

THE END OF LIFE

BIRTHRIGHT

CHAPTER 1

BEFORE THE END

KORBAN

I slumped into my chair, burdened throughout a sleepless night by the devastating news of cancer. I had already endured the painful loss of my wife twelve years ago during the birth of our youngest daughter, Mara.

Our family consists of four: myself and my three children. My son, Raymond, from a previous marriage, is now eighteen and on the cusp of high school graduation. Zoe, my late wife's daughter, also eighteen, was lovingly adopted and raised as my own following my wife's passing. Then there's little Mara. Zoe, not my biological daughter, holds as special a place in my heart as my other children. Remarkably, Zoe bears a striking resemblance to my late wife, more so than Mara.

However, last night's phone call from the doctor shattered me – Zoe had been diagnosed with stage four cancer. The prognosis was terminal, with less than three months given. Overwhelmed, I was lost in a haze of disbelief, struggling with the unbearable task of breaking this news to her.

The sounds of rummaging in the kitchen pulled me from my depressive daze, prompting me to leave my cushioned chair. Fortunately, I was only on call today, needed at the police department only for emergencies, particularly murder cases.

As a detective, being on call was a regular part of my life, often keeping me away from home. This responsibility left Raymond and Zoe to care for Mara, with Zoe ultimately shouldering most of the burden. My mother, Raymond and Mara's grandmother, Mrs. Ritter—who insisted on being addressed as such by her grandchildren—played crucial roles in the children's upbringing during my frequent absences. In retrospect, relying so heavily on my mother may have been a mistake on my part.

However, things changed once Zoe turned eleven and assumed the primary role of assisting with Mara, leading to my mother stopping her regular visits. An uncomfortable tension had always existed between Zoe and my mother, fueled by my mother's stern demeanor and Zoe's protective nature towards Mara. Zoe's refusal to speak to my mother unless addressed as Ms. Anastas in return certainly didn't ease the situation.

I was deeply pained by the thought of how Mara would react to the news about Zoe. To Mara, Zoe was more than a big sis; she had become a second mother, indeed the only mother figure she had ever known.

“Damn, Dad, you look like fucking shit,” Ray said, standing over a bowl of cereal he had just finished pouring. Without uttering a word, I pointed to an old pickle jar filled with dollar bills, labeled “Swear Jar” in sharpie across it. Ray groaned, pulling out a dollar and dropping it into the open top, before reaching into the fridge to pull out a gallon of milk.

“Where are your sisters?” I asked.

“Zoe’s helping Mara with her hair. They should be down soon.”

“How’s your video stuff going?”

“Pretty good, the video I uploaded yesterday already has two million views,” Ray replied with a hint of pride.

I had to admit, I didn’t fully understand the whole online streaming stuff that Ray was so deeply involved in. Yet, it had proven lucrative enough for me to set up a trust fund for him, which he accessed upon turning eighteen. Predictably, Ray had spent a good chunk of money on a new car, a common choice for any teenager flush with cash—an electric one, no less. Let’s just say, I wasn’t exactly thrilled about it.

Every time I saw that expensive vehicle quietly charging in the garage, nudging up the electric bill, I couldn’t help but roll my eyes, a mix of parental bemusement and mild disapproval etched on my face. I had hoped my son would inherit my own more refined tastes in cars, like the 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado now consigned to the driveway.

The electric car dominated the garage, a regular source of disagreement between us. There was enough space for both vehicles, but Ray’s god-awful parking skills, reminiscent of his mother’s, made it problematic. Despite my feelings towards my ex-wife, Karen, who lived up to the name in both title and awfulness, I was careful never to speak ill of the woman in front of Ray—such venting was reserved for work colleagues.

However, the usual mischievous spark in me, the one that often led to verbal sparring with my son over the garage space and that electric car I deemed a ridiculous waste, was absent this day. Instead, I found myself moving to brew a cup of coffee, while Ray settled at the kitchen table, eating his cereal as he fiddled with his phone.

“Ugh, the fuc—freaking lag,” Ray quickly corrected himself, narrowly avoiding another contribution to the dreaded swear jar. “I think the Wi-Fi is going out again,” he muttered, his voice muffled between mouthfuls of soggy cereal.

