

JENS BOELE

URBEX

PREDATOR

TAKE NOTHING BUT PICTURES

LEAVE NOTHING BUT BODIES

Urbex (short for Urban Exploration or Urban Exploring) is the private exploration of facilities of urban space and so-called Abandoned Places. This often involves exploring old industrial ruins, as well as sewers, catacombs, rooftops, or other spaces of unused facilities. The photographic documentation and artistic processing of such urban explorations founded the still-young genre of ruin photography and is gaining increasing popularity in social media.

Apex Predator (from Latin apex peak or apex) is the not strictly defined term in biology for a carnivore that is at the top of the food pyramid in an ecosystem. It is thus a predator that has no predators of its own.

PROLOGUE

Silence was all that was left. Neither the shouting of the officers nor the marching thunder of the soldiers had remained from the Cold War. Finally, it was time itself that had defeated all enemies.

Unwavering, indifferent, and relentless, it gnawed at the foundations of what the Allied forces had left behind. Heat had cracked the asphalt, rain washed out the concrete, wind and storm had smashed doors and windows. Tar paper had melted in the sun and frozen in winter. Tiles had cracked in the freezing cold. Weather had crept into the woodwork and driven the paint out of the wood. Moss and ferns clung to exterior walls, clogging gutters, and water pipes. The forces of nature had achieved what those of the enemy had failed to do.

In the cold moonlight, Scott and Billy wandered between the former apartment blocks near the barracks. Six-story residential silos had probably housed the soldiers' families at that time. Today they were surrounded by trees that had not been planted yet when the houses were abandoned. In the moonlight, the open front doors of the house looked like the entrance to a more sinister and terrifying world than the darkness of the woods. The night wind carried the heavy smell of forest soil and damp cellars to their noses. Now the nocturnal animals came to life and mingled their calls with leaves rustling.

“Wait!” Billy put his hand on Scott’s shoulder. “There’s something up ahead.”

They stopped on a grassy path that once had been a road.

“What’s supposed to be there?” Scott folded his arms in front of his chest.

“Look ...”

A black shadow emerged from the forest. Billy froze, Scott held his breath. It appears the animal was slowly approaching them. Gosh, let it be just a dog that has lost its way.

“It’s a wolf,” Scott whispered.

Billy felt Scott’s arm pushing him back.

“Damn, what do we do now?” Scott breathed frantically.

The animal approached slowly; head bowed.

“That’s a wolf,” Scott kept whispering, “that’s a wolf ...” Breathing frantically, his voice grew louder with each word.

“That! Is! A! Wolf!” he shouted energetically, stamping his foot with each word, and waving his arms.

When Billy came out from behind his back, the animal had disappeared. His shoulders slumped. Scott exhaled in relief.

“Was that really a wolf?” asked Billy in a low voice.

“I don’t know,” Scott went on. “Anyway, it’s gone.”

“Can’t you even turn on the flashlight?”

“No, man. Not until we get inside. I don’t feel like getting caught by

security anytime soon.”

Taking a deep breath, Billy let go of his tension. “And how is this even going to work? We’ve been walking through the forest for about half an hour now.”

“Yeah, so what?”

“How are we supposed to move those cables back to the car? Do you think I will run the route back and forth umpteen times?”

Scott abruptly stopped and glanced at Billy. “You aren’t even listening to me, are you? We will get all the cables out of the ceilings that night and stash them here. Then we’ll see what we got, and tomorrow night we’ll break down the gate and drive up here with the transporter. All right?”

Billy chewed on his lower lip. “Yes, but why don’t we go with the van already?”

“Because the broken gate would attract the security service in the morning, which would then catch us, stupid.”

Waiting for an answer, he glanced at Billy, “It’s not that hard to understand, though, is it?” Billy nodded mutely.

“But do you think there’s still a lot to earn here anyway? This place is kind of old, you know. I’m sure others have been here before and pulled the copper outta the walls.”

“Take a good look around. Do you see any graffiti? Do you see any trails? Has anyone been partying here?” Billy let his eyes wander. No, no one has been here for a long time. “Don’t ask me why, but this place is hot.”

Scott raised his eyebrows. “Now let’s get going.” Forgivingly, he patted Billy on the shoulder. “Otherwise, the Big Bad Wolf will get you right away.”

Sighing, Billy kept walking.

“This is probably just too far away from civilization. We’re just out here in the middle of nowhere. Nobody gets lost here ...”

A bloodcurdling scream echoed throughout the night.

Frozen, Billy stopped, Scott took a step back.

“What was that?” Billy’s voice trembled.

Scott stared into the night. “I’m sure it was just an animal.”

Billy shivered. “Was no animal, dude.”

Scott turned to him. “What else would that have been? The wolf probably took a deer. You know what kind of noises animals make when they’re scared to die?”

Billy shook his head quietly as he remained in a state of shock.

“See it like this—the wolf will feast now and leave us alone.” Scott smiled. “Is even better for us.”

After a brief silence, he added, “Think of the money!”

The wind had eased, the dark forest path lay in silence. Behind them, the moon illuminated the clearing where the houses stood. In front of them, there was darkness.

Billy whispered, “Wait,” and then walked on hesitantly. His legs were heavy as lead, his breathing shallow. “Wait for me.”

“Hurry,” Scott whispered softly.

As the path narrowed, the trees came closer, denying them the last light of the moon.

They could barely see anything when they noticed a motion in the shadows.

A large shade moved slowly between the trees.

It walked upright on two legs.

This was not an animal.

Billy felt an icy chill as his arms felt numb. He felt an invisible band tighten around his chest, draining his breath as Scott disappeared into the darkness.

