

CHRIS PEASE

The Prepper

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Day One

Matt stood, with his hands on his hips, staring hard at the clothes he had placed on his bed. His uniform was neatly arranged, covering its entire length. He ran his hands through his hair and inhaled deeply before forcing himself to change.

Once dressed, Matt walked into the bathroom and put his hand on the side of the mirror. Momentarily he paused, fighting with himself before continuing, in an almost trance like state, to slowly run his fingers along its sharp edge. Finally, he pulled his hand away and held on tightly to the sink, glancing into the mirror and taking a long look at his own reflection. Matt shook his head and twisted the tap, allowing the water to run for a moment before grabbing the glass nearby, pushing it underneath and waiting for it to fill. He took a quick drink then held his hands under the running water, splashing his face to wake himself up and trying to summon up the energy to face another day.

As he wandered out of the bathroom, Matt threw the small towel onto the bed before his attention was drawn to the noticeboard. A photo was tucked into its wooden frame. Pulling it gently free, he slumped onto the side of his bed and stared. Looking at the woman in the picture seemed to energise him. The scene was bright and positive, her grin brought Matt some

small comfort and he found himself smiling as he recalled the moment the photo had been taken. He wished he'd had been in the picture, standing beside her.

Matt flipped the photo over, like a playing card in his hand, before rising from the bed to tuck it neatly back into the corner of the frame. He stepped back and glanced at the calendar beside it, stumbling a little. As he followed the black crosses, today's date was covered by one word - **Resupply**.

Matt hesitated for a moment before moving to the small kitchen and beginning to open each of the cupboards, one by one. It was as if he needed a visual reminder that the calendar wasn't lying, someone hadn't come into his home and forced him to go. Matt paused as he eyed up the locker by his side. Tentatively he opened its door and pulled out a backpack. Rummaging inside, he found a few tins of food which he placed down next to himself. As he examined each one, he took a deep breath and checked the dates on each of them. Finally, knowing that he really must head out, Matt placed the now out-of-date tins on the kitchen table and rolled the backpack up in his hand.

Grabbing the car keys, he left his house. It was small in size, something like a log cabin, but it was sufficient for his needs and easy to maintain - and just far enough away from everyone.

Throwing the backpack on to the passenger seat, Matt started the car. The large four-by-four vehicle roared to life and he quickly double-checked the rest of his supplies. He pulled the lever and allowed the glove box to drop open, inside was an assortment of items that he could use in emergencies. He pulled out the torch and clicked the power button, waving it about briefly before powering it off and placing it back inside before drawing out a bulky yellow radio. The radio was crudely labelled '*Emergency Only*'. His thumb hovered over the call button, the

rubber of it resting on the activation switch inside. Suddenly he shook and threw the radio back into the glove box before closing it with a satisfying click.

Matt placed his hands on the wheel, the vibrations of the engine through the steering wheel distracted him. He squeezed it tightly until his fingers ached and he had to let go. Matt looked around to see if anybody was watching him, once he was satisfied he was alone and nobody had seen his brief loss of composure, he pushed the handbrake down and gently accelerated away.

As he drove to the rhythm of Cumbria's rush hour, Matt ran through his checklist in his head, mentally making a note of what he needed and how best to avoid certain people. He knew this day had to come and so had prepared himself for it, this was the time he really needed to go out and prepare again.

After a short drive, Matt parked the large vehicle as close as to the shop as the tight lanes of Windermere would allow. Taking his backpack, he swung round and forced himself toward the store. Grabbing a large trolley from the park, Matt stepped into the large store and immediately began picking up various items. His list was all prepared in his head and the less he had to write, the less chance of conversation with somebody who he didn't need to talk to. As he strode through the store he stopped for a moment, deciding whether he could manage to fit in a bar of chocolate. Just a small treat. After all the hard work he had put in recently, a fifty pence chocolate bar wasn't going to damage his stockpiling budget. As he handled the bar, the sound of a radio caught his attention and his chocolate-induced smirk dropped steadily.

