

The Intro

The apocalypse finally came around, and nobody really noticed.

Sure, there were a few loony bastards who started screaming about the End Times when that flu epidemic came across the Pacific and started killing people in San Diego. And yes, a couple armchair prognosticators told anyone who would listen that the high price of gas meant the end of civilization. But even when the war for South American oil fields spilled over into Mexico and as far as the southern bits of the US of A, most people just sort of shrugged and said, 'what are you gonna do?'

The thing is, if the apocalypse had happened in a day, everyone would have run around in a panic and started stockpiling canned goods. But when it takes fifty years for civilization to slide into the toilet, people just don't really notice. There's an analogy in there about a frog and a hotplate, but the point is, the end of the world kind of slid past, and left the survivors wondering what happened. Or, in most cases, it didn't leave survivors at all.

There are no records about this sort of thing, and it's not like there are conscientious historians out there recording everything for posterity, but the common number you hear is that, over that fifty-odd year period, the population of the world was thinned out by something like 80 percent. That means if you knew five people at the beginning, four of them were dead when it was all over. And it's not really all over, it's more like we quit counting.

Diseases still kill people, and since all the free clinics have been looted, burned, or turned into armed bunkers, people die from Tokyo Flu even faster than they did before. But without as many people to carry the disease, it doesn't spread like it used to. When we see someone with yellow eyes and blood coming out of their ears, most people shoot them and burn the body, just to be safe.

Same goes for the fallout. Sure, when those Salvadoran radicals blew a nuke in Denver, a few million people bought the farm. But now we all know to stay away from the Rockies, and when a radioactive storm cloud blows through, there just aren't enough people clustered up to lose a whole bunch at a time. Mostly, when it starts raining, we all get inside and stay there until the roads dry.

So things were bad all over, but it was so gradual that we just adapted. When gas hit a hundred bucks a gallon and biker gangs took over all the fuel reserves, we bought solar cars. When entire neighborhoods were crawling with sick people half out of their minds, we moved out of the suburbs and into militarized buildings in the city. We learned to shoot, to brawl, to steal and to kill, but it happened so slow that we never even realized that the world had come to an end.

Probably the biggest indicator that we were the ragtag remnants of humanity was when the government closed up shop. The president died from corn flu, and took half his cabinet with him before he went. New elections were scheduled, but never really happened, and then when some asshat terrorist nuked DC, I guess they just threw in

the towel and went home to their families. That didn't happen until the end, though, and it was only possible because there was no jet fuel, no National Guard, and our communication networks had been reduced to the occasional radio show. Basically, while it caught a lot of people flat-footed, nobody was really surprised when Uncle Sam decided to call it a day.

Now, I don't really know how the rest of the country looks, outside what I hear from the occasional traveler passing through town, but down here in Dallas, we've got it pretty good. At least, we're pretty good compared to California, where a handful of gun-toting thugs steal whatever they want and kill whatever they don't, or most of the Midwest, where the corn flu made everyone who survived it crazy as a shithouse bat, until they're all running around with lawnmower blades, caving in heads and eating each other.

Here in Dallas, we've got a shred of civilized order. There are lots of gangs, and lots of crime, but we've also got a wall around the center of the city, and folks eke out lives in high-rise buildings where investment banks used to have cubicle farms and call centers. People here are street cleaners and food vendors, message couriers and scavengers. The sheriffs boot anyone who can't make a living, which sounds a little harsh, until you consider that there's just not enough to go around if we take in every panhandler and sob story looking for a free meal.

Me, I'm a taxi driver. The name's Winston Creed. I inherited a solar-powered car from my old man, and live in a little garage at the edge of town, not too far from the Wall. There's enough room for the car, a gun locker, a tub and a lumpy mattress on the floor. The building used to be bigger, but half of it burned down in food riots thirty years ago, and it's never really been worth fixing back up again. It's easier to put concrete barricades on the exterior walls and steel reinforcement on the doors if I don't try to expand, and besides, I've got everything I need.

Of course, the biggest thing I need isn't even in the garage. It's in the Ross Building downtown, where Arlen Waites holds court. He saw the end coming, and got together with a few hundred of his closest friends and set himself up as the local ruling authority. He took over a water refinery in South Dallas, set up convoys to get water from Lake Ray Hubbard, and now he controls all the drinking water for everybody who lives inside the Wall. The sheriffs work directly for him, and while he recognized the value of law, he also recognizes the value of being the only guy in town who can burn down your house and kill your family if you steal his bread. He's a gangster and an extortionist, a thug and a villain, but he's also the only reason people in Dallas can sleep without a gun under their pillows and a dog the size of a piano.

He's also my boss.

Well, technically, he's everybody's boss. If you run a business in Dallas, you do it at his leisure. You pay your dues when his boys come to collect, and if he decides you need to open an hour early, well, you better get used to being a morning person. When one of his boys wants a ride from me, he gets it free, and in return, I get to keep whatever fares I pull down on my own. It's a rough life, and it sure isn't fair, but it beats fighting off raiders or starving to death.

We hear rumors every now and then that things are better in Europe, but I don't put much stock in them. For one thing, it doesn't matter - it's not like we can hop a 747 and take a red-eye to London. And these kinds of rumors are everywhere - Canada still has a government, France has farmland, Russia has airplanes. People like to think about how much better it is somewhere else, but not me. Arlen Waites might be a bastard, but he's saved a lot more lives than he's taken, and if you ask me, things could be a lot worse.

And then, sometimes they are a lot worse.

The Setup

It was a gray day in North Texas. Grayer than normal, and that's saying something. I was in what was left of Sundance Square, which used to be a bar-hopping tourist trap in Fort Worth but was now a handful of barricaded buildings and burned-out storefronts. My last fare had been unusually accommodating, and left me a fat tip on top of the hefty fee it had cost him to get a ride through the wasteland of the Mid Cities. Maybe he was just feeling guilty because we got attacked by drug-addled bandits outside Six Flags, but I didn't much care why. I was just glad I was going to have enough cash to fix up the bullet holes.

So there I was, idling outside a diner offering seriously overpriced chili that was almost certainly made of diseased cats, and trying to decide if I should go inside and grab a hot meal before I had to fight my way back through Grand Prairie. Motion in my rearview mirror made me look up, and I saw a six-foot-tall, long-legged pile of trouble running right for the car.

She was stunning. Long red hair bounced in curls around her head and shoulders, and her clothes would have been stylish and expensive even before the oil shortage shut down international trade. Her slinky tight dress showed off every curve, highlighting the parts I knew I wanted and hiding them just out of sight, all at the same time. How she ran in those heels, I couldn't begin to guess, especially since she was also carrying a big oversized purse in both arms. For a couple seconds, I couldn't think at all, just stare at this incredibly unlikely vision as she ran toward me, yelling at the top of her lungs.

I finally snapped back when I realized she was hollering to hail my cab, and she was pretty intent on it. I unlocked the back doors just as she reached the car, and she slid in and pulled the door shut in one liquid move.

"Dallas," she panted, "and step on it."

I turned around and fell right into her eyes. She was gorgeous, alright, the kind of girl a guy like me could only hope to spot on the cover of some pre-crash fashion magazine. Green eyes, wet red lips, and a smoky look that said mayhem followed this girl around like a fan club. Even through the bulletproof plexi, I could see she was the hottest female I had ever met.

"Can we drive?" she asked, a little insistent. She broke my gaze and glanced behind her, nervously clutching her giant bag and scanning the street.

I came to my senses. "You got money? This ride ain't free, sister."

She turned back and looked at me with a stare that could melt steel. "No, I don't. But I can pay in trade."

That figured. A dame this gorgeous was likely to do just fine selling the one thing she did better than everyone else. And from her clothes and jewelry and makeup, she was pretty damned good.

I shrugged. What can I say, I'm a man. It was this, or kick her out of my cab and drive home empty. Besides, this was the best offer I was ever going to get for a woman this hot. I turned around and killed the 'available' sign on the top of the car.

That's when I saw the heavies rounding the corner, tugging guns from inside their camo jackets and yelling for me to stop.

The girl saw them, too, and let out a little shriek. "Oh God Drive!!!"

For just a second, I thought about throwing open the back door and kicking her to the curb. No sex was worth a bullet. Maybe, just for a second, I had a premonition of how bad things were going to get. Maybe, for that split second, the universe slapped the back of my head and said, "what are you thinking?" as if to let me know that the leggy package in the back seat was more trouble than I ever wanted.

But then she whimpered a little and said, "Please," all quiet and scared, and suddenly I was furious at the two gun-toting thugs rushing my cab. They weren't getting my prize! This girl was going home with me! I shut down the voice in the back of my head that told me how stupid I was about to be and dropped the hammer.

My foot slammed to the floor, and while one hand was busy twisting the wheel away from the curb, the other was flicking the switches to drop steel shutters over the windows. Sure, the windows are bulletproof glass, but that stuff still chips like a bastard, and it's nearly impossible to replace. I was just in time, too, because bullets started spattering off the shutters and body armor as I pulled away, tires smoking.

"I hope you're worth all this, lady." Looking through the little slit in the windshield, I could see a couple more goons running out into the road with two-by-fours. I didn't need to get close up on them to know there were nails sticking up through them, and while my tires are armored against gunfire, driving over a pile of rusted nails was going to leave me riding on the rims.

