



# SLIMBIES

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## PART 1

## CHAPTER I

Ben hated breakfast.

Not because of the food... Though the powdered eggs and lukewarm oatmeal had the texture of old regrets, but because it meant sitting across from his mother, pretending everything was fine.

She was already at the table when he walked in. Threadbare cardigan. Spoon in hand. Watching him like she expected him to vanish mid-chew.

"Eat more," she said. "You look pale."

"Everyone looks pale," Ben muttered, sitting down.

It wasn't true. Most people here worked the fields or rooftops. They had sun-worn skin, calloused hands, heat in their blood. They were surviving. Working.

Ben looked like he'd been left in the basement too long. Pale didn't cover it. He was fading.

He poked at the oatmeal like it had wronged him.

His mother kept watching, each bite measured. Perfect posture. Perfect rhythm. She wasn't cruel, just calibrated. One of those people who never cracked, even when the world did. A wet blanket, sure. But one that came embroidered with his name on it, like she'd known from birth how to smother him properly.

He hated that about her.

He hated that she meant well.

He hated that he could never hate her enough.

Outside the window, the Delaware Safe Zone shimmered in the morning haze.

Chain-link fences wrapped in razor wire. Guard towers with mirrored scopes. Solar panels stretching out in every direction like glassy, dead sunflowers.

Rows of prefab homes lined up like Monopoly houses, each one a copy of the last. Beige. Gray. Beige again. Color-coded by hopelessness.

The illusion of safety had been pressure-washed into perfection. Nothing out of place. No room to rot.

Like if Barbie met the apocalypse.

You remember Barbie, right?

They called it the Delaware Protocol. A last-chance containment strategy when the Slimbie outbreak started burning through cities. The whole peninsula sealed off. One bridge in, one bridge out, patrolled like it was holy ground. Everyone who entered got scanned, tagged, cataloged.

Ben had been there when they added the second fence. The one with the razor wire. After the third wave. After it got close.

Delaware was the perfect vault.

Low population. Controlled border.

And the biggest air force base on the East Coast.

Humanity's little doomsday bunker.

At least, that's what the speeches said.

Across the room, a small speaker crackled to life.

"Remember: Community is what keeps us human.

Order is what keeps us alive.

We are not just surviving the Slimbie Crisis...

We are outlasting it.

Delaware will be the cradle of humanity's rebirth.

Let's give the future something worth rising for."

Carter's voice.

Warm. Clean. Practiced.

The DSZ clung to it like gospel.

And why wouldn't they?

He was young, decorated, camera-friendly. Last man to make the cover of GQ before the networks fell. The kind of guy who could hold a microphone and make genocide sound like progress.

Ben stirred his oatmeal and tried not to gag.

Everyone trusted Carter.

Everyone except Ben.

He was the face on every terminal, every speaker, every checkpoint welcome screen. Smiling. Guiding. Promising order like it was a birthright. The Zone's golden son.

Ben remembered when Carter was just a teenager with a chipped tooth and a busted baseball glove. Carter was a couple years older than him.

Back then, just after his dad passed, Carter was all he had. They used to play pickup games behind the old school, the field overgrown and full of mosquitos. Used to sneak beers from Carter's dad's cooler and talk about running away. New York, maybe. Even Canada if they could find a car that wouldn't stall out.

Ben was there the day Carter got his first security badge, back when the DSZ was still tents and whiteboards and hope.

Back when Carter still looked nervous.

Now he wore power like it fit.

Hero of the DSZ. Voice of the people.

The man who made survival look sleek.

Ben didn't buy it.

He didn't say it out loud anymore. People didn't like doubt. Doubt meant fear. Fear meant cracks. And the DSZ didn't tolerate cracks. Not in fences, not in morale.

So Ben smiled when Carter spoke.

He nodded along.



He even clapped once, during a broadcast.

But every time he heard Carter's voice, something twisted in his gut. Not because of what he said. He said all the right things. It was how easy it had become.

Like Carter had been waiting for the world to end.

It was supposed to be simple.

Take the shot.

Lose the weight.

Be happy.

GL-X was the fix. The final answer.

No more diets. No more gym memberships. No more shame.

It was easy.

They said it rewired your hunger. Crushed cravings. Boosted metabolism. Burned fat while you slept. And it did. It seemed like humanity had finally beaten obesity.

And people lined up for it like salvation. Didn't matter if you were rich, broke, sick, bored, or just tired of looking at yourself in the mirror.

Everyone wanted a shortcut to better.

The FDA greenlit it faster than anything in history. Big pharma had its hand in the pocket, and the public had their heads down, drooling. Influencers were slapping promo codes on apocalypse fuel. Half the world was injecting themselves before the second half had even finished reading the label.

