



# BUFFALO RUN

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"What time is this nightmare supposed to start, Stevie?" Mary asked as she tied the laces on her running shoes.

"Don't use my real name, Mary. Are you trying to get me killed?"

"Sorry, I'm not used to this," Mary said.

Stevie brushed aside the sweatshirt hood from her face and noticed Mary's trembling hands as she struggled with her laces. Stevie surprised herself by the level of calm she herself felt at the moment. No, that wasn't right. Not calm. Pissed off. That was more accurate.

"I just want to get it over with. I can't believe you actually snuck in for this," Mary asked.

"If you don't keep your voice down, they'll pull me out before I have a chance to make things right," Stevie said.

"These people are going to pay for Sophie." Stevie tucked her head back inside her yellow hoodie and pulled some of her blonde hair around her face in an effort to cover herself.

"But what about Miranda? Shouldn't you be home with her?"

"Who do you think I'm doing this for?"

Stevie scanned the crowd of the other waiting runners to make sure no one else overheard their conversation. If anyone had heard, no one seemed to care. Most seemed as anxious as Mary. Everyone fidgeted in some way or another: tapping their feet; swinging their arms; rolling their head from side to side.

They were in Yosemite Valley, just outside of the old Ahwahnee Hotel where one of the valley grocery stores used to be. They were due to run a couple of loops around the valley in the third annual Buffalo Run, one of many population control events created by the government to keep the country's numbers in check. The government and their genetic scientists modified a herd of American buffalo in such a way as to make them carnivores and to crave human flesh. In order to give their new toys something of a purpose, the government plucked out a few hundred citizens and forced them to run a mini-marathon amongst the modified killers. The goal was to have most people die before finishing. Taking a page out of popular dystopian stories from the past, they televised the entire spectacle for the

nation to watch like football on a Sunday afternoon.

A layer of misty fog hovered over the ground, enhancing the chill of the high granite walls that surrounded the valley and folded over the runners' bare arms and legs.

"It's fucking Rome all over again. I can't believe this shit is happening in the United States." Stevie's anger only intensified the longer she looked at the other doomed participants.

"Could be worse. You could be doing the desert crawl in Arizona through pits of scorpions and rattlesnakes," a large pot-bellied man said standing next to the two ladies. The man's young son of no more than ten clutched his father's hand, tears streaming down the boy's face. Stevie imagined Sophie with the same terrified expression while clinging to her father.

"Keep your kid close, mister. I lost my husband and daughter in this race two years ago," Stevie said.

"Why are you here? You should be exempt." The large man hugged his son close while looking at Stevie, puzzlement on his face.

"I'm going to put a stop to this insanity."

"Runners, take your marks," the race official said through a bullhorn.

Conversations ceased and everyone turned toward the

starting line. Butterflies swarmed in Stevie's stomach. They only served to make her more determined.

"GO!" The starting gun cracked like an electric whip, the sound splitting the air and reverberating in Stevie's bones as she pulled her hood off her head and burst into a sprint.

Normally, with such a crowd before a marathon, the elite runners took off at the front while the rest of the crowd shuffled toward the start line until the crowd in front dissipated and there was room to begin running. But with their lives on the line, people panicked and started running at the gun whether there was room or not.

Mary almost got pushed down by other runners, but Stevie caught her arm just in time. They barely had time to recover when they both nearly tripped and fell over the pot-bellied man who was splayed on the ground in an effort to protect his son who had fallen. He lay prone on the pavement, crushed by dozens of rubber-soled feet. The boy either shared his father's fate or was trapped underneath him unable to move. The father's screams faded as Stevie and Mary were finally able to run and pick up their speed. Stevie stole a glance behind her and saw a couple dozen trampled dead and dying bodies lying on the ground. There was no movement underneath the pot-bellied man. Stevie wanted to stop and go back and see if the kid was all right.

"Come on Stevie!" Mary cried. "We'll get left behind."

Being left behind or caught out by yourself was the worst possible scenario in the Buffalo Run. The animals singled out the weakest from the crowd, so if you could outrun other people, you had a decent chance. But if you were by yourself, you were shit out of luck.

Stevie resumed running with Mary and tried to forget the carnage at the starting line.

