tampered with. Besides, the fence has already been cut.

Ken glances at Oscar.

“Should we even bother with the bolt cutters?”

Oscar gives a dry shrug. “Doesn’t look like it matters, mate.”

Still, he lifts them and snaps through what’s left of the lock. The gate groans open.

It had taken them over an hour to reach the substation. The sun is sinking fast now, bleeding the sky of light. The rest from the night before has steadied them, but not enough to ignore the truth pressing in; there’s no way they’re making it back to the farm today. Whatever happens here, they’re committed.

Then they hear it.

A sharp, rhythmic *clicking* echoes from somewhere deep inside the electrical compound.

Ken freezes. “You hear that?”

Oscar does. His expression tightens as he listens. He knows this place, used to work here, understood its guts and rhythms. But this... this isn’t right.

“Could be a phase switch,” he mutters. “Or the sectionaliser trying to engage. Hard to tell.”

Ken nods toward the yard. “Only one way to find out.”

They move toward the control building. Ken’s memory guides him, the upgrades, the security systems, the

centralised controls run out of Fyshwick. No access without clearance.

Unless you know the override. He punches in the code.

For a second, nothing. Then the magnetic lock *clicks*, and the door releases.

Inside, the air feels still, stale and protected. Ken glances around.

“This place has a ferrite cage?”

Oscar nods slowly.

“Yeah... should do.”

Shamone frowns.

“A what?”

Ken smirks faintly despite the tension.

“Think of it like a shield. Blocks electromagnetic pulses. Anything inside should’ve survived the blast.”

He gestures to the walls. “If it’s working.”

The clicking continues outside, louder now.

Ken raises an eyebrow at Oscar. “So... what now?”

Oscar exhales. Decision made. “We kill the Tumut feed first. Safer that way.”

They crack open the control rack. The touchscreen flickers to life, barely.

“Strewth... it’s still running,” Oscar mutters.

Login prompt. He hesitates. Ken leans in and enters the master credentials.

Oscar shakes his head. “Mate... what did you do to this system?”

“Don’t ask.”

Within seconds, Oscar navigates the interface and shuts down the feed.

The clicking stops.

Silence drops over the compound.

Oscar doesn't waste time. He moves to the racks, ducks inside, and scans the boards. Something is burning.

"Found it."

One of the phase switching boards is burned out, charred, dead. The system had been trying to connect, over and over, failing each time.

He yanks it free and heads to the storage cage. If they're lucky...

There is a replacement board that sits untouched in a sealed box.

"Alright," he mutters, slotting it into place. "Let's see if this old girl still breathes."

He turns back to them.

"You two should get outside the perimeter. If this goes wrong..."

Ken doesn't argue. But he can't help asking,

"What about the surge? If the whole city comes online at once,"

Oscar cuts him off.

"Most of it's already dead. We're not bringing back a city... just what's left of it."

Ken studies him for a moment, then nods.

"Good luck."

He takes Shamone's hand, and they step out beyond the fence.

The sky is almost gone now. The last light clings to the horizon. They stand side by side, facing the silent compound. Shamone bows her head.

"Let's pray."

Ken follows, but his thoughts aren't on the power. They drift, to the dead. The lost. The ones who never had a chance.

Planes falling from the sky. Cars twisted on highways. People caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Faces surface in his mind

Rachel. Still waiting.

Timmy. Still fighting.

Bill. Still breaking.

Susanne. Still afraid.

Oscar... still risking everything.

and Ken, safe outside, and waiting.

The weight of it crushes him.

His voice cracks.

"How am I out here... while he's in there?"

The guilt builds, rising fast, sharp, unbearable.

"How can I stand here and do nothing?"

His head snaps up, speaking to the *Oh Mighty*.

"Oh, my God! "

Suddenly, the substation erupts to life. Lights blaze across the compound. Streetlights flicker on, one by one, stretching into the distance like a waking world.

And for the first time since the darkness fell, something answered back.

SOUND JUDGEMENT

Darkness presses in from every side. Stephen's wrists burn as he twists against the cable ties, breath shallow, controlled. The plastic bites back, until it doesn't, and it suddenly gives. He freezes, listening...hears nothing.

