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MONSTER of the
APOCALYPSE

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Chapter 1

Three huge motor homes lay among the small trees. The parking area and the road leading into it had long ago lost any semblance of travel and had overgrown with native grasses, wildflowers, and thick stands of rapidly growing conifers. Rabbit trails led under each coach, the artificial caves under their self-leveling chassis creating attractive homes for small animals.

They looked new, shiny chrome and glass sparkling in the early morning sun, unused tires full of tread. Two of the three still had operating solar-powered rotating antenna, searching for long gone non-existent signals. Automatic systems maintained their routines, keeping them warm or cool inside, washing the dust from otherwise clean dishes with recycled, filtered and purified water gathered and collected from the roofs. Coffee makers waited in limbo, their automatic cycle no longer operating only because the coffee bin, once full, had long ago needed a refill.

The third coach had a large tree laying across it about a third of the way back from the front, just over the door. A large, jagged limb punctured and ripped the roof, the weight of the tree caving in the side and roof opposite the entry. The solar panels were still intact, as were the antenna on the rear of the roof, but some critical wiring between them and the brain in the front had been severed, leaving this unit without its operating systems for some undeterminable time.

Each of the motor home entry doors had been forced, the locks broken this morning by the only human visitor in just over twenty years.

The intact homes were scavenged, any dried foods slipped into a pillow case, a can of cat food found in a still operating refrigerator, and appearing still good, joining them. Clothing in closets and drawers were evaluated for size, condition, and utility, and a couple of items found their way into the case. The best find was a sealed container of survival matches with a couple of homemade camping stoves. Short cans

held cardboard ripped into strips and wound tightly inside with melted paraffin filling the remaining space.

It took Lecti a little while to figure out what they were, but the matches being with them provided the clue, and she lit one just to be sure. The smoke alarm startled her, but she had experienced operating alarms before, including the security alarms as she broke the locks on these homes. Fortunately the alarms only lasted a few minutes while she found their source and broke them with the small wrecking bar she always carried.

The human remains held no interest for her. She knew the story already. These people had fled their homes in the cities with whatever accommodations they could carry, with relatives or friends they considered important, in hope that the seclusion of the mountain forests would protect them from the plagues. Of course they were wrong, as evidenced by the bones in the beds. The pantries were full of swollen cans, and the refrigerators contained decayed and desiccated organic matter, so they had not starved as some had.

Lecti finished her search, keeping the pillowcase light because she knew she would have to carry anything she put inside.

She was sitting at the table inside the holed motor home, thinking about the cat food and the cat that it must have been intended to feed. Cats were mostly wild in the cities but she had seen people with cats that they seemed to get along with, holding them on their laps and rubbing their fur. She wondered at that.

A light from the bed in the front of the motor home peeked out as she shifted in her seat. The folds of the bedclothes hid the light, and she wouldn't have noticed it at all unless she had positioned her head just so.

As she pulled the covers back she revealed a skull with a mat of longish blonde hair and a camcorder headset. This one was unusual in that the light was on even though it had been mostly covered and out of any direct sun. Apparently it was not solar powered.

What she did not know was that the people that had parked their vehicle here had brought this atomic-powered, prototype camcorder from the lab where they were working on miniature power sources. The fleck of material that powered this camera had lasted twenty years under the covers, and would last for another twenty or thirty years whether the camera was used or not.

Lecti's father had taught her to operate solar cameras and other technology as she brought them to him, much like he taught her about the animals and plants that they found.

After removing the headset and cleaning the clinging hair and skin from it, Lecti flipped the tiny screen open. She spent time with it, getting to know the people that lived here for a brief moment. They had been friends to each other, and now she knew them, too.

The most interesting moment to Lecti was the cat being released to its fate after the death of everyone except the wearer of the camcorder. She had known she would die soon, and in a loving gesture of hopelessness, had held and stroked the cat until she grew weak. Then, leaving several open cans of food open under the step of the motor home, she released the animal outside, shut the door, and made her way to the bed and

died.

