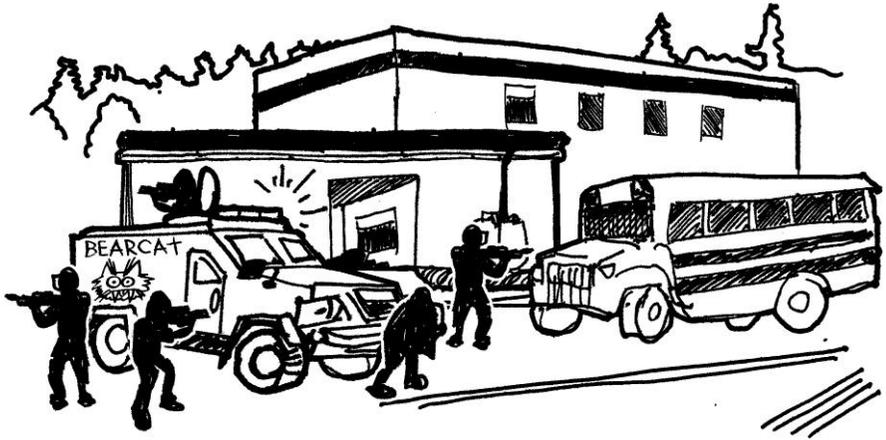


## Chapter One: Quarantined



The first rule of The Porcupine Freedom Scouts is “LIVE! If you die, you fail at survival.”

I was sitting in science class. Ms. Lessard was writing “Active & Hidden” on the board. She began her lesson, “An active virus attacks healthy cells and hijacks them to spread itself. Active viruses present symptoms immediately, making them relatively easy to diagnose, and hopefully treat.”

Science is my favorite subject. It is probably the only thing I like about school. But viruses are so kids’ stuff for me. My dad is a scientist and talks about them all the time, so I was struggling to pay attention. She continued, “Examples of active viruses are things like influenza, the mumps, and measles.” She wrote them on the board. I was bored, so I doodled in my notebook.

She went on, “A hidden virus invades healthy cells, but allows them to function normally, so it spreads when the cells replicate. Hidden viruses lay dormant until the body is weak, and don’t express symptoms until later, making them harder to identify.”

My phone made the signature jingle of a text message from Dad. I held the phone in my lap under the desk as I read, “They

won't let me take you. The school is under quarantine. Get home now! Whatever it takes. I'll explain later."

I blinked. Quarantine? I looked out the window, where I could see the parking lot in the front of the school. Two ambulances had pulled up to the school, followed by the local police department's armored vehicle. Behind them was a huge black van that looked like some kind of mobile command center. It was from the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. Strange. Very strange.

"Who can give me an example of a hidden virus ... Max?"

My attention darted from the window to the front of the room. The class snickered. It was one of those *gotcha* questions she only asked when she knew someone wasn't paying attention, and I wasn't. I stared up at her blankly.

"Max, you know you're not supposed to be on your phone in class. If you don't put it away I'm going to take it."

I put the phone on my pocket. "Sorry," I said. Then the school's lockdown alarm went off and the class erupted in panicked gasps.

"Calm down everyone! It's probably only a drill." Ms. Lessard began closing the window blinds, pausing when she saw the scene in front of the school. She continued with a slight quiver in her voice. "Everyone get under your desks. Max, would you lock the door?"

I went to the door, but hesitated before locking it. I looked at my phone again. "Whatever it takes." I opened the door and ran out.

As I ran through the halls I tried to call Dad, but he wasn't picking up. Principle Bownes came on the loudspeaker. "Governor Warden has announced a state of emergency in Thornton, and all of Grafton County. Everyone stay calm. Teachers, please bring your students to the auditorium in an orderly fashion for roll call. Their parents have been called. Everything is under control."

They called our parents, but wouldn't let them take us? That made no sense. Classroom doors were flung open and students poured into the hall. Teachers tried to keep them together but it was chaos.

I stepped out of the green steel doors at the front of the school, and bumped right into the school resource officer, a dim witted giant named Pike.

“Hey! You need to go to the auditorium!” He put one hand on my shoulder and the other on his Taser as he began pushing me back inside.

He’s pretty slow, not just mentally, but physically, so I considered running past him. The heavily armed men in head-to-toe body armor and badges who were filling up the parking lot behind him made me reconsider. So, I tried something else.

Despite his uniform, his badge, and his Taser, Pike was the dumbest member of the faculty. Even though security was his job, breaching security was as easy as outsmarting him.

I faked up a nasty sounding cough, and sniffled as I rubbed my nose across my arm. “Principle Bownes told me to go to the nurse’s office and wait. I guess I got a little turned around. I’m feeling kind of light headed.”

His eyes went wide and he quickly took his hand off my shoulder and rubbed it on his black pants.

