

Chapter 1 The Lucky Ones

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Judy Vargas slammed her fist down on the table as she watched the chase unfolding on the Visi-screen. "Damn them!" she muttered under her breath at the screen. She covered her eyes with her hands in a futile attempt to avoid seeing the final moments of the chase but she couldn't resist peeking. She peered out between her fingers and glared at the screen. "The bastards are going to kill the innocent person just like they always do," she grumbled to her husband. Bill motioned for his wife to calm down. "The screen can detect our emotions," he whispered to her.

"I don't care," she cried, as tears formed in her eyes. "This is the fourth chase in the last two weeks and the GOP's always catch their victim. If the poor guy doesn't die now, he will at the end of the year at the extravaganza. He doesn't have a chance. He's going to die just like our daughter will."

Bill and Judy Vargas, along with millions of other viewers all over the world, sat glued to their huge wall-mounted Visi-screens watching the frantic escape attempt as the young man flew his Astro-flyer at high speeds and made dangerous zigzag movements trying to save himself. The government official protectors, known as GOPs were in hot pursuit and had chased the young man for over a hundred miles. As the GOPs closed in on the fleeing flyer, people yelled and screamed. At least, most people did but a few cringed as they watched. The few that cringed hoped and prayed that the innocent person in the flyer would somehow manage to escape. However, they didn't hold out much hope because the GOPs were relentless. They would pursue their victims to the end of the universe. They were ruthless and never gave up. Everyone watching, knew that they wouldn't quit until they had their prey firmly in their grasp.

Bill smiled at Judy and stroked her hair. "I love you," he said. "I don't know what I'd do without you. We make a perfect team."

With a slightly turned up smile, Judy reached over and tugged on Bill's pants. "Let's go to the bedroom and check things out," she suggested in an alluring way. "It'll take our minds off of this terrible Terminus List."

"Let's go just as soon as this news report is over." Bill said. "I want to see if somehow the guy gets away. Then, we can have our fun."

"Okay, but I hope it doesn't go on too long," Judy whispered. "I want you as much as you want me and you know that the guy isn't going to get away. They never do." She looked at Bill with a lustful smile. "I'll be waiting for you."

Judy Spencer was born in Portland Oregon to Mr. and Mrs. Jordan Spencer. Bill Vargas and Judy fell in love during their freshman year at the University of Oregon and they got married immediately after they graduated. Two years later Judy got pregnant and nine months after that, Barbara was born. Barbara grew up and tried to choose the best qualities from each of her parents.

Her dad was almost too technical and, even though he smiled easily, he had a somewhat abrasive personality, unlike her mother. Her mom was stylish although on the slightly heavy side, she was very sweet, and always had a ready smile. Her sweetness won her over to her many friends. Barbara loved both of her parents and believed that she was the luckiest girl in the world for having them as her mentors.

While his wife waited in the bedroom, Bill sat with his eyes glued to the screen and shivers ran through his body as he watched the young man who had been identified by reporters as Brad Florin an escapee being pursued by the GOPs.

Brad Florin was a typical college student attending Lees-McRae a small mountain college in Banner Elk, North Carolina. Brad majored in Biological Science and had a great future ahead of him. He loved life and loved the college. He was in his final year at Lees-McRae and would be graduating that year. He was happy, had a girlfriend, and figured that he had a long life ahead of him. He and his girlfriend planned to get married after graduation. Then, one morning as he was sitting in his dorm watching the Visi-screen, he saw that his name was selected for the Terminus List. When he saw his name on the list, he felt like he was struck by a ton of bricks. All his dreams evaporated and he knew his life was over. He was one of the few who had not succumbed to the brainwashing and was terrified of being on the list. In a desperate attempt to get away, he told his girlfriend goodbye and left Lees-McRae and took his flyer and flew out of state and planned to live in seclusion in the North Carolina mountains. Government officials, through informers, had found out what he was planning and they sent protectors to bring him back.

Many viewers cheered and a few cried as the chase unfolded. After one desperate last minute zigzag maneuver, Brad crashed his Astro-flyer near a wooded area close to the small town of Blowing Rock, North Carolina. The young man, bloodied and disoriented, tumbled out of his crashed flyer and frantically stumbled towards the woods.