“Scott?”

He gasped for air.

“Run! Run Billy!”

Billy’s stomach clenched. He heard Scott try to shout something, but his voice turned into an uncontrolled gurgle. Like he was going to throw up. Then a rattle.

Billy wanted to run away, but he just stood there, unmoving and trembling, paralyzed with fright. He grabbed his cheek. His eyes stared into the forest, widening.

“Scott?”

A branch cracked.

Darkness surrounded him.

Silence.

FOLLOW THE TRAIL

The meadow was flooded with warm summer light. There was the scent of straw in the air. At the end of the clearing, nettles lined the adjacent spruce forest. Amidst the chirping of birds, one could occasionally hear speeding cars from the distant state highway. Nela and Tess followed a path through tall grass that hadn't been mowed in years. The meadow must have once belonged to someone, which was remarkable because somebody must have parked the cars that were slowly rusting away here.

"Look!" Smiling, Nela gently touched her friend's shoulder.

"Hello, hello, hello! What have we got here?" Excited, Tess jumped past Nela and ran toward the rusted pickup truck. "Pretty rad, that mopa!"

Nela laughed as she took the backpack off her shoulders and set up her equipment. Good to see that her friend was thrilled.

"Check out all the other cars."

She looked across the meadow and saw a green panel van at the edge of the forest. Branches had already grown through it. A station wagon and a Camry were parked next to each other. The station wagon was rotting away, while the Camry was in good condition. The pickup truck would be

the first subject, the panel van the second. Both cars looked just perfect. Untouched by human hands yet destroyed by time.

“Like they were just waiting for me ...”

Nela carefully extended the legs of the tripod, attached the SLR camera and finally put on the lens. On the camera’s display, the old car looked small and inconspicuous. The engine block’s rust tones blended into the spruce forest background and were framed by the meadow’s green and the trees’ needles. The body’s former white paint was the only thing that stood out. Yet, the rust underneath was blistering and breaking through the coating.

Rain, moss, and sunlight had rendered it dirty and brittle, giving it a hint of green. Nela focused on the seats, of which little more than wooden planks, foam, and the remnants of plastic trim had remained. The tire-tread, however, was surprisingly deep. So, whenever the car had last been driven, it hadn’t been long ago.

Nela took a look at the sky and was satisfied. Passing clouds provided a dynamic motif. This would be a perfect start for her shoot. Just get a little closer and move the perspective further down to have a more interesting view.

“Do you want me to sit in it, or do you prefer me to lie on it?”

Tess had propped herself up, elbows on the engine block. Her long blonde hair fell down on one side while she stuck her butt out on the other.

Her short jeans revealed more skin than they hid, and the knee socks in her hiking boots seemed more flirtatious than practical. Blinking at her, Tess pursed her lips.

Nela took a deep breath and gazed up at the sky.

“Come on, move your tasty ass to the other side” she prompted Tess, who changed her position and, with tilted head, positioned behind the car. “Like this, or would you rather do it just so?” Tess put her head in the other direction.

“Neither. You’re going to squat until I can’t see you anymore!” exclaimed Nela with a grin.

Tess scrunched her nose and folded her arms. “A little bare skin wouldn’t hurt your bachelor thesis ...”

“... but also, wouldn’t improve it,” Nela replied. “The theme is ‘natural decay.’ And it’s not like you’ve reached that point yet.”

Tess sighed at Nela’s joke. “For once, can you do me a favor? How else am I ever going to succeed with my Instagram?”

“Yes, we can schedule a photo session for sure. However, I think that displaying one’s body for the mere generation of likes is a first step into prostitution. But that’s for you to decide.”

Now Tess had to laugh. Nela’s cynical comments were having an effect. Slowly, with swaying hips, she approached her friend. “Mrs. Dubois, maybe we should prostitute ourselves together. This brown exotic beauty and the blonde angel are available for the paying customer for frivolous photos.”

Grinning, Nela shook her head, “Yeah, right. Now extend your wings and fly out of the picture, blonde angel. You are ruining the subject.”

“Excuse me? Am I not playing by the rules?” With feigned indignation, she recited the Urbex code “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints.”

“You do, but you are also leaving a trail on my picture.” Taking a step behind Tess, Nela straightened the blades of grass to restore the illusion of pristine.

Tess watched her friend struggling to brush through the grass like she was wielding a Japanese Zen rake. It was a fine line between cynicism and humor, and she was never quite sure which side Nela was on. Her gaze remained glued to Nela, becoming fixed and hazy.

Tess knew she was attractive before she had worked as a nude model at Nela’s college, where they had met. She was captivated by Nela’s determined nature from the start, but at moments like these, Tess wished Nela took her more seriously. She was confident that she would do better than the social media celebrities she followed. At least well enough for her not to have to wait tables anymore. And have a little more glamour in her life. And could afford to live in the sun, too.

Tess stretched out her arms and squinted her eyes. Her gaze focused, as she watched Nela make adjustments to her camera, press the shutter button, turn the camera again, make new adjustments, and press the shutter once more. Her loving way of working was somehow fascinating. Tess approached and glanced over her friend’s shoulder.

She admitted, “This looks great,” when she saw the old pickup truck in the picture, like it was a part of nature. And yet, it was obvious that it was

not of natural origin. While everything around it grew and thrived, the car decayed and died. The image had a unique magic that was hard to escape.

“Do you like it?” Nela asked without turning around.

“Yes, I do. A lot.”

“Me too, it’s perfect the way it is. We couldn’t have found a better day.”

Tess laughed. “So, now it’s my turn!” With quick, short steps, she hurried to the car and posed. “Go ahead and shoot, cowgirl!” she called out to Nela.

