

‘Exhilarating, intense, addictive.’  
SJ WATSON, author of *Before I Go To Sleep*

IF THE LIES DON'T KILL YOU,  
THE TRUTH WILL.

# WOOL

H U G H  
H O W E Y



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## About the Book

In a ruined and hostile landscape, in a future few have been unlucky enough to survive, a community exists in a giant underground silo.

Inside, men and women live an enclosed life full of rules and regulations, of secrets and lies.

To live, you must follow the rules. But some don't. These are the dangerous ones; these are the people who dare to hope and dream, and who infect others with their optimism.

Their punishment is simple and deadly. They are allowed outside.

Jules is one of these people. She may well be the last.

## About the Author

Hugh Howey spent eight years living on boats and working as a yacht captain for the rich and famous. It wasn't until the love of his life carried him away from these vagabond ways that he began to pursue literary adventures, rather than literal ones. Hugh wrote and self-published his first young adult novel, *Molly Fyde and the Parsona Rescue*. The Molly Fyde series won rave reviews and praise from readers but it was the release of *Wool* that made his career take off.

# WOOL

H U G H

H O W E Y



CENTURY

*For those who dare to hope*



## PART 1 – HOLSTON

THE CHILDREN WERE playing while Holston climbed to his death; he could hear them squealing as only happy children do. While they thundered about frantically above, Holston took his time, each step methodical and ponderous, as he wound his way around and around the spiral staircase, old boots ringing out on metal treads.

The treads, like his father's boots, showed signs of wear. Paint clung to them in feeble chips, mostly in the corners and undersides, where they were safe. Traffic elsewhere on the staircase sent dust shivering off in small clouds. Holston could feel the vibrations in the railing, which was worn down to the gleaming metal. That always amazed him: how centuries of bare palms and shuffling feet could wear down solid steel. One molecule at a time, he supposed. Each life might wear away a single layer, even as the silo wore away that life.

Each step was slightly bowed from generations of traffic, the edge rounded down like a pouting lip. In the centre, there was almost no trace of the small diamonds that once gave the treads their grip. Their absence could only be inferred from the pattern to either side, the small pyramidal bumps rising from the flat steel with their crisp edges and flecks of paint.

Holston lifted an old boot to an old step, pressed down, and did it again. He lost himself in what the untold years had done, the ablation of molecules and lives, layers and layers ground to fine dust. And he thought, not for the first time, that neither life nor staircase had been meant for such an existence. The tight confines of that long spiral,

threading through the buried silo like a straw in a glass, had not been built for such abuse. Like much of their cylindrical home, it seemed to have been made for other purposes, for functions long since forgotten. What was now used as a thoroughfare for thousands of people, moving up and down in repetitious daily cycles, seemed more apt in Holston's view to be used only in emergencies and perhaps by mere dozens.

Another floor went by – a pie-shaped division of dormitories. As Holston ascended the last few levels, this last climb he would ever take, the sounds of childlike delight rained down even louder from above. This was the laughter of youth, of souls who had not yet come to grips with where they lived, who did not yet feel the press of the earth on all sides, who in their minds were not buried at all, but *alive*. Alive and unworn, dripping happy sounds down the stairwell, trills that were incongruous with Holston's actions, his decision and determination to go *outside*.

As he neared the upper level, one young voice rang out above the others, and Holston remembered being a child in the silo – all the schooling and the games. Back then, the stuffy concrete cylinder had felt, with its floors and floors of apartments and workshops and hydroponic gardens and purification rooms with their tangles of pipes, like a vast universe, a wide expanse one could never fully explore, a labyrinth he and his friends could get lost in for ever.

But those days were more than thirty years distant. Holston's childhood now felt like something two or three lifetimes ago, something someone else had enjoyed. Not him. He had an entire lifetime as sheriff weighing heavy, blocking off that past. And more recently, there was this third stage of his life – a secret life beyond childhood and being sheriff. It was the last layers of himself ground to dust; three years spent silently waiting for what would never come, each day longer than any month from his happier lifetimes.