"You're listening to Lakeland Radio. NASA are still trying to piece together what brought down the space shuttle Valiant. The Valiant plummeted to Earth around one in the afternoon and

came to an explosive landing in the Lancashire area. Pieces of the shuttle landed in multiple locations around Cumbria, most notably in the town of Grayton whose inhabitants are in a state of lockdown.”

Matt slowly placed the chocolate into the trolley and then found himself gripping its handle. His breath quickened as he began to take in this new information. He forced himself through to the checkout, scanning each item quickly and almost throwing them back in to the trolley. After he crammed the notes into the machine, he barely registered his surroundings as he barged past the idle shoppers. Hurriedly, he put the shopping into the boot. Jumping back into the car, he abandoned the trolley to the streets and headed back onto the road, narrowly avoiding an oncoming car and a pedestrian who wandered out blindly engrossed on his smartphone.

He had one last job to do before he could head back to the cabin. The route he drove would take him to the petrol station and then straight back home. He could only pray that whatever had happened wouldn't escalate into something more sinister.

Arriving at the station, Matt threw himself out of the car and crammed the nozzle from the fuel pump into the tank and pulled the trigger. The fuel pump hummed in response and Matt leaned close to the car, urging its large fuel tank to fill quicker. He was occupied in thought when a hand touched his shoulder.

“Hey, I thought it was you.”

Matt jumped back abruptly, knocking the nozzle from the car, and leaking fuel down its side.

“Ah Christ, sorry Matt. Let me help.”

“Jesus. . ,” Matt released the trigger of the nozzle and pushed it back into the pump, “You scared me.”

“I am so sorry mate, I didn't mean to, it's just been ages since

I've seen you in the office."

"Sorry. I've been meaning to- "

"Hey, don't worry about it. Just glad I bumped into you. Literally."

Matt let out half a smile, twitching uncomfortably.

"So . . how's the cabin treating you? I hear you got the Lakeland Ranger post. Lovely little shack and the view of the lake! I'm jealous," the man laughed awkwardly as he glanced from side to side.

"The cabin's alright. Just out getting more food, you know, that time of the month."

"Oh yeah, it's been that long already? Wow. I know it had been tough after, well. . ."

Matt leaned away a little, "I'm alright. Honestly. Just taking some time away."

"I know, but just remember there are a lot of people who will support you. You remembering to check in with Doctor What's-his-face?"

"Yes, I am. Now I'd better go."

"Yeah, yeah okay, see you around."

Matt returned to the driver's seat and drove off quickly. The less human interaction the better. Something was happening. He had to be ready to move.

Bringing the car to a stop off the gravel track, Matt paused briefly as he stared at the glove box once more. Slowly he leaned in and pulled the handle revealing the torch and radio. He pulled the radio out again, rubbing his thumb along the rubber button. This might be it. Climbing out of the four-by-four, Matt shoved the radio into his pocket and began ferrying the supplies back into the cabin, piling it steadily beside the door.

In the distance, the sound of tyres driving across gravel, a

sound he had become so attuned to listening for, was edging quickly towards him. Matt turned to face the track, slowly stepping back. After a moment he dropped the long, cardboard box, which fell hard onto the floor. Matt sprinted back inside the cabin. Slamming the door shut, he peered out from behind the thin curtain, breathing heavily against the single pane of glass which kept the cool air out.

After a minute, the trail of dust and the sound of tyres across gravel became clearer. Matt found himself bracing as a silver car drove up and came to a sudden stop. Twisting the feeble chain lock on the door, Matt's breathing became heavier, panic began to set in as whoever had followed him to his property was now at his door.

"Matt? Matt! Come on man, I know you're in there!"

Matt moved slightly to get a better look and found his follower leaning against the small glass panel separating the door from the main wall.

"Matt!" the man repeated, pounding on the door.

"W-who is it?" Matt called out.

"It's me, Paul. We just talked back at the fuel station."

"What do you want Paul? I'm okay on my own I-"

"Matt, this isn't a courtesy call, I need your help. Please open up."