“You are a pain! Get out of my ...”

But Tess ran away before Nela could finish her sentence. “Hey there!” Tess yelled.

Two young photographers set up their equipment on the green box truck at the edge of the clearing. Astonished they paused.

“Would you guys like to take my picture?” With hands on her hips, Tess sauntered toward the speechless boys. She pivoted her upper body from left to right and gave them a bright smile. “You know, my friend back there is more into rusty sleds than hot curves.” Tess paused, batting her eyes. “But I’m sure you’d appreciate such hot bodywork, wouldn’t you?”

“Um...” was all the two photographers could say.

“Okay, okay,” Tess echoed, “I can show more skin if you’d like.” She pulled her shirt up and tied a knot under her breasts. “That’s better, right?”

Just as speechless as her male counterparts, Nela watched Tess’ performance. She wondered if it had been a good idea to take the photos for her final exam alongside a lovely but crazy wannabe model.

“Sorry, but we’re about to ...” the young man stuttered, “we would rather ...”

“You don’t have to be afraid,” Tess tried to relax the situation.

“Nah, it’s just that today we want to do more ...” he struggled for words, “Well, we would like to do more nature photography.”

As if not accepting his justification, Tess gave him a smiling, playful look.

“We just have a real plan for today” his partner interjected, “and an awful lot to do.”

Tess blinked in disbelief. “You’re aware that some chances only occur once in your life, right?”

“Hmm, yes, that’s right ...” he pondered, perplexed.

“But if we’re going to throw our plan overboard, it’s got to be for a superb reason,” his friend added.

“Well, thus it has to be an exceptional motif.”

“Yes, something special.”

“So, we could just say, ‘Good thing we shot the subject and not the old cars.’”

“Uhu.” Confirming nod.

“If it was, like, a rare butterfly in the meadow or something ...”

“You guys are real assholes, you know that?” Nela interjected angrily. “Come on, Tess, they’re not worth it.”

At the same time, the women held up their middle fingers to the shy boys. “You better keep pushing your cameras’ buttons, you sissies!”

While Nela packed her gear, they both had to hold back their laughter. Some of their Urbex colleagues were more uptight than altar boys.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” she urged Tess, pointing toward the end of the clearing. At the end, there was a small path that led into the unknown, where the forest opened. “Always follow the trail!”

“We still have a long way to go.”



“However, that’s the shortest way!” Out of the corner of his eye, Zander Regan watched the rest of the group with his arms crossed.

“Are you telling me that I have to crawl through a bush and then climb over a wall for a photo shoot? Really?” Yelka handed Vivian her sneakers. She was carrying her flip-flops in her right hand, like she was carrying a purse. The outfit she wore for her trip to the abandoned barracks was not appropriate, especially since she was wearing hot pants and a spaghetti-strap top.

“I have to tell you in all honesty, Yelka,” added her manager Damon, “that I’m also more than irritated about the location. Isn’t there any official entrance to the site?” He lifted his sunglasses and glanced at Yelka and Zander, eyebrows raised.

Zander ignored his stare, pretending to look at his watch. In fact, Vivian and Damon were already getting on his nerves. This could have been fun, though. But he was used to it. It was likely that one of them would become dramatic at the slightest opportunity. And the second thing you could bet on was that Yelka would try to appease her sister. His pretty Yelka.

Oh, if only she knew how much he desired her ...

“Zander really tried everything, Viv. This is the fastest way to the barracks—and your photos.” She smiled. “You’re going to look more than gorgeous, darling sis. As a backdrop, the barracks are just so impressive. Aren’t they, Zander?”

There she was again. Her velvety voice and twinkling eyes made his legs feel soft and rubbery. Zander didn’t understand why Vivian and not Yelka was the Instagram model. What was that even supposed to be?

I am a model on Instagram.

Yes, and I’m a mercenary in Call of Duty.

“Isn’t that right, Zander?” repeated Yelka.

“Huh? Oh yes,” Zander stuttered as if he had been caught in a lie. “The barracks were abandoned after German reunification and have lain fallow ever since,” he explained. “The area is in the middle of a 6,000-acre woodland and consists of barracks, a civilian settlement, and a military hospital. All areas are separated from each other, but are supposed to be connected by underground bunkers ...”

“For fuck’s sake, can you please wake me up when he’s done with his monologue?” Annoyed, Vivian glanced at Damon.

“Viv, please.”

“6,000 acres is pretty darn big,” Damon hooked in. “I hope we don’t have to trek for miles through the woods. Tonight we have to post our stories, and by tomorrow morning the pictures. And our designers still

must retouch them before.”

“This is the fastest way. We’ll be there in half an hour,” Zander meekly assured.

“I’m supposed to spend another half hour ...”

“Get down! Down!” shouted Zander and Yelka at the same time.

As they walked along a dirt path next to a weathered stone wall, a car approached.

Yelka pulled her sister behind a bramble hedge. Zander had already dropped to the ground, Damon followed him. A blue, old station wagon approached, kicking up dust as it went by. From through the bushes, Zander spotted a single driver. He was older, about his late 50s, and had a brown dog in the back. The man was watching the wall warily. This must have been the security guard, who was guarding the compound. They remained motionless on the ground until the car was out of sight.

“What was that all about?” Vivian vented her anger.

“If they catch us here, the photo shoot is over already.”

“That’s the reason it’s both risky and quick.”

“The other option is to walk a long distance from the old junkyard through the woods.”

While Damon was straightening his men’s purse, Vivian was still fiddling with her outfit, upset. Her top had ridden up so that Zander could catch a glimpse of her belly. The muscles stood out a little, but not enough to look athletic. It was then that his gaze reached the top button of her

jeans. If only she were not so arrogant ...