Brad was disoriented as he hauled himself towards a wooded area that he hoped would provide him some cover and protection. Just before reaching the woods, he tripped and fell and then, just as the protectors got to him, he picked himself up and managed to break away. He staggered and fell several times trying to get away. He managed to get to the wooded area, but the protectors were hot on his tail and quickly caught up with him before he got more than a quarter-mile into the woods. He struggled gallantly to get away from them, but he was outnumbered a hundred to one and the protectors quickly subdued him, handcuffed him, and threw him roughly into a waiting cruiser. Many viewers knew what fate awaited Brad and they cheered loudly as he was driven away. Other viewers cried silently.

With the chase over, Bill turned off the Visi-screen and headed for the bedroom. When he got there, he told his wife what had happened.

"I told you that there was no way he'd get away." Judy Vargas pounded her fist into her hand and exclaimed loudly, "Someday, I'll get those bastards! They haven't seen anything yet. Just wait until I unleash my power on them."

"Whoa," Bill said in a calming voice, "You're awfully feisty. Are you going to run for office or get an M26 and go after them?"

"Maybe, both," she retorted. "I'm that mad. They may be powerful politicians but I'll bet with enough women and people backing me, I could beat them and change the course of the world."

"Sara Chin is the most powerful woman in the world right now and she is well-liked by the Committee that basically rules the world," Bill emphasized. "You don't really think you'd have a chance against her, do you?"

"Yes, I do," Judy said firmly. "Yes, I do," she repeated.

If looks could kill, then Bill was sure that his wife could do exactly what she said she could do. Judy had the fiercest expression that he'd ever seen. She looked like a Mountain Lion ready for the slaughter. She'd always been very outspoken in high school and college and now Bill almost felt like hiding from her. He loved her but he was fearful of what she could do. Judy had been a conservative activist and a powerful politician in college and she still had that same fire in her eyes when she spoke. When she gave speeches at their school, the University of Oregon, or as everyone fondly called it, the U of O, in Eugene, she could really fire a crowd up. However, that was over twenty years in the past and she no longer believed the entire world should be conservative. Now, she believed that there was a middle ground and that's where the majority of people resided. The only thing she really wanted was to get rid of the ones trying to kill people with their so-called liberated punctuation. That was the one thing that bothered her more than anything.

"These damned Liberals have ruined the world," she said emotionally. "Maybe it's time that someone with common sense took over the government again and ran it like it should be run."

Bill again asked her to calm down. He told her that her face was red and that she looked like a volcano that was ready to explode. "I'm worried that you might have a stroke," he said.

"I feel like a volcano," she said as her nostrils flared and she continued seething about Brad Florin. After a few moments, she calmed down some and regained her composure. However, she was still frothing at the mouth.

"I'm not sure that there's anything we can do about it," Bill said.

"Maybe not," she said dejectedly, "but, I don't have to like it."

"True," Bill replied.

Judy smiled at Bill and pulled his body towards her. "Come on hon, let's try to forget about this for a while," she said and smiled. She grabbed Bill's hand and pulled him closer to her.

Judy reached over and grabbed the remote control. With it, she flipped the light switch off. "Now, she said let's use our Braille system." Bill smiled but Judy couldn't see him doing it. They made love and let all of the evil problems of the world fade into the distance.

At the year-end extravaganza in 1999, Brad Florin became a statistic. He was killed by liberated punctuation and he was no longer connected to the human race. He became just another number on the Terminus List. Brad Florin was not the only one, five thousand others were also killed by liberated punctuation. The committee had done an excellent job of getting schools to program young people. The majority of the young people, unlike Brad, accepted their selection enthusiastically. It was many of the older generation and a few like Brad that they were having problems with. Fear of reprisals from the governing committee had spread across the land. Rumors had been circulating for months saying that anyone caught showing any resentment would find *their* names on the Terminus List. The Terminus List was a list of randomly chosen people selected for being put to death at the end of each year. It was put into law in 2878 by the ruling World Organization to control the world's population.