"If you get me out of this, you can spend the night," she replied, and that was enough for me. I pulled a lever under the dash, and the pointed armor on the front of the car lowered to scrape the asphalt. I barreled past the roadblock as the tire traps went skittering past, caught and thrown by my improvised snow plow.

After that, it was pretty clear sailing. A few more bullets pinged off the armor, and I invented a few new curses as I thought about how long I was going to spend banging the dents out of the metal slats. Then we were clear, on the freeway, headed for home. I retracted the shutters and settled in for the drive.

She didn't talk much on the way, at least not to me. Every now and then she would open her purse and mutter something I couldn't hear, and I wondered what she might have stolen that got the locals so riled up. But it didn't really matter to me - this was a business transaction, and that purse was none of my business.

The drive home was a lot smoother than the drive out. I looped north through Irving, and

only had to stop once at a toll booth set up by a few enterprising survivors in the middle of the freeway. They were smart enough not to overcharge, making it worth more to just pay a few bucks than have to replace the underarmor if they happened to blow a claymore under the car. Aside from that, the drive was delightfully uneventful, and after an hour or so, we got through the western gate and into Home Sweet Dallas.

"Where to?"

"The Adolphus," she said, and now I knew that this dame had some pull. Before the crash, the Adolphus was a swanky hotel, and after Waites took over, he turned it into the most expensive high-rise apartments in Dallas. He didn't live there - he had his penthouse at the Hyatt Regency - but the Adolphus was the highest-rent address in the city. I had dropped lots of fares outside, but never been through the doors. I would have been tossed on my ear if I tried to deliver flowers.

We pulled up outside the hotel and a doorman stepped up, opened the back door, and offered his hand. I turned around, wondering how we were going to work this. I couldn't exactly leave the cab on the sidewalk, and I was damned sure not planning on having her over to my bombed-out garage.

She pulled out a card and passed it through the slot in the plexiglass. "Give this to the doorman. He'll bring you to my apartment." The card just said, 'Eva', and had her apartment number.

She stepped out of the cab and waltzed into the hotel as if nothing had ever ruffled her feathers, casually holding that huge purse under one arm and swinging her hips with a motion that would make grown men break down and cry.

I didn't waste any time getting back to the garage. I parked the car, washed up with the fastest bath I ever took, and double-checked all the locks before I waved down a rickshaw and headed back to the Adolphus. The card worked like a charm - the doorman waved me inside and walked me up to the eighth floor in an elevator so plush, you might never know the world had come to an end. He took me down a hallway and knocked on a door, and when the door opened, there she was again, smiling and inviting me in.

I don't need to bore you with details, and I never was a kiss-and-tell kind of guy. I'll just say it was a hell of a night, and when I finally passed out between her silk sheets, I slept like a dead man.

Which, it turns out, was almost an ironic turn of phrase.

The Hook

The first notion I had that something wasn't right was when a hand grenade went off in my ballsack. I sat straight up, gasping for air, trying to scream, and realized that there were two very unpleasant men in the room. One of them had just punched me in the nuts.

I curled up in a ball and cradled my wounded jewels, trying hard not to throw up. My gun was under the bed, but theirs were in their hands. Even if I hadn't been sucking wind and naked under the sheets, I couldn't have grabbed my piece before my visitors added a couple unwelcome holes to my chest cavity.

From my fetal position in the middle of the bed, I lifted my head to look at the two heavies. One was skinny and short, almost a runt. He looked especially small next to the mountain of meat standing next to him. Both wore faded suits that might have been expensive fifty years ago, but their hand cannons were plenty clean.

"Where is she?" asked the small one, which was kind of funny, because I was wondering the same thing.

I gulped in a mouthful of air and tried to respond. "She... oooooh..."

The little one nodded at the big one, who holstered his pistol in a shoulder rig and pulled on a pair of thick black gloves. The odd bulk at the knuckles told me it was probably loaded with sand. I put up one hand, feeble with pain, and tried to speak again.

"No idea," I gasped. "She... she was here when I fell asleep."

The big guy leaned over and punched me in the side. I grunted in pain, sliding halfway off the bed from the force of the blow.

The little one spoke again. "You understand, we have every reason to believe you're telling the truth. Unfortunately, we can't be certain until, well, until we're certain. It's unavoidable, really." He nodded at the big guy again, who pulled back his fist for another swing.

"Wait! Wait!" I put up one hand and tried to scoot back onto the bed, working clear of the sheets wrapped around me. "I'll tell you what I know!"

The little thug put his hand on the big guy's shoulder, which bought me a second to think.

"She told me I could stay the night," I said. "She told me she would make breakfast, and wake me up when it was ready."

"So the fuck what?" The runt waved at the big guy, who hit me across the face so hard that fireworks lit up behind my eyes. It took me a second to shake clear, and then I stammered again.

"So she probably went to the store! She should be right back!" I spit a wad of blood onto the bed, along with a tooth that was going to be very expensive to replace - assuming I had a chance to find a dentist.

"Hold on," said the little one to the big one. "That kind of makes sense. We'll wait for her here."

I had the sheets pulled out from under me now, and my bare ass hanging off the bed. The little one holstered his piece and pulled a frighteningly huge knife from behind his back.

"Let's kill this loser and see what's in the kitchen."

That was all I needed to hear. I pushed off the bed and dropped to the floor, then rolled under the bed. Both men started shouting curses, and the big guy threw himself across the bed to try to grab me. Lucky for me, the bed was pretty high off the floor, and years of living on canned rations and veggies hadn't let me bulk up around the mid-section. By the time the little one ran around the bed, I was almost out the other side, with my gun in one hand and my clothes in the other.

The big bruiser dropped down to the floor to reach for me. His eyes flew wide open when he saw the barrel pointed at his forehead, but he didn't have time to do much else. I shot him in the face, his head snapped back, and then he didn't move at all.

The little one swore again. All I could see was his feet as he retreated, firing into the bed. Bullets ripped through the mattress and into the floor beside me. I ignored them and shot him in the ankle.

Sadly, he didn't fall. I was kind of hoping he would, but I was happy to settle for his screams of pain as he leapt out of the room. He bit back his yelps of agony, and a moment later, I heard the apartment door open and then slam shut. I didn't waste any time pulling myself out from under the bed.

I suddenly realized that, dead body on the floor or not, those blows to the kidney were partnering up with several bottles of locally brewed beer to cause a pretty intense pain in the bladder. I needed to piss some blood, and I needed to do it in a hurry. Dragging my pants behind me, I hobbled into the bathroom and dropped unceremoniously onto the toilet. I groaned in pain and finished my business, then stood up and looked in the mirror. Time was working against me, but I knew it would look odd if I left the apartment naked and bleeding from the mouth.

I ran some water and rinsed my mouth (one of the many privileges of the wealthy elite - and their female escorts - was running water). As I turned off the water and spat blood into the sink, I heard scratching and muffled whining coming from the wall.

My heart froze in my chest. It was too soon - no way was I ready to face anyone else. Hell, I still wasn't wearing any pants. I was certain the goons were coming back, or worse, security was on its way up. The gigantic thug was bleeding all over the bedroom floor, and my pistol matched the hole in his forehead.

When I heard the scratching and crying again, I realized that I was being paranoid. This noise was inside the apartment. Come to think of it, this noise was in the bathroom with me.

I pulled on my clothes while I searched the walls. It took a minute to find the false panel behind the shower, and then another couple minutes to slide it sideways and reveal the hidden room behind it. A space big enough for a person to sit down was jammed half-full of towels and a bowl of water, with just enough room left for the bundle of fur that tumbled out into my arms as soon as I set it free.

It was a dog. Specifically, it was a puppy, a girl, but she was a big puppy, and in a few months, she was going to be a very big dog. Yellow and black, with feet the size of teacups and oversized floppy ears. She squirmed in my hands until I had to hold her closer to keep her from falling, and then she licked my face.

It's worth interrupting the story here for a quick aside about dogs in Dallas. Most places, dogs were either wild pack animals that raided caravans and ran off with babies, or they were food. But in Dallas, dogs were rare and pretty damned valuable. They made great alarm systems, and no burglar was going to break into your place if they heard a dog barking inside, at least as long as you had neighbors who didn't have dogs. They would eat you out of house and home, though, so the only people who tended to have dogs were usually doing well enough to have running water.

Another thing about dogs in Dallas is they were hard to steal. Once a dog was old enough to know where it called home, owners would train them to rip limbs off anyone stupid enough to get close without an invitation. And if the dog itself didn't stop you from stealing it, the owner was likely to fill you with holes if you tried. Rich people got pretty attached to their dogs, and the smartest thing you could do if you found a stray was to get it back to its owner, or get very far away.

I paused a second and thought back to the cab ride. My gorgeous fare from last night had been whispering to her purse all night – and the purse was big enough to hold this puppy. Not only that, but a whole lot of gun-toting bruisers had been willing to put a whole lot of bullets in her, and they didn't much care if they got me in the bargain. It didn't take a gambler to figure out where this dog came from, or why she was hidden all night.

I put that dog down in a hurry. I was already in farther than I wanted to be, and it was time to make tracks before someone came to ask about the gunshots. I ran back to the bedroom and pulled on my shoes, did a quick check for anything I might have left, and headed for the door.

And there was that dog. She was sitting in front of the door, looking up at me, as much as asking me for something to eat and a place to sleep. More than anything, I think the damned varmint just wanted me to scratch her behind the ears. I was starting to panic a little, though, because time was working against me, and besides, there was no way I wanted the hassle that came with this puppy. Hell, I lived in a concrete shack that was just big enough for a bed, a tub and my car! What was I going to do with a dog?

