The Re-creation of the Death Firm

By Lisa M. Lucero

Chapter 1

A trail of blood streamed down the yellowish-white sand in the middle of the Arizona desert. It was all that remained of the once-famous actress Velma Whitney. The Death Firm that scientist Dr. Fritz Camargo had sent out to get her had eaten every morsel of her body. The starlet had confronted Camargo just days before to ask him questions about the whereabouts of her missing ex-husband. Little did Whitney know that she was putting her own life at risk.

Camargo had no other choice. Whitney was figuring out that it was him behind her ex-husband Dr. Xander Park’s disappearance. He knew at that moment she would have led the authorities to his home, and they would soon figure out that he was also responsible for the disappearances of Dr. Garfield Franco and Dr. Tobias Lozano. Authorities would have also found out he was behind the re-creation of the Death Firm. He now had blood on his hands and showed no remorse for his actions. He had to kill them too.

The abbreviation of Death Firm was Destructive, Experiment, Animal instincts, Transformational, Hybrid; Fighting, Intelligent, Robotic, Man-eaters. Camargo, Franco, Lozano, and Park created the Death Firms by adding a combination of animal parts and DNA and robotic parts to strong, athletic, and healthy human beings. The combination of animal features, robotic features, and human features made the Death Firm an unstoppable force. The original Death Firm had the ability to look like a human being, but at times when it got hungry or felt threatened, it transformed into a deadly beast. Once the transformation to Death Firm was completed, it would look partially human, partially animal, and partially robotic. It would have long and sharp claws, tall and pointy ears, sharp teeth, animal hair, and be equipped with weaponry and mechanical devices.

The United States Army had asked them to create a human with superpowers to fight in combat. The quad of scientists realized this was a chance to create something that could be put to effective use. Unfortunately, one of them, namely Camargo, saw this as an opportunity to take power and use the Death Firms to fulfill his evil purposes. Park, Franco, and Tobias had no clue what Camargo was up to. After the original Death Firms were destroyed, Camargo sought revenge on the U.S. Army. The only way he could achieve this was to recreate them with the help of Park, Franco, and Tobias. He later plotted against them after recreating them and murdered each one of them.

Park, Franco, and Tobias saw potential in the Death Firms but were hesitant to help Camargo recreate them because they were extremely dangerous and could be used for the wrong reasons. Death Firms were tricky beasts. People could easily mistake the Death Firm for a human at first. The Death Firm would then shake, and its eyes would turn red as it transformed. Often, people would find out a little too late that they were in the presence of a Death Firm. The Death Firm was too quick for them. They would try to escape, but they couldn’t outrun it. The Death Firm had incredible speed, agility, strength, and could jump high.

It was only a matter of time before Camargo’s overall plan to take over the world would go into full effect. His Death Firms would soon spread across the world. So far, his plans had been falling into place. Camargo could easily create even more Death Firms with the help of a new team of scientists. He no longer needed the help of Franco, Park, and Lozano with the blueprint to the latest version of Death Firms in his hands.

Camargo unleashed the Death Firms on them because he knew they would turn him in to the authorities once they found out what his devious plan was. Camargo knew that Franco, Park, and Lozano would help him recreate the Death Firms if they thought it would be for a worthy cause. They would provide him with all the instructions on how to make one. They could once again work together as a team and create even more advanced Death Firms.

Camargo earned the loyalty of his assistants by providing them with a generous sum of money. He also told them it would bring them fame and they would make history with the newly created Death Firms. The assistants were perfectly okay with that arrangement. If the dollars were rolling in, they would happily take part in his plan. They were also fooled into believing that they would help bring about world peace and protect innocent lives. Camargo couldn’t believe how gullible they were.

Before Park, Franco, and Lozano were killed by the Death Firms, Camargo had given them more than two million dollars to help with recreating Death Firms. He provided them with whatever supplies they needed to create them as well. Camargo was an extremely wealthy man, so he had plenty of money to give to his assistants to keep them satisfied. He also made sure that he got his money’s worth out of the overall project. Camargo strived for perfection.

Camargo was pleased with how well his plans were being carried out, but at the end of the day, he found himself all alone. Was the obsession with power eating him up inside? Camargo wasn’t sure he had enough heart left to give to anyone after facing so much criticism for the chaos that the first Death Firms had created and how they could not be controlled. He was rejected by his peers and was one of the most hated people in the world. The U.S. Army came to him for help in building something to help secure the borders, and that was what he did. Never once did the U.S. Army take responsibility for the Death Firms. They penned all the blame on the scientists for creating them. The hatred and greed continued to grow inside him. No one had ever done anything for him, so why should he feel bad for re-releasing Death Firms out into the world. Helping create the Death Firms gave him something to feel proud about. It was the biggest accomplishment in his life. Getting an assignment from the U.S. Government made him feel important, but now he felt as if the government had turned against him. It was the Army’s fault for allowing the Death Firms to escape from the compound.

The only person that stood in his way was Winter Harris. Harris had created a Death Firm trap that had killed his entire army of Death Firms about two years ago in 2044. Camargo heard he still resided in Tucson, Arizona, and that he was now married with a child. He had to find Harris and get his revenge for destroying his creation. Camargo wanted Harris dead so that he would not be able to conjure up another plan to destroy his newly created Death Firms.

If he was going to outsmart him, he was going to have to be more careful with how he operated the Death Firms and where he had them positioned throughout the world. Camargo would need to have them further spread out, so Harris would not be able to lure them all at once into a trap. This time, they would be well-hidden so that no one for sure would know where their exact locations were. There would no longer be safe zones because no one for sure would know where they would be safe.

Camargo made sure the latest version of the Death Firms would have a protective shield on their heads that would prevent any tracking device from finding them. He remembered that the military was able to track them down from space with trackers and video surveillance, so they knew their whereabouts. The protective shield prevented anyone from tracking the Death Firms down technologically. The military would not know what was about to hit them.

He had more than eight hundred Death Firms placed in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Europe. Camargo had the ability to switch them back into human form. Currently, all the Death Firms were living normal lives in human form. When the Death Firms were in human form, they were not aware that they were even Death Firms. Camargo programmed their human brains to forget about whatever activities they took part in while they were in their monstrous Death Firm forms. *It is brilliant,* he thought to himself. Camargo couldn’t figure out why he didn’t think of it in the first place.

The newly created Death Firms could now swim and had the ability to stay underwater for extended periods. Camargo, Franco, Park, and Lozano added dolphin parts and DNA to them. They also made them waterproof by providing a protective shield around the Death Firm’s body. They had fish gills, which enabled them to breathe underwater. *This will really throw off the military,* Camargo chuckled and thought to himself.

Because they could now swim off over great distances, this would allow them to travel to other countries. The Death Firms could survive by eating aquatic life and drinking saltwater. They could sleep underwater as well if they needed to stop and rest.

Camargo also had the ability to give the Death Firm commands. He could switch them back to humans with just the press of a button now. Camargo had commanded a Death Firm to attack, kill, and eat Franco, Park, and Lozano. He then told the Death Firm to go into a deep sleep, and as it was sleeping, he turned it back into a human. When it woke up in human form, the human looked down at his body in terror when he saw blood dripping down his body and the dead bodies of Franco, Park, and Lozano in front of him. Camargo then changed the Death Firm quickly back into a monster and sent it back to its home where it could return to its human life. The humans would wake up at home dazed and confused. They could not figure out where the bloodstains had come from.

Camargo had already launched a few attacks in a few neighborhoods around Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona. Camargo watched as they attacked people inside their homes and a few outdoors during the evening time from his command room. He installed a video camera lens behind the Death Firm’s eyes. It was important that he knew their whereabouts and what was happening around them. Camargo could also keep track of the progress he had made. It gave him much pleasure when he saw the terror in the victim’s eyes and watched them run frantically about. They were small and fragile compared to his Death Firms.

When law enforcement and military soldiers arrived, Camargo would command all the Death Firms to run away and hide. He wanted to make sure they didn’t get damaged or destroyed. Camargo made them bulletproof and fireproof, but he just wanted to make sure they were left unharmed. He also didn’t want any of them to be caught and kept at a military compound where someone could figure out how the newly created Death Firms operated and what features they had. Camargo thought the military knew too much about the original Death Firms, and that was how they were able to come up with fighting tactics against them. They also learned what their weaknesses were and how they could be destroyed. Camargo had to be more careful this time.

He could continue to do surprise attacks until he was ready to do a full-scale attack. For now, he was just running a few tests on the Death Firms. He wanted to be fully prepared. It was too early to make any mistakes. Camargo wanted his creation to be flawless so that no one could defeat him. It was only a matter of time now.

Chapter 2

During the following morning, news reports of Death Firm sightings and the disappearance of famous actress Velma Whitney filled the air. The people of Tucson were shocked, scared, and saddened by the news. Reporters interviewed a few of the residents in a suburb of Tucson about what they had witnessed when the Death Firms were ravaging their neighborhood. Each one appeared frightened and bewildered. They answered the questions excitedly and spoke so quickly that they had to catch their breath at times.

The manager of the hotel where Whitney was staying showed video footage of the Death Firm smashing into the hotel room window where Whitney was staying. Viewers could see the Death Firm grab Whitney, kidnap her, and jump right back out of the window with Whitney in its arms. The video footage then showed Whitney trying to break free from the Death Firm’s arms. Viewers could see which direction the Death Firm had carried her off. Later that evening, the highway patrol showed footage of the Death Firm running and carrying her across the intersection. It was clear that Whitney was screaming for help and trying to capture the attention of the drivers. That was the last time anyone had seen her alive. Everyone knew that there was little hope she was still alive. Candlelight vigils took place throughout the world.

People were in disbelief that this was happening all over again. *Who would bring back the Death Firms?* they thought as they viewed the footage of Death Firms ravaging the neighborhoods and taking innocent lives. Many people were traumatized by the Death Firms. They had yet to recover from that traumatic experience. They feared that they would have to relive it all over again.

Everyone started to suspect the U.S. Army was involved in the recent attacks. Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson assured the media and the public that the U.S. Army had no connection to what was happening and that the U.S. Army was trying to find out who was responsible for the re-creation of the Death Firms. He told the press that he believed someone who was part of the creation of the original Death Firms was recreating them. Alderson said the U.S. Army had a list of all of those who were involved in the original creation. All the people on the list were currently being investigated. There were a few they could not find. Anyone who refused to cooperate would become a primary suspect.

After interviewing Alderson, the news switched over to a reporter who was standing beside Winter Harris outside in front of a house in the neighborhood where the latest Death Firm attack had happened. Harris stood nervously as the reporter asked him about how the Army should go about searching for the Death Firms and how they should be killing them.

“This is a rather odd situation,” Harris said. “It seems the newly created Death Firms run off as soon as military and law enforcement close in on them. They do not fight back at all. This makes it harder for us to kill them. They do not eat as much as well. We are dealing with a whole new breed. They have new bodily and robotic features as well. We will have to learn more about them to figure out a way to attack them.”

“Can you tell us what the new bodily and robotic features are?” the female reporter asked.

“We don’t know what they are fully capable of yet, but we do know a few features,” he replied. “They appear to be moving at a faster rate, have the ability to swim, stay underwater for extended periods, can climb now, and jump up higher.”

“With all of these newly acquired abilities, why do you think the Death Firms are running off?” she asked.

“We’re not sure yet,” Winter said. “We haven’t had a chance to study their behavioral patterns yet. Keep in mind this is a sudden occurrence. We must capture one to learn more about them. That is what we had to do before, and it successfully helped us get rid of the previous Death Firms.”

“Do you have any idea who could be responsible for all of this yet?” the reporter quickly asked with prying eyes.

“Right now, the Army and law enforcement are going through a list of the creators of the original Death Firms,” he answered. “Several of them are suspects. Law enforcement will soon start questioning each one of them until we find the answers that we need to arrest the person or people involved in this.”

“Is there anything that the viewers must do in order to stay safe when encountering a Death Firm?” the reporter asked.

“Seek shelter, hide immediately, and call law enforcement,” he told her. “Try to keep at least one weapon inside your home, and if you have a basement or underground shelter, go there. Please keep a stock of survival items, such as nonperishable food, weapons, medical supplies, tools, water, etc., in your basement or shelter just as a precaution.”

About ten minutes later, law enforcement and the military spoke during a news conference and told people they were thoroughly searching for clues as to where the Death Firms were coming from and who was responsible for creating them. People were asked to report anyone who appeared suspicious. Anyone with helpful information would receive a reward.

Camargo turned off his television with disgust. The whole idea of them interviewing Winter Harris was a joke to him. *Harris may have destroyed the original Death Firms, but he isn’t going to this time,* Camargo thought to himself. He was going to make it extremely impossible for the military to capture one of his Death Firms this time around. He laughed at the thought of the Death Firms living among them as normal American citizens without anyone knowing. No one was aware that he had the ability to make the Death Firm return to its natural human form with just a press of a button. When it returned to its human form, it could return to its normal lifestyle and remember everything about its past as a human. As a human, it could not remember anything from being a Death Firm. The human was not even aware that they could turn into a Death Firm. Camargo had the power to erase the Death Firm’s memory anytime he pleased on his phone.

It would take the military a long time to figure out it was him. Hundreds of people were involved in creating the Death Firms. They would have to find the location of each person, which would take the military some time. Camargo didn’t expect they would get to him for quite some time. Even if they did, he would refuse to reply and would send a Death Firm out to get them. Camargo was pleased that his plans were finally falling into place.

Camargo returned to thinking about his new creation and about how they were highly equipped this time. The military had no idea what they were up against. The Death Firms were so well-hidden and could strike again at any moment without anyone knowing in advance. Camargo, Franco, Park, and Lozano made sure they covered every little detail thoroughly. They were not going to make any mistakes this time when creating the Death Firms.

Camargo, once again, was pleased that he had the ability to switch the Death Firms from being monsters back to humans. It would make it extremely difficult for anyone to detect a Death Firm. He could easily fool them into believing that one was just a regular human. His plan was brilliant. He chuckled some more.

Camargo then thought about sending a Death Firm over to Winter Harris’s home. He wanted to play a little game with him. Camargo also wondered if he should unleash a Death Firm on him. If he eliminated Harris, he would not have to worry about Harris coming up with a solution to get rid of the Death Firms. He decided to sleep on it for the night. In the morning, he would decide. Camargo had to be extremely careful, especially now that he had to stay in hiding.

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Throughout that evening, Harris and his wife, Gabriela, took turns feeding, burping, and changing their baby daughter’s diaper. It was an around-the-clock job. Both were extremely exhausted. Winter held their daughter Emilia Abigail Harris in his arms as he rocked her back to sleep in a rocking chair. It was now 1:23 a.m. Harris had to return to his librarian duties at the Tucson Public Library at 7 a.m. He dreaded waking up early every morning after losing a considerable amount of sleep from his parental duties. He would need an extra shot in his espresso at a small coffee shop he went to while on his way to work. It was going to be another long and tiresome workday. Without the additional caffeine, it would be nearly impossible for him to stay alert at his job. It didn’t help that he had a lot on his mind lately. With the baby, his job, and the recent developments with the newly created Death Firms, it was nearly impossible for Harris to rest.

Harris then thought about the recent Death Firm attacks. He couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to bring the Death Firms back. Harris looked down at his precious daughter’s angelic little face. He feared for her life. If the Death Firms once again terrorized the streets of Tucson, he had to find a way to protect her in any way possible. Harris continuously assured Gabriela that nothing was going to happen to them and that the Army had everything under control. He hated lying to her, but he did not want to worry her. She had been through enough with the first round of Death Firms. This time Harris felt as if he was fully prepared for any future Death Firm attacks. His storage shed was completely stocked with weaponry, medical supplies, water, canned food, and other essentials. He also learned several fighting techniques during his time in the Army and was familiar with the behavioral patterns of the Death Firms after studying them for several months.

He told Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson that he would stop by the U.S. Army training facility after work tomorrow to discuss a plan on how they would locate the newly created Death Firms and how they would go about capturing one to study its behavior and find out what it was fully capable of doing. Harris was sure that whoever created them had made them more advanced than the previous Death Firms. He was worried that these Death Firms were going to be too skillful, and the military was going to have a heck of a time capturing them. The only individuals that were capable enough to create a Death Firm were those that were responsible for the original creation.

Harris dreaded going through the whole scenario all over again. He thought his days of studying the Death Firms and fighting them had come to an end. Now that he was a father, he knew he had to do it for his daughter’s sake. He would risk losing his life to protect his family. His daughter, Emilia, was now sound asleep. Harris slowly rose from the rocking chair and walked slowly toward the baby crib. He smiled as he looked at her rosy cheeks, cute button nose, and tiny hands and feet. Harris then quietly stepped out of the room and turned the light off.

Gabriela was in a deep sleep and didn’t notice that Harris had slid under the covers and nestled right beside her. He kissed her lips gently. She looked so peaceful. Harris brushed a strand of hair from her face while he admired her beauty. He then turned to his side and slowly drifted off to sleep. Harris couldn’t shake the feeling that something terrible was about to happen.

Chapter 3

It was a calm and cool night. The northerly winds swept over the desert, providing a subtle relief to Arizonans who endured temperatures in the hundred range throughout the previous day. Some people were out taking a late-night stroll, a couple of them decided it was an enjoyable time to walk their dogs, a few sat out on their porches to look up at the stars, some took a drive out in the desert with their windows down, a few enjoyed sitting around a bonfire with loved ones, and others went to sleep to rest up for the next workday. Nothing could prepare them for the tragic events that lay ahead for them.

At daybreak, everyone was snuggled up in their beds. Harris’s alarm clock annoyingly began beeping at precisely 5:30 a.m. Harris groaned and lazily rolled out of the bed. He was surprised to find Gabriela still peacefully resting after the sound of the alarm. He shook his head to help wake him up. Once he snapped out of it, he moved briskly away from the bed and straight to the closet to choose a light blue long-sleeve buttoned-down shirt, a purple tie, and a light brown pair of khaki pants. He marched straight to the restroom from there.

After his usual morning routine—consisting of a shower, breakfast, reading the newspaper, and dressing up in his work attire—he walked briskly to his car. The trip to the library was uneventful. He patiently waited in morning traffic while listening to the smooth sounds of Daryl Hall and John Oates. The radio station was playing his favorite song called “Maneater” by the famous duo. He tapped his finger on the steering wheel to the beat. He couldn’t think of a more appropriate song during a time when Death Firms were out on the prowl. Harris wasn’t sure whether the deejay was being funny or was sending out a warning that something terrible was about to happen. *If he is being funny, he has a sick sense of humor,* he thought.

Harris looked around and noticed there was a bit of a frenzy at one of the grocery stores. The parking lot was full. People were swarming at the entranceway. Several people were leaving the building with grocery carts full of food and supplies. It was déjà vu all over again for Harris. People were starting to get scared again. Harris grew weary of the situation. He took a sip of a mocha latte that he had picked up at a local drive-thru coffee stand along the way. The aroma from the coffee smelled good. Just one sip of the caffeine-infused beverage lifted his spirits. His senses now felt alive. He was now wide awake and alert.

He pulled up into the empty parking lot of the Tucson Public Library. Harris was always the first to arrive. He was well-known for his promptness and efficiency at work. He unlocked the automatic sliding glass doors at the entranceway to the library. He then locked them from behind him. The library opened at 10 a.m. Soon, other employees would be arriving.

He found several sticky notes on his desk. Some were about requests from patrons, some were about ordering books that were on demand, some were regarding the use of databases, and a few were regarding some research Harris had done. He had been doing research on various animal species, surgery procedures, and the use of machines. Harris wanted to learn more about the creation side of the Death Firms. He figured it would help him better understand the Death Firms’ behavior and how they operate. Harris thought he should get a head start. He was expecting to get a phone call from the military soon for help.

There were also several new books placed on a library book cart. A new shipment of books arrived yesterday. Harris would have to label them and find the appropriate locations for them on the shelves. He loved the smell of new books. He took a whiff of them. The scent of paper, ink, and glue tingled his senses.

As he checked his e-mail, he could hear voices coming from the fiction section. Two librarians were chatting. Three other librarians quietly sat down in their seats at the check-out section and started working on their daily duties. Harris returned to checking his e-mail, then suddenly, something grabbed his attention. He heard the glass to the sliding doors shatter, and then there was a high-pitched scream. He ran out of his office to see what the matter was. There, standing in front of the glass doors to the library, stood the children’s librarian. She held up a message tied around a rock that had been thrown through the sliding doors in the entranceway. She shook as she handed the rock with the note that was addressed to Harris to him. Harris quickly grabbed the rock from her hand.

He looked up at her with a grave look on his face. He nervously untied the rope. Harris unfolded the note and stood silent for a few seconds before reading it aloud. All the librarians were now standing around him.

The message read:

*Winter,*

*You will pay for interfering with my plan to unleash the Death Firms onto the world. I have sent out a Death Firm to kill you.*

*FC*

“Everyone, I need you to go home now,” Harris declared. “I don’t know what FC is fully capable of and when he plans to send a Death Firm out to kill me. You would be much safer right now at home. I will close the library down and call the police.”

“Winter, what are you going to do?” a librarian with long, dark brown hair and brown eyes with black-framed eyeglasses asked.

“Don’t worry about me,” Harris said. “I have experience fighting off the Death Firms. I will be ready for the Death Firm when it comes. Everyone needs to go now!”

“Good luck, Winter!” a tall, slender man with blonde hair and blue eyes told Harris before stepping away. “I will be praying for your safety.”

“Thank you,” Harris replied with a soft yet stern voice. He had to stay calm so that they could all keep their composure.

As soon as everyone left the building, Harris ran back to his office and pulled out a couple of handguns, some ammunition, and a flamethrower from a hidden compartment underneath his desk. He called Gabriela to tell her about the note. Harris told her they must leave the house and go stay someplace far away, where the Death Firm would not find them. He told her to remain calm for her and the baby’s sake. Harris assured her that he wasn’t going to allow anything bad to happen to them. She quickly got off the phone with him and began preparing for their departure. Harris packed all the weaponry and ammunition in a backpack. He hurriedly put up a sign on the door saying the library would be closed for the day and called law enforcement about the note. He went back to the office to grab the backpack and the keys to the library. Harris thought it was pointless to bring the library keys now that the front doors were shattered.

Just as he was about to leave the building, he heard a loud sound. It sounded like someone or something had stepped into the building through the shattered glass doors and was walking on the shards of broken glass that were scattered on the floor. The footsteps grew louder as it got closer to Harris. He reached down into his backpack and fully armed himself with a loaded gun, and stepped out of his office very slowly. He held his gun up and kept an eye out as he headed toward the entranceway. Harris quickly turned in the direction where the sound had been coming from.

Suddenly, Harris heard a mysterious thing or person running. He turned and saw a pair of red glowing eyes approaching him quickly. *Boom! Boom!* Bullets zipped past the Death Firm. Harris aimed again. This time blood oozed out of its chest. There was a piercing scream, then the monster jumped up and raised its arms up before swiping Harris on the arm with its claws. Harris felt a burst of pain. He quickly forgot the pain and turned his attention to the Death Firm as it stood in front of him.

Despite feeling weak, Harris managed to pull out the flamethrower from inside his backpack. The Death Firm hurled backward. Harris ran as fast as he could while aiming the flamethrower at the Death Firm. He had to get to his car quickly before the Death Firm could attack him again. He then remembered there was an ax in his trunk. He just needed to hold the Death Firm off for a while to allow him time to get into his trunk. The only way he could kill it was to chop it up into pieces, then set it on fire. This was going to be an extremely arduous task. He was no match for the Death Firm physically, but he could use his wit to defeat it.

He pulled out the keys from his pocket quickly with one hand while the other pulled the trigger to the flamethrower. The Death Firm kept reaching out to him and tried to take a few swipes at him as it screamed in agony from the burn of the flames. The Death Firm was clearly fireproofed, but it did not like the scorching pain it felt when the fire swept over its body. Harris turned the key to open his trunk while keeping a watchful eye on the Death Firm. He threw his keys frantically into the trunk, then reached for the ax. He quickly put the flamethrower to the side and started whacking the Death Firm with all his might. Harris started by chopping off both arms. The Death Firm continuously tried to bite him by throwing itself at him headfirst. It screeched, and its body moved side-to-side like a fish out of water. Harris had it right where he wanted it to be. It was completely defenseless.

Harris proceeded by chopping its head off. Blood gushed out of various sections of the body now. The Death Firm was completely useless now that it could not see. Harris finished it off by chopping off the legs and splitting the stomach in two. The body dropped to the ground dramatically. Harris burned the corpse to a crisp victoriously as he wiped the sweat from his brow. He then smiled and raised his fist triumphantly.

What Harris didn’t know was that a furious Fritz Camargo was overseeing the entire situation. Camargo underestimated Winter Harris’s fighting ability. He was going to have to rethink his strategy. Camargo stared at the screen in disbelief while Harris stood over the chopped-up Death Firm. He then watched Harris talking to law enforcement when they arrived at the library.

Harris saw the Death Firm’s monstrous body metamorphosized back into its human body. He was saddened when it turned into a man in his early twenties. It sickened him to know that someone would take a young man’s life from him for personal gain. The poor, innocent young man would never really have a chance to live fully. Harris knew it had to be one of the scientists who were frowned upon when they were let go from the military compound for their massive failure in creating the Death Firms, keeping them contained and under control. Now that he had their initials, he could have the military run down the list of names of people who helped create the original Death Firms to see if they could find a match.

Harris knew once they found the person responsible for this, they would try to track them down and get all the answers that were needed to destroy all the newly created Death Firms. They would need to find out where all the Death Firms were currently located first. He had to call Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson as soon as possible to inform him of the recent developments.

Right now, his main concern was to get his family to safety immediately. Whoever sent out the Death Firm obviously knew who he was and his whereabouts. He called Gabriela to tell her what had happened and to start packing up their things so they could quickly leave Tucson. Harris knew they had little time left to get prepared because whoever sent the Death Firm after him wasn’t messing around anymore.

As he was about to hang up the phone, the sound of police cars grew louder. About ten seconds later, Harris could see the flashing red and blue lights on some more police cars coming to the area. Five more police cars surrounded the library. Ten police officers stepped out of the police cars with guns in their hands. Most of them started searching the premises. Two of them were cautiously approaching Harris for questioning. Harris knew they were making sure he would not turn into a Death Firm.

One pulled out his notepad and pen before asking Harris what had happened. The other officer held up a gun in case Harris was up to no good. Harris quickly gave both officers a rundown of what had happened.

“So, you’re saying that someone threw this rock with a note tied to it through the glass door,” the tall, muscular officer, who looked like he was fifty-something years old, asked.

“Yes,” Harris said. “That is what I told the previous officer when they arrived at the scene. Officers, I really am in a hurry. I need to get to my family before whoever sent the Death Firm sends out another one to get them. We need to leave town as soon as possible.”

The officer scratched his head and brushed off his gray hair from his forehead before jotting down a few notes.

“How long after was it before the Death Firm entered the library and began attacking you?” he asked Harris.

“I really don’t know,” Harris replied. “I just remembered telling the rest of the staff to go home and going to the office to pick up some weaponry to defend myself in case whoever FC is decided to send out a Death Firm to kill me at that moment. I was in such a panicky state. The only thing that concerned me at the time was getting me and my family out of Tucson and going someplace where we could not be found. My guess would be sometime between twenty and thirty minutes at best.”

“Before you leave, I need to get your phone number and e-mail in case I have any more questions, Mr. Harris,” he said. “Please, don’t hesitate to call me if you have any additional information. My name is Finnegan Hooper, and I am the police chief of Tucson.”

Police Chief Hooper handed Harris his business card. Harris snatched the card from his hand while being annoyed by all the questioning he was getting. He couldn’t understand why he had to talk to these police officers, too, since he had already talked to another officer.

“I advise you to head out immediately,” Harvey said. “I wish you and your family the best, and stay safe. The police department will do a thorough investigation into the matter. We will give you a call when we find out more information on FC.”

“Thank you, Police Chief Hooper,” Harris replied. “I will let you know if I find out anything else.”

After a firm handshake, Harris headed home. He knew Gabriela would still be packing when he arrived home. Harris stopped at a gas station to fill up his tank so he would not have to stop on the way out of town. As he was filling up his gas tank, Harris was fully aware of his surroundings. He kept a close eye out for anyone who appeared suspicious. He was afraid someone might be spying on him. The last thing he wanted was someone to follow him, especially if it was FC.

When Harris got home, Gabriela was frantically looking for items to pack. Her hands were trembling; she paced back and forth quickly and looked bewildered. Harris tried hard not to startle her while stepping inside the house. He called out her name softly before approaching her. She turned quickly to face him. Harris could tell Gabriela was already jumpy.

“Oh, Winter!” she cried out. “I have been scared out of my wits. I can’t think straight. My mind has been a jumbled-up mess. I’m so glad you are here!”

“There’s no need to frighten yourself to death, my dear,” Harris said. “I need you to stay calm. If we go someplace far away, he will not be able to find us. We have been through this before. I didn’t let anything happen to you then, and I will not let anything happen to you now. Trust me.”

“What is going to happen to us this time?” she declared. “I can’t bear knowing that we will have to repeat everything that had happened to us when the first breed of Death Firm was after us, especially with having Emilia with us. It is not fair. I thought we could put all that behind us and start a normal life.”

“First off, we have to go someplace where no one will expect us to go to,” he answered. “That means we can’t go anywhere that our family members or friends are living. I was also thinking of a place with a different climate. We should also consider going someplace that is not in a big city. Everyone we know lives in either the Midwest, the Southwest, or the Southeast. We should head towards the Northeast. I am so sorry, my dear, we are having to go through this again.”

“But where?” Gabriela asked.

“I’m thinking either Connecticut, Maine, or Massachusetts,” Harris said. “I know you are not particularly fond of living in much colder weather during the winter, but I think we can learn how to adjust. We have to keep our daughter, Emilia, safe.”

“I hate how this is happening all over again,” she said. “I was really hoping that Emilia would never have to go through this. I thought for sure this was all over.”

“I know, sweetheart. I feel the same way. Since it is me that FC is after, it is best that we drive in separate vehicles on the way over there,” he recommended. “Being around me, right now, is dangerous. We will keep our cell phones charged, so we can always stay in contact until we get over there.”

“I agree with what you are saying,” Gabriela replied. “It is just going to be so hard. I am so scared, Winter.”

“I know you are, but we need to stay focused on what we have to do right now,” Harris said. “Where’s Emilia?”

“She is sleeping in her crib right now,” Gabriela said.

“Good,” he said. “This will be a good time to load up both vehicles.”

Harris quickly finished packing his own stuff while Gabriela started taking luggage out to her blue Honda Odyssey. By the time she was done, Harris was still working on loading up the trunk to his red Lexus. After they were both done, Gabriela went inside to wake up Emilia, feed her, and change her diaper. She and Harris discussed what route they were taking to get to the Northeast. Harris printed off a map for Gabriela to follow, along with some instructions. Harris kissed Gabriela and the baby goodbye before watching them drive off. The sight of them leaving brought a tear to his eye. He hated the idea that they had to be separated, but he knew it was for the best.

At the same time, he felt relieved, knowing that they were going to be away from him. It would be far too dangerous for them to be traveling with him. Harris walked to the kitchen counter to get his keys. He knew it was going to be a long, exhausting trip. He had no other choice, though. This was a matter of life and death. Harris begrudgingly headed to the door.

Before he stepped out of the house, he had to take one last look at all the family photos hung up on the living room wall. He took a deep breath to inhale the scent of spiced apple air freshener and lemon-scented Lysol coming from the kitchen. So many happy memories took place there. He finally thought all their trouble had ended. Sadness began to fall upon him. The realization that they may never return to their happy home had sunk in. *What if it isn’t still here when we return?* Harris thought. They had put so much work into fixing it. He just knew the Death Firms were going to come and destroy it all over again.

Harris walked quickly to his blue Jeep without looking back. He had to leave this life behind just like he had done with his two previous ones, the one before the Death Firms were created and the one after they had killed off the original Death Firms. Fear had consumed about half of his life. He had so hoped that Emilia would never have to live through this. Harris wiped another tear from his cheek and took a deep sigh before turning on the ignition.

*Luckily, Emilia is too young to know what is happening,* Harris thought. Because of this, he didn’t have to worry about her being traumatized by the whole situation. Harris was sure she would hear all about the Death Firms in her history classes later in life, and she would have plenty of questions for him, especially with him being a hero for saving the country by destroying all the Death Firms in the first invasion.

He slowly backed out of the driveway. Harris took one last look at this home before driving away. He was getting warm, sentimental feelings about it. He was leaving behind a place where there were so many precious memories behind it. Harris smiled, then drove away.

