Battle

in the

Avenue

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# Chapter 1

Owen Bradley made broad strokes as he erased the chalkboard. The University of Chicago, where Owen was a post-graduate student, had managed to gather the swamp-green colored boards from shuttered schools in and around the city. Every time Owen worked with them, the dust tickled his nose and made him long for the days of dry erase markers.

“Excuse me, Professor Bradley?” Came a voice at his back. “What you talked about in class, the SOR supply chain problem, can it be fixed?”

Owen turned from the board, leaving half of the subject in discussion still visible.

“I don’t think so. The problem with anything we make is that it requires raw materials. These calculations are based on real data that shows the yield per acre declining rapidly for the primary material needed to make Synthetic Oil Replacement—sugar. I’m afraid it’s the beginning of the end for SOR.”

The pair of undergraduate students looked at each other with wide eyes. They were two of only thirteen students enrolled in the spring semester of Physics 101. Going to college had become the exception to the rule, instead of the norm, over the last decade.

“Are we headed for another collapse?” the first student asked.

“Yeah, another Fuel Wars?” the second added.

Owen raised his hands with palms open and looked at each of their questioning faces. He could only imagine what their parents went through raising babies as the Fuel Wars ravaged civilization. Owen himself had been only five years old at the time. The moment in history was shortly after his parents had passed, and the beginning of his long road of loneliness that had led him here. His eyes cast down on the table between them. “I don’t think so. The Fuel Wars were a dark time for the world, but I think we can keep from going there again.”

“How?”

“Throughout history, society had lifted itself up by the bootstraps and when innovation was needed, it was delivered,” Owen said, giving precisely the reason why he studied alternative fuels. All he had ever known of a connection to humanity, was hope. This led him to want to solve the SOR crisis and deliver a future that could unite them all. Owen had to cling on to the hope, because there hadn’t been a breakthrough in years—the outlook among his academic circles far bleaker than he let on.

He continued. “Well, for one, we know what the Fuel Wars were like and I want to believe we’ll avoid that at all costs. And two, the best minds at this University and around the world are working on a solution. Trust me, we aren’t the only ones that know that the sugar required to produce SOR isn’t keeping up. There are daily yield reports and governments are constantly debating clearing more and more land to grow on. Only society can tell us if there will be another Fuel Wars, but I’m not overly worried about it.”

Owen turned back to the board and continued erasing. He always had a hard time maintaining eye contact when he was lying, so he took it out of the equation.

“Won’t an alternative take time? How much time do we have?”

“There’s no way to accurately predict how fast the supply will dwindle. The same sort of thing happened for the end of natural oil. Everything from demand fluctuations and line breaks, to weather and storms—they all impact the supply and that has to be modeled globally. There are just too many variables. The calculations we worked today are a simple example of a complex real-world application for statistics and predictive modeling."

A fresh cloud of dust erupted from the end of a swipe. “I’m looking for Owen Bradley,” came an unfamiliar voice from the back of the room.

“I’m Owen,” he said, as he finished cleaning the chalkboard. Satisfied, he turned to find a courier quickly moving towards him. Owen could only watch in amazement as the matching purple shorts, shirt, and hat came to stand next to him. Before he knew what was happening, Owen found himself holding a package.

“I didn’t order anything.” Owen said. “Who is it from?”

“I just deliver, man.” The courier replied. “And I get paid by the delivery.”

“Ah, okay.” Owen said to the man’s back. He could only watch in awe as long strides took the purple swiftly out of the room. Owen muttered to himself, “I wonder what it is?”

He found in his hands a plain brown cardboard box with no identifying marks on it except for the courier’s label. Owen turned it over and over on all sides, surprised at how light it was despite being slightly bigger than a ream of paper.

Owen realized the two students were still looking at him, their faces as forlorn as if they had lost a pet.

“I know it’s tough,” Owen said. “But SOR isn’t going to collapse overnight. We’ve already seen the price climb and climb. At some point, people won’t be able to afford it anymore. It will still exist though, and maybe even come down a little in price. SOR won’t be like the collapse of oil, where suddenly there wasn’t any more and we couldn’t make it. Don’t worry, something else will have to meet the demand—it always does.”

The student’s eyes went from loss of a beloved dog to first time goldfish. Satisfied they weren’t overly distraught, Owen dismissed them. The next class would be arriving soon. A course in statistical analysis was an appropriate session for their conversation, but the first years weren’t ready for it and Owen needed a few minutes to prep. He was subbing in due to the declining numbers in academia and he took the job seriously. Setting the box on the edge of the desk, Owen began to add notes to the freshly blank board.

The class proceeded smoothly with many hands scratching notes to the rhythm of Owen’s voice. When they concluded, Owen was done for the day. As the final remnants of the nine students in the class filed out, Owen gathered up his tattered bag and wrapped the package under his arm. He decided to wait and open it when he got back to his apartment.

