

DARLINGS OF DECAY



ZOMBIE STORIES FROM YOUR
FAVORITE FEMALE AUTHORS

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Thank you for joining us on these tales of zombie horror. As you begin to read these stories, wrap your mind around this...

The world as we've known it has ended. No one, living or dead, can be trusted. Now, desperate times call for desperate measures, because every single day is a struggle to live. The gates of hell have opened and hope seems well beyond reach. But... there are still survivors, and through blood, sweat, and tears, they'll fight to live in a world where tomorrow is never a guarantee.

Sit back as your favorite authors of zombie lit take you on a wild, horrifying ride that will leave you breathless. Come and meet the women who love to entertain you with their own unique versions of the zombie apocalypse.

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Tamara Rose Blodgett

Excerpt From:

Death Whispers

I am Caleb Hart, son of the first scientist to map the human genome back in 2010. Now, fifteen years later, all us kids (during puberty because we're so lucky) get to draw what's equivalent to a winning lottery ticket. What paranormal power would we have, would I have? It could be anything as benign as Empath, Telepathy, Pyrokinesis, Astral-Projection, and the real creeper, Affinity for the Dead, AFID. New abilities kept cropping up, like an untended garden. The paranormal ball had begun to roll and it was all downhill from here. As long as I didn't get anyone's attention, I was down with that. I should think Science is the bomb, but it's not, it's a bomb alright-- right on my head.

In eighth grade, we're required to take pre-Biology. My teacher is enthusiastic, so there's never a dull moment.

Especially with me passing out all the time.

That's how it happened the first time. The frogs came in and I went out... like a light.

At least that was the first time I hadn't been able to ignore it anymore.

Xavier Collins had reined in his ranting about bees becoming extinct and other huge rage-topics on the environment, to delight in telling us our next experiment would be dissection.

I didn't have Mark "Jonesy" Jones in this class but my other best friend, John, was here, so not a total loss. Jonesy kept school in balance, making jokes at the expense of the teachers (very wise). John countered with keeping Jonesy from getting us in trouble (not always happening). The drag of it was the two kids that hated my guts in a steaming pile were in Biology.

Carson Hamilton and Brett Mason sat next to each other, never giving me a moment's peace about anything. Carson had

everything anyone could want: money, looks (he's a mirror-lover) and parents that didn't care about anything he did. My parents had not caught the disease of indifference yet. Brett didn't have it so hot, but he was as miserable as Carson.

John sat down next to me with two pencils up his nose while Collins was at the whiteboard, discussing how to pin the frogs down.

Nice.

"Did ya make sure the erasers were in there first?" I asked him.

"Yeah, duh." The pencils bounced as he spoke. For a smart guy, he had some weird ideas about self-entertainment. It was very "Jonesy" of him.

"You still buzzing?" he asked.

I looked at John. "Yeah, it's on and off." I felt kinda defensive about this part, I was avoiding thinking about it myself, and didn't really want to talk about it.

"I've been thinking about that," he said.

How he could think with pencils up his nose? A mystery. "Yeah?"

"I think you have the undead creeper, like that Parker dude," John said.

That would be bad. "He's the one that could corpse-raise, right?" I asked.

John nodded.

Hadn't I just been thinking about how much that ability sucked? However, the rareness of corpse-raising might come in handy. Not likely to happen though.

"It would suck for you."

Nice, John restating the obvious. Yeah, it would suck. I mean, what's so great about communicating with the dead, locating the dead? Any of that... ah, *no*. Nothing in it for me but weirdness.

"Government took him. Bye-bye... gone." John made a fluttering motion with his hand like a bird flying away. The pencils kept bouncing in a distracting way.

I'd heard about that. Corpse-Manipulation, rare-much. Jeffrey Parker was the only recorded case.

"Why do you think?" I was interested for once, sometimes John would lose me in a tech-rant and it was all over.

"Are you shitting me? Dead people... come on." I got an

image of zombies with M-60s, interesting.

“No, think about it. They could get people raised and force them to do stuff. From a distance, they could look like they were alive, important people.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Presidents?”

“Rulers or whoever,” John said. “He was a five-point. He could do the whole tamale. I think the government exploits whatever they can; using whoever they can.”

I laughed.

“What?” he asked.

“I can't take you seriously. You look like a dumb-ass.” The pencils dangled indignantly inside each nostril, humiliated.

John pulled them out, checking the ends for gold.

Huh.

I'd been wondering why my head was buzzing. Now memories surfaced. When had the buzzing started exactly? What triggered it? Could John be right?

“Okay people, zip up here and pick up your trays. Your sterilized utensils should already be at your desks,” Collins said.

John went for our trays, minus the attractive pencils. I stared out the window, the splatters of rain causing rivulets that looked like gray streamers marring the glass.

I shook my head, clearing fuzziness. I couldn't shake the buzzing, a dull noise that ebbed and flowed. I felt it today the strongest. As soon as I entered class, the buzzing increased, like whispers.

“Here you are. One frog for the both of us” John plunked down a frog that had once been green but was a bone-gray now, staking pins gleaming under the LEDs.

That's when the screaming started.

The whole earth felt like it was swiveling on its axis, and I was on top. The whispering grew in volume until images flooded my head. There were marshes and swamps. A frog, in the bloom of its life, shiny with amphibian iridescence, leaped to a log, hoping to fool a small water moccasin close enough to take it.

(NO!)

Right behind you! I shouted in warning. But I couldn't be heard, these were images... memories.

A motor boat was closing in on the frog, getting ready to take it with a metal pole and loose net on its end. Caleb heard the

frog's thoughts, *strange predator must seek cover... noise... hurts...*

(NO! NO!!!)

It wasn't the only frog with memories. Every cut my classmates made, a new flood of memories came. I realized through some dim sense that I was on my back on the Biology floor. Carson and Brett in the background wheezed with laughter.

"He bit it over a frog? Seriously?" Carson ranted.

Brett, not to be outdone caterwauled, "He's a total girl!"

Collins was moving his hand in front of my face, holding up fingers, but I was caught in the grip of the death memories, absorbing my consciousness. The last thing I remember was John's anxious face taking turns between telling the dumb-ass duo to shut up and seeing if I was gonna live. My vision became gray at the edges, a pinpoint of black expanding to clear my mind of everything and I knew no more.

CHAPTER 1

Trees surrounding the cemetery danced in the languid breeze of the mild spring night. I looked behind me at the pair of eighth grade boys who'd come to egg me on. They had discovered my secret: that I knew the dead, heard the dead.

Headstones glimmered like loose teeth in the moonlight, the whispering like a steady thrumming of white noise in my head. My hands grew clammy.

"Caleb, show them you're not a frickin' poser," said Jonesy.

"I don't pose." My thoughts raged against each other in contrary purpose. Proving to Carson and Brett that I had AFTD wouldn't keep them off my back completely, but it'd notch down their stupidity to something me and my posse could manage. That's where it was, managing their shit behavior.

I took a step through the high, Victorian-style gate, my foot touching its reluctant toe on hallowed ground.

The feeling of being forced pressed uncomfortably against my mind.

Crossing the threshold of sanctified ground, the whispering turned into voices. One voice whispered to me the strongest. I stopped feeling tentative and like an invisible string pulled, was drawn toward one of the gravestones, standing sentinel near the middle of the cemetery, glowing softly in the moonlight. I came to stand in front of the headstone which read: *"Clyde Thomas, born 1900, died 1929."*

"Wake me..." it said.

"What?" I whispered.

It speaks.

"Wake me..." it repeated.

"Caleb, who are you talking to?" John asked, lack of understanding clear on his face.

My head swung in slow-motion as if through quicksand, moving in his direction, blood rushing in my ears and my heart beating thick and heavy in my chest. Everything became crystallized in that moment. John's frizzy hair and freckles stood out like measles. A microscopic chip lay like an imperfect shadow on the headstone, shining stark contrast to the white marble.

Something... something... was building, rising up as if

underwater, rushing to the surface. I was supposed to finalize something, but what? The whispering of the corpse in the earth was so loud it drowned out John's words. John's mouth was moving but no sound was coming out.

What-the-hell? He was arguing with Jonesy, his teeth a pale slash against his dark face.

Flailing, Jonesy's hand suddenly connected with my face. My teeth slammed into my tongue and the taste of copper pennies filled my mouth. I leaned over and a drop of blood hung tremulously on my bottom lip, falling to the grave like a black gem.

Everything clicked into place, vertigo spinning the graveyard on its side as if it had been waiting for this moment. The ground rushed toward my face and I threw my hands out to brace my fall, fingers biting into damp earth. A clawed hand broke through the ground like a spear through flesh. Searching, it grasped my wrist, the bones pressing in a vise-like grip that captured my breath, the intense coldness of the grave lingering on its dead flesh.

The head of the corpse broke free of the ground, its shadowed gaze meeting mine, the hand releasing me. I scuttled backward, standing up, swaying, overcome with, excitement? Fear? I had done this thing and now, didn't know how to undo it. The corpse moved with purpose, pacing me as it used the undisturbed ground to leverage itself as another drop of my blood fell and landed with a dull plop on the corpse's forehead.

The zombie's gaze fixated on mine, it put a hand on its knee and began to push itself upright. Dull, lank strands of hair hung loosely from a scalp strung together by a tight mask of rotten sinew.

Jonesy had long since run out of the cemetery and was at a "safe" range from what the ground had disgorged.

He better get his ass back here. He couldn't get away with whacking me *and* not helping me with corpse-boy.

"Why have you awoken me?" The words sounded garbled, maybe there was *some* tongue in there?

Must not be rude, not my strongest point.

Out loud I said, "You asked me to."

John was standing at my right, trying to mask a fine, all-over tremble. His freckles stood out on a pale face like beacons of fright.

"What the hell is this?" John asked.

He didn't really just ask that? John... duh.

The zombie looked at me with eyes that clung from threads of sinew; moving wetly in its sockets, sucking like a vacuum.

"Why have you woken me?" it repeated, shambling a step closer. The smell... wow. It rose like a torrent of rotting garbage. John clapped his hand over his nose, taking a step backward.

The corpse took another step closer.

"Got any brilliant suggestions?" I asked John, my eyes steady on the zombie, hoping like hell John would lend an intellectual hand.

"Do *not* have the Zombie Handbook handy," John said, his eyes a tad wide.

Not helpful.

The corpse looked at me, head tilted, "You're just a boy... how could you know for what purpose you have disturbed my slumber?"

Uh-oh, coming up with an excuse, *so* not my thing.

"I didn't... mean to wake you up..." I fumbled out. I wasn't usually this tongue-tied but meeting a corpse in the flesh (ha-ha) stole my speech.

"You do not know what you would have of me? You use your life-force to waken me and yet... without purpose? Put me back," he said thickly. His clothes hung in tatters and the smell was definitely old, dark coffin, not that I knew what *that* smelled like.

John's look clearly said, *do something!* I guess what I hadn't told my friends was that I had never thought that I could actually raise the dead. But here he was, standing before me in all his rotting glory.

Looking out amongst the teenagers collected outside the cemetery, "To whom much is given, much is expected. Put me back," he said.

Adults were all the same, even dead, lecture, lecture.

"How?" I asked.

"You are the necromancer, boy, not I." Again that quizzical brow over rotting facial countenance.

Interpretation challenge... but I was managing.

"A what?" I asked, surprisingly calm, for the first time, there were no whispers. Perfect, blessed silence filled my head. It was the most natural thing in the world; talking to the dead.

Looking at the corpse, its eyeballs like inky marbles stared back at me with uncanny devotion.

“A diviner of the black arts, magic...” he replied.

All that time with the star in my basement, huh, *right*.

