

# HEAT WAVE 3

by

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The truth of it was, Tess wasn't sure what to make of the three members of the tank crew—Sargent First Class “Bo” Briggs, Corporals Yousef and Malone—other than they'd clearly been traumatized by the loss of their gunner, a man they'd called “Quiet Cal,” (“he was so quiet, every time he opened his mouth a moth flew out”) —who'd been killed by one of the flying creatures only hours before. All she knew for certain was that they were young men from Fort Huachuca who'd been separated from their platoon—although how this had happened remained unclear—and who, lacking communications, had been “operating independently” since near the outset of the heat wave, about three hours ago now. And she knew this: which was that they would have killed everyone in the store had Coup not ran out in front of them like a lunatic, shouting and waving his arms (when no one else had even budged). Coup! The goofy, arguably hot writer. The 40-something year-old bad boy. Her hero.

She looked at him now where he was gathered with the others and smiled, even as by some fluke he saw her and winked back. Relax, he seemed to be saying—or was she projecting? Relax, I got this. And she tried to, she really did, wandering along the big windows (which were riddled with bullet holes) and staring out at the dark and the storm, which was as torrential as it had been sudden, wondering how her mother and father and little brother were doing in Miami, and praying they hadn't—no. No, she wouldn't consider that. They were fine, she was sure of it. After all, who was to say this had even happened there? Who was to say it had happened anywhere but right here in Bumfuck, Arizona? But she already knew the answer to that: Anderson Cooper. Anderson Cooper and CNN—in New York.

She slowed, peering through the rain and water running down the glass, noticing something strange amongst the gas pumps—some kind of jib, poking between them like a knife. It was funny, because she hadn't noticed it earlier—like a black pennant pinned to space itself—its single light showing red, blinking, before lightning flashed and it turned—it,

the animal, the thing in the rain—as others just like it turned also, skewing their heads like Egyptian dancers, seeming to focus on her.

*“Aaahhh ...!”* she blurted, backing away—it wasn’t a scream and it wasn’t quite speech—backing into Coup (who’d come to check on her), nearly knocking him over. “There’s something out there—!” She gripped his shoulders in icy desperation. “An entire pack of somethings. Like—like featherless emus, with *fucking alligator heads*. Just look,”

He squeezed her shoulders and gently moved her aside, peering out the window, peering into the rain. “I don’t see anything,” he said, even as the others joined them, crowding around the glass. “Just a bunch of gas pumps ... and some vehicles.” He stiffened suddenly. “Wait. There is something. Lights—”

“That’s them! That’s their eyes,” said Tess—as Ashley stepped forward to calm her. “They, like, glow or something. Like that borealis in the sky. They’re right there, Coup!”

“No ...” he said, in a kind of drawl, “No, these are flashing. Some of them are headlights—I’m sure of it. There, behind the electrical pylons—coming closer. Look,”

She looked, no longer seeing the—*well, let’s have out with it*, she thought, *the dinosaurs*, and saw instead a line of what indeed appeared to be headlamps—preceded by flashing blue lights—winding along a road she hadn’t even known was there, coming toward them through the rain.

“Might be the cavalry,” said Elliott, sounding excited—a notion that was quickly dashed when the modest number of vehicles became clear: two police motorcycles followed by a black limousine and a sport-utility vehicle, also black—followed by one more cycle.

“I’ll be goddamned,” said Rory. “But that’s a motorcade. Like the kind you see in the local parade.”

“Regular Apocalypse Day Cavalcade,” said Coup.

“Jesus, the President,” blurted Carson. “He was golfing at Rancho Loreto—did you know that? It was all over the news today. I mean, just before—”

"No way," said the tank commander—Bo. "It's too small, for one." He wiped the glass, which was beginning to fog. "The Presidential motorcade numbers, I don't know, like, forty vehicles, at least, most of them specialty rigs. Look, there's not even a decoy."

"Maybe it's been disappeared," said Ashley.

"Yeah, like those drivers on State Route 87," said Elliott.