“So, what’s next?” Damon was impatient.

“There should be a dune over there in front of the wall ...” Zander pondered aloud.

“Yes, I can see it already. Come on, come on, darling sis!”

Excitedly, they ran through the bushes and reached a section of the wall in front of which wind and weather had piled up a small mound of earth. It was hard to see from the path. Only a few people had chosen to go to the barracks from here.

“Come on, you go first,” Damon prompted Zander.

He put on his black safety gloves and approached the wall with slow steps. Even though the pile of earth reduced the height of the wall, Zander was forced to stretch his arms further in order to reach the top. The concrete was brittle and had gotten tanned by the elements. Cracks in the wall revealed rusty metal struts.

“Do you want me to help you?” Yelka stood behind Zander, watching him.

“Uh-uh.”

He braced one foot on the wall and pulled himself up. When he shifted his weight forward and got his first glimpse of the other side, he pulled his left leg up and sat upright.

Below him was a withered meadow that some distance away merged

into a dark spruce forest. Between the treetops, he spotted the roofs of the residential complex, which lay in the middle of the woods. His heart began to beat faster. What lay there was the first part of the old barracks. He bent back to Yelka.

“I can see them.”

“Is that true?” Her eyes lit up as they finally arrived at the place she had longed to visit for ages—it had been her idea to come here.

“Come on up!” With joyful excitement, Zander reached out to her.

Yelka quickly climbed up the wall to get to him. He pointed over the top of the forest to the dark roofs of the housing blocks. “See?”

“Oh my God, there it is!” exclaimed Yelka enthusiastically. Her joy was so great that she hugged and squeezed Zander.

He felt ashamed and smiled shyly. “Okay, I’m going down.” As he leaned to the side to lift his right leg over the wall, his head unintentionally settled into Yelka’s lap. When his cheek touched her thigh, he almost lost his balance. At the last moment, his hands clung to the wall and Zander was able to hold on. Yelka grabbed his forearm. “Hey, watch it,” she shouted, both startled and amused.

Zander took a deep breath and dropped. The soft ground cushioned his fall as Zander landed in the deep grass.

“Everything okay down there?” Zander gave Yelka a thumbs-up sign, nodding. “Okay, come on up then, Viv!”

“This will be fun.” Damon propped his back against the wall below, squatted down, and offered her a boost. Vivian gave Yelka her flip-flops

and let Damon lift her onto the ledge.

“Poor, poor guy,” Vivian whispered. “When are you going to let him have it?”

Yelka rolled her eyes. “Stop it!” She then grinned and gave her sister a nudge.

“Don’t you think he is cute when he blushes every time you touch him?”

“Shh!” Yelka definitely didn’t want Zander to overhear their conversation. “If you don’t behave, I’ll set you up with him.”

“Nah, he’s been in love with you since kindergarten, even spending a night with me wouldn’t change this.”

Amused, Yelka smiled and swung over the wall. “Yeah, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she grinned as she dropped herself down.

Only now did her sister realize how deep it was. She hesitated.

“Come on, it’s not that high, you can do it!”

But Yelka’s words could not convince Vivian. She took a deep breath. “Damon, come up, you have to help me.”

After a few moments, her social media manager appeared at her side. He was visibly upset that his new red sneakers had gotten dirty in the process. “Come on starlet, get down, I’m holding you” he instructed his model, but she didn’t listen to him.

Routinely, Vivian pulled out her cell phone and put on a simper smile. “Selfie time,” she chirped and pulled the trigger. “Last story before the leap into darkness!”

“Hey, no coordinates!” shouted Yelka. “We’re not posting any location.”

“Oh my God, you and your weird Urbex rules ...”

Zander had walked a few footsteps through the grass, ignoring the rest of the group. He would rather be here alone with Yelka. It wasn’t

clear to Zander anyway why she was going all out with a photo shoot for her self-absorbed sister instead of taking photos herself. They could have stayed here overnight easily.

She would surely like that better than to be put under time pressure by Damon. Yelka had loved Urbexing ever since she had been on that California vacation. Her chip card was full of photos of abandoned towns and resorts. Since then, she had infected Zander with the Urbex virus. He loved going on adventure trips with her, feeling the magic of these special places. With Yelka, though, he would have gone just about anywhere.

“Hey!” shouted Damon, upset. Meanwhile, he and Vivian had climbed down from the wall and were looking at him in bewilderment. “How are we supposed to get back up there?”

In fact, it was almost impossible to climb over the wall from this side without any tools.

Damon’s face turned a shade of red, and his jaw clenched as he balled his fists. Vivian’s eyes widened, as she vigorously shook her head, her hair bouncing with each motion. Yelka’s chest rose as she inhaled a slow, deliberate breath, and her lips pressed together in a thin line, the tension in her body evident.

It’s not my problem.

I didn’t want to be with you guys anyway.

Zander smiled, “We’ll find a way.”



“Did you see the Camry? It hasn’t been here for long.”

“So does the van. Looks like it had just been parked.”

“Well, who knows? Maybe we’re not alone in the barracks.”

“Okay, fine by me. Fingers crossed we don’t meet any more morons like those in the junkyard.”

Tess laughed. “I would still prefer a couple of uptight guys than a bunch of rioters.”

“Hey, that children’s hospital we visited last year burned down a week ago.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it was pretty battered, though.”

“I’m glad we had a chance to snap some pics back then.”

“Can’t understand why people do that? What do they get out of it?”

Nela and Tess had already hiked through the dense pine forest for an hour. The rain of the last few days had left swollen ground and deep puddles. It was humid, mosquitoes circled their faces.