The patter of footsteps interrupted the moment, two distinct rhythms echoing in the kitchen. One set was full of energy, the other slow and shuffled. I turned to see Mara, hand in hand with Zoe, her face alight with excitement. Zoe, however, wore a soft smile reserved for Mara but looked significantly more drained than I felt. Dark circles rimmed her eyes, her skin was pale, and the beginnings of sunken cheeks were barely concealed with makeup. The signs of her illness were subtle but unmistakable to a discerning eye.

I couldn't help but berate myself with thoughts of regret. "If only I had taken her to the doctor sooner," I chastised myself bitterly.

She exhibited a blend of her mother's predominant German and subtle South Korean heritage, along with a hint of Japanese lineage from her biological father, whom she sometimes dismissively referred to as the sperm donor. However, I held nothing but disdain for Zoe's biological father, a man now serving a life sentence for a series of crimes committed before Zoe was even born. In her, I saw no trace of that man; to me, she bore the unmistakable likeness of my late wife—clearly my daughter in every way that mattered. No, that man may have contributed to her genetics, but I am her dad.

Mara, on the other hand, displayed some of her mother's facial features but mostly took after me. I often describe my own heritage as a 'European mutt with a hint of Jamaican,' a legacy from my grandfather on my father's side. Ray, in contrast, bore a stronger resemblance to my ex-wife's side, his appearance heavily influenced by Karen's African American heritage—okay, fine, her name isn't actually Karen—with little of my European background evident.

Caught in a moment of uncertainty, I wasn't sure how to approach the subject of the news I had received from the doctor late the previous night. I found myself momentarily frozen, coffee mug in hand, as Zoe and Mara took their seats at the table. Zoe, in her typical caring manner, poured cereal and milk for Mara before serving herself, unaware of the pained gaze I directed towards her. My mind wrestled with the reality of her condition and the weight of the news I had yet to share.

My heavy thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Mara's enthusiastic bouncing in her chair. "Have you two looked outside yet?" she blurted out, her excitement matching that of a child on Christmas morning.

"What?" Ray grumbled, his annoyance stemming from his laggy phone.

Zoe offered another faint smile, a hint of amusement in her voice as she explained to Ray and me, "There's an aurora in the sky," as if we were the clueless children in the room, not privy to the wonder unfolding outside. Her gentle tone contrasted with Mara's bubbling excitement.

Upon hearing her remark, Ray momentarily abandoned his struggle with the phone. He leaned back in his chair, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the sky through the nearby glass sliding door. His precarious position suggested an almost certain fall, something Mara seemed to darkly hope for. Unable to resist, I watched as she gave him a slight nudge, toppling him over and sending him crashing to the floor.

This unexpected tumble caused Zoe to stifle her laughter with difficulty, while Mara, less restrained, burst into a fit of laughter. Observing the scene, I shook my head at my children's antics. I knew I should probably reprimand Mara for her mischief, but found myself lacking the energy to do so this morning, my thoughts still heavy with the news I had yet to share.

Ray remained on the ground for a moment, now with a clear, unobstructed view of the sky. "Huh, aren't auroras supposed to be blue and green?" he asked, curiosity piquing despite his fall.

"They can be the full spectrum of colors," Zoe replied.

“Okay, but this one looks all blue and pink,” Ray observed thoughtfully. “Also, I didn’t know they came this far south,” he added, his interest now fully shifted from his phone to the natural spectacle unfolding in the sky above.

“This one is reaching as far south as Brazil, and is still growing,” Mara chimed in, holding up her phone to display a news article about the phenomenon.

“Ugh, why do you have more bars than me?” Ray muttered, his frustration with his phone resurfacing as he picked himself up off the floor.

“I don’t,” Mara responded. “I’ve been trying to get this page to load since Zozo started doing my hair.”

I cherished this rare moment of togetherness with my three children, each absorbed in their own way with the morning’s excitement. I gathered my resolve, debating whether to share the news with Zoe alone or with all three children at once. Ultimately, I decided it would be better to tell them together. It might ease the burden on Zoe later, sparing her from having to relay the news herself or deal with their reactions individually after they learned about it.

Feeling the immense weight of the news I had to share pressing down on me, I began, “I-I have some news I need to—”

My words were abruptly interrupted by the ringing of my phone. The distinct sound of the Adam West-era Bat-Signal ringtone was an unmistakable indication that it was a call related to my work, signaling urgency. I knew I needed to share the terrible news with Zoe and the others, but the timing now seemed inappropriate. I couldn’t just blurt it out and then rush off to work; it wouldn’t be fair to them—especially to Zoe. I needed to be present for them, particularly for her, to offer support and comfort after breaking such news, not just deliver it and run.