On 15 September, the governing committee met in secret at a retreat in the Catskill Mountains a hundred miles north-northwest of New York City and forty miles south of Albany, New York. The committee's main agenda was to determine the best way to quell the festering resentment that people were having to the Terminus List. They'd secretly implemented the anti-

resentment rule in early 2996, but the rule was not working as planned. They'd heard reports of increasing rebellious activity, particularly on the west coast of the United States. Several rebel leaders had fled to the hills and small towns in northern California and were being aggressively hunted down. Some minor flare-ups had also been reported in Asia and South America. Something more definitely needed to be done and soon. The committee could not afford to have even a smidgeon of rebellion. They believed that the future of the United World would be determined by the committee's ability to maintain harmony. They couldn't legally throw the rebels into jail but they could do other things to disrupt them. They continued to try to get people to willingly accept the Terminus List and the other laws that they passed. They had an enormously strong grip on the people of the world and only the few rebels in California gave them any trouble. They were slowly getting the rebels taken care of by rounding them up and killing them off. They hoped that it wouldn't be long before the rebels were totally wiped out.

The committee chairperson, from China, stood up to address the group. Sara Chin looked out at the representatives and waited for them to finish clapping. Sara had been selected to rule the committee two years before. She was pretty, intelligent, and very popular among the members, but not so popular with ordinary citizens. She couldn't understand why people did not willingly accept the Terminus list. After all, being born and dying were natural and accepted and she felt the list should be a necessary part of this process. Sara personally thought the list was the greatest idea she'd ever come up with. Her proposal was submitted and unanimously approved by the committee. Sara and the people on the committee believed it was a nice way to keep the population under control. At this meeting in early 3000, she introduced a bill to have the government official protectors granted full authority to dispose of any rebellious activity and leaders that sprang up in the world. She had heard that they were trying to fight the political system and she wanted it and them quelled as soon as possible. Shortly after she addressed the group, the bill was narrowly defeated by the bipartisan committee. After the bill was voted down, Sara met secretly with the committee and got them to agree to have the GOP's do all that they could to harass the rebels and to disrupt their actions.

Bill Vargas and his wife Judy nervously scanned the morning news on the oversized Visi-screen on their living room wall. The date was the summer of 3000 and it was time for the new list of chosen names to be published. The new Terminus List would be out today and they were afraid of what they might find.

At the end of the normal news reports, there was a brief introduction to the new list.

"Today we are very happy to announce the annual year-end selection of names. We'd like to express our congratulations to those selected to undergo the liberated punctuation process. If your name appears on the Terminus List, you and your family should be very proud. As is always done, a computer was used to randomly select the individuals. Therefore, no one should feel slighted if their name does not appear on the list. This year we will celebrate the new millennium by holding the "Terminus exit show" during the Super Sunday half-time activities."

After reading the introduction, Bill and Judy quickly scanned through the several pages of names. Judy almost passed out when she saw their daughter's name on the last page.

"Number 1439-6827-99448—Barbara Vargas, Age 18"

Bill and Judy suppressed their emotions as best they could. They smiled at each other and then at the screen. After the forced smiles, that they hoped would show that they were pleased to see their daughter's name on the list, Bill remotely turned off the visi-screen. He was afraid that the screen could sense their emotions.

As soon as the screen went blank, Judy's face turned a bright red and she put her hands on her hips in a defiant manner. "They can't keep doing this crap," she yelled at the screen as her anger rose. "One way or the other they have to be stopped. Someone has to stop them from killing innocent people. So help me God," she said angrily, "if they kill our daughter, I'll find a way to kill those bastards. They make me so angry that I could bludgeon them with my bare fists," she added and shook her fists at the dark screen.

Super Sunday was less than three months away and the Vargas's were not sure what to do. Outwardly, before Bill turned off the wall screen, for any government spies that might be watching, they tried to show how happy they were that their daughter had been chosen, but inwardly they were scared and resentful. They did not want to lose their only daughter. They did not feel like throwing a big party to celebrate, like many families were doing. Barbara was not ecstatic either about being chosen. like many of her classmates were. For some reason, the years of programming had not worked as well on her or her boyfriend, Tom.

"They call the year-end killings "*liberated punctuation*!" Judy exclaimed in a repulsive voice.

"Liberated punctuation my ass!" Bill exclaimed loudly and shook his head in disgust. "It's just plain killing and nothing more."