“Damn!” Tess slapped her forearm where she had just felt a sting.

Nela kept her arms moving, scaring away the insects.

“How much further is it?”

“I don’t know, don’t have any Wi-Fi here,” Nela replied. “But if I’m guessing the distance correctly, we should be there soon.”

“It’s about time, I don’t like walking through the forest anymore. Mosquito bites mess up my skin. And itch.”

“I have got spray with me. Tomorrow morning we’ll use it, the way back will be less stressful, though.”

“I wonder if it’s such a good idea to spend the night in the barracks ...”

“Right, we can go back too.”

“I’ll sleep in my own bed then ...”

“... and don’t get any sexy photos of yourself!”

“Pft! Come on!” Nela laughed.

Talking quietly, they walked through the dense forest when a clearing opened up in front of them. The path widened and from under the grasses, faded asphalt appeared. A few decades ago, there seemed to have been a road here. To the left and right, there were other roads and paths to be found.

“Look, this is an intersection,” Nela exclaimed in surprise. “Cars used to drive here!”

“Look at that!”

The first apartment block rose behind the trees. Six stories of gray, windowless concrete surrounded by conifers were the last witnesses of the Cold War. The entrance to numerous apartments was once visible on a wide path, but now ferns, shrubs and branches have spread. The remains of a seesaw were visible in the undergrowth, next to it a climbing frame.

“Unbelievable, isn’t it?”

“Feels like I’m in the jungle of Cambodia.”

“Can’t even imagine; we are in the middle of Germany here.”

With long strides, Nela stalked through the thicket, always careful not to lose her balance.

“Look,” she called out to Tess, “a lantern!”

At first glance, the moss-green concrete pillar of the streetlight was invisible in the green of the forest. Only when Nela leaned against it did she feel the hard edges and the cold rock.

“It hasn’t lit up in years, though.”

“Awesome!”

“Hey, do you think they’ll light up tonight?”

“I don’t think so.”

As they walked along, Tess and Nela approached the entrance to the house. The windows of the lower floors were boarded up, but the front door was missing. Under a moss-covered shelter, they found the dark entrance to the interior.

Warm sunlight, chirping birds and lush green plants took away the dark, scary side of the building. Inside, raw walls, crumbling stairs and wet concrete gave a hint. The closer they got, the heavier and colder the air smelled. That sinister magic of abandoned buildings was what Nela and Tess were looking for.

“Should we go in, or do you want to take a lap around the block first?” Tess asked.

Nela was hard to stop. “Are you afraid?”

“No, it’s okay.” The summer air was humid and hot. In the cool shade of the abandoned house, it would be pleasant.

Cautiously, Nela took her first steps into the darkness of the block. It felt as if she was entering another world. Suddenly, the warmth of the summer day had disappeared, and the chirping of the birds had stopped. The damp cold made Nela shiver. Her grinding footsteps cast a soft echo through the stairwell. Quite naturally, she lowered her voice to a hushed murmur. She whispered to Tess, “Watch out, the stairs don’t have any railing anymore.”

The first rooms they entered were empty. Plaster trickled from the ceiling; paper rolled off the walls. In the glow of their flashlights, they could make out old newspapers whose pages were as faded as their contents.

“Hey, those are from the era of the collapse of Eastern Germany,” whispered Nela

“Yeah, that certainly looks like the Berlin Wall. How long have they been here?”

“Pretty much thirty years.” Nela had to stifle a laugh.

“Yeah, right ...”

For a moment, the friends were silent and let the place take effect on them. The atmosphere was surreal, as if they had entered a parallel universe where the passage of time had changed direction a quarter of a century ago. And yet not much of it was tangible.

“Let’s get further up. I sense the upper floors might have more to offer.”

“Maybe it’s warmer there, too.”

“The difference is crazy, isn’t it?”

The stairwell was dark even in the glow of the flashlights. Few windows were boarded up or overgrown by nearby trees. Condensation dripped silently from the ceiling, creating a dull echo on impact. Tess shined her lamp down the stairs, but it couldn’t see through the dark.

“Just keep looking up,” Nela encouraged her.

“Uh huh ...” Tess had pressed herself against the wall and slowed her pace.

“Grab my hand.”

Tess did not hesitate and took her friend’s hand. The cold and the altitude became more bearable.

“We’re there,” Nela now said in a clearly more confident volume.

She had been right, the apartment they now entered was almost untouched, with only the ravages of time gnawing away at it. The shelves had collapsed, and walls had turned green from exposure to the elements. Beneath the clothes rack were shoes the likes of which Nela and Tess had never seen before. They seemed so old that they had gone out of style even 30 years ago. Trash lay on the floor, fused to the musty carpet. It smelled of mold and wet paste.

“Before we spend the night here, though, we need to air it out” Tess joked.

“Good idea, open a window.”

“Come on. The wood is so swollen that the handle can no longer be turned.”

“You’d better leave it then. Maybe we can somehow get up to the roof and spend the night there. Fresh air would be great.”

“Hey Nela,” Tess now whispered again. “There are people down there.”

In fact, Tess recognized three or four people among the trees.

“Did those uptight boys follow us?” Nela grinned.

“Well, there seem to be several of them.”

“Urbexers, too, I’m confident.”

“Probably wannabe YouTubers, as ill-equipped as they are.”

From above, they could see that most of them were wearing shorts and T-shirts. They seemed to have little concern for their safety.

“But I think they’re photographers too” Tess reflected, “They have tripods with them”.

“Unfortunately, they are quite noisy.”

“They probably think they’re alone out here.”

“And they do not carry any backpacks or bags with them. Where do they keep their photo equipment?”