At the top of the spiral stairway, Holston's hand ran out of railing. The curvy bar of worn steel ended as the stairwell emptied into the widest rooms of the entire silo complex: the cafeteria and the adjoining lounge. The playful squeals were level with him now. Darting bright shapes zagged between scattered chairs, playing chase. A handful of adults tried to contain the chaos. Holston saw Donna picking up scattered chalk and crayon from the stained tiles. Her husband Clarke sat behind a table arranged with cups of juice and bowls of cornflour cookies. He waved at Holston from across the room.

Holston didn't think to wave back, didn't have the energy or the desire. He looked past the adults and playing children to the blurry view beyond, projected on the cafeteria wall. It was the largest uninterrupted vista of their inhospitable world. A morning scene. Dawn's dim light coated lifeless hills that had hardly changed since Holston was a boy. They sat, just as they always had, while he had gone from playing chase among the cafeteria tables to whatever empty thing he was now. And beyond the stately rolling crests of these hills, the top of a familiar and rotting skyline caught the morning rays in feeble glints. Ancient glass and steel stood distantly where people, it was suspected, had once lived aboveground.

A child, ejected from the group like a comet, bumped into Holston's knees. He looked down and moved to touch the kid – Susan's boy – but just like a comet the child was gone again, pulled back into the orbit of the others.

Holston thought suddenly of the lottery he and Allison had won the year of her death. He still had the ticket; he carried it everywhere. One of these kids – maybe he or she would be two by now and tottering after the older children – could've been theirs. They had dreamed, like all parents do, of the double fortune of twins. They had tried, of course. After her implant was removed, they had spent night after glorious night trying to redeem that ticket,

other parents wishing them luck, other lottery hopefuls silently praying for an empty year to pass.

Knowing they only had a year, he and Allison had invited superstition into their lives, looking to anything for help. Tricks like hanging garlic over the bed that supposedly increased fertility, two dimes under the mattress for twins, a pink ribbon in Allison's hair, smudges of blue dye under Holston's eyes – all of it ridiculous and desperate and fun. The only thing crazier would have been to *not* try everything, to leave some silly seance or tale untested.

But it wasn't to be. Before their year was even out, the lottery had passed to another couple. It hadn't been for a lack of trying; it had been a lack of time. A sudden lack of *wife*.

Holston turned away from the games and the blurry view and walked towards his office, situated between the cafeteria and the silo's airlock. As he covered that ground, his thoughts went to the struggle that once took place there, a struggle of ghosts he'd had to walk through every day for the last three years. And he knew, if he turned and hunted that expansive view on the wall, if he squinted past the ever-worsening blur of cloudy camera lenses and airborne grime, if he followed that dark crease up the hill, that wrinkle that worked its way over the muddy dune towards the city beyond, he could pick out her quiet form. There, on that hill, his wife could be seen. She lay like a sleeping boulder, the air and toxins wearing away at her, her arms curled under her head.

Maybe.

It was difficult to see, hard to make out clearly even back before the blurring had begun anew. And besides, there was little to trust in that sight. There was much, in fact, to doubt. So Holston simply chose not to look. He walked through that place of his wife's ghostly struggle, where bad memories lay eternal, that scene of her sudden madness, and entered his office.



‘Well, look who’s up early,’ Marnes said, smiling.

Holston’s deputy closed a metal drawer on the filing cabinet, a lifeless cry singing from its ancient joints. He picked up a steaming mug, then noted Holston’s solemn demeanour. ‘You feeling okay, boss?’

Holston nodded. He pointed to the rack of keys behind the desk. ‘Holding cell,’ he said.

The deputy’s smile drooped into a confused frown. He set down the mug and turned to retrieve the key. While his back was turned, Holston rubbed the sharp, cool steel in his palm one last time, then placed the star flat on the desk. Marnes turned and held out the key. Holston took it.