It was almost funny to look back on. Right after Covid. After the screams of how the shot was a government plot to put something in the people. Cries of conspiracy and hoax and make believe.

And the same sheep that cried wolf lined up GL-X around the fucking corner.

Ben remembered the ads.

Smiling women on beaches. Shirtless dads with six-packs and dead eyes.

The voiceover always promised a new you.

No one asked what happened to the old one.

Then came Aunt Suzy.

Not his aunt, just a neighbor.

She lost fifty pounds in five weeks. Said it was like a fog had lifted. Like

her body had finally figured out how to live.

Ben remembered her smile. How bright it was. How dead her eyes felt.

And then one morning, they found her curled up on her lawn, her mouth soaked red.

She'd torn into her own dog.

Like jerky.

Eyes open. Stomach empty. Still chewing when they dragged her off.

Nobody called them Slimbies back then.

They didn't call them anything.

They whispered. Blamed weird shit. Immigrants. Satanists. Bigfoot.

Anything but the truth.

The shot didn't kill people. Not necessarily.

It rewired them.

Took away the hunger for food and replaced it with something meaner.

Something constant.

People started locking their doors during the day.

Started noticing when the neighbors stopped waving.

Started counting their pets.

They started buying guns.

Then the screaming started.

And then the lockdowns.

They didn't shut it all down because people were dying.

They shut it down because the wrong people were still walking around.

For a lot of people, the DSZ probably felt like paradise.

Hot meals. Working plumbing. Fences high enough to keep the monsters out and your conscience in.

Routine. Rules. Safety. The illusion held, if you didn't look too hard or care enough.

But Ben had looked.

He hadn't meant to see it. And up until then, he was fine living behind the facade.

But something changed.

Last week, a few hours past curfew, he'd been at his desk. Lights off, window cracked. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't stop checking. Something in his gut had been crawling for days.

That's when he saw it.

Behind the resource trailer.

Dragging itself through the gravel, slow and lopsided.

Skin pulled tight across the bones. Hollowed face. Eyes cloudy, but tracking movement.

Not fast. Not angry. Just there. Present.

And the guards...

They didn't panic.

Didn't raise their rifles.

Didn't bark orders or hit the alarm.

They walked up to it, calm, steady.

And they guided it.

Right into the medical building.

Not even a bulletproof look of concern.

Ben had frozen at the window. Every part of him screaming that this wasn't protocol. This wasn't what they were told. This wasn't normal.

He knew what that thing was.

He'd seen one before. Up close.

Years ago, back when everything was still falling apart, he'd watched one tear through the wall of a nursing home like it was drywall. It moved like starvation with teeth. Left claw marks in tile. Tore through nurses and orderlies like they were tissue.

It didn't get tired. It didn't stop.

It was a seventy-eight year old path of pure destruction.

That one had been shot until it stopped twitching.

This one? This one got escorted.

Every time he closed his eyes, he kept seeing the same thing

Those dry, sunken limbs scraping over gravel.

The slouch. The eyes.

Not dead. Not feral. Just... compliant.

Like it knew where it was going.

Ben hadn't really slept in days.

He drifted. Floated. Slipped under for minutes at a time before something dragged him back.

Sometimes it was the heat. Sometimes it was the voice in the speaker.

Now, it was the dream.

Always the same one.

Always too close.

The Slimbie leaned over him.

Its frame was sunken, ribs poking out of its thin, papery skin that sagged off the bone, joints twitching like it couldn't quite control the machinery anymore.

Its breath came in short, wet bursts.

It didn't growl. Didn't moan. Didn't lunge.

It spoke.

Not words he understood. Just syllables stretched out, broken, turned inside out. Like a radio tuned half a click off. Like something trying to remember how a throat works.

But it was language.

That was the worst part.

It wasn't just noise. It meant something.

And Ben could almost understand it.

Then the blood came.

Not from a wound.

Just a single, fat drop from its chin, hanging in the air like time forgot  
what gravity was.

It would hover there.

For an impossible second.

Right before it-

Ben always woke up before it hit the floor.

Sometimes gasping.

Sometimes fists clenched, heartbeat in his throat.

And every time, from the living room, his mother would sigh.

The same way she would react to a dripping faucet or a neighbor's dog  
barking too early.

The way she'd acted before all this.

That was the part that really stuck.

Not the Slimbie.

Not the dream.

The fact that she'd stopped asking if he was okay.

She wasn't scared.



She was oblivious.

Something was wrong here.

It had been wrong for a long time.