I could still taste distressingly metallic blood in my mouth.

I was connecting dots here, but I had an epiphany, I could put it back with blood! Things had only gotten über-weird when I had my lip busted open by Jonesy. I looked back at the corpse, Clyde--no longer feeling that sense of swimming power just underneath the surface. Now was not the time to get queasy with the dead. I needed to regain that essence, fast.

“Ah... hang on a minute,” I said to the corpse, who stared blankly back... ah-huh.

“John, give me your blade.”

“What the heck Caleb? What are you planning to do with this...” John said pointing his finger at the patient corpse, “...thing?” who was as immobile out of his grave as in.

“I figure my blood made it jump out of its grave, now I need some to put him back and you’re going to help me,” I said in a one sentence rush.

John’s face got paler, if possible. “Ah, we’re good friends and all but no, not a good plan! We don’t know that for sure anyway.” The logic-master was not feelin’ it. Couldn’t say I blamed him, me holding a knife and all.

“... here’s the deal, let’s do a little ‘friendship blood bank’ just for the sake of putting the dead guy back in his grave, eh?” I began tapping my foot on the disturbed mess of the grave. John would ante up the blood or this was gonna be a long damn night.

“What?” strained trust crowded his eyes.

“Just here, give me your forearm.” I placed the side of the blade on his forearm where it shone black in the pale moonlight. My left hand wrapped tight, steadying his flesh for puncture.

John took a deep breath, “Okay, but you’re going to owe me, big time.” The whites of his eyes bulging.

I pressed the point of the blade against his arm until the pressure broke the skin. John sucked in a lungful, blood welled and I let up the pressure. The zombie’s head jerked at the sight of the blood, causing the disturbing sound of neck bones popping.

Would I ever get used to that noise? I repeated the process with my own arm. Our identical wounds pressed together, I offered

it to my zombie. I could feel somehow that he was mine, I knew it.

A vibrating tuning fork of trembling power welled up inside me. A strange mixture of fear, dread and excitement paralyzed me. My teeth throbbed with the intensity of it. The zombie's hand snaked out, taking hold of the offered forearm. It felt cold against my warm flesh, like iced tentacles. I swabbed a blot of blood, inking it with my index and middle fingers on the zombie's forehead, like warpaint. It rolled those empty eyes up at me, its dead bones clinging to my fingertips.

We shared a suspended moment in time, a terrible beauty of control balanced precariously. "Go back and rest," I said, feeling that balance reached, that *I* was choosing for both of us.

The zombie reluctantly let go of my arm, sand through a sieve, lying down on the disturbed ground while his grave encased him in a shroud of earth.

I was a corpse-raiser, one of two, and it was not a safe thing to be.

John and I stared at each other over the grave for a swollen minute, his face showing a mixture of sympathy and dread. He knew what this distinction would mean for me in the world we lived in.

I was shaking from the intensity of it all, there was no controlling it. This was not the same as Biology experiments and roadkill, this was real, this was huge. Looking outside the cemetery perimeter at two enemies and one friend, I knew it was time to swear the group to secrecy. A trickle of sweat slithered down my back, pooling at the waistband of my jeans, instantly chilling against my fevered flesh. I didn't want the same future as Parker, that loss of freedom was so *not* a part of The Plan, my plan.

John and I headed out of the cemetery in a wave of uncertain promise.

CHAPTER 2

I smacked my alarm, just five more minutes I thought, dozing off.

“Caleb!” Mom yelled up the stairs.

“Yeah?” I yelled back.

“School!”

I stumbled out of my bed and looked on the floor for today's clothes... Hmm, what to wear that wasn't too wrinkled. I picked up a pair of jeans and a shirt and took an experimental whiff. Good enough! I jerked the jeans on with a hop and a zip. Opened the underwear and sock drawer, nothing. I ripped open every drawer for socks, ah-huh! Finally, a couple of socks, not matched but clean... happy day.

I trudged over to the kitchen table, scarred from a thousand meals.

“You cookin' today?” I asked, hopeful.

“No, but you're eating.”

Eating in the morning blows. I was that lazy. I'd open the fridge, nothing. Then the freezer, repeat. I usually ended up cramming a yogurt down.

Mom looked in the fridge. “What flavor?”

“Do we have blueberry?” It was the only non-barf fruit I could think about eating this early.

“Last one.”

“Where's Dad?”

Mom and Dad were on the opposite end of the spectrum. She was free-spirited (read: hippie) and thought the mystery of life and choice was taken when the scientific puzzle of the genome mapping was solved.

It made for an interesting family life.

“He is working on that new project.”

Great, hopefully not anything new for kids to rant about. I'd gone through enough being hassled as I was growing up.

“Does that mean he'll be home for supper tonight? I've got something to talk to him about.” I wisely didn't want to mention the whole corpse-raising episode. Dad was logic and fairness mixed. He'd know what to do. This... I might need some help on.

“Yes, he will, you know how important meal time is,” Mom said.

Maybe, maybe not. Science was important to Dad.

After I wolfed down the yogurt, knowing the beast would awaken again at 10 a.m. in class, perfect timing, I made a 2-point shot at the trash can. Swish! No mess, but that didn't stop the frown forming on Mom's face.

I moved quickly to grab my backpack but she blocked me and I was forced to look up at her. Every girl in the world was taller than me... wonderful.

She brushed the hair out of my eyes and it shot back down. “You need a haircut.”

“No, mom.” A time-sucker was all a haircut was and I had more important things to do.

Slamming the door behind me I took the stairs two at a time, cruising at a jog. I wanted to reconnoiter with the dudes, get things straight in my head from last night.

I slowed to a walk. I'd still be there early and I was feeling lazy. Looking up, I noticed the canopy of trees allowing filtered morning light to break through, speckling the ground with sunspots. My head began the familiar thrumming, a buzz seeping into the crevices of my mind as I walked toward the school.

I stopped where I stood, the buzzing had become whispering, my heart speeding, my breath quickening in response, my palms dampening.

The whispering of the dead had arrived.

I looked around, noticing the paved street, the pebbling of the asphalt worn away by a million cars, the shoulder giving way into the ditch.

Nothing.

I started walking again but the whispering grew louder. I followed the dull roar of the insidious voice like a magnet and was rewarded with volume.

There, on the border of the forest and the soft dirt of the ditch lay a crumpled body, torn and broken, its head at an awkward angle. My hands trembled as the whispering broke through to voices and images, flooding my head like a pulse-screen.

I heard the thoughts:

Headlights bursting like twin spots before its eyes as it tried to escape

those lights... rushing forward... it sprinted across the street, not timing the advance properly and the twin orbs bore down on it.

Pain. Intense pain and blinding light.

The cat thought of its litter, its people... then-- was no more.

My breath returned in a paralyzing rush, my feet planted at the base of her body. A small body that had shared the last moments of its life with me. A life that was now gone.

I stood for a moment, taking it in, realizing that life as I knew it was never going to be the same. I wasn't going to breeze through being a teenager.

Snapping back to reality I realized I was the Pied Piper of road kill.

Great. Definitely my life-goal.

This was just the kinda thing that had been happening. The frogs in Biology, there had been so many. I hadn't been able to camouflage that. People would be suspicious. Why couldn't I be developing something righteous like Pyrokenesis? Now that would be tight. At least only Brett and Carson knew the corpse-raising part. Getting them to cooperate with silence, that was another thing.

I trudged on, my limbs heavy, my head swimming with the heaviness of an undead-moment. I lifted my hands, the fine shaking almost gone. Beaded sweat decorated my upper lip and I wiped it off with the back of my hand. I needed to get a hold of this thing. I was on it. That's what I told myself but my gut churned with uncertainty.

The familiar doors to our daily prison came into view. I went inside the school, spotting the "cemetery group."

John and Jonesy stood apart from the others in stark contrast to each other. Almost five foot ten, with a shock of frizzy, carrot-colored hair and pale blue eyes, John looked a little freakish but he was my main dude, the go-to guy when things went sideways. I gave Jonesy an unfriendly look, touching my face. He had short, nappy hair and teeth that stood out like white Chiclets in a dark face. He was taller than me too, but built stocky. They'd been with me since Kindergarten.

The rest of the group was a mixed bag, didn't feel solid here. It would take some clever conniving to get promises of secrecy from the rest. Brett Mason and Carson Hamilton stood

side-by-side with identical white-blond hair and height, hard to tell apart unless you looked at them full-on. They'd been with me since Kindergarten too, but not in a good way.

Edging through the throng of kids I made my way to John and Jonesy first. Jonesy leaned against the locker, arms crossed. John looked ready to explode, not typical.

Jonesy said, "Sorry about the bludgeoning."

"Yeah... what the hell?" I asked.

"Your face sorta got in the way?"

"Oh... *really*?" Gee, hadn't noticed that.

"It was an accident, John and I were discussing..." Jonesy began.

"... arguing..." John interrupted.

Jonesy gave him a look. "I changed my mind is all."

I raised my eyebrows, Jonesy never switched gears.

"About the merit of them *knowing*," John finished.

We looked at Bret and Carson. Too late now, spilled milk on the table and dripping on the floor.

Later, I thought. "I wasn't pulling a hypo in Biology," giving a hard look at Brett and Carson, the used-to-be-non-believers, "and now APs are coming up."

"Yeah, you have your dad to thank for that," Brett smirked.

I knew that was coming.

My eyes caught sight of a grape sized bruise the color of pale chartreuse, the edges fanning to green then finally purple. Brett's smirk faded under my gaze as he shifted his shoulder, his shirt falling over the mark that lingered on his throat. Someone's hand had left that, not my problem, but...

"Shut up, it's Caleb's ass on the line," Jonesy said, jamming a thumb at my chest. "You know what happens when you hit the radar as a corpse-raiser. He'd be a government squirrel, like that Parker dude."

"Nobody wants to have their life planned by somebody else," John said.

"My dad didn't have anything to do with that," I pointed out.

"But thanks to him, everyone's tested now because of the mapping. All the do-gooders want to 'realize our full potential'." Brett made quote signs in the air, "What an ass-load of crap that

was.”

Carson chimed in, “So even if we don't *want* to be mathematicians or scientists we're on that freight train until it reaches the depot.”

Carson's murky-green eyes burrowed into mine. This was an old argument. Kinda like being the preacher's kid, you got blamed for everything your parent did, or didn't do.

“You dickface... yeah you,” Jonesy looked at Carson, whose eyes narrowed. “It isn't Caleb's fault that his dad started that ball rolling with the mapping. If it hadn't been him, it would've been someone else...”

Carson's fists clenched and flexed, he didn't like being told the obvious. Probably shouldn't have opened his mouth and crammed a foot in there until he choked. Kinda brain dead-- kinda consistent.

“Listen guys, this isn't helping. It's the *now* we need to figure out. I don't want to pop a five-point AFTD on the APs. They're what, a week away? My dad,” Carson rolled his eyes and I ignored him, plowing forward, “says that puberty is the *exact* time they test because scientists have proven that abilities come online then, sometimes for the first time.” *Not for me*, I added silently.

The first bell gave its shrill beckon exactly then. I looked at Brett and Carson. “I need you guys to cover for me. At least until the tests are finished.”

I was appealing to their good side.

You can't force us to, Hart,” Brett said.

“Yeah, just because daddy's famous doesn't give you clout,” Carson echoed.

So much for that.

“How about doing it because it's the right thing to do?” asked Jonesy, out of the blue.

“The human thing to do,” interjected John.

“He's not human.” Carson said, stabbing a finger toward my chest.

Prejudice at its finest. But what did I expect from these two?

“You got that right,” Brett agreed, walking off with Carson.