‘You need me to grab the mop?’ Deputy Marnes jabbed a thumb back towards the cafeteria. Unless someone was in cuffs, they only went into the cell to clean it.

‘No,’ Holston said. He jerked his head towards the holding cell, beckoning his deputy to follow.

He turned, the chair behind the desk squeaking as Marnes rose to join him, and Holston completed his march. The key slid in with ease. There was a sharp clack from the well-built and well-maintained inner organs of the door. The barest squeak from the hinges, a determined step, a shove and a clank, and the ordeal was over.

‘Boss?’

Holston held the key between the bars. Marnes looked down at them, unsure, but his palm came up to accept it.

‘What’s going on, boss?’

‘Get the mayor,’ Holston said. He let out a sigh, that heavy breath he’d been holding for three years.

‘Tell her I want to go outside.’

THE VIEW FROM the holding cell wasn't as blurry as it had been in the cafeteria, and Holston spent his final day in the silo puzzling over this. Could it be that the camera on that side was shielded against the toxic wind? Did each cleaner, condemned to death, put more care in preserving the view they'd enjoyed on their last day? Or was the extra effort a gift to the *next* cleaner, who would spend their final day in that same cell?

Holston preferred this last explanation. It made him think longingly of his wife. It reminded him why he was there, on the wrong side of those bars, and willingly.

As his thoughts drifted to Allison, he sat and stared out at the dead world some ancient peoples had left behind. It wasn't the best view of the landscape around their buried bunker, but it wasn't the worst, either. In the distance, low rolling hills stood a pretty shade of brown, like coffee mash with just the right amount of pig's milk in it. The sky above the hills was the same dull grey of his childhood and his father's childhood and his grand-father's childhood. The only moving feature on the landscape was the clouds. They hung full and dark over the hills. They roamed free like the herded beasts from the picture books.

The view of the dead world filled up the entire wall of his cell, just like all the walls on the silo's upper level, each one full of a different slice of the blurry and ever-blurrier wasteland beyond. Holston's little piece of that view reached from the corner by his cot, up to the ceiling, to the other wall, and down to the toilet. And despite the soft blur – like oil rubbed on a lens – it looked like a scene one could

stroll out into, like a gaping and inviting hole oddly positioned across from forbidding prison bars.

The illusion, however, convinced only from a distance. Leaning closer, Holston could see a handful of dead pixels on the massive display. They stood stark white against all the brown and grey hues. Shining with ferocious intensity, each pixel (Allison had called them 'stuck' pixels) was like a square window to some brighter place, a hole the width of a human hair that seemed to beckon towards some better reality. There were dozens of them, now that he looked closer. Holston wondered if anyone in the silo knew how to fix them, or if they had the tools required for such a delicate job. Were they dead for ever, like Allison? Would all of the pixels be dead eventually? Holston imagined a day when half of the pixels were stark white, and then generations later when only a few grey and brown ones remained, then a mere dozen, the world having flipped to a new state, the people of the silo thinking the outside world was on fire, the only *true* pixels now mistaken for malfunctioning ones.

Or was that what Holston and his people were doing even now?

Someone cleared their throat behind him. Holston turned and saw Mayor Jahns standing on the other side of the bars, her hands resting in the belly of her overalls. She nodded gravely towards the cot.

'When the cell's empty, at night when you and Deputy Marnes are off duty, I sometimes sit right there and enjoy that very view.'

Holston turned back to survey the muddy, lifeless landscape. It only looked depressing compared to scenes from the children's books – the only books to survive the uprising. Most people doubted those colours in the books, just as they doubted purple elephants and pink birds ever existed, but Holston felt that they were truer than the scene before him. He, like some others, felt something

primal and deep when he looked at those worn pages splashed green and blue. Even so, when compared to the stifling silo, that muddy grey view outside looked like some kind of salvation, just the sort of open air men were born to breathe.