So I stepped around the puppy and opened the door. A quick glance both ways down the hall told me the coast was still clear, at least for a couple minutes, so I made sure my gun was hidden in a coat pocket and stepped out. I turned to shut the door, and there was that damned dog again.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to walk away and get back to my life and forget about gun monkeys and expensive hookers and stolen puppies. But for no reason I could explain, my feet wouldn't move.

The girl was gone. If she had any sense, she wasn't coming back any time soon. The goons who had shown up at her place might have been looking for a party, but the odds were pretty good they were here for this dog. They might come back for her in the next few hours, but they might also be a couple days – and by then, this cute little pooch was going to be eating the corpse cooling in the bedroom.

Even while I was telling myself that I had to get out, I had to run, I couldn't afford the extra baggage, this was a horrible idea, I was bending over and picking up the furry little beast. I tucked her inside my coat, crossed my arms to keep it in place, and headed for the stairs. The puppy, now cradled in warmth and darkness, panted a couple times and fell asleep in my arms.

I somehow managed to make it down the stairs and out the door without being stopped. I waved to the doorman as I headed out, amazed that I wasn't being searched. I guess if you were invited inside, the staff had to trust you, at least enough to let you go. I double-timed it all the way back to my garage, and when I finally got inside and locked the door, the puppy was starting to wake up.

I turned on the lights and pulled the little ball of trouble out of my coat. She squirmed until I put her down, and then she ran over to a pile of dirty clothes I had left on the floor and pissed all over them.

I slapped my forehead. Not home five minutes, and this dog was already a pain in the ass.

It would get worse before it got better.

The Reveal

The next several hours were a blur. That irritating animal wanted to make stinking messes all over the garage, and then she wanted food, then she wanted attention and wouldn't quit yapping at me until I sat down on the bed and scratched her ears. Then she hopped up on me and fell asleep, which was about when I realized she needed a bath. Sleeping in that little box in the bathroom at the Adolphus had left her curled up in her own filth, and she smelled like bad taco meat and open sewage.

I kept a big plastic drum full of water for filling up the bath, so I tied the rank little scamp to a bed leg and ran a couple inches into the tub. She struggled like I was trying to drown her, but settled down for as long as I kept scratching her belly. Made it a bit of a challenge to scrub the soap into her fur, but it was easier than having her jump out at me soaking wet.

I probably could have finished the bath and got her wrapped in a towel if someone hadn't knocked at the door. I jumped at the unexpected sound – I don't get much company – and the dog promptly jumped out of the tub and shook water all over me, then ran over and started rolling around on the mattress.

"Who's there?" I yelled, frantically looking around for a place to hide the dog.

"Eva," came the reply, and I recognized the voice as belonging to the hooker from last night. I breathed a sigh of relief – if there was one person certain not to rat me out for having a stolen dog, it would be the woman who stole it in the first place.

Still, better safe than sorry. I picked up my gun and checked the monitors to make sure she was alone. The cameras were a fairly extravagant expense, but they gave me eyes on the street, and they had saved my ass a couple times in the past. Now they confirmed that she was the only person on the street.

"Are you going to let me in?" she asked. "It's not exactly safe out here."

"Yeah," I answered, "just a minute."

The door slid sideways on runners, a replacement I made when I got tired of having people kick in the old door. I opened it just wide enough to make room for her, and waved her in with the pistol. She slid past me like she was gliding on air, and I shut the door behind her.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She was just smiling and looking at the dog. Then she turned that smile on me, and I think I almost melted.

"You saved her. Thank God. I thought they might have found her."

“I, uh, you...” All I could do was stammer a little while I tried to find some words that didn’t feel like a mouth full of marbles. “You went back?”

“Of course,” she said. “I just went out to get breakfast. I came back and found a dead man, bullet holes and blood stains on my satin sheets.”

Eva turned back to the half-soggy dog, who was now trying to climb her leg like a ladder. She knelt down and rubbed the dog’s belly, and the little pooch rolled right over on her back.

“And when I saw that she was gone, I was terrified. I am so glad you brought her with you when you left.”

I looked nervously at the monitors. I couldn’t help it. Between the dog and the dame, there was more trouble in my garage than a box full of sweaty dynamite.

“So, you going to tell me why two gun thugs were this interested in your dog?”

Eva picked up the dog and stood up, still scratching and petting. The puppy, for her part, was wriggling contentedly and making small happy noises.

“This isn’t my dog.”

Hell, I already figured that out on my own. No wonder we peeled out of Fort Worth under a hail of bullets. The dog was hot. I was an unwitting getaway driver, and now I was up to my neck in trouble that didn’t even involve me.

“So whose dog is it?”

She sat on the bed, still cradling the puppy.

“This dog was the property of Crandall Johnston.”

“Oh, fuck me.” I knew who Crandall Johnston was. Everybody did. He was the crazy scientist who lived in Fort Worth and ran that whole town, along with most of the outlying suburbs. He hadn’t ever walled off his city, though, so unlike Dallas, Fort Worth was a very dangerous place to live. Raiders were fond of picking off squatters living at the outside of town, and Johnston himself had a gang of heavies who robbed, extorted and pillaged anything they wanted. He and Arlen Waites had a sort of agreement – as long as Johnston stayed away from the wall, Waites stayed out of Fort Worth.

Eva looked up at me, and her eyes were shooting flame.

“He hired me for two nights. The first night he showed me his lab.

“I guess he was just showing off, trying to impress me with all his dangerous toys. It was a nightmare. Men in cages, crazy with pain and hunger. Bodies discarded after they were used for target practice, or something worse. It was horrible. But I was on the clock, so I pretended to be interested.

“Then he showed me the animals. He’s got half a zoo under the old Star Telegram building, and most of the animals he had are probably dead by now.

“But this little girl was his pride and joy. He had her in a really big cage, with expensive kibble and a big bowl of water and even a padded bed. He was petting her head and making a big fuss over her, and he told me that she was going to change everything.

“I asked what he meant, and he was still pretty vague, but he said something about testing and dissection and grand goals. I was about ready to throw up, so I got him out of there and back to his place.

“I wasn’t able to get away until the next day, but when I had the chance, I snuck away from him and got back to that basement. I grabbed her, put her in my purse, and walked out. They saw me, though, and chased me. If you hadn’t been waiting there, I would probably be in one of those cages now.”

Priorities are a funny thing. Some people, they see people in cages, and they get all riled up. Eva was fine with the torture victims, but she couldn’t tolerate tests on a puppy. The crazy thing was, I guess I kind of agreed.

She stood up and put the dog gently on the bed.

“I have to leave Dallas. If I stay here, Johnston will find me, sooner or later, and then he’ll kill me. I just wanted to make sure she was OK before I left.”

I was pretty sure I hadn’t heard that right. “Wait a sec. You mean you’re not taking her with you?”

Eva shook her head. “I can’t. I’m jumping a convoy for Houston tonight. I’ve got friends there. But I can’t take a dog with me, or they won’t let me on the truck.”

“But what the hell am I supposed to do with her?”

She walked to the door, pulled it open, and smiled back at me. “Just what you’re already doing. Food, water, a clean bed. And maybe give her a name.”

With that, she was gone. Right out the door and up the block, shutting the door behind her. I couldn’t believe it. This high-price hooker dumps this bundle of grief in my lap and just walks out, and all I got out of the deal was one hot night and one hell of a beating.

The puppy had woken up. She hopped awkwardly off the mattress and came over to me, snuffing around my feet. She sat back and looked up at me, and for less than a second I wondered what I would call her.

“Trouble. That’s what you are, and that’s what I’m calling you.”

She yipped happily and peed on my foot.

The Twist

Between the stolen dog, the dead thug and the fleeing call girl, I knew my problems weren't going to take care of themselves on their own. Ignoring them wasn't going to help. I needed to come up with a plan.

I spent the rest of the afternoon coming up with idea after idea, mulling them over and then throwing them away. I used the time to build a crate out of scrap metal and a section of chain-link fence that had collapsed behind the garage. A bowl for food and one for water, and Trouble could be left alone while I sorted out my situation.

Then it occurred to me that if anyone was looking for Trouble, they were looking for me, and if they came to the garage while I was out, all they had to do was take her. So I bundled her into the cab, cage and all, and headed to Milly's.

Milly was just about the oldest friend I had. We had known each other since before the president caught corn flu and killed half his staff, since before Waites had hired half the city to put up a wall made of junked cars and rubble. She had some crappy office job back then, and I was an auto mechanic, and her apartment was right upstairs from mine. She had a good ten years on me, but we still had a lot in common, and we spent more than a few warm summer nights sitting on her balcony and killing a six pack.

That was years ago, though, and all those six packs had caught up to Milly, so that she was shaped a little like an engine block. She was tougher than nails now, with a limp in one leg that she got when she single-handedly killed a dozen bikers who thought they might make her house into a club headquarters. After her old man died and left her the big house on Inwood, she had turned it into a flophouse, diner and brothel. I saved her ass a few times in the last ten years, and she returned the favor when I needed it. It sure looked like I needed it now.

There was a lot of traffic at Milly's tonight, but I never parked out front, so I didn't much care. The guards knew me on sight, and waved me around to the private lot in back of the house. I smiled and swapped jokes with them as I walked up to the big house and in through the kitchen.