We watched them move away into the multicolor sea of kids.

“Did ya see that bruise necklace Brett was wearing?”
Jonesy asked.

Yeah, some people had more than corpse-raising to worry about.

“It's the dad,” John said.

Jonesy turned those liquid eyes to me, “Feel sorry for him Caleb? Don't go soft on me bro. You're always giving jackasses the benefit of the doubt.”

Not yet, I thought, saying nothing.

Seeing my expression he said, “Yeah, my cup of care is empty too.”

My conscious teetered on the balance of right and wrong. Brett had it bad, but he chose to act bad. It didn't make things easier, it made it more complicated.

Jonesy clapped me on the back and John gave me the nod. My friends had my back.

It was gonna be a hurricane of crap and I was in the eye of it. The Js and I walked off to Shop class. Time to make my mom a heart-shaped box, when my heart was definitely not into it.

#

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Vanessa Booke

Dead Run

“The only good human being is a dead one.”

-George Orwell

CARLY

I know his gun is in the top drawer. I've watched him place it there. Tonight is the last night I'll ever let him touch me. I watch his breath rise and fall rhythmically as he sleeps. From where I stand, he doesn't look so threatening, anymore at least, not compared to how he looked earlier that night. My cheek still burns when I touch it. A bruise is starting to form underneath my swollen skin. I step into the darkened bedroom cautious, as the wooden floors squeak beneath me. He can wake at any moment. My hands tremble as I make my way toward his nightstand. It has to be here, unless...Tom hid it somewhere else. As I pull the top drawer open, I'm relieved to see the gun is still there. It sits shining in the moonlight that cascades down through the cracks of the boarded-up bedroom window.

I pull the gun from the drawer, but pause midway. My stepfather's snoring has stopped. Fear paralyzes me, and I freeze, still. Is he awake? Is he watching me? I hold my breath, my eyes squeezed closed, waiting. Several seconds pass, and then like clockwork, I can hear the sound of his snoring again. I look down at the handgun and then back at my sleeping stepfather. I shiver in disgust at the memory of his hands on me; no amount of soap could ever wash away how dirty he makes me feel. My stomach rolls at the memory of the way he whispered how I would always be *his*.

Not anymore. I step into the hallway, shutting the bedroom door quietly behind me. A small sense of relief washes over me. I did it. Before I know it, I'm all the way down the hallway of our one story home. Tonight is our last night behind the safety of the community fences. It frightens me to think about what's waiting for us outside, but staying isn't an option anymore. I stare down at the gun in my hands. I've never held one until tonight. The sound of a soft voice catches my attention.

It echoes down the hall. Michael must be awake. I slip the gun behind me. There's no reason for him to see it; it will only scare and confuse him. He's been pretty quiet these past few hours. He keeps asking for our mother. I don't have the heart to tell him that she's gone. The only thing left is a shell of the woman she used to be. It's been seven days since she became infected.

I made her a promise when it happened. I promised her that no matter what, I wouldn't let her become one. I know what I have to do, and despite what my stepfather Tom tells me, I know my mother is sick and she isn't getting better.

Our home is made up of three rooms. Tom sleeps in the master bedroom. I share a bedroom with Michael, and my mother is in the guest room. We live in a town sectioned off from the outside world. It's better than what most survivors have, but it's temporary. Our emergency supplies were never meant to last past six months. We're going on our seventh month and our food and water is nearly gone.

Tom keeps my mother isolated from everyone here. A cold draft hits me as I enter her bedroom. I can hear her heavy breathing, her lungs crackling as she inhales. Small white clouds of air escape her mouth. It's freezing in here. I switch on the emergency lantern near her nightstand. The fluorescent light reminds me of a hospital room as it chases away the darkness. I gasp at the sight of her; she's gotten worse. Her eyes are bloodshot and her pupils are dilated. I touch her skin to check for a fever, but she feels ice cold. I grab her hand and place it in mine. Her skin is pale yellow and she's starting to bloat like the others. She has a day at most, maybe less. The bloated skin on her finger engulfs her wedding band. It's the one my father gave her before he died.

It wasn't the infection that took him away from us. He was in a motorcycle accident when I was fifteen. He suffered an injury to the head and went into a coma.

I twist the ring off her finger.

My mother sold our old house to pay for his medical bills. She didn't have the heart to pull the plug. Not too long after his accident, they flew him to a fancy medical hospital in Colorado. I thought he died. She told Michael and me that he did, but a few days ago I found some old hospital bills stashed in a shoebox. She lied. For the past three years she's been paying to keep him alive. At least, she was until the outbreak happened.

"Mom."

She stares at me blankly, making it clear she no longer recognizes her own daughter's face. I'm sure in her eyes I'm only a stranger, someone she's never seen before. I reach down for the wash pan at the foot of her bed, and I cringe at the sight of the brown, murky water inside it. Tom refuses to bathe her with any of our clean water, and instead subjects her to the dirty-brown, rusted water from the faucets. As far I know it isn't hurting her, but she deserves more than that. Tom wants to keep her around because of the food rations. Each person in the community is given a certain portion of food, no more, no less. He takes hers for himself. I hate seeing her like this.

A moan escapes her lips. I pull the gun out from behind me, fearful that she's turning. I have to do what she couldn't for my dad. I have to let her go. I have to.

I raise the gun toward the front of her face. My hands tremble, the gun is heavier than I expected. Through her confused and sickened state, she looks up at me as if she has a moment of clarity. I close my eyes and turn my face. I picture her as she was before the outbreak. In my mind, she stands radiant and beautiful as she smiles down at me. I can almost hear her saying *everything will be all right*. They say goodbye is the hardest thing you'll ever have to say. So I don't say it. I breathe in and pull the trigger.

CARLY

-One-Week Earlier-

I stare down the empty halls of my old high school Maple Hills. The memories of walking with my friends to class now seem like pieced-together memories of an old movie. My fingers trace

across the cold metal lockers as I walk down the hall searching for mine. So much has changed. Posters that were once filled with drug-free advertisements and S.A.T. announcements are now replaced with quarantine signs and warnings that read:

**THE UNDEAD AND THOSE INFECTED WILL
BE SHOT ON SIGHT.**

At the end of the row of lockers, I find mine; number 513. I still remember my old combination 12, 42, 0. The locker pops open and inside sits my old textbooks. I smile as I turn them over; my pre-calculus book sits on top. I can remember Mr. Robinson spouting off about how pre-Cal would be important in our future. I'm pretty sure he didn't mean to fight the undead with, although it is pretty heavy book. I slide my hand to the back of the locker and pull out a box of shotgun shells. I've been saving these for the right time.

When the outbreak began, it started in small numbers, rapidly growing into what seemed like an overnight cataclysm. Cities like ours were scheduled for evacuation procedures that never came. The infection spread too quickly, taking out whole neighborhoods and leaving behind small numbers to fend for themselves against the undead. A few families like mine were saved and taken to quarantined areas outside of Los Angeles. It wasn't long before even those sites were compromised and overrun by death.

Nothing was ever normal again. Sometimes, I sit and think about what it would be like to have a normal life again. Maybe I would've gone to college and majored in Biology like Mom, or maybe history, like Dad. The Civil War is still my favorite time period. It would've been nice to get my first job in LA, maybe even an apartment. Somewhere far away from Tom.

Everyday I wake up hoping this is all a bad dream. That none of this is real, but I wake up disappointed daily. It's not good to dwell on the past, my mother would say, but sometimes the past is all you have.

I shut my locker and head back toward the infirmary to find my mother. Today she's making her rounds across the community. There aren't very many people left who know a thing or two about medicine. My mother was a nurse at a prominent

hospital in Los Angeles. Most of the people she worked with died immediately during the outbreak. My mother was taking her scheduled vacation days at home when the news reported the first incident. It was never confirmed how or where the outbreak first happened, but the television stations stopped reporting not too long after.

The sound of footsteps catches me off guard on my way through the main hall. The exit is not too far from me, but I pause for a moment, holding my breath in fear of hearing the dreaded sound of shuffling feet. The footsteps stop completely.

"You know you shouldn't be in here by yourself."

Nathaniel Thorne, one of the commanding soldiers in the community, steps forward from the shadows.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, startled.

"It can be dangerous," he says, avoiding my question. His stare lingers over me ever so slightly. "Something could've hurt you."

Or is it someone?

"There aren't any shufflers inside the community," and even as I say it, I know that it doesn't mean that there couldn't be. I am reminded of it daily when the school bell rings at 3:00 pm preceded by the cold voice of a soldier that announces, *all clear* over the loudspeaker. Every day I listen for even the slightest tone of panic in the voice, but it's always the same cold, emotionless tone.

"Civilians aren't allowed in unmonitored areas, even inside the fenced walls." He says, gesturing to the restricted sign on the entrance doors - how could I forget. We've been warned and forbidden to leave the community and although we practice evacuation procedures weekly we're never allowed to leave. A few have learned the hard way. The other day I watched David, a boy not much older than me climb the fence and when he returned soldiers were there to block him from re-entering. I overheard his mother crying during one of the evacuation procedures, she had pleaded with him not to go, but food is scarce these days and his family was starving. It's almost certain that he's dead by now.

"I was just on my way to meet my mother," I reply.

Thorne comes closer. "Do you have a boyfriend Carly?" he asks, running his finger along my arm.

I try to pull my arm away, but he grabs my wrist and pulls it to his lips.

“Such a pretty thing,” he says, pressing his lips on my wrist.

“Stop.” The feeling of his lips on me makes my skin crawl.

“Thorne?” someone calls out.

A voice echoes down the hall. Before Thorne can make another advance, a figure appears near the end of the lockers. It’s another soldier. He makes a beeline toward us. As he comes closer, I can’t help but notice something familiar about him.

“Thorne, they need you over in Avenue C.”

That voice.

“Code 3.”

The sound of another soldier’s voice comes crackling out of his hand radio. “*Tremell! Do you copy that?*”

It’s him. Joshua. My heart flutters at the sound of his name. He looks different –taller, leaner, and so much more serious than I remember him. He stops a few feet away and turns, lifting the radio to his face. “Negative.” A flood of voices flow from the radio, barely audible, but somehow Joshua can discern their message. “Ten-four.” He carefully reattaches his radio and then looks up at me, as if just realizing I was still there. The shock registers on his face immediately. He wasn’t expecting me to be here – to be alive.

My eyes are drawn to the fusion of emerald green and golden flecks in his eyes. He stares back at me, slowly looking me over. It’s hard not to stare at the fine muscles that have replaced the scrawny arms he once had. Two years have passed and I hardly recognize him. Joshua is three years older than me, but it never felt so, until now.

He reaches out, and for a moment it seems like he might actually touch me...my skin hums with excitement. Did he miss me as much as I missed him?

“You know this girl?”

Thorne’s cold voice pierces my thoughts, drawing me back to reality. Joshua’s hand drops and he looks away, clearing his throat. The magic of the moment is over.

“She used to live on the same street as me when we were children,” Joshua mutters.

His dismissive tone strikes a chord in me. We were more than just neighbors.

Thorne smirks, “Ah, I see.”

The silence between the three of us is uncomfortable. My cheeks warm in embarrassment. I should've known that I didn't mean anything to him.

"Let me escort you back to your mother, Ms. Rios."

Joshua gestures toward the hallway exit with disinterest.

"I can find my own way," I say, cutting him off.

The exit isn't close enough. I hurry down the hall and out the door before anyone can follow me. It's one thing having Joshua barely remember me and another thing letting him usher me around like some little girl. As I turn, I catch a glimpse of Thorne and Joshua in heated conversation.

Joshua's stare follows me. The look on his face is strange, and yet so familiar.

