

FLEE

By Joe Klingler

[PART ONE]

CHAPTER 1 #Run

DAMON GAZED THROUGH STREAKED glass at two lanes of faded, sun-drenched asphalt two stories below. No vehicles moved. Not even a rented e-scooter. A pedestrian on the opposite side of the street pushed a red, wobble-wheeled grocery cart. White letters on its side shouted SAFEWAY. The pusher's olive-green trench coat flapped against combat boots lacking laces. The traffic signal at the corner cycled to green. A Washington D.C. street devoid of greedy rats racing seemed impossible.

A spot on the windowsill drew his eye. The condo had been remodeled only months ago, just before Claire moved in. It was as pristine as an architect's model.

Except for that gray mark.

A carefully balanced cigarette, forgotten midst the excitement of a party, would leave a scar like that. Damon had once hosted a grand party in a magnificent house. It had been murder. He stroked the mark with his index finger: smooth and cool.

A scream rattled his insides with the impact of a car crash. Claire had left the room. A shower before breakfast. Complaints of another Monday in a job she hated. Another week to figure out the best way to spend a billion dollars.

He reached the locked bathroom door in an instant.

"Go away," Claire shouted.

He pressed his ear flat to the stained oak. Pounding of bare fists on stone countertop.

"Claire?" he said.

"It's here."

The door cracked open. A hand thrust toward him, fingers splayed like a dancer. Three tiny spots – on fingers that could fire a rifle in the top one-tenth of one percent. Spots exactly like the pictures saturating social media.

The hand withdrew.

"Leave!" The door slammed. Then softer, "Protect yourself."

His head and heart began to arm-wrestle. Claire was infected with a runaway microbe. Scientists had predicted it while begging for research money and tracking to fight it. Politicians had only gaped at each other in response. Now a hundred and forty three countries had reported infections.

He pressed a shoulder against the door, ready to force it open, hanging between the desire to help and her plea for him to leave.

He returned to the bedroom.

From the closet, he retrieved a pair of black cases containing ten thousand dollars in cash, a medical kit, clothing for two in compression packs, five passports with proper entrance and exit stamps, dehydrated food for a week, a nine-millimeter Beretta whose balance he liked, and a Kimber that Claire used for target practice.

He stepped into black armored pants and stretched a gray synthetic shirt over his head. Beside the cases he laid out Claire's riding attire and the rifle she used to assassinate people for her country.

The bathroom door banged against the wall. Claire's face was edges and angles of tension when she stopped in the doorway, but she acted as calm as if she were on a firing range.

"Good. You're leaving," she said.

"We are leaving. Right now."

She shook her head violently.

"You can't be near me. You'll die too."

"Lots of people are dying." He looked over her athletic body for more signs. "They'll lock you up."

"If they had isolated victims sooner I might not..."

Everyone wondered the same thing. If the government had acted more quickly with less concern for the victims' rights, families, visitation, cost, and a hundred other issues that were still being debated, the world would be different now.

But they hadn't; so, it wasn't.

Even after SARS-CoV-2 of 2019 and its variants cost millions of lives, the rules of the next pandemic of the twenty-first century were still being written by lawmakers – empty promises from governments circling the globe not backed by science or money.

He faced her. "Let's go."

She shook her head.

"Go where? They'll find me. And arrest you for aiding and abetting."

"Victims turning themselves in is just bureaucrats pretending to be doing something."

"But—"

"The goal is to not infect others." He met her raging green eyes. "If you still want me to leave by this time tomorrow, I'll go."

"But," she said more softly.

He pulled on his jacket and zipped it to the pants in a practiced motion, worked the gauntlets of leather gloves over the sleeves, and lifted a case with each hand.

"Be fast," he said.

She latched boots and donned gloves while he stood holding the cases like a man anxious to deliver radioactive material.

She grabbed two black helmets. One-way shields. Full-face coverage.

They exited through the front doorway. Mrs. Halstead from across the hall was backing out of her condominium with Chipper, a yapping white bundle, in her arms. She turned around and said nothing with her rouged lips, but her eyes ran through a litany of jumped-to conclusions.

"Hello, Mrs. Halstead," Damon said. "Would you mind keeping an eye on the condo while we're on vacation?"