He pointed toward the nurse’s office, and told me to wait there even though it was already evacuated. Once he was gone I slipped out a window.

Behind the school there was the playground, behind that, a field, and behind that open wilderness. At the far end, I saw two men in city jumpsuits constructing a chain link fence across the back of the school yard. As soon as they saw me we all began running toward the opening in the fence.

I barely made it through ahead of them. I heard one yell after me, “Hey kid! Come back!” The other yelled, “You’ll be sorry you left.”

They didn’t chase, and I escaped into the woods. I didn’t know what the lockdown was for, but I knew a quarantine was to prevent the spread of disease. That was Dad’s area of expertise. I figured I’d get all the answers when he got home from work.

## Chapter Two: Home Sweet Home

My name is Max. I am 11 years old and a bit small for my age. I am no good at sports, and I don't have many friends, but I love science. I like to figure out how things work, and make them work better.

I knew my way through the woods pretty well. I had been trained for that. I had twenty pounds of books strapped to my back, but my favorite was my Porcupine Freedom Scouts Survival Guide. PorcScouts is a small tightknit group of fathers and sons who go on outdoor adventures, share campfire stories and learn wilderness survival. I like it because it is science in action. Some physics, some biology, occasionally some chemistry, but always with a practical application, not the abstract book learning they taught in school.

It was a three mile walk on the roads to get home. Normally, I turned up a mountain road in the direction of Mt. Tecumseh in Northern New Hampshire. I avoided the main road by crossing directly through the woods, and I kept off the mountain road by taking a foot path on the other side of the tree line. I could still see the road, but I didn't want anyone to see me. Dad's text was confusing, he wasn't responding to my follow-up texts, and I was worried someone might be looking for me.

The cool autumn air and the sounds of the forest were soothing after my stressful escape from the school lockdown. In town, the sounds of nature were drowned out by the sound of cars and people, but the forest was filled with the sound of songbirds and the sweet orange smell of sugar maples. Seed pods from sugar maple trees have wings that make them spin like a helicopter when they fall. I tried to catch them midair as I walked.

I live with my dad in a gated community called Lochshire Estates. It is a new development, pretty much a walled compound. As I approached, I took all the seed pods I'd caught and dumped them in a hollowed out stump outside the compound. I did this whenever I walked through the woods, hoping that one of them would germinate and someday I'd get to see a tree growing inside another tree.

There was a delivery truck from the post office parked in front of the compound. The Postman was filling his bag with mail for the residents of Lochshire.

“Do you have anything for unit 4D?” I asked.

He frowned at me and brushed me away. “Leave me alone, kid. You’ll get your mail when I’m good and ready to give it to you.”

I was stunned by his rudeness, but didn’t let it bother me. I swiped an electronic keycard and walked through the entry gate of the compound.

“Hey, Sam. What’s the good news?”

Sam was the security guard at the front gate. He was more of a toll booth operator really, except there was no toll. On a typical day we talked, usually about the news. I liked him. He was funny. But this time he didn’t even look up from his mini TV. He just waved me through. It was unusual. From the flashes on the screen it looked like the Black Friday rush at Lincoln Shopping Center just north of here, but Christmas is months away. Maybe it was a riot, but why riot in a little town like Lincoln, New Hampshire? I walked through.

There are six apartment buildings in the compound. Three of them are two-story red buildings we call “the bricks.” The other three are four-story buildings we call “the towers.” They aren’t towers in any conventional sense, but in a little town like Thornton, buildings don’t get much taller than four stories. We live on the top floor of the east tower.

I went through the lobby and walked toward the elevator. I pushed the button and watched as the needle rattled on the second floor. *Rats!* This happened when something was blocking the door. It just opened and closed over and over. I headed for the closest stairwell.

A strange person I’d never seen before was at the far end of the hall, at the entrance to the other stairwell. He was old, dressed in a gray corduroy jacket and bow tie, but his clothes were all torn and stained. He looked like I imagined hobos look, except that I’d never actually seen a hobo. He was knocking on the door to the stairwell, which was weird enough because it wasn’t locked, but he even did it in a strange way. His knees were locked and his chest and face were pressed up against the door like someone being

arrested. He was smacking his palms against the door in a slow, steady thud, like fish slapping on a deli counter.

I watched the man, confused by how he was acting, when he finally noticed me. I couldn't say for sure, but it seemed like he smelled me, taking in a long breath through his nose as he turned his head and looked right at me. His eyes were glassy, and his face was pale. He sent me a cold stare that gave me the creeps, but I was not going to wait around to find out why. I shot up the stairs to the fourth floor, swiped my electronic key to our apartment and went inside.

Something was wrong.

The dining room table was turned on its side. Magazines, pens, and mail were all over the floor. The shelf in the living room was face down on a pile of books and DVDs. The sliding glass door to the balcony was wide open and the curtains were torn down.