One mile into the race, a large horned beast ran out of the misty woods and into the crowd of runners ahead of Stevie and Mary. They stopped and watched in shock as a small girl gored by the buffalo's horn was tossed into the air. The girl's body landed like a wet sack of cement at the feet of her horrified mother.

The girl's mother sobbed as she bent down to caress her daughter's lifeless body. Stevie grabbed Mary and forced her to continue running. They looked back and saw the mother's skull get crushed by the charging buffalo. Mother and daughter lay dead next to each other as the large beast began feeding on their carcasses.

"Oh my God!" Mary said. "We're going to die!"

"Shut the fuck up, Mary!" Stevie said. "We're going to make it through this."

"Did you see the size of that thing? There's no way out of here. We're trapped. They want us all to die."

Stevie slapped Mary across the face. Normally, Mary was a rock and let nothing get to her. Seeing Mary that scared only intensified Stevie's fright. "Get a hold of yourself. The only way we're going to make it is if we keep running and stay with the group. That's our best chance."

As soon as Stevie finished saying those words, they noticed that they were between two large groups of runners and on their own. One in front of them and another behind.

As they ran to try and catch up with the group in front of them, two buffalo came running out of the woods toward them.

"Run!" Stevie shouted.

Stevie grabbed Mary's shirt and steered her into the woods. They ran and didn't need to look back to know they were being pursued by large animals. Stevie could feel the vibration of the earth from the size of the animals chasing them. Trees appeared out of the fog and they had to work hard not to run into them. Stevie jumped between two closely standing trees into a small clearing. She turned to make sure Mary had followed her, but her friend was nowhere to be found.

"MARY?" Stevie called out, but all she heard was the rumbling of the oncoming buffalo as it slammed its head into the



trees in front of her. The trees buckled and swayed, but held.

"Take that you piece of shit! You're not having me for dinner tonight," Stevie said.

The animal backed up and seemed to assess the situation. Stevie's heart froze. Only one buffalo. No Mary. *Shit*.

The buffalo took another run at the trees. Stevie's body vibrated from the ground shaking as the monster charged toward her with only two small tree trunks between her and certain death. There was a large cracking sound on impact, and she was confident the trees would come crashing down on top of her. The trees listed to the side but remained intact. One more charge and they would fall and leave her exposed. Stevie stared into the dark eyes of the buffalo, convinced the animal was smiling.

"You wouldn't be grinning if I had a fucking buffalo gun, you asshole."

The buffalo backed up to get enough room to make another run. Stevie cast about for some kind of weapon, anything that she could use to possibly poke the animal's eyes out or distract it long enough to get away. She grabbed a branch that had a jagged pointed end. She needed to get out of there, find Mary, and then get back into a large group of runners where the math worked in their favor.

The animal charged again. The violent collision echoed

throughout the woods as the trees cracked in two. The trees toppled over to the side away from Stevie, leaving two stumps about four feet high. The gap between the stumps was still too narrow for the buffalo to fit its entire body through but he could get enough of his head in to try and gore Stevie. As soon as the animal thrust its head toward her, she stabbed at its eye. She missed and instead gouged it on the snout. The animal reared back and let out a loud roar. It then brought its head back and stared at Stevie with what could only be described as anger. It made a harder thrust at her. She sidled her way to the left just as it lowered its horns where she had been just a second before. Its right eye was right in front of her and she jabbed at it with the stick. Her thrust was so hard that it not only poked its eye out, it became lodged in its socket. The animal thrashed about, screaming in pain as it backed out of the little grove and ran roaring into the mist.

She gathered herself enough to step out of the relative safety of the pocket of fallen trees and searched through the fog for Mary. The day was getting lighter and the mist was starting to lift a bit from the heat of the sun.

"Mary?" Her voice echoed off the walls of the valley and the nearby pines.

No answer.

She walked laterally next to a large boulder that acted like a wall and gave her a sense of safety, from that direction at least, and kept an eye out for more buffalo. Mary might be dead, but Stevie couldn't give up, not until she knew for sure. What would she do if she came across Mary's dead corpse? Or worse, what if she never saw her again because she'd already been consumed by the deadly beast? She shuddered at the dark thoughts and continued paralleling the large rock until it ended in another bunch of trees. She left the relative safety of the boulder and headed out toward the road.