‘Always seems a little clearer in here,’ Jahns said. ‘The view, I mean.’

Holston remained silent. He watched a curling piece of cloud break off and move in a new direction, blacks and greys swirling together.

‘You get your pick for dinner,’ the mayor said. ‘It’s tradition—’

‘You don’t need to tell me how this works,’ Holston said, cutting Jahns off. ‘It’s only been three years since I served Allison her last meal right here.’ He reached to spin the copper ring on his finger out of habit, forgetting he had left it on his dresser hours ago.

‘Can’t believe it’s been that long,’ Jahns murmured to herself. Holston turned to see her squinting at the clouds displayed on the wall.

‘Do you miss her?’ Holston asked venomously. ‘Or do you just hate that the blur has had so much time to build?’

Jahns’s eyes flashed his way a moment, then dropped to the floor. ‘You know I don’t want this, not for any view. But rules are the rules—’

‘It’s not to be blamed,’ Holston said, trying to let the anger go. ‘I know the rules better than most.’ His hand moved, just a little, towards the missing badge, left behind like his ring. ‘Hell, I enforced those rules for most my life, even after I realised they were bullshit.’

Jahns cleared her throat. ‘Well, I won’t ask why you chose this. I’ll just assume it’s because you’d be unhappier here.’

Holston met her gaze, saw the film on her eyes before she was able to blink it away. Jahns looked thinner than usual, comical in her gaping overalls. The lines in her neck

and radiating from her eyes were deeper than he remembered. Darker. And he thought the crack in her voice was genuine regret, not just age or her ration of tobacco.

Suddenly, Holston saw himself through Jahns's eyes, a broken man sitting on a worn bench, his skin grey from the pale glow of the dead world beyond, and the sight made him dizzy. His head spun as it groped for something reasonable to latch on to, something that made sense. It seemed a dream, the predicament his life had become. None of the last three years seemed true. Nothing seemed true any more.

He turned back to the tan hills. In the corner of his eye, he thought he saw another pixel die, turning stark white. Another tiny window had opened, another clear view through an illusion he had grown to doubt.

Tomorrow will be my salvation, Holston thought savagely, even if I die out there.

'I've been mayor too long,' Jahns said.

Holston glanced back and saw that her wrinkled hands were wrapped around the cold steel bars.

'Our records don't go back to the beginning, you know. They don't go back before the uprising a century and a half ago, but since then no mayor has sent more people to cleaning than I have.'

'I'm sorry to burden you,' Holston said dryly.

'I take no pleasure in it. That's all I'm saying. No pleasure at all.'

Holston swept his hand at the massive screen. 'But you'll be the first to watch a clear sunset tomorrow night, won't you?' He hated the way he sounded. Holston wasn't angry for his death, or life, or whatever came after tomorrow, but resentment over Allison's fate still lingered. He continued to see inevitable events from the past as avoidable, long after they'd taken their course. 'You'll all love the view tomorrow,' he said, more to himself than the mayor.



‘That’s not fair at all,’ Jahns said. ‘The law is the law. You broke it. You knew you were breaking it.’

Holston looked at his feet. The two of them allowed a silence to form. Mayor Jahns was the one who eventually spoke.

‘You haven’t threatened yet to *not* go through with it. Some of the others are nervous that you might not do the cleaning because you aren’t saying you won’t.’

Holston laughed. ‘They’d feel better if I said I *wouldn’t* clean the sensors?’ He shook his head at the mad logic.