The front room at Milly's was always loud, and tonight was no exception. Milly had spent a lot of money keeping up the place, and anyone from poor street vendors to rich gangsters could find a way to spend money. Food, girls or a bed, Milly could find something you wanted.

I pushed my way through the room full of half-naked floozies and half-drunk men to get to the front desk. It wasn't really a desk, exactly, more like a couple sturdy wooden crates piled on top of each other, but it gave the hostess some place to stand.

"Hey, Rita," I said over the crowd. The pretty young thing standing at the crates turned and smiled when she saw me.

"Hey, Creed! Been a while! Business or pleasure tonight?"

“All business. Milly around?”

Rita pointed vaguely to the stairs. “She’s in a meeting. Ought to be done in a few minutes. Want a bite while you wait?”

One nice thing about visiting Milly was that her staff all knew better than to charge me for food or drink, so I slid into a table with my back to the wall and ate a chicken sandwich while I waited. At least, it was called a chicken sandwich. I would love to know where Milly found a chicken.

Rita came over just as I was finishing. “Milly’s in the back room. You know the way, right?”

I nodded, left a tip on the table, and headed for the dining room Milly had walled off to have a little privacy. I knocked once and let myself in. Milly was sitting in an overstuffed, faded chair when I walked in, but she bounced up with enthusiasm that gave lie to her size and wrapped me up in one of the crushing hugs she saved for people she actually liked.

“Winston, great to see ya, hon!”

I hugged back, and patted her back to let her know it would be OK to let me go before I suffocated. “Good to see you, too, Milly. Been too long.”

She showed me to a chair and said across from me. “Rita tells me you’re here for business. Whattaya need, hon?”

I started at the beginning, with the cab ride from Fort Worth, and Milly stopped me a few times to ask questions or just raise her eyebrows in disbelief. She looked positively furious about the beating I had taken that morning, and outraged at Eva for leaving me in the lurch.

“So what’re you gonna do?” she asked, obviously concerned.

“I’m going to talk to Waites.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “And how do you plan on doing that? He locks himself up inside that tower of his, goes back in forth in an armored car, and never talks to anyone he doesn’t trust.”

“He owes me one. He’ll see me.”

Milly looked even more surprised. “He owes you?”

I nodded. “A thing with his kid. I really can’t say more. I promised Waites I would keep my mouth shut. But he’ll see me, and hopefully, he’ll help.”

“I sure hope so, kid. You put your foot in it this time.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” I cleared my throat, a little nervous. “Milly, I gotta ask a favor.”

“What is it, hon? You know I’ll help if I can.”

“Keep an eye on Trouble. I can’t leave her at the garage, in case they come looking for me, and I can’t take her with me to see Waites. I just need you to keep her for a few hours while I go see him, then I’ll beeline back here to pick her up.”

She grinned and threw her arms wide. “Of course! That’s easy! Bring ‘er in, I’ll get her something to eat and have one of the girls look after her until you get back.”

I stood. “Thanks, Milly. I would say she’s a good girl, but if she was, I would have picked another name.”

She laughed. “Hell, if I can wrangle a houseful of halfwit hookers and horny drunks, I can handle one little ol’ puppy dog.”

It didn’t take more than five minutes to get the crate out of the cab and into Milly’s crushing hug, and then a cute girl with no shirt and drooping eyes started gushing over her and whisked her away to a room somewhere. Milly gave me another one of her bear hugs, and warned me to be careful.

“I’m always careful, unless there are crazy hot call girls or dogs.” I grinned at her as I got into the cab and drove off.

I drove past the Ross Building first, relieved to see Waites’s armored limo still parked at the curb. Nobody was allowed to park too close to the building – Waites might have been a little paranoid, but he hadn’t survived three assassination attempts by being careless. I had to leave the cab at a lot a couple blocks away and walk, looking over my shoulder the whole time, trying not to look as nervous and exposed as I felt.

The lobby of the Ross Building was closely guarded, with scary armed men at the doors and more waiting behind them. I was just glad one of the guys at the front door knew me, and let me go into the lobby to talk to the guards at the security desk. They left me standing around while they called up to the top floor, but after half an hour they waved to me and told me which elevator to ride.

When the elevator doors opened and I stepped off onto the top floor, I was surprised at how normal everything looked. I had never been up here before, and I was expecting opulence or luxury or gratuitous displays of wealth. Instead, there were clean floors, clean windows, and a truckload of armed men. There were a few plants, a couple people sitting at well-used desks, and a pair of heavy wooden doors. One guard said a few words into his sleeve and waved me on, opening the doors for me.

Arlen Waites sat behind a big oak desk in a corner office with glass walls. He sat with his back to a commanding view of Dallas, all the city below him, the few blinking lights of the city blinking up in the dark.

He was a heavy-set man, clean-shaven, with gray hair cut close to his scalp. The lines on his face could have been a freeway map. When he smiled, he was still one scary-looking son of a bitch, and he wasn't smiling now. He stood up and stepped around his desk to shake my hand. He was taller than I remembered.

"Mister Creed," he drawled in a Texas accent you could cut with a steak knife. "I figured you would have come to see me before now."

"Never had a reason to bother you, Mister Waites."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Ain't no bother, son. Have a seat, tell me what I can do for you." He lowered himself into his leather executive chair, and I sat in a surprisingly comfortable chair on the other side of the desk.

"Well, Mister Waites, I have a problem. I picked up a fare yesterday, a call girl named Eva."

He grinned. "I know just who you mean. If you're smitten, then you're right, you do have a problem."

I shook my head. "No, not at all. Well, I mean, I was a little yesterday, but I spent the night at her place last night and—"

Waites whooped with surprise. "Tarnation, boy! How'd you manage that? That girl is one expensive piece of tail!"

"I, uh, saved her life yesterday. She stole a dog in Fort Worth, and I was there, and gave her a ride back home. Last night was how she paid for the ride."

He grinned, showing a set of teeth that looked positively predatory. "You may not know it, Creed, but that was probably the most expensive fare you ever had. Eva ain't exactly a street whore."

"Well, that's just the start of it," I said. "This morning, some guys came to get the dog. Eva was out getting breakfast, and they kind of roughed me up a little. I killed one of them, and the other ran away, and then I found the dog."

Waites was looking at me the way I imagine his forefathers appraised beef before they bought it for slaughter. "Damn, son, maybe I oughta put you on the payroll."

I was a little surprised. I was here practically begging for help, and Waites was ready to give me a job.

"Well, that's very generous, Mister Waites, but the problem is, I'm pretty sure those Fort Worth boys are still going to want the dog back. Eva left town, and I'm stuck with this puppy. She told me it was Crandall Johnston's dog, and he was planning on using her to... I don't know, do something creepy."

He nodded. "Stands to reason. Johnston's always been a few head short of a herd."

“So there’s my problem, Mister Waites. These yahoos are probably going to come after me again, and I’ve got this stolen dog that Johnston wants bad enough to kill somebody. So I was kind of wondering...”

“Sure,” he said, not waiting for me to finish. “You just bring that ol’ pup up here, and I’ll make sure she gets back to Johnston. That oughta take the heat off.”

“Oh, no, that’s not – I mean, that’s real nice of you – but I was kind of hoping you could protect us. If Johnston gets the dog back, he’s going to do some kind of horrible experiments on her, and she’ll wind up tortured to death or something.”

He shook his head sadly. “Thing is, son, Johnston and I got us an arrangement. I don’t get involved in his business without a damned good reason, and if he wants that dog back as bad as you say, well, I don’t mean to stop him.”

He put one hand up, as if to make sure I didn’t cut him off. It wasn’t necessary, because a guy like me does not talk over Arlen Waites. “Now, that don’t mean I’ll hand you over, either. If you want to keep the dog, I won’t stop you – but you’ll have to take your chances on your own.”

“What about the fact that his gunmen are coming into your city and attacking your people?”

He leaned over the desk and pointed one thick finger at me. “In point of fact, son, his boys are just trying to get back what was stolen. I can’t blame you or Eva for what you did, but he’s got a rightful claim to your newfound furry friend. I can help you give the dog back, and even make sure he doesn’t get some crazy ideas about exacting some sort of stupid revenge for the man you ended, but I can’t help you keep it. It could mean war. And I don’t go to war without one hell of a good reason.”

I nodded. “I understand. Thank you for seeing me, Mister Waites.” I stood up, and so did he, and I shook his hand. “I can certainly appreciate your position.”

He spoke one more time as I was walking out. “Creed, one more thing. Once you sort out this dog thing, I’m serious about that job. You ever get tired of driving a cab, I could use a man with your balls.”

“Thank you, Mister Waites. I’ll keep it in mind.”

The whole time I was walking back to the cab, my head was spinning. Waites had been my ace in the hole, my last ditch solution, and now I was out of options. The only possible idea I had now was to follow Eva’s lead and run, just pack Trouble into the cab and head off into the sunset. But unlike Eva, I didn’t have friends anywhere else. I had one pissed-off mad scientist for an enemy, though, and that was a good enough reason to head for the Hill Country.

All that thinking distracted me, though. I was just fishing the keys out of my pocket and walking up to my cab when something hard hit the back of my head, and everything went black.

The Sit-Down

Waking up in the trunk of a car was disorienting. Realizing that I was in the trunk of *my* car just made me mad.

They hadn't bothered to tie me up after they knocked me out. I guess they figured I was going to be out longer. Hell, I was surprised to be awake. For that matter, I was surprised to be alive. The bumpy ride must have shaken me awake sooner than they intended. I was kind of wondering who they might be, though I had a pretty good idea where we were headed.