And then the vehicles were there, they were pulling up under the huge pump canopy, and the flags on the limo's fenders proceeded to droop—but not before it had become obvious what they were: the flag of the United States of America and the Presidential Seal—at which Rory could only shake his head, saying, "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"But there's more," said Tess, yanking away from Ashley, locking eyes with everyone who was close. "Because it looks like they're going to fuel up. And whether you believe me or not—I'm telling you: *there's something out there*. Several somethings, as I said."

"Jesus, we've got to warn them," said Elliott, even as Coup shoved against the door—and found it to be jammed.

"What the fuck is this?" he snapped, pushing repeatedly.

Rory tried it too. "It was that pterodactyl. Look, the whole bar's bent ..."

"Let me see," said Long, squeezing in, even as Bo unshouldered his rifle—and seemed to look for his men.

"Roof access," he snapped, appearing to locate them. "Find it."

"Shouldn't we be, I don't know, jumping up and down or something? Trying to get their attention?" asked Ashley, and started waving her arms.

Tess slapped them down. "The President's entourage? No!"

"It'll just draw them out—unprepared," said Rory, watching Bo and his men double-time around the counter—seeing them pause over the body of the clerk-thing.

"Jesus," one of them said—the loader, if Tess recalled. Malone.

"Holy shit."

“Come on. Move it,” said Bo.

They moved it, disappearing into the back, pounding up stairs.

“Someone’s out,” said Elliott, and when Tess looked she saw two men in dark suits standing at the pump, one of them working the console while the other looked on. And she saw something else: two creatures (she supposed they were what they called velociraptors) taking position behind the next pump isle—crouching there like black panthers, waiting like jackals.

“Oh, no,” she said.

Another darted past as she watched, almost invisible amidst the rain—then another, and another. “My God, they’re going to ambush them,” she said.

Several people gasped as they followed her gaze.

“Not if we can get this door,” said Coup. He grunted, applying pressure, as Long fiddled with the mechanism.

The men at the console, meanwhile, had given up—and were now striding toward the store.

“No, no, no,” pleaded Ashley. “Just get back in your car ...”

“Come on,” growled Coup, fighting the door.

“Y’all make it to the roof, or what?” bellowed Rory.

But there was no answer as the agents rapidly approached and the door suddenly gave way—causing the men to freeze and to reach into their suit coats, prompting them to draw their weapons.

Coup wasted no time. “Get back in the car!” he shouted, leaning into the downpour. “Jesus, they’re right there!” —at which instant the men took a defensive stance and pointed their revolvers, yelling at him to get down, down on the ground, “All of you, get on the ground! Now!”

—and they did, yelling and gesturing, trying to warn them; as the raptors darted forward and the soldiers opened fire from the roof—lighting up the lot. As the agents spun around and did the same—only much, much too late.

EVEN THROUGH THE RAIN, the lethal nature of the attack was clear; as one of the beasts launched feet-first at the nearest agent—its tail whipping frenziedly, its fore-claws splayed—and knocked him to the ground: pinning him there like a moth on cork, filleting him so that his entrails burst forth and steamed. The second man was luckier, so much so that he was able to turn around and begin firing even as they backed him toward the window, his pistol bucking and flashing, going *ca-crack, ca-crack*, its shells flying and clinking off the asphalt, until he was close enough to Coup and Rory that they were able to grab him and pull him into the store—which they’d barely managed to do before the pursuing raptors skidded into the glass and began thrashing about.

And then, bedlam—as more raptors descended and more men in suits opened fire (as well as the state troopers, one of whom was instantly pounced upon and swept from his bike); and the limo began to move: accelerating away from the gas pumps, swooping alongside the store, where its doors were opened even as the agent they’d rescued shoved wide the entry, and a largish man in a suit was hustled into the building—although not before a raptor’s jaws darted for his head and an agent dove between them, pushing him down, and was promptly decapitated. And then it was over, or nearly so, as the surviving raptors fled and the surviving Secret Service agents—both of them, as well as a State Trooper—followed the President into the store. Until the only sounds were several women sobbing and the hum of the refrigerators; and it wasn’t until things had settled considerably that Tess realized the old-young man—Henry—was no longer in the building. That he was, quite simply, just gone.

