

**ABOVE**

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# NATIONWIDE MANHUNT FOR THE POD CONTINUES FBI TASK FORCE SEARCHES WIDELY

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Members of the domestic terrorist group known as the Pod remain the target of a comprehensive FBI nationwide search.

“They’ve gone to ground,” FBI agent Tia Ryan stated during a brief press conference earlier today.

The Pod is thought to be composed of former members of the Weather Underground Organization, a radical group active in the late sixties and seventies. Their alleged leader is Dr. Lawrence Oliver Dane. Dane was taken off the FBI’s Most Wanted list decades ago, after he was presumed dead in an accidental bomb explosion at a safe house belonging to the group, also known as the Weathermen.

The FBI has been reluctant to release any details of their ongoing investigation of the Pod, but a source close to the

investigation confirmed that Dane is indeed believed to be alive.

Following his reported death, Dane led a group of radicalized followers, including some family members, to a top-secret, abandoned nuclear fallout facility beneath the borough of Manhattan in New York City. There, the group built a self-sustaining community that they called the Deep and lived undetected for decades.

Dane, considered by many to be a genius, received his first university degree at the age of fifteen. Other advanced degrees quickly followed. He has master's degrees in business administration and agriculture, and PhDs in computer science and psychology.

It is possible that Dane's degrees in agriculture and business administration inspired him to found the gourmet mushroom wholesale business Cloud's Mushrooms, which investigators believe was created as a means to keep the underground group solvent.

Executives of the now bankrupt global company issued a statement categorically denying any knowledge of Dane or his underground followers.

"We had no idea where the mushrooms were grown, or who the owner of

the company was,” ex-CEO Paul Pence said. “I’ve never met Dr. Dane. I was told that the unnamed owner was very reclusive and wanted to remain completely behind the scenes.”

When asked if this unusual way of doing business raised any suspicions, Pence claimed that it did not.

“We were selling mushrooms — not arms, sarin gas, explosives, or anything else the Pod has been associated with. I will admit that it was a strange way to operate a business, but in the twenty-plus years I worked for Cloud’s Mushrooms, it was a well-oiled machine. The mushrooms went out and money came in.”

Pence indicated that profits were in the millions.

“But I’m unemployed now,” Pence said. “All of us at Cloud’s Mushrooms are unemployed. I left work on Tuesday evening with tens of millions of dollars in our account. When I returned on Wednesday morning the money had vanished.”

So too have Dane and several of his followers. The FBI is warning the public not to approach suspected members of the Pod and they are asking anyone with information to contact local law enforcement immediately. The Pod are believed to be armed and extremely dangerous.

## BENEATH

the newspaper article are police sketches of Lawrence Oliver Dane, aka Lod, aka Lord of the Deep, and several of the original members of the Pod, the so-called Originals.

I'm sitting inside Union Station in Portland, Oregon.

I need a shower.

I need a Laundromat.

I need a real bed.

I need a hot meal.

I haven't seen Coop and Kate for five days.

I'm not sure why we're running.

The train station is crowded because all the trains are late.

Snow all across the country, blocking tracks.

It's snowing outside right now.

Twenty-eight degrees.

I came in from Salt Lake City.

Kate is due in any minute from Seattle. I hope.

Coop is coming up from Los Angeles in a couple hours.  
Maybe.

The stationmaster just gave me a look the last time I asked him when the LA train would arrive. I'm guessing it's because the answer is the same as the first five times I asked.

The waiting area is packed because of the delays. We're all sitting on these long oak benches, guarding our gear. All I have is a small backpack with a change of clothes; a laptop,

which I haven't used since we left DC; and an iPhone, also unused except for a couple texts from Kate several days ago.

Oh, and this journal, and a couple of pencils, which I bought in DC just before I boarded the train. I bought journals and pencils for Coop and Kate too. I wonder if they will use them.

Kate's friend the Librarian gave us the packs and the electronics after we escaped from the Deep. The Librarian's real name is Alex Dane. He's Lod's younger brother. *Younger* is a relative term. They're both in their seventies, though you wouldn't know it by looking at either of them. Good genes, I guess.

Alex said that he would let us know when it was safe. He hasn't called, texted, or emailed. He said we needed to change our appearance. Stay off the grid. Travel separately, because Lod and his people would be looking for three kids traveling together.

I cut my hair.

Ridiculous.

Because it's been so cold I've worn a sock cap since I left DC.

I quit shaving.

Ridiculous.

Because it would take me about a hundred years to grow a beard.