No footsteps above, no voices. Just the house... settling. A faint groan in the walls. A soft creak in the ceiling. He can hear the pangolin clock on the bench,

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

The sound cuts clean through the silence.

Stephen lowers himself to the floor, muscles tight, every movement deliberate. A grey sliver of dawn bleeds through the basement window, barely enough to shape the room. He doesn't trust it. He trusts the sound.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

It shouldn't be comforting, but it is. Each tick lands with mechanical certainty, steady and precise, like a heartbeat that isn't his. For a moment, it tricks him into believing everything is normal. Power, life, and routine.

A lie, but a useful one.

He exhales slowly, letting the rhythm guide him as he moves. One hand sweeps the floor ahead, careful not to disturb anything unseen. He maps the darkness from memory, the cold concrete, the scattered tools, the empty spaces where danger might be waiting.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

He crawls forward, counting each movement between beats, until his fingers brush metal, the stair rail.

He grips it, steadying himself. The ticking sound follows him as he rises.

In complete darkness, something creaks, soft, uncertain, as if the house itself is breathing.

Fear tightens around him. There's no turning back now. The only way out is through the basement door.

At the top, he feels the door handle. Holds his breath and turns the knob.

He enters the kitchen.

The stench hits him first, spoiled meat, thick and clinging. He pauses, letting his eyes adjust to the faint wash of dawn creeping through the kitchen window. Junk litters the floor. He threads his way through it, slow and deliberate, and enters the narrow passage beyond.

His fingers touch a washing machine, then a dryer. He finally reaches the back door, he grips the handle and pulls.

Nothing.

His pulse spikes. He fumbles lower, finds the deadlock. Empty with no key

He shuts his eyes for a moment, forcing the panic down. He thinks of the front door. There must be a way out.

He moves back through the kitchen, finds the archway, and traces the dining table with his hand, using it to guide him forward.

The living room opens before him. A faint shaft of sunlight catches the lampshade.

And then, Jimmy.

Sprawled on the couch, snoring.

Stephen freezes. Every muscle locks. He watches, listens, and counts the breaths. Still asleep. The front door is just beyond him.

Stephen edges forward, each step measured. A thought flickers, grab something, end it now, but it dies as quickly as it comes. Jimmy is too careful. Too unpredictable. There could be a trap. He reaches the door and wraps his fingers around the handle,

Then, without warning, the house explodes with light. Power has been restored. He jerks back as if the handle had burned.

A harsh white noise roars from the radio in the corner. It floods his ears, rattles his skull. He stands frozen, stunned by its suddenness.

Then he looks and sees Jimmy stirring. Still lying there... but waking up. Stephen yanks the door handle. It won't move. There is no escape.

He turns, breath sharpening, mind racing.

If he's getting out, he'll have to fight for it. His eyes dart across the room. I need a weapon.

There was a candlestick lamp on the side table.

He moves.

Stephen lunges, gripping the lamp. He swings hard. The base cracks against Jimmy's forehead with a dull thud. Jimmy collapses back down again. Stephen strikes again.

Jimmy lies motionless.

Stephen's chest heaves. Relief flickers, brief, fragile. He turns and rushes to the front door, yanking the handle.

Still locked. He freezes. Glances back. Jimmy hasn't moved.

Stephen exhales slowly, forcing his energy down. His eyes drift upward, to the light blazing above. The power is back on.

A grin creeps across his face.

“Oh... have I got something for you.”

He moves quickly. The lamp cord is temporary, but it's enough. He binds Jimmy's wrists and ties him off to the couch handle, pulling it tight. It won't hold forever. He needs something better.

His gaze shifts. The garage.

He remembers it now, feels like weeks ago, not days. With the lights humming overhead, he crosses to the stereo and shuts it off. The harsh radio static dies instantly. Thinking that could be useful later.

He scans the house, finds the garage door through the dining room. Red smears stain the wall around it, old, dried, unsettling.

A thought prickles; he could leave, right now.

He hesitates.

Then shakes it off.

He has to know.

The knob turns to the garage.

The smell hits first, thick, foul, unmistakable.

Stephen steps inside. He can sense something moving.