Outside the fences of the community, buildings sit abandoned, slowly crumbling from neglect. Mounds of trash litter the streets, broken TV sets sit smashed on the sidewalk pavement, —thrown from shop windows. Looters have come and gone, stripping cars and stores for whatever they can. There are rows after rows of cars alongside the street.

There are nights where I dream about walking outside the fence and taking one.

"Carly?"

I turn, startled by my mother's voice. She stands outside the medical supply shed leaning against the ramp railing.

"Carly, are you ready? Didn't you hear me calling you?"

"Sorry mom, I was just..."

"Day-dreaming again?" She smiles.

Always.

"I'm ready."

She hands me a basket of medical supplies as she heads toward the first street of community houses. The town is divided in houses for military and civilians. Our walk is brief, but silent; we haven't spoken since the fight we had the other night about my stepfather. A part of me feels compelled to say I'm sorry, but deep inside I know I'm right about Tom — I know firsthand.

“Carly, I know it’s hard for you to accept Tom, but your brother and you need a father figure and Tom is a good man.”

I scoff at the word *good*. She looks at me, pleading with her eyes. It’s impossible to see Tom as my father.

“He’s really trying this time; you should give him a chance.”

I gave him a chance last time and when you weren’t looking he put his hands all over me. The memory of his touch hits me with violent shivers.

“What’s wrong?” She asks.

I swallow my tears back and stare out into the vacant town around us. It’s early enough that few people are awake. From a distance something moves in the shadows catching my eye. I focus in on the movement past the fence. A gasp escapes from my mother’s lips and I know she sees it too. He’s running towards us breathless and behind him is a group of three shufflers, except they’re not shuffling, they’re running. His face is contorted in horror as he pushes his legs to run faster, but they’re catching up.

“That’s David, Martha’s boy.”

“I’ve never seen them run before.”

“Carly, we have to help him!”

My mother’s words snap me from my daze. David. It’s the boy who was recently exiled from the community.

“How?”

“Help me!” he screams.

The sounds of his pleas send shivers down my spine. My stomach turns at the sound of desperation in his voice. Inside I know there’s nothing we can do for him; civilians aren’t allowed to carry weapons and if the soldiers knew we helped him inside, we would be exiled too. I turn toward my mother - anguish fills her eyes, she knows all too well that we should turn and continue on our route.

“Carly, we have to help.” She says.

He only has a few feet ahead of them. Their limbs thrash forward trying to reach him, like wild dogs they snarl and snap their teeth at their prey. Their skin sags, barely covering the bones across their chest. As David’s body slams into the fence, he scrambles to get underneath the concealed hole at the bottom.

“Please! The fence, help me get under!”

He must have cut it.

My mother scrambles to hold up the loose section of the fence.

“Carly help me.”

I grab the opposite side of the fence and pull up. It’s a tight squeeze. *He can get back in. He has to.* David uses his feet to push his body beneath the fence, but just as he’s almost all the way through, his jeans catch on the bottom links.

“Shit!” he yells.

He pushes his foot against the fence in an effort to get loose.

“Hurry! They’re too close!” I scream.

I turn towards my mother - her face is pale white, her fingers bright red from holding the fence.

“Help, I can’t get my leg loose. Oh God.”

It’s too late. I want to let go and run away from all of this. I can’t watch him die. My mother drops to the floor and my heart goes still; what is she doing? Her hands slip beneath the fence pulling at the fabric of his jeans. I hold my breath in anticipation. My grip is slowly slipping. I close my eyes, whispering a silent prayer, but my thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a piercing scream. It’s my mothers. Blood oozes from her hand, a chunk of flesh is missing between her thumb and index finger. My fingers release the fence as I jump back from shock. I pull my mother away, keeping my eyes on the predator in front of us. I watch in disgust as he chews on her missing flesh.

Despite his elder appearances, his reflexes are quick. He lunges at the fence, shaking it in hunger. My mother’s blood drips warm over me as I lean her against my chest. I reach for gauze inside the medical basket and quickly wrap a layer around her hand. Her face is pale and her pulse is weak beneath my fingers. There isn’t enough gauze to stop the bleeding.

As I look up, I realize David is still stuck under the fence. He fends off the other two shufflers as he struggles to kick them. The older shuffler turns his attention toward David. He’s no match against the three of them as they pull him back out the other side.

I freeze as I watch them dig their nails into his intestines, pulling them out in one thrust, like ripping weeds from a garden. I pray his death is quick, although I know not painless.

“Nooo!” he gargles as blood surfaces his mouth.

Silence follows his screams. The shufflers tear and pull at his body like a bone shared between three dogs. They ravage his intestines and chew his fingers and toes as if savoring the flavor.

My mother shivers in my arms and her quiet voice calls me back to reality.

“Carly, leave me. The soldiers will be here soon. They probably heard everything.”

“No! You’re coming with me.”

“Carly...”

She looks down at the gauze wrapped around her hand. *She’s infected. They’ve warned us, one bite is all it takes.*

“Mom, I can’t.”

Unwanted tears spill down my cheeks.

“I can’t,” I say as I shake my head. “No, you’re coming with me. I won’t leave you. They’ll kill you.”

“Promise me...” she pleads.

I help her scramble to her feet. I know what she wants me to promise. I squeeze my eyes tight, shaking my head.

“I promise,” I whisper.

My heart aches at the thought of my mother as one of those monsters. In the distance an alarm sounds off. Soldiers would soon be here.

For more information on Vanessa Booke see:

www.vanessabooke.com and

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Chantal Boudreau

Just Another Day...

Margot cursed as her toast landed peanut-butter side down. This kind of thing always happened to her when she was already running behind, and mornings lately always seemed to be such a rush. She supposed that that could be said for any working mother with a self-employed husband and two teenage boys. They were totally incapable of doing anything for themselves, leaving her constantly playing the role of super mom.

She tossed what was meant to be her breakfast in the compost and scrubbed the sticky brown mess off of the linoleum, muttering under her breath as she did so. She had enough work to do around the house without adding to her own troubles. She supposed part of the reason that she was such a klutz lately was because she was so tired. Roy remained in his office when she went to bed, and she had difficulty falling asleep without him there. She had always been that way. Add to the fact that his office was below their bedroom, and that she could hear him shuffling about there, well into the night, and she was lucky to nab a couple of hours sleep before the alarm went off in the morning.

Margot tossed the sponge into the sink, too rushed for time to rinse it clean. The house reeked badly enough already, a bit more mess in the sink would not make things any worse. She did not have any time during the week to do any serious cleaning, and she could not rely on her family for help. That left the weekends, and she managed what she could, but she had other obligations to attend to that she had not had a few months ago, thanks to Roy's writing career. While cleaning, she did not dare disturb Roy's office, and Hayden and Wesley had turned the basement into a complete wasteland. She would have to be insane to venture into the depths and try to sort out the mess that they had left there. No... even super mom was not that brave.

Margot realized that things would likely have been different if Roy had found success before they had bought the house. It was a two bedroom bungalow, with a finished basement, in a questionable neighbourhood - all that they could afford on her miserable salary at the hospital. She would have made a lot more if she had actually finished school, but Hayden had come along and spoiled her plans. She had promised herself that she would go back, but that was not very likely with the way things stood now. She was far too busy to fit studying into her schedule. She was fortunate to be able to squeeze breathing in there.

After buying the house came the dilemma of which of the boys would get the upstairs bedroom, and which one would be banished to one of the rooms in the basement. At the time, neither of the two liked the idea of being holed away in the cellar. After several rounds of rather spirited arguments, Roy had found a completely different method of resolving the issue. He had declared that he would be converting the upstairs room into an office, where he could write in peace. That meant that both boys would be forced to dwell in the cellar.

"Yup," Margot sighed, pouring coffee into her travel mug, "My cellar dwellers."

She could hear Roy moving around in his office, but not the boys downstairs. Roy rarely liked to stay put, but that was not the case with their sons. The two young men had eventually accepted living in the basement, and had stopped complaining, making the best of it once they had grown accustomed to it. Margot rarely heard from them now, but they were fairly lazy for their age, much more sluggish than their father.

Margot added cream and sugar substitute, and stirred. She supposed that she could use real sugar, and her weight would not suffer for it. Watching after her family on a daily basis, and even looking out for herself from time to time, kept her so active, lately. She had thought that by her age, she would have more time to relax – spending weekends on the porch with Roy with a good book and some iced tea. That, however, was not her reality.

She tossed the spoon into the sink along with the sponge and started searching for the proper cover for the particular travel mug she had chosen. The covers were all jumbled together in the same drawer, and Margot had to play hide and seek, experimenting with a couple that looked right, before she found one that fit. Roy

had always complained about the way she had organized things in the kitchen, but he had never offered to help rectify the perceived problem.

They had relied on Margot's income alone, to begin with, but then Roy's writing career had taken off, and suddenly they had had money. It was not enough for her to quit her job, or even revert to part-time in order to finish school, but it had been enough that they had started living more comfortably. Several months ago, they had taken their first family vacation in years, and some of the burden of paying the bills had been lifted from Margot's shoulders. It had also meant, however, that Roy had spent more and more time locked up in his office, chasing for even more success after enjoying the first, rarely coming out, even for meals. Now, Margot never saw him.

Margot pushed her coffee to one side, and started digging through the cupboards for a granola bar. Since her toast had made the sacrificial leap, she would settle for something packaged and instant for breakfast, a concession that she would have to make that morning. When Roy had used to do all the grocery shopping, he would always buy the most disgusting, sugar-laden things on the market, chocolate-covered and filled with marshmallows and caramel. They were merely chocolate bars masquerading as something healthy. Now that that duty had been relegated to her, with the myriad of other responsibilities that she had been forced to assume because Roy was no longer able, Margot selected proper food. Her granola bars were high fibre, low fat, and reduced sugar. She had to stay fit after all. She was always on the run, and sometimes, she had to run faster than others.

Margot heard a few breathy noises and more shuffling from Roy's office. He was getting restless. That drew her attention away from the cupboards and she glanced at her watch. Seeing the time, she sucked in a breath sharply. She had ten minutes left before she had to leave, if she wanted to catch her train. That did not leave her much time to do everything that she had to do.

"Briefcase," she grumbled, staring haplessly about the kitchen. It was very disorderly, and would remain that way until Saturday, when she would finally be available to tidy it. "Where is my briefcase?"

There was a crash from down below, somewhere in the basement. Margot rolled her eyes and moaned. It sounded like something had broken, but she would not be able to investigate. No one in their right mind would go down there without a suit of armour and a flamethrower to clear the path. She could just picture herself tripping over something in the dark, left haphazardly on the stairs, and falling to her doom. She did not have the time for that. She did not have the time for anything other than getting ready for work.

Finally, her gaze did settle on her briefcase. She drew it out and tossed it on top of the table, along with her travel mug and granola bar. Margot needed one last thing before she left the house, and...

The unusual smell in the air, beyond the typical odours, reminded her of another task that required completion before she headed for her train. She was so fatigued and rushed that it had almost slipped her mind. Margot spun quickly on her heel and eyed the three brown paper bags on the counter. She always ate lunch at the hospital cafeteria but she could not let Roy and the boys go hungry, and preparing their meals had become a regular part of her morning rituals - so had distributing those meals.

She stared anxiously at her watch again. Did she have enough time? She did not want to miss her train and have to taxi it to work again. That seemed to be becoming a bad habit, and an expensive one at that. She wanted to consider setting her alarm a few minutes early, but she was already running on empty with the little amount of sleep that she got. She was not sure if she could physically function on anything less.