Harris knew he would be doing a considerable amount of thinking on the road. He would be spending much time in solitude, so he had plenty of time to get lost in his thoughts. There was so much to process. He then wondered how Gabriela and Emilia were doing. Harris was concerned about their safety. He tried hard to remain calm and to have positive thoughts. He also had to pay attention to the road and what he was doing.

He checked his rearview mirror to make sure he was not to be followed. Harris kept a close eye out for any suspicious characters. The sun was starting to set. Shadowy figures were appearing across the Arizonan desert. The temperature was dropping. In an hour, Harris will be driving in New Mexico. He knew that Gabriela should already be in New Mexico. Harris thought he should pull over somewhere once he crossed over the Arizona border to give Gabriela a call. He wanted to make sure they were safe.

Just as Harris started feeling like he was in the clear, a fire broke out in the distance. It looked as if a car had caught on fire. Further down the road, a gas station was surrounded by several emergency vehicles. A person was being pushed out on a gurney. A few people were being interviewed by the cops. The station had received significant damage. Windows had been shattered, products were scattered across the floor, and blood was splattered on the counters, walls, and refrigerator doors. Harris had a sinking feeling that the Death Firms were responsible for the chaos that had erupted along the highway. He prayed that Gabriela and Emilia were not involved in the incident. Harris slowly drove by the gas station so that he could spot Gabriela’s vehicle. He then sighed in relief when he did not see it there.

Harris knew that he had to keep going. It was not safe for him to get out of the Jeep because there still could be Death Firms lurking about in the area. FC had clearly sent out the Death Firms that night. He was searching for Harris. He had to lay low for a while.

Harris drove another hundred miles before stopping in Santa Fe to get something to eat and fill up his car with gas. Everything appeared normal when he stepped out of his vehicle at the gas pump. He quickly filled up his car, paid for it at the pump, then sped out. So far, there didn’t appear to be any damage or any indication that a Death Firm had been in the area. There was a feeling of relief inside him. He was worried about what lay ahead of him.

Harris searched for a place to eat while driving through the commercial area of Santa Fe. He wanted to grab something quick. He figured the best place would be a fast-food restaurant. A Chick-fil-A was coming up. Harris thought a chicken sandwich and waffle fries would suit him fine. He pulled into the parking lot and found the closest spot to the restaurant. After parking, he stepped out of the vehicle slowly and looked around the area carefully before heading toward the restaurant. Harris had to be extra careful with every step.

He stretched out his arms and legs after getting out of the vehicle. Harris was tired of being crammed up in the jeep. It was eight o’clock in the evening. He was already feeling exhausted from the long drive. Harris knew he would have to find a hotel in a couple of hours. He was in much need of rest. Harris knew he needed his strength and energy to fight off Death Firms in case he would come across one.

Harris held the door open for an elderly couple before stepping inside. The elderly woman smiled at him and graciously thanked him. He smiled back and told her she was welcome. He immediately got a whiff of fried chicken breasts and waffle fries. The aroma was quite inviting while he was standing there with an empty stomach. His stomach growled at him while he waited in line.

When it was his turn, Harris excitedly walked up to the register. He ordered his food, had the cashier fill up his cup with Coke, and took his seat at the farthest table away from the order counter. His eyes lit up as one of the employees brought over his meal. He couldn’t believe how good something as simple as a chicken sandwich could be. Harris didn’t waste any time devouring every morsel. Everything was going well until he noticed two cars crash into each other in front of the restaurant. He took a closer look out the window to see what was going on.

He then saw a figure move at lightning speed across the street. Harris couldn’t believe his eyes. It was moving toward him. He quickly jumped out of his seat. He dashed across the restaurant and headed toward his car. Harris could hear the front window shatter. He kept running without looking back. He knew exactly what it was and that there was little chance he could get away from it. Harris knew he had to escape for the sake of his child and his wife. For him to survive, he had to get to his weapons quickly.

How did it know the exact location he was at? Harris was beginning to wonder if someone had been tracking his cell phone. Without looking back, he could hear the elderly couple scream in horror. He could then hear some chairs and a table being tossed aside. Suddenly, the Death Firm was close enough that he could feel its breath on him. It took out its claws and swiped him across his back. He screamed in agony. Harris just happened to be near a chair. He quickly grabbed the chair and swung it with full force at the Death Firm. It knocked the Death Firm over. It didn’t take long for it to get back up. Just as it was about to take another swing at him with its massive claws, sirens could be heard. Harris aimed at it again with the chair. It grabbed the chair from his hands. Harris sprinted toward the glass doors like his life depended on it. Harris could hear a man shouting, “Get down!” Harris ducked immediately before several bullets shot out. He confronted several police officers at the main entrance. Harris continued to dodge bullets. He managed to squeeze between two of the officers and ran right out the door.

He ran with all his might to his vehicle. He quickly got into it and turned on the ignition without any hesitation. The scratches on his back stung as he lay on it against the car seat. Harris drove so fast out of the parking lot that his tires squealed. He had to figure out how he was being tracked down and who this FC person was. If he didn’t, there was no way he could escape.

Chapter 4

As the police officers continued to shoot at the Death Firm in the Chick-fil-A restaurant, Scientist Fritz Camargo laughed hysterically as the officers failed to kill it. The Death Firm picked up one of the officers and smashed him up against the wall. Another officer ran off once he realized their bullets had been proven useless. Restaurant employees had evacuated the building by using the back door. A third police officer was called in for backup.

Camargo knew that Harris had escaped and what direction he was heading. Camargo secretly had planted a tracking device on Winter Harris’s jeep on the day when the Death Firm had attacked Harris inside the library. He instructed the Death Firm to follow Harris and provide information on his whereabouts. The Death Firm complied and stepped over a few dead bodies before running off. Camargo knew that Harris was a long way away and that it would take some time for the Death Firm to catch up. He thought about sending out another one that was closer to Harris’s current location. Camargo felt like he was the one pulling all the strings. His Death Firms were his puppets.

Harris had just driven up the ramp to the highway. He sped down the highway at ninety miles per hour. Harris kept swerving past several vehicles and did not care if the Highway Patrol would try to stop him. He had to get out of there quickly. Harris knew he had to find someplace to leave his jeep and find another vehicle to drive. He had to throw FC off somehow. He searched for car dealerships that were near hotels along the highway. That way, he could easily walk to the dealership from the hotel, but first he had to lose his jeep.

Harris drove fifty miles, then exited the highway. He wanted to leave it in a parking lot and run off to hide someplace. Harris would try to get a lift from someone. He could stay the night in a hotel, then go to a car dealership the next day to purchase a new vehicle to drive. He knew he had to get rid of his cell phone and purchase a new one as well. Someone was obviously tracking him down somehow. Harris was a little worried that his wife may call to check on him overnight, but he couldn’t risk being found. He was sure she would be understanding, though, due to the present circumstances. Harris would call her on the phone in his hotel room as soon as he found a hotel to stay in.

He drove about three miles down a street where there were several retail stores, restaurants, hotels, and a few car dealerships. It was late at night, so there was hardly any traffic. He kept searching for the perfect spot to leave his vehicle. He drove on until he came across an empty parking lot of a closed-down business. There was no one in sight, so it was the perfect location. He pulled it off quickly. He drove slowly across the parking lot and parked underneath a tree, then grabbed what he needed out of his trunk before heading off. Unfortunately, Harris couldn’t bring along some of his heavier weapons. He would have to return to pick those up after purchasing a new vehicle. He made sure all the doors were locked before walking off. Harris discovered that a motel was within walkable distance.

Harris ran across a street, crossed over a large parking lot to a strip mall and another parking lot to a department store. He kept running until he came across a small, run-down motel. Harris noticed a few sketchy people wearing tattered clothing standing around smoking cigarettes in front of the motel. An old, scraggly man who looked and smelled as if he hadn’t bathed in weeks approached him. Harris covered his nose as the man approached him.

“Hey, mister! Do you have a few dollars that you can spare?” a gruff voice called out to him.

Harris could tell that the man was intoxicated. The old man’s glassy eyes looked up at him. He stumbled as he walked toward him. His breath smelled of cheap wine and whisky. Harris turned away quickly to avoid inhaling the scent. He dug into his pockets and pulled out a five-dollar bill to get the man to go away.

“Hey, thanks, mister! You are a real swell guy,” the man replied as he pulled the bill from Harris’s hand. The drunk man stumbled back to his friends.

After the old man walked away, Harris walked quickly to the front door of the motel. He was so exhausted that he didn’t care how run-down it was and what strange characters were there. Harris needed rest. He stepped into the lobby and was greeted by a young motel clerk.

“Hi! Welcome to Hotel Paradise,” the twenty-something-year-old motel clerk said. “Do you have a reservation with us tonight?”

“No,” Harris answered. “Do you have any rooms available for tonight?”

“Yes, we do,” the clerk replied. “How many people will be staying with you for the night?”

“Oh, it’s just me,” Harris said.

“We have a room with a queen-size bed for $39.99,” the clerk said. “It has a refrigerator and microwave. We also provide all HBO channels. There is a free continental breakfast in the lobby from six to 10 a.m., and coffee is always served at the front desk.”

“That sounds perfect,” Harris said with a sluggish voice. He pulled out his wallet and handed him his credit card. The clerk ran the credit card and printed off a copy of Harris’s driver’s license before handing over a room key to Harris.

Soon after Harris paid for his room, he wheeled his suitcase and carried his duffle bag to his room. He rubbed his eyes while walking on a long stretch of red carpet down the hallway. He paused in front of the door to his room, yawned, and pulled out the key.

Harris practically dragged his stuff into the room. He threw himself on the bed shortly afterward. He lay down with the TV remote in his hand. Quickly, he flicked the television set on. He started watching an episode of *Friends*. Harris figured he needed a good laugh after all that he had gone through. *It will be nice to see things on the bright side again,* he thought. He was tired of running and hiding. He also was tired of being in fear, constantly being on the lookout, and being in danger. Harris then thought about Gabriela and the baby. He was hoping they were staying put someplace safe and they had all that they needed.

He would call his wife from the hotel in the morning to keep her updated on all the recent developments. Harris thought it was too late at night to call her, and he wanted to make sure she and the baby got plenty of rest. He also needed to call a taxi to take him to a car dealership. Right now, he was too tired to process what was going on in his mind.

His eyelids grew heavy. He switched off the lamp and turned off the television. He drifted off into a deep sleep. He was still frightened by the recent events and was a little shaken by them. He feared what would happen the next day. Harris was just too exhausted to think about it. His eyes then closed, and he rolled over to his side.

While Harris was asleep, a lost and confused Death Firm was about five blocks away. It ran around aimlessly, trying to find Harris. It had trouble picking up his scent. Fritz Camargo couldn’t believe that Harris had left his vehicle abandoned in a parking lot. He knew right then and there that Harris had figured out he had placed a tracker on his vehicle. Camargo knew sooner or later that Harris would try to contact his family. He would have to find a new way to track Harris down. In the meantime, he would send out more Death Firms to attack the innocent. He wanted to start a frenzy. It would serve as a warning to Harris.

Camargo would send a message to Harris that would say if he didn’t come to him and his Death Firms, more citizens would die. Even if Harris did turn himself in, Camargo would still unleash the Death Firms out into the world. At least this way, he wouldn’t have to worry about Harris coming up with a solution to kill off all his Death Firms. He would then rule the world.

Camargo would have to find a way to control the airwaves to be seen on television and heard on the radio. This would allow him to get his message across to Harris and millions of other people across the world. The best way he could do this was to buy some airtime to run his message. He knew it would be a risk. People would then know he was the one responsible for recreating the Death Firms, and law enforcement might be able to track him down. Camargo would not reveal his name or be shown in video footage. He would only run a picture of Harris and use his voice only in the paid ads.

He knew news outlets across the world would cover his mysterious ads. Police and military personnel would be using them to help them find out the identity of the person behind the Death Firms. Camargo was about to be an internet sensation. He smiled at the thought. It was all too easy.

Camargo decided to call it a night. He had much planning to do in the morning. He turned off his equipment, switched off the light, and headed upstairs to his bedroom. He would give Harris this one little break. Camargo was much too tired from all the excitement that he needed rest as well.

Camargo slept peacefully throughout the night, while Harris repeatedly woke up throughout the night in fear that a Death Firm may have found him. Neither of them knew what would be in store for them the next day.

Chapter 5

Harris woke up startled by the sound of an alarm going off. The previous occupant had set the alarm for 6 a.m. He groaned as he slowly lifted his arm from under the blanket to hit the snooze button. Harris was still behind on his sleep because he had trouble sleeping throughout the entire night. He figured it was no use going back to sleep. *It will be nice to get a head start,* he thought. Harris laid in bed a few minutes longer to give his mind a chance to wake up.

As soon as he got out of bed, Harris knew he had to contact his wife. He knew she was worried sick about him all night. Harris sluggishly picked up the hotel phone, took a deep breath, and called his wife. Gabriela rushed over to her cell phone as soon as it rang. He could hear a lively voice on the other line. She sounded both excited and relieved to hear him on the phone. Harris also felt good to hear her voice again.

“Winter! Are you okay?” she immediately asked.

“Gabriela, calm down,” he assured her. “I am okay. I had to leave my vehicle behind, though. I believe someone is tracking me down. I plan to go out and get a new vehicle today. I also will be getting a new cell phone. Until I get a new phone, there will be no way for you to contact me. Also, it is wise that we don’t tell each other where we are yet. Who knows what FC is capable of? He could be listening to our conversation right now.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “I will watch what I say from here on out. I hope you have enough weapons to protect yourself with in case a Death Firm finds you.”

“Don’t worry, Gabriela,” he said assuredly. “I have a good supply of weapons and ammunition with me. You act as if I have not gone through this before. You know I have been specially trained by the Army to attack Death Firms.”

“I know, Winter,” Gabriela said. “It is just that I have been so frightened lately, and I worry about you so much. I just need to be reassured that you will be able to protect yourself and come back to me safely. I heard there were Death Firm attacks in various locations along your route last night on the news. Please, God, tell me you were not part of any of that?”

“I was attacked by one at a Chick-Fil-A in Santa Fe,” Harris said. “I managed to escape. Luckily, police officers had surrounded the building and started shooting at it. I was able to squeeze my way past them and drive off quickly.”

“Oh my gosh,” she replied. “I don’t know what I would have done if that thing got ahold of you. I can’t wait for us to get out of harm’s way and live a normal life again. This is all too much for me to bear. Please, please, please return to me safely!”

“You mustn’t worry about me,” Harris said. “I have experience fighting these things. Plus, God told me that things are going to be all right. We have survived once. We can do it again. You must stay calm for our daughter. I know it is hard, but you need to try to.”

“Winter, I will try my best,” Gabriela said. “I admit I can be a bit overdramatic at times. I can’t stay still. I keep tracing back and forth, looking at the clock repeatedly, and fidgeting nonstop every time I think of you out there all alone. I wish you had an entire Army behind you like you did the last time.”

“I do, too,” he admitted. “You are going to have to trust me on this.”

“I know,” she said.

“Now, enough about me.” Harris changed the subject. “I hope you remembered to pack up the weapons and ammunition I put out for you to protect you and the baby with. I am more concerned about your safety than mine.”

“Of course, I have,” Gabriela answered. “You don’t expect me to travel out all alone with Emilia without anything to protect us with while Death Firms are on the prowl, right? You don’t take me as a fool, or do you?”

“That was a silly question to ask,” Harris said. “I trust you wholeheartedly with our baby.”

“I have to go now,” Gabriela said. “I need to change Emilia’s diaper now.”

“Sweetie, I will give you a call as soon as I can get a new phone,” Harris said. “I will let you tend to your parenting duties while I call a taxi to take me to a car dealership so I can get a new vehicle. It was good talking to you. Please, be careful today on the highway.”

“I will,” she said. “I love you. Bye.”

“I love you, too,” he replied. “Bye.”

Harris then called up a taxi company to come and pick him up. He quickly grabbed his stuff and headed out the door. He would wait in the hotel lobby until the taxi arrived. He would then go to the nearest car dealership first. Harris needed to purchase one today, so he could get back on the highway as soon as possible. Later today, he would purchase a new cell phone. Since he had already talked to Gabriela, there was no need to rush to get one.

He sat patiently on the comfortable brown couch that faced the front sliding doors in the lobby so he could keep an eye out on the cab. He watched the desk clerk check in a customer to a hotel room. From the corner of his eye, he spotted a flashy yellow car pulled up in front. Harris stood up as soon as he read the word *Taxi* on the side door of the vehicle. He made sure it was the same taxi company that he had called before getting inside the car.

He instructed the taxi driver to take him to the nearest car lot. The driver asked him what kind of vehicle he was looking for. Harris told him he would prefer a Jeep that was sturdy and reliable. The driver then took him to a Jeep dealership. It was about a ten-minute drive to the dealership. Harris paid the driver and thanked him before stepping out of the car. The driver smiled when Harris handed him over a tip for his service.

“Have a nice day,” the taxi driver told him.

“You, too!” Harris told him.

Harris stepped into the car lot and walked up to each Jeep, studied it, read all the details on the vehicle, and compared prices. Harris knew he had to make a quick decision. He needed to get back on the highway as soon as possible, he reminded himself. It was not long for a car salesperson to acknowledge his presence. Harris quickly turned away and had a look of dismay on his face. He really didn’t feel like being bothered right now.

As the car salesperson approached him, Harris quickly walked in the opposite direction without making any eye contact with the salesperson. The salesperson seemed to have taken the hint and walked away. Harris sighed in relief. He walked along the last row of cars. He narrowed down his favorites. It was between a Grand Cherokee and a Wrangler. After much decision, he decided to purchase the black Grand Cherokee.

Harris noticed the car salesperson watching him from inside the car dealership building through the glass windows. It made him a little nervous knowing that he was being watched. Harris then quickly made his way to the building to negotiate with the car salesperson. He would try to persuade the salesperson to lower the price. He could tell the salesperson was eager to make a sale.

“Did you happen to find one that you like?” the salesperson asked after Harris stepped into the building.

“I would like to purchase the black Grand Cherokee,” Harris replied.

“That one is a very good vehicle,” he told Harris. “We have had many people ask about that one. Would you like to take it for a test drive?”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Harris answered. “I am really in a hurry, and I would like to purchase it today.”

“Will you be taking out a loan with us?” the car salesperson asked.

“No,” Harris said. “I will be paying up front.”

“Do you have a vehicle that you would like to trade in?” the salesperson asked.

“No,” Harris replied.

“Won’t you step into my office, please?” the sleazy, pushy, and rude car salesperson said. “My name is Harold Roberson. Here is my business card. I will just need you to sign a few papers, get a copy of your license, proof of insurance, and a check written out for $43,067.23. We also accept debit or credit cards.”

Harris took a seat and pulled out his wallet and checkbook from his backpack. He reviewed all the forms closely before signing each one. He quickly wrote out a check and handed it over. The salesperson took a copy of his license and insurance. Harris was excited to try out his new wheels after the deal was done. He was sure that Gabriela would love it as much as he did. One of the employees drove his new vehicle up front. The salesperson handed him a couple of keys to the jeep before shaking hands with him.

Harris could tell the salesperson was suspicious of him because he was trying to purchase a vehicle so urgently. He kept observing every movement Harris was making.

“You know, I don’t recall ever having anyone purchasing a vehicle without testing it out first,” the car salesperson told him. “I guess there is always a first for everything.”

As the salesperson handed him the keys, Harris looked up at him and smiled. They then shook hands.

“Thanks for doing business with us,” the car salesperson told him. “Enjoy your new wheels!”

Harris thanked him as he headed out of the car salesman’s office and walked out to the jeep with feelings of excitement, fear, happiness, and sorrow all in one. He put his stuff into the trunk first. He then stepped into the vehicle, put his seatbelt on, turned the engine on, and placed the automatic gear shift into drive. The drive out of the car dealership was smooth. His new vehicle operated like a champion. Harris was happy with his selection. It felt good to have a fresh, clean, new vehicle.

He planned to stop in Texas to pick up a new cell phone later that day. He would call Gabriela on his new cell phone tomorrow morning. Harris figured it would be best to call her after a good night’s rest. He felt better about his chances to get away from FC and stay hidden now that he had a new vehicle. There would be no way that someone could track his new phone or his new jeep unless somehow they managed to find him. The chances of that happening were quite slim. He wasn’t sure what FC was capable of either.

He stopped by a local coffee shop on the way out. He took a few sips of his caramel macchiato with an extra shot of espresso while driving full speed ahead on the highway. He had to make his way through a traffic jam. Many people were heading off to lunch. After eating a bagel, he felt full enough to wait until eating lunch. Harris would stop someplace in Texas to eat.

Once he got out of the city limits, the traffic died down considerably. He was able to take in the sights now and drive with ease. The desert looked beautiful with all the several types of cacti, sand dunes, blue sky, and beaming sun. Every once in a great while, Harris would spot wildlife. It was quite a sight. He put on some light, upbeat, catchy tunes on his radio to help make his drive more pleasurable. Harris was in a good mood, despite everything that was happening to him.

He would reach the Texas border in about two hours. Harris decided he would stop in Amarillo, Texas, to purchase a new cell phone, eat lunch, and fill up his vehicle with gas. From there, he would head out to Oklahoma, where he would spend the night. Harris was already exhausted from driving, but he knew he had to keep going as far away as he could to get away from FC. He could not wait to get out of his new jeep and stretch his legs out again.

Harris tried hard to keep his mind off driving by listening and singing along to the music. It was the only thing he could do to make time go faster. The two hours he had left seemed to take forever. He was relieved to reach the Texas border. It made him feel as if he had made some progress.

As he was listening to the radio, a strange bulletin aired. It concerned a paid television program that appeared last night. He then heard his name. Harris could not believe what he was hearing. He was in a state of shock.

“A mysterious man showed clips of the recent Death Firm attacks,” the announcer said. “He showed a blurred vision of his face so that he could not be identified. He claims to be responsible for the re-creation of the Death Firms and that he is seeking revenge on Winter Harris, who is widely known as the man who helped kill off the original creation of the Death Firms. The mysterious man threatened Harris that if he did not turn himself in to him, the consequences would be catastrophic. The man then told Harris he would be able to get ahold of him by calling his wife, who is now being held captive by him.”

Harris switched off the radio immediately. He was horror-stricken by the news. He went into a panic attack. Harris tried to recollect himself, so he could conjure up a plan. As soon as he got to Amarillo, he had to purchase a phone right away. He also had to purchase more weapons and protective gear. Harris couldn’t face FC as a sitting duck. He prayed to God that his wife and child were safe. Harris’s hands trembled as he turned the steering wheel.

He arrived in Amarillo about thirty minutes later. He purchased a new cell phone at the T-Mobile store. Harris called Gabriela on his new cell phone from inside his jeep as soon as he could. He had to check if she was safe and find out where they were located. His heart was beating wildly, and he was breathing loudly. The phone kept ringing, and there was no answer. Harris was frightened.

He headed to a gun and knife store to purchase more weaponry and supplies. Harris also purchased some protective gear. He finished off with lunch at a local steak restaurant. He kept trying to reach Gabriela throughout the day.

As Harris was about to get back on the highway, he could hear his phone ringing. Harris reached for his phone immediately. He had been so jumpy that he almost dropped his phone.

“Hello!” Harris said with a loud, animated voice.

“Hello! Mr. Harris,” a male voice said. Harris knew instantly who it was but asked who it was anyway.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my family?” Harris demanded angrily.

“I suppose it all doesn’t matter now,” the mysterious voice said. “Everyone will eventually find out who I am. My name is Dr. Fritz Camargo. I am one of the scientists that originally created the Death Firms. We were banished away from the lab as if we were criminals!” he shouted. “All we really did was take orders from the military. It wasn’t entirely our fault that the Death Firms had escaped the military compound. We were proud of our creation. We didn’t get a chance to show the military how beneficial they could be at combat. You destroyed our creation and our reputation. You will pay Winter for everything you have done to us. You do not deserve to live!”

“Like hell I will!” Harris shouted out. “Just look at what the Death Firms have done to the innocent lives that were taken! They have done nothing but bring out human catastrophe and terrorize all who stand in their way. They must be destroyed!”

“I won’t let you this time, Winter!” Camargo screamed out. “You have not seen the vast improvements that I have made with this group of Death Firms. You will see that I have them in complete control this time and what good works they are capable of.”

“I don’t believe you!” Winter shouted back. “Now, for the last time, where is my family?”

“They are here, right beside me, and are fine for the time being,” he replied in a maniacal voice. “I will text you a list of instructions and a set of directions on how to get here. Just do what I say, and they will not get hurt. If you screw up in any way, I will unleash the Death Firms unto them.”

“Let me hear their voices, you monster!” Harris said. “I want to know if you are telling me the truth.”

“Fine!” Camargo screamed out.

Camargo brought Gabriela and the baby up to the phone. He could hear the baby cooing. Camargo then removed the duct tape that was covering Gabriela’s mouth. She cried out, “Winter! Please hurry up and get here!”

“I will be there as soon as I can, honey, trust me!” Winter shouted back. “Just hold tight a little longer. I will get both of you out of there soon!”

Harris could hear Gabriela sob on the other line. He felt anger build up inside him. He couldn’t believe they were having to go through all of this. They did not deserve any of this torture. It was him that should be there, and not them. They had nothing to do with any of it.

“Alright, Fritz, I will do whatever you say,” Harris told him. “If you lay a finger on any of them, I will kill you. Do you understand?”

“I understand perfectly,” he replied. “Just make sure you do your part, and nobody gets hurt!”

Camargo hung up the phone without letting Harris have another word. Harris clinched his phone tightly before furiously throwing it down on the front passenger seat. Camargo texted him the location where they would meet and what time the next day. Harris would be meeting them at an abandoned warehouse in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Camargo instructed Harris not to bring anyone with him. Harris couldn’t see how he could go in without any backup. It would be him up against Camargo and many of his Death Firms. There would be little chance that he and his family would survive. He had to call in for backup. Harris knew just the person to call. They would have to find a way for Camargo not to know that Harris had anyone nearby for backup. It would have to be a super-secret mission.

Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson would know just what to do in this kind of situation. Harris picked up his phone and called Alderson right away.

Chapter 6

Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson rushed over to his phone as soon as he heard it ring in his office and hurried to answer it without even seeing on the caller ID who it was. He was surprised to hear a familiar voice on the other line.

“Lieutenant, I need your help!” Harris said excitedly. “I know who is responsible for the newly created Death Firms. His name is Dr. Fritz Camargo. He was one of the scientists the military hired to create the first batch of Death Firms. I will be meeting with him tomorrow in Oklahoma City. I need you and a few soldiers to back me up in secret. He must not know that any of you are there. He is holding Gabriela and Emilia captive.”

“Winter, I think the best way to approach this is that we plant a video camera with a microphone and speaker device on you,” Alderson told him. “All soldiers will not be in sight. We just need to come up with a cue to let us know when you need help. I will send my men out quickly. Be sure to wear some safety gear before entering the location in case there are bullets shot or explosions. We will have the weaponry needed to attack the Death Firms.”

“Will you be able to make it out to Oklahoma City by tomorrow?” Harris asked.

“I will start sending some of my men out by helicopter and plane tonight,” Alderson replied. “I also will arrange to have some military vehicles and tanks sent over to the location. Be expecting at least one hundred soldiers to show up. We will meet with you in the morning before you meet with Dr. Fritz Camargo, so we can plant a hidden device on you that will allow us to listen to what is happening and make plans. I will call you before then to let you know what time we can meet.”

“Okay, Lieutenant Colonel,” Harris said. “Thank you so much for doing this. I will talk with you then. Have a good evening.”

“You, too!” Alderson said. “Bye!”

Both men hung up. Harris felt relieved that he was not going to be facing Dr. Fritz Camargo on his own and that he would have a whole army to back him up. He now felt good about his and his family’s chances of coming out alive. He knew he had to get some more driving done today, so he headed off.

His nerves were more at ease while driving on the highway. Harris kept thinking about how he was going to approach Camargo and what he was going to say to him. He also wondered how he was going to protect himself. Harris knew he should devise a plan that night. He couldn’t believe the lieutenant colonel would go through this much trouble to protect him and his family. He felt lucky to have the support of the United States Army. Not everyone could say that.

Harris began observing his surroundings. He was taken back by the beauty of the Northern Texas prairie. Harris could see hundreds of miles of blue sky ahead of him. There was luscious, long, green grass, a few trees, and patches of golden wheat fields and sunflowers. Despite all its beauty, a part of Harris missed the desert in Arizona. He then began to feel homesick.

He was now about two hours away from Oklahoma City. He noticed on his gas gauge that he was nearly empty on gas. Harris would have to get off the highway at the next exit. He saw a sign about a mile away that indicated there was a gas station two miles from where he was. As soon as Harris saw the exit sign coming up, he turned on his blinker lights and slowly exited the highway to fill up his gas tank at Buc-ee’s, a popular chain of convenience stores in Texas. He checked his rearview mirror and the lane ahead of him before turning into the parking lot.

He could see the Buc-ee’s mascot, a beaver, lit up on the store’s sign. The little critter wore a red hat and smiled with its buck teeth in clear view. Several gas pumps were being used by customers. Harris couldn’t believe how happening a spot Bucc-ee’s was. Harris wondered what made the convenience store a huge hit. He drove around the parking lot till he could find an available gas pump. He spotted one a couple of minutes later. He quickly pulled up to it. As soon as he stepped out of the vehicle, Harris stretched out his arms and legs. It felt so good.

As he was filling his tank, Harris noticed a suspicious figure staring at him from inside a white Lincoln Town Car with tinted windows. He could not make out the face all that well because of the dark tinted windows. He could faintly see the eyes of the face. From what he could tell, it was a tall man with a look of disapproval on his face. At first, Harris did not see the man as an immediate threat. It wasn’t until the man pulled out a set of binoculars that made Harris feel unsafe. He began to wonder if he was being spied upon by someone working with Dr. Fritz Camargo.

Harris finished filling his tank. He swiftly walked away from the gas pump. Harris turned to see if the shadowy figure would step out of their vehicle. The person continued sitting inside the Lincoln Town Car. He used the restroom first before venturing through the many aisles at Buc-ee’s. Harris could see why so many people had stopped at the popular convenience store. There was so much to choose from. He was curious about the Beaver Nuggets, which were a sweet, buttery puffcorn snack. Instead, he bought two sausage kolaches, a cream cheese kolache, and a cherry kolache. Harris could use something to snack on while driving out on the highway.

As he made his way back to the car, Harris noticed the mysterious person had turned on their engine and slowly drove away. Harris got inside his jeep and placed the box of kolaches on the passenger’s seat. He pulled out a sausage kolache and took a couple of bites. He left the box open so that he could have easy access to them while he was driving. He looked up at his rearview mirror to make sure the mysterious Lincoln Town Car wasn’t behind him. Harris was wondering if the person in the white Lincoln Town Car was heading in the same direction as him. An eerie sensation swept over his body.

Harris placed the half-eaten kolache back inside the box. He buckled up, turned on the engine, and drove off slowly. As he reached the exit to the highway, he saw the same white Lincoln Town Car parked on the shoulder of the road. Harris drove past him and headed down the ramp to the highway. He began to have an uneasy feeling about the man in the Lincoln Town Car. Harris tried to shake the feeling but found that he just could not.

He looked up at his rearview mirror and saw the vehicle drive off the shoulder. It was headed his way. Harris sped away as fast as he could. He weaved in and out of slow-moving traffic so that he could distance himself some more from the mysterious man following him. Harris had to think of a way to lose the person. No matter how fast he drove, the white Lincoln Town Car was right on his tail. It was at that moment that he realized the man was after him.

The white car swerved past a vehicle and nearly missed another vehicle when it was going into the other lane. It gained speed and passed multiple more cars. Harris had to find an escape route. He searched for an exit. As soon as he lost the mysterious man, he could swerve off the highway quickly. Harris had to outsmart the man somehow.

Harris found the perfect opportunity. The white vehicle grew further behind when it was stuck behind two slow-moving semi-trailer trucks. One of the semi-trailer trucks was passing the other. Harris passed several more vehicles and then swerved in front of one. He kept gaining speed. Soon the white Lincoln Town Car was nowhere in sight. Harris exited the highway to drive on an alternative route to Oklahoma City. Harris took a deep breath as he drove on a small, deserted road in the country. He looked back one last time to make sure that the white car was still not behind him. To his relief, it was not. He was surprised to find the box of kolaches still sat perfectly next to him on the passenger side. Harris chuckled, then pulled out the half-eaten sausage kolache that he had already started eating and took another bite.