He stops dead, listening. The dim dawn light bleeding through the garage window gives just enough shape to the room, the concrete floor, a workbench, and a garage door.

He turns,

A slab of meat hangs from the rafters, swaying slightly.

Stephen exhales, tension easing a fraction. His eyes drift to the bench. A butcher's knife sits there.

Above it, strips of drying meat hang in rows.

Stephen's stomach twists.

He tears off a piece and chews, hunger overriding thought. A bit tough, salty, but he devours it, then pauses.

Something else is in the room. He looks around and spots it.

A massive ram, penned in the corner. Thick, with curling horns and dense wool, alive and facing him.

It bleats.

Stephen startles, then stares at the meat in his hand... and back at the animal.

Relief washes through him. He raises the strip slightly.

"Cheers."

He eats again, slower now, scanning the space. Blood stains the concrete. The blood trails from the bench to the door, explaining everything. The clothes and the smell.

Jimmy hasn't been scavenging; he's been harvesting.

Stephen grabs a handful of hay and pushes it through the enclosure. The ram edges forward cautiously.

With his hunger dulled, his mind starts turning again.

Back through that door... Jimmy waits. He swallows hard. The stench curls in his throat. He turns instead to the garage door and lifts it.

Fresh air floods in. Sunlight spills across his face.

He closes his eyes, breathing deeply, like surfacing from underwater. He was free.

The ram bleats beside him.

"Oh."

Stephen turns back, hesitates, then unlatches the pen. The ram bolts past him, charging up the driveway.

“It’s your lucky day, little fella.”

Stephen watches it go.

He glances up the street, and spots it. Graffiti scrawled across a fence:

Acts 9:3.

“Ahh... that’s it.”

Ken’s voice echoes in his mind.

We must follow the faith that God has brought to us.

Stephen lets out a quiet chuckle. thinking of his brother.

“Well done, little brother.”

He turns back, gathers the remaining strips of jerky, stuffing them into a sack. Then lowers the garage door behind him.

The streetlights are still on. The power’s back. perhaps a new world, again.

Jimmy, the Spider... that life is over.

Stephen adjusts the sack over his shoulder.

Now comes the choice. He had the dream, and now it’s time to follow it.

AREN'T THEY LOVELY

Jamie reaches the playground just as Alice coasts down the slide.

“Hey! Alice!” he calls.

She turns, grinning, and waves him over. Within seconds, they’re weaving through the worn-out equipment, their laughter cutting through the stillness.

“YOU’RE IT!” Alice shouts, darting away.

Behind him, Jamie’s mother approaches at a slower pace. She spots her sister seated on the bench, watching the children, and makes her way over.

“God bless you, Rachel.”

Rachel smiles warmly. “Thanks to Shamone... we’re all safe.” A ritual Rachel says when they meet. Shamone brushes it off with a small shrug, unwilling to take the credit. “Have you heard from Susanne?”

Rachel brightens. “Yes, she’s with Oscar now. Doing better, I think. She’s been struggling... PTSD. The doctors say it’s from what happened at the station. She finally left her old partner, Joe.” She hesitates. “Wasn’t there something strange about him?”

Shamone presses her lips together. “Maybe. Either way, Oscar’s good for her in a different way.”

Rachel nods, then asks, “What about Roy? Any news?”

Shamone’s expression tightens as she recalls Stephen’s story. “Not yet. I hope he’s alright.”

Her gaze drifts past Rachel, to the playground.

Rust creeps along the metal frames. Paint has long since peeled away. Even now, after all these years, the place feels... abandoned.

“It’s frustrating,” she says quietly. “A decade later, and we’re still living in the shadow of the Flash.”

No one knows how far the damage really goes. Before the Flash, schools were overflowing, noise, movement, life packed into every corridor. Now, most sit hollow, running at a fraction of what they were. Classrooms gather dust. Playgrounds rust. Seeing children outside, laughing and playing, has become rare. Unnatural, almost.

During the collapse, people didn’t just disappear; they died slowly of hunger, thirst and infection. The things society once kept at bay crept back in, patient and merciless. The law dissolved soon after. For a time, it was chaos, guns, theft, survival at any cost, until martial law stamped what order it could back into place.