People are starting to get up from the oak benches. Picking up their packs and bags, they begin lining up at the door leading out to the tracks.

The Coast Starlight Number 11 is pulling into the station from Seattle.

Between people trying to board and people detraining, it's impossible to pick Kate out of the crowd. I'm making a minor spectacle of myself standing on tiptoes and craning my neck trying to spot her in the mass of colliding humanity until I realize that's exactly how one of the Pod people will end up spotting me.

Kate is either on the train or she isn't. If she is on it she'll find me. Most of the people inside the station are boarding the southbound Coast Starlight. Those who have just detrained are hurrying toward the station exit.

I sit back down on the hard oak bench.

It doesn't take long for Kate to appear.

She sits down twenty feet away.

She's cut her hair and dyed it blond, but she is perfectly recognizable.

She's wearing sunglasses, which is the last thing anyone needs inside the dimly lit station. She might as well have had a sign around her neck that reads: HI, MY NAME IS KATE DANE. THE REASON I'M WEARING SUNGLASSES IS BECAUSE I WAS BORN AND RAISED UNDERGROUND AND MY EYES ARE SENSITIVE TO LIGHT, EVEN DIM LIGHT, WHEN I'M ABOVE.

I doubt it matters though. We're nearly three thousand miles away from New York City. From the sound of things, Lod and the Originals have more important things to worry about than three kids — like every law enforcement officer in the world trying to find and capture them.

Kate seems to be looking everywhere, and at everyone, but me. I want to jump up and shout: *I am right here!*

But I don't.

It must have been so strange for her to see the country for the first time on that long train ride. She's never been outside of New York City before, and most of that time she was living underground.

Traveling cross-country by train can be deceiving. Railway tracks do not run through the nicest parts of cities. If Kate was judging the country by what she saw clacking through the run-down parts of towns and cities, she might be thinking she made a big mistake surfacing and blowing the whistle on her grandfather.

Minutes pass.

I open my multi-tool pocketknife and carefully cut out the newspaper article. I've been snipping articles about the Pod at every stop and sticking them into the back of my notebook. I'm putting together an epistolary journal — from the Latin *epistola*, meaning letter. The author uses diaries, letters, and newspaper articles to tell the story.

Coop and I are no longer using digital recorders to communicate, but I still keep my recorder in my pocket out of habit. There could come a time when I might need it again.

It's interesting that none of the newspaper articles have pointed out that Pod stands for People of the Deep, or that if you reverse the words in Cloud's Mushrooms you come up with the symbol of a nuclear bomb explosion. Not that they

have a bomb; at least I don't *think* they have a bomb, and that's the problem. We don't know what they have, where they are, or what they're planning. All we know is that they are planning *something*, because, according to Kate, "Lod always has a plan."

## I WATCHED PAT

out of the corner of my eye, writing in his little pocket notebook. He had given me one just like it in Washington, DC, and I'd been using it.

I took off my sunglasses, squinted against the light, then slowly scanned the thirty or forty people left in the station one by one. Satisfied that there was no one in the station that I knew, I got up and walked over to Pat and sat down next to him.

"I think we're clear," I said. "I don't recognize anyone. But let's move over to the other bench so we're facing the entrance in case somebody I do recognize comes in. Is that the only entrance?"

"I think so." Pat stuffed his notebook into his pack and followed me.

I did another visual sweep, then turned to him and said, "How have you been, Pat?"

"Fine. I could use a shower and a hot meal."

"Me too. I'm starving. Is there a restaurant here?"

"There's a place called Wilfs. I haven't checked it out, but I looked at the menu outside the door. I've been here for hours."

I squinted at him, still bothered by the light. "You don't look that different."

"You do," Pat said. "At least with the sunglasses off. By the way, you need to keep them off."

"Really?"

"I don't know if you noticed, but it's gray outside and snowing. The lights inside are barely bright enough to read by. Nobody is wearing sunglasses. I doubt anyone in here is even carrying sunglasses."

"My eyes hurt even in this dim light," I complained. "When I crossed North Dakota a few days ago I thought my eyeballs were melting even with my shades on."

Pat shrugged. "It probably doesn't matter anyway. I doubt the Originals are looking for us."

"You're wrong," I said.

Pat retrieved his notebook and pulled a newspaper article out of it. "I think they have other things on their minds besides us," he said. "There's a massive manhunt for them."

I looked down at the sketches. I'd read several articles as I crossed the country, but I hadn't seen this one. "The sketches are accurate," I said. "Very accurate. But of course they don't look like this anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"My grandfather and the Originals are experts at disguise." I pointed at one of the sketches. "This is Bill Ord. He has brown eyes and gray thinning hair. Now he has a full head of black hair and a carefully trimmed black beard. His eyes are blue now. The same shade as mine. He looks twenty years younger."