The first thing I did was try to figure out how badly I was hurt. The back of my head was a tantric orgasm of pain, but when I checked it with my hand, it was dry. They might have rattled my brains, but they hadn't cracked my skull.

I must have awoken close to the end of the ride, because less than five minutes after I opened my eyes, the car slowed and stopped. It took a lot of self-control not to just jump out and run – it was my car, after all, and I knew right where the escape latch was located. But there was no way I could outrun a bullet, and even if I could, I would still be stranded a long ways away from home, smack-dab in the middle of land controlled by some seriously mean motor scooters.

"We're gonna open the trunk," yelled someone standing outside. "If you're awake in there, show us your hands. Try something stupid, and I'll blow off your kneecaps."

The trunk popped open, and my hands were the first things out. The two goons watched warily, shotguns pointed menacingly into my face.

"Easy, boys. I'm caught, fair and square. But my legs are asleep. A little help?"

The thug with the mustache handed his gun to the other one, and then reached in and pulled me out. He was a big ol' boy, for sure, and he yanked me out of that trunk like I was an overnight bag then dumped me on the sidewalk like the bag was full of dirty laundry. I wasn't lying about my legs, either – I crumpled to the sidewalk before I could catch myself on the cab.

"C'mon," said the muscle-bound meathead who had liberated me from my own trunk. "He wants to see you right away."

"Who?" I asked, trying to buy some time to get my legs underneath me, but they didn't reply. They didn't need to. I knew I was about to get an audience with Crandall Johnston, whether I wanted it or not.

"Either your legs carry you, or I shoot them off and he carries you. I'm fine either way." I couldn't see the second goon's face in the darkness, but when he spoke, I knew who it was. No wonder he wanted to hurt me. I had shot him in the foot not twelve hours earlier.

I pushed myself to my feet and stumbled down the sidewalk, following the bigger goon with the small one hopping along behind me.

“How’s the foot, Hopalong?” Maybe it would have been smarter to keep my mouth shut, but I was curious. Not about his foot – I knew it hurt. I just wanted to learn a little more about him, to get a better feel for the man in case pissing him off would get him to make mistakes.

“It hurts a little when it rains,” he replied. “How’s the balls?”

I laughed. “Nothing an ice pack and a blow job couldn’t fix.”

He laughed back. “Bad news, pal. Doesn’t look like you’re getting either one any time soon.”

“Well,” I said, “in that case, my balls feel like I got punched in the nutsack.”

We both laughed, which was not good. If he had been angry or sullen, that would have been useful, but he was a professional, and I wasn’t going to get any accidental aid by getting him riled up.

Not that it mattered. We walked up the steps to what used to be the county courthouse, and then we were inside. I was pretty well stuck now.

We passed a heck of a lot of guards as we walked through the building and up the stairs, with my hopes for escape dwindling further after each one. Finally we wound up at a tall pair of solid wood doors, the kind that would have been a big deal before the crash, and were incredibly rare now. Hopalong said, “Wait here,” and went inside. The big guy with the mustache clamped a hand on my shoulder like a vise, leaving me little choice but to stand there and try not to wince.

A second later the door opened again, Hopalong waved us in, and my giant escort pushed me ahead of him into an enormous office. The walls were all covered in wood panels, faded in places but still pretty impressive. One entire wall was devoted entirely to a bookshelf stocked to the roof with tomes and manuals, with bookends that were glass jars full of murky liquid and unidentifiable things floating inside. The desk was half the size of my garage, and behind it sat the man I could only assume was Crandall Johnston.

“Have a seat,” he said, waving to a series of beautiful overstuffed leather chairs. The leather was peeling and cracked, and a spring was poking painfully against my upper thigh, but it was still nice to be sitting down. It would have been even nicer if the big brute had decided to sit, instead of standing menacingly behind me.

The old man behind the desk stood and walked around. He was trying to look respectable, but he had a distinctly unsettling look to him. He was wrinkled and dry, like an apple left on the sidewalk all summer, and his few remaining wisps of white hair seemed to follow no perceivable pattern as they trailed down his back and over his ears.

Eyes like tiny black buttons peered out of wire-frame bifocals, and his hands were claws covered with liver spots.

“I am Crandall Johnston,” he said, surprising nobody. “Would you mind if I asked your name?”

I didn’t see any reason to lie. Not yet, anyway. “Creed. Winston Creed. I would say it’s a pleasure to meet you, if I hadn’t arrived in the trunk of my own car.” I stuck out my hand, and he shook it, then returned to his chair behind the monolithic desk.

“I must apologize for the rough treatment. My men are commendable for their enthusiasm, but sometimes lack subtlety. Do you know why I invited you here?”

I nodded. “Yes, your enthusiastic employees were asking me about it this morning. Unfortunately, I don’t have any idea where you could find her. I left her apartment shortly after your man here.” I waved negligently at Hopalong.

He coughed a little, shaking his head. “I don’t care about the girl. My only concern with her is that she took something from me, and I must have it back.”

I shrugged. “Well, if she’s in the wind, I’m not sure how I can help.”

He leaned forward on the desk. “Well, Mister Creed, it has come to my attention that you almost certainly possess the item she stole from me.”

I shook my head. “She didn’t give me anything, Mister Johnston. At least, not anything I could share. Our transaction was more... transient in nature.”

He laughed a little, a thin and reedy laugh that exposed teeth worn down to nubs. “Yes, I am familiar with her form of tender. But I believe that the item you now possess was not a gift. Unless I am quite mistaken – and I am certain that I am not – you took it without her consent.”

I raised one eyebrow, trying to look quizzical. “And what would that be?”

Johnston frowned, obviously tiring of my evasion. “A dog. More specifically, a young pup. I raised that dog from infancy, and I must have it back. Mister Black, please persuade our new friend of the immediacy of my demands.”

Hopalong’s face split in an evil grin as he pulled his enormous knife from beneath his coat. “My pleasure, Mister Johnston.”

“Whoa, whoa!” I put up my hands to try to slow him down. “I believe you! No need for violence!”

Johnston just leaned back in his chair. “Unfortunately, Mister Creed, I disagree. You will tell me everything, one way or another.”

“Yeah,” I yelled, “I will – but not if this nutjob starts carving on me!”

Johnston waved, and Hopalong backed off.

“I can get you that dog,” I said, “but I want to know why you want that particular dog so badly. It won’t cost you anything to tell me that, will it?”

His birdlike claws drummed on the desk a second while his brow furrowed, deep in thought.

“I suppose not,” he croaked. “I want Dallas, and the dog is how I will get it.”

“What do you mean, you want Dallas? Like, the whole thing? The dog is going to be big, but not that big, I don’t think.”

Johnston cackled. “No, you’re right. Its purpose is not as an attack animal. Its purpose is more alchemical in nature.”

He opened a drawer and withdrew a tiny glass tube filled with a blue liquid.

“I have spent the last seven years creating this mixture. It is a highly contagious disease with an extraordinarily fast onset time. If I were to break this vial, we would all be dead within three days. In order to survive this disease, we must be inoculated. And while I can manufacture more of this frightful product at will, I have but one source for the cure.”

He placed the little bottle on his desk with what I personally found an abominable lack of care. “The dog is the cure. I have spent almost as long creating the disease as I have the antidote, and have been rewarded with only one success. That dog has been genetically engineered to withstand the virus in this bottle, and what is more, its blood is the basis for an antivirus that can make its recipients immune to the depredations of this particular disease.”

I nodded. “I see. So you use the disease to kill everyone in Dallas, and inoculate your own crew. It’s easy to take the wall when all the guns are manned by dead men.”

He smiled, his thin lips creasing his wrinkled face like a rip in a sheet of paper. “Exactly. And since that dog is the only available source of the antivirus, I must have it, and I must have it alive.”

I leaned back in my chair. “No problem. I can get you that dog, but I want two things.”

Johnston’s smile vanished, and Hopalong looked ready to stab me again.

“They’re easy things, though. I want the cure, for starters.”

He bobbed his head. “Simple enough, and an obvious request. Done.”

“The other thing should also be no problem – I want the Adolphus.”

“The hotel? And why would I grant such a magnificent request?”

“For one thing, it’s only yours to grant if I deliver, which means if I cross you and don’t deliver the dog, I get nothing. For another, it’s a pretty big reward. I wouldn’t have to drive a cab and live in a run-down garage any more. I could make some actual money, and have a nice pad with running water. A reward that big is a hell of an incentive. I might hesitate to kill an entire city for a few bucks or a busted-up shack, but you can bet your last gray hair that I’ll deliver for a prize that big.”

“Hmm. And tell me, Mister Creed, why would I not simply ask Mister Black to extract the location of the animal and go get it myself?”

“Easy,” I said, “Because I gave the pup to Arlen Waites for safe-keeping. I can get her back just by asking for her. No way can you get enough men over the wall to take her from him, or you would already own Dallas.”

He sank back into his chair and pondered, fingers drumming on the enormous desk. He looked at Hopalong, who shrugged.

“Very well,” said Johnston. “You shall have the cure, and you shall have the hotel.”

“Great,” I said, rising to my feet. “I’ll be back this time tomorrow. Can one of your goons walk me out? I don’t want all those guards downstairs to think I’m escaping.”

“I’ll do even better, Mister Creed. My associate, Mister Black, will accompany you to Dallas.”