‘Everyone who sits there says they aren’t gonna do it,’ Jahns told him, ‘but then they do. It’s what we’ve all come to expect—’

‘Allison never threatened that she wouldn’t do it,’ Holston reminded her, but he knew what Jahns meant. He himself had been sure Allison wouldn’t wipe the lenses. And now he thought he understood what she’d been going through as she sat on that very bench. There were larger things to consider than the act of cleaning. Most who were sent outside were caught at something, were surprised to find themselves in that cell, their fate mere hours away. Revenge was on their mind when they said they wouldn’t do it. But Allison and now Holston had bigger worries. Whether or not they’d clean was inconsequential; they had arrived here because they wanted, on some insane level, to *be* here. All that remained was the curiosity of it all. The wonder of the outside world beyond the projected veil of the wall screens.

‘So, are you planning on going through with it or not?’ Jahns asked directly, her desperation evident.

‘You said it yourself.’ Holston shrugged. ‘Everyone does it. There must be some reason, right?’

He pretended not to care, to be disinterested in the *why* of the cleaning, but he had spent most of his life, the past three years especially, agonising over the why. The question drove him nuts. And if his refusing to answer Jahns caused

pain to those who had murdered his wife, he wouldn't be upset.

Jahns rubbed her hands up and down the bars, anxious. 'Can I tell them you'll do it?' she asked.

'Or tell them I won't. I don't care. It sounds like either answer will mean the same to them.'

Jahns didn't reply. Holston looked up at her, and the mayor nodded.

'If you change your mind about the meal, let Deputy Marnes know. He'll be at the desk all night, as is tradition ...'

She didn't need to say. Tears came to Holston's eyes as he remembered that part of his former duties. He had manned that desk twelve years ago when Donna Parkins was put to cleaning, eight years ago when it was Jack Brent's time. And he had spent a night clinging to the bars, lying on the floor, a complete wreck, three years ago when it was his wife's turn.

Mayor Jahns turned to go.

'Sheriff,' Holston muttered before she got out of earshot.

'I'm sorry?' Jahns lingered on the other side of the bars, her grey, bushy brows hanging over her eyes.

'It's Sheriff Marnes now,' Holston reminded her. 'Not Deputy.'

Jahns rapped a steel bar with her knuckles. 'Eat something,' she said. 'And I won't insult you by suggesting you get some sleep.'

*Three Years Earlier*

'YOU'VE GOTTA BE *kidding* me,' Allison said. 'Honey, listen to this. You won't believe this. Did you know there was more than *one* uprising?'

Holston looked up from the folder spread across his lap. Around him, scattered piles of paper covered the bed like a quilt – stacks and stacks of old files to sort through and new complaints to manage. Allison sat at her small desk at the foot of the bed. The two of them lived in one of the silo condos that had been subdivided only twice over the decades. It left room for luxuries like desks and wide non-bunk beds.

'And how would I have known about that?' he asked her. His wife turned and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Holston jabbed a folder at her computer screen. 'All day long you're unlocking secrets hundreds of years old, and I'm supposed to know about them before *you* do?'

She stuck out her tongue. 'It's an expression. It's my way of informing you. And why don't you seem more curious? Did you hear what I just said?'

Holston shrugged. 'I never would've assumed the one uprising we know about was the first – just that it was the most recent. If I've learned one thing from my job, it's that no crime or crazy mob is ever all that original.' He picked up a folder by his knee. 'You think this is the first water thief the silo's known? Or that it'll be the last?'

Allison's chair squealed on the tile as she turned to face him. The monitor on the desk behind her blinked with the

scraps and fragments of data she had pulled from the silo's old servers, the remnants of information long ago deleted and overwritten countless times. Holston still didn't understand how the retrieval process worked, or why someone smart enough to come up with it was dumb enough to love him, but he accepted both as truth.

'I'm piecing together a series of old reports,' she said. 'If true, they mean something like our old uprising used to take place regularly. Like once every generation or so.'

'There's a lot we don't know about the old times,' Holston said. He rubbed his eyes and thought about all the paperwork he wasn't getting done. 'Maybe they didn't have a system for cleaning the sensors, you know? I'll bet back then, the view upstairs just got blurrier and blurrier until people went crazy, there'd be a revolt or something, and then they'd finally exile a few people to set things straight. Or maybe it was just natural population control, you know, before the lottery.'