"What's wrong?"

"Just open the fucking door!" Paul slammed his fist hard at the door, cracking its wooden frame slightly.

Matt pushed himself as far into the wall as he could, frozen to the spot.

"Matt. . ."

Matt jumped as he heard Paul drop to the floor, the door rattling a little before the silence. The quiet was unnerving,

and Matt slowly pushed himself from the wall, edging out from his position.

“Paul? Are you okay?”

With no reply, Matt continued to edge forward as the rattling began again. This time Paul screamed loudly in agony. The noises that echoed from beyond the battered door turned Matt’s stomach. The painful scream and the sound of bones twisting and breaking, were replaced by a low groan and the light dimming as something large filled the doorway. Matt leaned back a little before a new voice spoke to him.

“Heeeyyy. . . I thhhhhought it wassss you,” the voice called from beyond the door. The shadow moved closer against it, as Matt watched the door twitch. Something was leaning against it.

“Paul, come on, this isn’t funny. Just-” Matt stumbled as the door shattered in front of him. He shielded his face with his arms and twisted to avoid the shower of splinters. Matt shook as he lifted his eyes. He was staring at the bathroom, horrified at what he was witnessing.

Behind him, slowly and clumsily, a large, man-like figure stood hunched over in the doorway. The figure’s entire body was bleeding, the blood slowly seeping into its clothing. Beneath the blood, were deep cuts which leaked a dark green liquid puss from its wounds. The figure’s arm was covered in various sizes of wood splinters from its fight with the cabin door. Matt found himself gaping wide-eyed at the figure’s head. He realised it had Paul’s face, but it was hanging to the side and had a large twisting pustule pulsating beside it.

Before Matt could question his friend, the monster’s head twisted from beneath Paul’s, emerging from within his skull like a parasite and screamed. The creature moved towards him

with incredible speed. Matt side-stepped as the monster landed hard against the weak wall, shattering it in one move, littering the room with chunks of panelling.

Matt scrambled along the floor to escape. Twisting around, Matt pulled himself against the last wall standing and attempted to catch his breath. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists, listening to the sound of flesh dragging across the floor, catching along the shattered wooden panels as it stumbled closer. Sinking to the ground, Matt pulled his knees close to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs, squeezing hard as he braced himself for the end. He was frozen to the spot, his fight or flight instinct completely deserting him.

The monster's mutated body moved with a disgusting, wet sound and Matt couldn't help but imagine the bloodied foot-prints thudding towards him.

"Wheeeress Gween I wonnnder?"

The monster hovered over Matt, the dark liquid oozing from its body. It fell onto Matt, who squeezed himself tighter as he became covered in it, a fleshy smell came with it. The monster screamed, but its tone was different, it was squealing. Matt released his grip on himself and glanced up. The monster stood on the spot, twisting more violently by the second. After a moment it fell silent, before it dropped to its knees with a bone jarring crunch and finally hit the ground. Matt stared at the monster as it lay there, fully expecting it to suddenly rise and finish the job. Instead, it lay still but Matt wasn't convinced he was safe and didn't budge. He sat, eyes wide, as he attempted to ground himself in the moment, trying to understand what on Earth had just happened.

Day Three

Matt stood in the doorway, his cloth face mask barely deflecting the smell that filled the small cabin. The cabin stunk of rotting flesh and whatever had been pulsing from his friend's body. He stood, running through various options in his head and the one that shouted the loudest won. Get out.

Matt stepped from the cabin's entrance and turned towards the car. It sat on the gravel with its boot open, as was the driver's side door. Matt squeezed the backpack strap which rested across one shoulder, allowing the fabric to rub against his fingers. Slowly he walked up to the car, running his hand along the cool, metallic bonnet before turning to climb into the driver's seat and throwing the backpack against the passenger side door.

Matt sat staring at the gravel path which lay before him and found himself leaning toward the glove box.