She took a few steps and then stopped to listen for buffalo, but all she could hear were far off shouts and screams. No doubt in the direction that she still needed to go. What if she just quit? She didn't belong there anyway, and no one would see her run off. At least while the fog still hung around. The opportunity to flee wouldn't last forever. What if she just took off her number and strolled back to the starting line pretending she was a course worker? Surely they didn't know everyone who worked at the race? No, that wouldn't work. She remembered the yellow badges the officials and course marshals wore. She'd stick out like a sore thumb and be caught immediately. If you tried to escape before finishing the race, they threw you into a pen full of starving buffalo.

Besides, she was there for a purpose. Her husband and daughter were killed because of some asinine bureaucrats who couldn't shit and read a paper at the same time. No one deserved to suffer like she did those past two years, and she was determined to put a stop to it one way or another. She had an idea of how that might be accomplished, but first she needed to find Mary. She didn't know if she would have the courage to go through with it without her best friend.

She stumbled onto the road and found it empty. Somehow, that was more terrifying than being trapped in the tree cave she was in just a few minutes before. She wanted to shout for Mary again but she didn't dare alert any buffalo to her presence. She started jogging and hoped for the best.

A mile or so down the road she saw the tail end of a group of runners. As she got closer she could tell it was comprised mostly of older people and small children accompanied by their wild-eyed parents. Thank God, she thought. If any buffalo came after that group, she would be able to outrun all of them. My God, did she really just think that?

Several people in the back turned in surprise upon hearing Stevie's advance. She held up her hands apologetically indicating that she wasn't a buffalo. They exhaled deeply and resumed running.

Stevie jogged into the middle of the group and spotted a familiar shape a few paces ahead. Her heart leapt and she squealed like a young girl.

"Mary?"

Mary turned around while continuing to jog until she recognized Stevie.

"Stevie!" Mary shouted.

The two women stopped and embraced but quickly resumed jogging so as not to lose position within the group.

"What happened to you?" Mary asked.

"Buffalo chased me through the woods until I got to a small enclosure. Poked its fucking eye out. What happened to you? I thought you were right behind me?"

"I was but then I stumbled. I called out to you, but the noise from the running buffalo must've drowned it out." Mary ran into the runner in front of her and the two almost went down.

"Watch where you're going! Are you trying to get us both killed?" an older woman said giving Mary an evil eye.

"Sorry."

"How did you not get taken by the other buffalo?" Stevie shook her head at Mary's clumsiness.

"I'm not really sure. I fell down pretty hard and I put my hands over my head waiting for it to stomp on me or gore me or

something, but instead it just sniffed me all over. Then it grunted and ran off."

"Fucking weird. Thank God, but weird." Why would the buffalo not eat her? Did it have to actually be the one to take them down? Stevie stowed that piece of intel away in case it came in handy later.

"I know, right?"

Soon they passed the halfway marker. Two and a half laps to go. They ran into the giant shadow cast by El Capitan. In the past, on a warm spring day like today, and no killer buffalo present, Stevie heard people sat in the meadow and watched the climbers through binoculars as they scaled the vertical wall of granite. There were no tourists in the meadow, not unless they wanted to be Buffalo fodder as well. She wondered if there were any climbers up on the wall but quickly dismissed the thought. She wanted to stay focused on the present. They entered the turn around that took the runners to the south side of the valley. The lateness of the morning meant the fog was almost gone. Stevie wasn't sure she liked the mist being there or not. The darkened woods seemed more haunting without the fog and mist. *Fucking animals*. Couldn't they come up with some more humane method of population control?

Stevie bet that no government officials or their families

ever had to endure such bullshit. If the parent and child selected for the run were part of a larger family and survived, then the rest of their family had to continue to be eligible for the lottery. However, if the one or both participants were killed, then the rest of their family were spared for the rest of their lives. It was a wonderful backward incentive to sacrifice oneself. On the other hand, people like Mary, who had no other family, only had to survive the day and they would be free from competing ever again. Since her husband and Sophie died, Stevie and her other daughter Miranda were free from ever participating again. But that didn't satisfy Stevie. No, she wanted to end it permanently. She was just one person, though, and her idea would most likely fail, but she had to try. If she tried and failed, perhaps others would be inspired to take up the fight for change?