Lecti brought the camera with her as she strolled through the woods back to her campsite. Long, tanned legs pumping slowly, pillowcase swinging easily across her shoulder, she didn't look much different from the myriad hikers that had wandered these areas years ago. Shorts with deep pockets, comfortable shoes, and a light man's shirt tied at the waist, with a billed cap on top of her short, blonde hair were similar to what was worn by the people on the camcorder. The light hunting knife strapped to the outside of her right calf and the nine-millimeter automatic holstered across her lower left stomach would have given those prior hikers some pause, however.

Her blue eyes and cocked head gave away her level of alertness as they searched, unconsciously, everything around her. Where the previous hikers had been "buff" at their best, this young woman was "wiry." Muscles worked beneath skin that had no discernable layer of fat, the product of walking constantly. Where there were obstacles in her path, she stepped over them rather than on them, showing a grasp of energy economy, and by knowing where she placed her feet, she made little noise. At seventeen, she was woods-wise and trail-hardened in a way that made her a formidable package.

Approaching her camp, she made sure she was downwind and that she hesitated before she broke out of the trees. There was little need, but caution was part of her nature.

Sounds coming from the tent made her cringe. Her little brother, Andeo, and their traveling companion, Toshi, were at it again, and Lecti did not approve. Why a grown woman would be interested in a fourteen-year-old boy was beyond her.

She threw the pillowcase on the ground and grabbing a container, headed for the lake, fuming silently. It was too nice a day to ruin with problems she could not control. Deo was taller than Lecti, and she was no longer able to enforce her will on him.

By the time Lecti returned from the lakeshore, water sloshing from the pan, Toshi was emerging from the tent. She ignored the look from Lecti, and naked, ambled to the lake and dove in.

Lecti watched her until she entered the water. She had to admit that Toshi had all the equipment to entice Deo. Dark hair, dark eyes and olive skin made her look Mediterranean. She was slender, with full hips and firm curves in all the right places.

Toshi's attitude was what really grated on Lecti. She would fawn all over either of them when she wanted something, especially Deo, but once she had what she wanted, she assumed a haughty, intellectually superior demeanor and liked to use mean-spirited verbal jabs.

Deo seemed completely unaware of the manipulation and was alternately elated and dismayed by her shifts in personality.

Lecti caught on early, though. Toshi, realizing that Lecti wasn't going to be handled easily, eased her acting out and had been trying to appear to become Lecti's friend. Lecti wasn't buying it. She knew a viper when she saw one.

Although the morning was getting late, Deo would sleep for a while yet.

Lecti rummaged through her pack and pulled out her road atlas. She studied their route, concentrating on the road to come later today. The road into Reno out of the

Sierra's, interstate 80, was ignored in favor of old route 50. Reno, it was rumored, still had high levels of radiation and Lecti didn't want to chance exposure. Besides, Carson City was the old State Capitol and if there was anyone civilized around, they should be there.

By the time Deo stuck his head out of the tent, the sun had reached its zenith. Toshi was back from swimming. Deo was covered in a heavy dew of sweat from sleeping in the enclosed tent in the warmth of the morning, and he ran to the lake to swim it off.

Lecti tied the tent flaps back to air it out. They would stay here one more night.

The afternoon was spent cordially enough. Deo swam for a while, both women eventually joining him. They lay out on the rocks in the spring sun for a short time and then as the day warmed, made their way to the shade of a tree close to the tent where the fire had been the night before. Choice of attire was optional and the casual nature made for some strange clothing combinations. Lecti showed them the camcorder, and Toshi spent some time with it playing back the old recordings and making new ones. She enlisted Deo and they made a record of the campsite and surrounding area, acting silly and eventually including Lecti.

It was easy to tell that Toshi was having a good time. In a soft melody she would sing, "Tra-la-la", whenever something was especially entertaining.

Finally tiring of the small camera, Toshi removed the headset, threw it to the ground and walked off. Lecti, frowning, picked it up and stuffed it into her fanny pack.

Dinner consisted of salvaged rice with skunk cabbage picked from low ground by the water, and the can of cat food divided three ways and made into patties and fried. Not a filling meal, but they were used to not having full bellies, and so they were satisfied.

Lecti invited Deo to hike up to the top of the ridge to watch the sun set, but he declined, saying, "Thanks, but I've got something else in mind."

Lecti knew what that meant, so disgusted, she went by herself.

It was fully dark by the time Lecti got back and both Deo and Toshi were asleep.