They watched the group, which appeared to be having a lively discussion. Nela and Tess heard laughter.

“Come on, let’s go downstairs and scare ...”

She choked on the word as one of the group banged his tripod against a tree.

“Those aren’t tripods. They’re steel pipes,” Tess whispered in a trembling voice.

“They’re coming.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”



Jesse slammed his steel pipe against a young tree’s trunk. His stare was rigid, and the force of his blows increased. Jesse was bound in the act of destruction, would not rest until the goddamn tree was shattered. The bark had already begun to splinter when he heard the sound of shattering glass. He spotted Mike, breaking one of that lousy ruin’s windowpanes. A tiny splinter hit him on the cheek. Abruptly, he lowered his pipe and yelled at Mike.

“Are you fucking retarded?” He stroked his cheek, looking for traces of blood. When he found none, he again shouted at Mike. “Can’t you be careful? I got splinters!”

“Cry me a river, man!” Leaning his head to the side, Mike grinned at his buddy. “What a sissy you are.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” — “Fuck you!”

Mousey watched as the two older boys attacked and pushed each other. He liked these moments when violence was in the air. As long as he wasn’t

the victim, he felt that tingling sensation in his stomach. A mixture of sensationalism and voyeurism was what triggered him. But Mousey was distracted. His gaze wandered over to Tami. The older girl had dyed her hair dark and wore a top cut off below her breasts. Mousey didn't want to miss the moment when she stretched, when maybe he could catch a glimpse of her tits.

Dave and Ryder had also noticed that Tami was getting dressed up. The two top dogs were constantly swarming around the girl. Mousey was pretty sure Ryder and Tami were dating, but they weren't officially together. If only Mousey were three years older, he'd chance his luck as well.

Tami had sat down on the old swing next to the rotten seesaw and carefully began to swing back and forth. Every so often she moved her pelvis forward, and occasionally, she stretched out her chest to gain momentum.

"Would either of you like to give me a nudge?" she asked with an innocent undertone, yet aware of her cockiness.

Standing wide-legged, Ryder kept a tight grip on his dog, Gazoo, while Dave pushed Tami lightly from behind. "If you want it harder, you better get on your knees."

Tami rocked forward. Her and Ryder's eyes met, smiling, and anticipating. As she slid back, Ryder's and Dave's eyes crossed. They flashed full of challenge.

"Most importantly, you shouldn't have a wimp standing behind you then."

"Is this something a sissy would do?" With a grin, Dave grabbed Tami's butt before giving her another shove.

"Uh!" Tami exclaimed with wide eyes. Dave's importunity seemed to

please the girl.

“Mousey!” Ryder didn’t take his eyes off her. “Mousey, come here!”

The youngest homeboy turned back to reality. For a moment, he had forgotten everything around him. When Dave touched Tami’s butt, she threw her head back and let out a cocky squeal of delight. Her top slipped up, and for a second Mousey could see her nipples.

“Yeah?” he asked, still in a trance.

“Yo, take Gazoo and go for a walk.”

Without looking at him, Ryder handed Gazoo’s leash to Mousey. Disappointed but dutiful, Mousey grabbed the leather strap and pulled on it. The brown mongrel with the short fur and the flat muzzle barked at him but obeyed. Gazoo was big, and if he had escaped, Mousey would have needed all his might to hold him.

Ryder, however, was not interested in that. The little fellow had to parry and do his bidding. Otherwise, he’d gotten his ass spanked. Just so.

Seeing Dave so close to Tami made him angry. She was his girl, and Dave shouldn’t think he could do as he pleased.

“Tough guy, huh!” he called over to Dave. “Haven’t had a shot in a while, have ya?”

“We’ll see who’s scoring today” he boasted back.

Tami knew that she would go with one of the boys today. The only

question was whether Ryder or Dave would prevail in the end.

“You absolutely won’t, that’s for sure!”

Now with both hands free, Ryder smiled at Tami and took a step toward her. As she spread her legs, their loins touched, and Ryder put his hands around Tami’s hips. She gazed at him in amazement. Ryder did not let go of her. As she threatened to slide backwards, she wrapped her legs around him, then let go of the swing and snuggled up to Ryder, who was holding her. As the swing swung back empty, Dave kicked it aside in frustration. Silently, he walked past the couple, joining Jesse and Mike. Ryder threw a kiss after him. “Should the two of us get out of here?” Tami giggled.

Silently, he watched Jesse and Mike standing in the entrance of a house, banging their steel pipes against the walls. Their wicked laughter indicated they were having some kind of perfidious fun. Behind them stood Mousey, holding Ryder’s barking dog with both hands.

Dave pushed Jesse forward. He turned around and looked at him, grinning maliciously.

“What are you doing?” Dave snubbed Jesse.

“There’s a cat down in the basement.”

“Filthy animal!” shouted Mike.

“We’ll scare the hell out of it, and then we’ll go down.” Jesse raised his eyebrows and gestured with the steel club in his hand.

Dave nodded with his jaw clenched. They’d waste the darn cat. “Hold that mutt, I’ll get that critter!”

Hastily, Dave rushed down the stairs into the dark cellar, Jesse and Mike following close behind. The steps led down to the lowest floor. There was a

half-open door in front of them. This must be where the animal was hiding.

“Kitty, kitty, kitty,” Dave whispered as he carefully opened the door. “Come to Daddy.” In the dim twilight of the basement, he could glimpse the cat in a corner. “I’ve got you now!” He feinted a step toward her, but jumped into the right corner, the only escape option. Jesse backed him up while Mike secured the left flank. There she was,

Dave grabbed the cat’s neck and yanked the snarling animal upward. Its eyes lit green. “Now we’re going to twist your little neck,” Dave fantasized. He was ready to take out all his rage on the defenseless cat.