But Ben had stopped talking about it months ago.

The last time he said something, anything... Carter gave him that look.

The one that said, "Be careful who's listening."

The one that made smiling feel like survival.

So Ben learned the script.

Smile at the checkpoint. Nod during the speeches. Keep the real thoughts buried somewhere dark and soft, where even he couldn't get to them most days. And keep it, all of it, hidden from Carter.

He stared down at the oatmeal.

It had cooled into a solid. A flat, gray paste.

He dragged his spoon through it like he might hit escape on the other side.

Dig deep enough, maybe you find a tunnel. Maybe you fall through.

His mother kept eating in neat, mechanical bites. She didn't notice how far he'd drifted.

"I have to get out of here," he said.

The words slipped loose like they'd been waiting for the chance.

He hadn't meant to say them out loud.

But now that they were out, they felt good.

Honest. Heavy. Like something rotting in his chest had finally broken the seal.

He looked out the window.

The fences. The towers. The endless rows of solar panels catching the morning light like a million dead eyes staring up at a sky that would never change.

Everything still. Controlled. Designed to never change.

A car honked outside.

His mother didn't even flinch.

"There he is," she said. "You'd better hurry."

Ben stood.

Didn't answer.

Didn't look at her.

"I have to get out of here," he said again.

But this time, in his head.

And this time, he meant it.

Soon.

## CHAPTER II

Ben blinked at the wall like it might blink back.

It didn't.

The terminal had rebooted itself again for the third time this week. Just lit up mid-scan like it had something to say and then forgot the words.

He pretended to run diagnostics.

Same five keys. Same ghost clicks. Same humming loop of static before it landed on the DSZ home screen:

COMMUNITY. ORDER. SURVIVAL.

Underneath it, Carter's face.

Smiling like he meant it.

Eyes too warm. Teeth too clean. Skin filtered into something that didn't sweat anymore.

Ben looked away before he punched the screen... Again.

The tech depot smelled like melted plastic and wet pennies. Ozone, hot circuitry, a dash of body rot. The kind of smell that lived in your clothes after you left. The kind that didn't scrub out.

He missed deodorant. Real deodorant. Not the gray paste they handed out in paper packets labeled Fresh #3 that somehow smelled like warm vitamins and despair. This stuff was depression in a stick.

He used to wear Teen Spirit. The purple one. Thought it made him smell like a rock star. Thirteen-year-old Ben didn't know what the hell a rock star actually smelled like, but it definitely wasn't this.

The depot was a graveyard of old gear and broken promises.  
Busted solar panels stacked in bins. Drone rotors cracked in half.  
Boards burnt out and labeled in marker: IRRECOVERABLE.

Everything cataloged.

Filed by severity.

As if entropy could be alphabetized.

Ben's job, officially, was "systems maintenance and solar routing oversight."

Which was a long way of saying "don't cause problems."

They stuck people like him back here.

Actually, no. Not people like him.

Just him.

And that was fine.

Back here, nobody asked questions.

Nobody noticed what you were building.

Nobody cared how much time you spent “repairing” things that didn’t go back into circulation.

It gave him privacy.

And time to plan.

The bike was behind a rusted locker in the far supply hall.

Not logged. Not tagged. Not assigned.

Technically, it didn’t exist.

Which made it perfect.

Ben had built it one scrap at a time over the past year. Quietly.

Carefully. Like a priest assembling a god from spare parts.

The electric-assist motor came from a mail depot that had collapsed in a storm. Nobody missed it. The solar caps? From a tower on the south perimeter that nobody patrolled anymore. Wiring from a busted medical bed. Chain scavenged from an old exercise bike with someone's dried sweat still on the grips.

Frankensteined. Wired wrong. Half-rusted.

But his.

He called it the Wireframe.

Not because it sounded cool. It absolutely didn't.

But because that's how it felt to ride it.

Exposed. Jittery. Held together by tension and hope.

It looked like it could fall apart if you breathed too hard near it.

Just like him.

"Ben?"

The voice came from the doorway.

He turned.

Carter.

Black shirt, sleeves rolled. No jacket. No badge visible, but it didn't matter. Everyone knew who he was.

No guards with him. No clipboard. No pretense of being official.

Just Carter.

Smiling like he always did. Half charm, half campaign.

"Can I come in?" Carter asked, already walking in.

Ben didn't answer, but nodded once anyway. Didn't trust his voice to sound normal.

Carter's eyes moved slowly, like he was seeing the place for the first time. Like he didn't already know every inch of it, every tag number, every item logged into whatever surveillance terminal he had access to.

His hand skimmed across a table of cracked drone rotors. Picked one up. Put it down. Like he was playing detective.

