
ABSORBING LIVES

LT ANDERSON

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Published in the United States by Rogue Street Entertainment, LLC.

Absorbing Lives / Les and Taylor Anderson (LT Anderson)

Summary: When the elite Changers harnessed immortality and the ability to change their appearance at will, they erased State lines and walled off sections of the country as human breeding farms. The Punks rebelled when they discovered the Changers absorb the lives of innocent people to retain their eternal life. To regain control of their breeding farms, The Changers are preparing high-tech AI Mutants to eliminate the Punks.

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Cover Design by Dane from Ebook Launch - ebooklaunch.com

ISBN-10: 1-7321795-0-6

ISBN-13: 978-1-7321795-0-9

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*ABSORBING LIVES is dedicated to society's rejects.
To the commonplace, average and ugly. To the blemished,
imperfect, unattractive and flawed, old and young, freckle-faced
and scarred, the fatsos and the beanpoles, the slow, the geeks, the
loners, the outcasts, the freaks and weirdos.
You are perfect.
Never change.*

CHAPTER 1

Krystal

THE SWAMP COOLER IN THE small two-bedroom, one-bath house offered little relief from the waning autumn humidity, even at 10:00 p.m. Krystal Peterson's greasy hair stuck to her forehead, resembling smears of brown ink, and her white tank top hugged her braless torso like a wet straitjacket. She glared at the skinny, grotesque loser in the mirror. She was positive her looks had caused the crack—the one that ran diagonally from the middle of the left-hand side across to the top right. *Twenty-nine point five percent of my body, assholes*, she thought. The doctors said the burns covered thirty percent. She knew they were wrong, because she had meticulously measured every millimeter of gnarled, withered skin on her body.

Krystal laughed, because now it didn't matter. After all, being a Changer had its perks. Krystal liked the idea of living forever, but she *loved* that she had the capacity to change her appearance at will. In the dim light, she closed her eyes and raised her arms above her head. Face to the floor, she crossed her legs. The vibration began at her feet, crawled up her body and shot out the tips of her fingers. It lasted exactly one point six five seconds.

She stepped back to survey her new look in the mirror. Pretty, with an edge. Tight. Tough. Jet-black hair.

A quick wardrobe change completed the transformation. Black on black on black: a black Underground Punk Band T-shirt strategically cut to expose a gray tank top over a black bra, black jeans with a black leather belt holding just the right number of studs, and black boots. *I'd give me a ten... maybe eleven.*

She closed her eyes again. A membrane lining the inside of her eyelids displayed critical information regarding her status as a Changer.

CITIZEN NUMBER: 1.999.780.001

SECTOR: 001 WEST USA

ACTUAL AGE: 26 YRS 2 MOS 15 DAYS 21 HR 14 MIN 33 SEC

CHANGE DISPLAY CONDITION: 21 YRS 6 MOS 15 DAYS FEMALE

EXPIRATION: 2 MOS 16 DAYS 2 HR 45 MIN 27 SEC

ABSORPTION STATUS: CRITICAL

Cool, she thought. *I still have over two months before I time out.* Krystal ratted her hair and tossed the comb onto the dinky second-hand dresser. She grabbed her cell and keys, picked up her wallet, stuffed it into her back pocket and hooked the wallet chain to a belt loop. *I'm outta here.* Her keys jingled as she passed through the narrow wood-paneled hallway.

"Where are you going?" her mother called out from the small dinette next to the kitchen.

"I already told you, out."

"When are you coming home?"

Krystal ignored the second question and closed the front door. She let the spring-loaded screen door slam shut behind her, hopped down the front steps and crossed the yard to her mini pickup, parked on the street. She turned the key in the ignition and hand-cranked the driver's window down, releasing the musty, gasoline-flavored scent of the truck's interior. Her cell vibrated under her thigh. She held it up for a quick look as she pulled away from the curb.

Curtis

Krystal put the cell on speaker and tossed it onto the dash in front of the steering wheel. “Hey.”

“Hey, babe. Where are you?”

“My street. I’m on my way.”

“Oh. I thought you said ten thirty.”

“Right.” She slowed the mini pickup. “Hey, I got traffic ahead.”

“Okay. See you in a few. I love you, babe.”

“Of course you do.” She tucked the cell back under her thigh, made a California stop, turned right and crossed the railroad tracks.

A large electronic sign atop the old ten-story building on her right negated the need for a streetlight on this corner:

JOIN THE ELITE.

BE THE PERSON OF YOUR DREAMS TODAY.

EXPERIENCE IMMORTALITY TOMORROW.

RECEIVE THE CHANGE!

Long ago, the Changers had harnessed immortality and the ability to change one’s appearance at will. This combination of powers had become a monetary boon for the Changers. In the beginning, there were humorous ads—amaze your friends and family, change your appearance. Then the ads appealed to the more rational person—live an easier, longer life. The final hook—everyone’s doing it, so join the party, be one of the elite, live forever. Krystal had seen the sign so many times it was nearly invisible to her.

She rolled up to a stop sign and stared at an old three-story brick building. She’d heard stories about how it used to be a Bank of America. Now it was a clothing store. She imagined how it must have been when it had been a thriving bank. That was before the Perimeter, before the Wall. *Quiet tonight*, she thought.

The staccato slapping of a hand on her passenger-side window jarred Krystal from her temporary vegetative state. She glanced to her right.

Scotty Van Buren.

“What the shit, Scotty?” Krystal unconsciously stiffened her right leg, pushing down on the already-depressed brake pedal. She felt the seat springs on her back, bulging out of the thin vinyl.