Pat grinned. "You act like you've seen him."

"I did see him. He was in Sandpoint, Idaho, yesterday."

"It must have been somebody who looked —"

"It was Bill Ord," I insisted. "I've been making sure to get off the trains with the crowd. I saw him before he saw me. I slipped into the women's restroom and hid." I pointed at another sketch. A woman. "That's Bella. Bill's girlfriend. They've been together for decades. She was at the station too. In a wheelchair."

"How did she get out of the Deep? It isn't exactly handicapped accessible."

"Bella is as handicapped as you are. The wheelchair is a disguise. In the Deep she was our BJJ and yoga instructor. All Shadows are required to have black belts in BJJ."

"What is BJJ?"

"Brazilian jujitsu. I've been practicing it since I could walk."

"Did you use martial arts to get away from Bella and Bill?"

"Of course not. They didn't see me. I hid in the restroom custodian's closet while Bella checked the stalls; then I slipped by them while they searched the rest of the station. I took a bus to Seattle and caught the train down here."

"Maybe they were just catching a train. They're on the run too."

"You don't need to check toilet stalls to catch a train."

"'You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows,'" Pat said. A quote from Bob Dylan's song "Subterranean Homesick Blues," which is where the Weathermen got their name.

I gave him a smile. "You're kind of funny. Let's get something to eat."

## WILFS RESTAURANT

was even darker than the station. Kate checked out everyone in the restaurant as we walked in. The hostess took us to a table, which Kate rejected, pointing at another table in a dark corner where she could watch the entrance.

I had the pacific prawns with roasted jalapeño peppers and celeriac, which turned out to be root vegetables sautéed in fresh herbs and butter. Kate had the Steak Diane, which she regretted because the waiter brought it to the table flaming, or flambéed, in an iron skillet. Everyone in the restaurant, of course, watched the spectacle. For a second I thought Kate was going to jump up and make a run for it, or hide under the table. Instead, she put on her sunglasses.

“Don’t worry,” the server said. “I have yet to splatter anyone with hot grease.”

Which caused the people at the two closest tables to laugh.

The flaming beef incident took less than a minute, but that was more than enough time for Kate to suggest that we leave.

“We’d have to wait for the check,” I said quietly. “The waiter would want to know why we didn’t like our food. And I’m hungry.”

Kate took off her sunglasses and put them on the table. “I’ve never eaten in a restaurant.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I was. I’ve eaten in thousands of restaurants. My parents are two of the most

undomesticated humans on the planet. The kitchen in our house in McLean, Virginia, functions as a kitchen in name only. The fridge isn't there to keep food chilled. It's a magnetic bulletin board for take-out and delivery menus.

"Where did you eat when you were traveling cross-country?"

"Train station convenience stores."

"Did you know you could eat in the dining car? The food isn't that good, but at least it's food."

"Too exposed. I picked my seats carefully. Window seats at the front of the car closest to the dining car, with the restroom forward. People going to the restroom, or the dining car, had to walk up from behind me."

"What about when they returned to their seats?"

"I sat in window bulkhead seats. They'd have to turn their heads to see me. People walking down a narrow aisle tend to look straight ahead. People exiting restrooms generally don't look at anyone. Don't tell me you didn't know this."

"No. I didn't."

Who thinks like this? People of the Deep. That's who. When Kate was Beneath she was a Shadow, kind of like a cop whose job it was to keep an eye on other Pod members. Paranoia runs deep Beneath, but if there was a nuclear holocaust you would want to have a Shadow at your side. They can see their way in the dark, and they're expert trackers and scavengers.

I forked a spicy prawn into my mouth.

It was delicious.

Kate started in on her steak.

“Did you talk to anyone on the trains?” I asked.

Kate shook her head. “I put my backpack on the aisle seat. If the car was full I put the pack at my feet and acted like I was asleep. Did you talk to anyone?”

“Of course. How can you not talk to anyone for five days?”

“By not talking to anyone.”

I ate my third prawn.

Three to go.

I thought about ordering another plateful.

“What did you talk about?” Kate asked.

“Nothing really. Just strangers-on-a-train things. ‘Where are you going? Where’d you come from? Cold enough for you?’ That kind of stuff. I lied about most of it, of course. Parents divorced. Going to see my mom, or dad, or uncle, or aunt, or grandparents. Told them my name was Jack, when they asked, but most of the time no one asked. So you never went to a restaurant when you were on top?”

