

Chapter 30 - Meet Some More Neighbors

“Oh my God,” Ned said, as Julie concluded her colorful story of traveling from Oregon. In Ned’s world of scarce news, he had learned there was an evacuation effort in Oregon—something about federal funding and some other fuzzy details. He had no idea that, essentially, the infrastructure of the United States was fractured. The ability to maintain law and order was failing or tenuous at best.

Floyd then told his travel story. He did not flee fires. He fled riots—violent and bloody riots. After leaving his home, he traveled through Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and the outskirts of Cincinnati. While not all the states he passed through were Great States, those three cities had riots. From the dark look on Floyd’s face, Ned could tell that he had seen unspeakable violence.

“After Cincinnati, I decided to take country highways. I won’t ever take a freeway through a major city again after seeing what I saw in Cincinnati,” Floyd said.

He went on to describe, in vague terms, watching rioters tip over vehicles and run people over with cars. He witnessed criminals beating innocent people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time; he described seeing motionless people laying in bloodstained streets. There were stores in flames, empty gas stations with looters streaming in and out of broken glass doors, and lawless gangs of criminals armed with nail-covered batons prowling streets as they hunted for victims.

“I couldn’t risk being the next person in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Floyd whispered with a crack in his voice. “If my opinion mattered, I’d say we are really close to civil war, if we aren’t already there.”

Ned repeated the only words he had said since hearing Julie and Floyd reveal the details of their travels. “Oh my God.” He put his elbows on the table and rubbed his temple with his fingertips.

“In Cincinnati?” Julie gasped. “What were they rioting over? They aren’t a Sanctuary State!”

“Our president. Nothing else. His recent withdrawing of funding from Sanctuary States was simply the match to light the fire of their angst. Cincinnati is a Sanctuary City. So, while the state isn’t, cities like Cincinnati are rioting because they believe they are next,” Floyd explained.

“I guess, philosophically speaking, those cities have good reason to be concerned that their funds might be pulled. If the president can enact such a measure on states, the cities will be no problem!” Julie said. “This is just as I predicted, though I wasn’t expecting riots on a large, organized scale across the nation.” She sighed.

“Here’s the problem—not many states are Sanctuary States. Certainly Oregon, Washington, and California picked a fight with the president. But, many states have Sanctuary Cities, and they are the next battle. We need to realize something—there are Sanctuary Cities in Colorado. The riots could come close to us. For sure, those escaping riots will be driving on the highway that runs through Smoky Flats,” Floyd warned. “Colorado also has a governor who is sympathetic to becoming a Sanctuary State. Look at what he did to the gun laws!”

“Oh my God,” Ned repeated for a third time.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was all too much to digest. He leaned back, put his hands on the back of his head, and stared at the ceiling for a moment. Then he spoke. "I know you two have been through a lot in your travels, but I need to ask a favor. Western Lakes Association is holding an emergency board meeting tonight because residents are getting wind of the unrest out there. It would be great if you could come and relay your experiences. I think people need to get a firsthand account of what is really happening out there."

"They don't know?" Julie asked.

"Residents don't know the scale or extent. They have heard rumors on their AM radios. Very few have TV up here, since most don't want to pay for cable. They need to hear it firsthand. Folks who own property, just like you, will be coming here to find refuge in the properties they usually use for ski season," Ned said. He stared up at the ceiling again for a moment. "Remember the concerns I had and shared with you awhile back about the lake—the fishing? All those things were decided, no problem. But now we need people to adjust their thinking. The world you just described will find its way here," he said. "I know sharing these accounts won't be easy for you two, but people need to know what we're dealing with, what the city will be like, how our supply lines to the town store will change, and so on. People need to prepare, if they haven't already. They need to step up—to think about securing Western Lakes Association and putting safeguards in place. The time has come."

Later that evening, Ned led Floyd, Julie, and Joel along the road to the clubhouse for Western Lakes Association. It was an old, two-story house that had been converted into a clubhouse. The ground floor had several couches, a pool table, and a ping pong table. In the corner was a soda machine that dispensed soda in glass bottles.

"Wow," Julie said as they entered. "This brings me back. So many childhood memories! Ping pong and orange soda. It's too bad the soda machine is empty... I could go for a bottle of nostalgia."