With a restrained whine, Margot approached the counter where the bags sat. That was when she noticed that she had left the plastic container open with the remnants of that day's meal. She glanced in without thinking or pausing to hold her breath, and the stench of it gave her the dry heaves, like rancid rotting meat. Trying not to look at the greyish gelatinous mass inside, she hastily popped the cover on top and securing it with an exaggerated push, swept the container off the counter and hurriedly shoved it onto the middle shelf of the refrigerator, placing it in between two other containers with similar proportions and quivering gray contents. One of the other containers still bore a medical biological waste sticker that Margot had forgotten to remove. She rotated the

container clockwise, turning the side with the sticker towards the wall of the fridge and away from view.

From behind the closed office door, Margot heard Roy groan.

“Just a minute, honey,” she called. “The boys come first – you know the drill.”

Margot was tempted to scoop up the bags and make her rounds, but the brown paper would often leak, and the last time she had made the mistake of doing that, she had left a foul-smelling stain on her business attire. If that happened again, she would be forced to go and change, and then she would certainly not make her train. She leaned over and grasped the lunch bags cautiously by their rolled up tops, careful not to allow anything to drip off them onto her clothing.

Plastic would be better to avoid spillage, she knew, but the fact was that she would likely never see any containers handed off to Roy or the boys ever again, which would mean constantly buying new ones, while the old ones, rank, fetid and growing mould, would pile up in some corner, forgotten in a closet or lost behind a piece of furniture. That much had not changed over time. Brown paper bags would remain the method of choice.

As Margot had just finished telling Roy, the boys were first in line. It was a mother’s prerogative to put the well-being of her offspring before that of her spouse. She approached the door tentatively, with their two bags in her left hand, and Roy’s in her right. She crept closer, trying to quiet her breathing, and pressed her ear against the door. All she could hear was her heart thudding loudly in her chest. That did not necessarily mean that they were not there. They were less mindless than one might expect of a typical teenage boy, as much as that surprised Margot. They could still be clever, when they really wanted to be. That, she assumed, was because they were Roy’s children. Her husband had always been smart as a whip, whereas she had always been forced to muddle her way through things, improvising as necessary.

Margot realized that she did not have the time to stand there and waffle over whether or not they might be lurking behind the door, waiting to jump out at her. She steeled herself, unlocking the basement door and making as little noise as possible in the process. Cringing, she swung the door wide, and dropped the two paper bags onto the top step. Before she had even released the

rolled paper tops, she heard a loud moan coming from below, and a scratching, dragging noise that almost made her jump out of her skin. Without hesitating, she slammed the door shut and fumbled with the lock. She managed to finally get it to click back into place just as something thudded against the opposite side of the door.

Margot took three staggering steps backwards and pressed herself up against the hallway wall for comfort. She was breathing heavily, still startled, and she clutched at her chest. Closing her eyes, she waited a few moments, listening to the sound of grunting and shifting on the other side of the door, before her muscles began to relax again, and her thoughts began to calm.

She was saddened a little by the fact that she had not been able to tell if it was Hayden or Wesley that she had heard. Not that seeing the boy would have provided her with any more information. Her sons, as they had aged, had grown to look so alike that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. One would never be able to guess that Hayden was the older of the two, and Wesley the younger. The one shocking time that she had seen them both at the same time lately, side by side, they could have been identical twins. The only thing that had differentiated them was the way that Wesley slouched a touch more on the left side, and drooled a little, but then again, he always had.

“Enjoy, boys,” Margot called through the door.

She wanted to press a hand to the door, as a gesture of endearment, but her fingers were still trembling too much to allow her to do so.

“I have to see to your father next and then I’ll be going,” she said. “I’ll see if I can pick something up for you both while I’m gone.”

Margot was met with silence, which was their own form of gratitude, she guessed. She did not understand them anymore, but she had not since they had hit puberty. They had often been sullen and silent. Roy tended to be much more vocal about things, especially if he liked something. The boys were a quiet pair – shy and reserved. That might have been why they had adapted to living in the basement so quickly. That was also why she did not miss their presence the way that she did with Roy.

With only one bag left to go, Margot headed for the back door. Roy’s office window overlooked the yard there and was open a couple of inches and covered over with metal bars. Roy

had insisted just after they had moved in, after word had gotten around the neighbourhood that there had been a couple of violent break-ins in the area, that they bar all of the windows in the house, including the one for his office. They did not, after all, live in the best of locations. Sure, it would look ugly, he had argued, but it would keep them secure, and he considered that much more important than appearances.

That judgement call had proven to be very useful, considering their current circumstances. Margot could safely leave that window open twenty-four/seven, without worrying about anyone or anything getting in or out. That was important with Roy being cooped up in there all day long. The air in the office had gotten stale and rancid, and having the window open allowed the air to circulate, making it a little more breathable. It also left enough of a gap to suit Margot's purposes.

She leaned down and grasped the handle of the pool hook. They could never have afforded a pool, but she had bought it when she had recognized the necessity for it. Margot entwined the paper bag in the cording on the end and slipped it in between the bars, sliding it in through the open window. There was a tug on the other end, a rather strong one, and Margot responded by giving the pool hook a good shake. It took a couple of minutes of jostling, but eventually Margot managed to pull it free, leaving the bag behind with Roy.

Unhappily lowering the unwieldy pole to the ground again, Margot crouched for a few seconds, listening to the sounds that emerged from the open window. Time was wasting, but this was the closest thing to quality time that she had with her husband nowadays. There was a lot of shuffling, tearing and slurping. Those noises were followed by a string of hungry lamentations, and only one word could be heard clearly.

“Braaaaaiiiins.”

“Still vocal,” Margot murmured, “But not so loquacious, my dear.”

His vocabulary really had gone downhill.

She hovered there for a few more moments, and then forced herself to turn back towards the back door.

“I’ve got to go to work now, honey,” she yelled to him, a fair distance from his window. “They have me working a long shift today. Don’t wait up for me, okay. I’ll be home late. It is budget

season, and you know what that means. I'll be buried up to my eyeballs in paperwork."

Roy moaned.

"I appreciate the sympathy," Margot chuckled. "But it would be even nicer if you could help out around here. There's only so much that one woman can do by herself, you know."

With a soft whimper, and a pained look at the barred window, she re-entered the house.

She was fortunate, she thought, as she headed for the kitchen again, that she worked for a hospital. The salary was not the greatest, but there were other perks. She could keep her three men fed and somewhat content, thanks to the availability of what they needed to survive, and it just happened to be found where she was employed. They never needed to leave home as a result, and that was important. It had been that way for the last three months, and she was adapting, gradually. It had taken some creativity and some manoeuvring to get things into place and functioning smoothly, but she had tackled the problem head on and come up with solutions. Margot was a good problem-solver.

There were times that she did feel guilty about stealing from her workplace, but she had come up with several means of justifying what she did, to make herself feel better. The things that she took were in the process of being discarded. Nobody would miss them, and it did no harm. It was something that they did not want, and something that she needed. Why let it go to waste?

There was also the fact that they had taken advantage of her for years, getting her to work unpaid overtime, knowing that her entire family depended on her salary. The threat of being replaced by someone who better matched their education requirements had always loomed over her. It had been an intimidation tactic on their part and it had been an effective one. Her family had paid the price in the past, missing out on her time and her presence. Well, now she was recouping that loss through her own efforts, in the form of containers filled with gray gelatinous material and bearing biological waste stickers.

She picked up her briefcase from the table with a sigh. She had been working late on the night that people had started turning. It was a disease, they had said. It was a virus that reacted with people on a genetic level, killing their regular biological functions, but then resuscitating them in some ways, with reduced

capabilities, a lack of comprehension and social awareness, and very peculiar urges. The doctors and scientists had said that their brains had begun degrading, faster than their bodies, and that was why they were craving brain matter in particular. It only affected about twenty-five percent of the population, who possessed a specific genetic mutation. That was a mutation, however, that Roy had had, and one that he had passed down to his sons. Margot, on the other hand, had been spared.

There had been mass hysteria at first, because those who were sick...those who became zombies, were violent and voracious. There were mass killings before the government had brought things somewhat under control. The government solution? Kill them all, for the sake of national security and the safety of the general populace.

There had been a few stragglers who had escaped the genetic cleansing, and those were the ones who had been smarter before they had turned. They still roamed cities and towns searching for new victims. That was why all citizens were now allowed to arm themselves in any way that they deemed would be effective against the zombies. It was necessary, for their own protection.

There were also those who had turned who escaped the cleansing because they had someone like Margot, someone willing to lock them away, to keep them safe, someone willing to shelter them, and see to their every need. They were, after all, still family.

Margot had been surreptitious, keeping up appearances for neighbours and co-workers. If anyone suspected what had happened to her family, they would send a cleansing team to the house, and she certainly could not have that. She loved her husband and her boys. She did not want anyone trying to take them away from her.

If anyone asked her about them, Roy's writing had supplied them with enough money to send their sons to private school, and what good mother would not want to provide her children with the best education possible. Margot also had started writing on her lunch hours and the weekends, trying to mimic Roy's style as much as possible and offering her stories up to his agent as his latest works. Her first few pieces had been rejected outright, but Margot felt like she was starting to catch on and the agent had been very pleased with her latest endeavours. He had

even commented that it was nice to see that Roy had finally overcome whatever trauma he had been suffering from as a result of the turning event and that it was especially good to see that he was back to his old self. He also suggested that it was about time that Roy finished up the sequel to his break through novel. Margot was not sure if she could manage that, on top of everything else that she had been forced to deal with.

Margot heard Roy's noisy lamentations begin anew. She had been lost in thought, not something that she could really afford at the moment. She had to get to work, or there would be trouble.

Margot glanced at her watch and gave a stifled gasp. She could still make it to her train, if she ran.

She scanned the kitchen one more time, and found what she was looking for, perched behind the inside door. She had installed a strap on it, making it easier for her to carry when she was on her way to work, with her hands otherwise full. Despite being a sympathizer, Margot was not immune to a straggler's attacks, and what she sometimes carried with her served as extra bait. She could not allow herself to be vulnerable. Her family was depending on her.

She slung the shotgun over one shoulder, hoisted her briefcase beneath her other arm, and grabbed her travel mug and granola bar from the table.

"Bye!" she hollered over Roy's groans. "I'm off!"

Then she bumped the door open with her butt, pushing her way outside as she whistled her favourite Tori Amos tune, "Happiness is a Warm Gun."

To find out more about Chantal Boudreau, please visit her blog at

<http://chantellyb.wordpress.com/2012/10/31/my-favourite-monsters-a-z-zombie/>

And connect with her on

[Facebook](#)

Laura Bretz

What Zombies Fear:

The Ballad of Ryan Fullerton

To Kirk: Thank you for being the kick-in-the-pants I need
when the going gets rough. Thank you for your endless
encouragement and inspiration. I couldn't do this without you.
To our readers: I couldn't have asked for a better group of people
to be the Maxists. You absolutely rock and you're what keep us
going.

This one's for you.

Chapter 1

Ryan was finishing up a session with one of his favorite students, Donte Jackson, when his cell phone rang on his desk. He'd been the guidance counselor at Bristol High School for just over two years, and in that time he'd trained everyone he knew not to call his cell phone during school hours.

"I'm real sorry about that, Donte," he said, swiping the 'ignore' key on the phone to send the call directly to voicemail. He didn't even look to see that the call was from his wife, Kelly. "I think you have a good chance at getting those grants, and I think you'll be really successful at Tennessee."

"Mr. Fullerton, if those grants don't come through, I won't be able to go," said Donte.