After finishing his kolache, Harris called Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson immediately while he was driving to tell him what had just happened. Alderson could not believe what had just happened and told Harris that he was relieved that he was able to escape.

“Do you think the person that was driving the car was Dr. Fritz Camargo?” Alderson asked him.

“It very well could be,” Harris replied. “At this point, anything is possible. He could have been checking up on me to see if I were, indeed, coming.”

“That’s true,” Alderson said.

Alderson then informed him that he and several soldiers were on their way. Harris was relieved to hear that they would be there soon to help. He absolutely did not want to do this on his own, especially with what had just happened. Alderson and Harris planned to meet at the hotel Alderson and the soldiers were staying in. They would meet at 7:30 a.m. in the hotel lobby.

The phone call put his mind at ease. He turned up the music on his radio. Carly Simon’s “You’re so Vain” was playing. *Dr. Fitz Camargo is so vain,* Harris thought to himself. The timing for the song couldn’t be more perfect. He then laughed while singing the lyrics. Harris looked at the time and noticed he was only about an hour away from Oklahoma City. He took a deep breath and tried to relax some by having happy thoughts. He was glad about almost being there because he was starting to feel tired again. Harris would need lots of rest for tomorrow. He was hoping to put an end to being hunted down by Fritz Camargo once and for all. Harris was also hoping that Camargo would come to his senses and help them track down and destroy the newly created Death Firms.

He was now entering the Oklahoma City area. The traffic was starting to pick up as he drove past a large casino. He suddenly felt tense. Harris realized that in less than twenty-four hours, he would be facing the person behind it all. He was so distracted that he almost missed the exit sign. He swerved off the highway quickly as soon as he reached it. Harris could hear someone honk their horn at him because he nearly hit them. He felt like a complete fool.

It was dark outside now. He looked around for the lit-up hotel sign. Harris couldn’t figure out the location of the hotel, so he pulled off into a busy parking lot for a grocery store to look at a map on his phone. He was not far from it. He drove for another ten minutes before spotting the brightly lit hotel sign. He could hardly wait to get something to eat and crawl into bed.

He parked his jeep in front of the lobby to check in. He felt a blast of cool air hit his face from the air conditioner. It tingled his senses. A pot of coffee was very inviting. Harris could tell it was freshly made because there was still steam rising from the top. He checked in first before indulging himself with a nice cup of coffee. Harris needed a dose of caffeine to wake him up.

After checking into the hotel, he ordered a steak dinner and a glass of wine through room service. He watched a couple of episodes of *Mad Men* before drifting off to sleep. In his sleep, he began to have a series of feverish dreams. In a few of his dreams, he had flashbacks of his time in the Army fighting the Death Firms and studying their behavioral patterns. It did not seem that long ago. He also dreamt of the day he lost his late fiancée to a Death Firm while on a hike. Harris remembered being so heartbroken after witnessing a Death Firm maul her and drag her off. He tried so hard to fight it off. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Harris tossed and turned throughout the night. He woke up once after getting scared of almost losing his life from a Death Firm attack. The attack left him with a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder. It took him several months to overcome it. He checked the time and noticed it was 3:45 a.m. Harris sighed and slowly went back to sleep.

He groaned as his alarm went off at 6 a.m. Harris felt like he did not get enough sleep once again. He could not see how he was going to stand up to Camargo with his lack of sleep. Harris lazily got up from the bed, walked over to the bathroom, quickly stripped off his clothes, and stepped inside the shower. The warm water and the scent of Paul Mitchell lemon-sage bodywash rejuvenated him. He would need a couple of cups of coffee to get him to function properly for the day.

Harris took the elevator down to the first floor and headed toward the breakfast bar. He needed to be well-nourished so that he could have the energy to face the obstacles that lay ahead of him. A couple of cups of coffee would give him a jolt of energy as well. He nibbled quickly on his toast and sipped his coffee in a hurry. Harris looked down at his watch and noticed it was about time for him to head out. He threw the paper plate and an empty cup away in the trash.

Harris pulled out his keys from his jean pocket while heading out the door. He walked briskly across the parking lot on the way to his vehicle. Harris texted Alderson to tell him he was on his way. The lieutenant colonel and the soldiers were staying at the Hilton Garden Inn. It was in the Bricktown District. Alderson texted Harris to let him know they were waiting for him in the hotel lobby. Harris texted him back, saying he would be there shortly before pulling out of the hotel parking lot.

He checked the traffic while he drove up the ramp that would lead him to the highway. He checked his rearview mirror one more time before driving into the lane. There were many people on their way to work. Harris found himself stuck in a traffic jam. He grew more irritable when he was cut off by a truck. He shouted out obscenities to the truck driver as he flipped the person off.

The traffic lessened as more people exited the highway. Harris was relieved when he could finally pick up the speed. His exit to the Bricktown District was about two miles away. He slowed down as he was approaching it. He kept a keen eye out for the exit sign.

Harris caught up with a slow-moving vehicle. He grew agitated. His patience was wearing thin. Harris’s eyes lit up as soon as he saw the exit sign. Harris quickly exited the highway and drove directly to the Hilton Garden Inn. He parked in front of the hotel and texted Alderson to let him know he was there. Harris then walked inside the hotel and waited for Alderson in the lobby. A few minutes later, Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson stepped into the lobby. Harris walked up to him.

“Good morning, Winter,” Alderson said. “I hope you had plenty of sleep last night. I certainly did not. I had a terrible dream involving the Death Firms last night. I nearly jumped out of my bed when one grabbed ahold of me in my dream. As it was about to swipe me with its massive claws, I found myself at the edge of my bed. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest.”

“I didn’t have much of a pleasant night either,” Harris told him. “I got some rest, but I am afraid not enough. I was frightened all night about having to face Fritz Camargo and the Death Firms. I’m worried about Gabriela and my daughter, Emilia, as well. I thought for sure all of this was over. Boy, was I wrong!”

“I know what you mean,” Alderson responded. “We have to keep a clear head when facing this guy. We can’t let ourselves get too scared. We have plenty of experience handling these types of situations, so there is no need to worry. We must be mentally strong when facing the Death Firms. They can sense fear or any kind of weakness, as we learned from your studies.”

“I believe we have enough knowledge about them to know what we are going up against,” Harris said. “We have to make sure to watch each other’s backs. They can be sneaky little suckers. It wouldn’t take much for one of them to jump out and surprise attack one of us with their speed and ability to leap high up in the air.”

“I agree,” Alderson said. “I will make sure to remind everyone to watch out for one another. It is extremely important to keep as many of us alive as possible. We are much stronger as a larger unit.”

“That is true,” Harris replied.

“I should call over the soldiers now,” Alderson said.

Alderson walked away and began telling the soldiers to gather around him. They walked quickly toward him. They lined up, stood still quietly, and waited for the lieutenant colonel to give them orders. Alderson counted how many were present first before speaking to them. He told Harris they were still waiting for about a dozen other soldiers to arrive. Harris and Alderson looked around and saw a few soldiers from a distance lined up to get a cup of coffee from the coffee pump thermals in the breakfast bar. Harris looked further out and saw another group of soldiers talking quietly amongst each other. It did not take long for Alderson to get their attention and get them to come into the lobby. Once all the soldiers were present, Alderson instructed the soldiers to go to the military vehicles and drive them to an isolated spot where they could load up their weaponry, dress up in their combat uniforms, and go over the plan. Alderson told Harris that he would be going with him.

They headed off to Arcadia Lake, where they would find a spot with no one around. The mission they were on was top secret. The military vehicles lined up on the highway and followed each other. When they arrived, the soldiers quickly hopped out of their vehicles and met up in a circle around Alderson. They listened carefully to him as he laid out the plan.

Once everyone understood the plan, they separated and went on to their assigned positions. *It is a comfort to know that the soldiers will only be a few miles away from the warehouse,* Harris thought. It should not take long for them to reach the location when he called for help.

Alderson drove Harris back to the hotel, so Harris could take his vehicle to Camargo’s hideout. The soldiers were now on standby and ready for action. Harris was given a watch to wrap around his wrist with a secret button on it. If at any moment Harris felt in danger, he would press the tiny button that would alert the troops to come and rescue him. The watch was also a tracking device.

“Good luck, Harris,” Alderson said. “I’m sure everything will be all right. Do not fear. Remember, we are here for you if you need any help.”

“Thank you for that assurance, Lieutenant Colonel,” Harris told him. “I will try to not let my nerves get the best of me. I swear if he lays one finger on either Gabriela or Emilia, I don’t know what I will do. I will try my best to not do anything harsh and keep myself always composed.”

“Just press the button, Winter,” Alderson replied. “Don’t try to be brave. You will be outnumbered and will not have weapons to protect either you or your family. Just let us do our job.”

“I should go now,” Harris said. “I will remind myself of that. I will see you shortly. If I don’t make it out alive, I just want to thank you for all your help.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Alderson said. “Just be careful and don’t do anything stupid, then you should be fine.”

“I will,” Harris replied.

Harris stepped out of the vehicle, took a deep breath, and faltered his way to the jeep. He wasn’t sure exactly what he needed to do, but he knew what needed to be done. Harris had to walk into the hideaway without any weapons to prevent any altercations. He wanted to keep things peaceful so that his wife and child would leave the location safely and unharmed.

Harris could hardly wait to see them. It seemed like an eternity since the last time he had seen them. He had prayed that they would all get out safely and put an end to the mess that Camargo had created. He knew that Camargo took extraordinary pride in creating the Death Firms, his ego was bruised, and his reputation had been ruined when the U.S. Army had put an end to all Death Firms. Harris heard that Camargo may have gotten help from other scientists in creating the new breed of Death Firms. Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson had told him that three of the other original creators of the Death Firms were reported missing. He was beginning to wonder if they might be responsible for recreating the Death Firms as well.

Harris had to drive clear across the other side of the city. The abandoned warehouse was just outside the city limits. It was the perfect place for a hideout. There was no need for anyone to be in the area. No one was around to expect anything. It would be the perfect place for battle if a war were to ensue between the Death Firms and the military.

Harris drove around the warehouse to find a parking spot. He found an empty parking lot on the other side of the warehouse. There was only a white van parked there. Harris assumed it belonged to Dr. Fritz Camargo. It looked like the type of vehicle that could carry equipment, a few hostages, and one or two Death Firms. The thought of his wife and baby being in the back seat of it put a sour look on Harris’s face. He secretly wanted Camargo dead.

He parked right next to it. It was one of the closest spots to the building. It was ideal for when he had to make a quick exit. Harris couldn’t believe that he had forgotten to purchase a car seat for the baby. Gabriela was going to need to keep the baby tight in her arms in the back seat for the meantime. That didn’t matter to him at this point. All that mattered to him was that they came out of the warehouse alive.

He pulled out the instructions that Camargo had given him and read them carefully. After he was done, Harris walked toward the back door, where he had to shout out Camargo’s name for him to unlock the door through an old intercom. It was so old that he wasn’t even sure that it even worked. Harris began screaming out his name as loud as he could. He could hear Camargo’s footsteps. Harris’s heart was racing. He kept reminding himself not to be afraid. He had to keep his cool.

The door opened. Harris was greeted by a menacing-looking man with dark, piercing eyes. The man sneered at him before telling him to come in. Harris looked at him closer, then recognized the face. He remembered seeing Camargo as one of the groups of scientists that were being scorned for the creation of the Death Firms by an angry mob as he was being escorted from the lab on the local news.

“Mr. Harris, I’m so glad you could join us,” he said with a devilish grin on his face. “I’m so sorry we couldn’t meet on better terms.”

“Save it, Camargo!” Harris shouted out. “What exactly do you want from me?”

“I want to get rid of you,” Camargo replied. “I must not have you stop me from destroying the world with my beloved Death Firms. I also seek revenge for damaging my reputation. I will never have a normal life again because of you. I also will not ever get the recognition that I so deserve, all because of you!”

“You got away with creating the Death Firms the first time because it was a U.S. military experiment gone wrong, but this time you have committed several crimes by recreating them,” Harris scorned him. “The new Death Firms have already killed many people and have caused utter chaos. Recreating them alone is a criminal act. Please do the right thing and destroy them.”

“Like hell I will!” Camargo shouted out. “I will not let you stop me this time, Mr. Harris. In fact, now might be a good time to destroy you.”

“Wait!” Harris spurted out. “I haven’t seen my wife and daughter yet. I need to know they are safe and that you will let them go before harming me.”

“Oh, very well,” Camargo said nastily.

He shouted out to a man that was standing by the doorway to bring them in. Three minutes later, the mysterious man brought out his wife and daughter. He then let them go. Immediately, Gabriela headed toward Harris with their daughter in her arms. She wept. Harris told her that everything was going to be all right. Just as he said that, Harris pushed the little button on his watch.

“Would it be all right if I walk my wife and daughter to the door before you destroy me?” Harris asked. “I just want to make sure they leave the premises unharmed.”

“I will allow it,” Camargo said. “I will warn you that if you decide to run away, I will unleash my Death Firms, and they will come and get you.”

“So, either way, I will die,” Harris sneered. “It sounds like a real win-win for you, Camargo.”

Harris then escorted them out the door. He told Gabriela to wait in his new vehicle and not to get out. He winked at her to let her know he had something planned. She looked at him with a frightened look on her face. She held the baby close to her as she walked away.

“Please, be careful, Winter,” she implored.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Everything is under control.”

Harris walked slowly back into the room with Camargo. He knew he had to stall Camargo just a little bit longer. Harris had to think fast.

“Follow me, Mr. Harris,” Camargo said. “I have a little surprise for you.”

“Oh, goody,” Harris said sarcastically.

Harris was taken into a small enclosure that was surrounded by a thick see-through wall. Camargo locked him inside it. Harris could see Camargo watching him from the outside of the enclosure. Soon, Camargo disappeared. Harris had a sinking suspicion he had gone to retrieve a few of his Death Firms. Harris looked down and saw a chair. He figured he could defend himself long enough until the troops arrived. Harris then started looking around for escape routes. He thought about pushing his way out of the enclosure by hitting Camargo and the Death Firms with the chair right when Camargo opened the door. He had to think fast.

He grabbed the chair quickly and stood right next to the door. Harris listened carefully for footsteps. Thirty seconds later, he could hear floorboards creaking louder. They were coming. He lifted the chair high up. Harris could hear the unlocking of the door. Just as Camargo’s head appeared, Harris whacked him as hard as he could. Camargo fell to the floor. Blood spurted out of Camargo’s head. Camargo groaned as he lay still on the floor. Harris was then confronted by three men who looked confused about their whereabouts. He did not have a good feeling about the three men. *Are they Death Firms?* he wondered. Harris ran away as fast as he could.

Camargo had the remote that controls the Death Firms in his hand. He opened one eye and looked down at the remote. His thumb pressed the button that transformed the Death Firms into the monster version of themselves. All three men that allowed Harris to pass through the door soon began to shake. Their fangs and claws grew out, their eyes turned red, and they became larger and more muscular. Just as Harris almost reached the door, Camargo commanded the three Death Firms to go after him.

Harris quickly turned around and saw the Death Firms charging toward him. He could not believe what he was seeing. It was apparent that Camargo had somehow managed to find a way to control the Death Firms, including transformation. He would have to report this newfound information to the lieutenant colonel. That was, if he survived. Harris knew that this meant big trouble for the military. These were innocent lives that they were dealing with. If they had the ability to be like normal humans, then there was a way to keep them from turning into Death Firms. They might not even realize that they were Death Firms.

Harris swung the door open quickly. He ran with all his might out the door and shut it quickly before heading out. The Death Firms jumped through the door. Harris could see Gabriela and his daughter in his vehicle. Gabriela’s eyes were wide with fear when she saw him running frantically toward them. He noticed a few weapons were placed on the ground in front of the vehicle. Harris knew his wife had planted them there. She must have found them in the back seat. *Gabriela is always thinking ahead,* he thought. It was a good thing too.

He grabbed the first gun he could lay his hands on. Harris shot at them continuously to hold them back until the soldiers arrived. The ground started to shift and shudder. He knew tanks were approaching the area. Harris kept shooting until the soldiers arrived.

Soon he was surrounded by soldiers. He could hear one of them shout out, “Move out of the way!”

Without thinking, Harris quickly got inside the vehicle with his wife. He drove off full speed ahead. Harris knew he had to get them to safety fast. Gabriela sat in the back seat with their daughter in her arms. They could hear explosions and gunfire in the background. Gabriela could see Harris’s hands tremble as he held the steering wheel. She felt much safer now that her husband was with her. As soon as they were out of the area, Harris started driving slower. He knew the baby didn’t have a car seat yet and that he had to be extremely careful.

“Winter, where are we going?” Gabriela asked him.

“I really don’t know yet,” Harris said. “We just need to get out of harm’s way for the time being. As soon as we get to the next town, we will stop and get a new baby seat and other essentials. I was thinking about heading off towards Arkansas next. We will spend the night there.”

“What happened to your old vehicle?” she asked.

“I had to get rid of it,” he said. “I’m quite sure that Camargo had planted a tracking device on it. I also had to get a new cell phone. I was afraid he was tracking me on that too. When all of this is over, we will go and get our old vehicles back. I just do not want to think about that right now. My main concern right now is our safety.”

“I understand,” Gabriela replied. “Besides, I like this new vehicle better than the old one. There is more space, and I like the new features added to it. Your other one has too many miles on it, so you would have had to trade it off eventually.”

“That’s true,” he said.

“Are we going to pull off the highway here soon?” Gabriela asked.

“The next stop is in thirty miles,” Harris replied. “Can you help me keep an eye out for my exit?”

“I will,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said. “I missed you and Emilia so much. I think from here on out, we should just stick together. I feel responsible for what just happened. If I were with you two, this would have never happened. I should have been there protecting you and the baby. I’m so sorry, Gabriela.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Gabriela said. “We don’t know that for a fact. You were just trying to protect us by keeping yourself away from us. I understand why you did, Winter. No matter what we could have done differently, something could have gone wrong either way.”

“Suppose you are right,” Harris replied. “I’m just so happy that you and the baby are safe. I was so afraid that I had lost both of you.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Gabriela said. “I was worried about your safety as well.”

The couple kissed each other quickly. Gabriela’s attention suddenly was caught by a huge red and white sign.

“Oh, good!” she said. “There is a Target sign. We need several items for the baby. Winter, I see the exit.”

Harris slowly pulled off onto the exit and followed the arrow that pointed to where the Target was. Gabriela pointed to the store so that he knew which side of the street it was on. The baby was still asleep. Gabriela had to carry Emilia gently so that she would not wake up.

Harris grabbed the cart. They headed toward the baby section first thing. They filled the cart with a car seat, extra pairs of clothes, diapers, baby hygiene products, wipes, a new diaper bag, and a stroller. After they went shopping, Harris set up the car seat and got the stroller out of the box. Gabriela filled up the new diaper bag with baby necessities while he did all of that. Once they were finished, they decided it was a good time to get lunch. Harris took them to a pizza parlor before heading out of town. They ordered a pepperoni pizza with black olives, onions, and green peppers. It was enough to satisfy their hunger. The baby was now wide awake and happy to be fed. Emilia cooed as her mother cradled her in her arms. Harris chuckled at the sound. His heart was filled with so much joy.

They walked cheerfully back to the jeep. *It feels so good to hold Gabriela’s hand and to see my daughter’s face light up again,* Harris thought. He happily opened the door to the vehicle and helped Gabriela buckle the baby back up in the car seat. He kissed Gabriela lightly on the cheek before running around the jeep to get back into the driver’s seat. He made sure everyone was safely buckled up before backing out of the parking spot.

About five minutes later, they were back on the highway. Harris was happy to be driving again. The further away they were from Oklahoma City, the better he felt about their chances of getting away from the Death Firms and Dr. Fritz Camargo. They were about two hours away from entering the state of Arkansas.

Harris began to wonder how things had unfolded in Oklahoma City after they had escaped the Death Firms. He was hoping Camargo had been caught in the middle of all the action. Harris knew he had to call Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson as soon as they got to a hotel in Arkansas. Now that his family was out of harm’s way, he knew he had to go back to helping the military kill all the newly created Death Firms. Harris felt like it was his duty to do so. Since he figured out a way to destroy them before, he knew he could do it again.

He looked over at his wife. She was sleeping so peacefully that he didn’t want to bother her. *There is no telling what she and the baby had to go through,* Harris thought. He felt so lucky to have a beautiful wife who loved and adored him. His daughter was a blessing sent from above.

Chapter 7

“Search the premises!” Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson shouted out. “We must find this Dr. Fritz Camargo. He is bound to be around here somewhere. We can’t let him get away!”

“We combed the area, and we couldn’t find anyone, sir!” a soldier shouted out. “All we found was one Death Firm down. The other Death Firms and Dr. Fritz Camargo managed to escape the premises.”

“Damn it! We must continue searching,” Alderson said. “I will send for more troops to come and search further out of the area. This is going to be much harder than what I had originally thought it would be. Thank you for the report, soldier. Now return to your duty. Keep me posted on any new developments.”

“Yes, sir!” the soldier responded.

Alderson walked through all the rubble that was scattered about. The old, abandoned warehouse was now destroyed by a series of explosions that erupted from the attacks between the soldiers and the Death Firms. The battle resulted in ten casualties, nine of which were soldiers and one a Death Firm. *It could have been much worse,* he thought. It was still such a pity that there were casualties involved. Unfortunately, death had always been a part of being in the military. It was a tough pill to digest.

Alderson returned to the tent to get more updates on Fritz Camargo’s background. Just as he sat down, his cell phone began vibrating. He pulled the cell phone out of his pocket and checked the caller ID. The call was coming from Winter Harris. Alderson knew that Harris wanted to know whether they caught Camargo in action. He groaned just before he answered it. Winter was not going to be happy about it.

“Hi!” Harris said. “I would like to speak with Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson.”

“Hello, Winter!” Alderson responded. “What can I do for you?”

“I was just wanting to know how everything went and the status on Dr. Fritz Camargo,” Harris said. “That is, if you are not busy now.”

“Sure thing,” Alderson replied. “There were ten casualties, the old warehouse is completely demolished, and Camargo is nowhere to be seen. There will be an ongoing search. We are hoping to get some clues that will lead us to Camargo. One of his Death Firms was destroyed, but a few managed to escape. We believe the Death Firms helped him get out safely somehow. Winter, did you notice if Camargo had figured out some way to control the Death Firms?”

“I noticed he was using either his cell phone or a remote control when the Death Firms began to take on transformation,” Harris answered. “Just as he told the Death Firm to attack, he pressed a button immediately. This is something that was not used on the previous Death Firms. I also noticed how they appeared as normal humans before Camargo transformed them. They had no awareness of what was going on around them. These are innocent human beings that we are dealing with now. How did he manage to create a device that gives commands and controls when the Death Firms transform?”

“We need to capture Camargo to find out,” Alderson said. “Has he contacted you since this morning?”

“No,” Harris said. “I don’t think he has my number. I just bought a new cell phone and a new vehicle because I believed he had planted a tracking device on them. He just somehow knew where my exact location was at all times before I had bought them.”

“You should still be exceptionally careful,” Alderson warned him. “We are now in uncharted territory. Camargo is capable of anything. We must capture him soon before he unleashes all his Death Firms out unto the world. The newly created Death Firms are more sophisticated. We don’t even know all of what they can do just yet. Since Camargo can control the Death Firms, he can command them all to come to us and change them back to humans. Hopefully, there will be a way to surgically remove all the additional parts that were built into them.”

“This all makes sense, Lieutenant Colonel,” Harris replied. “If I find out anything, I will be sure to report it back to you.”

“As will I,” Alderson said. “I hope you have found a place to stay overnight. It has been a long day, and I’m sure you and your family are exhausted.”

“We pulled off at a hotel for the night,” Harris said. “Thank you for all that you have done for my family. I owe you a great deal of gratitude. Take care, Lieutenant Colonel. I will talk to you later.”

“You, too, Winter!” Alderson said. “Get plenty of rest. Bye.”

“Oh, we will,” Winter said. “Bye!”

Alderson smiled, then looked off into the distance. He felt hopeful that they would be able to find Camargo and put an end to this whole charade. It was his duty to keep the nation safe from attacks. It was a privilege to serve the country.

Harris hung up the phone. He gave Gabriela a concerned look. He hated reporting bad news to her because she tended to worry too much. Harris had a desire to make her feel safe and secure whenever he was with her. He also just wanted her to be happy. Unfortunately, none of this was possible right now.

“Who were you talking to, Winter?” she inquired.

“I just got off the phone with Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson,” he answered. “Dr. Fritz Camargo was nowhere to be found. They are still undergoing a search.”

“I can’t believe this!” she shouted. “I thought you said he was laying on the floor motionless.”

“I did,” Harris answered. “It appears he got help from his Death Firms. They obviously removed him from the premises and carried him off to someplace safe.”

“He could be anywhere by now!” she added. “What are we going to do?”

“We will have to stay in hiding,” Harris said. “In order to do so, we can’t stay in one place or for sure they will find us. We will have to keep driving further out. Obviously, Camargo will stop at nothing to get to us. He will keep trying to track us down.”

“We can’t keep doing this, Winter,” Gabriela said. “Sooner or later, we will run out of money.”

“Gabriela, I realize this,” he said. “We will have to get help from the government. The U.S. Army will have to wire us some money to keep us afloat. Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson will make the arrangements to do so. Do not worry about money right now, Gabriela. You should be more concerned about our safety. We will figure something out.”

“Winter, I’m sorry for shouting at you,” Gabriela said. “I’m just scared, that’s all.”

“I know, darling,” Harris answered. “We both are. We just need to try and relax in the meantime. Now, try to get plenty of rest. We will need every ounce of energy to get us through all of this.”

“I will try my best, sweetie,” she said. “I just get so overly excited.”

“I know you do,” he replied. “That is one of the many things that I love about you. You always keep me on my toes.”

She looked up and smiled at him just before he kissed her forehead. Harris then wrapped his arm around her and held her tight. She felt warm in his embrace and could hear his heartbeat as she nestled her head on his chest. It was a tender moment for the loving couple. One they wished would last forever.

They continued snuggling together on the hotel bed while watching a romantic-comedy movie. Emilia was fast asleep in the crib while sucking on her pacifier. Harris tried to relax and thought the movie would take his mind off things, but he kept wondering what could have happened to Camargo and how he was able to escape the warehouse without being blown up to oblivion and getting away from a hundred troops surrounding the building without them ever noticing him. It didn’t make sense to him. *He obviously has help,* Harris thought.

As Harris was contemplating the situation, Camargo was plotting his next attack on him. Camargo was carried by one of his Death Firms to an open field about fifty miles out of Oklahoma City. He escaped the warehouse with minor injuries. Camargo had to stay out of sight for a while until the area was cleared of soldiers and law enforcement. He would have to rely on the Death Firms to take care of him for the time being. They were all that he had. Camargo lost everything after leaving his home in Arizona.

The Death Firms would have to go into the nearest town and take food, supplies, and beverages from supermarkets and convenience stores, then bring them back to Camargo for him to survive. They put together a fire and provided him with a blanket and pillow so that he could camp out. The Death Firms followed all his commands. Occasionally, he would turn them back into humans while they were in town, and he would watch them from afar on his phone. Camargo was still experimenting with them and seeing how much they could remember of their human lives and how they reacted to the transformations.

Camargo felt all alone. He knew if he transformed the Death Firms back to their human selves around him, they would turn against him and report him to the police for kidnapping them. They would hate him for taking their normal lives away from them. There were times that he felt afraid of the Death Firms when they were in their nonhuman forms. He made sure they were well-fed by commanding them to feed off other humans in the middle of the night. They would come back satisfied with blood dripping from their mouths and claws.

Despite everything that had gone wrong, there wasn’t an ounce of him that regretted what he had done. After he was let go by the U.S. Army, he became a disgrace and was shunned by everyone. Because of this, Camargo fell into a deep depression. All he could think about was getting revenge on those who ridiculed him and treated him like complete trash. Camargo hated Winter Harris because he was loved by everyone. He got all the fame and glory. Camargo had no chance of ever redeeming himself again.

Camargo could see three helicopters flying off from a distance, and they were beginning to approach the area. He knew they were heading toward Oklahoma City in search of him. Camargo hid himself under a tree as spotlights were shining down on the area. He felt relieved as the spotlights narrowly missed him. He wrapped himself with a blanket and nestled his head on a pillow. Camargo was able to drift off to sleep once the helicopters had left the area.

He dreamed of how good his life was before he created the Death Firms. If only he could have it all back the way it used to be. Camargo was once a prized scientist who showed a great deal of promise. Everyone respected him during the time. He was invited to parties, exclusive events, and family gatherings. Now he was just a joke. He slept at times with tears rolling down his cheeks. Everything was falling apart for him.

Camargo remained hopeful. He felt like he had to take the next set of attacks to a whole other level. No one was taking him seriously. The army of Death Firms would begin to attack cities across the world. There would be hell to pay.

Chapter 8

The following morning, Harris and Gabriela were awakened by sirens. Harris jumped out of the bed and rushed over to the window to see what the commotion was all about. He could see several fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars speeding down the highway from afar. Harris had an instinct that something was seriously wrong. He turned on the television to check the news. Sure enough, Death Firm attacks were happening all around the globe. A part of him felt responsible for them. He could not stop Camargo yesterday.

“Why didn’t I get him when I had the chance!” he screamed out. “This is all my fault that Camargo got away. When he was laying right there on the floor, I should have grabbed his phone from his hand and tied him up. I just know he was controlling the Death Firms on his phone. I stood there and watched him press that button on his phone that turned those men into their Death Firm forms, and I did nothing about it. I am such an idiot!”

“This is not your fault, Winter,” Gabriela pleaded. “How were you supposed to know that he was controlling them on his phone? In fact, it was a good thing you were able to figure that part out. Now, these innocent young men have a chance to live a normal life because of it. If they can be normal human beings, then they can undergo surgery and have whatever contraption that is in them that turns them into Death Firms taken out because of you.”

“I understand what you are saying, Gabriela,” he cried out. “I just hate that this is happening all over again. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. It is just the fact that I could have ended it before it even started.”

He dropped down on the couch to sit down and cry. Gabriela walked over to him, sat beside him, and wrapped her arm around him for comfort. Harris rested his head on her shoulder. Gabriela always had a way of making him feel better during tough times like these. He was so glad she was there by his side.

Gabriela assured him that he did all that he could. She told him he was outnumbered at the time and that he succeeded in getting his family out of the warehouse safely. Harris felt lucky to have both Gabriela and Emilia back with him. They were such a joy to have in his life. He would sacrifice himself for them to keep them safe.

After letting his emotions out, he regained a sense of purpose. Harris had a mission, and it was up to him to protect his family. He knew he had to call Alderson to find out what the military was doing and if they needed his assistance. Harris could not sit back and do nothing. It was his civic duty to serve the country and protect others. He knew that Gabriela would understand why he had to join the Army, find Camargo, and put a stop to all this chaos.

He watched the news in disbelief. The entire world was crumbling before his very eyes. It was now a global problem. Harris knew someone was going to have to get through to Camargo somehow. Camargo was the only person that could truly put a stop to it. He was controlling every move of the Death Firms. Nobody knew where he was or what was going on in his mind.

He turned down the volume on the television and called Alderson. No one was picking up the phone. Harris knew he was much too busy fighting the Death Firms off right now and devising a new fighting tactic. Harris felt completely useless. He told Gabriela they had to stay put for the time being. They had nowhere to run to for safety. There were Death Firms causing havoc just outside their hotel window. There were soldiers in the area fighting them off and keeping them from entering businesses where people were hiding.

Gabriela and Harris continued watching live coverage of the attacks on the news. Armed forces were using tanks, grenades, and missiles to blow the Death Firms up into smithereens. Many were resistant to the explosions. Soldiers were hiding in bunkers, and the Death Firms were running at full speed toward the soldiers in combat. Many places looked like a war zone. Buildings were either on fire, structurally damaged, or collapsed. There was a significant amount of debris on the streets. Everyone must stay hunkered down until the Death Firms were out of the area.

Harris ordered food for the family through room service. It was not safe to leave the hotel. The hotel started to board up its doors and windows. No one was allowed to leave their homes or wherever they were staying. Law enforcement officers were now patrolling the area, and the hotel had security inside the building. If Harris wanted to leave and join the Army, it was going to be extremely difficult not to get caught. Harris texted Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson to find out where their location was and where they were staying. He also asked if he could be of some use. Harris doubted Alderson would tell him they needed him. He knew that Alderson would tell him to stay with his family and leave all the fighting up to the soldiers.

