

AFTER THE GREAT DEVASTATION

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CHAPTER 1

I was at work. It seemed like I was always at work, and I didn't really mind it. I had been going there since I was eight years old, although at that early time it was hard to tell the training part, which to me was like playing games, from the work part, which was also like playing games. That was the way they got the young people involved at a young age, when they discovered someone had a specific talent or knack. As soon as the gift was identified, the kid would be swooped up and trained or channeled into the area to hone that gift, to become the best he or she could be. I didn't like the label they put on us, 'Kidgen' for a kid genius, but it was better than some of the alternatives: 'Ordin' for the Ordinaries; 'Crim' for the Criminals, even if they had only been caught one time breaking the law; the 'Runners,' who ran all over the place, doing errands for everyone else; and then there were the 'Chairs,' the huge people who lived in chairs and had Runners get for them what they needed. I worked with other Kidgens and the Comgens, the computer geniuses. I had a really fun job, although I didn't like to think of it as a career, something I would be doing all my life, since in that job I was so isolated at my workstation, and I liked to spend a lot of time with other people and outside.

Oh, they tried to accommodate us. It seemed like everything we asked for or even mentioned that we desired, they would provide. Like when they first brought me to the Complex, I mentioned that I liked ice skating. Well, inside the Complex it was so crowded, or should I say, every space was being efficiently used, so, I said to some of my co-workers, it would be nice to be able to skate all the way around the Complex, on the outside. I don't know who made the decisions around there, and, at that time, I didn't even know anyone was listening to my conversation; but soon a canal was built and filled with water, all the way around the Complex, and in the winter it was frozen so we could skate on it. It was at least several miles around the perimeter, and it was really a fun skate, wide enough for several people to skate holding hands. Also it was very smooth for skating and it was flat enough, with just a little incline. We skated up one side and down the other, as we went around the giant loop.

When spring came and the ice was starting to melt, they decided to make the canal into a swimming channel, and that was fun, too, in the summer when it was so hot outside. Then in the summer, when I mentioned I liked roller skating, they built a nice, smooth path around the canal. Some people rode their bikes on it, others walked on it, so, it was a good use of the resource, since not everyone loved to skate as much as I did.

It was a weird kind of freedom that we had, we Insiders who lived in the Complex. We would go to work when we wanted and take breaks when we wanted, as long as we finished our tasks on time. My job was really fun, like playing a game. They discovered when I was young that I had a gift for decoding and seeing patterns in codes, so they snatched me up and started giving me all these games to play. Later, I knew they were training me, but when I first started, I thought I was just playing games and working puzzles. And that was what I was still doing, nine years later, playing games, decoding codes, and working puzzles at the Complex.

They didn't know I had started doing these kinds of things much earlier, when my dad used puzzles for testing people when I was just two and three years old. He would bring the puzzles home to figure out how they worked, and I would dive in and solve the puzzles before he could even read the instructions. They thought I didn't have any early memories of my Life Before, but even at age eight, I knew enough to keep them to myself. After all, my memories were all I had of my Life Before. I had only fragments of memories, mostly of my dad and me, and many of my mom, who was so beautiful with her blond hair and green eyes, and her soft voice and her kindness. My young mind must have blocked out the Day of Devastation. I couldn't remember anything about it at all, even after reading about it and seeing the video.

Big Hawk said I didn't remember because it didn't really happen the way they said it happened, so we were only getting carefully controlled propaganda, video and 'news,' and he was probably right. He was a different kind of Kidgen; so very smart, but he was also defiant. I mean, they would never would have guessed, but in private, he was always telling us, his friends, the truth about what really happened in every situation, since he had access to all kinds of information, as well as a photographic memory. The rest of us were pretty compliant. That's not to say we didn't have our pranks and secrets, but we followed the rules and we did what was expected of us to do to help the general order of things.

So, I was at work when Kenrick sent me a PM, a private message. When others sent a PM, I was pretty sure they weren't really private, but since Kenrick was a Comgen, he had ways to send messages that couldn't be traced, tracked, intercepted or in any way read by anyone else, and as soon as I read his message, it dissolved into a cool graphic, so, even if someone figured out that I received a transmission from him, it could only be recalled as a graphic. I think it had something to do with layers, and the top layer could never be recalled. Anyway, Kenrick sent me a message, an invitation to go to his pod with Big Hawk and Hiding Cathy. I had never been to his pod before, but he said he had ordered some kind of great foreign meal and he wanted to share it with us.

Oh, that was another cool thing about the Complex, besides the fact that everything we needed was inside it, from food to entertainment to clothes to our work, we lived there, so, we didn't have to commute. I had heard about the horrors of commuting in Life Before, especially since the global gas shortage when all the old vehicles had been abandoned all over the place and were, in many areas, blocking the roads. That meant the mini solar cars could only travel in certain areas. Everyone who worked at the Complex lived at the Complex. They said we were free to travel, with proper authorization, but kids never traveled without adults. I hadn't traveled since I came to live at the Complex. I didn't miss traveling. Where was there to go?

I had seen on the monitors how horrible life was Outside the Complex, with all the pollution and the Runners and the Crims and the dangerous food. A few times I watched the transmissions that were being sent to the Outsiders, our nickname for everyone who didn't live in the Complex, and it was loaded with implications that soda pop and compact foods and chemical mixtures were real food. Their only choice of things to eat was from a selection of stuff that wasn't really food. Their menu was made up of a myriad of substances, pressed and shaped to resemble real food and drinks. Whereas we Insiders consumed only whole natural organic food and drink which was properly prepared for us fresh daily, the Outsiders drank mixtures of water with artificial colors and flavors and they ate processed dried food, mostly covered with chocolate and flavored with sugar. It was obvious to us why they were always so sick and weak and they had so many mental problems – their food contained no nutrition. The Admin of the Complex said that was nature's way of keeping us healthy while letting them survive a shorter time, to not let them suffer very long from all the diseases that were out there. As one of our cooks

once told me, “You are what you eat. We are whole, natural and organic. The Outsiders eat nothing but junk, so, what does that say about them?” I felt sorry for the Outsiders, since they didn’t have access to real food, but the attitude of the Insiders was that the Outsiders didn’t know what they were missing – and besides, they liked it! They liked to eat fake food! I almost couldn’t believe it, but then, I knew they were different from us. Their whole lives were different, their lifestyles were different, their attitudes about life were different.

At precisely the same moment, Kenrick, Big Hawk, Hiding Cathy and I left our workstations, went and washed our hands, and walked through the Complex to Kenrick’s pod. The guys lived on the south side of the Complex, the girls on the north, and the married couples were interspersed among both sides.

“You won’t believe what I was able to get!” Kenrick told us as we were walking. He always spoke very quickly, so we really had to pay attention to what he was saying in order to understand him.