Allison shook her head. 'I don't think so. I'm starting to think ...' She paused and glanced down at the spread of paperwork around Holston. The sight of all the logged transgressions seemed to make her consider carefully what she was about to say. 'I'm not passing judgement, not saying anyone was right or wrong or anything like that. I'm just suggesting that maybe the servers weren't wiped out by the rebels during the uprising. Not like we've always been told, anyway.'

That got Holston's attention. The mystery of the blank servers, the empty past of the silo's ancestors, haunted them all. The erasure was nothing more than fuzzy legend. He closed the folder he was working on and set it aside. 'What do you think caused it?' he asked his wife. 'Do you think it was an accident? A fire or a power outage?' He listed the common theories.

Allison frowned. 'No,' she said. She lowered her voice and looked around anxiously. 'I think we wiped the hard

drives. Our ancestors, I mean, *not* the rebels.’ She turned and leaned towards the monitor, running her finger down a set of figures Holston couldn’t discern from the bed. ‘Twenty years,’ she said. ‘Eighteen. Twenty-four.’ Her finger slid down the screen with a squeak. ‘Twenty-eight. Sixteen. Fifteen.’

Holston ploughed a path through the paperwork at his feet, putting the files back in stacks as he worked his way towards the desk. He sat on the foot of the bed, put a hand on his wife’s neck, and peered over her shoulder at the monitor.

‘Are those dates?’ he asked.

She nodded. ‘Just about every two decades, there’s a major revolt. This report catalogued them. It was one of the files deleted during the most recent uprising. *Our* uprising.’

She said ‘our’ like either of them or any of their friends had been alive at the time. Holston knew what she meant, though. It was the uprising they had been raised in the shadow of, the one that seemed to have spawned them – the great conflict that hung over their childhoods, over their parents and grandparents. It was the uprising that filled whispers and occupied sideways glances.

‘And what makes you think it was us, that it was the good guys who wiped the servers?’

She half turned and smiled grimly. ‘Who says we are the good guys?’

Holston stiffened. He pulled his hand away from Allison’s neck. ‘Don’t start. Don’t say anything that might —’

‘I’m kidding,’ she said, but it wasn’t a thing to kid about. It was two steps from traitorous, from *cleaning*. ‘My theory is this,’ she said quickly, stressing the word *theory*. ‘There’s generational upheaval, right? I mean for over a hundred years, maybe longer. It’s like clockwork.’ She pointed at the dates. ‘But then, during the great uprising – the only one we’ve known about till now – someone wiped the servers.’



Which, I'll tell you, isn't as easy as pressing a few buttons or starting a fire. There's redundancies on top of redundancies. It would take a concerted effort, not an accident or any sort of rushed job or mere sabotage—'

'That doesn't tell you who's responsible,' Holston pointed out. His wife was a wizard with computers, no doubt, but sleuthing was not her bag, it was his.

'What tells me something,' she continued, 'is that there were uprisings every generation for all this time, but there hasn't been an uprising *since*.' Allison bit her lip.

Holston sat up straight. He glanced around the room and allowed her observation to sink in. He had a sudden vision of his wife yanking his sleuthing bag out of his hands and making off with it.

'So you're saying ...' He rubbed his chin and thought this through. 'You're saying that someone wiped out our history to stop us from repeating it?'

'Or worse.' She reached out and held his hand with both of hers. Her face had deepened from seriousness to something more severe. 'What if the reason for the revolts was right there on the hard drives? What if some part of our known history, or some data from the outside, or maybe the knowledge of whatever it was that made people move in here long, long ago - what if that information built up some kind of pressure that made people lose their marbles, or go stir crazy, or just want *out*?'

Holston shook his head. 'I don't want you thinking that way,' he cautioned her.