Ben's stomach knotted when Carter drifted closer to the locker. The locker.



He stepped in front of it.

Not fast. Not defensive.

Just... enough. Casual, or so he hoped. The kind of movement that said I'm tired and bored, not I'm hiding something.

Carter paused. Looked at him. Said nothing.

Then turned his attention to a busted solar chip near the bench.

"Lot of junk in here," Carter said.

Ben tried to shrug. "We all have our gifts."

It came out wrong. Too clipped. Like a cough dressed up as confidence.

Carter didn't blink. Just smiled wider.

"You've always been the clever one," he said. "Smart enough to stay quiet."

He said it warmly. Like a compliment. Maybe it was.

Ben said nothing. His hands were still. He made them stay that way.

"I always appreciated that about you," Carter added. "Even back then."

Back when you were just a kid. Back when you still believed me.

He didn't say that part. But Ben heard it anyway.

They stood there for a few seconds more, just long enough for the silence to feel like pressure. Then Carter stepped past him, toward the door.

"I'll see you around, Ben," he said. Already halfway out.

"Big things are coming."

And just like that, he was gone.

Ben crept out well after lights-out.

The depot key weighed heavy in his pocket. He hadn't stolen it. Not officially. But he hadn't exactly signed it out either.

He moved slow. Quiet. Every sound felt louder than it was.

The yard was darker than usual. The clouds had rolled in and swallowed the moon like fingers rolling over a flashlight. The only light came from

the perimeter towers, sweeping in intervals like angry searchlights.

He crouched near the rusted locker, glove already on, fingers cold.

Slid the Wireframe free.

Tires deflated just enough to silence the drag. Chain oiled. Battery capped and tucked beneath the seat.

It looked worse than usual.

Frame rusted, wires exposed, one pedal bent.

Beautiful.

He wheeled it out across the gravel, hand gripping the seat post, other curled around the handlebars. The chain clinked once. He winced.

The first press of the pedal lit the panel. Just a flicker. Amber. Then green.

His breath caught.

He pushed again.

The bike sputtered forward with a mechanical wheeze, like an asthmatic blender on its last life.

Not loud. But not quiet, either.

A sweep of light cut across the depot.

Ben froze.

The beam moved past.

Then stopped.

Hovered.

His foot dropped to the ground, the Wireframe wobbling just enough to betray how close he was to tipping.

The spotlight clicked off.

He didn't move.

Didn't breathe.

Thirty full seconds. Maybe longer.

Then, finally, he exhaled.

He started forward again. Slow. Careful.

One loop around the far end of the yard. Not even a lap. Just enough to prove the motor worked. Just enough to know it could.

The battery gauge flickered at half. Probably ten miles.

Not much.

But ten miles was everything.

Ten miles was the bridge.

Back in his room, Ben pulled the atlas from under his mattress.

The cover was long gone. The pages had swollen with years of humidity.

But it was still legible.

He laid it out on the floor, smoothing the creases with both hands. The paper was soft in a way that meant it wouldn't survive many more openings. But this wasn't for keeps. This was for escape.

He traced Route 1 with his finger.

South to north. Up through the dead towns.

Stopped at the circle of faded red ink around the Roth Bridge.

Not Route 9. That bridge was gone. It collapsed in the first winter.

Not Route 13. Bombed out to stop the outbound spread. Or inbound.

Both knowing Carter.

Only the Roth stood. The last artery. A checkpoint to keep people in and everything else out.

Someone, maybe his dad, had drawn the circle years ago. Why, he'd probably never know. But that didn't matter anymore.

It was faint, but still there. Still breathing under the paper like a scar.

He flipped forward a few pages, scanning the scribbled notes he'd made in the margins over the last year:

South gate patrol blind spot. Confirm rotation.

Storm tunnel map? Partial collapse. Route 9 unusable.

Roth Bridge = ten miles. Uphill.

Power drain risk after mile 6.

Charge packs? Still not enough.

Still worth it.

Next to the atlas lay his overlay.

Five sheets of notebook paper, taped at the seams, curling at the corners.

It looked like something a kid would hand in late for a science fair.

But it was his.

Every inch of it.

And it sat in the middle of a room that hadn't changed in years.

Posters still clung to the walls. They were faded, curling, edges yellowed from heat and time.

A Fallout: New Vegas promo, one corner taped and re-taped where it kept peeling.

Another from Venture Bro's cartoon with Dr. Girlfriend painted to look like the cover from Silence of the Lambs.

And a ripped paper sign, still taped to the door in jagged Sharpie:

BEN'S ROOM — NO GIRLS ALLOWED

The dresser was covered in stickers from bands that hadn't put out a song since before the sky turned wrong.