"No. This isn't happening," he grabbed the steering wheel tightly and leaned forwards, "This isn't real. It can't be." Letting out a drawn-out scream, he slowly released the steering wheel and pushed his head back against the head rest, turning to gaze at the glove box once again. Matt closed his eyes and sighed. Reluctantly he leaned over and placed his hand on the handle, pulling it and allowing the compartment to open slowly.

Panic filled his body as he reached inside, pulling the radio out and sitting back. He rolled it over in his hand to read the label one more time.

Emergency Only

Matt rolled the radio again and closed his eyes, rubbing his thumb along the rubber button. He found himself arguing in his own head about what to do. Suddenly, he pushed the button and

the green light lit up.

“Gwen, urgh, you there?” Releasing the button, the radio returned static, “Gwen-I . . . urgh you there?” Static answered once again and Matt relaxed his hand and allowed it to fall to rest on the backpack beside him.

“Matt! Oh, thank god!” A green light flickered on the radio as the voice eventually answered.

“Gwen I’m sor-”

“Matt, I need your help-” the radio stuttered briefly.

“Gwen? Where are you?”

“I was-”

“Gwen?”

“Stupid fu- I need your help! I’m trapped in a mine in the god damn mountain.”

Matt leaned forward and held the steering wheel, “Gwen I-I don’t know if anyone-”

“Please, Matt, I need you to get me out.”

“Okay. Shit. . .”

“Matt, I know. Can you get to the top of the old mine?”

Matt peered over the steering wheel. His eyes followed the line of the gravel path which led to a large mountain which towered ominously over the lake, “Gwen I don’t. . .”

“Please Matt. Put a flare out, do something please!”

“Okay, okay. . . hang tight okay. I’m coming.”

“Thanks, I’m going to save the radio but. . . don’t forget about me, okay?”

“I’m on my way. Hold on, okay? Help is coming.”

Matt released the radio and let it slip from his hand. There was a lot to process and not a lot of time to do it. Matt twitched in the driver’s seat and fumbled the car key into the ignition, twisting it to bring the engine to life. Gradually Matt pushed

the accelerator and allowed the car to slowly build up speed, the mountain pass would be fairly accessible at this time of year but he knew that part way he would have to ditch the car and walk.

After a while, Matt allowed the car to slowly decelerate before he brought it completely to a standstill. The car's headlights lit up the mountain pass, illuminating the large tree that lay across the road, blocking the way. Matt swore under his breath and swung the car door open. Walking up to the fallen tree, it was clear he wouldn't be able to move it without help from someone else. Matt stepped back to the car and found the radio.

"Gwen, can you hear me?"

"Matt? Are you—"

"Gwen, I'm on my way. I just — urgh — hit a problem. I'm going to carry on, on foot. I'll be—"

"Jesus, this couldn't — Be careful I heard —"

"Just. . . just hang tight." Matt pulled the radio away from his mouth as the returning sound echoed loudly across the forest, "Gwen?"

"This rock fell down on me! Where are you?"

"I'm not even — just try to hang on."

Another barrage of noise came from the radio before a voice came back over the radio, "God damn it. Just keep moving Matt. Please."

The radio clicked off and Matt stuffed it into his jacket pocket and grabbed his backpack. Flicking open the button on the car boot, Matt put his backpack in front of him and began pushing more items into it, filling it. Content, Matt lifted the bag over his shoulder and shut the boot. Leaning into the driver's side, Matt pressed a red button on the car's dashboard. As he stepped back, he could see the car's emergency lights flashing steadily in the darkness.

Using the headlights to guide the way, Matt slowly began the trek up the mountain pass, treading carefully as he walked.

Day Five

Matt sat with his head in his hands, he winced as the headache slowly eased. Raising his head, he experienced a coughing fit and without warning threw up alongside the opposing boulder. He breathed out heavily and found himself staring at the dark green liquid that splattered the large rock. Matt rose from his perch and shook his head, using his sleeve to wipe away the mucus from his mouth. Stumbling, he climbed down and steadied himself back onto the path. Pulling the radio from his pocket, he pushed the button.