“Open up!” Scotty was smiling, full-toothed. Even when he wasn’t smiling, he always appeared to be smiling—the result of the way the corners of his mouth turned slightly upward. He thought it was cute. Krystal saw it as a permanent smirk that befitted his personality. The smug look suited his overall appearance: GQ look with a perfectly trimmed haircut, khaki dress pants, formfitting sweater with the dress-shirt collar sticking out and brown loafers.

The look fit Scotty perfectly as a spy for the Changers. His role kept him inside the Perimeter most of the time. Spying on the Bystanders gave him what every Changer needed—unlimited access to innocent lives for absorption. He used his position as Liaison to the mayor to his advantage, becoming friends with Bystanders and select Punks.

Krystal reached across the seat and flipped the manual lock upward. She flinched as the little pickup bounced hard to the right when Scotty hit the seat.

“Head out of town—Outpost 100.” He slammed the door. Scotty’s expensive cologne blended well with his flawless smile, but mixed with the petrol-inspired scent of the truck’s interior, the smell was gag-worthy.

“Why? I have plans.”

“Just do it.” Scotty looked out the back window of the little truck. “You don’t want to miss this.”

“Doubtful.”

“Fine, then—it’s mandatory. Just do it.”

Ooh, the serious smirk. One of these days I’m gonna wipe that serious smirky-smirk off your face. A series of flashing orange strobe lights on the water tower caught Krystal’s attention as a high-pitched alarm screeched to life. “Shit.”

“Mutant alarm.” Scotty shrugged. “Good thing we’re not staying.”

Krystal jammed the gearbox into first and lurched it twice

through the intersection before heading out of town. The couple drove in silence for several minutes until the pickup approached a traffic signal.

Krystal hurried the vehicle through a yellow light at the rural highway crossing. “This is bullshit, Scotty.” The suspension on the little pickup hit bottom after its flight over a small rise on the other side of the intersection.

Scotty squeezed the grab handle above his head. “It’s not bullshit. You’ve skipped out on two meetings. Levi wants an update on your progress. He wants to know what the Punks are up to, and he wants to know now. This is a mandatory meeting and I’ve been ordered to escort you personally.”

Krystal downshifted the mini pickup at the next intersection. A group of Punks stood beside a heavily armored guard house blocking the highway.

Scotty looked at Krystal. “What’s up with this? These checkpoints aren’t usually manned.”

The Punks had set up small checkpoints in the Wall after the rebellion. They had designed guard shack-style structures to monitor ingress and egress of citizens within the Perimeter. When the Punks signed the Treaty that gave them control of the interior, fear of Changers breaching the enclosed cities waned, the Punks relaxed and they deactivated the minor checkpoints.

“I don’t know,” Krystal said. “They haven’t used them in years—last time the Punks felt friction with the Changers. Let’s just hope I have friends here and we breeze through.”

One Punk was stationed inside the guard house. *C’mon, open up*, Krystal thought. *You know my truck.*

Krystal slowed to a stop and rolled her window down. “What’s up, guys? You know me.”

The little truck tilted slightly when the Punk leaned inside. “It’s late. You’re too close to the Perimeter.”

“You know me, Slade. Just open up.”

Slade wiped his sweat, forehead to neck. He looked across the cab. “Who’s this turd?”

Krystal shivered imperceptibly at the scent of Slade’s breath.

His bottom lip bulged from an overworked wad of tobacco. A crusty brown trace of dried snuff lined his lips and the corners of his mouth. "That's Scotty. He's a friend of mine."

"Still hanging out with Bystanders, eh?" Slade backed up as he opened the driver's door. "All right, everybody out."

The Punk on the other side opened the door, and the pair stepped out of the truck. "What the hell, Slade?" Krystal winced as Slade's sweaty hand pinched the skin on her shoulder.

"Up against the truck, Peterson."

"What, you're patting me down?"

Slade grabbed the back of Krystal's collar and slammed her against the vehicle. "Best be cool, girl."

Krystal tasted the blood from her bottom lip at the same time she saw the red smear on the roof of the mini pickup. She felt the pressure of the big Punk against her back. *This is taking forever.* Her vision blurred. She stiffened when the hand squeezed her crotch. "Damn you, Slade."

"Gotta do what we gotta do." He backed up and looked over the roof of the truck. "She's clean. How's Sparky over there?"

"Nothing here. He just smells funny."

"Off you go, Peterson."

Krystal lunged at the big Punk, punching him squarely in the chest. "Totally unnecessary, Slade." She dropped backwards onto the truck seat and slammed the door before grinding the transmission into first gear.

Slade chuckled as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather vest.

Krystal chirped the tires as the gate arm swung skyward.

Scotty smiled across the seat at Krystal. "Friends?"

CHAPTER 2

Curtis

CURTIS DYER HUNG UP HIS cell as he pulled his armored Chevrolet van into the driveway of his parents' two-story country-style home on the outskirts of Tremayne. His recent promotion within the Punks Organization hadn't sat well with his parents, particularly his mom. His new status came with perks, the best of which was private living quarters at Checkpoint One at the Perimeter.

Curtis bounded up the wooden steps to a large well-lighted porch. His lanky six-foot frame made two steps at a time a breeze. Knowing the doorbell was broken, he pounded his fist on the heavy wooden door. The broken doorbell was one of many small repair projects his dad never seemed to find the time for.

Curtis's mom sat at a small desk in the dining room, staring intently at a laptop. She jumped at the knock. "What? Come in!"