That sucked. I was not hoping for company. But it was pretty obvious that I wasn’t walking out of here alone, and I hadn’t really expected Johnston to be stupid enough to let me run off alone.

“Fair enough. Hedge your bets. Ready when you are, Hopalong.”

Hopalong grinned as he sheathed his knife. “After you, Creed.”

The Tension-Builder

Down on the street, Hopalong pulled his pistol. “Try anything stupid and I’ll blow your knees off. You can probably beat me in a foot race right now, but no way you can outrun a bullet.”

I tried my best to look wounded. “We have a deal, pal. I’m looking forward to my high-rise apartment. No need to get mean.”

“Yeah, well, Mister Johnston didn’t send me along for the company. I’m keeping you honest until you deliver.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Besides, the ride is long enough, I’m just glad for the company.”

My new best friend slid into the passenger seat next to me as I started the cab. I had kind of hoped he would sit in the back, behind the bulletproof plexi, but I guess I knew he wasn’t dumb enough for that. The gun sat in his lap, pointed at me, and he was watching me like a hawk as I found my way onto the freeway and headed for home.

It turns out, he wasn’t much of a conversationalist. Every time I said anything, he just said, “Shut up and drive,” which put an end to any hopes of lively debate. I took 287 toward 20. Normally I would never even consider going south, because a particularly unfriendly band of bikers had claimed the area around South Dallas, and I usually preferred to avoid them. Tonight, though, I was just hoping they were up and around. I had a plan, and it most certainly did not involve killing everyone in my hometown.

Hopalong scowled. “Why aren’t you taking 30?”

“You see the bullet holes in my body armor? I picked those up outside Six Flags yesterday. I could try 161, but North Gate is the best-guarded way into the city. And I hate to admit it, but I mentioned this morning’s altercation to Waites this afternoon, and there’s a damned good chance his boys are looking for you. You do want to get into the city, don’t you?”

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t argue any more. I didn’t see a need to tell him that if my plan worked out the way I hoped, he wasn’t getting into Dallas, anyway.

We dodged a couple feeble roadblocks on 287, and once we hit 20, we were making great time. We passed 360 and the wreckage that used to be Spur 408, and I was starting to worry that my surprise wasn’t working out, after all. We should have at least seen an outrider by now, but the freeway was completely deserted, just us and the burnt-out husks of cars and trucks scattered along the road.

My mind was spinning through options, ideas for dumping my unwanted passenger, when I finally heard the rumble of a motorcycle. We were just turning onto 67, and were less than ten minutes from the South Gate, and that rolling thunder was one of the sweetest sounds I had ever heard.

“Shit!” Hopalong cursed. “Are you bulletproof?”

“Not me,” I answered casually, flipping the shutters into place, “but the cab can take a hit.” I neglected to mention that the last time I had been through here, this particular band of raiders had shot out my tires and left me rolling into Dallas on bare rims, shooting sparks and doing grievous harm to my alignment.

When gas started to dry up, prices went insane. It could cost more to fill the tank in the family minivan than make a mortgage payment, and so most people just quit driving, or dropped a ton of green for a solar car. But the motorcycle gangs weren’t about to give up their road-rage way of life and start hugging trees. Instead, most of them grabbed up all the gas and hoarded it. Even a beat-up Indian will get crazy mileage, and the bikers tended to be pretty damned good mechanics.

Keeping all that gas meant fighting for it, though, and so it wasn’t long until the biker gangs turned into the biggest threat on the roads. They descended into a sort of barbaric anarchy, and if you drove the wrong freeways, you weren’t getting away just by paying a toll. The bikers would scavenge your ride, take your wife as a slave, and maybe even cook you up for dinner. The roads south of Dallas had been taken over by this particularly nasty bunch of psychopaths, and their numbers had been increasing in the last ten years. Normally, that would make me pretty nervous, but tonight, I was kind of counting on them to help me out a little. Not that they were likely to appreciate me for it.

More roaring motorcycles engines quickly joined the first, and they were closing fast. I gunned it, but my cab was no match for the speed of a gas-powered Harley. I knew it was just a matter of time before they were on us.

“I sure hope you can hit something when it’s this dark,” I said, and reached above him to slide open the roof. I had a cupola installed on the roof a few years back, when I used to ride with a partner. “I wish you had a bigger gun, though.”

Hopalong was incredulous. “You want me to stand up and shoot at them?”

I nodded. “If you don’t, they’re going to rip our wheels off, and then Johnston isn’t ever going to see his puppy dog.”

He cursed again, but pushed himself up and through the roof, balancing on his one good foot. The turret was armored, so he was pretty well protected. Bullets were already pinging off the armor here and there, and when Hopalong answered them with a few shots of his own, they started to come with considerably more insistent frequency.

We were only a few minutes from the South Gate, and I knew that once we were in the shadow of the wall, the bikers would back off. But I also knew they had all manner of creative ways to stop a car, and there was a good chance they could drag us to a dead stop before we could get safe. What they needed was a distraction.

I flipped down a panel on the gearshift, revealing a single button. It was well hidden, and for a good reason. This was not a button I wanted to push on accident. When I pressed

it, the springs under the passenger's seat released and shoved the seat against the roof. Hopalong's scream of anger and surprise was almost deafening, but it faded fast. He was launched out of the turret, over the back of the car, and met the pavement doing a good 50 miles an hour.

A couple of the raiders kept chasing me, but most of them stopped to inspect their easy prey. Hopalong was almost certainly dead, and frankly, that was a mercy. Unless I missed my guess, these wasteland psychos were not particularly kind to their captives. He probably avoided a very painful death, even if it was only because the death he did suffer was so quick.

Without the rest of the horde behind them, the last few bikers were barely a threat. I managed to avoid the spiked chains they threw in front of the car, though one of them did manage to crack my rear window with a lucky shot that found a gap in the shutters. One of them even tried to board me, but I yanked the wheel and sent him tumbling into the weeds growing on the side of the road.

And then I was at the wall, searchlights scanning the freeway as machine guns sprayed death from their towers high above. The bikers chose the better part of valor and turned back, leaving me to roll up to the gate alone. It wasn't until I stopped in front of the barricade that I realized how tightly I had been holding the wheel.

I knew the guard who walked up to the driver's side window, so I lowered the shutters and rolled down the window. "Hey, Mikey," I called. "Rough night, huh? Thanks for the assist!"

Mike leaned down. "Creed, what are you doing taking 20 this late? Don't you know the raiders own South Dallas these days?"

"Yeah," I shrugged, "but I had to offload an unwanted passenger." I jerked a thumb at the passenger seat, which was still shoved up against the roof.

Mike whistled. "Damn, Creed, I pity the poor bastard thought it was a good idea to jack your cab."

"Speaking of, man, I gotta go see Waites. It's crazy important. Any way you can call ahead and let him know I'm coming in?"

"Dude, it's four in the morning! Waites will kick your ass, you wake him up! Shit, he'll kick my ass for calling!"

I didn't realize so much of the night had passed. "I get that, Mikey, and usually, I would agree, one hundred percent. But this seriously cannot wait. The whole city could be in some deep stink, and Waites needs to know, like yesterday."

Mike shook his head, unsure.

"Listen, man," I said. "The goon I popped out the roof was supposed to be helping me kill everyone inside the wall. Well, that was some bullshit, and I wasn't about to do it, but

when his boss doesn't hear back in a couple hours, the plan may just go ahead without me. I gotta see Waites. It's seriously life and death."

Mike shook his head again, but he was unbuckling the radio from his belt. "Alright, Creed, but if the big man is pissed, I'm pinning it all on you. It's your ass from here, brother."

"Fair enough, Mikey. Thanks, man."

It was only fifteen minutes from the gate to the Ross Building, but it felt longer. The lives of everyone in Dallas were riding on me being able to make Arlen Waites listen to me – and he had a reputation for not listening to anyone but Arlen Waites.

It took more fast talking, but I convinced the guards on the street to let me park outside the building. I went inside, pretty sure I was going to have to wait around, but another hulking guard was waiting to drag me up to Waite's office. Somehow, the kingpin of Dallas had beaten me to the office. That was not reassuring, though I couldn't really say why.

The guard frisked me, though that wasn't necessary – my gun had gone missing when Johnston's boys grabbed me. Then he pushed open the big glass doors and I walked into the office of the most powerful man in North Texas, for the second time in twelve hours.

Waites was sitting at his desk, but now he wasn't wearing his coat or tie, and his shirt was unbuttoned, showing one of those old white undershirts we used to call wife-beaters. It looked more like he had never left the office, which would explain why he was here this late. He looked at me as I came in, but didn't stand.

"I gotta admit, Creed, I'm a little surprised to see you again so soon. I thought you meant to hash this thing out yourself."

He waved to one of the chairs, and I sat and took half a second to admire the view from this high. The sun was just starting to consider rising, and the sky to the east was slowly changing from black to gray.

"Well, Mister Waites, I know it hasn't been long, but it's been one heck of a night. I was cracked on the head, shoved in my trunk, and had the chance to sit down with Crandall Johnston. Then I had to come back and kill a guy just so we could have this chat."

Waites's eyes narrowed. "You're a regular grim reaper, son. Wanna elaborate?"

I nodded. "Johnston's goons grabbed me and took me back to Fort Worth to chat with their boss. Turns out, he wants Dallas, and he's got the means to take it."

The look on Waites's face was darker than the western sky. "And how, exactly, does he mean to make that work?"