“Gwen, good morning, I guess.”

“Morning to you. What’s it like out there?”

Matt lowered the radio and glanced around, spying the small birds that flew freely between the trees, the autumn breeze whisking up the dead leaves across the forest floor. “Ah, you’d hate it. It’s windy and-” Matt paused as he coughed violently, spitting a chunk of something that risen from his throat.

“You okay Matt? That sounds nasty.”

“I’m fine, trust you to worry about me when you’re trapped.”

“You know I’m here to look after you.”

“What would I do without you?”

“I fear that! How far away are you?”

“Close. I promise.”

“Matt I . . . I need you to know-”

“Listen, just hold on. I’m on my way, just please hang on. We

can talk properly. We can talk face to face, alright?” There was a brief pause and Matt slowly began to walk along the mud path once again, “Gwen?”

“Ma- I can’t-”

“Gwen?” The radio stuttered and Matt swore under his breath shoving the radio into his pocket and picking up his pace.

The path was littered with the early fallen leaves. The winter chill was in the air and Matt rested his chin along the top of the zip to keep the cool air from rushing into his jacket. As he walked, the sight from along the side of the mountain was breath-taking. The small villages dotted across the landscape seemed even more remote when viewed from this vantage point. With that thought, Matt slowed for a moment and glanced across the horizon. Looking back to the town he had visited for supplies, smoke billowed from the centre and, what looked like vehicles, briefly moved between the small gaps in the tightly packed streets. Matt closed his eyes and recalled his fight with Paul, the fear he’d felt, the scene playing in his head like a highlight reel. Whatever was happening, he had something more important to deal with, something that he couldn’t ignore. No one else would be close enough to help Gwen. He would have to do it himself.

A few hours later, Matt sat beside the small fire he had built, trying desperately to keep warm but trembling a little as the night drew close. The tinned meat he ate was becoming less appealing the further he climbed up the mountain. Matt rested the can against the rock he’d used for a seat and dropped his head. His stomach was twisting inside again, leaving him with little appetite. As he pondered his situation, a rustling sound quietly echoed around him. Matt’s head shot up and he stumbled to his feet. Tutting to himself as he knocked the tin and the contents over, Matt stood still and peered into the darkness. Leaning

over the fire briefly, Matt glimpsed a shadow, its shape almost humanlike. Panicking, Matt sprinted from his campsite and ran further into the darkness, the light from the small campfire fading fast as he pushed himself to move on, every tree root tripping him up.

Turning round, Matt panted as he attempted to catch his breath, trying to spot whatever had been spying on him. Breathing heavily, Matt spun on the spot and suddenly a headache grew bringing him to his knees as he screamed in pain. In an instant, Matt dropped first face into the dirt.

Day Seven

Matt woke with a start and rose, his body aching horribly from the awkward position he had fallen into. He held his head and rubbed his ears, noises seemed to converge from every location and only made him more disorientated. Eventually, the world came back into focus. Realising another day had begun, Matt thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled the radio sharply from it.

“Gwen?” There wasn’t any answer, “Gwen!”

“Matt-Matt!”

“Gwen, what’s wrong?” Matt pulled the radio away from his ear as it spewed a barrage of noise, “Gwen, answer me!”

“Matt the cave-” Another loud crash rumbled from the radio’s small speaker, “How much longer?”

“I’m close.” Matt spotted the dirt path and began to jog, “Gwen I’m so close, hang in there, I’m coming!”

“Hurry Matt!”

Matt pushed his legs to move faster, stumbling over and over as he urged his body forwards. Soon the path levelled out and the mine entrance was in sight.

“Gwen I’m here!” Matt pushed on once more along the dirt path which opened up onto the field leading directly to the entrance. Matt paused as he raised the radio to his mouth, “Gwen. . .”

Matt bit his lip as he slowly lowered the radio, the silence making his chest ache. Suddenly static filled the air and then he heard coughing.

“Matt? Jesus, are you here?”