"The door's locked." He surveyed the familiar wooden deck area: two wooden patio chairs with faded floral cushions, a love seat-sized porch swing with matching cushions, a round glass-and-steel table with no chairs around it, a stack of paving stones from an unfinished project, and numerous small terra cotta pots

with begonias in need of a trim. His thoughts drifted to Krystal, stirring butterflies in his gut.

Mrs. Dyer slapped the laptop shut and pushed her rolling office chair away from the desk. “Coming.” She waddled to the entryway and opened the door, just a crack. “Oh, hi.” She fidgeted with the useless chain lock on the doorjamb.

Curtis peeked in with one eye. “Hi, Mom. Just checking to see if you need anything before I head home.”

“This is your home, hon—you know I’ve told you that.”

Curtis moved his head from side to side, viewing his mom through the slit with first one eye, then the other. “I know. I don’t see Dad’s car. Do you need anything?”

Mrs. Dyer finally removed the little brass-colored chain from its hook and opened the door. “I made a pie today. It’s apple, your favorite. Would you like to come in and have a bite?”

Curtis smiled. Apple pie wasn’t his favorite. His mom only assumed it was since apple pie was always his choice at family gatherings when the only alternative was fruitcake. “I can’t tonight. I have to get back. I’ve got Perimeter duty.”

“You know your father and I don’t approve. Those are rough characters. Too rough. You’re not like them.”

Moths flicked the porch light. Curtis spun his key ring around one finger. “Well, if you don’t need anything, I better get going.”

As he turned to leave, a high-pitched ear-piercing alarm sounded in the distance. Reflexively, Curtis reached around his back to his waistband for his 9mm Beretta handgun.

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Dyer said.

“Mutants again, Mom. Drop the window shields and close the safety door behind me,” Curtis ordered.

Mrs. Dyer frowned. “But you’re not going out now, are you?”

Curtis smoothed a hand over his seven-inch blond Mohawk before slipping on a pair of fingerless leather gloves. “I have to, Mom.” He leaned over and kissed his mother’s forehead. “I’m leaving. Now get in the house.”

Mrs. Dyer patted her son’s arm. “Just be careful.”

"I always am." Curtis hurried to the van.

"I love you, honey," Mrs. Dyer called out from the porch.

Curtis closed the door and fired up the van. He stuck his arm out the window as he backed down the driveway. "Love you, too, Mom."

CHAPTER 3

The Assignment

A FEW MILES OUTSIDE THE PERIMETER Wall, Krystal swung her vehicle into an expansive driveway on the right. She braked to a stop and waved her cell in front of a small keypad on a post just left of the driveway. A large wrought-iron gate split in the middle and swung inward. Krystal crawled the little pickup through the gate and paused until it closed behind her.

“Why do you need an eight-foot wall around this place?” Krystal asked. “You can’t see in or out with these stupid trees anyway. And why do we call these *outposts*? It’s a *mansion*.”

“It’s what we call them. Just a place to keep an eye on our interests. Oh, watch it driving over the creek. Maintenance is supposed to fix that left rail tomorrow. Just hang a little to the right.”

“I can’t believe the Punks ever agreed to these outposts,” Krystal said.

“All part of the Treaty. It’s a give and take—they monitor inside the Wall with their little checkpoints and we monitor outside with our outposts.”

Krystal shook her head. “Those little shacks are minor checkpoints. Checkpoint One is a huge complex.”

“Exactly,” Scotty said. “Punks built the main checkpoints in

the Wall like regular fortresses. So we built our outposts as big as we wanted.”

“Right. According to the Treaty, Changer Outposts are supposed to be limited to one-bedroom bungalows, no larger.”

Scotty smiled. “Get real. You know we do what we want.” He shrugged. “Guess you just answered your own question about eight-foot walls and monster trees.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, hang on a sec while I call Curtis. I was on my way to meet him when you hijacked me.”

“He’s a loser, Peterson,” Scotty said. “I can’t wait till you take him out.”

“Hey, babe. Yeah. I got sidetracked by Scotty. Yes. I’ll be there. I’m just not sure when. Okay. Yeah. Bye.”

Krystal hung up. “Who says I’m taking him out?”

“It’s your assignment, Peterson. You have to absorb a high-ranking Punk. That’s the message Levi wants delivered—that we can get to the Punks anywhere, anytime.” Scotty tried his best to appear bewildered. “You know all this.”

“It’s my choice. Curtis Dyer isn’t the only high-ranking Punk I’m close to.”

“Prove it, then. I haven’t seen that you’re close to any other Punk, let alone high-ranking.”

Krystal shut off the engine and turned to face Scotty. *Okay, listen up, smirky-smirk.* “I’m not sure he’s the right choice.”

“I heard your conversation with Dyer just now.” Scotty raised an eyebrow. “If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect you’re confusing your emotions with your assignment, and your loyalties. Wouldn’t be good if you fell in love with your mark.” He opened the passenger door and stepped out of the little truck.

Krystal got out, closed the door and addressed Scotty across the roof of the vehicle. “Why are you on my back about it? This is my assignment, and who I take out is my decision.” Krystal’s keys jingled as she pointed at her chest with her thumb. “*My decision.*”

CRICKETS CHIRPED AS KRYSTAL AND Scotty walked toward the mansion. The two entered through huge front doors. Krystal

followed Scotty into the large round marble-floored foyer. She looked up at the ceiling, open through to the second floor and marveled at the ostentatiousness of the structure.

“This way,” Scotty said, making an immediate left into the library.

Krystal loved the scent in the library: wood, leather and sweet pipe tobacco. She bristled when she saw the young olive-complected woman sitting at one end of a brown leather couch. *Silver Long, I hate you*, she thought as the woman tapped away at a virtual keyboard on the glass coffee table in front of her. She deliberately stepped on Silver’s shiny black boots, which lay off to the side of the couch.