But when he tried to grab it, the animal slammed its claws into the flesh of his forearm. He cried out in pain and shock, throwing the cat away into the cellar. “Close the door!” But it was too late. The cat had disappeared.

“Fucking hell!” Dave was frantic, running up the stairs, where he caught Mousey watching Ryder and Tami. Gazoo sat in the grass and panted.

Smack! A juicy slap hit Mousey. “Are you jerking off right now, little fucker? Where’d that feline go? Can’t you even pay attention?”

Upset, the three came back from the cellar. Mousey didn’t know what happened to him. Even Ryder and Tami had interrupted their smooching.

“What’s going on?” roared Ryder, while Dave, Mike, and Jesse had lined up around Mousey. Mike shoved the boy and Dave went for another slap, but Ryder grabbed his arm.

“Cut the shit. I’m calling the shots here, got it?”

Dave yanked his arm out of Ryder’s grip. “Oh, yeah, but it looks to me

more like you're making a love birdy of yourself."

For a moment, hostile silence hung over the scene. Ryder was about to retort, but Dave was faster. "Look at our womanizer," he urged the rest of the gang. "We have to hang out here every day while he's having fun with his ..." Dave hesitated, "... birdy."

"Watch your mouth!"

"Or else?" They stared at each other challengingly, but this time it was not a contest, but anger that was in the air. Ryder clenched his fists and tensed his torso.

"Come here!" But Dave took a step back and lowered his tone. "Come on, even your dog doesn't care about you anymore."

Indeed, Gazoo was lying in the grass and did not rush to help his master.

"I don't need him for you either, you little shitbag."

Mousey was no longer interested in Ryder and Dave. His cheek was still burning from the slap the older boy had given him. He squinted over at Tami, but she had pulled back. She kept her arms crossed in front of her chest and scowled over at Ryder. She had to realize that she was the cause of the argument. Mousey sensed it, this time they'd snap, Dave had gone too far. Ryder would beat the shit out of him, no doubts. Yet then Mousey saw something that should relax the situation. For the moment.

"Hey," he whispered just loud enough to interrupt the two adversaries. "There are people over there."



“We better find a way out quickly. The editorial’s deadline is getting close, we can’t afford any further delay.”

Damon’s words lay upon the group like a heavy burden. He was good at making his personal problems everybody’s business. When he felt spoiled, he meant business. And Damon wasn’t done yet.

“Moreover, we have no Wi-Fi here. Zero, nada, not a bit.”

He let the words sink in, then added, “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t post anything out here.” He put his phone away and joined Zander.

“Here’s how it’s going down: While the girls are taking photos, you’re looking for an exit that will get us out of here A-S-A-P. Get it?”

“We’ll take the pictures, don’t worry about it” Yelka hooked in from behind. “And tonight, from our hotel, we’ll be able to watch your follower numbers skyrocket in no time.”

“I assume so,” Damon replied curtly. “The sore point in the planning is the way back. But Zander will take care of that. And I know for sure he’ll find a really fast way out for us.” Appreciatively, he patted his shoulders.

“Damon, when do you think we will break the 30,000 mark? I really want that to happen by this weekend.”

“Yes, starlet, we can definitely do that. Your pretty sister will do a fantastic job and Zander will get us back to the hotel in no time.”

Zander wasn't concerned about Damon's problems at all. If it were up to him, Vivian should just do blunt erotic shots on the beach or in a studio. Or better, shoot soft porn. That was what it was all about, after all. Maybe he would watch that too. Vivian naked in the sand. Hmm ... Anyway, none of this had anything to do with the fascination of abandoned places. And this barracks had so much of it to offer.

"If we continue along this path through the forest, we will soon reach the residential block. From there, another path leads to the recreational facilities. There is a pool, a sports field and a theater, but it could also be used as a cinema. In parallel ..."

"Sis, shouldn't we take a picture of me in this outdoor pool?" Lasciviously, Vivian played with the strap of her top.

"Absolutely" laughed Yelka.

Why wasn't she actually on his side? After all, he had planned the whole trip just for Yelka. Zander wanted everything to be perfect today. Yet, that wouldn't work with Vivian and Damon. Honestly speaking, they shouldn't have joined in the first place. When the forest suddenly opened up to reveal a settlement, Zander's heart began to pound faster.

Weathered multi-story apartment blocks rose into the sky, overgrown with birch and fir trees. Moss clung to the entrance areas; ivy sought its way upwards. The scenery looked like a modern Sleeping Beauty castle, sprung from the premonition of a sinister dystopia.

For a moment, the group stopped and let themselves be captivated by the magic of the place. Speechless, their eyes wandered up the multi-

story buildings, lingering on the dark building openings and absorbing the surreal atmosphere.

“This is incredible,” Yelka was the first to return to her words. She put an arm around Zander and hugged him. “Just incredible.”

Zander felt overwhelmed. His excitement was looking for a channel. “Considering that the residents lived here for 40 years, and nature has taken over for 30 years, then ... well ...” He didn’t know how to finish the sentence. Zander was overwhelmed, both by the place and by Yelka’s closeness.

“Darling sister, you can start thinking about whether you want to be photographed on the steps or the old climbing frame” Yelka indicated as she dug her camera out of the small backpack.

“The steps are great!” exclaimed Vivian, settling down on the moss-covered steps.

“Perfect,” Damon joined in again as well. “That looks excellent, starlet! Lie back, let your hair fall to the right.”

