

Chapter 1: It's Gone

“It’s gone!” said Hui Fen with a deeply concerned look in her large dark brown eyes. Hui rarely looked concerned about anything, one of the reasons she was probably ideal for this unique team.

“The castle,” she lamented as she looked around at the other three on her special hand-picked squad, “The elite royal guard, and even the King—all gone. I don’t mean that they are no more. My search didn’t find any evidence of them ever existing.” She held up her small, boxed device in her hand to show the rest of the team. “According to this device, whatever we call it,” she continued as she held up the Instant Gratification Device: Version 15, “there never was a King.”

The four intrepid members of the special investigative task force sent out by the castle leadership on behalf of the Great King stood helpless and confused on the high grassy ridge that once was the home of the king’s massive castle, from which one could see the entire Kingdom, the vast ocean to the north, Garden City in the valley to the southwest, but not anymore. They couldn’t believe what they saw. The sun was only a pale ghost behind a greasy film and struggled to cast any light upon the mountain ridge. The air, once crisp and clean, now hung heavy with the metallic tang of industry. A thick smog, clung to the peaks, obscuring their majestic forms and turning the jagged horizon into a smudged canvas. Below, the valley floor, usually a vibrant tapestry of greens and browns, was choked by the oppressive haze. Their eyes burned.

Just to their southwest, the once high verdant ridge, the former playground for deer and elk, owls, oaks and streams filled with trout, children playing stickball and hide and seek as their families lazily and joyously picnicked in the parks was now laced with sooty brick and asphalt roads, winding past crowded pubs and clubs with names such as the Iron Jack-o-Lantern, the Hippy Dippy Lounge And Dance Club, Freak Out Massage Parlor and Tax Preparation, and one bar just ironically called End Of The Road. The poured roads faded into miles of metal and plastic establishments, fried chicken joints, one shadowed by a giant statue of a cow for some reason, sketchy neon sign-riddled bodegas and supermarkets, food trucks pitching a variety of specialty tacos and hot dogs, one particular coffee chain shop seemingly every other block, a massive shopping center with movies and specialty clothing stores for just about any clientele, hamburger joints that advertised that anyone could have it their way and quickly, transportation repair shops, dirty hole in the wall restaurants that made one wonder if the health department existed anymore, a massive DIY store that sold vinyl siding, weed killer and bags of cement, liquor stores, a drug dispensary marked by a green cross and a sign that said, “Garden City Higher,” giant tall TV screens hung on tall narrow office buildings on both sides of the street, sporting headline news 24-7 (how could there be enough breaking news to fill 24 hours a day?)—and even a run-down church with a portable backlit sign that creatively and sensitively said, “God hates sinners, welcome everyone.” Turrets of dark choking smoke poured into the clouded atmosphere from nasty-smelling industrial complexes making something—not sure what—but apparently a lot of it. Closer to Garden City, a run-down pink motel with a vacancy sign proclaiming, “What happens at the Flamingo stays in the Flamingo”, tall brownstone apartment buildings were wedged tightly together, with locked doors or security guards out front. Buses, taxis and Ubers moved faceless bored people back and forth, back and forth, up and down the crowded strip. Sidewalks were small and crowded, passive dog owners carrying full-little plastic bags permanently tied to their pets who urinated on every other garbage can, and everyone

looking down at their IG device as if what was on the screen really was the most important thing in their world. Beggars and the housing-challenged staked their places at every corner, hoping to get a coin or even a simple semblance of any recognition from the distracted screen-absorbed commuters.

Their eyes burning from the pollution in the air, the four looked down over the loud ugly urban sprawl. It wasn't just that the country had dramatically changed from what they remembered and loved, this represented an entirely different way of life—a different Garden City—hardly better.

Now what? No one had any idea what had happened in the last 24 hours. This was a major disaster—worse than anyone could ever have imagined.

Now what?