“Hi, Van Buren,” Silver said without looking up from the keyboard. “Peterson.”

Krystal flopped down on the leather sofa opposite Silver.

Scotty leaned on the edge of a large mahogany desk positioned face-out on one wall. He crossed his arms. “Do you have all the information, Long?”

“Got it.” A holographic monitor appeared, revealing a detailed profile. Krystal’s picture popped up next to a series of charts, spreadsheets, narratives and statistical data. “You have a high-ranking mark named Curtis Dyer?”

“Maybe.”

“She does,” Scotty said.

“Maybe so.” Krystal’s eyes narrowed as she turned to Silver. “But I haven’t finalized him as my choice to absorb.”

“We have been monitoring your activities, Peterson.” Silver flipped to a second screen on the display. “You’re moving at a snail’s pace. The order directs your immediate action. This comes from the highest levels within our organization.” She smiled at Krystal. “That’s why we’re here. You have less than three months until your Change times out. Each absorption gives you twenty-four months, at best. Consequently, the choice has been made for you. You *will* absorb Curtis Dyer.”

“What’s that database, anyway?” Krystal asked. “How do you know so much about my activities?”

“It’s the chip in your head, Peterson. You know, the one implanted at the Underground when you became one of us.”

For decades, the Changers had experimented with cell mutation, chromosome regeneration, protein absorption and chip implantation as a means to extend life. The ability to effect physical change upon oneself merely by thought was an unexpected bonus. Now, every Changer can live forever and change their appearance at will. And because every Changer receives an implanted chip, the Organization tracks every Changer.

Silver stopped smiling. “Your deadline for action has passed. Complete the assignment, period.”

Scotty shook his head. “Your contract with us goes beyond normal circumstances, Krys. When I introduced you to Levi, that alone put you in the spotlight. You’re special, not a Lottery pick. You are bought and paid for by the Changers Organization. If you recall, you said you’d do *anything* to repay us for the gift of Change you received.”

Krystal shifted on the couch. “A figure of speech.”

Scotty stood from the desk and walked over to the couch. He sat next to Krystal. “No one heard it that way. You are specifically beholden to Levi.”

“Need I remind you how you got here, Peterson?” Silver tapped the keyboard as she eyed the monitor. “Let’s see, you had no place to go. No family, no contacts of any kind. Then along came Scotty. Two years before you received *our* gift of the Change, a girl in Tremayne disappeared. You saw an opportunity in this tragedy. One day, you showed up in town and coincidentally looked exactly like the missing girl. There was a lot of hoopla and a big celebration in Tremayne because the *missing girl* had *returned*. So you played the amnesia game and this poor unsuspecting woman you call ‘mommy’ accepted you into her home. You, Miss Peterson, received the home life you never had as a child.” She looked at Krystal. “I do believe you owe us. It’s time to pay up.”

Krystal’s scalp bristled. “Okay, so, let’s say I complete this assignment. That’s the payback, right?”

“Sorry, hon,” Silver said. “You’re in it for the long haul. No

matter what you do, you are not released from Levi's grip until he says so."

"And if I fail this assignment?"

Silver's eyes widened, ever so slightly. "Let's put it this way, Peterson. Don't think crossing Levi grants you death. That would be the easy way out. Levi will not allow you to time out and die. You'd only get death if our leader is feeling generous."

Krystal sat on the couch, silently rubbing the hourglass-shaped brass fob attached to her key ring.

Silver glanced at the time on her cell. "I think we've made our point. I've got less than four hours to be back at the City."

A man wearing a black jumpsuit appeared at the doorway to the library. "Excuse me, ma'am, the Hyperloop is available."

"Thanks, Aames. I'll be right there."

The man turned and exited toward the rear of the mansion.

Silver scooped up her laptop from the coffee table. "I better get my butt in gear."

Krystal stood. "I take it we're done?"

"Yeah, that's it," Scotty said.

"Then I'm outta here, too."

"I'm staying here. It's almost midnight. Trains will be running soon, and the checkpoints are closing in a few minutes."

"Big deal. Trains don't scare me, and I can drive a few miles out of my way to hit the main portal."

Scotty shrugged. "Suit yourself. Just don't get out of your truck. I heard some rumor about mutants running wild out there after dark."

"I'll take my chances."

THE AUTUMN AIR FLASHED INTERMITTENT cool drafts as Krystal accelerated down the curvy back road toward the Perimeter checkpoint.

Tired of her clumsy words and the voice of her thoughts, Krystal squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Her mini pickup screeched around every corner. She opened her eyes, removed her bandanna and shoved it into the glove compartment.

When she hit the rural highway, she downshifted without stopping at the intersection and pressed hard on the accelerator pedal. The little truck shot to eighty miles per hour.

Krystal winced at the stiffness in her shoulders. The swirling wind in the cab swept the hair from her face, rushed through her brain and disintegrated the cobwebs from her mind. She thought about Curtis. She thought about Scotty and Silver, the heavy-handed frisking at the Perimeter. The thoughts clung like litter to the filter of her brain.

"He's a loser, Peterson."

"You need to make up your mind."

"I love you, babe."

No! Krystal shook her head. *I love you, Curtis! How can I end your life? Damn you, Changers. Yeah, I owe you. But I hate you and everything you stand for.*

"Be who and what you want to be."

"Live forever."