The sleeping bag Lecti used was starting to develop an odor so Lecti made a mental note to find a replacement in Carson City when they got there.

They would get an early start in the morning and cover a lot of ground. Carson was still three or four days away.

Entering a new town was always exciting. You never knew what to expect.

Chapter 2

South Lake Tahoe appeared empty of human activity. The casino's gaming tables still held cards as though they were being played, though it was hard to read them for the dust. The restaurant's fine linen tablecloths were falling apart at the table rim under their own weight. A gift shop held their interest for a time. Fossils and carvings in walrus tusk were interesting, but the most fascinating item was a sealed globe of water holding a few small pebbles, a slip of green water plant, and a couple of tiny shrimp.

"The heating system must still be working," mused Deo, "otherwise this globe would have shattered."

"Well, that doesn't mean it can't be broken," and Toshi pushed it off the pedestal, exploding it on the tile.

It upset Deo to see the tiny shrimp squirming on the wet floor, but Lecti would not give Toshi the satisfaction of a reaction. It was all so pointless.

Rummaging through a clothing store with stacks of boxed denim jeans took the early afternoon and yielded a pair of pants for each of them. Toshi immediately cut the legs off hers, fraying the bottoms. Lecti would wait until they were out of the cool of the mountains.

The dust was especially thick in the store, and they all spent some time blowing it out of their noses after their shopping spree.

A bicycle shop gave them an idea. Prior travelers had scavenged the shop lightly, but there were still plenty of bikes. Soon they would be dropping down out of the mountains, and the thought of cruising down in style seemed like a good idea. After finding a hand pump and trying to fill several time-damaged tires with no success, the idea seemed less feasible. A portion of the shop held skateboards, and picking out the biggest three got their spirits up for the downhill trek. Hopefully the road would be in good condition.

That night they spent in a parking garage. The stairs in the casino gave access to the rooms, and finding one open, they dragged a king size mattress down and threw it on the cement between two expensive cars with flat tires. The view of the lake was amazing and the sunset, spectacular.

None of them slept very well. There was plenty of space on the mattress but it was soft, and they were not used to that. Toshi woke in a foul mood and started out without waiting for Lecti and Deo.

Deo waited for Lecti, then started out at a fast clip, obviously anxious to join Toshi. Lagging behind, Lecti tried to slow him down. She didn't so much want to avoid being with Toshi as give Deo a chance to have some independent time away from her.

Gradually Deo slowed his steps so he wouldn't outpace Lecti. She would

occasionally point out small discoveries that she knew he would appreciate. A wildflower, bird, an unusually shaped tree trunk, or any of an infinity of beautiful or unusual things could hold their attention. It was something that each of them enjoyed.

When wind chimes rang in subtle, low tones, they both paused to investigate.

The cabin had mostly collapsed, but enough of the porch and wall remained to provide support for long-barreled silver tubes. At the top of the chimes was a mass of grey wool-like material, flecked with small pieces of a paper-like substance. Lecti almost missed its significance, but then it came to her.

“It’s a hummingbird nest.”

And suddenly they were being dive-bombed by a tiny flash of iridescence.

“I want to see the babies,” whispered Deo, as he ducked.

“I’d like to see them, too,” said Lecti, “but how do we get up high enough without disturbing the nest?”

“We could just knock it down.”

“Now you sound just like Toshi.”

She knew before she finished speaking that she had said the wrong thing. Deo gave her a dark miserable look, turned around, and walked off.

The moment was spoiled. Regret would not bring Deo back. Fortunately Deo was not inclined to hold grudges or dwell on small insults, and Lecti, rather than chasing him down and apologizing, just held herself back and let him get over it.

Lecti and Deo knew little of Toshi’s story other than the few things she had let slip. She was sitting in the shade on a large rock by the side of an overgrown, rural road south of Oroville, California, when they first met her.

Toshi’s piercing eyes followed them as they approached, unaware. Just before Deo noticed her, she spoke up.

“So, where ya headed?”

Lecti almost jumped out of her skin. The woman was sitting so quietly that Lecti missed her entirely. Making eye contact with Toshi, Lecti knew immediately that she could be trouble.

Deo had the opposite reaction. He was lost in Toshi’s dark, liquid eyes right away.