She was jarred out of her thoughts by the sound of screams. Up ahead, in the middle of the road, stood a line of at least fifteen buffalo. Their eyes seemed red like they were possessed by demons or something. The entire group of runners slowed and then stopped. They looked around and waited for someone to do something.

"Shit, now what?" Mary said.

"Fuck if I know," Stevie said.

Stevie looked down at her hands and noticed they were shaking. What happened to that confident, pissed off woman from the starting line? Her thoughts turned to Miranda. Stevie hadn't thought of her in a while, and that realization shook her. She had been so consumed with revenge that she forgot to live for her daughter who was still alive. The whole situation disgusted her and filled her with rage. Fuck it. She didn't come there and abandon her daughter for nothing. It was time to act.

"Okay, fine."

Before Mary could stop her, Stevie ran out to the front of the group until she was several paces ahead of them. "Okay, come on. Let's do this."

She ran toward the waiting line of buffalo and then slowed her pace bit by bit until the rest of her running group drew closer. As she came within fifteen feet or so of the animals she abruptly made a sharp right turn and ran into the woods while flailing her hands above her head and shouting. She heard at least a few buffalo take off after her.

She sprinted through the woods hoping to find another tree-lined enclosure like earlier, but as she continued running there didn't seem to be an obvious spot to go. She heard chilling screams of terror from behind. So much for her great sacrifice. People still died no matter what she did. She didn't have time



to worry about that as she could almost feel the breath of the animals on her back. The woods seemed to continue on forever. There didn't seem to be anywhere to go, and she was beginning to tire. If she stopped, she knew she would die.

Suddenly, she was lifted off her feet, thrown through the air, and slammed into the side of a tree. She fell unconscious.

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Stevie opened her eyes and tried to take in the scene around her. She was being carried by Mary and a younger man. She recognized him as one of the fathers of the little kids from their group. Her feet were dragging on the ground and they stopped to check on her when they heard her gasp and cough and come back to life.

"Where am I?"

"In Hell with the rest of us," Mary said.

"We can't really afford to stop," the man said through controlled tears.

"How, what?"

"This man saved your life," Mary said.

"The name's Phil."

"Thanks, Phil" Stevie said still not quite awake yet. "How

did I get here? Last thing I remember is a large tree coming at me."

"We were running after you. You had four buffalo chasing you. We saw you get thrown into the air and Phil here began yelling and screaming. Three of them broke off and ran after him," Mary said.

"I managed to avoid them long enough until I got back to the road. Unfortunately, the other members of our group were still there running around in circles trying to avoid other buffalo. I brought the three that were after me right in on top of them. They took out four old women right away. Right in front of me," Phil said. He put his hands to his face and Stevie could see him struggling to hold it together.

"Come on, we have to move. Can you walk, Stevie?" Mary said.

"I think so." Stevie took a few steps and almost lost her balance. She pushed helping hands away and righted herself. Mary and Phil began to jog a bit and looked behind them to see if Stevie was able to keep up. She kept pace with them.

"Where are the others?" Stevie asked.

"Most of them are dead. The rest are up ahead," Mary said.

"What happened to the beast that was after me?" Stevie asked.

"I hit him over the head with a stick," Mary said. "I don't think he appreciated that very much. He chased me until I was able to find a small cave in the rocks that his head was too large to fit through. He kept trying to gore me with his horns but every time he did, I smashed a rock down on his nose. He ran off eventually."

"Damn, thanks Mary. You saved my ass," Stevie said.

"Some woman lost her child back there," Phil said. "I saw her head get squished by a buffalo. It started eating her right there in front of her mother. The mother lost it and started hitting the buffalo, and it stopped eating her kid long enough to gore her through the stomach. Last I saw, she was bleeding out on the side of the road, helpless. This is madness."

"Someone has to put a stop to this!" Stevie said. She raised her hands above her head and flipped off the unseen cameras, twirling her body in a three-sixty as she did so.

"I'm not sure what good that's going to do," Mary said.

"It makes me feel better. For right now, that's all I got."

"Stevie, what are we going to do?" Mary said.

"Just keep pushing ahead. We've been lucky so far. I have an idea that may change things, but we need to be closer to the start line for it to work. I think we can shut this whole thing down."

