

Contents

OPENING SCENE	2
BATTLE SCENE	7

OPENING SCENE

They took a vote.

It was their third day spent cooped up in that goddamn cabin, and nerves were beginning to fray thin. Jax had stayed sane by avoiding the others, he kept mostly to himself anyway and had spent his last three days lounging on a comfy little chair on the dock built next to the lake, a straw hat dropping over his eyes and a fishing rod in his hands. The line that went into the water had stayed loose most of the time, but he didn't care. It wasn't like he really needed the fish and his shoulder needed time to heal. He kept his shirt off and let the wound breathe as it cried brown tears of betadine ointment that he kept applying every three hours. It wasn't a vacation, but it was close enough considering the situation.

The others didn't see it that way.

He'd known it was a bad idea - the kind of personalities that they were (including him), this many of them cooped up in a confined space for any length of time was bound to spell disaster. The job itself had gone smooth enough: the cops had gotten there a full seventy seconds ahead of time than expected but by then all four of them were in the car and the rest was his job anyway. The Fat Man always liked to say that once Jax was behind the wheel, he wasn't Hell on Wheels so much as the Devil that couldn't be seen - and he'd never been in a chase that he couldn't drive his way out of. True, once when they'd gotten boxed in they'd had to exchange fire with a couple of squad cars, which was when he took a round in the shoulder but it missed the bone so he kept going. Out of the seven escape routes he had scouted out, four took him out of line of sight of any overhead choppers and two allowed them to swap cars without being seen.

Once they were in the minivan he'd let Johnny take the wheel. Honey rode shotgun wearing a fake belly that made her look pregnant, and he sat in the back with the Kid, who looked like a teenager with his gaming console and headphones. Which he more or less was, nineteen and pulling his first job. Jax himself bandaged off the wound so the blood wouldn't show, and put on a new shirt that hung loose on his frame. They looked like a family on a road trip, with little Billy and "Uncle Bob" riding in the back seat. Half an hour later, they were home free.

The trip into the Apalachicola National Forest was uneventful, and they'd arrived at the cabin without any excitement, where the Tailor was waiting: he got Jax's shoulder properly treated but decided to leave the bullet inside. Apparently the thing where doctors took a knife and went digging into gunshot wounds to get the bullet out only happened in the movies: in real life that was liable to make things worse, and supposedly the bullet hadn't hit anything vital.

"I won't know until I get an X-Ray," the Tailor had explained, "But the round isn't lodged in a bone and it doesn't seem to be moving around, so the most likely scenario is that we'll just leave it in there." He'd have to get one of those medical cards to avoid having interesting conversations with airport security for the rest of his life, but Jax wasn't fond of flying anyway, so it didn't matter.

The trouble was, the Fat Man had been supposed to send someone to the cabin to make contact in twenty-four hours, and that didn't happen.

They'd decided to wait it out, deciding it wasn't a good idea to deviate from the plan and they needed to lie low anyway. But Day Two came and went, and so did Day Three, at the end of which Johnny, apparently forgetting that he was only a pretend-husband, made a move on Honey. She slapped him, things got out of control, and when the rest of them had rushed into the cabin upon hearing her screams they'd found her beaten bloody with her clothes half torn off. Johnny was already on top of her.

"The rest of you wait your turn," He said with a grin, "Kid, you're becomin' a real man today."

Jax shot him.

Some part of him realized he could threaten the asshole at gunpoint, but he knew from stories he'd heard about how quickly this kind of situation could get out of control. Besides, the Tailor was known to be a psycho doctor and he didn't know the Kid that well, so if they turned out to want to take turns after Johnny instead of helping diffuse the situation he'd be outnumbered. He weighed the odds, made a split second decision, and went for his Glock.

The first round went through Johnny's ribs, and before the surprise wore off Jax kicked the man into the ground, rolled him upwards, and put two in his chest.

So they took a vote. They couldn't be cooped up in here any longer. The Kid volunteered to go somewhere where he could find a cell signal and make a call, but Jax didn't trust the little shit not to botch it up. Sending the Tailor, who was wanted in four states including Florida on outstanding warrants, was out of the question. Jax would've gone himself, but there was no way he was leaving Honey alone with those two. It wasn't her he was worried about - she'd grabbed a shotgun and hadn't parted with it ever since Johnny had ended up dead - but if there was another incident he'd likely come back and find all three of them dead. Not to mention the money.