"You meet all the qualifications and you're just the kind of student they're looking for. I think you'll be fine," said Ryan, trying to give the young man some confidence. Donte was a star scholar, had managed to stay out of trouble his entire high school career and had all the right extracurricular activities, including raising best-in-show sheep for two years running in the 4H club. Ryan spent his first year on the job trying to convince Donte he could go to college, and had spent the last year helping him decide which one was best for him. Ryan really loved his job, and it showed in his interactions with his students.

"Thanks, Mr. Fullerton. I don't know what I'd do without you," said Donte standing up to head back to class.

"I'm going to miss you next year," replied Ryan, also standing up to shake the boy's hand. Ryan stood almost six inches taller than Donte, but then Ryan was used to being taller than everyone. "Have a good day, and if I don't see you before, good luck at the farm show this weekend. I'll see you next Tuesday if I don't run into you at the show." Ryan always ended his weekly meetings with students with a reminder of the next one. Most of the students looked forward to their time with their guidance counselor.

Donte walked out of the tiny interior office as Ryan sat back down and picked up his phone. He hit the voicemail icon and listened as his wife shouted into the phone. Frustrated at not being

able to understand her message, he hit three to delete the message somewhere in the middle, and dialed her number.

“Ryan! Oh my God, Ryan, thank God you’re OK,” she said before it rang even one time on Ryan’s end.

“Kelly, what’s wrong?”

“The hospital is full of people. They’re sick, Ry, and they’re dying,” she said, her voice clear.

“What do you mean? What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. No one knows. Old man Hillsboro came in with his wife, said something about getting bitten by some stranger in the diner, and he was running a crazy fever. The next thing I know, he leaned over and bit his wife! Bit a piece right out of her! Now there are twenty or thirty people here, and the Broadmore Home is calling saying they need help. They’re saying the folks in the home are eating each other. Ryan, something’s happening. I’m--”

“Kelly, darlin’,” Ryan cut her off, “Is it bad enough that you need to get out of there? Do you feel like you’re in danger? If you are, get on out of there and go home. I’ll be home in an hour, and we can worry about the trouble at work together.”

Kelly was not prone to overreaction, and that had Ryan worried. If she was this panicked, there was something really odd going on. Kelly was one of those good “salt of the earth” women, a perfect quality for someone that worked in a hospital. When Ryan’s father had cut his finger off sharpening the combine blades, Kelly was the one who took charge of the situation. She ordered Ryan to get him to her car while she dug through the dirt to find his finger. It was because of her calm head and quick thinking the doctors were able to reattach the finger.

“Come on home, Kelly,” Ryan said. “On second thought, I’ll cancel my last appointment and be there to meet you.”

“Okay,” she said, satisfied. “I love you. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“I love you too darlin’. We’ll see this through.”

Ryan stood up as he was saying goodbye, locked his office door behind him and was halfway to the principal’s office before he stuck his phone back in his pocket. He knew the rules about using his phone in the building, but this had him pretty rattled.

“Miss Jo,” said Ryan, sticking his head in the administrative offices. “Can you email Katey’s 5th period teacher

and ask her to let Katey know I need to reschedule our appointment? Something's come up with Kelly, and I gotta go."

"Okay, Ryan. Hope everything is OK."

"I think it'll be fine. Some big ol' dust up at the hospital's got her shaken up, but I'm sure it's nothing," Ryan lied.

He worried about his wife as he drove home. He knew he didn't really need to; she could take care of herself, but she was his whole life. His fear of losing her was probably bigger than any danger she was in. She had her Glock and knew how to use it if necessary. She had a good, solid truck and knew all the back roads and side roads in Bristol county. The two of them had spent years exploring all those roads looking for good make-out spots in high school.

About halfway to the house, Ryan woke from his daydream of those evenings in high school just in time to slam the brake pedal to the floor. His old blue Ford F250 screeched to a sideways halt. Ryan jumped out to take a look at a still steaming car that had run into a tree. The whole engine compartment of a red Toyota Camry was folded around a mid-sized pin oak tree, and the shattered windshield was laying on the ground beside it.

When he got to the driver's side of the car, he thought he saw signs of movement inside. Ryan pulled on the handle to open the door, but it was wedged shut. In a panic, he crawled onto the hood of the car to look in the hole where the windshield had been. As he stuck his head in the car, the driver's hands locked on to his head and pulled. Ryan heaved backwards to break free of its grip. At the edge of his vision, he saw the driver's mouth moving towards his neck and as the driver's teeth snapped shut, he landed butt first on the hood of the car with his back against the tree.

The driver clawed and pulled at the frame of the car, slicing her hands to shreds on the shards of broken windshield still attached.

"Ma'am, stay still!" Ryan yelled, reaching in his pocket for his phone.

He dialed 9-1-1 and held the phone to his ear. A second later he heard the telephone company tones, followed by an "All circuits are busy. Please hang up and try your call again" message.

"Ma'am, I'm going to go for help. Try to stay still," Ryan yelled as he ran back to his truck.

Ryan sped off as fast as his truck would accelerate; flying down the roads he'd been driving since he was ten years old. He had to get to Kelly, and make sure she was safe, and he had to find someone to help that lady.

The old blue Ford veered right onto a dirt road, heading up the mountain. The first house on the road was Mrs. Wiggins house - she was always home. On these old country roads, houses didn't have driveways and yards as much as a general area where people parked. Ryan stopped his truck a few feet from the porch, hopped out and banged on the front door.

"Mrs. Wiggins! Mrs. Wiggins, there's been an accident. Can you call 911?"

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief when the old woman came tottering over towards the door. Her husband had died back when Ryan was in high school, and all three of her kids had moved out of the state. Ryan had taken to checking up on her a couple of times a week, just to see if she needed something, or to mow her lawn. She had a home healthcare nurse every other day, and the nurse's car was parked in the driveway.

Ryan opened the door as she approached, but she didn't stop. The little old woman grabbed the hand that was holding the door open and pulled it towards her mouth. As she did, Ryan saw a large open wound on her neck. He yanked his hand back, pulling the old woman on top of him, and both of them landed in a pile on her front porch.

The young man scrambled to get out from under the old lady, but she was holding on to his head with a frightening amount of strength. Ryan forced his hands out from under her and held her off by pushing hard against her neck. Old Mrs. Wiggins drooled a little onto Ryan's face, and was much stronger than someone her age should have been.

"Mrs. Wiggins! You have to stop. Stop! Don't bite me, STOP!" he yelled, getting louder with each "stop." She continued to push for his face, as if the only thing in her head was getting her teeth on him. He let go of her neck with one hand and reached his other arm out for anything he could find, settling on a wobbly brick that bordered her porch. The high school guidance counselor worked the brick free, and brought it up to her face and pushed with it.

“Ma’am, you gotta get off me. I need to get home to Kelly, and there’s been an accident.”

The old woman kept coming, even with a brick pushing into her teeth. That’s when Ryan noticed the healthcare nurse, a man in his late thirties, was coming out of the house. He was walking crazy, and holding his hands out towards Ryan. When he got close, he fell to his knees and grabbed at the pinned man’s leg. Ryan kicked his leg and gave one huge heave to throw Mrs. Wiggins off of him. She landed on the nurse, and the two creatures struggled to get untangled and stand up. Ryan dropped his brick and ran for the truck. Something was really wrong, and he needed to get home to Kelly.

The old Ford spun its wheels as Ryan flew up the hill, towards his log cabin at the top of the mountain. Ryan bounced along the rutted dirt road, across the wooden bridge he’d help rebuild last year after a mudslide took out the old one. The old bridge was still laying in the creek thirty feet below. The little bridge was only fourteen feet long but without it, he’d had to drive nearly an hour out of his way to get around the mountain. Ryan’s land started on the opposite side of the bridge. He lived on his family’s old plot. The land had been in his family for hundreds of years before his grandfather moved everyone down to the farm in the valley.

When Ryan took possession of the land, the only thing on it was an old, falling down pole barn. Ryan, his dad, and Kelly’s dad had built a beautiful 2500 square foot, three bedroom three floor log cabin on the top of the mountain that overlooked the valley. Kelly’s dad was a building contractor, and had given them the foundation and the log cabin kit for their wedding. The assembly was easy enough. Ryan was a capable plumber, and his dad had been an electrician in the Army. With the rough-in Kelly’s dad had done, everything went smoothly and the home passed all the appropriate inspections throughout the building process with ease. It was a solid, beautiful home, and Ryan couldn’t wait to get back to it, and the safety it offered. He couldn’t wait for Kelly to get back.

Ryan eased his truck into its parking spot, and ran for the house. He left the side-door open, but his first steps were to lock all three other entrances on the ground level. He pulled the drapes closed over the French doors that led to the lower deck, and went

upstairs to wait for Kelly, who should have only been a few minutes past him.

But she wasn't.

Nearly two hours later, he saw Kelly walking up the driveway, just behind Mrs. Wiggins and her nurse. She had the same stumbling gait as the pair he'd run into earlier, and Ryan knew she'd been bitten, without even seeing a mark.

Everything in his world stopped and Ryan felt his heart in his throat. His eyes focused on hers and even from this distance, he could tell that the light she carried that he so adored had been snuffed out. As he watched her, his knees grew weak and he fought to remain standing. In an instant, every single moment they had shared flooded his mind. Ryan had first seen her on the track and field ring in high school. Even in 95 degrees and after she had been sweating for at least an hour, Kelly was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Their relationship ran deep - often being called "disgustingly cute" because of how perfect they were together.

Ryan had fallen to his knees - his world moved in slow motion now. Hot, silent tears streamed down his face.

It had just been their anniversary the week prior and Ryan wanted to make sure it was something special. He had taken her to the river where they had first kissed, bringing a picnic lunch, white wine, chocolate covered strawberries and roses with him. The blanket had already been laid out and the edges were all lined with white pillar candles. It had been his goal for her to cry with joy. She did.

Everything about her had quickly become his entire world. He knew that because of her, he had striven to become a better man. To be that same solid rock for her as she was for him and as Ryan's body touched the floor, he remembered how soft her skin was against his palms. The way her skin smelled. How crazy her hair looked in the morning. The way her lips moved as she laughed - oh, how he loved her laugh. How her fingertips would trace his jawline and the soft way she would say "I love you" before their lips would touch.

A body-wracking sob exploded out of Ryan's mouth and he curled up into a fetal position. They had everything planned and knew where they wanted to end up in life. Ryan had often spoken of them growing old and sitting together on this porch, still

holding hands the way they always would. As a pair, they would be old and gray but still forever, endlessly, hopelessly in love. Just like the baby they had so tragically lost, that future would never happen. The nursery would sit, empty. Her side of the bed would no longer carry her warmth. Her smell would eventually drain out of her clothes and of the linens on the bed. And as he sat there, he realized the last words he said to her. We'll see this through. But they didn't see it through. He had gotten there too late and now he couldn't save her.

"God, no. No, no, this can't be happening. Not Kelly...not my Kelly." Ryan was muttering to himself over and over, trying to form some sense of what had happened. But there was no sense to this.

Chapter 2

A month passed. Ryan was like a zombie himself. He ate very little, losing weight on his tall frame. Kelly stood outside the house almost every day. In the first few days, he spray painted the inside of all the windows black so he wouldn't have to look out at her. He rarely went out during the day. Every time he went out the front door, she was standing there, watching. She'd start towards him, arms outstretched, and he would run. He couldn't bear the thought of his precious love and whole life being gone. So he ran away, and hoped that someday, somewhere, someone would find a cure.

When he ran out of food in his own pantry, he walked down the mountain to Mrs. Wiggins' house. Her house, a modular pre-fab home, was empty. Ryan knew it would be. He'd left the door open the day he fought with Mrs. Wiggins. The day he lost Kelly.