The blinds were warped and cracked, chewed by the family dog that died before the Slimbies ever showed up.

The bedspread hadn't changed either. Same twin mattress. Same faded Ghostbusters cover, full of loose threads and small holes worn through by years of elbows and knees and restless sleep.

He looked up at the ceiling.

The plastic stars were still there.

Dozens of them.

Stuck up there since he was twelve.

They didn't glow anymore.

But the tape still held.

This place was supposed to be temporary.

Just until the outbreak settled.

Just until things stabilized.

Just until the world found its footing again.

Now it felt like a tomb.

Not in the haunted way.

In the sealed shut and labeled permanent way.

Ben lay back on the bed, the Ghostbusters comforter crackling faintly under him.

He stared at the ceiling. At the stars that didn't glow.

They weren't even stars anymore, just plastic outlines of something that used to mean something.

Just like this room.

Just like everything.



From the other room, his mother was humming again.

That same tuneless melody. The one she always defaulted to when she didn't want to feel anything.

He didn't know what was waiting out there.

Past the depot.

Past the fences.

Past the Roth Bridge.

Maybe it wasn't better.

But it would be different.

And that was enough.

It had to be.

## CHAPTER III

The fences weren't the hard part.

The hard part was lying still in a bed he was about to abandon, pretending this wasn't goodbye.

Ben stared at the ceiling like it might blink first. The plastic stars still clung up there. Dusty, cracked, sun-bleached to piss yellow. They didn't glow anymore. Haven't in years. But the tape held. It always did.

His mother was humming again from the other room. That same warped melody she always defaulted to when the world got too loud. It looped like static on a busted cassette. A lullaby built from muscle memory and unresolved grief.

He didn't say goodbye.

Couldn't.

Wouldn't.

It was easier this way. No teary confrontation, no drawn-out hug, no guilt bomb. Just slip the knife in quiet and hope it didn't twist on the way out. She'd pretend she didn't hear him leave. He'd pretend she

never expected him to stay.

They were good at pretending.

His boots were already laced. Pack already zipped. The key was heavy in his pocket in a way that made his spine ache. Maybe from fear. Maybe from hope. Same difference now.

Thirty-eight minutes between patrol rotations.

That was the window.

A rusted-out storm drain on the west end, low enough to duck into, pliable enough to pry loose. A soft patch of dirt beyond the solar field where the inner fence had a sag. If he hit the compost corridor by the ten-minute mark, he could cross the ag tanks without alerting the tower. And if the Wireframe's charge held, and the motor didn't stall on the uphill...

He could make it to the Roth Bridge before sunup.

Big if.

But he'd already said his real goodbye months ago.

When he stopped calling this place home.

And before he knew it...

It was time.

He moved like smoke.

Past the depot. Down through the compost corridor, where the stench of rot stuck to your teeth if you breathed too deep. Across the catwalk above the ag tanks. Thirty feet of rusted metal hanging over recycled sludge that looked like soup and smelled like war crimes.

He wore his old wrestling shoes for grip.

No tread left, but they knew his feet.

They knew how to hold when it mattered.

Every step sounded louder than it was. That was the paranoia talking.

Or maybe the part of his brain that still wanted to survive.

He hit the ladder. Slid down fast, gloves catching. Landed hard on both feet and crouched beside the locker where the Wireframe was waiting.

Still there. Untouched. Holy.

He ran a hand over the frame like it was a prayer.

One quick pedal. Panel blinked amber... then green.

Alive.

“Okay,” he whispered. “Okay, okay. I’m really doing this.”

The outer fence was already cut. He’d clipped it three nights ago with a salvaged bolt cutter and a half-dead blowtorch. Covered it in brush and scraps to make it look forgotten.

It peeled back like fabric.

The inner fence was less forgiving.

He touched it with the back of his glove, just enough to test the charge. A jolt snapped through the fabric and stung his knuckles. Still live. But the gloves held. Mostly.

He ducked low. Slid through the narrow opening on his stomach, elbows dragging. The fence edge snagged and tore a line across his back, shocking him as he crawled.

He clenched his teeth, trying not to make a sound.

Nearly flawless.

Except.

In the distance, the bridge rose from the fog like a dead god.

The Roth Bridge stood tall. Skeletal, rust-worn, cables like exposed veins pulled tight against the sky. Its towers punched into the mist with their tops lost to cloud. The lights were dark. The checkpoint booths empty.

But Ben knew better.

Empty never meant safe.

He straddled the Wireframe. Breath tight. Legs already sore. Gravel crunched beneath the tires.