Krystal slowed at the only large curve in the road, but she didn't slow enough. The rear end of the little truck broke free and swung around to meet the front. Sliding sideways down the highway, she hit the brake and turned the wheel sharply to the right. Too late. The front of the truck hit the shoulder and dove into the ditch on the side of the road. Her head slammed against the roof and the glove compartment popped open. The little truck plowed through the first row of orange trees in the adjacent grove, rolled over once and landed upright. The engine died.

"Ow, shit." She shouldered the driver's door open and fell out onto the ground.

crickets

Krystal stood slowly and grabbed her lower back. She stepped up to the dirt shoulder. She put her palms to her face, rubbed her eyes and fell to her knees. There was no let-up from the voices in her now-throbbing head. *"I can't think of a better choice for your big assignment."*

What am I gonna do? Tears formed in Krystal's eyes. She smoothed her hands over the top of her head. She felt the tangles

in her hair and knew her fingers would never make it through. “Dammit.” Tears dropped between her legs, forming tiny craters in the dust.

She remembered the day she had become a Changer. From the beginning, Krystal was a pawn. She possessed every negative trait and experience the Changers loved. She was the perfect balance of needy and defiant—she’d never stood a chance. She had been passed from bad home to foster home to foster home, and finally to the street before Scotty found her.

The *accident* only served to magnify the pain. It wasn’t the physical pain from the burns. It was the added rejection for being ugly. To Krystal, school had been a nightmare from which she’d found it impossible to awaken. Social classes tended to gravitate toward each other. The upper class hung out with the rich, the middle class with the middle class, the poor with the poor, and the losers with the losers. Krystal had never found her crew. Until Scotty. Until the Changers. She would have agreed to *anything*, and she *had*.

The highway checkpoints are gonna be closed by the time it takes me to walk, Krystal thought. She checked the battery on her cell: 16%. *Shit*. She turned the brightness down to almost zero and shoved it into her back pocket. A train horn sounded in the distance—two long tones. *Hmm, just leaving town. I’ll head that direction and sneak in on the tracks*.

Krystal stepped off the road on the other side of the highway and headed toward the sound of the train. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and shivered. *So cold. What the heck? These boots were not made for walking, I’ll tell you that much*.

Ignoring the pain in her back, she trudged forward through the short sagebrush, intermingled with tall grass. *Agh!* She tripped on a root, exposed from the last heavy rain. *Gotta keep moving*. Her once-jet-black jeans and boots quickly faded to grayish-brown from the foliage.

Krystal never saw the log. She felt her knee twist and squeezed her eyes shut when her face plowed through the heavy bush in front of her. “Ow!” The outcry wasn’t from her knee, or her face—

now streaked red from the branches. Krystal pulled a pencil-sized branch out of the meaty side of her thumb. “Aaagh!”

Cradling her injured hand with the other, she pulled out her cell and rolled onto her back. She checked the battery again: 12%. The words Krystal texted blurred as tears again filled her eyes:

I need you. Don't know where I am.

CHAPTER 4

Traveler

A CLOUD OF DUST ENGULFED THE fifty-year-old nondescript minivan as it skidded to a stop at the edge of a sand dune in the Southern California desert. The driver got out to stretch, leaving the creaky door open. He looked down. A drop of sweat trickled off his forehead and fell from his nose, forming a sun-shaped splat on the toe of his leather boot.

He leaned into the cab and shouted through the cage that divided the front seats from the rest of the van. “How you girls doing back there?”

The man was distinctly aware of the grit that chafed his neck, his armpits, the back of his knees and his groin. His legs prickled with sweat beneath his coat. He removed a canteen from the center console of the van. Tilting the titanium container to his dry lips, he finished off the water, feeling a sandy remnant against his teeth in the last few drops.

“We need water,” a female voice said.

A second young woman pounded the metal floor inside the van. “It smells like a locker room in here. Let us out.”

The man tossed the empty canteen onto the passenger-side floor of the van. “What’s the matter, number three? You giving me the silent treatment?”

“Suck it, scumbag,” a third girl replied.

“Okay, three, I’m calling you Miss Feisty from now on. You get to be first in the Arena, just because Levi likes a good show.” The man closed his eyes and faced the stars, just beginning to show. “Yeah, I think I’ll recommend you be the main event tonight,” he muttered. He drew his duster upward, gathered it in front of him and tied the long trench coat’s straps around his waist. He was grateful to be wearing shorts; his legs shivered involuntarily in relief as the cool evening breeze dried the matted hair on his calves and thighs.

Looking east toward the river, the man squinted. No signs of life. He removed his battered Stetson and strained his eyes to the west at the silhouette of a small group of dark hills, scarcely discernible against the muted sky.

“Hey, Miss Feisty.” He pounded an open palm on the side of the van. “Let’s you and me go for a little walk.”

“No way, asshole. I’m staying with my friends.”

The man stepped to the back of the van and opened the door. His keys jingled against the interior cage when he twisted the lock open. “It was your choice to jump the train, Missy. Shoulda caught a ride someplace else. Finders keepers, you know. Now you’re mine.”

“I don’t belong to you.”

The man grabbed a fistful of the girl’s hair. “Get *out* here.” When she hit the desert floor, he slapped a ready-made leather strap around her neck and wrapped the slack around his wrist. He clamped the lock back onto the cage and slammed the van’s door.

“The rest of you pretty ladies wait here. I’ll send you some dates to escort you to my little oasis.” He heaved a guttural laugh that lasted until he slammed the driver’s door shut.

“You look stupid with that coat tied around your waist like that.”

“Okay, Miss Feisty, out in front.”

THE MAN GAZED INTO THE dark distance at the main entrance to the Underground. The Changers had established the Underground

as their Elite Headquarters after the Punks' rebellion became a force to be reckoned with.