Toshi claimed to have been traveling, but her small pack and lack of companionship made Lecti suspicious. When Deo invited Toshi to join them, and she did, lagging behind, Lecti was already keeping her eyes and ears open. Toshi avoided any direct questions, but couldn’t help giving away information in indirect ways with her acid tongue and quick sarcasm. By the time they had made the next hundred miles, Lecti was pretty sure that Toshi had caused some sort of problem in whatever group of people she was involved with, and was probably forced to leave. In fact, Lecti suspected that Toshi was a terminal troublemaker. Several things that she said led Lecti to conclude that a change of scenery for Toshi was nothing unusual. The fact that she seduced Deo within the first few days didn’t help.

Within a mile of his becoming upset with Lecti, Deo stopped and waited for her to catch up. They were back, pointing out interesting things to each other again. As the day warmed and they tired, they became quiet and spoke less. Thoughts of the past invaded Lecti’s thoughts.

She missed her father and frequently found him in her thoughts. Mother had disappeared shortly after they had wandered into Roseburg when Lecti was five. She had gone out to work a field crop with a party of women, close to term with Lecti and Deo's younger sibling, and had not returned. It was not an accident of childbirth. That much Lecti knew. When her father and several other men left to search, they did not take shovels to bury a body. They took weapons. They went out to attempt a rescue and came home with nothing. Were there a trail to follow, Lecti knew her father would not have come back until they had returned together.

Her father took his responsibilities to his children seriously. He comforted them and answered questions as well as he could, never avoiding them, though it sometimes pained him tremendously. Even at a tender age, Lecti realized this and didn't ask much or often. Sometimes she could not contain her curiosity or her sense of loss or loneliness. Deo never asked much, but he listened intensely.

Father had never been tempted to take another wife. Women in the community recognized him as a potential mate for themselves, their sisters and even their daughters. He was encouraged by other men. He said it wasn't in him, and when the community declared their mother dead, he became and stayed a widower.

The community was led by a man and woman that survived the plagues as one of the very few existing pre-plague couples. They gathered people to them like a garden attracts life.

Early on the community began practicing polygamy under the guidance of this kind octogenarian with a long beard and a longer staff. It was not a religious practice as much as a practical one. A woman was beaten to death by her husband, a match made when her first choice was married to another. The leader's wife spoke up, noting that in this new world some men were better suited to be husbands and fathers than others and that women or their children should not be forced into accepting men that could not, or would not, provide them a safe and loving home. It being a small community, and the elderly couple being well respected, the discussion was short. Once it was decided that first wives had to agree, and no woman would be forced to accept polygamy, and that a woman must be old enough to make that decision on her own, the practice was reluctantly accepted.

The sister of the beating victim had stuck a knife in her brother-in-law's chest. It had been ruled a justifiable act. She had been living unwed, with her sister and her sister's husband, and now stood up and in a loud clear voice proposed marriage to a man and his wife that had no inkling of her interest. The man, startled, looked to his wife. His wife made the decision. There were two other proposals over the next week, including a woman that was married to a man that drank too much and a woman that had been cheated on. Three marriages in a week, it was a good start.

It was becoming a custom to wed couples under the spreading branches of the huge tree in front of the old city office building. A new kind of ceremony, developed under the many limbs, somehow seemed appropriate.

As the population grew, accidents and disease took their toll. Situations changed, circumstances evolved, wanderers found them and decided to stay.

Lecti was fourteen when the old leader died shortly after his wife. A wanderer with a wise demeanor and an aura of gentle kindness led the group through their

mourning and soon began gathering support among the men without wives. Within a year, after some unusual deaths, several of these men had forced marriages, including some younger girls formerly considered too young to wed.

Lecti was gathering unwanted attention. While she had crushes on young men of her own age, her father noticed the glances she elicited from the older men.

On a warm summer night her father explained to her what was happening and explained his plan to keep her safe. She was almost sixteen and Deo was already thirteen. They would be leaving immediately. Their backpacks were already waiting.

Leaving seemed so uneventful, so easy. They did not know about the sniper that had been in position since soon after the change in leadership. It was obvious that their father was dead when they started running.

“Hey, Sis!” Deo woke her from her reverie. “Look, the intersection ahead means we’re almost to the top of the pass. I’m worried about Toshi. We need to catch up.”