The three kept running until they joined back up with what was left of their group. It was so much smaller, less than half the number of people as before. They came around to an open meadow near a small church. Several people crowded around the building, and some sat on top of the roof taking a break and getting some rest.

"That looks like a good place to stop for a bit," Mary said.

"We need to keep moving. I have a feeling stopping is not a good idea," Stevie said.

They both looked over at Phil. "I agree. Let's keep moving."

The entire group now followed Stevie's lead so after she and Mary and Phil took off running, the rest followed. Farther down the road, they heard a loud chorus of screams erupt behind them. Stevie hated it when she was right sometimes, no more so than at that very moment.

"Just keep going. Don't look back."

But Mary couldn't help herself. She slowed and turned to watch the carnage behind her.

"Oh my God," Mary said. She started shaking and crying uncontrollably. "I can't take this any longer."

Mary slowed to a stop, still shaking, and Stevie grabbed

her arm. Phil grabbed her other arm and together they pushed her forward.

"Come on, Mary. You can't stop here. We have to keep going," Stevie said.

"I don't want to keep going anymore. I don't want to live in a world where this is seen as okay and just. Population control or not, a country can't treat its citizens this way!"

"I know. I feel the same way. What keeps me going is that we're going to change this, Mary. We're going to change this fucking carnage and spectacle and make them see that this is not the way to go about reducing our population. I don't care if I have to kill them to stop it. I'm going to stop it no matter what. I promise."

Mary looked at her with agonized hope. She pulled her arms out from both Stevie and Phil and continued running on her own.

They reached the other end of the valley and made their way around the eastern loop. That meant they were getting close to the starting line. It was do or die time.

Stevie pulled on Mary and Phil's arms and slowed them to a stop.

"We need to capture a buffalo and ride it into the starting area when we loop back around by the starting line," Stevie said.

"Capture a buffalo? Are you crazy?" Mary said.

"I've got no family, but if I can put a stop to this, then I'm willing to do whatever it takes." Phil said.

Stevie looked upon Phil in surprise. She hadn't thought anyone else would buy the idea.

"How are we going to catch a buffalo? And better yet, if we do manage to catch one, who's going to ride it and how are they going to ride it?" Mary asked.

"I'll ride it," Stevie said.

When Mary gave her an "are you serious" look, Stevie shrugged. "I'll figure it out as we go. First things first. We've got to catch one, and then I have an idea."

Ten minutes later, the three runners staggered from the road and into the woods. They scoped out the area and made a plan. Phil would attract an animal and then run into the woods, where Mary would try to distract it toward the small clearing surrounded by a thick clump of trees. Once the buffalo was trapped, so to speak, Stevie would jump down from the large boulder onto its back. She had no idea how she was going to stay on its back or steer it where she wanted it to go, but she had to try something proactive.

From atop the rock, the trees were too thick for Stevie to see Phil out on the road. Stevie's hands were balled into fists. She had a purpose now. Instead of just trying to stay alive for herself, the plan would make things better for everyone. If she failed, at least she gave it her best shot. She discovered that her fear had been swallowed by her anger and she relished the feeling. She hadn't felt so alive in a long time. Miranda popped into her head and she immediately felt guilty. The girl had been suffering along with her mother, but her mother hadn't been there. If Stevie got out of there alive, she promised herself she would devote herself to Miranda.

Phil must have lured an animal her way as she heard him yelling, "Coming your way! Coming your way!" His voice echoed throughout the area.

In a small window through the trees, Stevie could see Mary screaming and flailing her arms over her head in order to attract the buffalo. It must've worked because Mary took off running toward Stevie as fast as she could. Behind her was the largest buffalo Stevie had seen yet. It was too late to back out now. Mary sprinted toward her but the buffalo was faster than she was and closed quickly. Faster Mary, run faster. Stevie

squeezed her hands harder, and nails cut into her palms. Maybe she should jump down and distract the beast? No. Stick to the plan. The plan was what mattered now.

Mary burst into the clearing, the buffalo right on her ass. The large beast lowered its head, preparing to gore Mary in the back. The scream struck in Stevie's throat as Mary grabbed the trunk of a small tree and used her running leverage to swing out of the way just as the beast's head thrusted upward. The creature slid to a stop as it realized it had been out-manuevered. It turned around, its back was now facing Stevie. It was in the perfect position. All she had to do was jump down on its back. But her feet stayed glued to the rock.