With a heavy heart and a sense of duty pulling me in another direction, I reluctantly set aside my breaking heart.

I answered my phone, “Korban Ritter,” before pausing as I listened to the dispatch, Susan, on the other end. With a deep sigh, I glanced at my children before giving Zoe a soft smile that concealed my pain. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go in to work,” I said, excusing myself from the kitchen.

RAYMOND

I glanced at Zoe, who returned my look with a raised eyebrow. Neither of us said anything about Dad’s strange behavior. Instead, seeking to fill the silence, I asked, “What do you think is causing the aurora outside?”

“Solar flares, duh,” Mara responded, rolling her eyes with a hint of teasing sarcasm. “Maybe if you paid attention in school instead of making your 3D printed outfits for your OnlyFans, you would know that.”

“It’s not Only—,” I started, but then abruptly halted. Taking a deep breath, as I realized Mara had once again succeeded in baiting me. “Outplayed by a twelve-year-old,” I groaned.

“Mara!” Zoe’s voice took on a tone of mild chastisement. “Where did you hear about that?”

“Miss Lee down the street does it,” Mara replied with a casual shrug, as if that explained everything.

Opting to overlook Mara’s comment and keeping silent about my own membership to Miss Lee’s account, I redirected my focus. I mentally regrouped, counting down from five to regain my composure. Then, turning to Zoe, my features softened, showing a deeper layer of care and worry.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, my tone sincere and filled with genuine concern for my sister’s well-being. She had been to several doctor appointments recently, and her energy seemed to fade with each passing day.

“Like the life is being drained from me,” Zoe replied with a soft smile. “But it could be worse. How about we stop off at a coffee hut on the way to school? I could die for a Caramel Macchiato.”

“Why don’t you let me get you a car already? I’ve made a killing from my subscribers,” I said, my voice betraying a hint of concern beneath my casual offer.

“Zozo’s not some mooch,” Mara chimed in cheekily, defending her big sister’s independence.

Zoe grinned, her smile conveying both appreciation and a touch of playfulness. “Why would I want a car, when I can have you drive me around everywhere? Now come on, I’ll let you buy me that Macchiato.”

At that moment, a loud boom echoed from outside, causing Mara to startle. Her expression quickly shifted from surprise to annoyance. “Ugh, Mr. Jefferson and that stupid loud car,” she growled in irritation.

I leaned in, sharing a piece of local gossip in a conspiratorial tone as we all made our way to the garage. “I heard he moved up here from Arizona after a bad divorce. Apparently, his stepdaughter went missing, and everyone believes he did it. However, they could never prove it, so he got away with it.”

Mara, hearing this, mumbled to herself with a childlike bluntness, “Why would anyone want to move here? Spokane sucks!”

Zoe, having dismissed my gossip, paused as we entered the garage, her eyes narrowing at the sight of my car parked in an impossible angle. “How did you even get that thing in here like that?” she asked, her tone a mix of accusation and disbelief. “It doesn’t even go into the garage that way. You would have to drive through the house to park it like that,” she added, baffled by the sight.

“He uses some kind of weird, wheeled car jacks,” Mara threw in nonchalantly.

“Why?” Zoe inquired, still trying to make sense of it.

“For one, my viewers love seeing Dad’s reaction from the hidden cameras I’ve set up in here,” I explained with a wicked smile. “And two, my charging cable isn’t long enough, so I have to angle the car just right.”

“Why wouldn’t you just buy a longer cable then, instead of... car jacks?” Zoe asked, her confusion evident.

“It’s funny,” I stated simply, as if that explained everything.

“He’s an idiot,” Mara concluded, summing up her thoughts on my antics.

I responded to their lack of enthusiasm with a grumble, “You two have no sense of humor.” I walked over to my car and started adjusting it. Using the wheel jacks, I started swiveling the car around, demonstrating the practicality of my unusual parking technique. However, Zoe and Mara were not impressed by my efforts.

ZOE

Deciding to distance ourselves from Ray’s shenanigans, Mara and I stepped outside. Our gaze was immediately drawn upwards, mesmerized by the stunning display of the aurora in the sky. Leaving Ray to his peculiar task, we focused on the celestial spectacle. Ray spent the next twenty minutes laboriously adjusting his car, making sure it was properly aligned so he could pull out, before methodically removing the jacks from underneath. Despite his efforts, Mara and I remained disinterested in his parking strategies.