He felt like his mind would not be put at ease until he heard from Alderson again. Harris hoped the lieutenant colonel was all right. There was another part of him that did not want to stay put. He felt like he had to do something. It was him that Camargo was after most. Gabriela watched Harris from across the room. She could tell that Harris was in deep thought. He had mentioned leaving the hotel and helping the United States Army find Camargo several times to her after he had found out Camargo had escaped. Gabriela knew that he would not be able to stay with them at the hotel for much longer and that he would find a way to sneak out. Gabriela hated the idea of him joining the Army and putting his life at risk. She wanted him to stay, but she knew in her heart that she had to let him go. He looked back at her, and it was as if they could read each other’s minds.

Emilia woke up crying. Gabriela knew she was ready for a diaper change and wanted her bottle. She left Harris alone while he sat there, lost in thought. He began to wonder how he was going to get out of the hotel. None of the hotel guests were allowed to leave. How was he going to get through the boarded-up windows and doors and get past law enforcement patrolling the area? There had to be at least one door that wasn’t boarded up. Harris was going to search the premises until he was able to find an exit.

He walked up to Gabriela, who was feeding the baby, and wrapped his arms around her. He began to whisper in her ear.

“I am going to find a way to get out of this building, sneak past law enforcement, and go back to where the old warehouse is to find the lieutenant colonel,” Harris said softly. “He is not picking up his cell phone, which tells me things are bad over there. Something is telling me he needs my help.”

“I really don’t want you to go, but I also know you too well, Winter, and that you will leave regardless of what I say,” Gabriela replied. “If this is something you feel strongly about, then who am I to say whether you go or not. It is your life, and you have the freedom to live as you please. Just be careful out there and remember you are also a father and a husband. Emilia and I need you.”

“I will keep you both in my mind and heart the entire time,” he replied. “I love you both dearly.”

“We love you too,” she said. “Now, go and save the world.”

Winter kissed her lips and forehead, then kissed the baby’s cheek before heading out. He did not have a plan laid out, but he did make sure to grab his backpack filled with weaponry and supplies. He just knew that he had to find a way to get out of the hotel without being seen. Harris walked slowly through each hall in an inconspicuous manner, trying to find an exit. He then came across a fire exit that was being guarded by hotel security. Winter had to find a way to get the two security guards to move away from their position. He figured the only way to do so was to pull the fire alarm. Winter realized he would be committing a crime, but it was the only way. Also, it wasn’t like the fire department was going to care. There were much bigger things happening right now.

He slowly walked away and headed to the stairwell, where he would walk up the steps to the second floor. He remembered he had seen a fire alarm on that floor. He would make sure no one would be there to see him pull the fire alarm, then take the elevator back down to the first floor where he could get past the fire exit while the security guards were off trying to find out what was going on. When Harris saw no one on the second floor, he quickly ran up to the fire alarm and pulled down the lever to set it off. He then sprinted toward the elevator and pressed the button that would take it down to the first floor. As soon as the elevator doors opened, he rushed toward the fire exit on the first floor while it was left unoccupied. He ran out of the hotel as fast as he could.

Harris was surprised to find himself outside of the hotel, running across the parking lot. He could hear explosions nearby. Jets were flying above. Harris could feel the ground shake from tanks rolling a few blocks away. He made sure the coast was clear before running straight to his jeep. He had to duck from fallen debris. As he looked around, Harris thought the nation looked as if it was being attacked and that a war had broken out. As soon as he got into the jeep, his tires squealed as he sped out of the parking lot at full speed.

He saw patrol cars and emergency vehicles swerving past him on the highway. Harris was worried that the police would stop him, but law enforcement was too busy fighting off the Death Firms that they did not even bother pulling him over. Harris was relieved. He was afraid he would get in trouble with the law. There was so much chaos that the law hardly mattered now. It was all déjà vu again. He had already suffered one war with the Death Firms. He nearly lost his life during battle when a Death Firm sunk its claws deep into him and nearly ate him up. Harris didn’t want to relive those memories.

He had a long drive ahead of him. Harris would stop someplace once he crossed over the Arkansas border and try to reach Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson again. He prayed that Alderson was safe. He couldn’t imagine going to battle against the Death Firms without him. Alderson taught him everything that he knew about combat fighting and weaponry. It would not be the same without him. Winter hoped that there would be gas stations opened along the way. He needed gas, nourishment, and plenty of caffeine to get to Oklahoma City. Harris dreaded the trip. He felt exhausted from driving this far from Arizona.

During the afternoon, Harris could barely keep his eyes open. He stopped at a gas station as soon as he noticed that it was open. He bought a large coffee, a sandwich, and a bag of chips. It would be enough to get him to the border. Harris parked at a nearby park to eat his lunch, get some caffeine in him, and take a quick nap before heading back on the highway. He called Gabriela before he left to let her know that he was safe and that he was thinking about her and the baby. Gabriela was relieved to hear his voice. She had been worried about him all day.

Harris pulled out his map from the glove department to find out where he was and how much further he had to get to Oklahoma. He then realized he wasn’t that far from Oklahoma. He could make it there before it got dark outside. About an hour later, he called Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson from a truck stop in Oklahoma. Alderson’s phone rang and rang, but still no answer. This was unlike Alderson to not pick up his phone. Harris did not have a good feeling about it. He was going to have to wait until he reached Oklahoma City to find out if he was alive and well. He was about three hours away. His nerves jumped and jangled in his body.

Along the way to Oklahoma City, drivers on the highway could see fires, explosions, military aircraft buzzing above, and tanks off to the side. There were many drivers speeding away from the scene. They drove erratically, cutting off other cars, nearly avoiding wrecks, and not being courteous to other drivers. It was complete chaos. Everyone was on edge right now and not thinking straight. With a battle going on all around them, no one was safe.

Harris heard someone on the radio preaching that it was the apocalypse, and everyone needed to repent their sins. He couldn’t believe how ridiculous some people were sounding. Harris quickly switched the channel. He turned it to a station that played light, happy tunes with a quick beat. Harris began to tap the steering wheel with his index finger along with the beat. The music made him feel alive. It uplifted his spirits significantly and made him feel more at ease. Harris saw the mile marker and noticed he was only about an hour away from Oklahoma City. He could tell because the traffic was denser. The closer he got to the city, the more chaotic it was. Drivers were swerving and zooming left and right. Harris tried to stay focused on the highway and ignore all of what was happening off the highway.

The music was interrupted by a special announcement. Harris turned up the volume so that he could hear the news announcer speak clearly.

“The United States National Guard is warning people to stay in a secure location, preferably indoors,” the announcer said. “It is not the time to be outside sightseeing. Lock your doors, board up windows, and make sure you have weapons to protect yourself and your family within your reach. There is a horde of Death Firms invading the area. Stay tuned for new developments.”

Harris deeply sighed. He then turned off the radio. Harris had a bad feeling about what happened to Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson. He had left several messages in Alderson’s voice mail, and he still had not heard back from him. Without Alderson, he wasn’t sure who he should contact and what he should do. Harris had always worked with him. Other than his family, Alderson was the only person he could trust.

He refused to think of the possibility that he might be dead. Harris and Alderson had bonded over the past few years, and Harris owed him a great deal of gratitude for saving him and his wife’s lives after Death Firms had broken into their home in Tucson. They had been trapped in their underground shelter for days until Alderson sent in some soldiers to get them out safely. They were taken to the military campground site, where they stayed in bombproof shelters for nearly a year. It was Alderson’s way of showing appreciation to Winter for all his help in capturing and killing all the original Death Firms, Alderson had told him.

Harris exited off the highway and entered an area filled with fire, smoke, bullets flying in the air, explosions, people running, and Death Firms running havoc in the streets. Harris screamed as bullets went through his windshield and nearly missed him. Harris slammed on his brakes as he ducked and covered the upper part of his body and face with his arms as the windshield glass flew out at him. Harris had done it just in time. He was lucky not to get hit in the face by the glass. Harris’s arms stung with pain. He had been cut in multiple places on both of his arms from fallen shards of glass. He began to breathe in the outdoor smoke and felt debris fly right into his car. After he took a moment to clear the debris from his body, he continued driving through the chaos and kept an eye out for more gunfire until he got to the old warehouse. He was stunned to find the building was now just a huge pile of bricks.

Harris had a challenging time finding a parking spot that was clear of debris. It took him several minutes until he could finally park his car. He then got out of his jeep and ran quickly toward the trunk of his vehicle to pull out a fully loaded gun and a backpack filled with additional weapons and ammunition. Harris quickly put on his backpack and kept a gun at hand in case a Death Firm ran out and attacked him. He looked around him to make sure the coast was clear. He then spotted a soldier who was searching the area for dead or wounded soldiers to haul off in green camouflaged trucks. Harris carefully walked up to the soldier. Harris hated to disturb him, but he had to know what happened to the lieutenant colonel. He then waved at the soldier to get his attention. The soldier pointed a gun at him before cautiously speaking to him. Harris stood still with fright. The soldier inched closer to him while keeping a close eye on him. Harris knew that he was making sure that he wasn’t a Death Firm.

“Sir, you really shouldn’t be here,” the soldier scolded him. “Go seek shelter immediately!”

“Have you seen Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson?” Harris frantically asked him.

“He was airlifted to Mercy Hospital,” the soldier answered back quickly. “He sustained life-threatening injuries. The lieutenant colonel was inside this building when it collapsed. He was trying to rescue a soldier who was trapped under some debris.”

“Oh, God,” Harris said with an exasperated voice. “Thank you so much for your time, soldier.”

“Now, I advise you to go to a safe place,” the soldier told him. “You must not be out here when there is a battle going on. There are not enough soldiers, law enforcement officials, or paramedics to save you right now. They are all much too busy right now.”

“Okay, officer,” Harris replied. “I will let you go about with your duties now. I will take your heed to heart. Good luck out there.”

He rushed back to his jeep and pulled out his cell phone. He looked up directions to the hospital. Harris found out Mercy Hospital was about three miles away. He nearly jumped out of his seat as soon as he saw a Death Firm running from a distance. Harris wasn’t sure whether it was coming toward him or not. He turned on the ignition and sped away. He was not going to take a chance. He swerved around a smashed-up vehicle and tried his best not to run over anyone running around on the streets. His heart leaped, he shook as he turned the wheel, and he wiped off the sweat from his forehead. Unexpectedly, a Death Firm leaped out onto the car. Harris lifted his gun that was on the front passenger seat, pointed it in the direction of the Death Firm, and pulled the trigger while simultaneously keeping an eye on the road. He managed to shoot the monster in its face five times. It was just enough for the Death Firm to lose its grip on the car. It fell off Harris’s jeep and was run over by another vehicle. Harris became overwhelmed with relief. From there, his drive was much easier.

About ten minutes later, he saw the entrance sign to Mercy Hospital. He noticed several law enforcement and military vehicles surrounding the hospital. Harris had to stop at a checkpoint before driving into the hospital parking lot. The officer working at the checkpoint looked stunned when he saw Harris approaching the hospital entrance. Just like the soldier standing guard at the warehouse location, the officer immediately pulled out his gun and pointed it nervously at Harris.

“Excuse me, sir, I must search your vehicle and ask you a few questions before allowing you in,” the officer at the checkpoint said. “First of all, why are you here?”

“Officer, I was just checking in on a friend,” Harris answered.

“What is the name of the person you are visiting?” the officer asked.

“The name is Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson,” Harris said. “I need to know if he is all right. He has not replied to any of my calls. I am deeply worried.”

The officer looked through the list of patients on his clipboard. His finger slid across the paper and landed on a name. The officer then had a solemn look on his face. Harris had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach when he saw the expression on the officer’s face. The officer then cleared his throat before softly speaking out.

“I’m sorry to say this to you, but it appears that Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson died this afternoon from multiple wounds he sustained in a Death Firm attack,” the officer sadly informed him. “We found several bite marks and a few deep scratches on his body from the attack. The building then collapsed with him inside it.”

Harris immediately broke down in tears. He was too late. A familiar feeling came over him. It wasn’t that long ago that he had experienced the loss of his parents, fiancée, and siblings from being mauled by Death Firms. He felt a deep pain inside him.

“Thank you,” Harris choked out. He drove away, feeling lost and confused. Harris had never done anything without Alderson’s approval before. He wasn’t sure who he should turn to now. Harris had to go back to the old warehouse and tell the commanding officer they had to find Camargo and have him order the Death Firms to stop attacking and have them come back to him so the Army could figure out what they should do with the newly created Death Firms. It would be an easier approach than starting a full-scale war with the Death Firms. He slowly backed out of the hospital parking lot while he tried to fight back the tears that were streaming from his eyes. He knew after he told the military unit of Alderson’s death that the news would get out quickly.

Memories of Alderson flooded his mind as he was driving. No one would forget Alderson’s brave, heroic, kind nature. The world would soon be grieving. Harris tried hard to concentrate on the road as he was lost in his emotions. The twenty-minute drive seemed more like an eternity. Amidst all that he was going through, explosions, gunshots, and fires surrounded him. It was total chaos.

He swerved his car quickly to avoid a Death Firm that leaped out at him. Harris was not in a good state of mind. He backed up, spun his car wheels, and drove as fast as he could toward the Death Firm. He hit it so hard that the Death Firm flew through the air and crashed into a store window. Shattered glass fell on top of the Death Firm. A large glass shard struck the Death Firm right in the chest. The Death Firm lay lifeless on the store’s window display. Harris drove off quickly.

He parked less than a block away from the old warehouse. He walked briskly toward a soldier and asked him who the commanding officer of the military unit was. The soldier pointed out to a tall and lean man with light brown hair who was talking to another soldier while showing him a map. Harris watched the commanding officer point out a location on the map. He then gave the soldier directions on how to get to the location. The soldier nodded his head to show he understood. Harris tried not to look as if he was eavesdropping. Harris’s attention then turned back to the soldier, who showed him who the commanding officer was.

“His name is Major Casper Bruce,” the soldier told Harris as he waited his turn to speak with the major. “Wait here. I will let him know you are here.”

The soldier walked over to the major once he was free. Both exchanged a few words before the soldier gestured to Harris. The major nodded his head. Harris grew nervous as the major began walking toward him.

“Winter Harris, I have heard of you before,” Bruce said. “Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson spoke highly of you. What can I do for you?”

“Major, I know you have much to do,” Harris responded. “I appreciate you taking your time to speak with me. Have you found Dr. Fritz Camargo yet?”

“No, but I have called in for more troops so we can do a more thorough search of the area,” Bruce answered. “We believe he is still alive and on the run. His body was nowhere to be found in the warehouse or anywhere near it.”

“Major, I saw Camargo pressing buttons on his cell phone right before a human transformed into a Death Firm in front of my very eyes,” Harris said. “Somehow, Camargo figured out a way to control the actions of the Death Firms on his phone. The Death Firms follow his every command. While the Death Firm was in human form, it behaved like a normal human being. It was confused about its whereabouts right before Camargo commanded it to transform. Right before the transformation, the human looked as if he wanted to say something to me. I didn’t even get a chance to talk to the frightened young man.”

“Very impressive,” Major Casper Bruce commented. “If he can control them, does that mean we will have to find Camargo and convince him to transform all of them back into humans to end the attacks that are being carried out all over the world?”

“Yes,” Harris answered. “We also need him to bring them all back to Arizona so we can figure out what we should do with them. Maybe see if they can return to a normal lifestyle in their human form and destroy all contraptions that were built into them to control them. There may be a few glitches here and there, but we will see. As of right now, they are a threat to society.”

“They could be useful in the future if we can have them under control by the right person,” Bruce said. “Of course, we would have to get permission from the person who turns into a Death Firm first. We would be doing a great deal of injustice if we didn’t. I know this is changing the subject, but how is the lieutenant colonel doing? I heard he was sent to the hospital with serious injuries.”

Harris stood silent for a few minutes as if he were taken aback by something. He had to collect his thoughts for a moment before answering the commanding officer’s question. He was choking back tears when he replied.

“I regrettably inform you that Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson passed away today,” Harris spoke softly. “I tried to visit him at the hospital before I came here, and that is how I know. I could hardly believe it at first. In fact, I am still in a state of denial over it.”

“That is such a pity,” Bruce said. “He was such a good guy. He will be deeply missed. It is going to be tough to break the news to everyone. Winter, I think you will be much safer staying with us, and we could use your help. We understand that it is you that Camargo is after. Let us just say we use you as bait.”

“And how might you do that?” Harris asked.

“We will send out a helicopter to fly all over the area,” Bruce explained. “We will have you in the helicopter speaking through a megaphone. The volume will be loud enough for people miles away to hear. You can call out to Camargo and ask him to meet you somewhere.”

“I believe he was upset about the military destroying the original creation of the Death Firms and ruining his reputation,” Harris mentioned. “Maybe I can tell him that we are considering keeping the new Death Firms around and that we could make him out as a hero if he stopped having them attack others and bring them all back in.”

“It sounds like a plan,” Bruce said. “We will later try to have him arrested for all of those he has murdered. He will never really be a hero, but he will be known for making the right decision.”

“We also have to remember that these Death Firms also are fully loaded with weapons,” Harris added. “They may use their lasers from their eyes and guns that come from their hands. They may try to shoot us down. They have the ability to leap high, high enough to reach the helicopter in the air.”   
 “All of that has occurred to me,” Bruce said. “We will have combat aircraft nearby in case we need to shoot back at them.”

“That scoundrel shouldn’t be far from here,” Harris said.

Chapter 9

Dr. Fritz Camargo decided it was safe enough to leave the field he was camping out in and venture further out on foot. There were no longer helicopters with searchlights flying over the area. He knew he had to get out of there before they started searching the area again. Camargo had enough food and beverages to last him for a few days, plenty of money and credit cards, two pairs of extra clothes, his cell phone, and a blanket. He had enough on him to last him for a long time until he could return to his home in Arizona to pick up more necessities.

He barely could sleep last night because of the sounds of weaponry going off, aircraft whizzing overhead, and explosions. He also got cold and felt uncomfortable lying on the ground. Camargo was exhausted, felt weak, and was slightly in pain. He wobbled a little as he got up on his feet. Camargo knew he was not strong enough to walk all the way into town. He had to get a lift from someone driving down the road.

He had to get out of there as fast as he could. Military and law enforcement officials would soon be searching the area. He began to collect his things and stuffed them in a large hiking backpack. He could barely lift it, so he dragged the backpack across the ground. Camargo had taken several breaks to continue his journey. There was no road in sight. *I may very well die before I reach town,* Camargo thought.

The weather was ideal for walking. The sun shined brightly, it was warm out, and there was a subtle cool breeze. The grass rippled like water as the wind blew through it. Camargo somehow remembered the path that the Death Firm took as it carried him into the field. He continued walking toward the barbed wire fence that was down. It would be from there that he would start walking down a gravel road. He had to find a location where he could charge his cell phone quickly. Without it, he could not command the Death Firms to do anything. He left the Death Firms fighting in their beastly transformational forms.

About forty minutes later, he could see the broken-down fence with barbed wire and the gravel road that would lead him into town. He held in his breath as he walked around some cow manure. He took four more steps before approaching the fence. Camargo knew he had to work his way through the barbed wire fence and that he would sustain some injuries. He hesitated for a while before proceeding. He groaned as he placed his foot on the fence. Blood began trickling from it. He screamed in agony as he placed his other foot on the fence. Next were his hands. He wrapped some cloth around both hands before placing them on the fence to ease the pain in his hands as he placed them upon the spikes. Carrying a heavy backpack made the climb much more challenging. He slowly moved his hands and feet on the fence until he was able to get to the very top of it. From there, he jumped down to the other side of the fence. He quickly took off his backpack and searched for his medical supplies. Camargo poured antibiotic ointment over his newfound wounds and covered them with bandages. He was surprised that he managed to avoid significant injury. Camargo got a few scratches that bled a little.

He slowly wobbled his way out of the ditch and started limping along the narrow gravel road. Camargo was only ten miles away from Guthrie. Under his condition, he knew someone driving down the road would feel sorry for him and would be willing to give him a ride into town. He was wearing a red T-shirt with a front pocket that was slightly ripped by the barbed wire. He was dirty and had a body odor. Camargo hoped he could get checked into a hotel soon, so he could take a shower and have a bed to sleep in.

Camargo pulled out his phone and saw that he only had about 20 percent of battery percentage left. He put the phone back into the back pocket of his light wash blue-colored jeans. If Camargo came across any trouble, he would use what little battery percentage was left to contact the Death Firms to come back and save him. He tried not to think about getting into any trouble. Camargo had to focus on getting to town first. He was in desperate need of rest and medical treatment.

He wiped the perspiration off his forehead and wiped it on his pant leg. Camargo looked back and saw a blue pickup truck heading his way. Now was his chance to get a lift. He held out his thumb to see if the driver would stop and offer him a ride. Instead, the truck sped past him, leaving behind dust and rocks. He coughed up some of the dust and gagged. He brushed off all the dust on his clothes. He flipped the truck off, but the truck was too far away for the driver to see it.

Camargo was then caught off guard by an approaching yellow Volkswagen Beetle. Music was blaring from the vehicle. He got a closer look at the driver. The driver appeared to be a twenty-something-year-old man. Camargo once again put up his thumb. This time the driver stopped, lowered his window, and looked at him. Camargo sighed with relief.

“Hey, do you need a ride into town?” the young man said. “I am headed there myself. I can give you a lift.”

“If you don’t mind,” Camargo replied. “That would be very much appreciative.”

Camargo limped his way toward the vehicle. The driver got out of his car to help him out when he saw how bad Camargo’s condition was. The driver carried Camargo’s backpack for him and placed it in the back seat. He then helped Camargo get inside his vehicle.

“Hi! My name is Luke Barlow,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“My name is Fritz Camargo,” Camargo said. “Thank you so much for giving me a lift. It was brave of you to offer a ride to a stranger, especially with all that is going on right now. I mean, with all the Death Firms running about. I would never have done that.”

“You seem harmless, plus I think I could have taken you down, given your condition, really easily if you did come after me,” Barlow responded. “Besides, I couldn’t have you walk that far with you limping the way you are. It is no telling how long it would have taken you to get into town walking that way. You look as if you have been fighting a few Death Firms yourself. I noticed all the scratches and bruises on you. I would have felt bad had I had drove past you. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine,” Camargo said. “Definitely now that you have given me a ride into town. It will save me a lot of time and energy.”

“I am always happy to help others out that are less fortunate than I am,” Barlow said. “I also could use the company. It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Camargo.”

“It’s nice meeting you too,” Camargo responded. “It is awfully kind of you to help me out. I don’t normally do this sort of thing. It is just that I was so tired, and I endured several injuries from a Death Firm attack. I am in so much pain as well. Without you, I don’t know what I would have done. You are a real lifesaver.”

“I’m glad to be of service,” Barlow replied with a smile on his face.

Both became quiet. Five minutes later, they were in town.

“You can just drop me off at that truck stop over there,” Camargo instructed him. “I can take it from there.”

“Are you sure?” Barlow asked. “There is not much in this town. I can take you to a much bigger town where you will find more stores, hotels, and restaurants.”

“Yes,” Camargo replied. “This is just fine.”

Barlow drove up into the truck stop parking lot. He parked right in front of the restaurant part of the truck stop. Camargo smiled at him before getting out of the vehicle.

“Thank you for the drive,” Camargo said one more time.

“You are welcome,” Barlow said. “Take care of yourself out there. We are living in a dangerous time. There are too many wackos out there. Keep on the lookout for those Death Firms. I hope you have something to protect yourself with.”

“I think I can manage,” Camargo said. “I have a couple of guns in my backpack to help fend them off.”

The two then parted ways.

Camargo saw two semi-trucks at the gas pumps. One of the truck drivers walked past him and held the door open for him. Camargo thanked him as he stepped inside the building. He was relieved that the truck driver had not suspected him of anything. It was clear the truck driver had not been keeping up with the news. Camargo felt for sure by now he would be a national celebrity.

Camargo knew he had to be careful when he got inside the truck stop. He was afraid that the FBI had announced that he was a suspect in the re-creation of the Death Firms and now was on the run. Camargo had to keep a low profile. He asked the cashier how he could use a shower. The cashier put him on a waiting list and told him it should not be long ’til the next one was available. He began to browse through the aisles to look for items he might be able to use. Camargo purchased a hat, a few newspapers, a flashlight, a lighter, deodorant, bodywash, shampoo, a comb, and a razor. He heard his number for the shower called out over the intercom. Camargo walked up to the cashier and got a code to unlock one of the showers.

Camargo was relieved to know that he was finally getting a shower. He felt dirty, and he knew he had to get his wounds cleaned out before they became infected. Camargo could hardly wait to feel the warm water spray on his muscles that were sore. Inhaling the warm moisture would clear out his nostrils, and the scent of the soap would help him feel clean.

After taking a thirty-minute shower, Camargo felt rejuvenated and was ready to continue his journey. He ate breakfast while his phone charged at the truck stop first before heading out. Camargo walked over to a car dealership about a mile away. He knew it would be impossible for him to get around without a vehicle. His van at the warehouse had been destroyed during the battle between the Death Firms and the military. It was shot up and exploded when a missile struck it. Camargo knew this because he had witnessed it through one of his Death Firms’ video cameras that had captured the incident. He felt extremely lucky to be alive. He nearly escaped the warehouse. If he had been there ten minutes later, he would have been blown to smithereens.

Now that his phone was fully charged, he knew he could call on the Death Firms for help if he were to get caught. Camargo spotted a red Ford Escape Hybrid that was in good condition. He test drove it to make sure it was reliable. Camargo knew he needed a vehicle quickly, so he purchased it right away. The car salesman looked at him suspiciously. He knew it was unusual for someone to need a vehicle right on the spot without much consideration. The salesman also wasn’t used to customers coming in and having the money to purchase the vehicle right on the spot. Camargo lied and told him he had had his eye on the vehicle for months and saved up enough money to purchase it. Camargo felt fortunate to be rich enough to continue his quest for world dominance while he was telling the car salesman this.

Camargo felt relieved when the car salesman finally let him go. He was tired of answering all his questions. He quickly turned the vehicle and looked up at his rearview mirror to make sure he could get into the other lane. The highway exit was about two miles away. He turned on the radio to get the latest news. Camargo was hoping to get some updates on how his Death Firms were managing. He turned up the volume.

“We are hearing reports from military officials saying they know who is involved in this latest creation of Death Firms,” the announcer said. “His name is Dr. Fritz Camargo. He was one of the creators of the original Death Firms. He is now suspected of murdering Dr. Garfield Franco, Dr. Xander Park, Dr. Tobias Lozano, and Actress Velma Whitney. He is on the run and is armed and dangerous. He is a fifty-four-year-old white male that has gray hair with a few brown streaks. He has brown eyes and is five feet and seven inches tall. He was last seen yesterday in an abandoned warehouse in Oklahoma City. Authorities believe that he could still be in the area, if not nearby. An anonymous source said that Camargo can control the Death Firms and may unleash them on people if he feels threatened by them. We just got a report that the military is planning to send out more helicopters this afternoon to search for him and tell him to come back so they can find out exactly what he wants and try to persuade him to stop the Death Firm attacks. Dr. Fritz Camargo, if you are listening to this, please return to the old warehouse on Ellis Street.”

“Like hell I will,” Camargo blurted out. “Do they really think that I am that stupid?”

Then something suddenly came over him. He was in a state of disbelief. Camargo started recalling everything that had just happened within the past few weeks. He couldn’t believe what kind of a monster he had become. Camargo never envisioned his life would end this way.

A wave of guilt swept over him. He remembered the look of horror on the faces of his late colleagues and the wife of one of them. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Camargo couldn’t believe he had let it go this far. He was filled with so much hate, anger, and pride that he forgot what really mattered. All he really wanted was his life to return to normal and to be recognized for his achievement in helping create the Death Firms. Camargo really believed the Death Firms could be put to good use. He felt like everyone had turned against him and his life was destroyed for something he genuinely believed in. Now, he was running from the law for it.

He knew he had to go back. If only there was some way he could convince the military that the Death Firms could be put to good use now that they were under complete control. He knew the public wouldn’t see it that way because they were so afraid of them. Camargo knew he got carried away and that there was no way he could bring back the four people he had killed. He was no longer a victim. He was a murderer and was pure evil. He would for sure go to prison if he turned himself in. Camargo didn’t want to take that risk.

He drove on toward Kansas. He would stay the night in Kansas City. It would be there where he could decide what his next move should be. He pulled out his cell phone and noticed on the screen that he had missed a phone call. Camargo was nervous about checking it, especially now that the authorities knew that he was responsible for murdering four people and bringing about chaos and more death with his Death Firms. He would check his voice mail as soon as he reached a motel. His mind was a mess right now.

Chapter 10

“Camargo, it’s Winter Harris!” Harris shouted out on the megaphone while flying in a military helicopter. “If you are out there, please come out. I want you to meet me at the warehouse. I think we can work out a deal. The military is interested in the newly created Death Firms. We can help build your image again and put your Death Firms to good use. Please do the right thing and come out of hiding.”

Harris put down the megaphone and looked at Major Casper Bruce with great desperation. He wasn’t sure what to do next. It seems the battle against the Death Firms was never going to end. They had been out all day searching for Camargo with no luck. Harris was exasperated. The whole mission was a complete disaster.

“We need to head back, Winter,” Bruce told him. “We are running low on fuel. We can stop and get fuel, then try again in an hour. We should really get some lunch and take a short break.”

Harris sat down feeling defeated. He was tired, thirsty, and hungry. The major handed him a bottle of water. Harris quickly gulped up the water. His throat was dry, and his voice was cracking from yelling into the megaphone all day. Earlier, he tried reaching out to Camargo through a new cell phone that the military had given him. It was a special kind of cell phone that Camargo couldn’t track down.

“Has he returned your phone call?” Bruce asked him.

“No,” Harris replied. “I’m doing everything that I can to reach him, but it is no use. Camargo is much too stubborn and proud. There is no way he is going to respond. He thinks we are in the wrong and will do everything he can to get his revenge.”

Harris looked off into the distance. He could see fires, cars swerving all over the roads, explosions, and military vehicles and aircraft. Harris began to feel bitter about the whole situation. He texted his wife to let her know that they still could not find Dr. Fritz Camargo. He could hear Major Casper Bruce ask if it was safe to land on a walkie-talkie.

The helicopter slowly landed on the helicopter pad. Immediately, a few individuals appeared on the pad. They were waiting to fill the helicopter with fuel. Once the helicopter landed, Harris sluggishly got up out of his seat and carefully stepped out of the helicopter. He knew Bruce was right about taking a break. The search had already taken so much energy from him. Harris was also badly in need of nourishment. He barely had anything to eat the past few days. Thoughts of the Death Firms and the loss of Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson had caused him to lose his appetite.

From the helicopter pad, Major Casper Bruce drove Harris in a jeep to a tent where soldiers were being fed lunch. Harris inhaled a savory scent in the air surrounding the tent site. He noticed smoke rising from a barbecue pit. His mouth began to water.

Harris walked toward a lengthy line of soldiers that were waiting eagerly for food. He looked over to a long serving table where soldiers were being served barbecued chicken legs, steaks, hamburgers, and hotdogs. There were also several side dishes to choose from. He could hardly wait to sink his teeth into a hotdog. Harris had plans to try each of the meats, a large helping of potato salad, some baked beans, and chips.

About ten minutes later, it was his turn to get a plate of food. He looked down at his loaded plate excitedly as he walked toward an empty seat at a picnic table. Harris devoured all the food in less than thirty minutes and washed it all down with sweet tea. He felt so much better now that he had a full stomach.

He met up with Major Casper Bruce afterward. Bruce then rode them back to the helicopter pad. They searched for several more hours for Dr. Fritz Camargo but found nothing. Harris was losing hope. Bruce assured Harris that the military would find Camargo, but it may take some time and that he was just going to have to be patient. Harris nodded in agreement.

It was now 7 p.m., and in less than two hours, the sun would start setting. Harris was staying in a hotel where some of the military officials and soldiers were staying. The major promised him that they would protect him. Harris was so grateful for their assistance.

As soon as the helicopter landed, they were greeted by a few soldiers in a jeep that was followed by a tank for their protection. The faint sound of gunshots could still be heard from a distance. Harris knew they would be entering the war zone again to get to the hotel they were staying at. He thought his life was an absolute nightmare. Harris could not believe he was reliving this mess.

The jeep began to move. It was a bumpy ride over there, thanks to all the debris on the road. The road conditions were hazardous.

