

PROLOGUE

TRANSIT CAMP, EAST COAST,
FORMER UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:
FEBRUARY, 120 YEARS AFTER THE START OF THE
DECLINE

Fingers should always be broken first. Never start with the bolt cutters.

Breaking is educational. It hurts like hell, but bones heal, so it's a lesson in how bad things could get if permanent damage is inflicted. My advice: don't chop anything off before you've tried it, because you need to leave yourself some space to escalate. You'd be surprised how fast you can run out of body parts when you're trying to make someone see sense.

But Zakko's already had his first warning about thieving. Now we're short a box of meds from the camp supply, so I don't think I made my point clear enough last time. This kind of explanation is best done in the privacy of Zakko's cabin.

"Come on, Zakko." Jared's got him pinned down, one arm up his back and the other held flat on the table, but if Zakko keeps squirming like that he's going to lose the whole hand. I grip his wrist, just resting the meat cleaver on his forefinger. I've tied a piece of string tight around it, yakuza style, to stop the bleeding, just in case things go the distance. "What did you do with the meds? We do *not* thief from our own or from the townsfolk. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Everyone thinks the forefinger is the one you can't afford to lose, because the kidnapper in the movies always lops off the pinkie like it's a spare you don't really need. *Wrong*. Along with your thumb, it's one of the two digits you'll really, *really* miss.

Try gripping without it. The pinkie's more or less a miniature thumb, the same kind of muscles and almost as mobile. How do I know that? Well, it's a long story. Just trust me. We're not the only animal with an opposable thumb, but we're the only one with a thumb long enough to make a proper precision grip with the fingers. So if you ever find yourself in Zakko's shoes and you have to choose which finger you can live without, pick the index. It might look the most important, but it's the least useful. You can even squeeze a trigger without it just fine. Next time — well, there shouldn't need to be a next time.

If I stop for a moment and wonder whether this is what I've become, or if this is what I always was, the answer doesn't matter. There are still things that I have to do.

Here's my problem. I get that good people do dumb things, and sometimes even evil things, but what I don't understand is why Zakko did it. All he has to do is ask Chuck, the old corpsman who organises the first responders. We're not short of much. We keep the area free of undesirables — two-legged, four-legged, it's all the same to us — and the townsfolk pay for the service with supplies. Zakko can have what he needs. But he steals. We can't have that.

Jared doesn't say a word. He just looks at me, fed up. It's cold and he's probably getting a cramp from holding Zakko down.

"Talk to me, Zakko." I need to know. "Last chance. Where are the meds?"

Believe me, I don't like this. But two communities count on me. I can't turn a blind eye to this, because that's

how things eventually fall apart. Rules are the difference between us and the scavengers and marauders out there. Just because we decided not to live under the town's regulations, it doesn't mean we want anarchy.

So I visualise the arc of the blade and raise the cleaver. I'm one held breath away from bringing it down as hard as I can.

"No — no, no, no, *no!*" Zakko caves. "I swear it was just this once. There was a woman. She was on her own and she had this real bad infection. I said I'd try and help her out." He nods in the direction of the metal-frame bed pushed against one wall. "I didn't get the chance to go find her again. The meds are under my mattress."

Yeah, we have a problem now. But a totally different one.

"Did you touch her?" Well, shit. If he's caught anything, I've got it. I've been holding him down and so has Jared. Maybe the whole camp's been exposed. It's too late. I nod at Jared to back away, but he does a very slow, single shake of his head and doesn't move a muscle, so I hang on too. Zakko might just be playing for time. "When did this happen? Why didn't you report a contact right away?"

"A couple of days ago. I didn't lay a finger on her."

"So how do you know she had an infection?"

"Her hand was bandaged. She said she had a wound that wouldn't heal."

Sometimes you pray even when you think you don't believe. I hope this was just some random conversation and Zakko was trying to impress her. But I have to work on the basis that we might have the beginning of an epidemic, or a raid. Of the two, I'll take the raid. I can handle that.

"And you thought playing Mr Nice and giving her medical aid would get you somewhere with her." We've all done dumb things for women. Even the smartest guys can't think straight when there's a woman involved. "So on the off-chance of a quick fling with some anonymous female,

who might have untreatable TB, tox, anthrax, super-staph, hemo, flu, or whatever, you took pity on her because she hurt her hand.”

“I said I never touched her.” Zakko’s now panicking about more than losing a finger. “She was camped on the river. By the old jetty. I didn’t get closer than ten yards, I swear.”

Well, if he’s telling the truth, at least he hasn’t got something spread by contact. “Did it ever occur to you she might be scouting for marauders?”

“She was on her own. Just a skinny girl with a crappy tent. I’d have known.”

People look to me to keep things under control. I don’t lose my head and I always have a plan, or at least that’s how it looks on the surface. “What did she say? Did she ask for refuge here?”

“No. She just wanted to know if she was anywhere near somewhere called Nanton Park.”

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s what I told her.” Zakko starts getting hyper. “Okay, okay, just do it. Get it over with. Cut the frigging finger off.”

I really was going to do it. I’m sure I was. I did shit like this in another life, and that makes it easier, but it doesn’t make it *better*. I’m almost glad I’ve now got something bigger to worry about so I can put the cleaver away.

“Stay where you are, okay?” This time I let go of his wrist and gesture at Jared to stand clear. “You set one foot outside this shack and I’ll shoot you. You’re quarantined.”

“Nah, I’ll take care of that,” Jared says, patting his holster. “You go do whatever you need to.”

