

Prologue

Westport

Watching out of her living room window at the streets of downtown Westport in the distance, twelve-year-old Amanda Williams sees a town unrecognizable from the one she's known all of her life.

The buildings and the marina, and even the constantly-changing sands of the beach look the same. The residents themselves, however, including their friends and neighbors whom they've known for years, are different somehow. They seem frantic and scared, even terrified — but its not a storm or even a world war that has them on edge.

If only it were that simple.

Something has been quietly and systematically killing residents one household at a time, with no reason or warning given — and its pace is quickening.

Even under ordinary circumstances, you might expect that life in Westport is filled with stress and anxiety, given that its location is wedged between two massive bodies of water, Grays Harbor and the Pacific Ocean — but the truth is, life

here is relatively predictable and oftentimes uneventful. In fact, residents of the area never seem to be fazed by much of anything at all. Even the massive windstorms that are a regular occurrence in the winter months are met with a stoic resolve, and not the panic and chaos one would expect from less experienced souls. The harsh environment and violent weather are simply considered a way of life here.

Fear had actually started to creep in several weeks before now, when news of a deadly virus first began making headlines in the newspapers and on television. Panic, however, didn't set in until yesterday, when communications were suddenly cut off from the world around them. Within a fraction of a second they went from being concerned about an illness making its way through their town, to finding themselves with no electricity, no phones, no Internet, no radio, and no way of knowing if the outage was limited to only their area. Even worse was their limited access to medical needs here on the peninsula — the nearest hospital is in Aberdeen over twenty miles away. For most, this latest setback proved to be too much, and packing up and leaving the small fishing community seemed the only sensible option left.

Amanda's own household wasn't immune to the panic either. Both her father and stepmother were busy behind her, throwing essentials haphazardly into boxes, bags or any other containers lying around the house. Her seventeen-year-old brother, Aaron, has been making trips back and forth between the house and the family car, loading what they hope will be enough supplies to get them someplace safe.

Throughout all of this, Amanda hasn't shown the least bit of concern, something that her stepmother, Diane, feels grateful for. She's raised Amanda from infancy, and the last thing in the world that she wants is for her to feel the stress and agony that the rest of them are experiencing.

As Diane hands Aaron another handful of bags to take to the car, she turns to Amanda and watches her for a moment — noticing a slight smile on her face.

"Sweety, what are you looking at?" she asks Amanda.

"The neighbors. Mrs Morgan is out on their lawn throwing up."

Diane stands beside her step-daughter and looks out at the scene across the street. Kate Morgan, a good friend of Diane's, is on the ground on her hands and knees, vomiting

what appears to be mostly blood. Her husband is standing about ten feet behind her, holding their three young children back at a safe distance, while cars passing by on the street speed up as they drive by.

Diane feels horrible for her friend, and guilty for not running to her aid, but she knows its too late — Kate will likely be dead in only a day or two, if not sooner. They've all seen it happen before.

Her real concern is Amanda's reaction to it — the smile.

"Amanda, what were you smiling about?"

The girl looks up at her, straight faced and serious. "I wasn't smiling Mother..."

Amanda's gaze returns to the neighbor's house, and Diane watches her face to see if the smile returns — and while her mouth doesn't move, the excited glint has once again taken over her eyes. An uneasy feeling creeps into Diane's mind, watching her child enjoy someone else's misery.

"Come on, help me sort through these clothes in the bedroom. We can't take all of them."

She pulls her away from the window and leads her into the master bedroom, where Amanda's father, Paul, is on the far

side of the room beside the bed, staring out of the window toward the harbor in the east.

"The whole town is gonna be empty by nightfall." he says, still looking outside.

"Do you think maybe we should stay another night? I can't imagine how packed the road is going to be..." she answers back, handing Amanda a pile of clothes to sort through.

"No, the longer people stay, the more desperate they'll become. We'll find someplace safe down the road." He motions for Diane to come closer, then points outside in the direction of the marina. "Looks like the rest of the boats are leaving..."

Diane stands next to him, wrapping her arm around his waist and squeezing. She can see that most of the marina is already empty, and the few dozen boats that are left are beginning to leave. Other than the people boarding them, the area around the marina is completely deserted.

"I wonder where they're headed..." Diane says.

"The same place we are — anywhere but here."

Diane leans in close to Paul, then whispers... "Kate is sick."

He turns to face her. "You can't go over there, you know

that..." he replies, his voice filled with sympathy.

"I know, I just feel horrible about her kids."

Paul leans over and kisses his wife's forehead, then grabs a large suitcase off of the bed and starts to walk out of the room — pausing for only a moment to speak. "We should leave soon, we might be able to beat at least some of the traffic."