Harris dreaded seeing what lay ahead of them. Sure enough, they encountered a couple of gruesome Death Firms. The Death Firms jumped out at them. The jeep swerved. Some soldiers in the jeep turned around and started shooting at them. The Death Firms shot back with bullets coming out of their hands and even tried to laser the soldiers with their eyes. The tank shot both Death Firms repeatedly as soon as the jeep gave it a clear shot. Winter covered his ears as the shots were made. There was a slight buzzing sound in his ears. The shots were so loud that he could not even think.

Once the Death Firms were blasted away, chopped up, and burned, they had a clear path the rest of the way to the hotel. Harris ate a large meal before bundling himself up under some blankets in his bed and watching the nightly news. He watched in horror as the Death Firms continued to cross the United States border. The Mexican authorities told reporters they had never seen anything like this in their country before. The Canadian Army was lined up all along the Canadian border, trying to keep the Death Firms from entering the country. There were reports of Death Firms as far away as Australia. They were spreading further and further out of the United States. Nothing was stopping them.

Harris picked up his cell phone to see if Dr. Fritz Camargo had returned his phone call. Just as he expected, Camargo had not. Then it hit him. The police could track him down through his phone. Harris couldn’t figure out why he and the major had not thought of that before. He told Major Casper Bruce first to present the idea to him before calling law enforcement. They would certainly find Camargo now. A ray of hope shined upon him.

“Camargo, we got you now,” Harris said.

*It is a good thing that I kept Camargo’s phone number,* he thought. Harris then thought about trying to reach out to him again. Camargo might feel more comfortable getting back with him if he texted him instead. Harris quickly dialed Camargo’s phone number to send him a message.

The message was too long, so he had to break it up into two text messages. He texted the following:

*Camargo, I know we have not been on the best of terms, but this is extremely important. You must stop the Death Firms from attacking innocent lives. There must be some part of you telling you that this is wrong. This can’t be what your original intent was in creating the Death Firms. If this is about getting recognition for your work and losing your job, we can work this out. It’s very impressive that you were able to figure out a way to control them. This can be extremely beneficial for the military. Please get back with us. This is extremely important.*

*Thanks, Winter Harris*

Harris pressed the send button. He kept hoping to put some sense into Camargo and persuade him to do the right thing before it was too late. He put his phone away when he realized they were approaching the hotel. As soon as the vehicle stopped, he hopped out of the jeep and quickly made his way to his room. He took a shower, put on some clean clothes, and ordered some food to be sent up to the room.

Harris would continue checking his phone throughout the night, eagerly waiting for a response from Camargo. It wasn’t until the following morning that he would hear a ding from his cell phone. He felt an unusual high as soon as he saw that it was from Camargo.

Camargo texted back the following:

*You must think that I am an idiot. I know what you are up to, and I am not going to make it easy for you. I will make sure that you don’t find me. I am getting rid of this phone so there won’t be a way for you to get ahold of me or track me down after this text.*

Harris grew frustrated. How was he going to reach out to him now? He threw his phone down on the bed. Harris called the police department to tell them he got a response from Camargo. They could trace where he texted him last. They would have to leave right away to catch up with Camargo before he got too far away.

“And so, the manhunt continues,” Harris said softly to himself after hanging up his phone. He felt restless. There was no way he was going to get any sleep tonight. The police chief told him that he would send some officers out after him when they found out which location he was currently at. They would also put up wanted signs with his picture and information throughout the country. Every police department would be sent copies of the wanted sign via e-mail. If anyone saw Camargo, it would be hard to resist the $5,000 reward money that they would be offering to the person who helped them locate Camargo.

The idea that the police department would do everything that it could to capture Camargo put some ease to Harris’s mind. He was hoping to hear the news of Camargo’s capture first thing tomorrow morning. However, Harris knew it wasn’t going to be easy.

Harris finished eating his dinner, which consisted of alfredo fettuccine, some breadsticks, a house salad with ranch dressing, and a glass of merlot. He rested up some by watching a lighthearted comedy romance movie before slowly drifting off to sleep. Harris woke up a few times during the night to make sure he didn’t miss any phone calls from the police department or the major. It was important to him to stay in the loop of things. If Camargo was captured, he wanted to be one of the first people to know about it.

He woke up disappointed after not receiving any news about the whereabouts of Camargo. Harris was also very sluggish. He made himself a cup of coffee first thing. Harris inhaled the aroma of the coffee and managed to finish it after taking a few long gulps. The warmth of the coffee felt good running down his throat. It only took a few minutes for the caffeine to kick in and do its job.

Harris then headed to the shower and turned on the water. Steam filled the bathroom. The hot water soothed his muscles, and his body started to feel more alive. He bathed himself with mountain fresh scented men’s soap. The smell was invigorating.

As soon as he got out of the shower and was fully dressed, Harris noticed he had a message on his phone. He picked up his phone immediately to see who it was from. It was from the police department. He gasped before quickly checking his voice mail.

“This is the Oklahoma City Police Department returning your phone call regarding the whereabouts of Dr. Fritz Camargo,” a female voice said. “We have traced the phone call. The call was made in Overland Park, Kansas. The Overland Park Police Department has already sent out a group of police officers to the scene. The FBI will soon arrive as well. Once we find Camargo, we will contact you. Thank you so much for your help. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

Harris felt relieved that they were getting closer to finding Camargo. The only thing he could do right now was to just sit back and wait until Camargo was captured. He felt positive that Camargo would soon be found. He quickly called Gabriela to give her an update. Gabriela spoke excitedly over the phone.

“Oh, thank God,” she nearly shouted out. “I hope they catch him. I just want us to go home and be able to return to our normal lifestyle. This has dragged on for far too long, and it must come to a stop. I mean, enough is enough.”

“Everyone feels the same way,” Harris replied. “Do you think I want to be here and have to relive some of it all over again? It is a tragedy that Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson lost his life from all of this. He was a good man. That monster needs to be caught and face the consequences.”

“Winter, I was so sorry to hear about that,” Gabriela said sympathetically. “I know you two had grown very close to each other throughout the past few years. I also liked him and appreciated everything that he had done for us. If it wasn’t for him, we might not even be alive today. Do you know if his family will be holding a funeral service for him?”

“I do not know,” Harris answered. “But if I do find out, I will make sure we will go to it. I want to pay my respects to the man that saved our lives. That is the least that we can do. He was a great man, and he deserves to be honored.”

“Winter, are you going to come back to us now?” Gabriela asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Harris said. “I’m just waiting to see how it all pans out and whether the military and law enforcement could use my help. Camargo should not be on the run much longer. I believe we are getting closer to finding him.”

“I just think that if all you are doing is waiting for the capture of Camargo, you should be here waiting with us,” she said. “Especially if he doesn’t know where you are. Camargo said he threw out his cell phone and was getting a new one. How can he track you if he doesn’t have the same cell phone that you called him up on?”

“There might be ways,” he said. “Camargo is a real smart guy. He might have come up with a new way. It would be too risky for me to be there with both of you. I don’t want to put your lives in jeopardy. It might be best if I just stayed here until this whole thing is resolved.”

“We miss you so much,” Gabriela cried out. “Can’t you just make this one exception?”

“I miss you too,” Harris replied. “I would love to come back, but there are a number of risks I have to consider. It is not safe to travel right now. Also, I know if Camargo finds both of you with me, I might be putting your lives at risk as well. I want you to stay put. You are safe where you are at. I’m going to lay low until I can be of use out here.”

“I love you so much, and I know this is very important to you,” Gabriela said. “I just wish you were here.”

“I know, darling,” Harris said. “I love you very much as well. We must stay put for a little while longer. I just want you to know that you and the baby are everything to me, and I am doing whatever it takes to keep you safe. I will call you again with additional updates. Just remember, I am always with you no matter how far apart we are. Now, give little Emilia a hug and a tender kiss on the cheek for me and tell her Daddy will be back soon. I will talk to you again soon, my love. I must go now. I need some rest after having such a big day.”

“Okay, l will talk to you later,” Gabriela spoke softly. “Please, please, please stay safe, Winter. I love you.”

“I love you too!” Harris replied. “Bye!”

“Bye!” Gabriela said.

Harris wanted Gabriela to think that everything was going to work out in the end, but he really wasn’t sure how it was going to go. He hated giving her false hope, but he was sure she already knew things could take a dramatic turn. Especially after nearly losing his life the last time the Death Firms wreaked havoc.

He walked over to the window. Harris observed the traffic flow on the interstate and glimpsed over at the skyline. Smog blurred the view of the skyscrapers. Harris squinted his eyes as the sunbeams were glaring in his eyes. He suddenly felt the floor shake and heard heavy thumping throughout the hallway. Something or someone was outside his door.

Harris grabbed his backpack, which contained two guns, a knife, and ammunition. He then ran into the bathroom and locked the door. He got in the shower, closed the shower curtain, and laid low in the tub with some towels over him. The footsteps kept getting louder. He could hear long fingernails scraping at the wall just outside his hotel room. Harris knew instantly it was a Death Firm. He could hear it breathing heavily as it slowly walked down the hallway. Harris knew he couldn’t make even the slightest sound. His right hand, which was holding a gun, was shaking. He kept reminding himself to stay calm.

As the Death Firm passed his room, the Death Firm shrieked as it heard a ding coming from the elevator. Harris took a deep breath, and his heart began to pound loudly as the Death Firm sprinted toward the elevator door. Within seconds, someone had screamed loudly. The Death Firm snarled and growled as it took a huge bite of the person’s flesh. Harris could hear a man’s voice pleading for help. He felt guilty for not jumping in and helping the man, but Harris had promised he would return to Gabriela and his daughter safely.

As the Death Firm was preoccupied with its dinner, Harris knew he had to sneak out of the hotel before it got to him next. He grabbed everything he needed and put it in his backpack quickly. Harris slowly opened the door and looked to his right, then looked to the left. On his left, the Death Firm was standing just outside the elevator. On the right, there was a door that led to the stairwell.

He closed the door as quietly as he could and tiptoed quickly toward the door. Harris gently pushed the door open. Just as the door closed, Harris sprinted down the steps. There was a loud shrieking sound from a distance. He continued running down the steps without looking back. He ran out the exit door without looking back. Seconds later, he opened the door to his vehicle. Harris drove full speed out of the parking lot. He felt incredibly lucky to have narrowly escaped the Death Firm.

He noticed through his rearview window that there were other Death Firms surrounding the hotel. A few broke into the hotel with no problem. Harris wondered if Camargo had tracked him down. It was also possible that the Death Firms knew his scent and were able to track him down that way as well, but it could just be pure luck that they found the location that he was in and didn’t even know he was there.

He knew that he couldn’t return to the hotel and that he had to flee as far away as possible. Gabriela was right about him going back to them. If something bad happened to them, he would feel guilty for not being there to protect them. He kept thinking about the pros and cons of him going back to them. It was then that he decided to go back to his wife and child in Arkansas. From there, Harris would take Gabriela and Emilia even further away from Oklahoma. Since he knew Camargo was in Overland Park, Kansas, they would have to go in the opposite direction. He was thinking about going to someplace in the southeast portion of the United States.

Harris pulled out his cell phone and gave his wife a call to inform her he was going back to them. He knew she would be absolutely thrilled about his decision. A smile broke out on his face immediately. Once he told her the news, she couldn’t have been happier. Gabriela jumped up and down and excitedly told him she and the baby were really looking forward to seeing him again.

Once he was there with them, he still felt it was his duty to track how the search was going. Harris planned to call Major Casper Bruce once he reached the hotel where he had last left his family. He knew that Gabriela would not have a problem with it if he was there with her and the baby.

Harris kept a close eye out on the road. He spotted a few Death Firms running wildly in a few small towns. They were going in and coming out of businesses and homes with blood dripping from their mouths and claws. Someone had to find Dr. Fritz Camargo before the situation got out of control.

Chapter 11

It was a dreary day out in St. Louis, Missouri, where Dr. Fritz Camargo was hiding. It was not an ideal day for walking outside. It had been raining lightly all day. Camargo carried an umbrella while he made his way through the downtown area. He was on his way to get lunch at Lucas Park Grille.

A woman and her child were wet after a motorist had soaked them by plowing through a water puddle around a street corner. The woman angrily shouted out at the driver and searched for a location where she and her son could dry up. She and the boy walked a few blocks down the street, then stepped inside a coffee shop where they could purchase a warm beverage and sit in front of the fireplace to warm up and get dry. Camargo thought the fireplace looked very inviting. He shivered a little when the wind picked up. His teeth chattered as he held his hands toward the fire to warm them up.

Camargo had little success in staying dry while being outside under the umbrella. His shoes were soaked from accidentally stepping into a mud puddle, and his clothes were wet from a car that had driven past him and splashed water on him. He angrily threw the umbrella down on the floor. Everyone in the area was annoyed by the weather and just wanted to hurry up and get to their planned locations. Camargo was relieved when he got a view of the restaurant. He felt cold and miserable. Being in someplace warm and dry was just what he needed.

Camargo picked up the pace when he was just a few feet away from the entrance to the restaurant. He brushed past a few people before stepping inside. He could hear the clinking sound of plates, glasses, and silverware. Sounds of people talking and music being played loudly filled the air. The host walked up to him and asked if he would like a booth or a table. Camargo told her it did not matter, so she directed him toward a booth and handed him a menu. She turned over a glass and filled it up with some water from a glass pitcher. Camargo smiled and thanked her.

Camargo placed his coat on the seat across from him. He pulled out his new cell phone to check the latest developments involving his Death Firms roaming the world. The Death Firms were easily breaking through borders of several countries thanks to their ability to swim across the ocean for days and reach new borders. The current death toll was 10,224, according to a reliable news website. A wicked smile stretched across his face. He had not changed the transformation of the Death Firms for several days. They were savage beasts now, feeding on anything that crossed their paths. Camargo didn’t feel a bit of remorse for the victims. *Nobody feels sorry for me when my career and reputation are damaged forever,* he thought. All he cared about was getting revenge.

Camargo searched through the menu. He was having trouble selecting because he had so many thoughts in his mind, and he could not focus. As he ran his finger across the menu, it landed on the grilled beef tenderloin. At that moment, Camargo knew that was what he wanted. The waitress came by to take his order. He ordered a Coca-Cola and grilled beef tenderloin and a baked potato with just butter and sour cream on top. The meal also came with a side salad and a roll.

As the waitress began to take the menu from his hand, she looked at him funny. Camargo was afraid she had recognized him at first but then realized she was wondering why he wasn’t letting go of the menu. Aside from that, his hands were trembling because he was so nervous about getting caught.

“Oh, how silly of me,” Camargo told her. “I didn’t even realize I still had the menu in my hand. I must have been zoning out.”

“That’s okay,” she replied. “I figured that was what was happening. You seem lost in deep thought. I get that way sometimes too.”

She gave him a strange look, then chuckled awkwardly before walking away.

“Whew! That was a close one,” he muttered to himself. Camargo knew he had to get a grip. He couldn’t allow anyone to suspect him of anything. He felt like he was losing it.

Camargo knew she was right about being lost in thought, though. Lately, he had not been himself and was absentminded at times. He had spent the past few days thinking about what Winter Harris had told him. Camargo knew he had gone too far, and there was no way he was ever going to turn himself in. He didn’t want to go to prison or get the death penalty. No jury would ever say he was innocent. Every person who knew him and what he did in America wanted him dead. He grimaced at the thought of what may lie ahead in his future. Out of all the possibilities, each one had an ugly ending. His mood became somber. Harris had been spending a lot of time trying to justify what he did.

Camargo looked out the window and watched people walk by. Each one had a more promising future. He was envious of them. Camargo had no career, no wife, no family, and no place to go. He fought back tears. After all this time, he thought he had a heart of stone when he really didn’t. It was no time for Camargo to be a softie now. He had to toughen up for the occasion. He must not let anyone see him as a weak individual.

As soon as his food arrived, he shook off all his sadness and indulged himself instead. The taste of the food was very satisfying. No matter how warm and well-nourished he was, Camargo couldn’t forget how much trouble he was in. He was surprised that no one had recognized him yet from all the news reports on television and on *Wanted* flyers. *His disguise must be working,* Camargo thought.

He took out his phone and pressed the transformation button. All the Death Firms across the world would now transform back to their human bodies. He turned on the video camera feature that was installed behind one of the Death Firm’s eyes to get a glimpse of what it was doing and where it was at. It appeared to be walking on a sidewalk near a narrow street in a residential area. Camargo noticed the apartment buildings had a British style to them, and there were European cars parked alongside the streets. Two women walked past the Death Firm and were chatting. He listened in carefully and could hear their British accents. They smiled and greeted the Death Firm as they walked by. The Death Firm then walked slowly past a red telephone booth. It looked down at its hands. Camargo could see its human hands trembling. Then the human Death Firm looked up. Camargo could now see a man with blonde hair and brown eyes walking toward it. The man, who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, waved and smiled at the human Death Firm. The Death Firm then looked down at its human body and lifted its arm to wave back at the British gentleman. The man appeared confused and a bit shocked. The Death Firm was asking him where he was at frantically.

The man in a light blue short-sleeve buttoned-down shirt and stonewashed colored-straight fit jeans replied in a haughty, clear, and distinct British accent.

“You mean you don’t know where you are at?” he asked with a quizzical look on his face. “You are in London, England. Are you feeling all right?”

“I don’t know,” the Death Firm said. “The last I know, I was in Arizona, then the next I find myself here. I don’t know when I left Arizona and how I got here. It is like someone drugged me or knocked me out somehow and left me here.”

“That is rather odd,” he responded. “The police station is just a few blocks from here. They can help you. Just keep going straight for three blocks, and you will see it to your left.”

“Thank you,” the Death Firm said. “I really appreciate you taking your time to help me, even with how strange of an occurrence this is.”

“You are welcome and good luck on your endeavor,” the young man said.

Just as the Death Firm walked away from the young man. Camargo switched off the video camera. He couldn’t believe how well his Death Firms blended in with society when in human form. He was so proud of his Death Firms. They were perfectly disguised.

As Camargo put his phone away, the Death Firm was heading toward the police station in search of answers. It was surprising to remember so much of his past and who he was. The police station was now only about a block away. He picked up the pace, stopped at the crosswalk, and waited for the traffic to pass by before walking across the street. People were looking at him as if he was a peculiar fellow. He looked down at his clothes and noticed they were dirty and tattered. It looked like he had worn the same clothes for weeks. The Death Firm had also realized it had a foul smell. He couldn’t figure out where he had been and how long he had gone missing. Although he remembered much of his life, there was still a small portion of it that remained a mystery. He tried to think back hard to what may have led him to this predicament. The Death Firm thought his family would be able to provide him with some answers about how he went missing and how long it had been since the last time they had seen him. As soon as the bewildered man’s version of the Death Firm reached the police headquarters, he would contact his family. He realized that somehow, he remembered all their phone numbers.

Five minutes later, he had reached the police station. As he walked up to the front desk of the station reception officer, he saw police officers scurrying about the office. Someone handcuffed was being questioned by an officer in front of a desk. There was another police officer filling out paperwork.

“May I help you?” the station reception officer, who was a man in his thirties, asked.

“Yes,” the Death Firm replied. “I don’t know for sure how I got to London. I live in the United States. I seem to have blacked out and woke up here with no explanation. I don’t know how long I have been here.”

“What is your name?” he asked.

“My name is Alex Bloggs, and I live in Tucson, Arizona,” the Death Firm replied. “I’m sorry I cannot provide much of an explanation of how I look, my injuries, or my recent whereabouts. I will try to answer your questions to my best ability.”

“Can you tell me the last place you were at before you lost your memory?” the officer asked.

“I do recall volunteering for an experiment in some warehouse or office space in downtown Tucson,” Bloggs replied. “I then went home and had dinner, then suddenly I seem to have blacked out. From there on, I can’t remember much of anything else.”

“I see,” he said. “Who did you talk to last before you took part in this experiment?”

“My wife,” Bloggs said. “I said goodbye to her before she headed off to work. I don’t know if I ever left my home since I blacked out. I may have very well been kidnapped, drugged, beaten, or brainwashed afterward.”

“Was there anyone that you had bad vibes with, so much so that they may have wanted to hurt you?” the officer asked.

“Not to my recollection, officer,” Bloggs answered.

“Do you think anyone knows you are here?” the officer questioned him.

“No, absolutely no one,” Bloggs answered.

“Have you had any history of substance abuse?” the officer asked.

“No, none whatsoever,” Bloggs replied.

“Let me check to see if anyone you know has filed a missing person case,” the officer said as he ran through missing person cases reported in Arizona on his computer. “Here we go! I see a missing case for Alex Bloggs that was reported by Kyra Bloggs. Does that name ring a bell?”

“That’s my wife,” he said. “I bet you she is worried sick about me. Officer, I must get back to her as soon as possible.”

“Would you like me to call her and tell her that you are safe and that you have been found?” the officer asked.

“Yes,” Alex Bloggs said.

“After I contact her and tell her you are fine, I will have someone send you to the hospital to have you examined,” the officer said. “It might give us some clues to how you got here and whether you have been harmed in any way. You will be brought back in for further questioning after that.”

“Is it possible for someone to send me back home afterward?” Bloggs asked.

“We will find someplace to set you up for the night and provide you with food; from there, we will work out all the rest of the details,” the officer said. “We should have you back home in a couple of days.”

“Thank you, officer,” Bloggs said. “I really appreciate all of your help.”

Bloggs sat down in the waiting area. He was waiting for another police officer to drive him to the hospital. He picked up an old issue of *GQ* magazine. Bloggs scanned through the magazine to pass the time. He felt hopeless. He had no money, credit cards, or identification. Bloggs was not sure how he would survive. Because he had no passport on him, he knew that he would be deported soon. Bloggs wondered what his wife was going to say when she found out he was alive and in London.

Bloggs was greeted by a police officer fifteen minutes later. The middle-aged officer was tall and stocky with blonde hair and blue eyes. He looked down at Bloggs, shook his hand, and introduced himself.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Bloggs,” the officer said. “My name is Lieutenant Jasper McConnell, and I will be driving you to the hospital. Is this your first time in London?”

“Yes,” Bloggs replied. “I have never dreamed my first visit here would be this way, though. It is a beautiful city. I hope to come back when the circumstances are right.”

“I hope you do,” McConnell said. “There is so much history here and plenty of things to do.”

“I bet,” Bloggs replied.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” McConnell said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Officer McConnell,” Bloggs said.

“Are you ready to go to the hospital now?” McConnell asked.

“Yes,” Bloggs answered.

Bloggs followed him to the back of the building that led to the small parking lot behind it. They had to walk through the busy police station to get to the back entrance doors. Bloggs was interested in seeing the police officer at work. It wasn’t as exciting as police television shows had depicted it. They walked through the double glass doors and began walking across the parking lot to the police car. Bloggs watched the police officer unlock the car. He opened the door for Bloggs. Bloggs quickly got in and buckled his seatbelt. He then clasped his hands on his lap. Blogs felt tired, anxious, scared, and eager to return home.

It was a quiet ten-minute drive to the hospital. The police officer and Bloggs exchanged very little eye contact and said nothing to each other. Bloggs took in some of the sights as they drove through the City of London. He was in awe as they drove past some famous sites, such as Buckingham Palace and Big Ben. Since he had no passport, the police would not allow him to go out on his own. He had to always stay with them until he was deported back to the United States.

Upon arrival, the policeman led him to the front desk of the hospital. The receptionist gave him some paperwork to fill out. The policeman looked bored as he was sitting next to him in the waiting area. Bloggs was so confused about what was happening to him that it was hard for him to concentrate. He filled out the paperwork carefully, walked steadily across the room, and handed it back to the receptionist. The receptionist scanned through the paperwork slowly to make sure everything was filled out. She then gave Bloggs a nod of approval.

“Thank you, Mr. Bloggs,” she said. “You may return to your seat. The doctor should be out shortly.”

He nodded his head, turned around, and headed back to his seat. He grew increasingly anxious as he waited for the doctor. Just as he leaned back on his chair, he heard, “Mr. Bloggs, the doctor is now ready to see you.” He nearly jumped out of his seat and walked nervously toward the doctor who was standing in front of the hallway that led to the patients’ rooms. He was wearing blue scrubs and had a stethoscope wrapped around his neck.

“Hello, Mr. Bloggs,” the seventyish-year-old-looking doctor told him. “I am Dr. Albert Bernard. I will conduct a physical examination, have the nurse draw some blood for testing, and perform an X-ray on you to make sure everything is working properly and to see if you have any internal injuries. I understand you may have been abducted by an unknown entity and that you have no memory of how you came to London or who is responsible for you being here. We are going to check to see if you have suffered any more memory loss and what was the cause of it. Just follow me.”

The doctor led him to a small room where he checked his blood pressure, his reflexes, his eyes, ears, and nose. He then asked him if he was feeling any pain. Bloggs said he only felt a slight headache and that he couldn’t remember what had happened to him. The doctor began examining him to see if he had any scratches, bumps, or bruises on his body. Dr. Bernard told him he only noticed a few bruises. The doctor then examined his head thoroughly to make sure something hadn’t hit it so hard that it would cause him to black out, go into a coma, or injure his brain. The doctor was astonished when he found no evidence of injuries to his head.

“Well, just looking on the outside of your body, it appears you have suffered minor injuries,” the doctor told him. “Your head looks perfectly fine, so you wouldn’t have lost your memory from a severe blow to your head. We might get some answers from the blood test or X-ray.”

The doctor then had him wait for his nurse to take some blood from him. Bloggs was relieved now that the doctor could not find anything seriously wrong with him. He waited nervously. Bloggs saw the nurse enter the room with the syringe. She placed a tight elastic band around the exposed arm. She looked for a visible vein. She then dabbed the area around the visible vein with an alcoholic pad before inserting the needle. Bloggs could see his blood going up the tube. The nurse told him to relax and that she was almost done.

He took a deep breath as the nurse slid the needle out of his arm. She placed some cotton over the punctured skin and placed a bandage over it. She left the room and informed the doctor that she was done. Bloggs sat quietly and started looking around at his surroundings. He noticed a poster with an illustration of the human body. He studied all the human body parts as he nervously waited for the doctor.

The doctor returned and escorted him to the X-ray room. Bloggs was instructed to remove his clothing. He was asked to stay still, take a few deep breaths, and hold his breath. Once the X-ray was done, he was led back into the patient room, where he was examined. The technologist told him it should not take long for the results to come back in. As soon as the technologist left the room, he got up and paced the room some. He looked around aimlessly. He felt like an animal trapped in a cage. Bloggs was placed in quite a predicament. It was scary; he had no control over the situation, and he was unsure of what it would all lead to next.

Bloggs waited anxiously for the doctors to return. Thirty minutes had gone by, and still, no one had gotten back to him on the results. Bloggs began to get worried. He heard voices coming from the hallway. All sounded shocked. Bloggs could tell they were in the middle of a deep conversation. They spoke quietly amongst themselves. Ten minutes later, four doctors walked over to him to discuss the X-ray results. Bloggs became gravely concerned when he saw the expressions on their faces. The doctors looked at each other as if they were unsure of how to tell him exactly what was wrong with him.

“Mr. Bloggs, after reviewing the X-ray photos, we discovered some unusual body parts in you,” Dr. Bernard informed him. “We also found some robotic parts as well. Mr. Bloggs, are you aware of any surgical operations that had been done on you?”

“None that I am aware of,” Bloggs blurted out. “This is impossible. How could this happen? I bet you it had something to do with that scientific experiment that I took part in.”

“Do you remember what kind of experiment it was?” the doctor asked him.

“No,” Bloggs shouted. “The scientists did not tell us anything about what the experiment was for. They just told us it would not take long and that we should not be harmed in any way. They also told us that when we woke up, we would not notice any changes.”

“I’m going to need you to stay calm and focus really hard on how this came to be,” the doctor replied. “We understand you are experiencing some form of amnesia. Do you know the names of any of the scientists and how we can contact them?”

“Unfortunately, I do not,” Bloggs answered while feeling frustrated. “There were two individuals at a table where they handed each of us forms to fill out. They told us the information that we gave them would be strictly confidential. They never introduced themselves or what kind of experiment they were conducting. I remember they had me put on a mask and that I would inhale a drug that would put me to sleep. After that, I can’t tell you anything else about what they did to me.”

“Do you remember the events that occurred after you woke up?” the doctor then asked.

Bloggs sat still and focused with all his might. He thought about things that had occurred more recently that would have led up to the recent development. He remembered finding himself in his bed at home with no recollection of how he got there. Bloggs didn’t feel quite himself that day when he had woken up. He recalled having headaches and finding a few stitches on his lower abdomen. When he rose from the bed, he felt pain in several spots throughout his body. Bloggs then remembered seeing his car keys and wallet on the nightstand. He had opened the wallet and found some additional money in it and that it matched up with the amount of money that the scientists had promised to pay him for his participation in the experiment. At the time, Bloggs didn’t think much of it. He figured he had gotten drunk and passed out on his bed. He told the doctor all of this. The doctor listened carefully and shook his head to show interest in what Bloggs was saying.

“Interesting,” the doctor said. “And you never thought about having it checked out by a doctor?”

“No,” Bloggs answered. “I just didn’t think it was a big deal. Of course, now I realize that it was a big mistake and that I will no longer participate in questionable experiments, even for money.”

“Do you remember any other odd occurrences?” the doctor asked him.

Bloggs then told him about blacking out a few times since then and finding himself at home with unexplained bruises and blood stains and dirty and tattered clothing. It was something you only saw in werewolf movies.

“Maybe I am a werewolf or something,” he told the doctor half-jokingly.

Bloggs couldn’t put the idea behind him, though. What if he was metamorphizing into a creature at the time and turning back into a human? That could explain things. He began to wonder if someone was controlling him. The surgeons did find some robotic parts in his body.

“Doctor, do you think the scientists are behind all of this?” Bloggs asked the doctor. “Do you think they are controlling me?”

“We will need you to come in for further examination,” Dr. Bernard said. “If someone is indeed controlling you, we can put a stop to it by performing surgery on you and removing all robotic parts that were installed in your body. We are hoping to remove the animal body parts as well. We believe you may have been turned into a Death Firm.”

Bloggs stared off into space in complete disbelief.

Chapter 12

Harris asked Gabriela where their next exit was. She browsed through her cell phone and instructed Harris to take the second exit in five miles. They were now making their way through Georgia and were thirty miles away from Marietta. Harris told his wife they could spend a night in Atlanta before heading off to Columbia, South Carolina, where they would stay until it was safe to head back to their home in Arizona.

Gabriela nodded in agreement and told him it would be nice to take a break from driving for a while. Harris then asked his wife to start looking for hotels in Atlanta on her phone and make a reservation for them.

“Here’s a place for $80 a night,” she said cheerfully. “It has a swimming pool, a breakfast bar, and a restaurant. It looks nice too!”

“That sounds fine, honey,” Harris responded. “Go ahead and book us there for a few nights.”

“Okay,” she said with a smile.

Harris noticed something peculiar ahead. There appeared to be a massive wreck ahead of them. Several cars were crushed and flipped over. Ambulances, fire trucks, and highway patrol cars were in the vicinity. A patrolman stood off to the side of the highway and directed people to an alternative route to bypass all the wreckage. *This can’t be good,* he thought. Harris knew this was caused by Camargo’s Death Firms. He had to proceed with caution. He couldn’t risk the lives of his family if Death Firms still were lurking about.

Harris groaned as he exited the highway. He knew this would slow them down considerably, but it was for the best. Gabriela knew that he was annoyed and that there were times like these when the best thing to do was to keep quiet. She began looking up restaurants and attractions in Atlanta. Gabriela wanted to look at this trip as if it was a vacation and not escape the horrors they left behind. She figured tasty food and entertainment would bring up their spirits.

Unfortunately, her happiness was turned into terror as soon as they saw a Death Firm smashing a car in with its bare hand and ripping open the front passenger door to the car furiously. Gabriela gasped and covered her eyes in enough time to avoid seeing it pull out a woman from the vehicle and viciously sink its claws into her before it took huge bites of her flesh. Harris sped around the car and drove as fast as he could to pass it. He did not want either of them to be next on the menu. As soon as they were far off from the brutal scene, Harris and Gabriela felt huge relief. It didn’t appear they were ever going to escape the Death Firms. Gabriela glanced back to see Emilia still fast asleep.

“Oh, thank God,” she said with a sigh of relief.

“Let’s not get too relaxed,” Harris told Gabriela. “We could face many others down the road.”