After witnessing the entire process, Mara and I reached a unanimous verdict: Ray was indeed an idiot. We couldn’t help but agree that a simpler solution, like purchasing a longer charging cord for his electric car, would have been far more sensible.

With a shared sigh of resignation, we climbed into Ray’s car, doing our best to ignore the constant rumbling from behind Mr. Jefferson’s house. The man seemed to spend all day tinkering with that obnoxiously loud car he kept hidden back there, a constant source of noise in the neighborhood.

“What’s wrong,” I asked as I noticed Ray pressing the start button a few times in a row.

“It’s so quiet, I can’t tell if it’s on or not,” Ray answered before grabbing the steering wheel and backing out of the driveway.

Driving around the block to the nearest coffee hut, I felt a sense of relief wash over me. I loved how in Washington, these quaint, family-owned coffee stalls were almost a staple, dotting nearly every parking lot. They offered a charming alternative to the impersonal, imperialistic big-name coffee chains.

On my last trip outside the state, I had been sorely disappointed to find only corporate coffee shops and none of these small, shed-sized coffee stalls I so adored. For me, the quality of a coffee made by someone passionate about their work was unparalleled. This held true for me with all things,

from coffee to food trucks; the family-owned and operated places always seemed to have the best to offer.

As we approached the service window of the cozy coffee hut, one I hadn't visited before—they're constantly opening new ones, so it wasn't surprising I hadn't been to every single one—a warm, friendly voice greeted us. “How can I assist you?” the barista asked from behind the sliding window.

“We'll have a tall Caramel Macchiato,” Ray began, unintentionally using the sizing terms of the corporate coffee chains, which I had vowed to avoid like the plague.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes, injecting a bit of humor into the situation. “Wrong place, Ray,” I corrected, leaning over to speak to the barista. “I'll have a large, iced Caramel Macchiato,” I ordered, pausing briefly to wordlessly confirm with Mara, who nodded in agreement. “And a watermelon Italian soda, please.”

Ray, still oblivious to his error, chimed in, “And for me, a quad shot mocha.”

“Hot or iced? And what size would you like?” the barista at the window asked, maintaining a friendly demeanor.

“Hot and tall,” Ray replied, flashing a cheeky grin both at the barista and me, who seemed just as unamused.

With a hint of exasperation, I corrected him. “That would be a medium here,” I said, my annoyance creeping into my tone.

Ray, still perplexed, hesitantly suggested, “Grande?”

Taking a deep breath to contain my irritation, I stepped in. “He'll have a large,” I said firmly, steering Ray away from the jargon of the big coffee franchises towards the more straightforward language of the local, family-owned establishment. My patience was wearing thin with Ray's apparent lack of basic coffee knowledge.

From the back seat, Mara couldn't resist chiming in, seizing the opportunity to tease Ray. “Big brother, do your OnlyFans subscribers know how clueless you are?” she asked mischievously, her question catching both Ray and the barista off guard and prompting me to facepalm.

“Mara, you need to stop saying that,” I sighed, turning to look at my younger sister with a mix of exasperation and amusement.

“Fine,” Mara replied curtly.

“Our sizes are listed in ounces,” she pointed at the sign displaying 8 oz, 12 oz, 16 oz, and 20 oz, with 30 oz being reserved for iced drinks only. The barista gave a soft smile, choosing not to comment on Mara's remark.

I blinked like an owl at the sign before sinking back into my seat, not wanting to say any more. Ray mumbled something under his breath, barely audible, as he handed his debit card to the barista.

I was just grateful Mara didn't call me out as well. The woman, doing her best to maintain her composure, seemed to be holding back a laugh.

After trying the card for a few moments, she leaned out of the little hut with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, but it seems our card reader is down. Do you have cash?" she asked, her voice tinged with regret.

"I only have a few dollars I reserve for the pickle jar," Ray said with a hint of frustration as he glanced at me, hoping for a solution. However, I shook my head, indicating I didn't have any cash either. Turning back to the barista, Ray sighed in defeat. "No, we don't," he admitted, the inconvenience further complicating our morning.