A platter of sandwiches sat on the ping pong table surrounded by cans of soda and cookies. The room was full of people. Ned put his arm around Julie and pointed her to a bench along the wall. He noticed her flinch when he touched her shoulder blade. He pulled his hand away just as Julie grabbed Joel's hand and sat down in the hub of noise. Floyd sat next to his daughter.

Ned knelt down. "I need to make a report as the caretaker. Larry Wilkes is the board chair." He pointed to a man at a card table stationed next to the massive fireplace. "He's a good guy. I told him earlier what my report would be, and that I would yield much of my report to you. No one here I can see is unfriendly in any way. They are all residents. Make note of them. These meetings will change in the future as the 'vacationers,' as we call them, arrive. You are considered vacationers, so people will be a little untrusting. That's okay. You'll gain credibility by your report tonight. I need these folks to raise their awareness and be willing to help with security. In the bigger picture, we also need to make a plan to partner with the four other associations around Smoky Flats to guard the interest of the whole valley. That is the end goal. Tonight, we need folks to simply listen and take in the seriousness of what is happening."

“Got it,” Julie said.

Larry gaveled the meeting to order. Ned noticed that Joel was eating a sandwich and had a can of soda in between his feet. Floyd had a few cookies on a napkin but he wasn't eating them. Julie didn't have any food, and was fidgeting in her seat, looking nervous.

“The emergency meeting of the Western Lakes Association will come to order. I am Larry Wilkes, your board chair. I understand that we have many people here tonight who may not be regular attendees to these meetings. Because of that, if you do speak, for the sake of all of us, but especially the secretary recording the minutes, please identify yourself by stating your name and address within the association. If you are not an association member, I ask that you refrain from speaking. This meeting is to conduct the emergency business of members only. Any questions?”

Everyone looked around. It was almost an unspoken introduction of faces. Julie felt very self-conscious, like every eye was on her and her family. Ned sat on the fireplace hearth, near the card table where Larry was seated, and looked at Julie.

He mouthed, “It's okay,” and winked at her.

She realized that she must not have been wearing a poker face—her emotions were obviously right on display.

“Seeing as there are no questions, let us move right to the reports we have for tonight. Buster Jepson, our vice chair, has a report. Buster, you're up,” Larry declared.

Buster, a large man in a threadbare, plaid shirt, was seated at Larry's immediate left. As he stood up, he pushed his black watch cap up on his forehead. His forehead was pasty white and his face was tanned. He looked like a man who spent most of his time outdoors.

“Buster Jepson. Vice chairman. I live on Granite River Road. My report tonight is going to focus on the status of getting the lake stocked this fall. Our scheduled load was supposed to be delivered this coming weekend. My calls to the hatchery for a status report are not being returned. I have read the same headlines all of you are reading. I gotta wonder if the hatchery is somehow affected by all this upheaval. My recommendation is that we entertain a motion to implement the ‘lake sustainability policy’ we put into place last year for this very scenario.”

“Any questions for the vice chairman?” Larry piped up.

“Yes. Betty Conklin. Marblehead Circle. Can the vice chairman please remind us what the lake sustainability policy is?” asked an elderly woman wearing overalls and a purple sweater.

“You bet, Betty. Last year, we agreed that if the hatchery couldn't make a scheduled delivery of our lake-stocking for whatever reason, we would change our fishing policy for members. Currently, those who are paid on their annual membership dues can fish two fish out of the lake per day, and that extends to visitors. I give us a fifty-fifty chance that the truck isn't coming Saturday. If it doesn't happen, then we automatically implement a policy that members are then allowed to fish one fish out of the lake per day, and no fishing privileges will be extended to visitors. The plan was decided so that we could maintain healthy fish levels during a time when replenishment would be unavailable. Since times are so uncertain right now, we might get a truck in a week or so. Maybe I'm just being optimistic,” Buster concluded.

“Andy Cahill. I also live on Granite River Road. I make the motion that we implement the policy if the truck doesn’t come on Saturday.”