The late-afternoon sun was shining bright and added to the warm, early May weather. Like the majority of people, Owen had grown accustomed to his body’s temperature being left to the whims of nature. He didn’t mind, and any thought of discomfort was absent as the intertwining sidewalks of the University campus led him home.

The buildings were a portal in time, standing almost as they had been since before the Fuel Wars. What little money the University could spare went towards upkeep and their task as landlord. A majority of universities had shut down and those that remained open were usually in a major city. This allowed them to use their once sprawling campuses to house students, teachers, plumbers, and everything in-between. The offset in rental income went towards keeping the lights on, something that wasn’t a guarantee in the age of SOR.

Owen lived on campus in one of the last University acquisitions before the Fuel Wars. An old canning factory had been converted into student housing but kept most of its previous charm. Owen saw it as he rounded a corner and by force of habit, found his window on the second floor. He had left it closed with the black-out curtains drawn. Good, he thought, not long now before the sun would start to set and he could open it up to let in a nice breeze.

Entering the apartment, Owen set his bag and the package next to his keys on the discolored dining table. He brushed past one of the four mismatched chairs as he made his way to the kitchenette and got a glass of water. Owen looked beyond the rim as he drank.

The walls were mostly exposed brick wall with industrial style panes for windows. Owen really enjoyed it and it was a good thing, because the walls were mostly bare. He was supposed to have a roommate, but they left a few months before to seek a more stable economic situation. Owen understood. Having spent a majority of his life in boarding school, he was used to the coming and going of people. Owen was happy to commandeer the spare bed as a place to spread out notes and school work. The setup made everything easy to see all at once.

Academic work made sense to him. He had grown up living in the endless silence of contemplation. Owen knew that was why he continued at university when everyone he knew came and went like the changing of seasons. He understood that he was in the right place, doing the work that needed to be done. He knew that was why he had lied to those undergrads about his true fear for the end of SOR. Somewhere, deep down, Owen still held on to hope.

Trading his empty glass for the package, Owen was ready to find out what lay behind the mystery. With a little bit of effort, he managed to tear open one side of the box.

He peered inside. A dark void of brown greeted him.

Tilting the box for better light didn’t help. There was nothing in it but walls, four brown corners, and a packing slip.

“Wow,” Owen said. “I can’t believe I got an actual package of nothing but air. This is a first.”

Curious as to what was supposed to be in the box, Owen dug out the paper. The act was surprisingly difficult as the paper clung onto the wall of the box with an invisible static force. Prying it off, Owen brought it up to read. He looked at it, blinked a few times, then looked at it with furrowed brows.

His eyes saw what they saw but his mind did not comprehend. On the paper was a single line. The sight of it sent Owen’s heart pounding as his feet sank into the floor. He turned the sheet over—nothing. He had just been sent a package with a line that read:

*Celestial bodies abound in close family heirlooms found.*

*Celestial bodies? Family heirlooms?* *Found?* Owen’s mind swam with fractional thoughts and a thousand questions. He tried to focus and gravitated to the one word he knew nothing about—*family*.

As far as Owen knew, his entire family had died suddenly when he was four years old and he hadn’t been able to find any trace or history of them since. Looking up from the paper held clutched with both hands, Owen’s gaze found the lone item hanging on the wall—a framed sketch from a cartoon. The show had been his favorite growing up and it was the only thing he had from his childhood. There weren’t any pictures, no hand-me-downs, and certainly no heirlooms. And now he held a piece of paper in his hand that, with a simple phrase, turned his world upside down.

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The air was heating up quickly on that quiet Friday afternoon, and Clare welcomed it. The sweat running down her cheeks and beading across her neck made her appear vulnerable—adding exactly the element she needed to complete her desired look.

Keeping an eye on the clock, Clare smiled in revered silence as she ran her hand across the dash of her 1967 Chevy Nova. The car was the only thing her biological father had left to her, and thinking about it always struck sentiment in her heart. She didn’t really know the man, only a handful of faint memories. She liked to believe that he was as beautiful as the car he loved. This was the reason she had decided to add the SOR convertor to the classic Nova, because the machine needed to live on despite what the world tried to take away.

Clare hadn’t seen a single car in the ten minutes she spent pulled over to the side of the road. Her research showed that County Road 513 was rarely used. The lone stretch of road was the perfect place for her to set up. Clare watched as the clock rolled over a new minute; it was time. Flipping a switch below the ignition to disconnect the battery from the starter, Clare looked to the rearview mirror and kept an eye on what was behind her as she adjusted the two braids hanging to either side of her head. She needed to look as young as possible, and just as naïve. While getting out of the strikingly polished car, she unbuttoned the top three buttons of her blouse for good measure.