Sure enough, Harris was right. They faced a few more dangerous situations along the way. A few Death Firms were running amok off the side of the highway and were racing toward a herd of deer in the middle of the night. Harris nearly hit one of them. It ran swiftly across the highway without even paying attention to them. Harris could see its eyes light up as the headlights beamed on it. Its mouth and eyes widened with fright. It turned and leaped up in the air high. Harris never saw where it had landed. He didn’t know what to expect at that moment. The Death Firm could have easily attacked them instead but chose to continue running after the herd of deer.

He remembered feeling so tired during the time that it took a while for his brain to fully function and realize what had just happened. Gabriela and the baby were fast asleep. Harris told Gabriela about it the following morning. The news of it frightened her so. Since Gabriela was well-rested enough to drive, Harris had her drive for a couple of hours, so he could get some rest.

The other time they encountered a Death Firm was during the daytime in a neighborhood where they had stopped in to get something to eat at one of the local restaurants. As they were eating, they noticed a chaotic scene at a supermarket across from the restaurant. A Death Firm had been running, jumping on top of cars, and attacking customers. Several people were fleeing. The Death Firm then ran through the glass doors to the supermarket where several people were hiding. Harris knew they had to leave the area immediately. Once the Death Firms were inside the supermarket, they ran toward their vehicle and drove off quickly before they could be seen by the Death Firm.

Harris and Gabriela felt lucky that they were still alive. Harris looked down at the fuel level gauge and noticed his vehicle was running low on gas. They had to stop at the nearest gas station. There was a sign up ahead that showed there was a Shell gas station five miles away. Harris could not believe they were already low on gas. He groaned. Harris felt scared, frustrated, and sad at the same time. Atlanta seemed so far away.

“Why can’t everything return to normal?” Gabriela cried out. “I’m sick and tired of running and hiding. This has gotten out of hand. Camargo needs to be found immediately.”

“I agree,” Harris responded to his wife. “We can’t let ourselves get hysterical, though. We have to keep in mind that we have a baby in the back seat. I am having a hard enough time myself, trying to not lose my cool.”

“Oh, Winter,” she said. “I’m trying so hard to keep myself under control, but lately, I have been put on the edge. I worry myself silly over the safety of us and the baby every night. If something were to happen to our daughter, I don’t know how I could go on living.”

“I understand, Gabriela,” he said. “I think about that often, but I am doing everything that I can to protect us. You are going to have to trust me.”

“It’s you that I trust,” Gabriela said. “It is the Camargo fellow that I’m worried about. He is capable of anything.”

“Law enforcement is getting closer to finding him,” Harris said optimistically. “They have been tracking him down closely. I believe he will be captured soon.”

“Well, they better,” she replied. “This is complete, utter nonsense. People have endured enough already.”

The gas station was now in view. Harris tried to concentrate on his driving while his wife went on and on about the Death Firms and about how much devastation they had caused. He turned his signal light on.

He was relieved when they got to the gas station. He was in great need of stretching out his legs and arms. They had been on the road for nearly ten hours straight. They should be in Atlanta in about two hours. Gabriela offered to drive the rest of the way so that Harris could get some sleep. Harris watched Gabriela take their daughter, Emilia, out of the car seat. Emilia’s cheeks were rosy. She stuck her tiny fingers in her mouth to suck on. Harris was amazed by how cheerful the little one was during such a dark time. The baby was completely oblivious to what was happening. Seeing her smile always brought warmth to his heart, and it made him feel happier. It was tender moments such as these that helped get him through it all.

Gabriela grabbed the diaper bag and took the baby to the restroom to change her diaper. Harris pulled out the nozzle from the gas pump and started filling the jeep up with fuel. He could understand Gabriela’s frustration. He stared at the number of gallons and cost of gas going up on the gas pump as he thought about everything that had happened since the Death Firms came into existence. His optimism soon turned to sadness. Harris felt like he was going on an emotional roller coaster. One minute he was happy, one minute he was sad, and another minute he was scared. So many important people in his life were taken from him.

He missed his parents deeply. Their lives were taken by the Death Firms. It was times like these that he really needed their guidance. Tears began to roll down his face. He had never felt so lost in all his life. He quickly wiped them away as soon as he saw Gabriela and the baby return to the vehicle. Harris knew their lives were in his hands. He was under much pressure to keep them safe from the Death Firms. He had to remember that he wasn’t the only person in the world that had lost so much. Nearly every person in the world had either lost loved ones, their homes, their jobs, and everything else that they had cared deeply for. Harris thought that everything that was taken from them was over nothing. The evil person responsible for all of this was doing it just out of pure greed and pride. Camargo was heartless and did not care about what he did to others or what he took from them. He just sought revenge.

Gabriela looked up at him and could tell by the expression on his face that he was feeling troubled. She quickly turned her attention back to Emilia as she buckled her back into the car seat. The baby cooed and wiggled her arms and legs excitedly. It was as if Emilia knew she was going on an adventure and was ready to check out some more sites. Gabriela chuckled at her daughter’s delight.

Once Gabriela buckled herself into the driver’s seat, she smiled at Harris and asked him how he was doing. He looked up at her and told her he was doing fine. She then told him to get some sleep.

Harris was ready to enjoy a day on the beach as soon as they reached the East Coast. He could hardly wait to lay out under the sun, sip a beer, and splash through some waves. He watched Gabriela check her mirrors before driving off. Harris made sure there were no Death Firms around before drifting off to sleep. He needed his sleep to have the strength to fight them off. Gabriela put on some soothing music. Both he and the baby found themselves fast asleep. Gabriela kept a close eye out for Death Firms on the way to Atlanta. She imagined what she had to do in case there was one on the highway.

Harris hated the idea that they had to drive so far away, but he was also excited to explore new states along the way. He thought about making their stay permanent if they enjoyed themselves too much. He could get a job there, and they could start a whole new life. Both he and Gabriela had recently been discussing whether Arizona would be a safe place for them. There were too many tragic memories in Arizona. They just wanted to go somewhere where they could forget all those memories.

Harris knew the best thing they could do was just start a new life by being in a new atmosphere, meeting new people, and having new jobs. It would be a fresh start for them. Harris then suddenly felt Gabriela tugging at his arm.

“We’re here at the hotel,” she told him. “I’m going to check us in. You can stay here with Emilia. She is still asleep.”

“Thanks,” Harris said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Gabriela responded.

She jumped out of the seat, closed the door, and headed up to the hotel lobby. While she did that, Harris wanted to get some updates on the Death Firms on his phone.

Harris opened a news site on his phone. The main headline was “American Death Firm Found in London.” He was amazed by what he was reading. It all sounded surreal. This was the first time anyone had spoken with and helped a Death Firm in their human form. He wondered if it would be possible for them to remove the animal body and robotic parts from the man’s body and make him fully human again.

It took him five minutes to finish reading the story. When Gabriela got back to the jeep, Harris told her about the article.

“The American man that was found in London appeared lost and bewildered,” he said. “He was behaving erratically and walking excitedly along a residential street when a British man approached him and asked him if there were something the matter. He asked the British man where he was at first and was stunned when he found out he was in London. The American told the British man that he had no recollection of how he got there. The American was then led to the London Police Department. The American told the police who he was, where he was from, and how he couldn’t remember going to London or how he got there.”

Harris paused to take a breath. Gabriela impatiently asked what happened next. Harris sighed and continued with the story.

“The police then took him to a hospital,” he said. “It was there where they discovered he was a Death Firm. The hospital will be the first one to do surgery on a Death Firm and remove some of the robotic parts from their body. They are hoping to make the man a normal human being again. If it is successful, there could be some hope for humans who are turned into Death Firms.”

“That is quite the discovery,” Gabriela replied. “I hope they can help him out.”

Harris got out of the vehicle to take their suitcases up to the room. Gabriela carried the baby and diaper bag. They could hardly hold their excitement when they opened the door to the hotel room. The sight of the bed was warm and inviting. They were so exhausted from traveling that all they wanted to do was jump right into the bed, throw the covers over themselves, and fall to sleep. They went inside and began unpacking. A few minutes later, a hotel staff member came up to the room with a crib for the baby.

They rested a bit, then ordered food to be brought up to the room. It had been a long day, and they really didn’t want to go back out at all. They nestled up in the room for the remainder of the day.

The next day, the family toured the Margaret Mitchell House and toured the CNN Center in downtown Atlanta. It was a nice break from being on the road and escaping Death Firms. Harris was interested in trying out El Super Pan Latino Sandwiches & Bar because he had heard about it on the Food Network. He wanted to try out a new kind of food since they only had been eating their usual type of food on the road. The day went pleasantly well, and the family had not had this much fun in an exceptionally long time. They enjoyed themselves so much that they were not sure whether they wanted to leave Atlanta. Harris decided it was best that they stick with their schedule.

“I haven’t felt this much happiness in a long time,” Gabriela said. “I almost forgot what it was like to go through an entire day without worrying about Death Firms.”

“I know what you mean,” Harris replied. “It was almost like a normal day. Of course, no one really knows what normal is anymore. But I would say today was pretty close to it.”

“Even though we are not back at home and working, being on the road has allowed us to spend more time together as a family,” she said.

“That is true,” Harris said with a smile.

Just before Harris could speak more, there was a loud explosion, followed by a thump. Gabriela screamed. He slowly pulled off to the side of the highway. Harris stepped out of the vehicle and inspected each tire carefully. Minutes later, he had found where the blowout occurred. Harris took a deep breath and got out the spare tire in the trunk of the vehicle. He felt frustrated and wondered why he and his family couldn’t find a break. He thought, *Why not, everything else seems to be falling apart.*

The flat tire held them back for about forty minutes. As soon as they reached their next destination in Augusta, Harris drove to the nearest auto repair shop. The first thing they did after the tire had been changed was get a bite to eat at a restaurant called the Wife Saver, which served Southern food. They needed some comfort food to brighten their spirits after a long, grueling trip. They left the restaurant with happy tummies.

They were surprised to still not have encountered any Death Firms. Harris continued to keep his guard up, though. He knew how fast and sneaky Death Firms were. A Death Firm could attack at any moment. Harris went ahead and took the family for a stroll along the Riverwalk during the evening. The cool, crisp evening air felt good. The walk was peaceful and relaxing.

They checked into a charming hotel in Augusta. Harris took advantage of the outdoor pool there and swam a few laps around it. The water felt cool and refreshing. He later laid back on the lounge chair to catch a tan. Gabriela came outside to join him. Emilia laid back in her stroller. She had a sun hat on. Harris thought she looked adorable in it.

Harris checked his phone to see if he had any missed calls or messages. Sure enough, there was a missed call from Major Casper Bruce. The major left a voice mail. He could tell by the sound of his voice that it was about something huge that had happened. He sounded excited.

“Winter, you won’t believe it!” Bruce exclaimed. “We found him. We found Dr. Fritz Camargo!”

At first Harris was in shock, then ran off excitedly to find Gabriela inside the hotel purchasing a frappuccino at Starbucks in the lobby, along with Emilia. He could not wait to break the news to her. Soon, it would all be over.

Chapter 13

Harris ran so fast that he hardly had any breath. When he confronted Gabriela, she was not sure whether she should be frightened or jump up and down with joy judging by the way her husband had looked. He was breathing heavily, sweating out bullets, and trying hard to collect his thoughts.

“Gabriela! Gabriela! Gabriela!” Harris shouted out.

Gabriela turned around quickly to hear what the excitement was all about.

“Gabriela, they caught him!” he said. “They caught Dr. Fritz Camargo! He was in St. Louis at the time. Apparently, someone had recognized him in one of the restaurants he was dining in. There’s video footage of him stepping in and out of the restaurant. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was able to confirm it was him, and now they have him in custody. I just heard it from Major Casper Bruce. He called just a few minutes ago.”

“Thank God,” she said excitedly. “I hope they lock him up for life or, better yet, execute him. His creation has murdered a countless number of innocent people. People like that don’t deserve to live. He is a coldhearted monster.”

“Right now, Camargo is refusing to cooperate with the authorities,” Harris said. “They are hoping to get answers soon. He will be found guilty in court for sure. There is so much evidence against him, and he, himself, admitted to it. If he were sentenced to death, I would be hoping that he had the decency to say sorry to all those impacted by this whole mess.”

“Either way, he will pay for all of what he has done,” Gabriela responded. “I do not feel sorry for the man. He has done this to himself.”

They quickly went back into the hotel room to watch news coverage of the capture of Dr. Fritz Camargo. They watched as the authorities led Camargo to a police car handcuffed. Camargo looked at the camera with a smirk on his face. He glared at the policemen as they pushed him into the car. Both Harris and Gabriela laughed when they saw the look on Camargo’s face.

The anchorwoman reported that Camargo had tried to pull out his cell phone when the authorities closed in on him, but he had dropped it. The FBI had taken the cell phone and found some unusual features in it. They believed Camargo used his cell phone to control the Death Firms. They had reached out to the Death Firm they found in England, who was now in human form, that was being controlled by Camargo. His real name was Alex Bloggs. He was reported missing by his wife, Kyra Bloggs, about two months ago. Alex Bloggs told the FBI he would help them find out how Camargo was controlling the Death Firms by having them experiment on him. They would go through all the controls on Camargo’s cell phone. They were hoping to find a way to bring all the Death Firms to them and remove all the robotic parts in their bodies to prevent anyone from ever turning them back into monsters and making them human again.

“Does this mean you are going back over there?” Gabriela asked.

“There’s really no need in me being there at this time,” Harris replied. “It sounds like they pretty much have everything under control now. All we can do now is to wait and hope for the best.”

“Thank goodness,” she said while sounding relieved. “I don’t like it when you leave me and the baby alone. At least when you are here, I know you are safe, and it is a great comfort for me as well.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Harris said. “Why don’t we go out and celebrate tomorrow at Myrtle Beach?”

“I would say that is a fine idea,” Gabriela answered. “What did you have in mind?”

“I think we should have dinner on the beach,” Harris replied. “I’ll order a three-course meal for the both of us and a bottle of wine to go along with it. There is an aquarium there that I think Emilia would like. We can also tour a beautiful plantation while we are at it. I think it will be a lot of fun.”

“I would like to do some shopping as well,” Gabriela added. “I have not bought new clothes for myself or Emilia in a long time. We could buy a few more outfits since we left most of our clothes at home. I would not mind stopping by a spa and setting up an appointment to get a massage, facial, and pedicure.”

“I think we can manage to make time for that as well,” Harris said. “Besides, you deserve it. I could use a haircut myself.”

They couldn’t help but smile throughout the rest of the day. A change was coming. They could feel it.

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Meanwhile, Dr. Fritz Camargo was being held in a federal prison located in Leavenworth, Kansas. He had spent several restless hours at the prison. He stayed up all night pacing back and forth in his cell, trying to devise a plan to escape and get his cell phone back. Because he was in a high-security prison, he would have to sneak past several guards and dodge several security cameras. Camargo knew it was impossible and felt like he was trapped.

Camargo couldn’t eat because the food looked unappetizing, and he felt so tense inside that he couldn’t even if he tried. He had only been in prison for three days now, and he could already tell that he had lost a considerable amount of weight. He was starving and wished he could go to a swanky restaurant and order either a lobster or a steak with a plump baked potato smothered in butter and sour cream. He could only imagine it and how good it would taste as he took bite after bite. He would wash it down with a glass of fine wine. His stomach growled loudly.

He wasn’t popular with fellow inmates. Many of them threatened to kill him. They blamed him for the death of loved ones and destroying the world by releasing his Death Firms out into the world. If it wasn’t for a guard, one inmate would have attacked him and may even have killed him. Camargo felt all alone and had no one he could talk to. Camargo was scared to leave his cell to perform his prison duties because many of the cellmates were twice his size and would beat him if they had the chance.

At least twice a day, he was questioned by the authorities about how he was controlling the Death Firms, how many he had created, and where they were located. He refused to speak. Camargo spent several hours being interrogated by them. He didn’t care if he was tried in court and found guilty. Camargo just wanted to get it all over with.

Camargo heard they were bringing in one of his Death Firms in human form that was willing to be experimented on. This didn’t faze him one bit. Camargo knew that authorities would eventually be able to figure out how to use the controller on the Death Firms. He wasn’t going to make it easy on them by telling them how. Camargo just wanted to sit back and watch them with immense pleasure as they struggled to try to figure it all out on their own.

The sound of footsteps was headed his way. He became incredibly nervous. *Are they here for more questioning?* he wondered. Camargo then heard a clinking sound. He recognized it as the sound of keys. Someone was either going to be set free, taken in for questioning, or taken to court. The sound grew louder. Camargo grew more anxious. His heart beat faster and louder after each step. He was surprised when the sound of steps came to an abrupt stop at his cell, then kept going.

He looked up and noticed the security guard had passed him by. Camargo took a deep breath. His heart had nearly leaped out of his chest for a moment. He walked over to the prison cell bars to get a peek at what was happening. The guard took out his jailer king ring that was attached to his belt. He unlocked a cell that wasn’t far from his own.

“It’s time, Regan,” the guard said with a solemn voice. “Say your prayers, prisoner. You will need them.”

“I don’t need prayers!” the prisoner shouted out. “If anything, I will rise from the dead and haunt you ’til your dying days. You bet, I will.”

“Quit dragging your feet!” the guard shouted as he escorted the prisoner out of his cell. “For a tough guy, you seem awfully scared.”

Camargo watched as the guard escorted the prisoner out. He realized that the man was about to be executed. Reality suddenly struck him. The prisoner named Regan glared at Camargo as he and the guard approached his cell. The look sent chills down his spine.

“What are you looking at?” the prisoner snapped out at Camargo. “Don’t think you are coming out of here alive. Nobody does in this part of the prison!”

“Hey! Good luck frying in the electric chair!” the prisoner next to Camargo shouted out to the doomed prisoner being escorted out. “Have fun in hell!”

Camargo’s eyes grew wide with fear. He realized his fate might be the same. Camargo looked down at his orange inmate uniform sadly. He felt out of place and missed wearing his own clothes. He knew that if he were to be sentenced to death, he deserved every bit of it. Camargo was being held responsible for hundreds of deaths, and that did not count lives that were taken from the original Death Firms. He was being tried as a homegrown terrorist. He had received several death threats during the past few days. Camargo was the most hated person in the world.

Then unexpectedly, he heard a whisper. He turned to his right and saw the prisoner that shouted out to the man on death row a few minutes ago.

“Hey, don’t you worry about Regan Sanchez, the one they were taking to the electric chair,” the prisoner from the cell said to him. “He has always had a mouth on him. I would be a rich person if I got a dime every time he tried to pick a fight with someone in the prison yard. Regan was sentenced to death after being convicted for murdering eleven women.”

“Who are you?” Camargo asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the mysterious voice said. “Pardon my manners. They call me Knuckles because I have a habit of cracking my knuckles anytime I get angry. My real name is Gary Rogers.”

“My name is Dr. Fritz Camargo,” Camargo replied. “You can just call me Fritz or Camargo; either way is fine.”

“I have heard about you,” Knuckles said. “We all have. Many people here don’t like you, but I’m rather impressed by what you have created. I wish I were smart enough to create something so powerful and destructive as the Death Firms. This world was already in chaos. They needed something like the Death Firms to bring about order.”

“What are you in here for?” Camargo asked.

“I’m in here for armed robbery, murder, and kidnapping,” Knuckles said. “I robbed three banks, shot and killed four police officers, two bank tellers, and eight bystanders, and sexually assaulted and kidnapped one of the bystanders. I did all of this in two weeks. I was sentenced to death about a month ago. I just sit here and wait for my turn to take a seat in the electric chair. I do not have a scheduled date yet.”

“Are you scared?” Camargo questioned the man on death row.

“Nah,” Knuckles said. “I have been here for so long that I have already accepted my fate. It should not take long at all for the electric chair to fry my brain up to oblivion. I bet it will only take a minute or two for me to die. You will soon realize that yourself.”

“Have you ever tried to escape?” Camargo asked.

“I tried to twice,” Knuckles answered. “I tried hiding in a laundry hamper that was to be taken outside of the prison, but the dogs sniffed me up really quickly. I also tried during a huge fight. I beat up one of the guards and stole his clothes. I thought I had knocked him unconscious, but he was well enough to tell the other guards what had happened and to be on the lookout for me. The guards were waiting for me just outside the prison doors. I gave up after that. It was embarrassing. All the prisoners were laughing at my failed attempts.”

“Without my Death Firms, there’s no way I could do so,” Camargo commented. “I’m powerless without them.”

“If you don’t mind,” Knuckles said, “I’m going to catch up on some of my sleep. Have a goodnight, my friend.”

“Okay, you too,” Camargo replied.

And just like that, Camargo suddenly didn’t feel alone anymore.

*It is getting late,* Camargo thought. There was nothing else for him to do. Sleep was all he could do. He laid back down on the hard flat mattress in his cell and drifted off to sleep. He wished everything that was happening to him was just a bad dream and that he could wake up in the morning in his home, take a long shower, enjoy a home-cooked breakfast, and take a stroll around his neighborhood. Those were now things of the past.

Chapter 14

Camargo woke up early in the morning the following day to the sound of chatter outside his cell. It was time for breakfast. Camargo refused to eat the foul-smelling and disgusting prison food. He was accustomed to fine dining. A guard then approached him.

“Fritz, are you coming out to eat breakfast?” the guard asked.

“I would rather starve to death than eat that muck,” Camargo responded.

“Oh, come now,” the guard said. “It’s really not all that bad. You have not eaten anything since you’ve been here. Sooner or later, you will give in and eat whatever we serve you. You have got to be starving by now.”

“Well, until then,” Camargo said. “I’ll let you know.”

The guard then walked away. Camargo was relieved to be left alone again. He tried falling back to sleep but couldn’t. He kept getting further behind in his sleep. Camargo washed up some before reading a biographical book on Abraham Lincoln’s life that he had checked out from the prison library. While he was reading his book, Camargo had a visitor. The guard escorted him to the visiting room.

As he entered the room, he saw his lawyer, Arlene Stewart, looking up at him through the security glass window. She was wearing a pink blazer and pants, along with a white buttoned-down blouse and black high heels. Her mahogany-brown hair was pulled up into a sleek ponytail. She had dark green eyes and wore a noticeably light amount of makeup. She was sitting up straight, trying to look professional. She cleared her throat as soon as Camargo sat down.

“Dr. Fritz Camargo, let’s go over what we have been discussing the past few days,” she said. “It is highly important that you listen and take heed of my advice.”

“Yes, I will sit here quietly as you give your little spiel on why I did what I did, about my impressive background, and how I am a loyal U.S. citizen. I will then say how the military has mishandled the Death Firms and allowed them to escape,” Camargo said. “I will also say that my intentions were good and that all I wanted to do was to create a fighting machine that was part human, robot, and animal to secure the United States borders and protect the troops at combat.”

“If things don’t look good in the trial, I want you to plead insanity,” Stewart said. “That may help you get life in prison instead of the death penalty. Don’t do so until I tell you.”

“What are my chances of getting out of here?” Camargo asked.

“Very slim,” she replied. “There is much evidence against you. Family members of the victims will be called upon to speak as well in court. They will blame you for everything that has happened and give a tearful reaction to everything that you have taken from them. They will also talk highly of the person whose life was taken from them. You will need to show some understanding and sympathy as they speak. Do not look like a cold-blooded murderer.”

“I don’t see any point to all of this,” he said. “I’m going to be found guilty no matter what I do. I don’t see how I could possibly get life in prison after all of the lives that I have taken and destruction that I have made.”

“You could start contributing to society behind bars if you feel guilty about all that you have done,” Stewart suggested. “You are a wealthy man. You could donate to charity or start one yourself. Maybe somehow you could help clean up the streets by helping catch criminals, give people with psychological problems hope by providing free counseling, or aid those in need. The possibilities are limitless. This will help make up for some of what you have done.”

Camargo was starting to like the idea of him being a charitable person. Maybe people would not hate him as much.

“I’ll think about it,” he said. “With your help, maybe I will come out of this whole situation as a new man. You never know.”

“Good,” she said. “I don’t want you to be one of those prisoners who give up by committing suicide or wasting away in a cell without doing anything good for the rest of their lives. Be strong, Fritz. Don’t give up.”

“I’ll try my best, but there will be no guarantees,” Fritz said. “You can’t just change a person overnight.”

“I’ll call you the day before the trial,” Stewart said. “If you need anything, don’t be afraid to call. I will be sending you some paperwork within the next few days for you to sign.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” Camargo replied sarcastically as she walked away.

Camargo left feeling somewhat hopeful after their discussion. He had a lot to ponder on today. Camargo knew he couldn’t let his money and estate go to waste. He had no family members to inherit them. The trial would begin in two weeks. He had to start planning. Camargo had a new mission now. At least this would give him something to distract him from thoughts of going to the electric chair.

He later went to the prison library to search for more books and search online for information on charities and how planned giving works. Camargo was allowed to have a pencil and some paper to jot down notes with. He took his newfound information up to his prison cell, where he would study it for hours. By the end of the day, Camargo started feeling weak, and his stomach growled louder than ever. He then felt lightheaded. His knees began to tremble. Within minutes, he blacked out.

Camargo woke up in a bed with a doctor and a nurse by his side. He was now in the prison hospital. The doctor had told him he was malnourished and needed some food and water. The nurse brought in a tray with food, water, and juice on it.

“You will stay here for a few nights,” he told Camargo. “We will not let you leave until you have eaten some. I understand you have refused the food being served at the prison. What kind of food would you like to eat?”

“Well, for starters, I would like a medium rare steak with a baked potato, accompanied with a side salad,” Camargo answered. “I would be more than happy to pay whatever amount to get better food. Is there a way I can do that?”

“I will talk to the warden about it,” the doctor said. “We can’t have you malnourished. I hope I will not find you back in here again over this. In the meantime, you will eat whatever we give you.”

“Whatever you say, doctor,” Camargo said. “I didn’t catch what your name was.”

“Just call me Dr. Roman Tapia,” he answered.

Camargo lazily picked up his fork and looked down in utter disgust at the mystery meat, a side of runny mashed potatoes, and corn. He groaned while he cut up his meat. He slowly took a bite and swallowed it with a look of dismay on his face. He dreaded eating each meal, but he knew he needed to build up his strength.

He lay in his bed and watched TV for the remainder of the day. He would be checked up on by a nurse and guard frequently. Camargo was beginning to feel as if he were useless because he could not get anything done this way. He knew he had to get out of here soon, so he started to eat every morsel that was sent to him, plus more. The doctor came in the next day and noticed he was healthy enough to be released. Camargo had gained enough strength to continue with his research. He left the hospital gleefully.

Knuckles was surprised to find out that Camargo was back. He had heard about him collapsing and being sent to the hospital. Knuckles and many of the other cellmates thought it was just another prisoner attempting to commit suicide.

“Hey, buddy!” he told Camargo. “We all thought you were a goner.”

“I’d just as well be,” Camargo said. “Nobody would care if I perished in this prison cell.”

“You’re right about a lot of people, but a few would,” Knuckles said. “That few includes me, and I don’t sympathize with a lot of people, so take that as a compliment.”

“Thanks,” Camargo replied. “I just barely know you, but hearing you say that makes me feel better.”

“I’m glad to be of some kind of service,” Knuckles said. “Well, I think I will take a little nap. If you need anything, just holler.”

“Will do,” Camargo said.

It was not long until it was night again. The hours that day just flew by.

He dreamed all night about how he would approach the matter and what good he could do for the country. It kept him from having nightmares about going to the electric chair. He woke up late the next morning. Camargo felt much better. He stretched out his arms. Camargo made sure he ate breakfast because he did not want to land back in the prison hospital. They recently started putting him to work, which he did not mind. It gave him some sense of accomplishment.

It was now about time for him to tend to laundry duty. He liked laundry duty much more than doing custodial work. After Camargo was done with his work, he usually watched television, did puzzles, or played billiards with Knuckles. He also made sure to follow up on the latest news about his case and the Death Firms during his free time. It was easier living in prison now that he was following a daily routine.

At ten o’clock, Camargo was on his way to the laundry room. There were eleven other prisoners doing laundry duty. They started sorting out the laundry. Knuckles was working beside him. They began chatting.

“Hey! How is it going?” Knuckles asked Camargo.

“It sounds like I’m going to have to get used to prison life,” Camargo answered. “There’s little hope that I will ever get out of here.”

“Oh, it’s really not all that bad,” Knuckles said. “You get used to the routine. You must go with the flow. That is how you survive behind bars. Some guys just can’t handle it. They either lose their minds, or they take the easy way out by committing suicide. I think you are a fighter like myself. I think we will get out of this together just fine.”

“I believe you are right,” Camargo said with a smile on his face. “I don’t care what anyone thinks about me. I will show them that I’m not a quitter.”

“That’s the spirit,” Knuckles responded. “I think we are going to be real good friends.”

“I could sure use one,” Camargo said. “I have been feeling awfully lonely in here. It would be nice to talk to someone other than myself for a change.”

Both continued working throughout the day together as a team. Camargo was so happy to have someone to talk to. It made his time in prison much better. He was able to keep his sanity because of it as well.

Chapter 15

Alex Bloggs was nervous about the operation. It was only about a month ago when he was found wandering the streets in England and discovering he had been turned into a Death Firm. He was afraid that he would not come out alive after the surgeons removed robotic and animal parts from his body.

He originally volunteered to help the FBI and law enforcement figure out how to use the controller that controlled all Death Firms by allowing them to experiment on him. Instead, he chose that he could no longer take being a Death Firm and that he wanted to return to being a normal human being and not someone’s puppet. However, he would be the first Death Firm who had undergone surgery and had all parts that were installed in them removed.

His wife, Kyra Bloggs, had been sitting with him for the past hour in the waiting room at the Tucson Medical Center. She was there to offer him support and help him fill out paperwork. She held his hand and smiled at him frequently to help comfort him. Alex knew that she was just as frightened as he was about the operation. They prayed that it would be a success right before leaving their suburban home.

He wanted to do this because he didn’t want all the men who were created as Death Firms to lose their lives because they were seen as a threat. Alex wanted them to still have a chance at life. He was hoping that law enforcement and the military would find a way to bring the Death Firms to them by finding the device that was controlling them, learning how to use it, and commanding the Death Firms to come to them. Alex was sure some of them were wandering around, lost and confused about what had happened to them, just as he was when he was found in London. They might not even know they were Death Firms.

He turned to his wife and thanked her for being there for him and that she must not worry. Alex also told her if there was some reason he didn’t come back alive, he wanted her to know how much he loved her. She sobbed for a bit. Alex wrapped his arm around her and kissed her cheek.

“Oh, Alex!” Kyra said. “I thought I had lost you once. I don’t know if I could bear losing you again. I pray to God that nothing happens to you. I swear losing you the first time was the hardest thing that has ever happened to me.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Alex replied. “I believe the doctors know what they are doing, and I should come back alive and well. If I don’t, darling, I want you to know that you are my one and true love. Just remember, you will always have a special place in my heart.”

She smiled at him with a few tears streaming down her face. Their eyes locked, and they seemed lost in each other’s eyes. He placed his hand on her cheek and kissed her forehead. Kyra’s heart beat wildly as she felt a tingling sensation from when her husband’s lips touched hers. Whenever she was in his arms, she felt like she was at home.

Just as he was about to say something else, the doctor appeared. They broke eye contact immediately and turned their attention to the doctor. The doctor smiled.

“Mr. Bloggs, we are so happy that you are willing to go through with this, and I can assure you that we have the best surgeons performing the operation today,” the doctor said. “My name is Dr. Harold Riley, and it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Alex responded.

“I see you brought your lovely wife,” Dr. Riley said. “And your name might be?”

“It’s Kyra,” she said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you as well,” Dr. Riley said. “I know you both must be wondering how long the procedure will be. The overall procedure shouldn’t take longer than ten hours. From there, you will need to stay in the hospital for at least three days. We want to make sure there aren’t any complications. If this is a success, you will save many lives.”

“That’s the goal, doctor,” Alex said. “I don’t think anyone should be changed into something as deadly and monstrous as a Death Firm. No one wants to think that they might be responsible for murder and carry that amount of guilt along with them throughout their lives. I have no idea whether I killed anyone, but it is quite possible that I have killed a few or even many. I just want a normal life again, and I am sure everyone who is like me wants the same.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Mr. Bloggs,” Dr. Riley said. “I can’t say I blame you. That would be an awful lot to take in. I most certainly don’t want to be a threat to anyone. As a doctor, the only thing I care about is the health and safety of others.”

“I can believe that about you,” Alex said.

“Now, won’t you follow me this way,” Dr. Riley instructed him. “We already have a patient room set up for you. Kyra, will you be staying overnight with him?”

“I want to stay the first night after the surgery to offer him support and to make sure he is all right,” she responded. “What time will the operation begin?”