“He’s got a disease in a bottle. He chucks a few bottles over the wall, and everyone in town drops dead.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Crazy bastard. We can’t defend the city if we’re all dead, but he can’t exactly march in and grab it if all his boys get sick in the process.”

“No, sir, but that’s why he wants the dog so bad. I guess she’s the cure. He can use her to make an antivirus that will keep his men safe.”

Waites snorted. “That’s some crazy-ass bullshit, I gotta say. But then, Johnston’s one crazy sumbitch. Might be he could do that. Did you see this ailment?”

“I saw a vial of something. Could have been Kool-Aid, for all I know, but then again, could be it really is a killer virus.”

“And why would he tell you this and then let you go?”

“I agreed to get him the dog, and he agreed to let me have the Adolphus. He thought I was on board. He still sent me with an escort, though. That’s the guy I had to kill, or this would have been a very different conversation. Hell, this conversation wouldn’t be happening at all, if that guy were still around, because he would have plugged me as soon as he found out I lied about giving the dog to you.”

“You told him I had the dog?” His eyes narrowed. “You pulled me into this?”

“Sir, you’re in it, whether you want to be or not. He means to kill the whole city. I doubt he was planning on sending you a heads-up about it.”

“OK, so what did you have in mind?”

“Nothing. I have the dog, and you can have her, and I’ll do whatever you need me to do to keep this city safe. I was actually kind of hoping you could come up with a better plan than I can. Mostly because I’m pretty much fresh out of ideas.”

Waites looked at the ceiling for a couple seconds, and I could almost hear him thinking. When he looked back, he said, “Sounds like the thing to do is kill the dog. That puts one hell of an end to his plan.”

I shook my head. “No, it just slows him down. Without the dog, he can’t send in his guys to take the city back – but he can still kill everyone. As long as you have the dog, you can treat everybody and keep us alive. He won’t bother striking as long as he knows you can stop him. But if the dog is gone, he’ll just kill us all anyway and spend the next five years working up a cure.”

Waites nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Well, in that case, I’ll have to make sure the little bugger’s safe. Bring her here, and I’ll find you a cot in the building for the day. Then I mean to see you take me up on my previous offer. You’re gonna work for me tonight, Creed, because I’m gonna need every driver I can get.”

I nodded. What else could I do? My head was still splitting, my jaw ached, my gonads were swollen like bruised cantaloupe, and my tongue wouldn't quit poking into the hole where my tooth had been knocked out. But whimpering and curling up in pain wasn't really an option, because if Arlen Waites said I was going to drive, well then, I was going to drive.

I stood, Waites stood, and I shook his hand. Then I took off and headed to Milly's.

Milly was glad to be shut of Trouble. The dog had started barking, and wouldn't stop, and then she pissed all over some very nice rugs. It's probably a good thing Johnston's goons didn't decide to just look at Molly's place, because they would have smelled the dog about the same time they heard her.

When I got back to the Ross Building and handed over Trouble to one of Waites's guards, they showed me a room with a shower and a cot. I was bone-tired, but couldn't help taking advantage of what might be my last chance for a long time to wash up in running water. Then I slept like a log until the guards came to get me started on the night's work.

It's good I got some shut-eye. Before the sun came up again, I was going to be glad for it.

The Big Finish

We headed out with the sunset. I had three guys in the car with me, tough bastards I didn't recognize, though I got to know them as we drove. It's an hour drive to downtown Fort Worth, and there wasn't anything to do but chat.

Rob was from Chicago. He was a cop, until they dissolved the Chicago PD, and when the city went to Hell, his family got killed. He got out of the city just ahead of the fires and found his way to Dallas, where Waites made him a sheriff. He didn't mention how he felt about leaving a life chasing criminals to work for one.

The huge black guy with his bald-shaven head was named Grover, and he was one funny son of a bitch, most of the time. He quit being quite as amusing when he chuckled his way through a story about dismembering a raider with a meat cleaver – while the raider was still alive.

The only family man called himself Skip, which sounded like a good name for a dog to me. I didn't mention it, though, because Skip was in a seriously bad mood. When Rob asked him what had him so riled up, all Skip said was, "I live with teenagers."

We were part of a convoy, twenty cars in various states of repair. My cab wasn't the best-looking car there, but it sure wasn't the worst. We had to putter along at about 35, because one beat-up old clunker had smoke coming from the engine the entire time. That's especially a concern in a car that doesn't actually burn gasoline.

The convoy went up 30, not the least bit worried about being attacked. Even the bikers would have kept their heads down when twenty cars full of armed soldiers came through. And we were right not to worry, because we didn't see so much as a squirrel with a switchblade on the way to Fort Worth.

Once we passed the off ramp to 820, the chatter in my cab died down. Rob pulled a rather impressive pistol from under his jacket and handed it to me. "You'll probably need this real soon," he said. That probably should have had me worried, but honestly, it was comforting to wrap my hand around a gun again.

Rob started in on the plans. "We're part of the cordon. We'll be parking three blocks from the courthouse, and our job is to make sure nobody gets past us. We could take fire from both directions, so we'll stay in the cab and fight from inside. If we're lucky, we won't have to do much more than lay down some covering fire and keep some heads down.

"Two teams of our guys are going into the area we block off. They'll do their jobs and come back out, and then we're leaving in a big hurry. We'll have two cars covering our escape. Waites gave them all pretty specific orders – we're supposed to make sure Creed gets back to Dallas in one piece, as long as we can manage that and make sure the mission still comes off."

"And what mission is that?" I asked. "Anyone know?"

Rob stared at me hard from the passenger's seat. "Yeah. Somebody knows. But you don't."

I shrugged and kept my eyes on the road. "Just wondering, is all. I can handle parking and shooting. Wouldn't be the first time."

The rest of the drive was pretty quiet, with the only noise being the clicks and snaps of weapon checks. Everybody counted their ammo, checked their various arsenals of weaponry, and generally got ready to do a whole lot of violence. Well, everybody but me. I was driving.

Downtown Fort Worth was quiet as we rolled in. One upside to solar-powered cars is that they're really quiet, especially compared to the old gas-guzzlers that drove the whole world into peak oil crisis. We didn't see anyone on the road, though before we even managed to get to our posts, someone saw us. Johnston's guys may have been disorganized and undisciplined, but they at least had enough sense to post a guard or two.

We started taking fire just as we rolled up to the intersection we were supposed to hold. The rifles were high up in buildings and parking garages, so there wasn't any point in rolling down the windows and shooting back. We would have exposed ourselves and probably been shot without ever seeing the snipers, so we just settled in and waited.

Two cars peeled off and headed up Main. Our intersection was directly up from the courthouse, so I watched them jump out of the cars and start shooting anything that moved. They moved like machines, insanely fast, firing and running without losing so much as one man. So far, the plan looked like it was working – whatever the plan might be. All eight men cleared the front door and were inside before they even took any serious return fire.

But while the assault team breezed into the courthouse like a cool Sunday afternoon, our position was starting to get really hot. The cab was rocking with the number of bullets bouncing off the body armor, and it wasn't going to take long before pieces started to fall off. Men were pouring into the streets, armed with rifles and pistols and in some cases, just baseball bats with nails hammered through them. Rolling down the windows to fire back would have been suicide.

"Rob!" I yelled through the din. "We can't stay parked here! They'll take us apart!"

He nodded and pointed at an alley up the street. "Pull in there!"

I didn't need to be told twice. I burned rubber throwing the cab into the alley, and then Rob popped up through the cupola and started firing at anyone who came into sight. That was a lot of targets, too. The guys in the back seat rolled down the windows and helped, and since we were just sitting there, I thought I might as well join in.

I don't know how many men I killed in that alley. I know I shot at least three, and saw them fall, but whether they died or not, I couldn't say. They quit shooting at us after I

clipped them, though, and after a bunch of our enemies fell, the rest decided to fall back a little and wait for us to come out.

“Go!” yelled Rob from the turret. “Back us out, and do it fast so they can’t get a bead on us!”

That sounded like a uniquely horrible idea, but I did get the sense that just waiting in the alley was a bad idea. It was only a matter of time until someone dropped a piano out a window and we all ended up flattened like cartoon cats, and then just floated up to Heaven with wings and white robes and tiny harps.

I bumped over a couple bodies on the way out, and felt one of the tires blow as I rolled over something sharp. That made me curse, but it didn’t slow me down any. It wasn’t the first time I ever drove on a flat, and when I got back to the street and spun the wheel, the busted tire even helped me turn a little sharper.

Up on the roof, Rob was death in a yellow cab. His assault rifle was cutting down men so fast that the enemies were either dropping like flies or running like roaches when you turn on the kitchen light. I never slowed down, just whipped around the narrow streets and alleys while Rob and Grover and Skip claimed lives like a team of grim reapers.

Then Rob got hit. He dropped back into the cab, clutching his throat, and his rifle went over the side and into the street. It may as well have fallen off a cliff and into a river, because there was no way we were going back for it, and with Rob’s life squirting out between his fingers, he wasn’t going to have much use for it, anyway.

“Sons of bitches!” yelled Grover, and leaned out the window to spray hot leaden death at a trio of Johnston’s goons who had the misfortune to run into the street at a most inopportune time. They fell under Grover’s twin machine pistols, and then they were gone as we rounded another corner.

Now we were looking right at the courthouse, and headed towards it. One of Johnston’s goons was running away from the building, looking over his shoulder, and he never even saw us before I ran him down. He flew over the car, mangled and twisted. I didn’t watch to see where he landed.