"The politicians can come up with some of the damndest things to make what they do sound okay," Judy said looking at the blank screen on the wall.

Judy Vargas was not one to take things lying down. She had fought the school district over children being bullied. When their daughter Barbara was in high school, she was bullied and the school just ignored it. They said that to them it wasn't bullying, it was just normal interaction between students. This really upset Judy because she knew darn well that it was bullying. When the teachers wouldn't listen, she went before the school board and filed a complaint. Shortly after that, the school was reprimanded and they were forced to apologize to Barbara and Judy. Judy became a political activist in college and a lot of that was because she believed that the liberal politicians were ruining the country. Judy looked and sounded tough but she was genuinely pleasant and sociable. Judy was of German ancestry. She wore gold-framed glasses that gave her an intellectual appearance. Bill was just the opposite as Judy but they fit together perfectly. Where she was more of a leader, he was a follower. They'd met in high school, fallen in love, and got married immediately after graduating from the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. The college was a four-year college with a picturesque campus. Its backyard was full of trees, hiking trails, and only a short ten minutes away from beautiful downtown Eugene.

"Let's take a vacation and get away for a few days," Bill said during a Friday breakfast the following week of the Super Sunday announcement.

"Will they let us?" Judy asked.

Bill and Judy Vargas owned a large company that supplied a vast array of remote control devices. They had owned the company for over twenty years and loved it. Not only did they love

the business but they also loved the money that it generated. Bill made all of the decisions about the company.

"Sure, it's normal for families to have a last get-together with their loved ones before they are liberated," Bill said. His eyebrow shot up in an obvious show of dislike for the term, liberated.

"Just the three of us?" Barbara asked.

"Just the three of us," Bill repeated. "Since we own our business, it'll be easy for us to take a vacation. I'll ask Janice to run the company while we're gone."

"How long will we actually be gone?" Judy asked.

"That depends on what we find. Maybe forever," he whispered to Judy. Barbara didn't hear the forever part. She was thinking too much about taking Tom with them on the vacation.

"Forever?" Judy whispered and sounded stunned. "That's a very long time."

"Yes, it is." Bill said. "I don't think that we have much choice but we have to do what we have to do. I don't want to give up the business," Bill said, "but if I have to do it to save Barbara, I'd gladly do it in an instance. Her life is more important than anything."

"I feel the same way," Judy whispered. "Do you think we'll have to give up the business?"

"I hope not but if we do, it's just something we'll have to do."

"Can Tom go with us?" Barbara begged. "I'd like to be able to spend some time with him. This may be the last two weeks we'll be alive."

"Sure, if it's okay with your mom and his parents." Bill said with a slight grin and added, "Just the four of us then."

"Fine with me," Judy said. "I like Tom."

"When? Where?" Barbara eagerly asked.

"How about the next two weeks?" Bill said and tried to sound convincing. "We can go to the campground in the redwoods near the Oregon-California border. Barbara you used to like camping there when you were younger."

"You're talking about the Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park in California, right? I love it there."

"I think I'd like that too," Judy said. "We haven't been there for a long time."

"I'd really like it," Barbara added. "Especially, if Tom can go with us. I love Tom and it would mean a lot to be with him on the trip. This may be a last chance to be with him before the Terminus Celebration."

"Can we tell the company today that we're going?" Judy asked. She forced a smile and tried to keep her emotions in check. The words, "*Terminus Celebration*" sent shivers down her back.

"Today it is," Bill said.

Barbara took off for the Visi-Phone to call Tom to tell him about the planned vacation and to find out if he could go with them.

"It's sure going to be hard coming back here after the vacation," Judy said, looking at Bill after Barbara left.

"Maybe not," Bill said and smiled.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you later. Maybe, after we're cozily snuggled up in bed. Love has a sneaky way of making everything seem right and making love with you is better than anything in the world." Bill said, smiling at his wife.

"The feeling's mutual," Judy said and gave him a hug. "I'd rather make love to you than anything else that I can think of. It makes me feel good to know that I can make you happy with what I do."

"What you do?" Bill said and then added, "That's the best part of being married to you and having you by my side." Judy smiled at the thought of her husband and how she could make him smile.