It turned out that the old lady had been something of a hoarder. Like most people of her generation, she had an entire cellar full of canned vegetables from her garden. Jams and jellies, squash, green beans, pickled okra, tomatoes, salsa, apple sauce, you name it; it was there. The dill cucumber pickles were his favorite. On that first trip to Mrs. Wiggins' he sat on her cellar floor and ate an entire jar, then drank the juice. That day, he filled a garden cart with canned goods and hauled it up to his house. The next night, he went back for the rest.

He lived up there on his mountain top for two months until one day there was a short rapping at the door. He was sitting in his leather chair, staring at the blank TV when he heard it. He reached for the television's remote before he realized that it was already off. He hadn't had power since the second week after his world ended. "*Old habits die hard.*"

Then again, two successive raps. It was definitely a knock. He got up, walked to the door and opened it but there was no one there. Only Kelly, standing there about 100 feet away. Watching him the way she always did. She started towards him, jaws

snapping open and closed, but Ryan slammed the door and fastened the deadbolt. He felt sick to his stomach.

This continued for several weeks. There would be a knock at the front door. If he ignored it, it wouldn't stop. Every few seconds, knock-knock. And every time he answered, there was no one there. Only Kelly, waiting for him to die so they could be together again.

At some point, he stopped shaving. It wasn't because he was running out of water; mostly he just didn't care. It didn't take long for him to have a full beard and greasy hair that hung down into his eyes. He was vaguely aware that he hadn't bathed in weeks. He hadn't changed his clothes since the last time he kissed Kelly. It was the last thing she ever saw him in, and it was the thing he was going to be wearing when they were together again.

Sometime mid-July, he was no longer sure of what the date was, Ryan turned the faucet on but nothing came out. "This shouldn't be happening," he mumbled to himself, "Not yet." Thinking out loud helped him ignore how quiet the world had become. Ryan's family built the original water tower in Gander Valley back in the 1950's. It was a wooden barrel that held twenty-five thousand gallons. Just the year prior, the town had finally upgraded its water-tower to a modern one. Because of his family ties to the original, Ryan had followed the story and construction with some interest. The new tower was three times taller and held 750,000 gallons. It was enough to keep Gander Valley's full population drinking, bathing, and flushing for almost a week. With everyone else dead, it should have taken Ryan something like two hundred years to use that much water.

He sat down on a wooden bar-stool at the kitchen counter and considered his options. He knew the town had a generator that would power the well-pump, but he didn't know the capacity of the well. It would probably take him the better part of a year to refill the tower if he ran the pump for a couple of hours every day. If he ran the well dry and it lost its prime, he'd have to drain a large part of the tower to re-fill the stand-pipe with water and get all the air out of the system. Running the well dry was the worst thing he could do.

Someone must have left a garden hose or a sprinkler on. He reached across the counter for a pad of paper and a pencil to do some math. Five gallons per minute, was 150,000 minutes.

Divided by sixty minutes in an hour was 2500 hours, divided by 24 hours in a day was one hundred four days. They were about 90 days after the outbreak, so when you added in his use, plus a couple of other survivors, it made sense. Someone was watering their lawn or garden or washing their car when they got bitten, and the hose has been running ever since.

He was pretty sure he could make the necessary wiring changes to connect the tower's pumps to the generator, and knew that the town would have a mostly full diesel tank buried beside the equipment garage. If he towed the generator with the town's snow-plow, he wouldn't have any trouble with the sick people wandering around. They couldn't get to him up in the cab.

Ryan spent the next three days in a flurry of activity, planning, thinking, planning some more, gathering supplies and drawing diagrams. It felt good to be doing something again. It never occurred to him that the knocking at the door stopped while his mind was active.

On the morning of the third day, it occurred to him that he would have to search the entire town, house-by-house turning off the water if his plan was going to work. Without people living in and heating the houses, hundreds of pipes would burst over the winter, and all the water would drain out of the water tower again.

That realization deflated his motivation and reluctantly, Ryan abandoned his plan to refill the water tower. Instead, he risked a trip across the back field to a spring every day. The first trip he carried two five-gallon buckets, placing one under the trickling mountain spring to fill, and leaving the other empty beside the small stream. From then on, every morning he took the full bucket and replaced it with the empty one, giving him about five gallons of water to use every day. After a week or so, things settled down into a new "normal" routine.

Every day was the same, day in and day out. Fetch the water bucket. Eat a few of Mrs. Wiggins' beans from a jar, sit in his chair to stare at the blank TV. Answer the door. Eat a few more beans. Some days he slept. Some days he didn't. But awake or asleep, he was doing pretty much the same thing.

Knock, knock.

This was the twelfth round of knocking today – two more than the usual. Ryan had had enough. "Go the fuck away,

goddammit! Stop tormenting me! Just let me die!” His voice was crusty because he hadn’t spoken out loud in months.

“Mr. Fullerton! Is that you?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Now I’m hearing people too?” Ryan got out of his chair angrily and stormed to the door, flinging it open, his eyes looking to Kelly out in the yard, but she wasn’t there.

“Mr. Fullerton! You’re alive!”

Ryan focused a little closer and saw Donte standing in front of him. “Donte?” he croaked. “What are you doing here? Why didn’t you go to college?”

Donte shook his head and sadly looked at Ryan. “Mr. Fullerton, there is no more college. You need to come with me. We have food and safety, hot water and people.”

“I can’t leave Kelly,” he replied flatly. “I’m not going anywhere; I have to stay with her until we can be together again.”

“Was she bitten? Didn’t you see the news after school that day? When people are bitten, they’re dead. The last hour CNN was broadcasting, they showed one of them being dissected; there was no heartbeat anymore, Mr. Fullerton. Once someone is infected, they are dead.”

“Then I’ll wait here until I’m dead. I won’t leave her,” said Ryan.

Both of their heads turned at the sound of a shotgun from the bottom of the mountain. “I gotta go, Mr. Fullerton. But I’ll come back tomorrow. I’ll be back tomorrow at this same time. Maybe we can talk some, you know, like the old days?” He was already running down the mountain as he finished, yelling the last bit back up to Ryan.

Ryan slammed the door and locked it. For a fleeting moment, he wished that it was just Kelly out in the yard. At least that was familiar. Moments later he was sitting in his chair, staring blankly at the television. Like an animal sinking into quicksand, an idea occurred to him. It was an agonizingly slow process; a full seven hours after he sat back down in his chair, Ryan had fully thought-out something that never even occurred to him.

“There might be others alive out there.”

Chapter 3

That single thought brought his brain back to life. He started planning immediately, and over the next few days he prepared for his escape from his house, and the torment it contained.

On the day he was to leave, he poured a sink full of water from the morning's bucket before sunrise, and started on his face with scissors. In three months, he'd grown a beard to make a lumberjack proud, and his hair, which was normally kept closely-cropped, was out of control. When his beard was trimmed as closely as possible with scissors, he shaved his face and then pulled out his trusty clippers.

Amazed that they still held a charge, and hoping that it would last through his hair cut, he started buzzing his head. He clipped the sides and back first, leaving a Mohawk strip down the center of his head. A little of Kelly's mousse stood the strip straight up, and for the next hour, Ryan paraded around his house feeling like a bad-ass. In his garage he found his old halligan. It was a half crow-bar and half axe; the tool was left-over from his days as a volunteer fire-fighter the summer before he left for college. He stood in the mirror and admired himself, and for a minute, thought maybe he should start a journal.

"I could call it 'Ryan's Undead Diary,'" he said out loud and laughed. He allowed himself to laugh for a long time before deciding that it was time to get moving before he did anything else ridiculous. He set the halligan down on the entry table and went back upstairs to remove the rest of his Mohawk. He didn't want people to see him and think he was some hoodlum.

Just after sunrise, Ryan stepped into the garage and rummaged through years of collected sports equipment. He donned a black plastic chest and spine protector; a hold-over from riding motocross all over the mountains as a teenager, and the matching black motorcycle helmet.

From a huge blue and white duffel bag, he put on his old football shin, thigh, and kidney pads, and then strapped a pair of soccer shin-guards around his forearms. Finally, from the rack of metal shelves by the door, he pulled out his softball bat. It was used in the yearly "Staff Vs Seniors" school softball game. The

staff lost every year, but it was great for the kids. He felt a pang of sadness as he realized that he would never participate in another game.

Ryan rolled the garage door open, and moving quickly, pushed his old 4wheeler out onto the driveway and closed the garage. The battery was long-dead, so he pulled the choke and looked around him. Kelly was on the opposite side of the driveway, and had started towards him. He yanked on the cord, the old Honda sputtered and died. Kelly was now seventy-five feet from him.

He pulled again, heard the motor turn over on its own a couple of times and then it died again.

“Come onnn, baby,” he said, yanking the cord a third time. Kelly was closing quickly, less than fifty feet away. Once again the engine sputtered, sounded like it might catch, and then died.

Ryan pushed the choke in and pulled it back out, reached down and ripped the cord one more time, yanking with all his might. The engine sputtered, missed a few times, but kept going. Kelly was twenty five feet away. He hopped on the quad and gave it a little gas. The engine bogged down, not ready to run yet, so he quickly let off the throttle. Seconds passed as Kelly closed the distance. When she was ten feet away, Ryan tried the throttle again, and the engine responded.

He shoved the choke in, hit the thumb lever to put it in first gear, let out the clutch and gunned it down the gravel driveway, spraying rocks out behind him. Kelly’s cold, outstretched fingertips brushed his helmet as he roared past. Ryan rode down the mountain with tears running down his face. He was grateful for the black-out visor on his helmet. To be so close to her and so afraid of her at the same time was torture. He had to find some people, or next time he might not come back from his depression.

It was a beautiful summer day. The temperature was in the mid-eighties, and the sun was shining. Even with the heat, Ryan was glad he’d opted for long sleeves. After being cooped up in the house for so long, sunburn would have been a guarantee. The quad rolled along about thirty miles per hour, making good time down Highway 7 towards the city of Gander Valley.

At the corner of Highway 7 and 613, he made a right, and rode the four miles into town. It was weird being out on the road

on a quad, and even weirder not seeing a single thing moving. Usually this road was packed with cars. The houses along the highway were all overgrown and the grass in the yards had all grown tall and spindly. Every fourth or fifth house was boarded up. Some of them had the boards torn down but some of them still looked sealed. The ones that looked sealed up would be the most promising houses.

At the edge of the town proper, the speed limit dropped to twenty five, and Highway 613 became Valley Street. Two blocks later, he pulled the quad into an old 1950's strip mall and stopped at the front door of Thornton's Hardware.

His family and the Thornton's went way back. Mr. Thornton was a little older than Ryan's grandfather, and the two of them had practically built this town together. When times were tough for Ryan's family, Mr. Thornton always extended them a line of credit for whatever they needed to make it until the harvest. In addition to always paying back the loans, the Fullerton's kept the Thornton family well fed; no Thornton ever paid for produce at the local farmers market.

Ryan removed his helmet and cupped his hands to the window, peering inside. He was looking for any sign of movement or struggle, but with the power out, it was so dark inside that he couldn't see more than a foot or two inside the glass.

The armored man pushed on the door and was relieved to find it unlocked, although the sound of the brass bells hanging from the handle sounded as loud as the bells of Notre Dame in the silence. With a cringe, he wrapped his hands around the bells to silence them. Ryan tightened his grip on his bat and stepped inside the store, gently closing the door behind him.

Ryan grew up in this store. All through middle school and the first year of high school, he spent most of his free time sitting on a stool behind the counter talking to Charlotte Thornton. When they were little, they roamed the shelves, playing hide and seek or tag, but later Charlotte's father put them to work stocking the shelves, probably at the behest of Ryan's father. Ryan never got paid for the work he did at Thornton's, he considered the time he spent with Charlotte payment enough.