"Jump, Stevie!" Mary shouted.

Everything up to that point had gone as planned and Stevie should already be in mid-air about to land on the buffalo's back. So what happened? Why wasn't she moving? Her thoughts went to Miranda. Suddenly, she didn't want revenge anymore. She wanted to be home with her only living daughter. Once she leaped off of that rock, her chances of survival were slim to none.

"I can't do it," Stevie yelled back.

"Yes you can! Quickly, before this thing gores me to death," Mary shouted.

*Shit.* Too late now. Stevie looked down at the broad back of



the giant killing machine, closed her eyes, and jumped. She landed with a hard thump and almost bounced right off and over the side onto the ground. She flung her hands out and grabbed a handful of the buffalo's thick neck fur to keep herself from falling off. She had barely pulled herself upright when the beast started bucking wildly. Since it was so large, it couldn't quite get its entire body off the ground. Instead it hopped around like a bucking bronco in a rodeo. Its back was so large, though, that Stevie found it relatively easy to hang on and remain stable.

Finally, the beast tired and looked backward to see who or what was on its back. Stevie smiled at the beast as a nervous reflex. She had survived the initial round, now it was time for her to figure out a way for the thing to do her bidding.

She let go of the large tuft of fur in her right hand and scooted up farther toward its head. She spread out both arms fairly wide and grabbed fur on either side, just inside its two shoulder blades. She pulled back on the left tuft and nothing happened.

"It's not working," Stevie said.

By that time, Mary had worked her way onto the other side of the thick stretch of trees in relative safety. "Try again," she said. "Use your legs to squeeze it and kick with your heels

to point it where you want it to go.”

“My legs barely go down past his back. He’s too big to be treated like a horse.”

Stevie pulled harder on the fur and still received no response from the beast. Frustrated, she decided to give Mary’s advice a shot. She kicked it in the side with her left foot at the same time as she pulled on the fur. To her amazement, the beast walked slowly to its left.

“Holy shit!” Stevie shouted.

The beast cleared the thick part of trees and drew even with Mary. She was now completely exposed. She and Stevie locked eyes before Stevie pushed forward on the fur with both hands while simultaneously kicking the beast on both sides. It ignored Mary and moved forward. Stevie couldn’t believe it. She was actually controlling the thing. She fought the urge to make it run and instead opted to calmly walk it back toward the road.

The animal must have read her thoughts because it only walked a few paces before it bolted into a run. She struggled to hold on but she found herself giggling with excitement as they emerged from the woods, past an unbelieving Phil, and onto the road. The buffalo slowed to a stop on the pavement. She gently kicked it forward and it began walking down the road.

They had set it up so that they were only half a mile or so

from the initial starting line. Stevie worried that if other buffalo appeared they would spook the tamed beast. *Tamed?* Perhaps not the right word, but Stevie thought it would do for the time being. So there she was, riding on the back of a giant, man-eating buffalo, as they strolled down the paved road. Phil and Mary walked behind them keeping a safe distance. There was no telling how long the wild animal was going to remain so docile. In fact, Stevie wondered what she was going to do to provoke the thing once she arrived at the starting area. She wanted to rampage through all the officials and the secured viewing stand where all the VIPs watched the race on monitors. She was sure as shit they were enjoying what they were seeing now. She wasn't so sure they were going to like what she hoped was about to happen.

As they approached the starting line, there was a table full of cups filled with water but no one to hand them out. Someone had warned them about what was coming down the road, apparently. After they passed the table, Stevie pulled and kicked on the beast's right side and it turned toward the starting area.

The few people that were still milling about fled in terror. They hadn't expected danger to come this close to them, probably. What made them think they were so safe? There were no

real hard fences or borders or anything like that to keep the buffalo out.

The start area had a large open space where all the runners had stood waiting for the race to start. Behind it were a couple of rows of large white tents where the spectators and race organizers congregated after the spectacle got under way. It was into those tents the stragglers ran.