“Never. We weren’t up top often, and when we were, it was usually very late, or very early in the morning. Most things were closed. And when we were up top we were always working — shadowing people, mostly Originals. If they had to go inside a building, we waited outside for them. Not much risk of an Original running. We were more like security than shadows. Lod liked us to spend time up top so we’d be used to it in case there was a runner.”

“Did you ever have a runner?”

“Twice. Caught one Beneath. The other managed to make it up top, but he was only up for ten minutes before we ran him down. Very nice guy. His name was Bob Jonas. Some

kind of computer genius. He was going to be promoted to Original. We were all shocked that he ran.”

“What happened to Bob?”

Kate slowly chewed a piece of steak, which she seemed to be enjoying, before answering. “Lod said he sent him to the mush room. He said he would return as soon as he was back in sync with the group.” Another bite of steak. A sip of water. “I never saw him again. No one did.”

Coop and I had been sentenced to the mush room before Kate had helped us escape.

I scarfed down another prawn.

Two to go.

“Up top,” I said. “That’s where you saw Coop. I mean, the first time.”

She nodded. “I was up top with Lod. He had some business to take care of. He went into an apartment building to talk to someone. I was standing on the stoop, waiting. Coop walked by with another man. They stopped under a streetlight and started tap-dancing. It was so weird. I was mesmerized by the strangeness of it.”

Another piece of steak disappeared.

“The following week I was up top again for a drill. We had a lot more of them toward the end. That’s how I knew something was up.”

“What kind of drill?”

“Retrieval. Lod would send someone up top and the Shadows’ job was to find them and bring them back down.”

“And you saw Coop again?”

“Three more times. Once on his own, tapping in a tunnel.

Twice with Terry Trueman when they were Dumpster diving. That's when I first thought that Coop might be trying to join Terry and the others Beneath."

"Were you looking for him?"

"That's the strange thing. I wasn't. I just kept bumping into him in completely different parts of the city. It was like he was a magnet."

*More like a lightning rod*, I thought, eating my last prawn. Coop had been attracting people to him from the moment he was born. Complete strangers. Rich and poor. From every walk of life.

"Somehow I knew," Kate continued. "I would meet Coop in the Deep."

The server brought the check. I paid him from the pile of cash Alex had given us in New York. We had divided it three ways. I still had several thousand dollars left.

The station had gotten a lot more crowded. I was trying to figure out where we were going to sit when Kate grabbed my arm and yanked me into the tiny convenience store near the restaurant.

"I've already been in here," I said. "They don't have anything I —"

"Bella," Kate said.

There were windows in the store looking out into the waiting area. I peeked out past the potato chips. Fifty feet away was a woman sitting in a wheelchair. She was facing the boarding doors.

I couldn't see her face.

“How do you know it’s Bella?”

“Because Bill Ord is standing fifty steps to her right, facing the opposite direction, holding an open paperback like he’s reading. But what he’s really doing is scanning the crowd.”

Bill Ord. Black hair. Black beard. He was too far away to see the color of his eyes. He looked nothing like the sketch in the newspaper.

“How did they get here?”

“Train? Car? Bus? Airplane? Who knows.”

People were gathering their things.

Standing up.

A train was pulling in.

I walked over to the counter and asked the woman which train it was.

“Los Angeles,” she said.

Coop’s train.

Kate came up behind me. “You can leave the station through the restaurant.”

I stepped away from the counter. “Me? What about you?”

“Someone has to intercept Coop before he comes into the station. Someone has to warn him.”

“And that someone should be me. Not you.”

“You have no idea who these people are. What they’re capable of.”

“Exactly,” I said. “They’ve never seen me. I could walk over and offer to push Bella’s wheelchair, or ask Bill what he’s reading. Neither one of them would look at me twice. My disguise is that they don’t know who I am.”

She stared at me for a second, then gave a reluctant nod. I followed her back over to the window.

Bill and Bella had not moved from their positions.

“What’s your plan?” Kate asked.

I grabbed a bag of Cheetos. My third of the day.

“I’ll get in line like I’m catching the train. Hopefully I’ll spot Coop before they do. He and I will figure out a different exit strategy. There has to be another way out of the train yard other than through the station.”

I hoped there was another way out of the yard.

“And what am I supposed to do?” Kate asked.

“Voodoo Doughnuts.”

“What?”

“I just read about it. It’s not too far away. It’s just the kind of weird place that Coop would like.” I showed her the newspaper advertisement with directions. “We’ll meet you there.”