My heart began racing, but I stopped myself, and remembered the second rule of PorcScouts, "Don't Panic. What you know is more important than what you have." I took a deep breath, and tried to imagine what a private investigator would do.

I went back to the door and examined the frame. There was no sign of forced entry. I retraced the path of destruction through the apartment, using my phone's camera to document the damage. I took great relief that there was no blood or signs of a fight. Dad probably wasn't home yet.

It didn't look like anything was stolen, just broken. In fact, common valuables were left in plain sight. I photographed the desktop computer, which had been smashed with a dining room chair. Maybe it was just vandalism.

I tracked the damage from the kitchen, to the dining room, to the living room. I gulped when I saw Dad's wallet on the coffee table.

"Dad! Are you here?" I half yelled, my voice cracking. There was no answer.

I heard a siren in the distance and stepped out on the balcony to see if I could spot it. It sounded like it was right outside, but I couldn't see it. Then it faded away.

Suddenly I heard a strange, bone-chilling sound inside the apartment. It was a low, wet growl. Almost a gurgle, like a dinosaur with a mouth full of marbles. It turned my guts upside down. I was

afraid to look, but I forced myself to turn, slowly peeking back through the torn curtains.

Dad was standing in the hallway to the master bedroom. At least it looked like Dad, but he had the same gray face as the stranger downstairs. He lurched into the living room, sniffed in my direction, and gave me the same foggy stare. I was trembling, but he didn't pause for a second. He crept toward me with slow, heavy foot falls, his fingers out in a grasping motion, his mouth open.

My brain was frozen, but my hands had a plan of their own. In an instant they threw the sliding glass door shut, and fumbled with the handle, but I couldn't lock it from the outside.

There was no way I could hold the door closed. He would overpower me, and force it open if he wanted to.

Dad, or whatever it was, built up speed and lumbered toward the balcony door, but he didn't go for the handle. Instead he smacked against the glass with full force, like a bird flying into a window. The impact made a long diagonal crack in the glass and the man began pounding and biting at it.

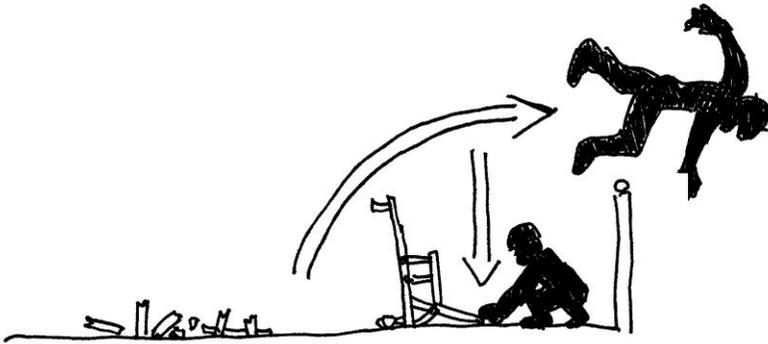
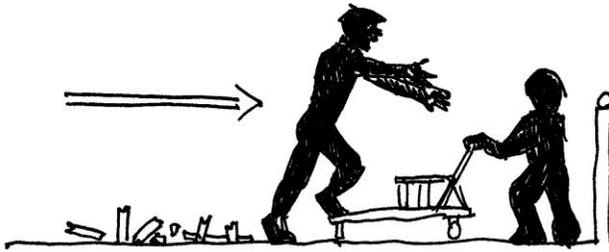
I fell back, watching as he tried to eat his way through. Why didn't he open the door? "Dad, what's wrong? It's me, Max!" He showed no sign of comprehending. He had only one goal, to get me, and then... I didn't even know. "Dad, stop! You're scaring me!" My face was wet with tears.

A second crack crossed the first. I was dead for sure. I came to my senses and backed up all the way to the railing, looking for something to defend myself. I looked over the edge, but the ground below was way too far to jump.

As he pressed harder, the glass began to give way. He came through head first, cutting up his own face. Whatever that thing was, it wasn't Dad. It wasn't even human.

In a flash, I had an idea! I roughly guessed the speed and force, the necessary leverage and distance. This could work. It had to! I spun a balcony chair between me and the creature, and I stood between the chair and the rail.

The glass crumbled away and the creature rushed at me, lunging over the chair to grab me. When it stepped on the extended foot of the chair, I pushed down hard on the back, using the chair as a simple catapult. The front shot up, lifting the attacker off its feet and launching it over the railing.



I turned and grabbed the railing, my knuckles white, and watched the creature spinning off the fourth story balcony. Its body crashed against the asphalt, broken but twitching. What was it? It had Dad's hair, and it wore Dad's clothes, but it wasn't Dad. Was it? My whole body was shaking. I felt the blood rush out of my face, and thought I might be sick. Did I just kill my dad?