Jax went into the woods and buried the bag of cash while Honey held the shotgun on the other two. The three of them were unhappy about his decision, but all four of them knowing the location was a bad idea and he was the Fat Man's contact (plus the Tailor and the Kid were both looking at him warily after he'd executed Johnny in cold blood) so they relented.

That was how they ended up driving out through the little dirt road from the cabin, back to the highway. The plan was the same - the Tailor drove, Honey rode shotgun with her belly back on, and little Billy and Uncle Bob took the back seat again. Jax didn't know who the fuck they thought they were kidding: Honey had a black eye you could spot from a mile away, the Tailor was twenty years older than her, and he himself didn't resemble either of them in any way to be their family - both were blondes, and Jax had hair as black as the night, same as Johnny, who was lying in a ditch along with a pile of cash in the jungle, a ghost watching over a treasure. If they were pulled over, trouble was inevitable.

The road that ran through the woods didn't have a cell signal. They drove until they reached the last gas station at the intersection that led off into the forest, and that was when things got weird.

It might've been the sheer disarray of the place, littered with magazines from the store, empty cans, and other stuff flying around; or it might've been the way the pumps

were both empty, one's hose dangling off and lying on the ground. It might've been the store which didn't look like it had been robbed so much as *stripped*, with nearly everything gone from the shelves.

Or it might've been the dead body lying outside the store.

"What the fuck?" The Kid had a tendency to swear non-stop like some ten-year old who'd just discovered four-letter words, but on this occasion Jax felt it appropriate.

"Somebody rob the place?" The Tailor wondered out loud as they were looking around the store.

"Then where are the cops?" Honey demanded.

"Maybe the robbers got away clean."

"And nobody came here the last, what, *two days* or something? That guy out there's starting to stink."

"Hey, that's why we were here, remember? Nobody comes out here."

Jax didn't reply. He was busy looking around; it took him a few minutes to let his sharp eyes, trained for hectic driving, run through the entire scene in detail. And he didn't like what he found.

For one thing, the cash register was intact. Anything that had any shitty value on the streets - like the cell phones and GPSes the place sold, had also been left behind. For another, the *rest* of the store had been cleared out: *all* the food was gone - even the candy jars next to the register. So were all the tools, the whole section was empty. Third and finally - and this was the weirdest part - the body didn't belong to the store clerk, who Jax had once met when he'd come in here a couple of weeks before when the Fat Man had brought him out to the cabin to show him the place.

So, what, a bunch of gangstas had held up the store, stripped the place bare of all the potato chips, noodles and candy it had, left all the cash, and on the way out one of their own had gotten killed (by who?) and they'd left the body behind and driven off to have a jolly old time? Then the store clerk, instead of calling the cops, had walked out of the store and disappeared into thin air?

Something was very, very wrong.

"Maybe someone was on a killing spree." The Tailor speculated. "They came here because this place was out of the way, perhaps?"

"Jax?" Honey asked. "What do you think?"

He ignored her and went around behind the counter once again to pick up the phone.

The number was supposed to be for emergencies only, but he figured this counted as one. He punched it in and heard the ringing on the other end.

No answer.

He tried again. This time, after what seemed like an eternity, someone picked up.

"Yeah?"

"Boss? It's me."

"Jax? Where the *fuck* have you been?"

"In the cabin, like you told us to - "

"Why didn't you come out and call me when nobody showed up?"

"I thought - "

"Never mind, where're you now?"

"At the gas station store on the road leading out of the forest. We couldn't get a cell signal."

"Yeah, of course you couldn't. The store have any supplies?"

That's a very specific question, was Jax's first thought. Why would he ask me that?

"No," He replied. "Looks like the place got robbed. Money's been left in the register though."

"Yeah, no shit. Listen, you need to get back to the cabin."

"What's going on?"

The Fat Man sighed his huge sigh. "Look, I don't have time to explain. Just get back to the cabin, okay?"

"We might have a problem. There's a dead body outside the store."