Resistance to the high-tech world and the Changers' rule had begun slowly at first. A small contingent of Bystanders had rebelled. The moral compass of the rebellion had resisted the absorption of the innocent to feed the elite.

The rebels had deleted their social media accounts, dropped their satellite entertainment, and gone off the grid to deny revenue to the Changers. Word of mouth had spread their message quickly—stand against the high-tech takeover of one's existence. They'd insisted on being individuals, not part of the mass sellout.

They were called Punks because they had a beef with the profit-driven world. They were about not buying into society and the quest for money, just for the sake of having more than the next guy. For them, it wasn't a fad. They were a serious culture. They were specifically against doing things to be part of the average person's idea of the new, high-tech society. Their attitude came from inside each individual person.

Resistance to the Changers grew among the military and the common person—the factory workers, the mechanics, the farmers, the doctors, nurses, students and teachers—and they joined the rebellion. But the resistance was not without technology. Rebels in the high-tech community declared their independence and allied themselves with the Punks.

So, the Changers struck back. They confiscated weapons and destroyed factories and manufacturing plants. They deprived the Punks of their science and technology. And they developed the Underground.

The main entrance was thirty feet high and a quarter of a mile wide. Multiple layers of reinforced high-strength steel framed triple-thick bulletproof panels of glass. From this distance, the entrance was merely a sliver of blue light against the foothills. Tonight, the man would not access the Underground through the main entrance.

His feet twisted and turned on the sharp multisized rocks beneath him. The man guided the girl toward the nearest dark

hill, scrambling between increasingly larger rocks. Small tufts of sagebrush scratched his legs. His sweaty feet slipped and writhed within his boots. The grit between his toes and under his feet chafed his skin.

“Be glad you got those tennis shoes on.” The man stopped at a narrow opening in the rocks, removed his hat again and wiped his forehead. “Down you go.” He shoved Miss Feisty headfirst into the opening and let go of the strap. The man followed and disappeared down into the portal.

Moments later, the man stepped into a familiar stone foyer, girl in tow. He felt a cool breeze from the Underground and paused. “Love that fragrance, don’t you? Kind of like”—he sniffed the air—“cinnamon and peaches.”

The girl crammed her fingers between the leather strap and her neck. “You smell like piss. That’s all I smell.”

He shrugged and continued downward through the smoothly polished passageway. He stopped at a tinted glass wall blocking the corridor and spoke into a microphone on the wall. “It’s me.”

Voice recognition technology prompted a soothing reply from the female attendant. “*Welcome, Traveler.*”

“Yes, I’ve got a Rogue here, and another load up on the surface. Send a security detail to retrieve the others. Take this one off my hands and have them all stripped, shaved and delivered to the Arena.”

The female voice replied, “*Confirming, the Arena. And how many in the party?*”

“Three.” The man smiled. “And it’s not a party yet, but I’m sure we’ll make it one.”

“*Yes, sir. Security detail has been dispatched.*”

CHAPTER 5

The Punks

THE LATE-EVENING AUTUMN AIR FELT perfect for driving with the windows down. *Convertible would be nice*, Curtis thought. He turned the volume up on his radio to compensate for the added wind noise.

At 10:30 p.m., Curtis pulled into a parking lot in front of the Punks' main checkpoint at the Perimeter. He cruised the Chevy van past the largest of several groups of Punks. A few noticed Curtis's vehicle. A couple of the guys tilted their chins up in acknowledgment.

From the center of the crowd, a pretty red-haired girl stood on her tiptoes, smiling and waving to Curtis. *Ah, Melody*. He returned the wave and thought about the time he'd had a crush on her. That was sixth grade.

To the uninformed, they all looked alike: dressed in a myriad of denim, leather, plaid, army camouflage and leopard print. Guys and girls wore flight jackets and vests, warmers, T-shirts with band names, safety pins of every imaginable size, metal studs and spikes. Some wore obviously custom, one-of-a-kind T-shirts with both random and patterned cuts in the fabric. Many in the crowd wore studded and spiked wristbands, with belts over multi-zippered jeans and skirts.

Their footwear ranged from sneakers, creepers and army boots to Mary Janes and pumps. Most had no discernible brand name.

Hair among the crowd was you-name-it individual. No style was specifically in, but nothing was necessarily out: Mohawks, bihawks, trihawks, bitch handles, long, short, spiked, straight, teased, layered, bleached, colored, accessorized and plain.

They were smokers and nonsmokers, shy and outgoing, tattooed and pierced—or not. They sat, stood, crouched and knelt on chairs, benches, tables and walls. Each individual was his or her own person. The group was a family of individuals.

Curtis's new rank afforded him an assigned parking spot. He checked his look in the rearview mirror. *Hmm, Mohawk's a little weak*, he thought. He got out of the van and closed the driver's door, wincing when the window hardware rattled inside.

Melody greeted Curtis as he sauntered up to the crowd of Punks. "Hey, buddy!" She mussed his hair with both hands. "Your hawk's droopy tonight."

"Yeah, I drove with the top down," he joked. "What's happening around here?"

"Not much. The Changers are unusually quiet tonight. We're just shootin' the shit."

"Cool."

"So where's Krystal? I haven't seen her lately."

Curtis shrugged. "She was gonna meet me, but something came up."

"Too bad, I wanted to say hi. Maybe I'll give her a call later." Melody flashed a look over her shoulder into the crowd. "You notice things are strange around here lately?"

"Oh, you haven't heard?" Curtis liked how Melody's eyes kept their sparkle, even when she worried. "There's a lot of friction between our groups right now."