As Stevie, atop her tamed beast, slowly strolled toward the tents, she looked up at the permanent wooden structure that overlooked the entire area from a bluff above. She assumed that was where the government officials were. The men and women of the Population Control Board were no doubt watching their race of horrors while eating hors d'oeuvres and sipping on champagne. Perhaps they even drank mint juleps out of metal goblets? Either way, Stevie hoped the television cameras reached back into this area so all involved and around the country could see what was about to happen.

She held the beast still as she approached the first tent, his large head inches away from the opening. Inside, someone peered out through a small opening in the tent and Stevie kicked the sides of the beast and pushed its fur forward. The peeper looked eye to eye with the buffalo. He turned and ran deeper into the tent. Stevie screamed and kicked and pushed on the

buffalo as hard as she could. It grunted and ran inside.

Tables with electronics, and piled high with food and drink, all overturned. Sparks flew as people dove under the tent in attempts to get out. Most weren't successful. Stevie struggled to stay on as the beast trampled or gored each to death. The last one, a woman dressed as if going out for a night on the town, with a look of utter disbelief on her face, was gored right through her neck. When the buffalo retracted its horn, blood spurted out of the side of her neck like a fountain spraying everything nearby in bright red. The buffalo bent down and started eating her face. Stevie pulled back on the beast and managed to wrestle it onward, through the tent wall and into the next one over.

The scene repeated itself in each canvas pavilion. Somehow, for some reason, people must have not seen it coming or didn't believe it was actually happening to them, because each tent she and her beast stormed into, the stunned people all had the same look of surprise and incredulity on their faces.

"Please, no. I survived last year's race. I don't have any other family. I was free," a tall, thin, young man said as the beast slowly approached the man.

"Then I guess you should've tried to do something about it instead of returning to watch others suffer and die," Stevie

said.

The man tried to respond, but the buffalo lunged forward and head-butted the man. He fell to the ground dead, half his head caved in.

After all the tents were down, it was time to make her way up to the main building and take care of business. She and the buffalo, working in total synch at that point, walked around the area looking for the path up to the cabin. It took a few minutes and she noticed a few of the people up there were now looking down at her, with complete shock on their faces. *Good*. Time to get a taste of their own medicine.

The buffalo bucked and kicked in another effort to eject Stevie off its back. It even ran up against a couple of trees attempted to scrape her off. She held tight and hoped it would stop trying to get rid of her. Finally, exhausted, the animal simply stood there panting.

Stevie spotted the path that must lead to the top of the bluff, and she gently coaxed the animal in that direction. It almost seemed resigned to her authority and it walked slowly toward the path. She liked the buffalo's deliberate pace as she wanted to draw the tension out in the building and let them taste the fear that she had been feeling all morning.

As they approached the small wooden bridge that led to the

front stoop of the building, a petite woman, wearing a fine set of slacks and a nice silk blouse, stepped out onto the porch. She held some type of small gadget in her hand. She did not seem frightened. No, not at all. In fact, she seemed to have an amused look on her face. She held up the device in her left hand.

"You've done well. And you've given us a bonus. You managed to cull some from the untouchable herd. Those people in the tents were ineligible for any events. We salute you for finding a loophole," she said. "Now, there are even fewer mouths to feed."

"Didn't seem like you were too worried about food, not with spreads I saw in those tents," Stevie said.

The woman pursed her lips and quickly flicked her eyes upward before returning her gaze to Stevie.

Stevie urged the buffalo forward. The woman pressed a button on her device and Stevie heard a whine coming from inside the buffalo's head. The large animal shook its head back and forth violently. As the noise continued, it shook with such violence that his entire body swayed back and forth. Stevie held onto the fur in her hands for dear life, but it started ripping out of the back of the animal from the force of the violent shaking. It started bucking its back legs as well and it was

only a matter of time before...The fur ripped completely free from the animal and its girth was too wide for Stevie to hold onto with only her legs. She fell off the animal and hit the ground with a thud. She felt something break inside of her, probably a rib, but still managed to scoot out of the way of the thrashing animal.

She saw the woman release the button on her device, and the animal turned and fled back down the path, whining as it ran. Stevie managed to sit up and stare at the woman.

"Congratulations again," the woman said. "You almost accomplished your goal."

"If it wasn't for that device in your hand, I would be staring down at your dead corpse right now. And so would the rest of the country," Stevie said.