Diane nods in agreement, then looks back out the window. A man walking on the next street over catches her attention. He's wearing a pair of filthy pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, moving so slowly that for a second she's not certain if he's standing still or not.

"Paul..." Diane calls out, curious if he saw the man or not. She leans over the bed to see if her husband is still in the living room, but she doesn't see anyone. She focuses her attention back to the man outside, who's still making his way down the sidewalk cautiously, as if he's in excruciating pain.

"I think you're right, I don't think we should leave either." Amanda blurts out, startling Diane.

"No, your dad is right, things are just going to get worse around here."

"What if its worse everywhere else?"

Diane had to admit, she raises an excellent point. She can't let on that she feels that way though, somehow it seems important that she and Paul appear to agree on everything, at least in front of the kids anyway.

"That's not something you should be worrying about. Your dad and I will find someplace, you'll see."

"How will our mom find us?"

Diane's heart sinks when she hears the question. The two kids haven't seen their biological mother for almost three years, and that was only under court supervision. As far as Diane knew, she'd been in and out of jail or rehab ever since — making absolutely no effort to see her children. Her last known residence was a halfway house in Aberdeen, but that was over a year ago.

"Once the phones are working again I'm sure things will be fine." Diane answers, trying to hide her emotions.

Amanda finishes separating the pile of clothes in front of her into two heaps, not bothering to actually sort them. As she tosses one of them into an empty bag, she notices something shiny in a box at the foot of the bed. Making sure that Diane is still facing the window, she moves closer to

inspect it.

"What are you looking at?" Amanda asks, hoping her step-mother doesn't turn around.

"Nothing. Just a guy."

As Diane remains glued to the scene outside the window, Amanda reaches into the box and pulls out a large kitchen knife, the weight of it so heavy that it shakes in her hand. She quickly wraps it into a small towel, and then holds it to her side while she slides into a sitting position beside Diane — placing her head on her step-mother's shoulder as they both look out of the window.

"Where is the guy?" she asks Diane.

"Over there, next to the yellow house..." she answers, pointing in the man's direction. He's just standing there, with his mouth hanging wide open, staring up at the sky, his face gray and sunken.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's delirious."

"What does that mean?"

"It means he's sick, and he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Is that what happens to everybody who gets sick?"

"No, most people just die." She looks down at Amanda, ignoring the man for a moment, and notices that the sweet and innocent look has returned once again to her eyes. "Don't worry about it, we'll figure everything out."

"Mom, what if we get stuck on the road?"

"I told you, your father and I will figure it out."

"But wouldn't it be safer to stay here, once everyone else is gone?"

"We'll be back home soon, just as soon as all of this is over." she answers, kissing Amanda on the forehead.

When Diane looks out the window again and sees that the man is no longer there, she stands up and faces the bed, figuring that she's wasted enough time as it is. As she opens her mouth to tell Amanda to continue packing, she lets out a loud moan instead, and nearly collapses to the floor in pain.

Afraid to move with any sudden motions, she slowly reaches behind her back for the source of the pain, and feels something warm and wet just below her ribcage. As her legs begin to go numb and become unsteady, she looks at her hand and discovers that its completely covered in blood. She looks

over at Amanda and tries to speak, but for some reason she's unable to say anything. Amanda's face is entirely expressionless, with no hint of worry or surprise. It takes Diane a moment to notice the knife in her step-daughter's small hands, both fists wrapped tightly around the handle. The blade is bright red.

"Amanda..." she manages to whisper.

The girl smiles warmly, then plunges the blade deep into Diane's chest, pulling it out quickly before she falls to the floor. Careful not to come into contact with any of the blood, Amanda sits beside Diane on the carpet, wiping the knife off on the towel before wrapping it up once again.

Despite her stepmother's desperate gasps for air, and the panicked look on her face, Amanda patiently sits and waits for her to stop breathing — her eyes never looking away from Diane's. Finally, after hearing the front door open in the next room, she decides that she can't wait any longer, and begins to push her stepmother under the bed and out of sight — leaving the towel-wrapped knife lying next to the body. When she's finished, she stands up and pulls a pile of clothes off of the bed and onto the floor, covering the large bloodstain on the carpet.

Just as she returns to sorting through clothes once again, her father enters the room behind her.

"How is everything coming along?" he asks, surveying the progress on the bed.

"Fine, almost everything is packed."

"Good. Where's your mom?"

"She left."

"Where'd she go?" he asks, confused.

"I don't know, she went outside and said she'd be back in a bit."

"She went outside? What for?"

"She didn't say..."

Paul walks back into the living room, with Amanda following closely behind him. Just as they enter the room, Aaron comes in through the front door and sits down on the couch, exhausted.