Clare knew every inch of the car and casually propped opened the hood in the same way she had done many times before.Positioning herself bent over the driver’s side headlight, Clare shifted her hips to expose her long, toned legs to the road. The sun’s powerful energy quickly warmed her newly exposed skin. Now transformed into a hot and stranded country girl… she waited.

Sometime within the next few minutes Clare knew that the county sheriff would be passing by. Her targetkept a strict routine, but life was inevitably variable despite the best made plans, so Clare was ready and waiting.

Only a gentle breeze stirred as Clare took a deep breath to focus on what she knew. The Hancock County sheriff had an impeccable service record, with over thirty years on the force. He was friends with congressmen, union leaders, and community standouts all over West Virginia. But Clare knew the truth, and so did her client.

Hiding behind his badge and a flawless public persona, the sheriff was untouchable from within the system. Clare, however, took the liberty to operate outside the law. She believed some things weren’t meant to be judged in polished mahogany courts of law run by corrupt men. There were some things that needed the swift decision of unrelenting justice.

Her process required that she had proof of the target’s crimes before she committed to a contract. The client knew exactly where to look and provided Clare with the info. Only a week before, Clare had snuck into the man’s house to find proof of his crimes. The images of what she had seen were gut-wrenching and flooded her thoughts now as her sweat dropped onto the engine with a brief sizzle.

As she recalled each one of the horrific scenes she had discovered, it made her boil with rage. The experience focused her and was the jolt she needed as her target’s large SUV made its way around the bend.

She worked to steady her breathing.

The law enforcement vehicle—outfitted in the same way as her car to operate on SOR—slowed as it passed her then pulled over to the shoulder. The sheriff climbed out. The sight of him caused Clare’s heart to beat steady. Her nerves retreated. She was in control.

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” she said in her best country drawl. “I haven’t seen anyone pass by in an hour. Thank you so much, officer!”

The man had a thirteen-inch height advantage plus a solid hundred and twenty-five pounds on her. Still, she held her ground, confident in her ability.

“What seems to be the trouble, miss?” the sheriff asked, just touching the brim of his hat, his eyes hidden behind thick sunglasses. He had the look and the walk of a man with nothing to hide.

“I’m not sure, officer. I’m just on my way to see my aunt and Betsy here died. Now my cell phone doesn’t work and if I’m not there by supper, then my aunt will call in the cavalry. Which I guess is you. I’m just having a terrible time today. But, now that you’re here, I feel a lot better.” She opened her stance and placed both hands on her hips to pull her shirt tight across her chest.

“Well, ma’am, these classics running a SOR convertor can be fickle,” the sheriff said, his neck staying still as Clare felt his eyes scanning her body. “I’m surprised you could find a SOR convertor for her. Seems you can’t find any quality classics anymore, most left to the scrap yards since the collapse.”

“Well, I’ve always admired muscle,” Clare said, biting her bottom lip.

The sheriff’s left eyebrow rose above his sunglasses. A few moments passed as his mind caught up with his lust, and he moved to stand in front of the exposed engine body. “Betsy looks finely taken care of though. Maybe we can get her up and running again.”

Clare moved closer to him, brushing her hand on his shoulder and taking note that he wore his uniform collar loose. She spoke lightly, “I would be much obliged.”

“Well, I’m no mechanic, but I would be remiss if I didn’t take the opportunity to get my hands on a ’67 Nova.” He pushed his sunglasses down his nose to reveal the brown eyes of a heartless bastard. He turned from the engine compartment to look at Clare. She met his gaze, putting on doe eyes as best as she could.

“Oh officer, you know your cars!” Clare said with a forced giggle. “That’s about the only thing I know about this one. I just love the color.”

The sheriff’s lips curved into a primitive smile, thinking all that stood between him and getting lucky was probably a loose electrical wire. He was full of what stereotypes were based on. She had him and it was almost too easy.

“Well, ma’am, why don’t you try it and we’ll see what we’re dealing with.”

Clare slid back into the car and tried the ignition. Nothing happened—the car played dead.

“Could be an electrical problem,” he shouted from under the hood.

She observed him with disgust through the slit under the open hood. He was looking around and jiggling a few wires, completely clueless. For some reason, men that didn’t know any better thought a couple tugs would be enough to fix a complicated machine. The sheriff’s hands passed over the engine compartment, hoping to get the bad karma out of it. In no time at all, he asked her what she knew was coming.

“Let’s give it another try.”

Clare smiled, a genuine smile this time—everything had gone according to plan. She flipped the ignition kill switch back and tried the key. The two-hundred-and-seventy-five-horsepower engine roared to life as perfectly tuned as it had been when it rolled off the factory line almost three-quarters of a century before.

Clare pulled out what looked like a makeup case and covered her left index finger thoroughly with the gooey substance inside of it. Satisfied she had enough on her finger, she stepped out of the car, leaving the door open.