"Perhaps." The woman looked up again and Stevie noticed a small, silent drone for the first time. It must be capturing the scene for the viewing audience. The woman looked right up into it when she spoke next. "And you might've gotten a nice thrill out of that experience. Perhaps you even thought it would change things somehow? Some sort of policy shift? I'm afraid you would've been sadly mistaken. You see, there is no other choice. We no longer have the ability to grow enough food to sustain our population. With gasoline gone and coal depleted, there's not



enough energy to keep us going the way were are. These little events are just tests. Tests we've been conducting for years now. And I think your little show marks the end of the testing phase."

"What are you talking about?" Stevie asked.

She heard a couple of sticks crack and turned to see Mary and Phil running up the path toward her.

"As of right this moment, I'm going to call the President and tell her to activate Population Control Order 13," the woman said, a gleam in her eye.

"What is Order 13?" Stevie asked as Mary helped her to her feet.

The woman continued to talk directly into the drone. Apparently, she was making a nationwide announcement. "Our final population restriction operation. As of tonight, anyone not inside a major city will be cut off from the goods and services of our country. These modified buffalo, along with the other modified predators we have in stock, will be let loose across the countryside. All major cities have electronic barriers that the beasts cannot cross. Once they have had their fill, we will eliminate them in an organized matter to use as food for the remaining population."

"You are fucking monsters!" Stevie said.

"Someone has to take control of the situation. No matter who is in my position, there are nothing but bad choices to make," the woman said.

"That's not right, and you know it. There are ways to fix the problem without mandatory gladiator bullshit. People don't need to suffer needlessly. That's not something other people would do. If I was in your position, I would find a way that works without taking human life."

"You think it's as easy as all that, do you?" the woman asked.

"I know it is," Stevie said.

She realized that the woman was completely alone. There was no security or bodyguards and no barrier standing in her way. She inclined her head toward the woman and Phil stepped up next to her. Mary stayed put.

Phil and Stevie marched over the wooden bridge toward the woman. She stood there staring at them with a smug look on her face. She raised the device in a threatening way, as if it were some kind of weapon.

"I'm not sure what that's going to do," Stevie said. "We're not animals with chips in our heads."

"Aren't you?" the woman said before pressing a button on the device.

Stevie and Phil dropped immediately to the ground and grabbed their heads. The pain was so intense they couldn't do anything but writhe on the ground and hope for it to stop.

"You see, all of you people have been implanted. What did you think those pre-race shots were for? Oh, yes. That's right. They were anti-viral shots. I don't think so. You've been implanted with the same chips we put in the animals. I'm afraid your little rebellion is at an end," the woman said.

"Fuck you!" Stevie managed to say through the pain. Even though she was immobilized by the intensity of the high pitched sound bouncing around her head, she managed to get up on her feet and stagger slowly toward the woman. Thoughts of Sophie and her husband Don filled her head. Then Miranda. No, the physical pain she was feeling paled in comparison to the pain she'd been feeling those past two years.

The woman looked to be in shock, as if no one had ever overcome the insidious device before. If she had been smart, she would've run back into the cabin and shut the door, but all she did was stand there and watch Stevie's approach with her mouth agape.

Stevie reached the woman and punched her in the face. The device fell from her hand and onto the ground. As soon as the gadget fell out of the woman's hand, the pain in Stevie's head

stopped.

"You might want to make that switch one that works without having to hold it down on the next version," Stevie said as she hauled the woman up on her feet by her blouse. She looked over the side of the overhang onto the flat staging area below. She noticed a few buffalo feasting on the dead bodies of the people from the tents.

"No, you can't throw me down there. I'm too important. The rest of humanity counts on me for us to survive," the woman said.

"We'll take our chances," Stevie said. The drone camera followed the woman as she flew through the air. It stayed on her after she hit the ground. She writhed in agony with two contorted and broken legs, and screamed when she was set upon by several ravenous buffalo. They started eating her while she was still alive. Her screams even made Stevie almost feel sorry for her.

"Now what?" Mary asked as she walked up to them and peered over the side at the woman.

Stevie looked up at the drone. "Miranda, honey, if you're watching this, Mommy will be home soon." She then looked at Mary and Phil. "Let's go talk to the President."

THE END