

## **Dr. Doomsday's Guide to Ultimate Survival**

### **Rule One: Always be prepared.**

I exhale in relief when MacKenna pulls the car into the Halliwell's Market parking lot. Because of the Sugar Sales Permit waiting list, old stores like these are the only places that carry Extra Jolt soda. I have to buy it myself, because Mom won't keep any in the house.

She thinks too much caffeine rots your brain or something. Halliwell's is a squat brown building that sits across the street from the mall and is next door to the town's only skyscraper.

The First Federal Building was supposed to be the first piece of a suburban business district designed to rival the hip boroughs of New York. The mayor announced the construction of a movie theater, an apartment complex and an indoor aquarium. But the New Depression hit, and the other buildings never materialized.

The First Federal Building alone soars toward the clouds, an ugly glass rectangle visible from every neighborhood, surrounded by the old town shops that have been there forever. Most of the stores are empty.

We park in front of the market.

Our car nestles in the long shadow of the giant bank building.

Charles gets out and stands on the sidewalk in front of the car.

MacKenna opens her door. She hesitates again. "Listen, I know you might not want to hear this or believe it. But my book report wasn't about hurting you or getting revenge. I'm trying to get you to see what's really happening here. That Carver's election is the start of something bad. We could use you at the rally. You're one of the few people who understands Dr. Doomsday's work. You could explain what he did. How he helped Carver cheat to win."

"I've been planning this raid for months," I say. My stomach churns, sending uncomfortable flutters through my insides. I don't know what it would mean to talk about my father's work. What I really want to do is pretend it doesn't exist. Pretend the world is normal and whole.

I reassure myself with the reminder that there's no way MacKenna is going to the rally either.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Charles give us a small wave. Before MacKenna can say anything else, I get out and grab my backpack.

Inside Halliwell's, I pick up a blue basket from the stack near the door. The small market is busy and full of other people shopping after school or work. The smell of pine cleaner hits me as we pass the checkout stations. They are super serious about germs and always cleaning between customers.

I leave MacKenna and Charles at the Click N'Grow rack near the door to check out the seed packets that my brother collects. Dad got Charles hooked on this computerized gardening that uses an e-tablet and a series of tiny indoor lights to create the ideal indoor planter box. Each week, they release a new set of exclusive seeds. Their genetic modifications are controversial.

All the soda is in large coolers that line one of the walls of the market. They keep the strange stuff in the corner. Expensive root beers. Ramune imported from Japan. And! Extra! Jolt! I put a few bottles of strawberry in my basket. I snag some grape too. For a second, I consider buying a couple of bottles of doughnut flavor. But that sounds like too much, even for me. The chips are in the next aisle. I load up on cheese puffs and spicy nacho crisps.

MacKenna and Charles are still at the rack near the door, and I try to squeeze by them without attracting any notice. I usually don't buy unhealthy snacks when I'm with my brother. I smuggle them in my backpack and have a special hiding space in my desk.

My brother has type 1 diabetes, and he's supposed to check his blood sugar after meals. He can have starchy or sugary snacks only when his glucose level is good or on special occasions.

MacKenna grimaces at a packet of seeds in her hands. "I still don't like this one. It's pretty. But still. It's...carnivorous."

I have to hand it to her. She really does have a *look*. She's pale and white, like me, but she manages to seem like she's doing it on purpose and not because she's some kind of vampire- movie reject. Her glossy black hair always rests in perfect waves, and if the journalism thing doesn't work out, she could definitely have a career in fashion design.

Charles smiles at her. "It's a new kind of pitcher plant. Like the Cobra Lily." He points to the picture on the front of the seed packet. "Look at the blue flowers. That's new."

"It eats other plants," MacKenna says.

"You eat plants."

"But I don't eat people," MacKenna says. "There's got to be some kind of natural law that says you shouldn't eat your own kind."

Charles giggles.

So far so good. Until.

My brother trots up behind me and dumps a few packs of seeds in my basket. His gaze lands on my selection of soda and chips. "Can I get some snacks too?"