'I'm not saying they were right to go nuts,' she told him, back to being careful. 'But from what I've pieced together so far, this is my theory.'

Holston gave the monitor an untrusting glance. 'Maybe you shouldn't be doing this,' he said. 'I'm not even sure *how* you're doing it, and maybe you shouldn't be.'

'Honey, the information is there. If I don't piece it together now, somebody else will at some point. You can't

put the genie back in the bottle.'

'What do you mean?'

'I've already published a white paper on how to retrieve deleted and overwritten files. The rest of the IT department is spreading it around to help people who've unwittingly flushed something they needed.'

'I still think you should stop,' he said. 'This isn't the best idea. I can't see any good coming of it—'

'No good coming from the truth? Knowing the truth is always good. And better that it's us discovering it than someone else, right?'

Holston looked at his files. It'd been five years since the last person was sent to cleaning. The view of the outside was getting worse every day, and he could feel the pressure, as sheriff, to find someone. It was growing, like steam building up in the silo, ready to launch something out. People got nervous when they thought the time was near. It was like one of those self-fulfilling prophecies where the nerves finally made someone twitch, then lash out or say something regretful, and then they'd find themselves in a cell, watching their last blurry sunset.

Holston sorted through the files all around him, wishing there was something in them. He would put a man to his death tomorrow if it meant releasing that steam. His wife was poking some great, overly full balloon with a needle, and Holston wanted to get that air out of it before she poked too far.

*Present Time*

HOLSTON SAT ON the lone steel bench in the airlock, his brain numb from lack of sleep and the surety of what lay before him. Nelson, the head of the cleaning lab, knelt in front of him and worked a leg of the white hazard suit over Holston's foot.

'We've played around with the joint seals and added a second spray-on lining,' Nelson was saying. 'It should give you more time out there than anyone has had before.'

This registered with Holston, and he remembered watching his wife go about her cleaning. The top floor of the silo with its great screens showing the outside world was usually empty for cleanings. The people inside couldn't bear to watch what they'd done - or maybe they wanted to come up and enjoy a nice view without seeing what it took to get it. But Holston had watched; there was never any doubt that he would. He couldn't see Allison's face through her silver-masked helmet, couldn't see her thin arms through the bulky suit as she scrubbed and scrubbed with her wool pads, but he knew her walk, her mannerisms. He had watched her finish the job, taking her time and doing it well, and then she had stepped back, looked in the camera one last time, waved at him, then turned to walk away. Like others before her, she had lumbered towards a nearby hill and had begun climbing up, trudging towards the dilapidated spires of that ancient and crumbling city just visible over the horizon. Holston hadn't moved the entire time. Even as she fell on the side of the hill, clutching her

helmet, writhing while the toxins first ate away the spray-on linings, then the suit and finally his wife, he hadn't moved.

'Other foot.'

Nelson slapped his ankle. Holston lifted his foot and allowed the tech to bunch the rest of the suit around his shins. Looking at his hands, at the black carbon undersuit he wore against his skin, Holston pictured it all dissolving off his body, sloughing away like flakes of dried grease from a generator's pipe while the blood burst from his pores and pooled up in his lifeless suit.

'If you'll grab the bar and stand—'

Nelson was walking him through a routine he'd seen twice before. Once with Jack Brent, who had been belligerent and hostile right up to the end, forcing him as sheriff to stand guard by the bench. And once with his wife, whom he had watched get ready through the airlock's small porthole. Holston knew what to do from watching these others, but he still needed to be told. His thoughts were elsewhere. Reaching up, he grabbed the trapeze-like bar hanging above him and pulled himself upright. Nelson grabbed the sides of the suit and yanked them up to Holston's waist. Two empty arms flapped at either side.

'Left hand here.'