He walks outside with me and takes up his sentry stance by the door. The air’s freezing and I can hear the *chock-chock-chock* of someone splitting logs nearby. The two Monroe girls are playing out front. One of them starts

heading our way, but Jared waves them back. We need to keep clear of everyone until we've been checked by the doc.

"Zakko might be sick," Jared says. "Quarantine until we say otherwise, okay?"

The girl gives him a big grin and a thumbs-up. He returns it. If I'd known what Zakko was up to, I'd never have put Jared at risk.

"Sorry, buddy." Either we tell people now and worry them before we have answers, or we let it ride and risk something spreading. There's no second chance to learn lessons these days. "Call Doug and tell him I need to meet him. Usual place."

Jared shrugs. "Understood."

I turn to walk away, but I still feel I owe him an explanation for why I didn't listen to him about Zakko in the first place. He warned me that the guy wouldn't fit in. Jared's got a nose for that kind of thing and it's saved our asses more than once.

But I never leave anyone behind.

"I'll make Zakko a useful member of society if it kills me," I say.

"This is the best time to take out the trash, Chris. He'll only do it again. Or worse."

"Okay. Whatever."

"Still on for beer and vids tonight? Provided we're not dead."

"Sure. Not that time-travelling vigilante crap, though. I hate that one."

I hate it because it's hard to watch any let's-change-the-world stuff these days without wondering exactly which moment you'd jump back to and who you'd shoot to head off a disaster. Where do we stop the show? Fifty years ago? A hundred? When the epidemics started, or the famines, or the endless small wars in every damn place? We've been going down the pan a dozen different ways for

the last century, and now we've finally gotten around to nukes and agriweapons just to make sure we kill ourselves off properly.

Eventually, you reach a tipping point. Straws and camels' backs. You can maybe ride out individual disasters, but when they all pile up, things collapse. So if anyone ever asks me what that last straw was, not that they will, I'm going to blame the agriweapons.

This is what happens when you're working on an engineered crop virus to kill pests or something — or create infected bugs to destroy an enemy's agriculture, whichever explanation you believe — and it's stolen from the lab by folks who know folks who'll pay good money for that kind of thing.

This is what happens when terrorists, who've indeed paid good money for it, find it's so effective that it wipes out half the US wheat crop in two seasons.

This is what happens when the die-back virus moves into soy, causes a shortage of animal feed, and then gets into rice and maize, and everybody panics — especially Asia, which closes its borders, locks down, and destroys millions of acres of its own forests and farmland to fire-break the infection.

This is what happens when a few years pass and we still can't fix it, when famine's killed millions and we're overwhelmed by burying and burning bodies, and an Asian and Pacific States force nukes our infected vegetation to stop the die-back reaching them, starting at the West Coast and moving inland.

Seriously, I don't blame them. I wouldn't even call it a war. I'd do the same.

After that, it's kind of a blur. Europe's mostly a no-go area, but then it already was.

The world's changed out of all recognition in just over a century. We're living in the Decline. They say

North America's lost four-fifths of its population since 2200 — epidemics, famine, emigration, big companies headquartering overseas, civil wars, gang wars — so most of the people who kept the modern world running are gone. That means nuclear power stations, chemical factories, water plants... which is why we've got contamination everywhere as well. Cascade failure, our old commanding officer called it. Or at least he did before the cholera got him.

Yeah, it's hard to pick an intervention point for a time machine to put things right, but I'd go back for the first guy in a white coat. Obvious. So Jared had better find a nice simple action movie. Identify enemy, aim, shoot. Job done.

Anyway, I've got work to do. It's a twenty-minute walk into town. That's a healthy distance for neighbours, close enough to keep an eye out for trouble, but far enough apart to lead our own lives — or contain an outbreak. The direct route takes me down the hill. From the ridge, you can see the whole area laid out like a map: the town of Kill Line, population eleven hundred, and to the north-east, behind a serious security perimeter, the Ainatio Park research facility, where they're supposed to be working on some remedy for die-back.

Still, at least Ainatio stayed. They didn't abandon the country — or abandon Earth — like the rest of the corporations. They never say how many people are working in there now, but the farmers guess about five thousand, judging by how much food they supply.

An acre feeds a man. Kill Line has ten thousand under cultivation or pasture, and that's why it has to be defended from marauders, whether they're human or animal. We're three small tribes marooned on a fertile island, not neighbours by choice, but we have food, we have fuel, and we're safe for the time being.

And we have one flag in common. For all the differences in how we got here, there are three flagpoles and three American flags, so with or without a government, we know who we are.

Nobody alive today remembers the good old days anyway. Did they ever happen? Did the likes of us ever get anything out of it? There's always been disaster and war, ups and downs, dark ages and golden eras. It's not the first time that something's wiped out a big chunk of life on the planet, either. But each time that happens and the world recovers, some species don't make it. This time it just might be us.

The track worn down the hillside by scuffing boots takes me past sheep scraping at the thin snow to graze, and now I can see Doug in the distance, walking through the fields with his grandson. He's bundled up in his sheepskin coat, puffing clouds on the cold air, heading for our rendezvous point, the sign at the entrance to the town. I know the words embossed on that sheet of metal by heart.

WELCOME TO KILL LINE
STOP AND WAIT WITH YOUR VEHICLE
YOU WILL BE FIRED UPON
IF YOU CONTINUE PAST THIS POINT

Yeah, welcome to Kill Line. Sometimes I'm not sure if Doug likes me, or even if I like him, but you don't have to like someone to trust them.

And we do have to trust each other, me and Doug. We have an understanding. I do the killing and he does the farming. That's how we stay alive.