Zander walked thoughtlessly over the moss that covered the former street. Here, families must have once walked home, children played on the sidewalk, and vehicles drove north to the barracks. With a kick, he plucked the green from the ground and looked at the dark asphalt. This was how the place had been left nearly three decades ago.

He squatted down and let his fingers slide over the old pavement. A shiver came over him. At that moment, he felt the same fascination for these places as Yelka. Stealthily, he glanced over at his secret love as she

took photos of her hot sister.

Vivian had leaned back dramatically, her chest up, her hair hanging down behind her. Her belly was exposed, her breasts pressed against the top. She stretched her long legs, like she was riding a bicycle.

Zander's gaze drifted off to Yelka, who held her camera with both hands. She was shifting positions from time to time. Although she was wearing cargo pants, boots and gloves, she didn't look one bit less sexy than her younger sibling.

He averted his eyes and let them roam over the facade of the apartment block again, only to look back over at the sisters.

"So, now ..." Damon was about to intervene in the shooting when heavy dog barking made their blood run cold.

Yelka stopped her shots, Vivian lost body tension and Damon turned his head.

The big, short-haired yapper hung on the leash of a young guy in his early 20s. His tattooed arms were pumped up, stretching a red shirt. His chest jutted out as he stood wide-legged, holding the dog. A sharply cut face framed his full lips. He wore a gold necklace, his hair was shaved short. Behind him, four boys and a girl had set up. Two of them held metal pipes in their hands, brandishing them menacingly.

"Good day to you all!" The words didn't sound like a greeting, but more like a threat. "This is private property. No trespassing!" As if to underline his words, the dog growled insistently. The group slowly approached. Those two men carrying the batons grinned menacingly. "The whole compound

is surrounded by a concrete wall.”

Yelka was the first to speak up, “Hey, we’re just taking pictures, we’re not destroying or stealing anything.”

“So what?” told Ryder Yelka. “Fuck it, you guys are still illegal. There are signs on the outside walls and gates that state that this place is off limits.”

“Yeah, but you’re still coming here,” the dark-haired boy with the scratched forearm shouted.

“Even though it’s forbidden.”

The group had surrounded the four, leaving no way out. Gazoo barked at Vivian, tugging at Ryder’s leash.

“What you are doing here is forbidden, you know that.”

“Okay, we made a mistake,” Yelka tried to concede. “How about we pack up and get out of here?” Seeking help, she looked over at Zander, but he was transfixed.

“Yeah, you just thought so.” A grim smile played around Ryder’s face. “I want to see everyone’s IDs!”

“IDs out!” repeated Jesse, roaring.

Yelka looked at Zander first, then at Damon. “Please, let us just go our merry way and everything will be cool,” she offered the boys.

Damon had regained his composure and was surveying the situation. Yelka and Zander getting married would be more likely than these guys being security guards. There was danger in the air. They were in the middle of nowhere and were being threatened by a gang of rednecks, carrying a loose dog.

Dave lifted the steel pipe and touched Yelka's chin. "Ain't nothing cool here," Ryder told them. "Either you show us your IDs or else."

As if to make an example, Dave hit the ground with his club.

Yelka flinched. Gazoo jumped up at her, held back only by Ryder's leash. "Chop, chop, IDs out!" Ryder roared indignantly.

"I think we need to make a cut here!" With a brisk step, Damon put himself between Yelka and Ryder. "To me, it seems like a misunderstanding."

For a moment, there was silence. Gazoo stopped barking, Dave's steel pipe hovered in the air, and Ryder waited to see what Damon would say.

"My name is Duke. Damon Duke, of Duke Executives." He spread his arms and stood between Ryder and Yelka.

"We rented this location today to hold a photo shoot."

He pointed to Vivian, who was still sitting on the steps. "This is Vivian Donahue, one of our most important models, known as Violet-D."

Damon waited a moment, watching the gang as they stared over at Vivian. He could see the aggression draining from the young men's faces. Desire appeared in their eyes.

"We are taking pictures for the centerfold today. Vivian's work needs a relaxed atmosphere. So, I'd be grateful if we could do the shoot without any further disruptions. Later, I'm sure she'll have time for a short meet and greet with autographs. If you have any further questions, please contact Councilor Wilbanks. Please carry on, we don't have any time to lose. Hush, hush!"

A stunned silence hung over the scene. The gang hadn't quite taken their eyes off Vivian when it dawned on them that they had just been set up. Yelka and Vivian were already preparing to resume the photo shoot when Ryder suddenly straightened up again. "Are you kidding me? I want to see your fucking IDs—no photos until I say so!"

"Good," Damon turned abruptly and held out his ID to Ryder, "that's me, Damon Duke." He gave him a moment to compare ID photo and face, then pulled out his cell phone. "And now I'd like to know what company you're with."

Damon held the phone to his ear and waited for Ryder's answer. But he remained silent.

"Mr. Wilbanks, this is Damon Duke speaking. I apologize for the interruption. Contrary to our agreements, we were evicted from the place by security." His and Ryder's eyes met. "They didn't hire any security at all? Then I assume this is a misunderstanding."

Dave looked at Ryder, waiting for any reaction. But he just stared at Damon indecisively.

"No, I don't think we need police here. Thank you very much, and again, I'm sorry to bother you."

Damon dropped the phone into his purse, then pulled out a slew of business cards. "Here you go."

First, he handed Ryder his card, then to the rest of the gang. "We're still looking for security employees. If any of you want to make money, you're more than welcome to contact me."

Dazzled, the gang looked at each other. “Have a nice day! Now, starlets, we’ll move on to the next location.”

Ryder looked grimly after the Urbexers as they walked on. Soon they would find out what kind of a nice day they were going to have.