Melody frowned. "Changers and Punks?"

"Yeah. Word on the street is the Changers are planning an offensive of some sort."

"Wow. What about the Treaty?" Melody smiled nervously.

“You know, the arrangement where we provide their dinner and they leave us alone.”

“Yeah. But the prisons are almost empty, right?” Curtis ran a hand through his Mohawk. “We’re doing what we can.” He sighed. “But no one’s naive enough to think we could really stand up to them like last time. Their technology just keeps advancing.”

Melody shook her head. “No way, Curtis. We’re damn strong. We could kick their asses.”

“Yeah, we’re strong. But the days just keep going down, you know? And the days turn into years and nothing changes. Seriously, how long can this cycle we’re in last?”

“But we have a good life as Punks.”

“It’s life,” Curtis said. “But is it really *living*?”

“You have a point. But I’m putting my money on us.” Melody grabbed Curtis’s wrist and turned back to the group. “C’mon. I want you to meet someone.” She dragged Curtis to the approximate center of the crowd, dropped his wrist and stepped over to snuggle up to a guy twice Curtis’s size. She wrapped her arms around the guy’s waist and laid her head on his bicep.

“Johnny, this is my friend, Curtis. Curtis, I’d like you to meet Johnny.”

Curtis extended a hand. “Nice to meet you, Johnny.”

Johnny tipped his chin slightly upward. Curtis dropped his hand. He shoved his hands into his back pockets, thumbs out.

Johnny stared at Curtis. “So is this your old boyfriend or something?”

Melody slapped Johnny’s arm. “Johnny! I said Curtis is my friend.”

Curtis ignored the comment and looked at Melody. “Whatever. I gotta talk to Dion anyway.” He turned to the side and slipped between Melody and a faceless leather vest connected to some jeans and army boots. “See you later, Mel.”

“See ya. If I’m gone, say hi to Krystal for me if she shows up.” Melody’s attempt to touch Curtis’s arm failed, and he disappeared into the crowd.

CURTIS FOUND DION AND JIMBO near the edge of the crowd by one of the fire barrels. Dion had assumed the role as leader of the Punks after a skirmish with the Changers had taken the life of his uncle, Angelo. Angelo's death had thrown the Punks' organization into disarray. Although power struggles naturally occurred, Dion had risen to the top due to his cool head and his ability to make a decision under pressure. Raised by his dad, Dion was a man's man. His mother had disappeared when Dion was five years old, and he barely remembered her.

During Dion's early years as the Punks' leader, Jimbo had come to Dion's side as the top enforcer. Dion had grown to depend on the ever-loyal Jimbo to squelch attempted uprisings by rogue factions within the organization.

"Curtis, m'man," Dion greeted him. "So, what's up?"

Curtis bumped fists with his two friends. "You tell me. Anything new about the Changers moving on us?"

"Nothing new there," Dion said. "Seems to be more mutants out and about, though."

Jimbo's eyes widened. "Man, you shoulda been here earlier. We killed a fuckin' monster tonight!"

"Great," Curtis said.

"So there's that," Dion said. "Plus, we heard a rumor about some sleaze bag going around kidnapping people outside the Perimeter."

"What the heck for?" Curtis asked.

"Don't know. Sounds like some random masochistic sonuvabitch. Been happening after dark."

"Yeah," Jimbo said. "With that, and all those mutants out there, who would chance going beyond the Perimeter after dark?"

Curtis turned up the collar on his leather jacket and shoved his hands into the pockets. "You guys think all this strange stuff is related?"

"Who knows?" Dion lit a cigarette. "All I know is, something's up with those bastards. I can feel it. Which brings us to you, buddy."

“Me?” Curtis asked. “Why?”

“You have Perimeter duty tonight. You packing?”

“Always. You know that.”

“Better grab one of the ARs,” Jimbo said. “It’s hairy out there.”

“I don’t need an AR-15. My Beretta will do.”

“You can zip off thirty rounds way faster with an AR.”

Dion blew a smoke ring. “Take an AR.”

“All right, man. If you guys insist.”

“We insist,” Dion said.

During the rebellion, the Punks had lost weapons facilities but salvaged the castings and molds and the ability to manufacture AR-15s. Consequently, the AR-15 was a staple for the Punks. They stole technology from the Changers, defended what their meager resources could defend and abandoned the rest.

“Cool. But, hey, before I head out, did you guys meet Mel’s new friend? I haven’t seen him around here before.”

“Boyfriend,” Jimbo clarified. “He’s her boyfriend.”

“I met him.” Curtis glanced in Johnny’s direction. “He’s kinda hard to miss. Even without the Trojan, his head sticks out above the rest of us.”

“Here comes Ryker, guys,” Jimbo said. “Let’s ask him.”

Ryker walked over to the friends and brushed his wavy brown hair off his forehead.

“Hey,” Dion said. “Wanna do the meet-and-greet with Mel’s new boyfriend? Curtis met him.”

As Dion’s best friend, Ryker had naturally floated to the top of the Punks’ organization. His home life, or the lack of it, influenced both Ryker’s graciousness and his penchant for fighting. Raised by a drug-addicted single father, he had been the unwilling recipient of regular beatings, just for being a kid. The last most severe thrashing had driven him to hang out at Dion’s almost full-time at the age of ten.

Dion’s dad, Pops, had raised Ryker like he was one of his own. Ryker liked that Pops gave so much and expected nothing from “his boys,” other than to pull their own weight around the shop.