Even now, it feels fragile.

The failure of electronics forced a reckoning. Systems people trusted without question, automated, invisible, vanished overnight. And with them, certainty. Experts warn that the sun moves in cycles, and storms like the one that caused the Flash come every eleven years.

Which means it could happen again.

When the power finally returned, it brought little comfort. The machines came back to life, but the world they served did not. ATMs stood useless. Vehicles couldn’t move. Phones connected to nothing. The internet, once the spine of everything, was simply... gone.

And with it, records, money, and identity.

Banks lost it all. Insurance collapsed under claims it could never have imagined; there was no clause for the sun turning against them. What people had built, saved, depended on... erased without warning.

So people adapted, or they tried to.

Work changed. It had to. No more sitting behind screens, moving numbers no one could see. Survival became physical again, picking, lifting, digging, and trading. Keeping what you needed. Letting go of the rest.

Ownership blurred. The government stepped in, taking control where systems failed, promising stability that never quite returned. A decade on, real wealth is gone. Cash still circulates, coins pass from hand to hand, but they feel like relics of something that no longer fits this world.

Fuel is scarce and expensive. Planes sit idle. Buses don't run. Trucks can't deliver. Cars line the streets like abandoned shells. The rhythm of life is broken. And yet,

The sun still rises. The rain still falls. Birds still sing into the quiet, as if nothing ever changed. Plants grow. Seasons turn. Nature continues, indifferent, uninterrupted.

It's only us who faltered. Only us who built something so fragile it could vanish in a single flash, and still, we chase what we want, as if nothing has been learned.

Rachel exhales. "We always will. But... the kids," she gestures toward Jamie and Alice, still chasing each other "There was something good that came out of it. If the Flash never happened... they wouldn't be here."

She smiles faintly.

"If Jason and I hadn't been trapped in that bunker, we never would've found each other. Never had Alice. So... I can't regret it. Not completely."

Shamone listens, her thoughts drifting.

Before the Flash, pregnancy had been impossible for her. The tumour, the complications, and every door closed.

And then, somehow, seven months after it all, Jamie was born. It was a miracle.

Rachel had conceived around the same time. Their children grew side by side, the same age, two unlikely lives in a world that had lost so many.

Because for most... it wasn't like that.

Birth rates collapsed. Miscarriages surged. Experts blamed the aftermath, the CME-induced ozone-layer rupture, and the spike in gamma radiation. Damage no one could fully measure, and no one could undo.

The list of complications kept growing, and still, nobody really understood why.

Shamone lets out a slow breath, then glances back at Rachel, a thought forming.

"You know..." she begins, a faint smile returning, "I was thinking about something Ken said, back before we came looking for you."

Rachel tilts her head. "Oh?"

"Proverbs 18:1," Shamone says.

Rachel gives a small, apologetic laugh. "You'll have to remind me."

Shamone nods, then recites softly,

*"One who isolates himself seeks his own desire;
He rejects all sound judgment."*

She lets the words hang for a moment, then looks back at the children.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” she says. “Something written thousands of years ago... and it still feels like it’s describing us today.”

Rachel follows her gaze.

Jamie and Alice collapse into laughter, breathless, alive, unaware of everything that came before them.

Shamone smiles.

“Maybe I’ll use that in Sunday’s sermon.”

Then, softer she says,

“Aren’t they lovely?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you listen to my American accent, you will detect a Boston and an Australian pitch. I was born in Melbourne and dragged to Philadelphia when I was 3. My father pursued a doctorate at Temple, and we lived there for 3 years. After my dad finished his studies, he landed an associate professorship at Boston University, which led us to move to Massachusetts. Having spent most of my formative years at elementary, middle, and high school in Framingham, MA, I decided to exercise my right to a free College education in Australia. Yes, further education was free back then, but not now. I never became an American citizen; I only had resident alien status. So I was brought up as a Yankee, as some Australians would say, a “septic tank” rhymes with Yank. Go figure? I finished my education and have lived in Canberra for 40 years. Currently working as an Electronic Technician in Canberra. I’m married with two children.

Andrew Cheffers