"Gladly. It's wonderful you kids have time to get away. Especially..." She eyed the cases in Damon's hands. "Where are you going that's safe?"

"The Blue Ridge Parkway. It's beautiful in the late spring. We hope to see wildlife now that the roads are...less traveled."

Mrs. Halstead's smile crinkled her cheeks. "Be careful on that murder-cycle. Lots of people die—" She stopped. Her smile faded.

Damon nodded. Tens of thousands of people were dying every day. A motorcycle was the least of their worries.

He thanked her as they left, confident that by the end of the day all the tenants would know that he and Claire were headed off for a scenic ride that could carry them all the way to South Carolina.

Of course, they weren't.

They were headed to six-million acres of wilderness in the opposed direction.

The garage door rose. Blast-furnace heat flowed over them. He clipped the bags to the triple-black motorcycle (paint, wheels, engine) with practiced efficiency. They rode onto Hike street in bright sunlight. Claire leaned far back, not touching him. Damon turned left into an alley, the stench from neglected garbage reaching inside his helmet. He worked his way under the Interstate onto a county road and headed north.

In a city of over half a million, they were alone on the road. But five miles outside of Alexandria they bore down on a row of stopped traffic.

Citizens trying to exit the city.

A pop-up military checkpoint impeding them.

The guards would insist that riding gloves be removed. A U-turn would attract the attention of the sentry on top of a 6x6 military truck, staring down the line of cars, hoping for just such an action to add excitement to his day. He would radio a team ready to descend on the black bike like a swarm of wasps.

Damon slowed.

The hills to the west contained hiking trails and open meadows. As good as asphalt for his adventure bike.

He flicked on a turn signal and swung slowly left into the driveway of a split-level house with green shutters. A multi-colored beachball drifted on the calm surface of a swimming pool in the back yard. Damon parked in front of a white garage door and gave the sentry time to watch as he patted his pockets and talked to Claire about who had the garage door opener.

Ten seconds. Fifteen.

Just enough time for the sentry to get bored and look away.

Damon slipped the bike into gear, inched forward, then swerved onto a brick walkway. He opened the throttle to ram the front tire into an unpainted wooden gate. The latch popped loose and it swung outward on rusted hinges. They blasted through the opening into a gravel alleyway and turned right.

Houses encroached on both sides of the alley leaving no way out for half a mile. Foot-high grass gone to seed appeared on the left. He rode near the edge of the vacant lot to leave the smallest footprint he could with a five-hundred pound motorcycle.

The lot led to a dead-end street. The street ended at a trailhead where an engraved wooded sign indicated Marathon Trail to be 13.1 miles. The knobbed tires attacked the foot-trodden earth. There was nothing legal about riding on a hiking trail, so his violations were piling up.

Failing to report an infection.

Dodging a checkpoint.

Riding a motorized vehicle on a hiking trail.

Minor issues compared to Claire dying. Not since the Black Plague had so many died so fast, bringing politicians, religious leaders, doctors, and witches all out in force.

He ducked beneath a tree branch and disappeared into a hardwood forest he hoped would hide them from drones and satellites – for just long enough.

*

Marathon trail led to a smaller trail and another, the bike's GPS navigation guiding the way. Hours later, while winding

through dense forest on trails designed for hiking boots, they exited into a county park near Oslo, New York. Damon rode west on pavement for miles. Reached a fire road. The only people who used fire roads when there wasn't a fire were the fire inspector and locals taking shortcuts. He and Claire were neither. That was likely why, thirty-one bumpy miles up the fire road, a lone rider on a dirt bike blocked the trail ahead.

The bike was olive drab, but the rider wore tan desert camo that stood out against the long needle northern pines. He held a capable black rifle pointed at the ground.

Damon eased to a stop parallel to the other bike but pointed in the opposite direction. They were close enough to talk. And if he decided to take off, the dirt bike was pointing in the wrong direction to block him.

"License and registration." The voice revealed that the rider might still be in high school.

"Was I speeding officer?" Damon said, and laughed a little.

No response came for five full seconds while the kid decided how to handle a wise guy. Then he laughed too.

"That's what they teach us. Check the papers. We uncover a lot of stolen vehicles."