“We will start at eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” Dr. Riley answered. “You are more than welcome to stay with him. I can have the kitchen send meals up for the both of you, and I can send more blankets and pillows up in case you decide to stay.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Kyra said. “I think I will stay with him tonight.”

“Good,” he said. “I will leave you two alone now. A nurse will come up and check your vitals in a little while. I will need you to change into this patient gown. Is there anything else I can do for you before I step out?”

“No, we’re good,” Alex said.

“Alright,” Dr. Riley said. “If anything comes to mind, any of the nurses will be happy to help. Get plenty of rest and nourishment tonight, Mr. Bloggs, and don’t you worry about a thing. Well, take care and see you in the morning.”

“Alright, doctor,” Alex said. “I will be right here waiting for you. Have a good night.”

“You, too,” Dr. Riley replied as he stepped out of the room.

Alex waited until the doctor had closed the door before getting out of his clothes and putting on the gown. Kyra closed the window curtains. It was now two o’clock in the afternoon. She put down his backpack filled with an additional pair of clothes, some hygiene products, a couple of magazines, a phone charger, a few snacks, and a couple of pairs of underwear and socks.

They both sat down on his bed and looked into each other’s eyes for a few more seconds. Alex took a deep breath. Both appeared worried. Kyra cleared her throat and turned her body toward him. She then bent over and kissed Alex on the lips softly. Alex smiled at her and held her chin with his right hand so that her face was kept close to his.

“I really don’t think it is necessary for you to spend the night here,” Alex told her. “You would be much more comfortable sleeping in our bed at home. I will be fine. You need your rest just as much as I need mine.”

“Now, what kind of wife would I be if I didn’t stay and support my husband during his first night in the hospital?” she replied. “I want to make sure to be here right before the surgery. I know you will be nervous, and I want to provide you with comfort. I would feel guilty if I were not by your side before and after the procedure.”

“Well, if you say so,” he said. “I don’t have a problem with you staying. I would hate seeing you uncomfortable and eating hospital food. But if you are up for it, I suppose I can’t stop you from doing so.”

Suddenly, they heard some knocking at the door. Alex told the person to come in. It was a nurse who looked like she was in her mid-thirties. She was tall and skinny, with blonde hair and brown eyes. Kyra glanced over at Alex to make sure he was not checking out the pretty nurse. To her relief, he only had eyes for her.

“Hi!” the nurse said. “My name is Emma Garner, and I will be your nurse. I am going to check your pulse rate, respiration rate, body temperature, and blood pressure. A phlebotomist will also be here shortly to draw blood for some tests. Now, I need you to sit up and inhale and exhale slowly.”

Kyra watched attentively as the nurse examined her husband. She couldn’t believe how well her husband had been taking all of what had happened to him. If it were her, she would have been traumatized by the overall experience. She would be incredibly scared.

“Okay,” the nurse said. “All done now. Everything is working in order. Before I go, I will leave a couple of dinner menus for both you and your wife. Both of you will have to circle everything on the menu that you would like to eat. I will come back shortly to pick them up.”

“Thank you,” Alex said. “We certainly appreciate it.”

“Dinner is served at six o’clock each evening,” the nurse added. “If you need anything, just press this button on the bed and someone will come up and help you. Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?”

“I think we are good,” Alex answered.

“Okay,” she said. “I will see you in a little bit.”

“Well, she seems nice,” Kyra said after the nurse stepped out of the room. She then grabbed a menu. Kyra chose to have the chicken enchiladas with Mexican rice, a side salad, a peach cobbler, and tea for dinner. Alex chose a cheeseburger, fries, peach cobbler, and tea.

Alex turned on the television and started watching a football game. Kyra pulled out one of Alex’s *Sports Illustrated* magazines and started flipping through the pages. She stopped about halfway through the magazine and started reading an article about a professional woman tennis player who was in training for Wimbledon.

“If all goes well with this surgery, do you want to start trying to have a little one again?” Kyra asked softly.

“You know I do,” Alex said. “There’s nothing more than that I want.”

“Good,” she replied. “I think you are going to make a wonderful dad. I have always envisioned us having at least two kids together. One of them being a boy and the other a girl, but I wouldn’t mind having two boys or two girls. Either way, it is going to be an adventure for us.”

“And I think you are going to make a wonderful mother,” he said just before gently kissing her on her forehead. Kyra rested her head on his chest while he ran one of his hands through her hair. It was a tender moment.

They ate dinner about two hours later. They delved into their food as soon as it was served because they had eaten very little that day. The surgery and the idea that Alex was transformed into a Death Firm had caused them to go through so much anxiety that they were having trouble eating. They ate their food silently while watching television.

The night had fallen. Both enjoyed a quiet evening, along with some snuggle time and resting in each other’s arms. Kyra was so happy to have her husband back. She thought she had lost him forever. There wasn’t any talk of the surgery or Alex being turned into a Death Firm. It was just like old times.

They fell sound asleep in each other’s arms in the small hospital bed. Alex was in such a deep sleep that he didn’t even know that time had passed by. He couldn’t believe how lucky he was to have such a beautiful, kind, gentle, loving, and sensitive soul as a wife. He stroked her hair and looked at her face with adoring eyes as he held Kyra in his arms. It was amazing how she had the ability to brighten his life even during the saddest, scariest, and darkest periods of his life. The idea of how she was always there when he needed her most put his mind at ease. He looked up at the clock and noticed it was only 4 a.m. Alex smiled when Kyra took a deep breath and stretched out her leg before turning her body in the other direction. Alex then drifted back to sleep.

He woke up three hours later feeling surprisingly well-rested and optimistic about the operation. Alex couldn’t believe the surgery was less than two hours away. Kyra was already up. She was sitting in a chair, eating her breakfast and reading the newspaper.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” she told him. “Did you sleep well?”

“I actually slept really well last night,” he said. “I think it was mainly because you were here with me. Everything is better with you by my side. However, I did wake up in the middle of the night once to watch you sleep for a few minutes. I couldn’t help but be mesmerized by your beauty. You look like an angel while you are sleeping.”

“Aww, thanks, babe,” Kyra responded. “Your breakfast is right over there next to your bed.”

“Good,” Alex said. “I’m starving. It’s funny. I thought for sure that I would be so nervous about the operation that I would not have much of an appetite. I guess I am feeling positive that everything will turn out all right or else I would be a total nervous wreck right now.”

He grabbed his fork and scooped up some scrambled egg from the orange hospital food tray. The eggs tasted bland, so he opened a packet of pepper and sprinkled the seasoning over the eggs. He took another bite of the eggs. The pepper didn’t add much of an improvement, for the eggs were overcooked and on the dry side.

Alex looked up at the window and saw rays of sunshine coming into the room. He began watching a squirrel bite into an acorn while sitting on a tree branch. Another squirrel scurried up the tree. There were birds perched on power lines. Alex could not believe there could be such peace during a time of chaos. It did not seem like there could be Death Firms roaming about.

Shortly after he finished his meal, Dr. Harold Riley stepped into the room. *The doctor came in right on cue,* Alex thought to himself.

“Good morning,” he said cheerfully. “I trust you slept well, Alex.”

“I did sleep well,” Alex responded. “Amazingly well!”

“Before we get started,” Dr. Riley said, “a couple of anesthesiologists will come in and give you anesthesia. It will put you to sleep during the whole surgery, and you won’t feel any pain. Your wife will not be allowed into the operating room. She will have to be in the waiting room, or she can leave and come back later. If something goes wrong while she is gone, we can give her a call. We can also let her know when we are finished, and then she can come in and talk with the doctors and visit you.”

“I will stay for the first few hours of the surgery,” Kyra said. “If everything seems to be going well, I might leave for a while. There are some errands I need to run. Please, doctor, just keep me informed.”

“Okay,” the doctor said. “I will leave you two alone now. The anesthesiologists will be here shortly.”

“Alex, I don’t really want to leave,” Kyra said. “I think it will be best for me to go out and get some fresh air and have some alone time to contemplate all of this. I promise I will be here when you wake up from the surgery. Don’t think I won’t be scared over this. Trust me, I am completely petrified.”

“It’s okay, my love,” Alex told her. “I understand completely. I will be fine. Just think that the next time you see me, it will be all over with, and we can return to living a normal life. I promise.”

“Thank you so much for understanding,” she said. “Ever since I first laid my eyes on you, I knew you were the one. I love you with all my heart, and I cannot imagine a life without you. You are my heart and soul.”

“If for whatever reason I don’t make it, just know that you were always the one for me,” he said. “I never once dreamt of a life without you. I felt an instant connection when I first met you. I knew right then and there that you were my soulmate. I deeply, truly love you.”

“And I deeply, truly love you,” Kyra replied.

Alex rested his hand on hers as they gazed into each other’s eyes. Just as they were about to kiss, there was a knock on the door. It was the anesthesiologists. They walked up to Alex and began to prepare to inject the medicine in him that would put him to sleep and prevent him from feeling any kind of pain. They told him the anesthesia would take effect anywhere between thirty minutes to an hour.

Kyra looked away as they jabbed his arm with the needle. In less than a minute, the anesthesiologists pulled the needle out of his arm. They quickly put a cotton swab and Band-Aid on the targeted spot.

Kyra whispered, “I am so sorry that you have to go through all this.”

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” Alex whispered back. “Remember, I won’t feel a thing.”

About fifteen minutes later, Alex’s eyelids became heavy. He could see Kyra looking at him and saying something that he could not make out. She held his hands as he slowly drifted off to sleep. It was not long before he was completely out of it. Alex couldn’t even feel Kyra hold his hand even. It was as if he had no sense of touch.

Kyra watched as the doctors came in and wheeled him off to the operation room nearby. She walked along with them until they reached the room. Kyra decided to stay at the hospital for a little longer to make sure the operation started off right. She was given directions to the nearest waiting room. She walked nervously to the waiting room. Kyra tried to remain calm and have positive thoughts. She kept telling herself that he was in good hands.

The chairs in the waiting room were uncomfortable because they had no cushion on the seat. The television was set on the Hallmark Channel. There was a stack of magazines in front of her placed on a coffee table. Kyra started flipping through a few pages of *Homes & Gardens*, but it was no use. Her mind was still focused on the surgery.

After an hour passed, Kyra realized she couldn’t even focus on the romantic comedy movie that was being shown. She couldn’t sit still anymore. Kyra had to check up on how Alex’s surgery was going. She walked over to the receptionist desk downstairs to ask if she could get an update from the doctor. The receptionist told her politely that she would try to reach the doctor, but there was no guarantee that he would answer. She waited patiently on the phone to see if the doctor would pick up his phone. The doctor’s secretary told the receptionist he was in the middle of surgery. The receptionist then told her that the patient’s wife wanted to know how the surgery was going.

“Okay,” the receptionist said. “I will let her know. Thank you.”

She then hung up the phone and told Kyra that everything was fine and that the surgeons had not come across any problems yet. Kyra felt relieved. Kyra knew she had to get out of the hospital soon to clear her mind. She could not take sitting around the waiting room much longer.

“Thank you,” Kyra told the receptionist.

She decided that she needed some coffee first before heading off. On the way out, Kyra stopped at a coffee stand in the hospital. She then drove to a mall that was nearby so she could walk some of her frustration out. Kyra also knew that shopping would help clear her mind. She kept the volume on her ringtone high so that she wouldn’t miss a call from the hospital. She made sure the phone was somewhere in her purse where it would be easy to find.

Walking around the mall, shopping for new clothes, and getting a bite to eat in the food court livened up her spirits some. She found some enjoyment during her time there, and it put her mind at ease. She had spent about two hours at the mall. Kyra knew it wouldn’t be long ’til she heard an update from the hospital. After she finished her Chinese food, she decided to head back over to the hospital. Kyra thought about stopping by the gift shop there and finding something that might cheer Alex up. It was the least that she could do.

As she was walking back to her vehicle, her cell phone began to ring. She scrambled to find her phone in her purse before pulling it out. Kyra knew it had to be the hospital trying to reach her. She hurriedly answered the phone.

“Hello,” Kyra said as she was trying to catch her breath from frantically searching for her phone in her purse.

“Is this Mrs. Bloggs?” the person on the other line asked.

“Yes,” Kyra calmly answered.

“This is Sherri Woodrow, Dr. Riley’s secretary,” she said. “Dr. Riley wanted me to inform you that your husband Alex Bloggs is doing fine. He is sound asleep right now. All the robotic parts were removed from his body, including a small computer chip that was used to control him. Unfortunately, we could not remove all the animal parts at this time. We are hoping to come up with a solution for removing the animal parts soon. We will continue to monitor his progress by doing a series of testing for at least a year to make sure he is healthy.”

Kyra took a deep breath. She could finally relax now.

“Oh, thank you so much,” she told the secretary. “I have been freaking out about it all day. This is truly a huge relief for me. When will he be able to leave the hospital?”

“We are not sure,” Woodrow said. “The doctor believes he will be released from the hospital in no more than two weeks.”

“That’s excellent news,” Kyra responded. “I will come in shortly to check on him.”

“We will see you when you get here,” Woodrow replied.

A big smile stretched out across Kyra’s face. Her heart was overjoyed by the news. She felt very hopeful and full of life now. Tears of joy flowed down her face. Her loving husband would soon be home. She wiped off the mascara that had smudged under her eyes from crying.

She was so happy that she blasted an upbeat dance song on her radio. She couldn’t help but sing out loud and move along to the beat. An elderly couple stopped along her side of the vehicle during a red light. They gave her a funny look. All she could do was smile right back at them. The couple then laughed.

About twenty minutes later, Kyra found herself in the gift shop looking for a few gifts and some balloons to take to Alex’s room. She thought they might cheer him after being through so much. Kyra bought him a new fluffy robe, some snacks, a new book, and three get-well balloons.

When the doctor came into the waiting room to inform her that she could now go visit him, she nearly jumped out of her seat. She grabbed the large gift bag, her purse, and balloons and merrily walked toward her husband’s room.

When she opened the door to Alex’s room, she found him still asleep. She placed the gift bag and balloons on the table next to his bed. Kyra ran her hand down Alex’s face and smiled. He looked so peaceful. She then pulled up a chair and placed it next to his bed so she could sit right beside him. An hour later, a nurse walked into the room to check on him. She told Kyra that Doctor Riley would be in shortly to give her an update on Alex’s condition. Kyra sat patiently until the doctor arrived.

Shortly after the nurse left, the doctor walked inside. He informed Kyra that Alex was in excellent shape and that he would be out of the hospital in no time. He told her that Alex would experience some pain around the incisions where they had removed the robotic parts and that it would take a while for his body to function like normal again. He handed her a prescription for some pain medication. The doctor recommended that Alex rest for two weeks once he left the hospital.

As the doctor was speaking, Alex began to flinch. He yawned and slowly opened his eyes. He looked around the room and was surprised to find his wife and doctor watching him as he awoke. Kyra looked into his eyes, then gave him a kiss on the lips. He smiled at her. The doctor walked over to Alex.

“So, how are we feeling now?” Doctor Riley asked him.

“I feel great, doctor,” Alex told him. “I feel like a new man.”

“Good,” Dr. Riley said. “That’s what I want to hear. I just gave your wife a prescription for some pain medication and recommended that you rest for two weeks when you get home. Let me know if you have any questions or concerns. I will leave you two alone now.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Kyra replied.

“I am so happy to see you again,” Alex told Kyra. “I couldn’t imagine not being able to wake up and see your beautiful face. While I was being operated on, I had a terrible dream. I dreamed that I had died and that I was a ghost. I was watching you and many others react to the news of my death. My heart was broken when I saw you fall to your knees by my bedside right after I had taken my last breath. You cried and cried in complete agony and screamed out why repeatedly.”

“Well, it wasn’t easy for me to leave the hospital,” Kyra told him. “If something had happened to you and I wasn’t here, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life. I had to constantly reassure myself that everything would be all right. I was scared to death to answer the phone when I saw it was the hospital trying to get ahold of me. There was both a sense of hope and a sense of dread when I picked up the phone. I was greatly relieved as soon as I heard you were alive and well after the surgery. By the way, on my way up to your room, I stopped at the gift shop and bought you a few things to cheer you up.”

“Oh, honey, you didn’t have to do that,” Alex said. “Thank you so much for thinking of me.”

Throughout the remainder of the day, they laughed and smiled. It was one of the greatest days of their lives. They could not have felt more blessed.

Chapter 16

Two weeks after the surgery, Alex Bloggs was released from the hospital. He made plans from home to return to work as a senior construction manager at Major Construction Company in Tucson, Arizona. Alex could hardly wait. He wanted to feel like he was once again productive and a part of society.

He also felt like he was given the opportunity to have a fresh start. From there on, Alex was not going to take life for granted. He wanted to live life to its fullest. Alex and Kyra had talked about going to the Bahamas quite a bit before he turned into a Death Firm for a romantic getaway since they really didn’t have a honeymoon. Alex didn’t consider staying a week in Branson, Missouri, to be much of a honeymoon destination. He thought, *Why not?* Alex would have a talk with Kyra about making plans to go there during the summer next year. She would be so excited. He also always wanted to skydive and learn how to play the guitar. That would be next on his list of things to do.

Ever since he had returned home, Kyra and Alex’s marriage had strengthened. They both were reminded that life could be taken from either of them at any moment. His disappearance made them realize that if something did happen to either of them, they would have a hard time living without the other and that they were meant to be together.

They decided that they would spend less time fighting when there were problems and more time discussing them in a calm and rational way. They were not going to let anything stand between them from there on out. The couple also discussed having children now that the Death Firm situation was coming to an end. Kyra was now thirty-two years old, and she didn’t want to wait any longer. Alex agreed that it was time to start a family.

Just four months after making the decision to have a family, Kyra was now eight weeks pregnant. Alex was working full-time again and was getting ready to undergo surgery one more time to get rid of more animal parts in his body and replace a few of them with human body parts. The doctor believed this was the last time he would have to be operated on. Alex was confident that this surgery would be a success, just like the last one was. He believed the surgeons knew what they were doing. He read in the newspaper that a few more Death Firms had surgery and were mostly human again. So far, every surgery had been a success. The future now appeared brighter. The streets were safer, and cleanup had begun. Children were playing in the playgrounds, people walked to work, and the nightlife was bustling again. There was so much happiness all around. The days flew by.

Kyra and Alex stayed busy with doctor appointments, getting the baby’s room ready, buying baby items, working, and being available for date nights. The doctor called that afternoon to set up a date for Alex’s second surgery. It would take place in about three weeks on October third. Between the surgery and the baby appointments, it seemed like an awful lot to take in. Alex had to reassure Kyra that everything would be all right and that it was unhealthy for her to worry so much, especially with her being pregnant. Kyra agreed and did everything she could not to think about it.

Alex kept his mind off the surgery through his work and by thinking about the baby. He knew that Kyra was hoping for a girl, but he secretly wanted a boy. Whatever the sex of the baby was, he was going to be a proud papa. He could hardly wait to meet his first child. He grew increasingly anxious each day. Kyra told him that he was going to be a good father and that there was nothing to worry about. Alex wanted to be the best father that he could be. He had been getting advice from his friends who were parents and reading books on parenting. He also supported Kyra in every way that he could. Alex knew that being pregnant wasn’t easy for her. He had watched her cope with morning sickness, occasional emotional outbursts, strange food cravings, and complaining about a few aches and pains. He did his best to comfort her and be there when she needed him. Alex would occasionally surprise her with flowers, a favorite drink or snack, taking her to her favorite restaurant, or taking her to a spa where she could get a pedicure, massage, and manicure. There were moments when he could see how happy and excited she was about having a baby, and there would be a glow on her face. Her happiness was also his happiness.

Once it was time for the surgery, Alex told Kyra that it would be best if she didn’t go with him to the hospital at all. He wanted her not to worry about him at all and that it was best for her just to stay home and take care of herself. He promised her that he would give her a call as soon as he could after the surgery. Kyra understood what he was saying; she knew it was for the best.

Alex drove himself to the hospital. He dreaded undergoing surgery and was not looking forward to the healing process, but he was ready to just get it over with and have a normal human body again. Alex had prayed that morning that he would come out of the surgery well and alive. He had so much to look forward to. He was still young and had a long life ahead of him.

He told Kyra before he had left that he wanted her to tell their child how much he had loved them and that he wanted the best for them in life in case he was not to make it. She cried after he had told her those things. They hugged and kissed one last time before he left the house. As he walked toward his jeep, he turned and waved at her while she watched him leave as she stood on the porch. Alex knew she was having a tough time letting him go on his own just by the sight of a tear rolling down her cheek while she stood there frozen without losing sight of him. He looked back at her and gave her a wink and a smile, even though he knew it would not brighten up her mood.

When he arrived at the hospital, he hesitated a little before stepping out of the vehicle. Alex took a deep breath.

“This is it, Alex,” he whispered. “You can do this. It is just one last step.”

He slowly slid out of his seat and took a step out. The parking lot was nearly filled up. He could see people coming in and out of the building. An ambulance whirled with its sirens blaring into the parking lot and parked right in front of the entranceway to the emergency room.

It was a hot, dry, sunny day. The sun beamed down on Alex. Sweat trickled down his forehead.

It took an eternity to reach the front desk because of all the dread he was experiencing. He couldn’t even smile at the receptionist. All he could do was nod. When the doctor arrived to escort him back to the operation room, everything was déjà vu all over again. He tried to stay calm as the doctor explained to him how the operation would work, but he couldn’t help but tremble in fright. It was scary the first time, but for some reason, this time was scarier.

He put on the patient robe and waited nervously for the anesthesiologist to arrive. He laid down on the operation bed. He closed his eyes as the anesthesiologist stuck a needle in his arm. In about ten minutes, he began to feel drowsy. His eyelids grew heavy. It did not take long for the drug to fully kick in. Alex couldn’t remember when it happened. All he could remember was falling into a deep sleep. He didn’t know how long he had slept. He just remembered waking up during the night in the hospital with the curtains partially closed. He had a blanket over him, and his head was rested on a big, fluffy pillow. There was a part of him that wanted to lift the blanket and see where the surgical incisions were, but he was too frightened. Alex decided to wait for the doctor to give him the details of how the surgery went.

Since he had been asleep for several hours, he was not tired at all. He looked over at the alarm clock next to his bed. It was 12:45 a.m. The moonlight shined through the window. Alex flipped on the television set and searched through the channels until he found a movie that he wanted to watch. He decided to watch the movie *Back to the Future*. *If only times were simpler as they were during the eighties,* he thought. If only Doc Brown knew what the future held, then he would want to stay put in the eighties. Alex went back to sleep at 4 a.m. and got back up at 7:30 a.m. A nurse walked in with a breakfast menu. Alex was famished. He chose pancakes, bacon, and a side of oatmeal. He had not eaten anything for eighteen hours. Alex scarfed down the food in no time. The doctor walked in while he was drinking his orange juice. The doctor smiled at him.

“Good morning!” the doctor said. “Now, I will not take up much of your time. I just want to tell you that the surgery went well and that there were no complications. You are now one hundred percent human. I called your wife already and told her you were fine. She was extremely happy and relieved. I’m going to have you stay in the hospital for three more days to run some tests and make sure you are healthy enough to leave.”

“Thanks for the update,” Alex responded. “Also, thanks for all the work you have done for me. My wife and I are profoundly grateful.”

“You are welcome,” the doctor replied. “If there is anything that you need, just give me or any of the nurses a buzz.”

“Okay,” Alex said. “I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Chapter 17

A few months after Alex’s surgery, Alex and Kyra welcomed a healthy baby girl into their lives. They had never felt happier in their whole lives.

They would never forget the time Alex was turned into a Death Firm. It was an extremely scary moment that changed their lives forever. Now that the person responsible for creating the Death Firms was behind bars and more Death Firms were being changed back to humans, their daughter’s future was now both safer and brighter.

Every night on the news, more interviews with former Death Firms being turned back to humans were aired. They were happy to be back with their families, working, finishing getting their college degrees, authoring books about their experiences, competing in sports, and fulfilling a happier life. Alex was so proud of them. It took a tremendous amount of strength and willingness to put their lives as Death Firms in the past. He was thankful to have a loving wife by his side and a precious baby to hold and love. He could not have had a happier ending. It was everything that he had wanted and everything that he had dreamed about.

Alex stood over his baby girl’s crib and watched her sleep. The sight of her angelic features and tiny little body warmed his heart. Alex and Kyra Bloggs named her Angelica Rose Bloggs. Alex heard footsteps approaching the baby’s room. He looked up and saw Kyra enter the room. She looked at him and smiled. Kyra walked quietly toward him. She then stood right next to him. Kyra softly spoke to him.

“She is so beautiful,” Kyra said.

“Yes, she most certainly is,” Alex responded.

Alex wrapped his arm around Kyra and kissed her forehead. She chuckled a little when she saw Angelica place her thumb into her mouth and start sucking on it. The baby cooed while doing so.

“That is so cute,” Kyra said.

After adoring their daughter for a while, Kyra suddenly changed the subject.

“Alex,” she said, “I am going to the grocery store to pick up some food for dinner. Is there anything that you want me to get while I am there?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he responded. “If anything comes to mind, I will text you.”

A few minutes after she left the room, Alex decided to go downstairs and get some exercise on their treadmill. Many thoughts and memories invaded his mind. The exercise should help ease his nerves and clear his thoughts. He started walking briskly before easing his way into running. His heart beat faster, and he breathed heavier as his workout intensified. He started to have thoughts about Dr. Fritz Camargo and everything that he had done to him.

Alex hoped that one day he would find the courage to forgive Dr. Fritz Camargo for all the damage he had done. Right then, it did not seem possible. What Camargo had done to him had created a significant burden that would impact the rest of his life. Not one of the former Death Firms would forget all that he had done to them. Alex knew that one day he would get what was coming to him and that he would be severely punished for it. When he saw live footage of law enforcement escorting Camargo in handcuffs to the prison on the local news station a few months ago, he noticed that Camargo didn’t even have a look of remorse on his face. Instead, he had a devilish grin and a wicked glare in his eyes. It was as if he was plotting something evil in his mind at that moment.

Alex wiped the sweat off his face as he continued his workout. He was so angry at Camargo that he had almost lost his concentration on what he was doing. His face was not only hot from the workout. He knew he had to get Camargo off his mind. It was hard, too, since there were constant news updates on Camargo on the television and in the newspapers.

On the news last night, Alex heard the news anchorman report that law enforcement and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were still trying to unlock Camargo’s phone to send out a signal to all the Death Firms who were currently running savage in their beastly forms to come to a law enforcement facility where they would be transformed back into their human bodies. From there, law enforcement would question them and send them to a hospital where they would have all the robotic parts and animal parts removed. There were still hundreds more out there roaming the streets, killing people and eating them. So far, the state of Arizona had no Death Firms. Most of them were on the West Coast. There were a few located in locations as far as Australia. It would take months to round them all up, and that was assuming Camargo would either cooperate or a technician would be able to unlock the code. It was going to be an exceedingly arduous task.

Alex then realized it was best for him not to watch or read the news for a while. He had to go on living, and by doing that, he must keep Camargo and everything that had happened to him off his mind before it drove him crazy. Alex was going to keep happy thoughts on his mind only from there on out.

He prayed to God that someone out there would find answers and solutions to end all the pain, suffering, and damage that was created by Dr. Fritz Camargo’s Death Firm attacks.

Chapter 18

Technician Monica Massey had spent several weeks trying to unlock Dr. Fritz Camargo’s secret control panel that controlled the Death Firms on his phone that could help locate all Death Firms and bring them all to the laboratory where they would be transformed back to humans and be studied. It would allow law enforcement, military officials, and scientists a chance to better understand how they were being operated. With Camargo’s help, they could learn how they were created.

From there, they would be sent off to the hospital to have both the robotic and animal parts removed, so they could return to their normal lives. Thanks to the successful operation of Alex Bloggs, they now knew that people who were Death Firms would be safe after surgically removing the robotic and animal parts. If some decide they would like to remain Death Firms, they could be sent to the military, where they would be put into combat or help secure the U.S. borders. Massey could not understand why anyone would want to be a Death Firm, but to each his own.

She had studied Camargo’s past to try to find keywords related to his life that may have been used as a password. Massey was hoping Camargo would someday realize what he was doing was wrong and that he would cooperate with them. He would be the only person who would know the password. Camargo was such a private person that they couldn’t dig up much information on him. They discovered that he didn’t have a close relationship with his parents, and the only relatives that he had left had not seen or heard from him for years.

According to a few high school classmates, Camargo was an honor student who was quiet and very studious. He was picked on quite a bit by the popular kids and had very few friends. His closest friend was Hugh York. Both were members of the National Honor Society, Technology Students Association, Mathletes, Yearbook, and Book Club. Massey found the contact information on York. She had called him up and left a message on his voice mail. She thought Hugh York might be able to talk some sense into Camargo. Camargo needed someone close to him to talk to him. There was no way law enforcement or the FBI could get him to trust them. York was their only hope.

Massey looked up at the clock in the lab and noticed she had worked for nine and a half hours. She knew her boss did not like it when she worked overtime. She took Camargo’s phone and locked it up in a safe. She then cleaned up her workstation before heading out. Massey made sure her cell phone was fully charged in case York called her back. She threw the charger and cell phone back into her purse, turned off the lights in the office, locked up the building, and stepped out into the parking lot.

It was now 10 p.m. The parking lot was nearly empty. She was usually the last employee from the lab to leave. The moonlight shined down on her vehicle. She could hear the clicking sound coming from her high heels as she walked on the pavement. Massey ran out of hope that she would get a call tonight from York. It was much too late.

She got into her car, turned the ignition on, and slowly backed out. She yawned. It had been a long day at work. Massey was happy to finally go home. She was so tired and did not feel like cooking. Massey decided to pick up some takeout food from a burger joint on the way home.

She was relieved to pull up into her driveway. She felt exhausted when she got out of her car. Massey slowly walked up to her door, checked her mailbox to see if she got any mail, and unlocked the door. She kicked off her shoes and placed them next to the door. As soon as she turned on the lights, she headed toward the living room and plopped down on the couch with her takeout food. Massey could not believe how dull her life was. She also was single and had very few friends.

She took a few bites of her cheeseburger, then pulled out her phone to see if she got any messages. Her voice mail was empty, but she noticed she had received a text message from someone. Massey recognized the phone number right away. The text said:

*Hi Ms. Massey! This is Hugh York. As it is too late to call, I decided to text you a short message instead. I, indeed, was close friends with Dr. Fritz Camargo until shortly after we both had graduated from college. It is a pity what happened to him, but I can give you some more insight into his personality and some of the things that happened to him while we were growing up together. I will try to talk to him, but it may not help. I will be available to talk with you in person at 2 p.m. tomorrow. Just let me know where you would like to meet.*

She was so excited to receive the message and that he was willing to help her find the password that would give her access to the control panel. *This is going to be huge,* she thought. She texted him back immediately to make an appointment to talk with him. Massey suggested that they meet at a small coffee and pastry shop downtown. Her heart raced as she pressed the keys on her phone. Massey couldn’t figure out how she was going to get any sleep during the night. She was filled with too much joy and excitement.

She finished her meal quickly. She had a big day tomorrow, and she wanted to be well-rested for it. Massey needed to be in the right frame of mind when speaking with Hugh York. She also had to come in well prepared with questions for him. It was extremely important that he cooperated. The entire world depended on it. She could not blow it.

Right before she fell asleep, Massey thought of different ways to help calm her down and get her to fall asleep. Her muscles were relaxed from the warmth of the water from her shower, drinking a nice, warm cup of chamomile tea and listening to some soothing jazz music. Her mind felt at ease. As her eyes slowly drifted off to sleep, she had a big smile on her face. Tomorrow would be Massey’s big break.

She woke up twice feeling anxious in the middle of the night. Her mind could not shake off the idea of her helping with ending the Death Firms. *To help end the terror of the Death Firms will bring so much relief and joy to everyone,* she thought. It would be the biggest achievement in her career. This was a pivotal moment in her life, and it could change everything. The excitement soon wore off, and she suddenly found herself back in a deep sleep.

Once Massey’s alarm went off, she nearly jumped out of bed. She had a renewed feeling of hope. Today would be one of the biggest days of her life. Massey was optimistic that she would get to the root of the problem. She checked her phone to see if she got any other messages from York. Massey wanted to make sure they were still on that day to talk.

She brushed her teeth, took a quick shower, brushed her hair, and applied a light amount of makeup to her face. The smell of her perfume was intoxicating. It was a white musk with a hint of white datura flower and berries. She inhaled it once more before heading off to the front door of her house. She grabbed her purse quickly. It was a mild summer day with a light breeze. The warmth of the sun felt good, and the breeze gently tickled her skin as she eased her way to her vehicle. Massey changed the radio station to a soft rock station. She took a quick look to her right and then to the left before backing out of her driveway slowly. Two children were running around the front lawn of the home next to her. She made sure they were out of her way before proceeding.