"Of course there's a body outside the store! The fucking *world* came to an end and you missed it!"

"What?"

"Goddamn it... listen, do you know what a solar flare is?"

"No."

"Neither did I, two days ago. Apparently it's a thing that breaks off from the sun and hits the earth. One's headed to hit us in twelve hours."

"What?"

"Nobody believed it at first - but apparently there were *two* flares, one small and one big, and Canada got hit first - these things cause EMP - you know what *that* is?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Well, Canada just got sent back to the stone age. No more electronics, no phones, no cars, no power. It took out half the cell signals over us, too."

There was a long silence in which neither of them spoke. Jax felt as though someone was suddenly going to yell "April Fool!" and it would all turn out to be a joke. It wasn't true. It *couldn't* be true.

And yet...

Somewhere in the back of his head, Jax realized that, unbelievably, it made sense: someone had robbed the store for its supplies, and they'd left the cash because it wasn't worth anything. There was a body because people had been fighting over the food. That meant there was looting going on, and the cops had bigger concerns than clearing bodies from out-of-the-way gas station stores.

"Jax?"

"I'm still here."

"Listen to me. Get back to the cabin, and - "

"What about the money? No point in it now?"

"*FUCK* the money! Yes, there's no point to it now! It's a bag full of toilet paper as of yesterday, you understand? You've got enough food to last a week, which is the important point here. You can't come to the city."

"Rioting?"

"I don't think that's enough of a word to describe what's happening. Half the city's hell bent on killing each other. The thing that keeps civilization civilized is an illusion, Jax, in this line of work we know that better than anybody. Cops aren't cops anymore; the army's here and they're shooting people who break curfew. It's fucked, no two ways about it. Do you even believe me?"

"Any reason I shouldn't?"

"Frankly I don't know if *I* would, if I were you. I'm working on getting out of here, but it'll take some doing. Can you get back to the cabin? Do you have a car?"

"Yeah."

"Listen, here's what you do: there's a survivalist nutjob who lives a couple miles past the cabin. I know the guy; he might be able to help. Park outside the fence, do *not* drive in. Walk up to the door alone, with your arms raised. I'm not kidding, Jax, this idiot's not a joke. He usually sticks a rifle out the door when he opens it, so don't aggravate the guy and tell him I sent you and you need help. He knows you're nearby, I called him but he wouldn't drive out to the cabin. He's a little...unhinged. Don't threaten him, we need his help for whatever's coming. Remember, the second flare hits tomorrow, phones and cars won't work after that, got it?"

"Yeah."

"His name's Zachariah, he'll have a satellite phone, call me when you get there."

As the line went dead Jax realized he hadn't explained about Johnny or everything else that had happened, and the question that popped up in his head as he hung up to look at the three of them, who'd been listening to his side of the conversation, was simple but at the same time not simple:

What do you want me to tell the others?

BATTLE SCENE

In his rather long career as a criminal, Jax had never been in a siege. He'd never gotten holed up in some diner with a bunch of hostages, he'd never gotten into a shootout with the cops if he could help it, and he'd never assaulted some building like a Tac team in gear. As a result, his long career as a criminal hadn't come to an end after a short run, and he was still alive. He'd learned early in the game: you pulled shit like that, you *died*.

"It just doesn't happen." The Fat Man had told him, so long ago, "Nobody, in all of history, has *ever* locked themselves up in a bank, killed a bunch of people, demanded a suitcase full of cash in exchange for the hostages and lived to tell the tale. It just doesn't happen. Best case scenario is that you kill a bunch of civilians before the cops take you out. If you want to live, don't ever get yourself into shit like that."

Jax had followed that advice and it had served him well, so it said something about him - or about the world at large, he wasn't sure which - that he was now in an abandoned high school with nearly twenty heavily armed assholes outside trying to take him out.

"Not good." Zachariah summed up the situation in an understatement, as usual.

"Yeah, no shit."

"I think they're planning something with the cars." Linda said.

Jax thought so too. The three cars were lined up now, and they'd spent a lot of time pushing them around to get them into position - not an easy task, since they'd had to stay behind the vehicles for cover, to make sure they didn't get sniped from the school windows.

"Everyone in position?" He asked Zach.