The drive afterward felt particularly long for me, especially without my morning iced coffee. I sat, somewhat bitterly, gazing out of the car window, my eyes occasionally drifting upwards to the captivating beauty of the aurora overhead, feeling as though it was pulling at me. Despite the lack of my caffeine fix, I couldn't deny the allure of the pinks and blues.

As we reached the middle school, I gave Mara a warm wave. "Have a good day," I said affectionately as she stepped out of the car. Ray, however, remained quiet, not saying goodbye as Mara walked towards the school. The morning's earlier eeriness with Dad, combined with the absence of our usual coffee ritual, seemed to linger in the car.

Fortunately, the high school was just across the street from the middle school. Yet, my feelings towards East Valley High School, mockingly referred to as "Easy Valley," were far from fond. I viewed it as a gang-infested institution and had repeatedly expressed my desire to be transferred to a different school. Despite my pleas, I was still there, bound by the constraints of my school district. This added an extra layer of frustration to my already challenging morning.

"I'm surprised nobody's keyed your car here," I teased Ray, trying to lighten the mood with a bit of humor.

"They have," Ray answered, his tone tinged with bitterness. "Remember when I took the car in two weeks ago? It was to get the scratch marks fixed." His revelation hinted at the less-than-friendly reception his car, and perhaps his online persona, had received at the high school.

"Ugh," I muttered in response, my single word expressing a mix of sympathy and frustration.

The reality of our situation, compounded by the morning's disappointments and the ongoing challenges at school, weighed heavily on me. Yet, the sight of the aurora and Mara's unaffected cheer offered a glimmer of hope, a reminder of the small joys and wonders that persisted despite everything else.

As Ray and I prepared to face the day, with all its uncertainties and the promise of new challenges, I couldn't help but feel a sense of resilience building within me. The morning hadn't gone as planned, but it was a reminder that we could adapt, support each other, and find moments of beauty in the most unexpected places.

KORBAN

As I navigated through downtown, I took deep breaths to center myself, my mind weighed down by Zoe's diagnosis, a chaotic blend of worry and grief. I tried to compartmentalize these emotions, but it was a futile effort. My troubled thoughts were involuntarily redirected towards one of the buildings up ahead.

Leaning over my steering wheel, I peered up through my windshield at the old steam plant's twin smokestacks. My eyes were drawn to something that defied explanation. Massive pink and blue crystals, almost otherworldly in their appearance, adorned the sides of the smokestacks. The sight of these crystal-like formations, clinging precariously, was both bizarre and mesmerizing.

As I pulled into a parking spot, I noticed the conspicuous absence of the usual police presence at a crime scene, an oddity that unsettled me.

Taking another deep breath, I tried to shift my focus from Zoe and the difficult conversation looming with my children. Slipping into my detective mindset, I turned off the vehicle, my fingers slightly trembling as they touched the car keys. After pausing to collect my thoughts, I opened the car door and stepped out.

Beneath my shoes, I felt an uneven surface, as if walking on scattered pebbles. Glancing down, I saw debris strewn across the ground – shattered fragments reflecting hues of pink and blue, mirroring the crystals adorning the smokestacks above.

“What the hell?” I muttered under my breath, my detective instincts kicking in.

“Korban,” called an officer with a hint of humor in his voice. “Still driving that old thing?”

“Nemo,” I responded, a trace of a smile on my lips. “Don't mock the classics. Where is everyone?”

“Funny,” Derek retorted dryly, never fond of the nickname that hinted no one could ever find him when needed. Then, his tone shifted to concern. “This aurora's messing with all our equipment. It was tough even reaching you, and we can't get through to the fire department for a structural check. Inside,” he paused, his expression turning grim, “it's a complete nightmare. And now, we're dealing with this,” he gestured towards the smokestacks, “whatever this is.”

“Yeah, I don't know what the hell to make of that,” I agreed, my gaze lifting once again to the smokestacks. A sense of resignation tinged my voice as I asked, “Number of bodies?”

“Four,” Derek replied.

My resolve hardened as I stepped into the repurposed old steam plant, now a brewery. The scene unfolding before me was a tableau of horror—a gruesome bloodbath that spoke volumes of untold chaos and savage violence. I scanned the area, my brow furrowing at the sight of crimson splatters and disarray.

“What happened?” I uttered, my voice laden with shock as I took in the macabre scene.

“I wish we knew,” Derek replied, trailing behind me. His gaze swept across the room, lingering on the grisly aftermath. “Looks like a wild beast went after the prep workers.”