She had to get some work done in the lab before meeting up with Hugh York. She was helping with two other cases at the police station. Massey wasn’t as excited about working on those cases as she was about meeting up with York. She had to stay focused as she drove through morning traffic. Massey had already driven past two car wrecks, and she wasn’t about to find herself involved in one as well. Along the way, she stopped at a quaint little coffee shop to pick up a mocha latte and a bagel with cream cheese. It was her usual stop on the way to work.

She arrived at the lab right on time. Massey started going through her usual routine of trying to decode passwords and restore missing files on several electronics. She found herself periodically checking her cell phone while completing her tasks. She anxiously waited for the time to meet up with York. After checking for the eighth time, she noticed it was her normal lunchtime, which was 11:30 a.m. Massey stopped searching for files on a PC that was used by someone who was being tried in court for embezzling money through a corporation that he was working for. Her mind was in a whirl, so the timing for a break was perfect. Her eyes were starting to strain a bit from staring at a computer screen all morning. She rubbed her eyes and took some aspirin for relief before leaving the lab.

For lunch, she went to an Italian restaurant where she ordered spaghetti and meatballs, and breadsticks. She continued checking her cell phone to make sure York had not canceled their appointment. Massey was relieved when she found out he had not. She quickly put the phone back into her purse when the waitress arrived with her food. She delved into her food and relished every bite. Massey knew she had to relax and quit worrying so much about it. This was very uncharacteristic of her. She was normally an upbeat and easygoing person. Instead, she focused on finishing her lunch. She had almost forgotten how hungry she was.

When Massey was back in the office, she began chatting with one of her coworkers named Maddie Swanson about a fire that had happened just a block away from Swanson’s home. Massey pretended to be interested in what Swanson was saying, but she was much too interested in meeting up with York to talk about Dr. Fritz Camargo’s past life. She tried to listen carefully to Swanson but just couldn’t.

After their conversation was over, Massey dove into her work and kept her mind preoccupied with her tasks, which made the time fly by much faster. Because Massey was so busy, it did not take long for it to be time for her to go meet Hugh York at the coffee shop. When she looked up and noticed it was 1:45 p.m., she quickly rose from her chair and grabbed her purse. She walked briskly to her car while her heart was racing.

She sped out of the office parking lot and rushed over to the coffee shop. Massey felt like a woman who was on a mission. She was amazed when it only took her five minutes to get over there. As she walked across the coffee shop parking lot, she wondered which vehicle was Hugh York’s and whether he was already there. She pulled back a strand of her hair away from her face and took a deep breath before stepping inside. She looked around the room for someone who had matched his description. York had described himself as tall, lanky, with gray peppered hair. He also said he would be wearing a red collared shirt with gray pants.

Massey searched all around the room until she spotted a man that matched the description sitting at an oval-shaped table with reading glasses on. He was reading a book and drinking a small cup of coffee. She was about ten minutes early, so she went ahead and ordered a cup of mocha latte before taking a seat next to the man that appeared to be York. She walked over to him and introduced herself. The man stood up and shook her hand.

“Hi! Miss Massey,” York said with a friendly tone. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you, and it is a pleasure to meet you as well,” she replied. “I know it must have been odd to get a phone call about asking you questions about Camargo, but you were the only person with connections that I could find.”

“You came to the right person,” he said before changing the subject. “I hope you are having a nice afternoon. It is such a lovely day out. The temperature is ideal for a nice stroll through the park.”

“Yes, it is,” Massey replied with a smile. “Now, what can you tell me about Dr. Fritz Camargo? I need to know more about his character, what his likes and dislikes are, and more about his background. That might give us some clue as to what his password is or help us understand him more. We were hoping you would try talking to him as well since you know him better than anyone else. Maybe you can convince him to cooperate and stop killing innocent lives with his Death Firms.”

“I will do whatever I can to convince him,” York said. “Believe me. I would like to put a stop to all this madness just as much as everyone else does. I don’t want him to hurt any more people. Honestly, the Fritz I know would never do a thing like this. I guess as you get older, priorities start to change, and your ambition drives you to do things out of the ordinary.”

“That may be so, but going on a murderous rampage and creating flesh-eating monsters with sophisticated robotic parts is unusual and to the extreme,” Massey commented. “No one in their right mind would have that capacity to do so.”

“You do have a point,” York said. “I cannot argue with you on that one.”

“Now, tell me what he was like during his youth,” Massey said.

“When I first met him, Fritz was a quiet and shy boy who kept within himself most of the time,” York told Massey. “It took a while to get him to open up to people. People had to gain his trust first before he was able to fully communicate with them. He was very selective when choosing friends. That is why he only had a small group of friends. I was one of four of his friends in school.”

“Did he seem troubled at the time?” Massey asked.

“Not at all,” he answered. “However, he was picked on quite a bit by the school’s bullies. I stood up to them a few times. Fritz was just a skinny, frail, and weak boy in high school. He didn’t have an athletic bone in him.”

“Do you think that’s the motive behind creating the Death Firms?” Massey said. “Has he ever mentioned that he would seek revenge?”

“I do recall him saying one time that one day those that picked on him were going to pay for it,” York responded. “I never really took him seriously. I didn’t think that he had it in him.”

“What were some of his interests?” Massey then asked.

“He had a love for reading science fiction and horror novels during his spare time,” York told her. “He spent most of his time studying, doing scientific experiments, going to the movie theater, and playing video games. Camargo was a brilliant student who thrived in all his science and math classes. He was a straight-A student and a teacher’s pet. He hung out with me, Warren Berry, and Stephen Bryan. We were the nerdiest group of people in school. We would study together, discuss the latest science-fiction novels and comic books that we were reading, and play video games together at the arcade.”

“Aside from being bullied, was there anything else that might have caused him to tick?” Massey asked.

“There was a girl that he had a huge crush on,” York answered. “Her name was Hannah Finley. She was one of the prettiest girls in high school. She had long blond hair and big blue eyes. Hannah was bright and exceedingly popular. She was the class president and was nice to everyone. She would occasionally come up to Fritz and talk to him. Unfortunately, she was dating Tommy McDonald, who was the captain of the debate team and was a star basketball player. Fritz was so jealous of him. Fritz and Hannah remained friends in college. Then one day, Fritz confessed that he loved her. Hannah told him that she did not feel the same way. Fritz got angry and stormed off. A year later, she got engaged. Fritz was completely devastated when he found out. He was not the same ever since. Fritz should have known that he would not have a shot with her. They were just too different.”

“That is so sad,” Massey said. “I almost feel sorry for the guy, but I don’t because of all the lives he has taken. Deep down inside him is an evil brute seeking revenge who does not care for anyone but himself. Please come to the police department and talk to him. We must get the code from him to control the Death Firms. Can you come to the police station tomorrow?”

“I will come in first thing in the morning, right around 8 a.m.,” York replied. “I will see what I can do.”

“Great,” Massey said. “I will see you then. I must head back to the lab right now. It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise,” he said.

Chapter 19

The next day, Massey woke up feeling rejuvenated after a good night’s rest. She stretched out her arms before getting out of bed. She felt so comfortable in the bed that she had to lay in the bed just a little longer. Hugh York would be making a trip to the police department in about two hours to visit Dr. Fritz Camargo. She was hoping he would be far more successful in getting Camargo to talk.

It was a cool, brisk morning. Massey put on a scarlet-colored sweater. She then put on a long gray skirt and long black boots. The ground was damp from last night’s thunderstorm. Massey ran out to her car as the wind whipped around her. Her hair blew up in the air wildly.

Once again, she pulled up to her favorite coffee place and ordered a hot mocha coffee and some coffee cake. The large cup of coffee warmed her hands as she held it. About fifteen minutes later, she was sitting at her desk. Massey began working fervently. It was not long before it was time for York to arrive at the police department. Soon, she would be hearing from the police department on how York’s visit with Camargo went. She made sure to tell the police chief to keep her posted on how things went. Hugh York also told her he would keep her updated if anything should happen.

She began jotting down notes about some of her latest findings on a computer that contained extremely sensitive information regarding an embezzlement that recently took place at a major corporation. Massey found enough proof on the computer to send the owner of the computer to prison. She looked up at the clock hanging on the wall. It was about 9:30 a.m. She knew that York was either speaking to Camargo, finished speaking to him, or at least attempted to by now. She eagerly waited to hear how it all went.

It was not until about 10 a.m. that her cell phone started to ring. She nearly jumped out of her seat and rushed over to the phone to answer it. To her delight, it was Hugh York.

“Hello,” she said excitedly.

“Hello, Ms. Massey, this is Hugh York,” he replied. “I have both good and bad news. Which one would you like first?”

“The bad news, please,” Massey said.

“Fritz told me he would be willing to cooperate with me; however, he would not give me the code to unlock the command panel on his phone,” York said. “The good news is that he will unlock it himself, and he will show law enforcement how to use the command panel. This would allow us to get access to it and bring the Death Firms back to him.”

“I’m not sure if we can trust him,” she told York. “It might be a booby trap. I suppose it is the only hope that we have. Did he say when he was willing to do this?”

“He said tomorrow at the earliest,” York answered. “He wanted more time to think about it.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” Massey replied. “I will talk to you later. I have to get back to work now.”

“Okay,” York said. “I will give you a call tomorrow evening to see how things are going. Bye!”

“Bye,” she said softly before hanging up the phone.

Shortly after they had spoken to each other, the police chief came in to pick up Camargo’s cell phone. The chief then explained the scenario and thanked her for all her help in trying to unlock the code and reaching out to York. She walked over to the safe that contained the cell phone, unlocked the safe, then handed the phone over to the police chief.

“Good work,” he told her. “I’ll let you know how it all pans out.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “I’ll be looking forward to hearing back from you.”

She smiled at him and waved goodbye after the police chief smiled and said goodbye. *He seems like a nice guy,* Massey thought to herself. She then returned to her duties. It was only two hours away when her shift ended. To make time go by faster, she turned on some uplifting tunes on her computer.

Once the two hours were up, Massey cleaned up her station and locked up all the electronics that she was examining. She turned off the lights and locked the doors. Massey walked slowly toward her vehicle as she dug through her purse to find her car keys. She couldn’t figure out why she just didn’t pull them out while she was in the office, where she could easily see them in the light. She rolled her eyes before she continued searching for them in the dark.

“There you are!” she said excitedly as she pulled out her keys to unlock her car door. A beeping sound could be heard from afar, and her headlights flashed as she walked toward her vehicle. The parking lot was dark. Massey hated that the parking lot was not well lit up. She felt unsafe walking all alone.

She then heard footsteps. Massey now knew she was not alone. The sound of footsteps got louder. Could it be someone was following her? She quickly turned her head to see where the mysterious footsteps were coming from. All she could see was darkness.

Massey started to pick up her pace. The footsteps got faster and louder. She began to run. Her heart was racing, and her eyes widened with fear. Suddenly, her body froze as soon as she felt a hand on her shoulder. Massey was so frightened that she could not turn around to see who it was. She then heard heavy breathing. It sounded as if the person had been chasing her.

“Ms. Massey, it’s me!” the mysterious person said excitedly. “I have something to tell you.”

“W-Who are you!” she shouted out with a quiver in her voice.

“It’s Hugh York,” he answered as he tried to catch his breath.

Massey was not sure whether she should be relieved or frightened. Why didn’t he call instead of waiting outside her place of work and scaring her half to death? Because of this, she wasn’t sure if she could trust him. He could have an evil, twisted mind like Camargo’s. She slowly turned her body in his direction and took a few steps away from him.

“You scared me to death!” Massey shouted out. “You could have called me or something. Do you realize how creepy this is?”

“I am very sorry for startling you,” he said apologetically. “I have to warn you about something Dr. Fritz Camargo said. Camargo knows you are the one that contacted me. He also is aware that you have been doing research on him. Camargo is afraid that you will interfere with his plans. He is willing to bring the Death Firms back to him under one condition. Once he has them here, he wants to take full control of them again. Camargo does not want anyone else controlling them. He also does not like the idea that we have figured out a way to turn them back into their human selves. Camargo said he wanted to find you and kill you for making him do this.”

“I don’t understand why he is after me,” Massey said. “He just needs to put a stop to all of this. There is no way law enforcement is going to allow him to have complete control of them. He is going to have to follow instructions and will be forced to do so. I will not be there when it happens. You will have to be there to reason with him. You are the only person that he knows is willing to talk to him.”

“I will do my best, but you need to still keep your guard up,” York said. “Camargo is an extremely complicated character. I am afraid he is not being completely honest with us. He might be setting us up.”

“Well, whatever it is, at least we are now getting him to talk,” she said. “This is the closest that we have ever been to resolving the problem. We can’t back down now.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he responded.

“Thanks for warning me,” Massey told him. “But please, please, please just give me a call the next time. I don’t think I can handle any more surprises.”

“I will do so,” York said. “I promise I will no longer creep up on you. I’m terribly sorry for scaring you. I will allow you to go back to doing what you were doing. Just give me a call if you need anything from me. Thank you for your time.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later,” Massey said. “Have a good evening!”

“You too,” he said.

They waved at each other and went their separate ways. Massey could not believe York would creep up on her that way in a dark, empty parking lot. She had no idea what he was thinking. He seemed like a normal guy when she first met him, but now she was not so sure. She was hoping he would never do anything like that again. She ran across the parking lot to her car, got inside it, and quickly locked all the doors to her car. She wasn’t going to risk anything else happening to her.

Chapter 20

The next day, Massey was invited to join law enforcement and York as they began working with Camargo on giving them the code that would allow them to bring back all the Death Firms. They wanted her there in case there were some technical difficulties.

Camargo was sitting upright with a smug look on his face in the interrogation room when York brought over Camargo’s cell phone to him to unlock the control panel that would turn the Death Firms back into humans and bring them to headquarters. Massey stood amused on the other side of the interrogation window. Camargo could not see her through the window. Massey was glad that she did not have to confront him. Camargo scared her. There was nervous excitement in the air. Officers gave frequent reports of what was happening over walkie-talkies as they waited for Camargo to unlock the control panel.

She stood quietly. She was thinking about the warning that York had given her last night. Massey was frightened. She had no idea what Camargo was planning to do to her. Massey also wondered if York was up to no good. She did not like the way he had looked at her. There was a crazed look in his eyes. Neither were to be trusted. She was afraid they were now teamed up. Massey watched carefully as Camargo went to work. She could tell he was in deep concentration and quite possibly coming up with a scheme. Camargo diligently pressed the buttons on his phone. *It is the code,* Massey thought to herself.

Camargo looked up at York and spoke softly to him with his hand covering his mouth as if he didn’t want anyone else there to see what he was mouthing to him. York nodded his head in agreement with whatever he was saying to him. York then looked up at the window, smiling, then turned his attention back to Camargo. Massey was not sure what to expect afterward. Security guards were all over the place just in case things got out of hand.

Camargo gestured to a security guard that was standing next to the door of the interrogation room to come over. The security guard came forward and listened carefully to what Camargo had to say. Camargo then told the police chief what he had done and that all the Death Firms were on their way over. He also told the security guard that there was no need to be afraid. Camargo had instructed the Death Firms not to harm anyone in their path, he told him. He said there were a few already in the area, and they should arrive shortly. Camargo informed the police that there were a few Death Firms in the area, and it would not take long for them to get there. Everyone stood in fear as they waited for the first few Death Firms to arrive. Massey’s knees began to shake, and she suddenly started to feel lightheaded. She grew ever so anxious.

Everyone nearly jumped when they heard footsteps coming from the hallway about thirty minutes later. The sound grew louder. The doorknob to the room where Massey, the police chief, a few security guards, and law enforcement were in then slowly turned. Massey’s eyes were wide with fear. Her heart stopped when the door opened. She shook as her head turned toward the door to get a glimpse of the monster.

A few seconds later, a humanlike figure with sharp fangs, red eyes, facial hair, and long claws stepped inside the room. The monstrous figure drooled in front of Massey and two police officers as it stood still. Massey could see the Death Firm’s red eyes glaring at her. She stepped back and hid behind two police officers for protection. The officers drew their guns and pointed them at the Death Firm. Massey looked down and noticed the officers’ hands trembling in fright.

Massey then turned her attention to Camargo to see if he was aware that the Death Firm was inside the building. Camargo told everyone not to make any sudden movements and that he would press the transformation button that would turn the Death Firm back into a human being. Everyone stood completely still as Camargo pressed the button. About two minutes later, the Death Firm began to shake, let out a squeal, then covered its head with its arms and hands. Massey could see the changes come into effect. It wasn’t long until the Death Firm moved its arms and hands away from its face. She could see a man in his early thirties with dirty-blonde hair and blue eyes. He appeared confused and wasn’t aware of where he was at. He looked up at Massey with a scared expression on his face and asked where he was and what he was doing there. She explained the situation to the young man and asked him what his name was.

“My name is Tobias Herrera,” he told her with a quiver in his voice. “All I remember was going to this old building where some scientist paid me to participate in some scientific experiment. A man gave me a shot. Minutes later, I was out cold. From there on out, everything has been a blur. Does my family know I am here?”

“No,” one of the police officers answered. “Are you feeling all right? Do you have any injuries?”

“I feel tired and hungry,” Herrera said. “Other than that, I am fine. I have a few scratches here and there. I do feel some pain, but only from some minor injuries. Where am I?”

“You are at the police station in Tucson, Arizona,” a security guard answered.

“We will still have to send you to the hospital to have you examined,” a police officer said. “We will take you to a phone and have you call your family to let them know you are all right.”

“Thank you, officer,” Herrera told him. “I really appreciate that.”

It was not long until a few other Death Firms appeared at the police headquarters. Every single one had the same reaction after they were transformed back into a human. For now, Camargo had kept his word in bringing them to the police headquarters. By the end of the day, a total of forty-four Death Firms had arrived, and all of them were transformed into their human forms.

They were then taken to the hospital, so they could undergo surgery to remove the animal and robotic parts from their bodies. Unfortunately, not all of them could be admitted at once. When it was time for Camargo to give back his phone to the police, Camargo was hesitant. He slowly handed back the phone. York quickly grabbed the phone and began running off with it. Camargo shouted out, “Remember what I told you! It is all up to you now!”

Just as York stepped foot outside of the building, he was shot to death by police officers that were surrounding the building. Massey’s heart leaped at the sound of the gunshots. Camargo shouted out, “No!”

The police chief then told him, “You didn’t think we would let you off that easy, Fritz, did you?” Camargo then buried his face in his hands. He was taken immediately back to his jail cell afterward, where he tried to conjure up another plan. Everyone was shaken by the occurrence.

Hours later, the building was surrounded by news reporters wanting to know about the shooting and what led to it. The police chief only talked to the reporters about the shooting. He was not ready to tell them about the Death Firm’s arrival and about their plans to bring them back to being humans. He wanted to know more about the Death Firms before informing the press about them.

Chapter 21

A few days later, Camargo was forced to bring back the remainder of the Death Firms. People throughout the world were frightened to see several Death Firms running savagely past them on the streets, sidewalks, lawns, and even in the water. When they heard the news of the Death Firms migrating to Tucson, Arizona, they were relieved to hear that the Death Firms were instructed not to attack them by Dr. Fritz Camargo. Many streets were now clear of Death Firms, and once again, it was safe to come outside. People were seen shooting photos and video footage of the Death Firms as they zoomed past them from a distance. They were fascinated by the Death Firms; physique, their behavior, and how they operated.

Everyone resumed their lives just as they did when the original Death Firms were all destroyed. The Death Firms had impacted each of their lives in a different manner. Some lost more than others. Some had a much easier time coping with the devastation that the Death Firms had created than others. No matter the location, people were helping others get past this grim time in history, and they rebuilt. They were going to create a better world.

Massey was relieved that she no longer had to deal with the creepy Hugh York and that Dr. Fritz Camargo was behind bars. Winter and Gabriela Harris were happy their daughter could live a normal life. Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson’s family reunited and honored him by putting up a statue of him in downtown Tucson that had a plaque that included all his greatest accomplishments and everything that he had contributed to society and to the battles against the Death Firms.

Once the police chief felt comfortable enough about letting the press know about Camargo putting in the code on his phone and commanding the Death Firms to come to the police headquarters and have them surgically operated on at the hospital, so they change back into their human selves, he held a news conference to let the public know about it. The news of the arrival of all the Death Firms spread across the world. Everyone was filled with joy and felt safe once again. After they were transformed completely back to their human forms, the former Death Firms returned to their families and went back to living a normal life.

The trial of Dr. Fritz Camargo ended about two years later. He was found guilty of murder and terrorism and was given the death penalty. It was the most widely watched trial on television in history. Millions were glued to their television sets across the world. Protesters stood outside the federal courthouse in hopes that Camargo would be found guilty. No one wanted the Death Firms to ever be recreated again. The courthouse was heavily guarded by law enforcement. There were several threats from various people that they would assassinate Dr. Fritz Camargo during the trial. People screamed, threw items, and splashed liquids at him as he stepped out of the police car and walked up to the courthouse.

When the guilty verdict was read, people rejoiced by dancing on the streets, celebrating in bars, pubs, and even at their homes. People shouted out cheers of victory on the front lawn of the courthouse. The trial was talked about on television news stations, in newspapers and magazines, and on the radio for several weeks. There wasn’t a single person who did not know who Dr. Fritz Camargo was and everything that he had done.

Camargo told reporters that he thought he could change and make things right again, but deep down, there was still hatred in his heart. He still was not happy that his creation of the Death Firms would never get the type of recognition it deserved. Camargo believed the Death Firms could still be put to effective use. He was extremely disappointed in the U.S. forces for not bringing them back. Camargo partially blamed individuals, such as Winter Harris, for stopping him from creating a successful version of a Death Firm, one that could be a powerful force for the military. He wished he would have succeeded in killing Harris.

Harris responded by saying it wasn’t he who made the invention of the Death Firm unsuccessful and that Camargo was a fool for saying so. He told the press that Camargo had evil intentions with his Death Firms from the beginning and could care less about the safety of the country. The murders of Camargo’s former colleagues who helped him recreate the Death Firms were proof that he was evil, Harris said.

The military threatened all creators of the Death Firms if either of them chose to recreate them, that it would be considered a capital crime and that they would be found during a press conference. After Camargo was caught and found guilty in court, anyone involved with the creation of the Death Firms thought it would be rather fruitless to even try.

As Camargo sat in the electric chair, he remembered turning himself in to the authorities and helping them control the Death Firms. He wondered what made him do it. It must have been his ambition that drove him to do it.

“Maybe there is some good in me,” he whispered to himself seconds before he was electrocuted. And just like that, it was the end for Dr. Fritz Camargo.

Chapter 22

About a week later, Winter Harris, his wife Gabriela, and daughter Emilia were back on the highway, leaving their haven to go back home to Tucson, Arizona. The news of Fritz Camargo’s execution made airwaves all over the world. All the Death Firms had been turned back to humans now. Harris finally felt safe enough to leave Columbia, South Carolina, where he and his family started a new life as a librarian while Gabriela stayed in their temporary home with their daughter.

Now that Fritz Camargo was no longer after him, there was no need for him to be in hiding anymore. One-year-old Emilia was a precocious, curious, and happy child. She recently took her first few steps. Both Harris and his wife were extremely proud of her. There wasn’t anything that Harris would not do for her. He was extremely relieved to know that his daughter could now live a normal life.

He couldn’t believe that he successfully kept him and his family hidden from Camargo after he helped them escape from the old, abandoned warehouse where Camargo had kept them after kidnapping them. Harris thought for sure the Army would have found Camargo when they surrounded the warehouse and broke into it to capture him. He was happy that Emilia did not endure the same struggles they had during the original creation of the Death Firms. Something as powerful as the Death Firms should never have been created in the first place because they would be bound to be under control by the wrong hands. They also could have malfunctioned and backfired on humans, which they did. One thing that was certain was that evil would never go away. There would always be villainous people with dark purposes that would find a way to achieve their evil feats.

Along the highway, the Harris family could see people freely walking in and out of businesses without any fear. It brought joy to their hearts. In residential areas, some were being rebuilt, some were being repaired, some were jogging and walking on trails, some were at the playground, some were washing their cars, and some were sitting in their backyards. It was the first time in a long time that he could see signs of hope.

He pulled off the highway, so they could stretch their legs, get a bite to eat, and fill up their vehicle with gas. They were in Waco, Texas. Their hearts were aglow. Harris and Gabriela could not help but smile as they walked side by side while Gabriela carried their daughter in her baby seat into the small, local deli. They had not seen a restaurant filled with people like this since before the Death Firms were created. It was a happy atmosphere. Everyone was in good spirits.

People were laughing, ordering drinks from the bar, smiling, and chitchatting with each other. It was the happy ending that everyone was praying for while being hunkered down in their safe locations. They had nearly forgotten about how good life truly was before the Death Firms. Many of them thought they would not survive and counted down the days in despair.

Once Harris, his wife, and baby were fully nourished, the drive home was peaceful and relaxing. When they arrived in Tucson and returned to their home, they knew the city would never be the same. But they also knew it was time to turn over a new leaf. Their home needed major repairs, and there wasn’t a hotel in town that was available because all of them were either destroyed or were fully booked. The family had to make do in their home. Harris and Gabriela cleaned up the home and created a safe space for them to sleep in. Harris had to cover a massive hole in their roof with a tarp. There were some insects and rodents inside their home that Harris had to either kill or chase off. He sprayed the home down with pesticide and placed traps throughout the property. They went to the nearest home improvement shop to pick up tools and supplies. Harris wasted no time in making repairs. It would take several months until the home would be completely restored. He managed to get the electricity back on the following day.

They were grateful that their home was still standing when they returned. Some of their neighbors had to either completely rebuild their homes or move to a different location because it would have been too expensive for them to repair. Many lives were lost in their neighborhood, so it was much quieter. It broke their hearts knowing that many of their neighbors would never return. They were simply happy to have a roof over their heads, electricity, and plenty of food and water. It was a promising start. They could not ask for more.

The Tucson Public Library was once again up and running. It had been closed for nine months for repairs and for the safety of the employees. Several books had been replaced because many of them were either damaged or stolen during the time that the Death Firms were wreaking havoc on the city. Several bookshelves were destroyed and replaced. The building had undergone many structural repairs too. Harris was extremely happy to return to his old job as a librarian. It felt great returning to his usual routine of waking up early in the morning, indulging in a bagel with cream cheese, and picking up a cup of coffee at his favorite coffee house on the way to work. He was saddened that not all his old coworkers survived the brutal attacks brought on by the Death Firms. However, it was nice to see some fresh faces. Every morning when the newspapers arrived at the library, Harris would read some of the latest stories on individuals who were turned into Death Firms. He was overjoyed when he found out many of them had been already returned to humans and were now living normal lives. The remainder of them could not wait to be completely human again. They were only happy that they were no longer being controlled by Dr. Fritz Camargo and that they were not in the monstrous Death Firm form. They were eagerly waiting for surgery. A few of them still did not feel completely like themselves and were discomforted by the robotic and animal parts in their bodies. They felt relieved that they were still alive.

Harris put away the newspaper and thought about contacting Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson’s family to see how they were coping with his death and if there was anything that he could do. He owed Alderson a great deal of gratitude. Losing Alderson was a major loss to the world. If it wasn’t for him, Harris would not have helped find a solution to destroying the Death Firms. He was very much surprised that someone as honorable as Alderson would put their full faith in him. Alderson was like the father he had never had. He found Alderson’s wife’s phone number online. Harris dialed the phone number of Holly Alderson on his cell phone. It rang twice before someone answered.

“Hello,” a female with a soft-spoken voice said.

“Hi,” Harris responded. “Are you Holly Alderson?”

“Why, yes, I am,” she said.

“This is Winter Harris,” he said. “I was a close friend of Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson. I wanted to call to pay my respects and to see how you and the rest of your family and close friends are doing.”

“That is nice of you, Mr. Harris,” she responded. “We are all doing fine. My husband would often bring you up during our conversations over the phone. It seems you two grew remarkably close during the war against the Death Firms. He was enormously proud of you and your service in the U.S. Army. I am incredibly grateful that he had a friend like you fighting aside him.”

“Is there anything I can do to bring comfort to you and your family?” Harris asked. “I feel like I owe him that much for everything he has done for me.”

“You have already done a great deal for us and our country through your service,” Mrs. Alderson replied. “We couldn’t ask for anything more. Thank you for everything, and may you and your family be blessed for all the sacrifices, commitment, and duty you have provided. It is you that we owe.”

“Thank you for your kind words,” Harris said. “I ask for nothing in return. I just want you, your family, and your loved ones to be happy, safe, and healthy. That is all I want.”

“Thank you, Winter,” she said. “It was genuinely nice talking to you, but I have to go now. I am baking a cake. Feel free to call us anytime. Goodbye!”

“Goodbye,” Harris replied.

He felt a great deal of warmth inside after having a friendly conversation with the wife of his late friend Lee Alderson. Harris knew the lieutenant colonel would be much appreciative for reaching out to his family to ensure they were all right. He would have done the same thing for Harris had something happened to him.

He smiled. The phone call brightened his spirits as he worked cheerfully throughout the rest of his workday. After he shelved the last book of the day merrily, he waved goodbye to his colleagues and skipped his way back to his vehicle. He put on his sunglasses, blared a rock song on his radio, and checked his rearview mirror before carefully backing out of his parking spot. He then slowly drove out of the parking lot. Harris couldn’t wait to get home and relax. It was a busy day at the library. Several patrons came into the library to return or check out books. A few of them asked Harris how to use the electronic databases on the computers or where they could locate certain books in the library.

While he was driving down the street, there was a honk from a car next to him. Harris turned and noticed it was one of his close friends. He smiled and waved at him. Harris playfully honked back and waved at his friend. Life couldn’t get much better than this. He couldn’t wait to tell his wife about his conversation with Lee Alderson’s wife. She would be overjoyed by it.

Harris drove up into the driveway. He hummed a tune as he stepped out of the vehicle and briskly walked up to the house. When he stepped into the house, there was a delightful scent coming from the kitchen. *It has to be Gabriela cooking dinner,* he thought to himself. She stepped into the living room and walked up to Harris to give him a hug and a kiss. He gave her a tender kiss back and embraced her for a little longer. They looked up and smiled at each other.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“It was good,” he said. “I have much to tell you. Let me change my clothes first, then I will tell you all about it.”

“Well, don’t take too long,” Gabriela replied. “I want to hear all about it.”

They kissed one last time before Harris went to their bedroom to put on some more comfortable clothes. Gabriela went back into the kitchen to check on dinner. Their daughter, Emilia, was asleep in her bedroom. Harris quietly walked past his daughter’s room. He stepped into his bedroom and made his way to the closet to pick out a T-shirt and jeans. On the way to the kitchen, he stepped into his daughter’s bedroom, quietly walked up to her as she slept, and kissed her tiny forehead.

In the kitchen, Gabriela was pulling out a chicken and rice casserole from the oven. She had already had a fresh batch of dinner rolls set out on the table that she had made from scratch earlier in the day. The plates and silverware were also already set up on the table.

“How long has Emilia been asleep?” Harris asked.

“She has been asleep for about two hours,” Gabriela answered. “I am going to wake her up shortly before dinner. She looks like a little angel when she sleeps, doesn’t she?”

“She certainly does,” Harris said.

“You said you had something to tell me,” Gabriela said.

“I was going to tell you that I called up Lieutenant Colonel Lee Alderson’s wife today,” Harris excitedly told her. “Her name is Holly, and she is a very sweet lady.”

“So, how has Lee’s family been taking the loss?” Gabriela asked.

“According to Holly, they have been handling it well,” Harris said. “She was grateful that Lee had a friend like me by his side during the war on the Death Firms. She mentioned that he spoke a great deal of me. Holly also thanked me for my service.”

“That is awfully nice of her,” Gabriela said. “We should invite her for dinner sometime.”

“Yes,” Harris said. “That would be nice, and that would give us a chance to get to know her a little better.”

“So, dinner should be done in about fifteen minutes,” she said. “Do you want to wake up Emilia, or should I?”

“Oh, I can wake her up,” he said. “I really don’t mind at all.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Gabriela, can you believe we can finally have a peaceful dinner without any fear?” Harris asked.

“Honestly, I cannot,” she said. “We have come a long way since the Death Firms, haven’t we?”

“We sure have,” he said with a smile that practically stretched out from one ear to the other. Harris chuckled softly to himself.