In Ryker's mind, it was a good exchange. *I don't have to be around my scumbag dad, and I don't have to sleep with one eye open.*

As kids, Dion and Ryker had fought a lot—regular fist-flying, blood-drawing brawls, mostly started by Ryker. Cool-headed Dion shrugged it off because he knew Ryker had it in for his piece-of-shit dad. The fights almost always started after Ryker had been with his father. They usually ended in a draw, because Pops would only let it go on for just so long before breaking it up. “*You guys are brothers, now get cleaned up,*” was the usual epilogue from Pops. And they had no choice. Deep in their hearts, Dion and Ryker knew they were brothers.

Ryker looked at Curtis. “You met him. What’d you think?”

“He’s a poser.”

“Good enough for me.” Ryker clapped his hands once. “Let’s go, guys.”

About a dozen people—including Curtis, Dion and Jimbo, followed Ryker.

When they reached Melody and Johnny, Melody acknowledged the group. “Hey, guys!”

Johnny turned to face them. He remained expressionless and silent.

“Hey, Mel,” Dion said. “Kinda thought maybe you might want your boyfriend to meet some of the crew.”

“Sure!” Melody wrapped her arms around Dion’s neck. He one-handed the return hug, leaned into Melody and placed his right arm around her waist.

Johnny muscled his way between the two friends. “Hey, hands off my girl!”

Dion smiled and raised both hands in a “no foul” gesture. A number of the Punks around the trio broke into a mildly subdued laughter.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Ryker said. He stepped forward and put one arm around Melody’s waist. He cradled her neck with the other hand, dipped her backwards and planted a full, closed-mouth kiss on Melody’s lips. “Hi, Mel!” He smiled.

“All right.” Johnny puffed up. “That does it, asshole.”

“Johnny,” Melody said. “These are my friends. Ryker and I have been friends for years. We grew up together.”

Johnny moved toward Ryker. He grabbed Melody’s studded belt from the rear and forced her behind him. “What’s up, dude? You need a girl to stand up for you? Can’t you defend yourself?”

Ryker raised his eyes slightly to meet Johnny’s. “Hard to defend yourself against crassness and naïveté.”

Johnny’s mouth opened, exuding the faint scent of Budweiser mixed with clove cigarettes.

Ryker smirked. “What, were the words too big for you?”

Johnny nudged his chest against Ryker’s. “Don’t push me, asshole.”

“C’mon, Johnny.” From behind him, Melody grabbed Johnny’s shoulders. She sprawled butt-first to the ground as he shrugged her off.

Curtis stepped forward from behind Dion. “Hey.”

“Don’t you start with me.” Johnny raised his arm to backhand Curtis.

Ryker struck a blow to Johnny’s arm, deflecting its intended target—Curtis’s head. Curtis ducked under Johnny and rushed to help Melody to her feet.

Johnny’s eyes were locked on Ryker. “Let’s go, tough guy.”

Dion slipped Ryker a set of brass knuckles. Ryker removed his glove and gripped the weapon in his right hand. “We don’t need to do this, Johnny.”

“I’m gonna whip your ass worse than you ever felt it from your daddy!” Johnny made his move, lunging at Ryker.

“No!” Melody screamed.

Ryker’s gut flinched at the reference to his father as the memories flooded his head. He attempted to shake off the comment. *No, you don’t.* His left hand caught a wad of Johnny’s vest and shirt. *Try this on for size, Dad.* His right fist connected. Johnny’s cheek glowed pink.

Ryker’s follow-up right hand never reached its mark. Johnny caught Ryker’s wrist midflight.

“Johnny, stop!” Melody pleaded.

“Dion, let’s give him a hand,” urged Jimbo.

Dion waved him off. “Give it a minute.”

Ryker felt extreme pressure from Johnny’s grip. Using his left fist again, Ryker rabbit-punched Johnny’s face. The other cheek reddened. Johnny squeezed Ryker’s right arm, forcing him to his knees.

“Johnny, please!” Melody cried.

Jimbo and Dion stepped up to Johnny. Each grabbed a bicep.

“Okay, big guy,” Dion said. “You proved yourself.”

Johnny sneered. “Let go of my arm, wimp!”

Ryker’s right hand felt hot.

Curtis watched beads of sweat break into streams and trickle down Ryker’s temples.

Ryker strained. *Damn, this guy is strong.* Ryker heard his ulna snap. Mind-numbing pain shot through his arm and launched into his chest like a lightning bolt. “Aaahhh!” His knees weakened and his legs went limp.

Johnny grinned and shoved Ryker’s shoulder with the bottom of his boot, then shrugged off the other two Punks. “Nice try, pussy!” he whispered.

Ryker grabbed his shoulder with his left hand. The brass knuckles fell from his right hand and clinked onto the dirt. The skin on his fingers, stripped back from his grip on the brass knuckles, oozed blood. Sweat dripped from his forehead and stung his eyes. His fingers involuntarily pointed at the ground, his wrist swollen and limp from the broken bone inside.

Johnny kicked the brass knuckles at Curtis. “Don’t even think about messing with me.” He turned and walked toward his car, pausing long enough to grab Melody under one arm. “Let’s get outta here.”

“No, you don’t,” Dion said, his 9mm handgun pointed at Johnny.

Johnny turned to see Dion, Jimbo, Curtis and three others, guns drawn, facing him. Melody squirmed to get away as he pulled her closer. “You’re hurting me,” she said.

“Get over here. You’re going with me.” Melody stumbled and tripped as Johnny dragged her to his Cadillac, keeping her between him and the row of armed Punks. He shoved her into the car on the driver’s side and followed her in.

“Only reason he’s in with us is because of Mel,” Jimbo said. “Too bad I never had a clean shot.”