My eyes narrowed as I scrutinized the area, my detective instincts kicking into high gear. I pointed towards a severed arm lying in isolation, the cut on it alarmingly neat. “See that limb?” My voice was steady, analytical. “That’s a blade’s work, not an animal’s.” The precision of the cut was a silent witness to a different kind of brutality than what was initially suggested.

“But what about the bite marks on the others?” Derek interjected, pointing to another set of gruesome evidence.

I let out a deep, measured breath, feeling the weight of the complexity before us. “We need forensics here, now,” I stated firmly, my mind racing through the implications of each clue.

Derek’s expression conveyed clear frustration as he shook his head. “Communications are a complete mess with this aurora. It’s not just some lights in the sky—it’s causing real chaos. We’ve sent someone to bring in the forensic team, but so far, there’s been no response. Even some of the newer police cruisers are malfunctioning. It’s an absolute disaster, and the worst part is, no one knows when this is going to end.”

The air between us thickened with a tense silence, punctuated only by the sporadic flicker of the interior lights. The flickering intensified momentarily, casting erratic shadows across the grim scene, before the lights abruptly surrendered to darkness. The room was now bathed in the soft glow of the morning sun filtering through the windows, mingling with the ethereal pink and blue hues of the aurora overhead.

“Shit, looks like the power grid is down,” Derek groaned, his voice heavy with resignation. “Things couldn’t possibly get worse,” he added, his words hanging in the air like an ill-fated prophecy.

My glare at Derek was sharp, a silent but potent reproof. The situation we were in was already fraught with difficulties, and the last thing we needed was to ponder over what else could go wrong. Yet, as if on cue with Derek’s foreboding words, our circumstances took a turn for the worse.

The brewery, repurposed from an old steam plant, boasted a unique layout with multiple floors interconnected by metal grated stairs and walkways, showcasing its industrial architecture. However, during our examination of the scene, a distinct growling sound from below abruptly captured our attention. This noise appeared to originate from the bar section located in the basement, drawing our focus there.

Peering over the railing that overlooked the bar, I found myself questioning my sanity. There, in a scene almost too bizarre to believe, was a four-foot-tall green creature, foaming at the mouth and snarling up at us as if it was mad with rabies.

“What the fuck is that?” Derek gasped, his voice a mixture of shock and disbelief.

Without hesitation, I swiftly drew my weapon and aimed it at the green creature. “Hands in the air,” I commanded loudly. From my vantage point above, its humanoid yet bizarre form led me to consider if it might be a person in an elaborate costume; after all, arresting a drug-induced cosplayer, like the furry with a chainsaw last year, wouldn’t be a novelty for us. However, the sight of the creature’s elongated, blade-like claws made me hesitate. This startling feature shattered my

initial skepticism. As the tension escalated, all my doubts about the creature's authenticity were swept away.

The beast snapped aggressively, almost as if attempting to bite its own ear, with foam still bubbling at its mouth, before suddenly leaping towards us. Derek, caught off guard, stumbled backward and fell. Meanwhile, the creature landed on the railing a full floor up with ease. I, steadier on my feet, retreated without losing my balance. Without a moment's hesitation, I pulled the trigger. The pistol recoiled in my hand as the bullet shot out, striking the green creature squarely in the chest and sending it reeling backward, over the railing and back into the basement below.

Derek scrambled to his feet, and together we peered over the railing. To our astonishment, the creature was already standing up again, twitching and snapping at the air, seemingly unharmed and visibly enraged. It slowly raised its head, its glare fixed on us, and crouched as if ready to leap again.

Exchanging a quick look, both of us opened fire. Bullets rained on the creature as it stumbled backward, using its arm to shield its face. We continued firing until our clips were empty. Yet, to our shock and horror, the creature appeared only slightly bruised. As it lowered its arm, the one it had used to protect its face, it looked more irritated than injured.

“Oh, shit,” Derek muttered under his breath.

Quickly, we stepped back from the railing, our movements swift and coordinated. We worked in unison to reload our pistols, each click of the magazine sliding into place echoing the urgency of the situation. As we did so, the creature made its move.

With a powerful leap, it launched itself upwards again. But this time, it didn't stop at the railing; it soared over it, landing squarely on the ground in front of us. It snarled menacingly, resembling a wild animal that had cornered its prey, its eyes burning with a predatory intensity.