*Crap.*

I freeze. "What's your number?"

Charles pretends he can't hear me. That's not a good sign.

"Charles, what's your number?"

He still doesn't look at me. "I forgot my monitor today."

"Well, I have mine." I kneel down and dig around for the spare glucometer I keep in the front pocket of my backpack. By the time I get it out, MacKenna has already pulled Charles out of his blazer and rolled up

the sleeve of his blue dress shirt. I wave the device over the small white sensor disk attached to my brother's upper arm.

After a few seconds, the glucometer beeps and a number displays on the screen.

221

*Crap. Crap. Crap.*

"Charles! What did you eat today?"

My brother's face turns red. "They were having breakfast-for-lunch day at school. Everyone else was having pancakes. Why can't I have pancakes?"

I sigh. Something about his puckered up little face keeps me from reminding him that if he eats too much sugar he could die. "You know what Mom said. If you eat something you're not supposed to, you have to get a pass and go to the nurse for your meds."

My brother's shoulders slump. "I couldn't go to the nurse. Hummingbirds were visiting the Chuparosa and..."

Charles is on the verge of tears and frowns even more deeply at the sight of my basket full of junk food.

"Look," I say. "There are plenty of healthy snacks we can eat. I'll put this stuff back."

"That's right," MacKenna says, giving Charles's hand a squeeze. "We can get some popcorn. Yogurt. Um, I saw some really delicious-looking fresh pears back there."

"And they have the cheese cubes you like," I add.

We go around the store replacing the cheese puffs and soda with healthy stuff. I hesitate when I have to put back the Extra Jolt, but I really don't want to make my brother feel bad because I can drink sugary stuff and he can't.

We pay for the healthy snacks and the seed packets.

I grab the bags and move toward the market's sliding doors.

I end up ahead of them, waiting outside by the car and facing the store. The shopping center behind Halliwell's is mostly empty. The shoe store went out of business last year. Strauss Stationers, where everyone used to buy their fancy wedding invitations, closed two years before that. The fish 'n' chips drive-through is doing okay and has a little crowd in front of the take-out window. Way off in the distance, Saba's is still open, because in Arizona, cowboy boots and hats aren't considered optional.

I watch MacKenna and Charles step out of the double doors and into the parking lot. Two little dimples appear on MacKenna's cheeks when she smiles. Charles has a looseness to his walk. His arms dangle.

There's a low rumble, like thunder from a storm that couldn't possibly exist on this perfectly sunny day.

Something's wrong

In the reflection of the market's high, shiny windows, I see something happening in the bank building next door. Some kind of fire burning in the lower levels. A pain builds in my chest and I force air into my lungs. My vision blurs at the edges. It's panic, and there isn't much time before it overtakes me.

The muscles in my legs tense and I take off at a sprint, grabbing MacKenna and Charles as I pass. I haul them along with me twenty feet or so into the store. We clear the door and run past a man and a woman frozen at the sight of what's going on across the street.

I desperately want to look back.

But I don't.

A scream.

A low, loud boom.

My ears ring.

The lights in the store go off.

I've got MacKenna by the strap of her maxi dress and Charles by the neck. We feel our way in the dim light. The three of us crouch and huddle together behind a cash counter. A few feet in front of us, the cashier who checked us out two minutes ago is sitting on the floor hugging her knees.

*We're going to die.*

Charles's mouth is wide-open. His lips move. He pulls at the sleeve of my T-shirt.

I can't hear anything.

It takes everything I've got to force myself to move.

Slowly

Slowly

Leaning forward. Pressing my face into the plywood of the store counter, I peek around the corner using one eye to see out the glass door. My eyelashes brush against the rough wood, and I grip the edge to steady myself. I take in the smell of wood glue with each breath.

Hail falls in the parking lot. I realize it's glass.

My stomach twists into a hard knot.

It's raining glass.

That's the last thing I see before a wave of dust rolls over the building.

Leaving us in darkness.

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