"You don't look like a crime fighter," Claire said. She waved a gloved hand. "Too much firepower."

The kid smiled from inside a white dirt bike helmet with a plastic bill projecting out over his eyes.

"Depends on the crime, doesn't it?" he said.

Damon smiled big inside his helmet so it would show in his eyes. Claire nodded and began to unstrap the box lashed to the top of the aluminum case to her right.

"I'm on patrol," the kid said. "Sarge told us to check anyone who looks suspicious. The county mandate says people should stay home. Restricts them to main roads only. That's where the checkpoints are." His eyes scanned Claire and Damon. Then he did the same thing to the bike itself. "That's a lot of motorcycle out here in the dirt."

"Easier than Alaska," Damon said. "The trail isn't permafrost."

While the kid stared down at the blacked-out engine, maybe waiting for Damon to elaborate, Claire opened the box. The kid's eyes automatically went toward the motion.

"Never seen a weapon like that," the kid said.

"Rare, but not unique," she said. "Snipers get one after their first important..." she let the air grow still while the kid thought about the word sniper, then said, "mission."

His eyes revealed gears spinning inside his head. He turned to Damon.

"You're a sniper?" he said.

"Army," Damon said. "On special assignment for the General Williams Foundation. But not me." He jerked his thumb toward Claire, who was sitting on the back of the bike displaying the rifle as if it were on auction.

The kid swallowed and lowered his own rifle.

Claire closed the lid.

"They shouldn't have you out here alone," she said. "Too many desperate people running around."

"Sarge told scouts to observe and report." He glanced at the ground. "I'm not supposed to engage."

Claire lifted her face shield so the kid could see into her eyes.

"Tell you what. You don't tell anyone that you saw my rifle, and I won't tell anyone you engaged special forces personnel."

The kid nodded solemnly.

"How well do you ride that bike?" Damon said.

"I was runner-up state motocross champion when I was sixteen."

Damon considered the bike: Army issue 125cc single. A fine choice for scouting. It sipped gasoline, delivering a hundred miles per gallon. And it could go places most people couldn't even walk.

"Think you can catch me?"

The kid looked from Damon's face to the pistons sticking sideways out of the black machine.

"Against that pig? No contest."

Damon dropped his wrist and took off. If the terrain had been rougher, or more twisty, or wetter the kid might have had a chance. And he tried, wringing everything he could out of that little 125. But his desert camouflage shrank in the rearview mirror as Damon wondered what kind of tale the young man would tell about the encounter. Or if he would keep the whole thing to himself.

Soon, Damon was rolling at 85 mph on desolate blacktop.

Claire tapped his shoulder. Her voice came through the intercom.

"Will we be riding all night?"

He shook his head no but didn't elaborate.

*

Bugs smacked the windscreen like raindrops as the last rays of sunshine became a cool, overcast dusk. Claire nudged his back to get his attention.

"ETA?"

"Zero hundred hours," he said.

He was glad she hadn't asked about their destination. If she knew, she might make him stop now.

They topped a hill with 23:40 showing on the dash. A village in upper New York State lay below, sitting adjacent to the reason Damon had chosen this area.

Adirondack State Park.

He pulled in the clutch and glided downhill. At 70 mph, he flicked the kill switch. He, Claire, and the bike soundlessly parted the air as they coasted along a main street devoid of traffic. Puddles of yellow light formed shadows in cracks and potholes the city hadn't bothered to fix. Cars parked along the left side would likely be there until dawn.

The road leveled out. They passed through a traffic signal as it turned red. A hundred yards later, they coasted through a green one. The whole town – two traffic signals.

Motion along the curb. Lit by moonlight, a shirtless cyclist in jeans and sneakers was riding furiously toward them. The cyclist lifted his head and became a high-school kid past curfew sneaking back from his girl's house.

Damon gave a thumbs up with his right hand and received one in return – guys bonding over life on two wheels. By the time the bicycle flew past in the opposite direction, his motorcycle had slowed to 25. Damon checked the mirror. The kid didn't look back.

The flick of a red switch and release of the clutch brought the engine to a quiet thrum. They climbed a long hill and rolled over the top into a forest of pines. Five miles later they climbed a second hill. On the downside Damon pulled to the shoulder, lowered the kickstand, and stepped off. He tapped the screen of the navigation system. Claire's eyes indicated understanding. He sprinted across the drainage ditch running parallel to the road.