“I’m going to call your motion out of order, Mr. Cahill. The policy this association agreed upon last year was that the policy would automatically be implemented if a truck didn’t show up. We’ll know by Saturday night, won’t we?” Larry said as he tapped his gavel to conclude the discussion.

Julie wondered if some of the residents didn’t like the lake sustainability policy, and if it had been met with some level of opposition last year.

Larry continued. “Since this is an emergency meeting, we will table our regular committee meetings and commence our caretaker’s report. Ned, you’re up, sir.”

Ned stood up. “Ned Collins. Crystal Springs Rd. Caretaker. Keeper of the association. Buster is going to pass out a few copies I printed off of headlines from around the country about what is happening. I want each of us to take about ten minutes to read everything. I need to be able to reference them in the next part of my report.”

The room was still and silent except for an occasional turning of a page. Julie read the news from various outlets. Not much was new to her since she had been listening to the radio as she traveled. Her father seemed a bit surprised at the extent of the fires on the west coast.

Julie turned to a page from an Oregon news outlet. It had a map of Portland and Eugene. Julie’s eyes were drawn to the Eugene map. It had colored overlays over a street map of the city. Red overlays indicated neighborhoods that were burned down. Yellow indicated neighborhoods that were evacuated and had extensive damage. Green neighborhoods were those where people were allowed to be in their homes, but had to be ready to evacuate. The homes with no overlay were in the clear—there was no concern of fire. The caption read, “Residents are encouraged to check this map often. Officials indicate boundaries are subject to change on a moment’s notice.” The time stamp of the article was from earlier that afternoon.

She looked closely at the map; Julie and Joel’s house was in the red zone. Julie’s ears started ringing. Her face felt hot. Her breath quickened, and she could feel the emotions rising from deep within. *This is not the fucking time to lose it, Julie*, she scolded herself. Her father tapped her shoulder. She realized she was shaking, and that he could feel it.

“What is it?” he asked, his expression turning grim when he noticed the tears in her eyes.

Julie pointed to the map, to where her house was located.

“Oh my God, Julie.” He exhaled.

They tried to stay quiet as everyone read their news quietly. Trying to maintain her composure, Julie stood up and stepped outside. As soon as she was through the closed door, she ran to the edge of the property, bent over with her palms on her knees, and threw up. She stayed hunched over and cried. There were no sounds, only tears.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped up and screamed. “Shit! Don’t do that!” Julie yelled. It was Ned.

“Don’t you have a report to give?” she yelled at him, realizing she didn’t need to.

“I asked your dad to tell his story first and then went looking for you, hoping you weren’t changing your mind. You okay?”

“No. Sorry. Seriously. I can’t stress to you enough. Do *not* come up behind me like that. Please call out to me first. Man, I’m sorry. It’s not you... it’s me,” Julie apologized and

explained all at once. “Seriously, sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you.” She took a deep breath and wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeves.

“It’s okay.”

“Ned, did you see the Eugene burn map?” Julie asked as she tried to calm herself.

“I did.”

“If that map is correct, then my house is destroyed,” Julie said. “This is news to me and I’m taking it a little hard.”

“Julie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He reached out to her with one hand and she instinctively drew away. “So umm... Julie, let’s just have your dad tell his story, and then I can wrap this up. No need for you to tell your story. I think the news reports and his story will be enough,” Ned said. “Why don’t you stay out here, and when the meeting is done, I’ll walk you all home.”

“No. I’m fine. Just give me about five or ten minutes. Seriously. I got this.”

She knew she could pull it together for a few minutes. Later, she would go find a place to work out an ugly cry. She was good at that. Julie stood up. She cleared her throat and took a few cleansing breaths before going back inside.

Julie took her place by her father, cleared her throat, and told her story.

“Hi, I’m Julie. I now live on Mueller Circle. This is my father, Floyd, and my son, Joel. I used to live here.” Julie pointed to the piece of paper, hovering over the red section where her house once stood. She moved the picture around the room for everyone to see, and felt like a teacher showing off an illustration in a book. “So, bear with me. This is the first time I’ve seen this map and it’s... umm...” Julie paused while she swallowed down her tears. “So, uh... four... or maybe five days ago... I don’t know for sure, my son and I evacuated Eugene, Oregon when we saw the fire lines.”