Skipping over to the sheriff, she said, “Oh, thank you, thank you! My big, strong hero!” Without hesitation, she threw her arms around the sheriff’s neck. The gesture didn’t bother the man. Instead, he leaned heavily into her advance, despite being thirty years her senior.

Her skin crawled, breaking her concentration for a moment, as what she found at his house flashed once again before her eyes. Clare had gone in search of proof for her client’s claims and what she came away with was worse than she had imagined.

In what Clare perceived to be the man’s office, she found several boxes piled on the closet floor. Inside them were rows and rows of folders containing photos of young women tied up to the same dirty, cinderblock walls. The photos weren’t enough for her to be convinced. The sheriff could have some sick perversion to the images that, although disgusting, was not the type of target she sought. So, Clare continued to look, pressed forward by her client’s testimony. It wasn’t long before she found the stairs leading down.

The walls of the basement were cinderblock, the same as those in the photos, but instead of one large room, it was divided into five partitions. Each area was bare except for a set of hooks driven into the wall and shackles ready to restrain. The stench of urine and feces had made Clare’s eyes water. How many women had come through here? The thought of it had caused Clare to search frantically only to find that none of the holding cells were occupied. She had been relieved. She hadn’t known what she would have done if she had found someone.

The dungeon at the sheriff’s house was enough to prove his guilt. The man had been running a sex trafficking operation right from the inside of his house and the soulless piece of shit had been at it for decades. It took all of Clare’s tenacity not to vomit while standing there among cages meant to hold women that were no different than herself. Recalling those feelings solidified Clare’s resolve. The seemingly naïve young country girl had come for him to hasten his judgement—the man deserved to die.

She slid backward, letting her left index finger glide across the exposed skin of his neck. Clare made sure all of the substance she had taken from the case was transferred there.

She glanced at his badge, though she already knew his name. “Well, Sheriff Miller, you are my hero.” Taking a step back, she pivoted sheepishly on the spot, hiding the fact that her left index finger was now in her shorts pocket, submerged in a solution to render any leftover acting agent inert. “I am terribly late, but I don’t suppose…” she started, playing up the part and keeping his mind away from his oily neck. “I don’t suppose I could bring some fresh-baked cookies by the station on my way back through town on Sundee,” she said, putting a little too much emphasis on the accent. “I would like to show my appreciation, and maybe we could get a bite to eat. You know, when I’m not expected anywhere until… the next day.”

“That sounds like a mighty fine invitation,” the sheriff responded. “I wouldn’t be a gentleman if I turned down such a generous offer from a pretty young lady like yourself.”

Clare turned and walked back to stand behind her open driver’s side door. “Well, ’til Sundaythen—and bring your appetite.” She winked in his direction.

The sheriff could only tip his hat to her as she put the car in gear and drove off. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she could still see his dumbfounded expression as he watched her go. Clare knew that a small rash would start to appear on his neck. The slight discoloration would be the only indication of the chemical agent entering the man’s bloodstream. From there, it was only a matter of time until the sheriff suffered cardiac arrest and the world was rid of another parasite.

Clare let out a deep sigh. “Rot in hell, you bastard.”

County Road 513 wound around a hill and she was on her own again. Clare opened and closed her fists to loosen her grip on the steering wheel. The job was done for now; she could relax. The steady sound of the Nova’s engine settled her mind. She let out a long, deep breath. Driving in the quiet car allowed her past to creep into her thoughts. The screams were faint at the back of her mind, like far off birds forever fighting over scraps. The memory of it too far in the past to know what was real and what was only her mind’s fiction.

She knew there had been a car wreck when she was young. The circumstances and facts surrounding that day she had tried to piece together with gut feelings and whatever she could find. Clare had lost her parents in that wreck and with it, they seemed to vanish from existence. Her memory was all that seemed to be left of them. Over the years, her memory had twisted and tangled itself in doubt, but it was all she had.

If she closed her eyes, crimson flashes of fire lit up her vision as the scarred image of her mother slumped over the steering wheel came forth. Clare believed the image to be true. Maybe the screams of pain were her own, the sound of her soul bellowing unrecognizable to her own ears. She could never fully comprehend it and had spent the last seventeen years searching for some form of closure. The pain of it caused her to remember what had happened while the belief that it hadn’t been an accident drove her to a life of vigilante justice.

The life she had chosen was how she came to be on the side of County Road 513 that day. The sheriff was the next contract, one in a long line of her quest against the powerful. Clare sought to rid the earth of every bit of evil that crossed her path. Each contract she executed was an attempt to quell the screams plaguing the quiet recesses of her mind, but the shrill pitch of her memories remained. So, she continued to search for retribution, refusing to believe that the truth was out of reach.