"Come on, girl," he whispered to the bike. "Just ten miles."

He pressed down.

The motor kicked in with a cough and a sputter, like an old man waking up too fast. The frame shuddered, but held.

He rode.

Concrete passed in a blur. The climb was steeper than he remembered, his thighs burned, lungs clawed for air. Chain squealed. The motor groaned like it wanted to die but wasn't allowed.

Halfway up, a hum rose behind him.

Not sirens. Just a low mechanical vibration in the air... wrong and rising.

A surveillance drone lifted from one of the silent towers, blinking to life like it had just remembered its job. It wasn't fast. But it was watching.

Ben didn't stop.

He ducked low. Pushed harder. Dodged around a sun-bleached sedan with half a skeleton still seatbelted in, its jaw locked open like it had been screaming at the end. A row of SUVs sat rusting, doors open, vines curling in through broken windows.

Another drone buzzed to life ahead, whirring in slow arcs, scanning.

He veered left. Skipped the guardrail. Sparks spat from the rim as it scraped. The Wireframe howled. So did Ben.

The first drone passed overhead. Paused. Turned.

Its camera lens whirred. A soft red dot blinked to life.

Ben didn't look up.

He kicked his body low, gripped the handles harder and shoved his whole body into each push like he could outrun electricity.

The battery warning blinked yellow. One bar left.

The second drone tilted, tracking. Too far to grab him. Too close to miss.

He cut hard off the ramp into the overgrowth. Tires slid through moss, vines, leaves, gravel. The Wireframe hit something and jumped. He flew off, landed hard in the dirt, hands tearing open on rock.

He didn't stop.

Back up. One breath. Back on the seat. Legs screaming.

Branches slapped his face. One caught his lip. He tasted copper.



He didn't stop.

The forest took him. The bridge vanished behind a curtain of green.

The hum faded.

The light disappeared.

Only the breath stayed.

His.

Loud.

Alive.

Was this it?

Had he made it?

Ben didn't know. His legs didn't care. They kept pedaling long after the bridge vanished behind the trees, long after the buzz of drones faded into nothing but memory and nerve.

The Wireframe stuttered once on a broken branch. He steadied it. Kept going.

He rode for another three hours.

Sunlight crept behind him, slow and pale, like it wasn't sure it wanted to be part of this world anymore. The trees thinned. The road didn't.

It fell apart.

What used to be pavement was now more suggestion than surface. Cracked to hell, grass growing through the lines, whole chunks sunken into the earth like it gave up holding shape. Street signs leaned like drunks. Most had lost their letters. Just rust ghosts and empty silhouettes.

No cars.

No voices.

Just the sound of tires crunching old gravel and the dry wheeze of the motor dying slow.

The battery gave out around mile twelve. A long, low beep, and then silence.

Ben didn't curse. He just kept pedaling.

By midday, his knees screamed. His stomach twisted. He hadn't eaten since before the run. His back burned from the fence cut. His palms were raw from the crash. His body wasn't built for this kind of freedom.

But he kept going.

Eventually, he saw it: a bus stop, barely standing. The shelter's glass was cracked, half the roof torn off. The bench inside was crooked, one leg splintered.

Perfect.

He coasted to a stop. Pulled the Wireframe under the shelter like it was a dying animal he couldn't leave in the sun. Then collapsed onto the bench.

His lungs pulled in air like they hadn't earned it yet.

It smelled like dirt.

Like mold.

Like freedom.

And something else.

A sound... Low, sharp, alive.

Ben stopped like time stood still.

It hadn't come from the trees.

It had come from beneath the bench.

He leaned forward slowly, blood still pounding in his ears, heart trying to crawl out through his throat. He didn't breathe. Didn't speak. Just tilted his head, inch by inch, and looked.

A dog.

White fur streaked with grime. Gaunt. Eyes sharp. She crouched low, pressed against the shelter's back wall like she might become part of it if she tried hard enough.

One ear stood upright. The other had a brown patch and a twitch.

Her ribs were a map of desperation.

She growled again. Barely audible, more a warning than a threat. Her eyes locked on his.

Deep brown eyes with dirty white eyelashes. Not wild. Not rabid. Just tired. Like she was doing the math on whether he was worth the risk.

Ben stayed still.

No sudden moves. No words. He reached slowly into his pack, fingers brushing the edge of the last oat brick. Crumbled. Dry. Worthless.

Perfect.

He broke off a chunk. Held it in his palm, then placed it gently on the ground between them and backed a few steps.

She didn't move.

He set another a few inches away. Then another.

Minutes passed.