Lecti was surprised they hadn’t caught up with her already. She looked back. It would be just like Toshi to hide along the trail and come up behind them after making them apprehensive.

“Look, you know she’s using you, and she’ll throw you away whenever it suits her.” Lecti told Deo.

“I love her.” This raised an eyebrow. Deo had never told her that. “And she’s really trying to be your friend. She likes you, you know.”

“Yea, you would think that because you can’t see how she works, but I can, and you need to wake up and see what she’s really doing.”

Deo gave her a look, half dangerous and angry, half pitiful and sorry. “Don’t say that. I don’t want you to talk about her that way.” He almost sounded ready to cry. “If you’d ever felt the way I do you would understand.”

Lecti didn’t want to see Deo hurt, and she could either let Toshi hurt him or hurt him herself with very little chance of changing his mind and opening his eyes. Her worst fear was that Toshi would separate them somehow and then lead Deo away from her. It would be easier if Deo were angry. Easier still if he thought he was in love.

“You’re my little brother, I have to protect you, but you’re making it very hard. Please, please, think about how she treats you, and ask yourself if you would treat her that way. I love you, little brother. If you decide to stay with her, I’m with you too.” Lecti used a conciliatory tone, “Just remember, if you need to talk, I’m here for you.”

She gave Deo a hug, which he seemed to accept. “Love you, bro.”

Toshi had stayed ahead of them all the way to the pass. She sat on a rock in the shade, shoes off and picking at her toes, waiting for them. Her pack and the skateboard had been thrown on the pavement to sit in the sun. She smiled as they approached, standing up and picking the shorts out of her ass.

“Yo, ‘bout time you got here! The road looks good!” she yelled.

Apparently she was over her snit, but underlying her smile was a coolness that chilled Lecti.

Toshi eyed them both intently as they got close. Seeing the look in their eyes she knew they had been talking about her. Lecti was still being difficult, but Toshi imagined herself to be a patient person and willed herself to be nice. She must not be

upset in front of Deo. She would wait her chance. Soon she would either take Deo for her own and get rid of Lecti or just lose them both and move on to better things.

As Lecti approached, she criticized Toshi for leaving them behind.

Toshi snapped, "Get over yourself, Lecti. I'll do as I please, and you know it."

The façade that Toshi had projected was cracking, and Lecti took advantage. "Well you sure seem to be in a mood."

"I don't Tra-la-la when I feel like crap," fumed Toshi with an evil look.

Deo came between them, "Calm down. You guys will argue over anything." He pointed ahead. "Why don't we take a look at this hill? C'mon."

The topic of discussion became the condition of the road. It looked great. It was a solid, smooth surface with very little debris. Some drifted or washed sand along the edges could mean some weaving might be necessary but as far as they could see, nothing large or dangerous. It was a long way to the bottom, however, and they could not see beyond the first curve.

"Look," Lecti said, "not too fast and watch ahead. If you can't see far enough ahead, then slow down."

"Sounds good to me," simpered Toshi, "I'd just as soon get down in one piece. Deo, you go first."

"Yeah, fun!" Deo was all too ready.

"No, Deo goes last in case he needs to help us if we get in trouble," vetoed Lecti. "Besides, I don't want him to leave us behind."

"Well then, I'll go first," said Toshi. "Try to keep up."

She sat on her board, her pack in front between her legs, ready to use her feet as brakes. Putting her feet up on the board and pushing with her arms, she was off.

Lecti was surprised and didn't want to get left too far behind. Despite her feelings about Toshi, she did not want to see her get hurt.

Hurrying, she sat on her board and pushed off just as Toshi rounded the curve, out of sight. She could hear Deo close behind her.

Catching up with Toshi was easy. She was cautious but fast enough to have fun. A couple of abandoned cars, a tree across their path, and a gully cut through the road. Minor stuff in Lecti's mind and she was relieved by the easy distance they covered. If it had not involved a grueling hike back to the top, she would have done it again, and even faster.

Deo passed her when they could see the bottom, and the look on his face said it all.

A couple of skateboards abandoned in the sagebrush attested to the idea having been tried already. Their boards joined the others, and with packs slung over shoulders, they approached Carson City.

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