Dense undergrowth scraped against armored pants as he walked, making the sound of a giant windmill. The last half mile he hiked up a creek bed, knee-deep in the subdued gurgle of water.

No light flowed from the windows of the cabin standing in a small clearing. The back door opened without a key. A helmet sat on a pine table, two glasses of water beside it. One full, the other half-empty. He sat down at the table and placed his helmet beside the one already there.

Claire drifted out of the shadows and sat across from him. She drank from the half-full glass, still wearing her riding gloves.

"You wanted others to see a rider arrive alone," she said.

Damon nodded.

"This where you hide when you're not in Washington."

Not a question. He nodded anyway.

"Man cave. Like you had in Vietnam."

"Never said it was in Nam," he said.

She smiled. "Is it the same?"

"Mostly."

"Where's Maxx?"

"Still in the cave."

"Is it safe to communicate over the Internet?"

"We email."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Proton mail," he said. "End-to-end encryption. Servers in Switzerland."

She drank again. He did too.

"The world sees a mysterious biker ride in and out of here on a regular basis. Always at night. He doesn't go outside. Never talks to anyone. No one sees his face. Recluse. Tibetan monk type. Maybe a writer commiserating with his muse."

"Good description," Damon said.

"Tonight, I ride in. I'm smaller, but the bike is familiar. The recluse is back. Who knows or cares how long he will stay this time?"

"Yep."

"Which one of you lives here?"

"Tresuniak. Guy from Russia."

"Who do you work with?"

"Minn."

Claire squinted her question.

"Rack of computers inside," he said. "Keeps information local."

She glanced at his glass, then out the window to the woods beyond, then back to the glass.

"You worry about web traffic?" she said.

"Obfuscation."

"Thus, the near-town location."

Damon nodded.

"You've been working on this since?" She paused. Her eyes moved. Settled. "That first ride in the U.S. The weekend we flew into Washington."

He smiled. "That wasn't my first ride."

"Oh yes, you've even seen Alaska," she said.

She sipped, barely touching the water with her lips.

He let her think it through. For a twenty-something, she had a great deal of relevant experience.

She downed the rest of her water before speaking.

"Damon has a plan. Maybe he's had a plan all along."

"I was hoping not to need this one."

"I hide here. Violate the Victims Inclusion Act. Put other humans at risk of this, this..."

"That law is based on votes not science. The head of infectious disease research for the CDC admitted that the mechanism of transfer isn't clear."

"I'm a soldier in the U.S. Army. It's still the law."

He picked up his glass.

"There's no one here for you to infect."

He poured water from his glass to hers.

"You," she said.

"I'll leave."

"You're trying to help me be comfortable while I die."

Another non-question.

The little cabin sat silently in the woods where it had stood since before either of them had been born.

"This is the best I can do on short notice. If we could get out of the country, we might find a beach that isn't patrolled."

She smiled. Let it fade.

"I should turn myself in."

"They'll put you into a converted prison and use your body for experiments. And if —"

She locked onto his eyes.

"You're not that much of an optimist," she said.

"I prefer thorough and pessimistic. The world works better that way." His chronometer ticked off eight seconds. "However, sometimes optimism is the only option."

"Damon, a man who could have invented the phrase 'contingency plan,' is suddenly optimistic he can find a cure in ... fifty-one days?"

"We go down fighting."

She looked down at the table. Lifted only her eyes. Slid lower in her chair.

"You should go while it's still dark," she said. "It's important the neighbors think you're still here. They'll stay away."

She stared out the window where stars twinkled between hazy gray clouds.

"Please don't come back."

He studied the curve of her cheekbones and tried to imagine the assassin inside her head. Of course he would come back.

Dying was inevitable. Dying alone was poor planning.

He stood.

She forced a smile.

"At least we have money to work with."

He returned her smile. The new foundation she headed had an annual budget of one billion dollars, not counting matching funds from private industry.

He hoped it would be enough.

FLEE

by Joe Klingler

Available February 15, 2023

Pre-order now at:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BSCP8FTY>