She sniffed. Edged forward. Paused. Sniffed again. Took one bite. Chewed like she hadn't eaten in a week, which maybe she hadn't.

Another piece. Closer.

Ben stayed frozen, hand out.

After five minutes, she was curled beside his foot. One paw tucked under her chin. One eye still half-open.

He slowly held out his hand.

She sniffed it.

Then, quietly, licked his palm.

A frayed pink collar hung around her neck, held together by grime and time. A red, heart-shaped tag dangled from it, scuffed and scratched to hell. Most of the lettering was gone but under the dirt, just barely, he could still make out a single word:

GIRL.

Ben smiled. "Guess we're both strays now."

She blinked. Then tucked in tighter against his leg, let out a sigh that sounded more human than dog.

"You can stay with me as long as you like, Girl."

She didn't move, but her ears flicked like maybe she understood. Like maybe someone had said that to her before.

Ben leaned back on the cracked bench, head tilted toward the sky, the glass roof half-collapsed above him. The sun filtered in sideways, and everything smelled like dust.

He closed his eyes.

And for the first time in years, something stirred in his chest.

Not fear.

Not dread.

Not even hope.

Just warmth.

She stayed curled against him, breathing slow.

And Ben slept.

## CHAPTER IV

The further north Ben rode, the quieter it got.

Something about it felt wrong.

Before the world broke, heading north meant more cars, more lights, more people. Honking, shouting, concrete stretching like it was trying to catch up with itself. But now?

Now the world exhaled.

No more towers buzzing. No Carter preaching survival through order. Just the creak of the Wireframe under him, the occasional wheeze from the motor assist, and the soft pad of Girl's paws on broken asphalt.

She trotted beside him like she'd been doing it her whole life. Light on her feet, head low, always listening. She didn't bark. Hardly growled. But when her ears twitched, he knew to pay attention.

The road rolled out in front of them like a memory that hadn't decided whether to stay or fade. Every seven to ten miles, there'd be the bones of a town, just like before. Same rhythm. Old horse trails and early rail



stops, placed by how far a body could travel before dusk hit.

Now, all those places were quiet.

Signs rusted into illegibility. Gas stations gutted. Buildings leaning like they were just waiting for an excuse to fall. Some collapsed in on themselves. Others looked like they were being eaten by trees. Nature didn't reclaim things with fire or teeth, she just wrapped herself around it and squeezed until it forgot it was ever something else.

Ben didn't stop unless he had to.

He hit Glasgow around late morning, or what was left of it. There wasn't much. A diner swallowed by ivy. A hardware store where the aisles had collapsed into the basement. He picked through what was left like a raccoon in a thrift shop: two sealed cans of something unlabeled, a bottle of water that didn't smell like metal, and a roll of duct tape that still had teeth on the edge.

Not great. But not nothing.

Girl stayed close, nose to the wind. She didn't whine. She didn't bolt. She just watched.

They didn't talk, but he swore they understood each other.

Ben moved with purpose. Kept his eyes forward. Cities were worse. Always had been. Too many corners. Too many hiding spots. Too many things already hiding. The bigger the city, the bigger the outbreak.

And now the road ahead felt like it was holding its breath.

By the time they reached Bear, the sun was high and angry.

They stopped in what used to be an elementary school. An old single-story, flat-roofed building. The kind of place that smelled like pencil shavings and spilled milk back when the world made sense. The back half of the roof had caved in, and ivy had crawled in through the cracks like it was taking attendance.

Ben stepped over a rusted bike rack and into the ruined hallway. Dust swirled in the light like memory. Lockers sagged open, some half-filled with notebooks swollen from rain, their covers warped like burnt toast. Girl sniffed one and sneezed.

In what had once been a classroom, rows of desks sat crooked and broken, the blackboard split down the middle like someone had tried to carve their way out with math. He found a few torn-up workbooks

beneath a pile of plaster. Just basic stuff. Word problems about apples and trains.

He flipped through one absentmindedly.

If a train leaves New York at 9:00 A.M. traveling 60 mph, and a second train leaves Boston at 9:30 A.M. going 75 mph...

Ben stared at it for a beat.

He didn't remember the answer. But he remembered Carter reading it out loud once, years ago, to a class Ben barely belonged in. Some volunteer day or early training exercise, back when the world was still duct-taped together.

Carter had made a whole scene of it. Did the voices. Made the class laugh. Winked when Ben raised his hand with the answer.

That was Carter. Back then.

He closed the book.

Ben stood there for a while, holding the math book like it might turn into something else if he waited long enough.

In the hallway, something small caught his eye.