Holston numbly obeyed. It was surreal to be on the other side of this - this mechanical death-walk of the condemned. Holston had often wondered why people complied, why they just went along. Even Jack Brent had done what he was told, as foul-mouthed and verbally abusive as he'd been. Allison had done it quietly, just like this, Holston thought as he inserted one hand and then the other. The suit came up, and Holston thought that maybe people went along with it because they couldn't believe it was happening. None of it was real enough to rebel against. The animal part of his mind wasn't made for this, to be calmly ushered to a death it was perfectly aware of.

‘Turn.’

He did.

There was a tug at the small of his back, and then a noisy zipping sound up to his neck. Another tug, another zip. Two layers of futility. The crunch of industrial Velcro over the top. Pats and double-checks. Holston heard the hollow helmet slide off its shelf; he flexed his fingers inside the puffy gloves while Nelson checked over the dome’s innards.

‘Let’s go over the procedure one more time.’

‘It’s not necessary,’ Holston said quietly.

Nelson glanced towards the airlock door leading back to the silo. Holston didn’t need to look to know someone was likely watching. ‘Bear with me,’ Nelson said. ‘I have to do it by the book.’

Holston nodded, but he knew there wasn’t any ‘book’. Of all the mystic oral traditions passed through silo generations, none matched the cult-like intensity of the suit makers and the cleaning techs. Everyone gave them their space. The cleaners might perform the physical act, but the techs were the people who made it possible. These were the men and women who maintained the view to that wider world beyond the silo’s stifling confines.

Nelson placed the helmet on the bench. ‘You got your scrubbers here.’ He patted the wool pads stuck to the front of the suit.

Holston pulled one off with a ripping sound, studied the whorls and curls of the rough material, then stuck it back on.

‘Two squirts from the cleaning bottle before you scrub with the wool, then dry with this towel, then put the ablating films on last.’ He patted the pockets in order, even though they were clearly labelled and numbered – upside down so Holston could read them – and colour-coded.

Holston nodded and met the tech’s eyes for the first time. He was surprised to see fear there, fear he had

learned well to notice in his profession. He almost asked Nelson what was wrong before it occurred to him: the man was worried all these instructions were for naught, that Holston would walk out – like everyone in the silo feared all cleaners would – and not do his duty. Not clean up for the people whose rules, rules against dreaming of a better place, had doomed him. Or was Nelson worried that the expensive and laborious gear he and his colleagues had built, using those secrets and techniques handed down from well before the uprising, would leave the silo and rot to no purpose?

‘You okay?’ Nelson asked. ‘Anything too tight?’

Holston glanced around the airlock. My life is too tight, he wanted to say. My skin is too tight. The walls are too tight.

He just shook his head.

‘I’m ready,’ he whispered.

It was the truth. Holston was oddly and truly very much ready to go.

And he remembered, suddenly, how ready his wife had been as well.

*Three Years Earlier*

'I WANT TO go out. I want to go out. I want to go out.'

Holston arrived at the cafeteria in a sprint. His radio was still squawking, Deputy Marnes yelling something about Allison. Holston hadn't even taken the time to respond, had just bolted up three flights of stairs towards the scene.

'What's going on?' he asked. He swam through the crowd by the door and found his wife writhing on the cafeteria floor, held down by Connor and two other food staff employees. 'Let her go!' He slapped their hands off his wife's shins and was nearly rewarded by one of her boots to his chin. 'Settle down,' he said. He reached for her wrists, which were twisting this way and that to get out of the desperate grips of grown men. 'Baby, what the *hell* is going on?'

'She was running for the airlock,' Connor said through grunts of exertion. Percy corralled her kicking feet, and Holston didn't stop him. He saw now why three men were needed. He leaned close to Allison, making sure she saw him. Her eyes were wild, peeking through a curtain of dishevelled hair.

'Allison, baby, you've gotta settle down.'

'I want to go out. I want to go out.' Her voice had quietened, but the words kept tumbling out.

'Don't say that,' Holston told her. Chills ran through his body at the sound of the grave utterances. He held her cheeks. 'Baby, don't say that!'