"Yup. Don't know how long we can stay that way, though."

Jax agreed with that, too. A sustained siege would be hours of boredom broken up by minutes if not mere seconds of action, and keeping your focus was something you needed training and practice for. Jax could get into the zone, stay alert, calm, and still, like he did whenever he was behind the wheel and waiting for his team to come out of whatever job they were pulling, and he knew for a fact he could maintain that mindset for hours. The same couldn't be said of everyone else, who, at the end of the day, were just people forced to pick up weapons and defend themselves after the world had come to an end.

It would all come down to whether or not they could hold their positions when the shooting started. People inevitably had a tendency to abandon post and group together, and that was the worst thing to do. Unless you needed to change position as part of a strategy (even if that strategy was retreat) the best thing to do was stay put and do your job. Zachariah had explained this to everyone, and pointed out that, since they had no comms to speak of, they'd need to keep their heads unless he or Jax called out orders stating otherwise. The two of them were positioned on the first floor, looking down and in a good place to be easily heard in case they needed to shout to the others.

Thankfully, it looked like Milch didn't have the patience for a long siege, either. They were definitely up to something with the cars.

"We won't have to wait that long." He said.

"You doin' okay?" Zach asked.

"My head's in the game."

"Ain't what I asked."

"Only thing that matters."

"That's true, I suppose. But when we're done here, I think - ah, shit."

Two of the cars had just been set on fire. The flames went up in bright orange against the twilight sky, smoke billowing up in the wind. The cars started rolling towards the doors.

"Here we go, people!" Zachariah yelled. "Remember, stay cool and pick your shots!"

The cars hit the wide doors, stayed like that for several long moments, and eventually exploded.

"We got a perimeter breach, I'm takin' my team to deal with it." Zach disappeared, yelling orders to his people.

Small arms fire rang out from somewhere on the other side of the school, and it was too soon to be Zach's team, so he could only hope whoever was shooting hit what they were aiming at. Answering fire came from somewhere in the distance. He stayed focused on the sight ahead of him, and saw as black-clad figures broke out of cover to come charging at the exploded door.

"Go." He said.

Jax and Devon opened fire almost at the same time, firing on semiautomatic. Jax's AK bucked against him as he aimed through the window and squeezed the trigger, sights locked on to distant figures. He saw one stumble and fall, aimed at another, saw muzzle flashes aimed at him and ducked back in.

"I got one!" Devon yelled in ecstasy.

"Change position and get another." Jax replied as he moved to another window.

Linda, who had been peeking out of the window but not firing, picked out her target and opened up in full-auto. He was impressed with how well the skinny woman was able to handle recoil, managing it well enough for several controlled bursts. She'd been aiming at four who'd been bunched together, and he saw one go down. Another fell, got up and kept moving but in a way that clearly indicated he was seriously wounded. The rest made a run for cover.

Linda moved off the window just as the frame erupted in bullet impacts, and crouched down to move to another vantage point. Jax, who was in another position already, saw an amusing sight: Milch had, probably from having seen it on TV, ordered his men to push the last car, a pickup truck, slowly forward. A whole bunch of armed men were taking cover around the thing, two in the flatbed of the truck and two on either side, behind the doors. Jax guessed that there were at three or four pushing the truck from behind to make it move, and he saw one behind the wheel.

He smiled. That really was a whole bunch of armed men, and they were all grouped up in one big target.

I'm glad I kept you around, he said in his mind as he moved away from the window and picked up the rocket launcher.

He only had one missile, but with something like this and shooting at a target moving at that slow a pace, it'd be more than enough. Instead of leaning out he kept back so they couldn't see the tube, and, taking his time, got a clear line on them. He felt the tube push back, and heard the *whoosh* as the RPG zoomed through the air.

What happened next was beautiful.

The explosion didn't send a fireball up into the air like you saw in the movies, in fact there was actually very little by way of fire - probably because there was no gas in the tank - but when the pickup blew it was enough to take everyone around with it, body parts flying in the air. The shockwave raised a cloud of dust and a tire and several parts from the vehicle went flying. The *boom* of the rocket's hit seemed to hang in air, and the silence was only broken by the whooping and hollering that broke out inside the school.