

WATER

By Wanda Ernstberger

Finally, I emerged to claim my place in the New World Order. For five months I had waited in the underground bunker, six rooms for my family and three for the ones who served us, and as the cramped conditions closed in, I itched to come out and take control as a leader of the new society. There were sixty of us, businessmen, tech geniuses, and politicians, who created a plan to scrub the world clean so humanity could start anew, in God's image. Mushroom clouds purified the land in a baptism of fire, and then, on schedule, a virus unleashed, eliminating the rest of the vermin. Now the world was safe. My home would be redeveloped into the Riviera of southern California, where our needs would be met by AI and a few select people, until technology developed to the point when the help would become obsolete.

An acrid smell burned my nose and dust stung my eyes as I looked out at a green sky with acid yellow clouds swirling over an empty land, no plants, no animals, no buildings remained, more like the surface of Mars than America. Dust sprayed across my leather shoes, coated my white shirt and tie, and crawled down my throat. I coughed. "Andre, go fetch me some water."

"Yes, sir." Andre was a slip of a man, wiry but strong. He proved loyal in the old times, and his strength would aid to rebuild the new society. Without another word, he grabbed a bucket and started off across the hills of sand.

I licked my parched lips and brushed my fingers through grey, thinning hair, my throat burning for a cool sip of water. The bunker had run out last night and there was nothing left to drink,

prompting me to exit three days ahead of schedule. No matter. No stragglers remained to steal our possessions. Indeed, there were no signs of life at all. Thank goodness.

My daughter emerged, a handsome girl with blue eyes and blonde hair, barely seventeen, a prime age to start spreading her superior genes. Perhaps I'd pair her with Richmond's boy, or maybe Davidson's young buck. She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, it's awful. There's less to do here than in the bunker."

"Don't worry, pumpkin. Soon this will become a paradise on Earth."

She nodded, biting her lip, saying nothing, such a good girl.

Her mother's cough carried through the doorway. She hadn't done well recently, her skin dulling, silver streaking through her hair, bags under her eyes. The cough grew, leaving her gasping. Janson's wife, a lovely girl twenty years my junior, was a tempting replacement.

Wind blasted past, covering my suit jacket in grit, burning my eyes, scratching my throat, lodging between my teeth. I coughed again. Damn. Where was that useless Andre?

At last, he appeared on the horizon, the sight of him taking the edge off my impatience and annoyance. "All right, Andre. I could really fancy a glass of cold water."

He stood before me, his face ashen, black eyes filled with fear. "Sir, there *is no* water."

THE END