The assault team was on its way out of the building now, and they were not having as much luck as they had going in. Eight men had run in, but only three ran out, and one of those was limping badly. The limping man was holding a big black box in one hand and waving for us to run. I slammed on the brakes and threw the cab into reverse, and while I was looking out the back window, Grover swore again and said, “Stop! Get up there!”

I turned to look forward again, and saw that all three of the surviving assault team had just been gunned down on the stairs of the courthouse.

“Get in there!” yelled Grover. “We gotta get the detonator!”

“Detonator?! What the fuck are we doing here?!” I was more than a little leery of any job that required a detonator, but still reversed direction again and hauled ass for the

courthouse steps. I screamed to a quick halt, and Grover and Skip bailed out the back doors, running toward their fallen comrades.

I ducked low and fired out my still-open window, picking targets when I could and firing at nothing when that's all I could see. Two of Johnston's men came out the front doors, guns blazing, but I shot one and Skip shot the other. Then Gordon swept up the black box and ran back for the cab, with Skip hot on his heels.

It looked like they would make it. They didn't, but it sure looked like they were going to. I never saw where the bullet came from, but one second Gordon was running like a wide receiver, and the next he was bouncing off the sidewalk. Skip skidded to a stop and threw himself prone, which saved his life just before the entire world stopped.

I would swear to this day that there was a long, fat second where time just quit moving. It was like the entire scene was frozen. Gordon was hunched over the black box, Skip was captured in the air three inches from the ground, and even the broken glass quit falling and just hung in space.

Then the world turned white. I was looking at the ground, not the courthouse, so my retinas managed to not be burned to a crisp. But even inside the cab, I could feel the heat as fire blew out the windows of the courthouse. Other witnesses – our guys who made it back – swear they saw the clock tower shoot into the sky.

Then a wave of flame washed over the cab, slamming it sideways and lifting two wheels off the ground. I would have sworn I was about to flip over, but as the explosion passed, the cab slammed back down on all four wheels, and I had a chance to look around.

Everything was still blazing white, no details anywhere. I could see movement here and there, and shimmering bright spots that must have been fire. The heat was intense, like a living creature swallowing me whole. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, trying to figure out which direction would get me out of there.

I was deaf as a post, too, because the blast had been loud enough to make my ears bleed. All I could hear was a high-pitched ringing. I was half-blind and all-deaf, but I knew that if I didn't get the hell out of Fort Worth, I was going to end up a permanent part of it. There might have been men shooting at me right then, for all I knew. I couldn't have heard them if the gun was against my forehead.

Scanning around the destroyed intersection left me even more confused. The fire had come from the courthouse, but I couldn't use that for a landmark because by now, the fire was spreading. Buildings were on fire everywhere I looked. I remembered where some of the cars had been parked, but the explosion had thrown them all around and turned the cab to face a different direction. If I could just pick out some details, I was sure I could find the road out, but everything was gray shadows against a white screen.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm down. Just slamming the gas and driving like mad wasn't going to help, especially when I couldn't see. I made myself count to five, which was hard when all I wanted to do was run. I wanted to get out of the heat more than I had ever wanted anything, but just hauling ass was only going to get me killed.

When I opened my eyes, the world was making a comeback. I saw a car explode into burning shrapnel a block away, and in front of me, Skip was trying to crawl to his feet. He was more dizzy and disoriented than I was, and his gun was long gone. He managed to stumble to his feet, so I yelled to him to get to the cab. Of course, he was as deaf as I was, and blind, too. He started wandering back toward the courthouse, which was burning like an Arizona wildfire.

I threw open the door and jumped out of the cab. When I grabbed Skip's arm to try to pull him back to the cab, he spun around and punched me in the chest, flailing to get away. Then a bullet bounced off the sidewalk and kicked his knee out from under him, and I knew I didn't have time for relaxation techniques. I smashed an elbow into his face and caught him before he hit the ground.

I'm not a weak man, but I'm no body builder. So I guess it was pure adrenaline that let me throw Skip over my shoulder, race back to the cab and chuck him in the back seat. Then I threw myself into the driver's seat and headed out of that hellish intersection. I wasn't entirely particular where I was headed, as long as it was away.

A couple more people shot at us, but the fight had gone out of Johnston's boys, and the gunfire was almost pathetic. We made it back to the freeway in one piece, mostly. Skip woke up and started moaning – he had shattered his elbow when the blast threw him on the sidewalk, and his knee was bleeding pretty good from the bullet that had hit him as we were making our escape. I wasn't shot, but I had one hell of a sunburn. The cab was in even worse shape.

We found the rest of the convoy pulled over on the ramp to 30, a high overpass that let the scouts look out for stragglers. We waited there for half an hour, which was enough time to get Skip some bandages and painkillers and put the spare tire on the car. I threw the flat over the side of the overpass. It was completely wrecked, so I wasn't going to get any more use out of it.

Of the twenty cars that went into Fort Worth, eight made it out. And as we drove away, the city burned behind us. The courthouse was completely gone within an hour, and the fire jumped to the neighboring buildings with no effort at all. Before long, half of downtown was on fire.

The survivors of the raid got to spend two days in the Ross Building, with the best doctors Waites had making sure we were comfortable. My only real injuries were bleeding eardrums and a total bastard of a sunburn, but several of the guys were pretty banged up. Happily, only one of them died, and it wasn't Skip. He thanked me for saving his life, but complained that it meant he was still going to have to see his idiot kids later.

I stared out the window at the sunset that second night. There was a yellow glow on the western horizon, probably the fire heading east. It framed the bottom of the sunset and spilled its light into the clouds, so it was pretty awesome to watch.

“Creed, I sure am glad you made it back.”

I turned, and there was Arlen Waites, holding a leash with Trouble at the other end.

“This dog is a pain in the ass. I tried to give her to my youngest, but when my little girl tried to put a dress on her, your dog bit her. I locked her up, and she howled for twelve hours straight. I don’t know how a dog this small makes that kind of racket, but she kept us up and my wife wanted me to go out and shoot her. Truth be told, I wasn’t entirely opposed to the idea, but she’s your dog, and this whole damned city owes you, so you at least get to decide what to do about her.”

I stuck my hand out without hesitation and took the leash. “She’s Trouble, I know. Hell, that’s her name. But yeah, if you don’t need her any more, I would like her back.”

“Fine. Your call. So take her, go downstairs and get in your cab, and go back to your garage. That dog might be more trouble than she’s worth, but she’s your problem now.”

“Thank you, Mister Waites. I guess I owe you one.”

He waved his hand. “We’re square, son. Seems Johnston’s goons tore up your garage pretty good, but we fixed it up. We also fixed the damage to your cab. I’m waiving your taxes for the next two years, too. I figure that ought to about set us even.”

“Well, Mister Waites, that’s downright generous of you. Thank you. Sorry to have been a bother.”

He shook my hand as he pointed me to the elevator. “No bother at all. Far as I know, you saved the whole town, and from what Skip tells me, the whole trip to Fort Worth could have gone bust if you hadn’t been there. Least I could do.”

Waites was being modest about the repairs he had made to the cab. It ran smoother than it had for ten years, and not only was it clear of bullet holes, but it had a fresh coat of paint. He even replaced the bulletproof glass in the windows, which had all been chipped in our visit to downtown Fort Worth.

His work on the garage was even better. A new security system greeted me at the door, and asked me for a thumbprint before it would open the door. When I got inside, I was even more impressed. There were two clean suits in the closet (which was especially impressive because I hadn’t had a closet before) and my lumpy mattress had been replaced with an actual bed, frame and all. Best of all, my bathtub had been replaced with a shower stall, and I even had a sink. I turned the faucet to check and had to laugh out loud with glee.

My garage might have been a half-ruined concrete shack, but I had running water.

Epilogue

The fire burned out of control for four days, and lots of folks in Dallas started to worry. The winds were blowing from the west, which meant the flames were being pushed toward the city. There were refugees at the walls the whole time, setting up little shanty towns at the base until Waites sent men to run them off. Even if fire destroyed everything you ever had, the rules were pretty clear – to live in Dallas, you have to work.

The fifth day we had one of those springtime storms that would have made weathermen panic before the crash. It rained buckets, dropped hail the size of your fist, and we even had a tornado tear a rut through the Trinity River basin, just outside the wall. It lasted a good ten hours, and had everyone in town holed up and praying. But when it passed, the fire was out.

That should be the end of the story, but it isn't. About two weeks after the storm, people in Dallas started getting sick.

What would happen was, you would start getting a really itchy rash, usually on your neck or back. Then little red spots would start to appear, spreading all over your body. Your fever would jump up, you would get tired as hell, and then there wasn't much to do but let you sleep for about fourteen hours.

And then you got better.

I don't know if Johnston's pox was defective, or if the fire somehow made it weaker than it was supposed to be. But whatever the case, not one person died of it. Not one. It was less dangerous than a cold, and once you got it, you were immune, and wouldn't ever get it again. After a while, parents were taking their kids over to play with any other kids who got the pox, just to get it over with.

Hell, I even got it. I took a day off driving and slept in that comfy bed I got from Waites, and the next day, I was good to go. The bumps took a few days to fade, but they barely itched before they were gone for good.

Johnston's failed disease (and Waites's failed attempt to stop it) should, once again, signify the end of the story. But there was one more thing, one more piece of stupidity.

Trouble got the pox.

Don't worry, she's fine now.