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THE ONLY THING HE KNEW for certain was: he wanted to be with her—with Amal—his wife. And if that meant suffering the same fate, well, he’d decided he was prepared for that. Decided it as he unbarred the exit and walked unprotected into the Sonoran Desert. Reconfirmed



it as he gained State Route 87 and began heading west, heading *back*. Toward the crushed Toyota Camry and the blood on its door. Toward the last place he had ever seen his wife alive.

For it was over, this much he knew; and if he hadn't known it before, the slaughter of the Secret Service agents and Troopers had surely convinced him. The world, such as it was, for he'd never been an optimist, had—how had Stephen King put it?—*moved on*. He knew this just as sure as he knew he had no interest in living without Amal—much less as an old man who could barely walk; who's back ached with each step and who's lungs felt papery and thin; and who's eyes were failing not just rapidly but *exponentially*—who couldn't even hear!

No. No, he would drink of her presence (or the ghost of it) one last time in the crushed car at the side of the road—the car they had bought as a wedding present to themselves in 1997 and in which they'd made love as twenty-year-old elopers and which had always run like a dream no matter what because it was a *Toyota* and that used to mean something—and then dash the cup to the ground; having no more answers—to Life, to where the socks went in the fucking dryer, to this, this *flashback*—than he'd had as a boy in Tacoma, Washington—and not caring. For he wanted to see his wife again—that was really the long and the short of it. And maybe, just maybe, there was a place where he could still do that. At which point a shadow fell over him and something snorted in the rain (which was lessening) and he looked up—to see the same animal that had killed his wife looming high above (for its markings were distinct: a U-shape above its eyes and two black circles, like a cobra). —and he smiled. Because he knew they'd be together soon.

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“WE'RE GOING TO GET to the bottom of this, all of it, believe me,” the President was saying, gesturing as he spoke—his large frame swaying slightly—just like on TV. “And we're going to win it. It might take time ... but we're going to win it. Believe me. We always win.”

He paused for a moment as the lead Secret Service agent—Halverson was his name, Agent Halverson—handed him a cup of water. “For one, we’ve got something the animals don’t have. Which is our incredible men and women of law enforcement.” He gestured at the surviving State Trooper and then at the soldiers. “Not to mention our armed forces, some of whom are with us right now.” Everyone clapped—albeit briefly. “It’s hard. So hard. What has happened is so terrible. So many people have disappeared—while others have fallen victim to these—these animals. People are saying they’re dinosaurs. I don’t know. I think they’re dinosaurs. And they’re horrible, so horrible. They’re eating people alive. I’ve seen this, and I’ve sort of witnessed it—in fact, in two cases I have actually witnessed it.”

He continued as Coup and Tess exchanged nervous glances. “You know it’s funny because they say—the scientists—they say human beings and dinosaurs didn’t exist at the same time. And yet here we are ... right? Here we are. We’re existing at the same time. That I can tell you. But we’re going to take care of it. We’re going to make America safe again.” He paused and took a drink of water, appearing conflicted. “Some people are saying, or they were before the TVs went out, some people were saying, not everyone, just some people, they were saying this hasn’t happened anywhere else. That it’s only happening here—in the U.S.” He shrugged as if he couldn’t possibly know. “Not Mexico. Not China. Not Puerto Rico. Just us. We’re the only ones who have, how’d they say it? Flashed back. That’s just what I heard. I don’t know if it’s true. I don’t think it is, to be perfectly honest.”

Tess glanced at the soldiers, who were whispering amongst themselves.

“Even if it is, I’m a big believer in a little thing called *fluctuation*,” He emphasized the word with his thumbs and forefingers, “—just like with the markets. Or with co-called climate change. You cannot just have a standard. You cannot just say that we have a blanket standard all over the world ... you can’t have a blanket standard. You may say ... it sounds nice

to say, 'I have a blanket standard; here's what it is' ... But you know ... it won't be a blanket standard."

Tess looked at Coup—who just looked back and shrugged.

"What I'm telling you is, this is temporary. Okay? Believe me. I may not be a scientist but I can tell you that. It's temporary. In the meantime we got the best armed forces and police responders in the world keeping us safe. These guys, right here," He indicated the soldiers. "Aren't they great? Great guys."