“Yeah, yeah I am! I’m looking right at the mine entrance,” Matt glanced to his left and walked slowly across the field “Your truck’s here too. What the hell were you doing out here alone?”

“Don’t act the Ranger with me! Grab my spare pack. But be... something’s-” The radio cut silent and Matt rushed forward.

“Gwen! Gwen who’s with you?” There was no reply. Matt threw the radio down and sprinted for the yellow truck. Matt pulled the large backpack over his shoulders and twisted the torch which was strapped to its arm. Taking a deep breath, Matt walked up to the opening.

As Matt slowly and steadily moved inside, the air became thicker and dust-filled causing him to cough over and over. Matt pulled his face cloth over his nose to try to avoid breathing in the dust from the mine.

All around him the world was jet black, the torch pierced it with its powerful beam, but a feeling of dread was firmly gripping his chest and his imagination was running riot. Turning a corner, he breathed a sigh of relief and forced himself to move faster.

“Gwen?”

Gwen turned her head slowly and raised her hand to cover her

eyes, "Matt? Is that you?"

"It is, it. . .," Matt slowed to a stop and took stock of the situation. Gwen was trapped beneath a rock, her leg buried. "Gwen, what we're you-?"

"I know," Gwen coughed and slowly laid her head back, "I remember why you hate me doing this." Gwen tried to free herself a little from her trapped position before grabbing Matt's arm, "Please." In the distance a high-pitched scream echoed through the mine and Gwen's eyes widened.

"What the hell was that?"

"Matt, listen to me. There's something in here. You have to get me out."

"What do you mean something is-" The scream filled in the mine again and was louder. Gwen wriggled and patted the rock on top of her leg.

"Get this off me now!"

Matt dropped his backpack onto the floor and grabbed the boulder, pulling with all his might to budge it. Gwen whined in agony as it rocked against her battered leg.

"I'm sorry. It won't budge. Shit. . ."

Gwen groaned and managed a small smile before turning to Matt, "Since when did you swear?"

Her smile faded as Matt's attention became focussed on the thin, reptile-like creature purring in the darkness, it's body barely visible in the light from the torch. Gwen lay frozen in place, her hand reaching for Matt's and holding it tightly. Matt winced as he ran his free hand along the floor, walking his fingers slowly towards the backpack. Matt found the bottom of the backpack and carefully felt up the seam to the side pouch. The creature screamed as if delivering a warning and Matt quickly grabbed the handle of a flare gun tucked into the pocket.

Gwen followed Matt's hand with her eyes and shot him a fearful look.

"Is it loaded?" Matt mouthed to her as best he could. Gwen's eyes were wider than ever as she carefully moved her head up and down. Matt blinked for a second before nodding to his friend. Gwen squeezed his hand and looked down. Matt pulled the flare gun from the pocket. Pulling the trigger, the flare flew from the canister and bounced off the creature's head as it screamed and lunged for him. The flare ignited, catching the creature off guard. It landed awkwardly against the rock covering Gwen's leg as she screamed in pain. Matt threw the flare gun towards the creature and pulled Gwen from the floor, dragging her painfully through the mine, rubbing his hand along the rock wall as the flare and torch light quickly faded from sight.

After a few moments, the pair emerged from the opening, the screams echoing out of the mine urging them to keep moving. Matt drew Gwen along with him, loosening his grip on her hand to open the truck's passenger side door, almost pushing her inside and slamming it behind her. Gwen screamed in agony as it closed. Matt sprinted to the driver's side and clambered in. The keys rattled against his leg as he made himself comfortable, he twisted them in the ignition and the engine roared to life. Releasing the handbrake, Matt pushed the gear stick forwards and pressed the accelerator hard, the truck's large tyres throwing up dust behind them. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, they saw that the creature had followed them out and was standing, watching them as they left its territory. Gwen grabbed Matt's hand and squeezed it tightly. He turned to her and took in the gentle smile she offered before she winced in pain. Gripping the steering wheel harder, he began to navigate the mountains he was charged to protect and just hoped he could

get to safety.

The End

Also by Chris Pease

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