"Did you see your mom outside?" Paul asks Aaron.

"No, I thought she was in here..."

Paul turns around and faces Amanda. "Are you sure she went outside?"

Amanda nods.

"And you're sure she didn't say where she was going...?"

"I'm sure."

Paul walks to the window and looks out at the town beyond. The sun is beginning to fall west toward the ocean, and the street in front of their house is filled with cars, trucks and even hikers — all of them heading south and away from Westport. The Morgan family is still sitting on their front lawn, overcome with grief, but Diane isn't with them. Part of him is worried about Diane, and what might happen to her out there — but another part of him is furious with her for leaving without telling him.

"Should I go out and look for her?" asks Aaron.

"No, its too dangerous. Besides, we have no idea where she went."

Paul waves at Aaron to move over, then takes a seat next to him on the couch, then motions for Amanda to join them.

"Dad..." says Amanda, as she takes a seat on his lap.

"What is it, sweetie?"

"Does this mean we're not leaving?"

"No, we're still leaving. We just have to wait until your mom gets back."

Its nearly dark outside, and the only objects illuminating the Williams household are two small candles burning on the kitchen counter, and an old propane lantern that sits precariously on the edge of a coffee table in front of Paul and his two kids. Its been nearly three hours since Diane disappeared, and Paul is growing increasingly worried about her safe return.

Aaron stands up and walks to the door, staring out at the street. "Maybe I should go look for her, just around the house..."

"Do you see anybody on the street?" asks Paul.

"No, its still empty. I think everyone is gone."

Paul gets up and stands next to his son, both of them looking at the dark, empty streets of a seemingly abandoned town outside. "Why don't you and Amanda check inside the house, and I'll look around outside."

"What are we checking for?"

Paul gives him a stern look, a look that tells Aaron not to ask anymore questions.

"Don't let your sister out of your sight..."

As his two kids disappear down the hallway toward the bedrooms, Paul quietly opens the front door and steps outside into the damp air of Westport. Somehow it feels different tonight — the air is warm and fresh, almost like summer.

As he makes his way out onto the street, looking in all directions for any sign of his wife, or of anyone else for that matter — he suddenly realizes just how isolated and alone his family has become. He can hear the ocean striking the jetty off in the distance, and he can see the light of the first stars overhead as they appear and disappear through the clouds. What he doesn't hear, or see for that matter, are signs of life in the town itself. Even his neighbor, John Morgan, who lives across the street, left with his three kids less than an hour ago. Paul can only assume that his wife is still inside the house, no doubt on the verge of death from the looks of things earlier in the day.

He can't imagine what must have gone through John's mind as he drove away, sacrificing the love of his life to protect the only three things in the world that meant more to him. He doesn't know if he has that kind of strength inside of himself,

and he's afraid to find out.

As he makes his way around the house, his flashlight beam leading the way, he calls out to Diane, hoping that in these breezy conditions his voice reaches far enough for her to hear. When he comes back to the patio and faces the harbor in the east, he can see the faint lights coming from some of the boats still anchored in the harbor. What he doesn't see are the lights coming from Hoquiam and Aberdeen on the other side. Normally there's a bright glow in that direction, but late last night everything changed, and the skies turned dark in that part of the horizon.

When he approaches the front door again and begins to reach for the handle, he notices that the door is already partway open. Knowing for certain that he'd locked it when he came out, he peeks in through the antique glass window at the living room beyond, but doesn't see his kids anywhere — only the lantern still burning on the table where he left it.

He gives the door a slight push, slowly opening it enough to fit through, then takes a single step inside — his heart pounding in his chest.

"Aaron... Amanda..."

No response.

"Are you guys in here...?"

He starts to take another step inside, then sees a bright flash coming from the hallway, and the sound of gunfire echoing throughout the room. Feeling a dull pain in his stomach, he looks down and discovers a gaping wound in the middle of his abdomen. He looks up, hoping to catch sight of his attacker, but the hallway is pitch black once again. As he carefully backs up, holding his right hand firmly on the wound, another shot rings out, this time striking him in the chest and sending him to the ground.

When he comes to, the world feels like its slowly spinning, and his eyesight is slightly out of focus. Eventually things begin to clear up, and he realizes that he's facing the sky. Then something else comes into view, a person. At first he doesn't recognize her, and then he notices the dress, its white fabric now tinged in red. Amanda kneels down beside him, stroking his hair and smiling. He tries to open his mouth, but he's too weak.

"Shh, don't try to speak. It'll be over soon." Amanda whispers in his ear. Sitting up, she unfolds the kitchen knife,

then holds it against his throat. "Don't worry Papa, I'll be fine."