"But, sir?" Elliott appeared starstruck as he stepped forward. "I mean, Mr. President. Isn't it true that CNN was reporting that most of our military had simply disappeared? How do you account for that?"

"Fake news," said Tucker, and pointed at Carson, who had taken off his MAGA hat and raised his hand. "You. Your hat was fine, by the way."

Laughter.

"Sir, I just wanted to know what you intend to do next; and what your thoughts are on the situation right here. Right now. We've got dead needing to be buried, for one—or at least moved to where those things can't, well, you know, scavenge off—"

"Like the head laying against the limo's front tire," said Rory.

They all glanced out the windows—and at the little girl standing in front of them, who was looking out at the thing. She must have saw their reflections because she turned to face them as they watched.

"It keeps staring at me," she said—prompting Tess to hurry toward her, cajoling her, before quickly ushering her away.

Everyone just looked at each other. "I'll, ah—I'll sit down and take your answer," said Carson.

"Horrible," said Tucker. "Just horrible. So sad. He was an amazing agent. And, you know—an incredible man. Just an incredible man. First-class. I—what was his name, Joe?"

"Miller, sir," said Halverson. "Lieutenant Dan Miller."

"Miller," said Tucker. "Make sure he gets a Medal of Honor, okay? Can you do that? I'll do it. I probably will do it. Maybe. Definitely. But,

you know, as for what's next ... well, for one, we've got these bodies—as the gentleman said. So many. So many. And we've got to clean them up. And, you know, pay our respects. I must tell you it's not going to be easy. It will probably be dangerous. But. We have to. We have to."

Tess sighed quietly—his manner of speaking was starting to grate—even as Coup leaned close.

"Ever get the feeling it's going to be a long apocalypse?" he said.

"Mr. President? If I may?" —Long, the civil engineer.

"Go," said Tucker.

"Well, I can't help but to notice we've got this beer cooler, right here—that's separate from the rest of the refrigeration. Why don't we use it? To store the bodies, I mean?"

Tucker seemed to think about it, rocking back and forth on his heels, his chin angled imperiously. "Possibly. Possibly. What does everyone else think?"

No one said anything. At last Bo said, "I think, Mr. President, that it's getting late—and that everyone's getting tired. Including, if I may, sir, *you*."

Tucker just looked at him, his lips pursed, his expression intense—like a puffy-eyed Bald Eagle after a bender, thought Tess. "I don't sleep much," he said.

That's when they heard it: the long, warbling cry (but with an edge; a rattling muscularity, like a cross between a coyote and a lion; something *big*), which echoed along the plain and was just as soon answered—by something even bigger. Or at least bigger-sounding.

"That was nice," said Tess, leaning into Coup; and then she was falling over as he stood abruptly and addressed the group.

"Okay, it's sleepy-time, for everyone—except, of course, for a night-watch, which will consist of one soldier and one civilian." He paused, as though he was unsure who had been talking. Everyone just looked at him. "I mean ... there should be one person experienced with weapons

awake and alert at all times, right? They all stand guard at once—and we're out our best assets the next day. Am I right?"

Tucker raised his eyebrows. Most the others muttered some form of approval.

At last the President said, "I didn't catch your name."

Coup hesitated. He had to hand it to the man—he knew how to intimidate a person.

"Cooper," he said. "Cooper Black. Friends call me Coup."

Tucker squinted as though he hadn't quite heard him, then glanced at Halverson. "Black? Cooper *Black*?"

"Yes, sir."

Tucker continued to squint.

"Like the font, sir."

Tucker nodded slowly, gravely. "Well," He turned back to Coup. "I tell ya, Coup, you have some talent." He looked at everyone else. "Coup is very smart, very high-energy, and we need that. Whatever it is, I'd let Coup handle it. This is peanuts for Coup! Okay. You're hired. You and one soldier. You got the red-eye. Stay awake and keep us safe."

And then he left the room, Halverson scrambling after him—although where he was going in the Border Rendezvous' limited confines was anyone's guess.

To be continued in  
HEAT WAVE 4

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**Coming Soon**