A child's backpack. Pink. Cartoon-stamped. The zipper half-open, like it was waiting for the next day to start. Rain had wiped out the name on the tag, but a plastic triceratops still clung to the zipper. One eye missing. Horn chipped.

Ben crouched beside it.

Didn't touch it. Just looked.

Girl padded up next to him. Sat down quietly. Her breath steamed in the dusty light.

They didn't speak. Not in words anyway, but Ben felt her watching him. Felt something pass between them, quiet and mutual. An understanding.

Then he stood.

They shared a ration bar in the ruins of the lunchroom, drank some warm water, and moved on.

Around the ruins of Christiana, Ben found a half-standing fire station.

The trucks were long gone. So were the doors. But inside, past a scorched locker room and what looked like a collapsed sleeping bay, he found something miraculous:

A sink that still worked.

Not pressurized, just runoff, gravity-fed from a cracked cistern on the roof. But the pipe groaned, and water came out clear. That was more than he could ask for.

He scrubbed his face. His hands. Peeled off his jacket and went at the grime beneath. Five years of sweat and DSZ air and all the things he hadn't wanted to think about ran down the basin in little gray spirals.

The kind of filth that felt like it lived in the bones.

When he looked up into the cracked mirror, a stranger stared back.

How long had it been since he'd really looked at himself? Was this really him?

He was thinner than he remembered. Jaw sharper. Skin pink and raw from scrubbing. Eyes sunken but focused. Alert. Awake.

Not the scared kid Carter used to clap on the back and steer through checkpoints. Not the ghost sneaking oatmeal under observation. Not a resident.

Something else.

Someone else.

He didn't mind the reflection.

At the top of the hill, the world opened.

Below them lay the bones of a town. Shattered parking lots, peeled-open storefronts, twisted road signs. Probably what used to be a rest stop or a commuter hub outside Newark, but now it just looked like a scar.

And in the center of it...

Movement.

Ben lay belly-down on the ridge, eyes locked on the shapes below.

He squinted. It looked like static at first. Like his eyes couldn't quite hold the image. But then the shapes resolved, and his gut turned to ice.

Dozens of them. Maybe more.

Slimbies.

They swirled through the open lot like a school of diseased fish, weaving between wreckage and bones with an awful kind of grace. Bodies bent the wrong way. Limbs twitching. Skin like melted wax hung from bone like wet laundry. One of them dragged a leg so long it kicked up dust behind it. Another twitched every three steps, like something in its nervous system still hadn't given up the fight.

It was wrong. They were wrong.

And the sound...

Not moaning. Not screaming. Something worse.

Clicking.

Rhythmic. Patterned. Like a chorus of broken teeth tapping out Morse code on hollow wood. It rose and fell like speech. Like a language. One that didn't care if you could understand it, only that you knew it was happening.

Girl whimpered, low and soft.

Ben pressed a hand to her back. Not to quiet her, just to remind himself she was real.

Then one of them paused.

Sniffed the air.

Tilted its head like it heard something.

Ben didn't wait to see if it turned.

He slid back down the hill, smooth and slow, Girl right beside him.

No rush. No sudden movement.

Just the quiet panic of a man who knew better.

They didn't run.

Didn't have to.

The feeling in his gut was louder than any alarm. It sent a chill down his spine and raised the hair on his arms.

Back on the Wireframe, he veered west, a wide arc around the city.

Didn't stop riding until the skyline was a memory and the



click-click-click of bone on concrete was something he could pretend he never heard.

That night, they made camp just off an old service road west of Ogletown, tucked under the broken span of an overpass that hadn't seen a car in years.

The concrete still held, mostly. Cracked and moss-lined, but strong enough to keep the cold wind off. Vines curled through the rebar like nature had decided to braid its own kind of support beams.

Ben struck the flint a few times until a spark caught the nest of dry bark and leaf pulp he'd built. It smoked, hissed, flared. A small fire. Enough.

Girl circled once, then settled beside him. Her body warm against his calf, head on his boot. She sighed like this was the first night she hadn't had to earn her breath.

Ben leaned back against the concrete support wall and looked up.

No ceiling this time. Just sky.

Stars filled it. Thousands of them. No towers, no haze, no light pollution. Just open black speckled with pinpricks of maybe.

They reminded him of the paper stars stuck to his bedroom ceiling.

The ones that hadn't glowed in years.

These ones glowed fine.

"We're out here," he whispered, mostly to himself.

Girl didn't stir.

Ben curled tighter into his jacket, pulled his pack close. The fire crackled. The road didn't make a sound.

The world was dead in every way that mattered. But not here. Not right now.

Tonight wasn't about tomorrow.

Tonight was just about not being eaten.