The two of them shared their first kiss at MacDougal pond, laying in a field of dandelions on a day much like this so many years ago. Ryan was convinced the two of them would get

married, until the middle of their freshman year of high school when Charlotte met that moron Josh Binghamton. Josh and Charlotte started dating, and she virtually never spoke to Ryan again. Ryan was crushed, and swore off women until he met Kelly, and his life was completed.

He crouched and moved slowly, keeping his head below the shelves. If there was something in here, there was no reason to let it know where he was. He scoffed at himself. The bell on the door was like a damn dinner bell. Bon appetite. Even though it was pointless, he kept his body low. It made him feel better.

Due to the years spent in the store, there was no question in Ryan's mind where he was going. He crouch-walked down the center aisle to the third row, then halfway down the third row he stopped and picked all five rolls of duct tape off the bottom shelf. On the way out, satisfied that he hadn't heard any noises inside the hardware store, he stopped at the front counter.

Thornton's was an old-fashioned store. You paid at a bar rather than a conveyor belt. At one end of the bar was an old fashioned cash register, one of the first electronic types. Ryan set the rolls of duct tape on the counter and opened the first one. He tore off five strips, each about eighteen inches long, and stuck them up and down his chest protector. He put one more strip down each forearm, and two strips down each thigh. When he was finished, he put the remaining half-roll in the cargo pocket of his canvass work pants and pulled out his wallet. He dropped a twenty on the counter, and slid a pen and paper over. On the paper he wrote:

5 Rolls of Duct Tape @ \$3.49 each.

God Speed, Thorntons. – Ryan

He slid the paper under the cash, and tucked both under the edge of the cash register. Even in these times, taking the tape felt a little like stealing. Just before he left, he stopped at the information rack and pulled out a three-fold map of the city of Gander Valley.

Chapter 4

Ryan rode his quad to the far side of town, towards the newest subdivision. It was a fancy place. A huge brick wall surrounded the entire subdivision. The area even had a pool and a golf course. He passed the guard shack, where normally he'd have to tell the guard his name and which family he was visiting, and pulled onto the circular road that followed the edge of the central lake.

He drove to the back of the subdivision, all the way on the far side of the lake and parked his quad. His plan was to move like a postal worker, parking the quad on the corner, walking down one side and up the other looking for survivors.

"Special delivery for Ms. Watson," he muttered to himself.

It was odd that he hadn't seen a single infected person on the entire trip. He figured, when he was making his plans, that he'd see dozens of them wandering out on the street. Kelly had survived outside this long; it didn't make any sense that there weren't any others.

"Quit stalling, Ryan," he said to himself as he turned to walk up the walkway to the first house. "It's gonna be fine. No one will be in there."

He knocked on the door, and called out, "Hello? Anyone home? I'm looking for survivors!" Ryan's hopes were momentarily up when he heard the sound of footsteps coming towards the door. He opened the glass front storm door and stood in the doorway waiting for the people to answer. Then there was a thump on the door, and some scratching. He waited, but it became very clear to him that there wasn't anyone uninfected inside.

"Shit. First house," he groaned. He knew he couldn't leave the infected in there. If they got out, they could bite someone else. He reached down and loosened the tape on his chest and then turned the knob on the door. He shoved the door, hoping to push the person back. It worked. As his eyes adjusted, he first saw a middle aged black woman in a ruined pant-suit moving towards him. The second thing that hit him was the smell. The house reeked of death. The stench almost knocked him off his feet as he tried to control the urge to vomit right there on the doorstep.

Almost out of instinct, he ripped the tape off of his chest and held it out horizontally in front of him. When the zombie crashed into him, he wrapped the tape around her head, sealing off her mouth. The length of tape made almost two complete wraps around her head. The two of them struggled; she was much stronger than Ryan had anticipated. She pushed him backwards into the door frame, bouncing his head off the edge of the doorway, cutting his scalp.

It wasn't a major cut, but the sight of blood on the door jamb seemed to excite her. Her foggy eyes got a little bigger, and her nostrils flared as she fought on. He finally got the tape secured over her mouth, and was able to use the wall to push himself off and gain the upper hand.

Ryan reached up and grabbed one of her hands, twisting it off of his neck. He ripped the strip of tape off his forearm with his other hand and wrapped it around the wrist he was holding. Once the tape was on one of her wrists, he deftly brought her other hand down and wrapped them together, rendering her almost completely harmless. He thought briefly about taping her feet together, but decided against it because he only had five rolls of tape. Instead, he shoved her backwards through the house to the powder room under the stairs to the second floor. Ryan pushed the woman into the small bathroom, closed the door and wrote "INFECTED INSIDE" on the outside of the door in big, black letters.

Then, he surveyed the rest of the first floor, deciding to start with the kitchen. Surprisingly, it was much cleaner than he'd expected. The closest thing to a sign that there was an apocalypse going on was an overturned chair at the eat-in table and a plate with a dried out waffle and a dark stain of what was probably syrup sitting on it.

He went through her cabinets and piled all the food on the counter before he moved through the den, office, dining room and living room. Ryan ascended the stairs, absently thinking about what nice carpet they had, like this was some kind of home tour. He refocused himself, and pushed open the first of four doors on the second floor. He assumed there were three bedrooms and a bathroom up here.

This bedroom appeared to be for a young teenage boy. Clothes, books, magazines, and other odds and ends covered every

available surface, sometimes in layers of books on top of clothes, and sometimes the reverse.

The next bedroom was probably for a little girl, based on the pink bed linens and rainbow colored pony dolls that filled the shelf. This room was clean, and empty, so Ryan headed to the third. As he neared the third bedroom door, he realized that's where the smell was coming from. Ryan forced himself to open the door. Inside was a large master bedroom. Against the center, opposite wall was a king sized, mission style wooden sleigh bed with matching dresser, night stands and a huge chest of drawers.

Ryan sank to his knees right there in the doorway. On the far side of the bedroom there were three people sitting on the floor. A man, a young teenage boy, and a little girl, all three of them dead of gunshot wounds to the head. Ryan crawled closer. Something inside him needed to make sense of this horrific scene as tears flowed down his cheeks. The two children were sitting in the father's lap. His face was covered in blood, except for two streaks, where tears that were now long dried washed the blood away. Behind them, a white leather couch was coated in gore, with three spots where stuffing had exploded out of the back.

In one hand, the father had a gun, some kind of pistol, like a police officer would carry. His other hand was resting on his daughter's lap, with a bloody bandage wrapped around his arm.

There was no way to know for sure what happened in this house, but Ryan would have bet money that the bite mark under that bandage would fit the teeth of the woman downstairs. She'd bit her husband. He locked himself and the kids in the bedroom, and when he started to turn he shot his children and then himself.

The enormity of that wasn't lost on Ryan. As the woman thumped and banged in the bathroom downstairs, he sat and wept for this man and his family.

Chapter 5

After only one house, Ryan rode home and locked himself in. It was just too much to deal with. That poor man and his children. He didn't sleep much; Ryan couldn't shake the images of their bodies from his mind. It was exactly a week before he was able to force himself to leave again. This time, he started the quad in the garage, so he didn't have to worry about Kelly coming for him.

Back in the neighborhood, he sat on the quad for nearly a minute looking at the house he'd been in the previous week, knowing what was inside. He could still see the white couch and he felt his stomach turn. Ryan shook his head and tightly set his jaw, refusing to get sucked into that again. He wrapped the 4-wheeler's tow-strap around their mailbox, put the powerful machine in gear and pulled their mailbox over. That was his signal to himself that he'd searched the house.

Every house on the street was inhabited by the infected. Not one single house had a living person in it. At the end of the day, he'd knocked over fourteen mailboxes and left thirty-four people duct-taped in their bathrooms. The worst house had had six people in it. Ryan had been forced to use his bat in that one, hitting one of the infected in the leg to slow them down while he taped up the rest of the family. He hoped that whenever there was a cure for this, that person's leg would heal up.

Over the next five weeks, Ryan finished the neighborhood. Out of one hundred forty-three houses, only fourteen houses were empty, not counting those that had for-sale signs in the yard. He lost count of the zombies somewhere in the middle, but riding home in the middle of September, he guessed there were somewhere near three hundred zombies.

The first house was the worst by far, but three other houses had tiny infected newborns. Ryan hadn't had the heart to tape them up; they lacked the muscle coordination to walk anyway, so he just left them laying silently in their cribs. Unless he came close, they didn't move. There was no kicking, no looking around. They just laid there. He thought the first one was dead until it reached for him; he was able to get within two feet of the first tiny

infant boy before it realized he was there. It was horrifying and seeing them only reminded him of his own empty nursery back in his house. They were the embodiment of everything he had already lost. In those nurseries, he wrote the same “INFECTED INSIDE” on the doors and never looked back.

It was heartbreaking work, but he was determined to find survivors. Until day forty-seven of his search, it never occurred to him that in the tiny town of Gander Valley, survivors might not be so happy to see him. It was unseasonably cool for the beginning of fall. The high that day was only about forty degrees when he hopped off his quad and heard a gun-shot. The bullet hit the driveway just behind him, taking a large chip of the concrete with it.

Ryan threw up his hands and screamed, “I’m not armed! I’m not infected! Don’t shoot!”

The next shot was a little closer. It looked like it was coming from a church steeple on the next block. He waved his hands in the air, trying frantically to figure out some way to pantomime that he was alive. The third shot was even closer, causing Ryan to give up and run as fast as he could around the back of the house.

In the back yard, there was a huge pile of trash under the kitchen window. There had to be more than a hundred black trash bags, which were buried under white grocery bags, and then finally, there was a layer of loose trash on top. Cans, cereal boxes, juice boxes, soda and beer cans littered the yard. He sneezed, uncontrollably, three times in a row, wiped his nose on his sleeve and approached the sliding door on the back of the house.

As he peered through the door, he heard a shout from behind him. “Get down on the ground, face down, hands behind your head.” Without hesitation, Ryan dropped to his belly and put his hands on his head.

Six men ran up, each yelling at him. “Who are you!”

“Why are you by our house!”

“Identify yourself!”

“Don’t fucking move!”

“Stay down!”

“What’s your name!”

All of the voices barking orders, Ryan didn’t know who to answer first, so he just started talking. “My name is Ryan

Fullerton. I'm just looking for survivors. I've been alone since all this happened; I just wanted to know that there are other people out there. I've been looking for survivors for almost two months."

"Hey Tommy, I think this is the duct tape guy," said one man. Each of the men were dressed in all black tactical clothes, carrying military rifles. They were the kind with the big curved magazines hanging out the bottom. Ryan was more terrified of these guys than he was of the zombies.

"Yeah. I duct tape all the infected when I search a house. I don't ever take anything, I just round up the infected and inventory the food," Ryan said.

"Why would you do that?"

"Do what? Tape them up? So they can't bite anyone. So they can't infect anyone else."

"They're dead, dude. Walking corpses. Just shoot them in the head and put them out of their misery."

"I can't believe that. My wife..." Ryan stopped himself.

"Your wife was bitten? And you hope there's going to be a cure? All of our wives were bitten. There is no cure."

"Who are you? Why did you shoot at me?"

"You're in our territory. Can't have people stealing our food."

"I haven't taken anything. Let me go. I won't come back to this neighborhood," said Ryan.

"What if he's one of them smart ones, Tommy? We can't let him go in case he's one of them. Remember Ron? Ron was with us for a week before anyone figured it was him that took out Jonesy and Bill. What if he's a Ron?"

The man that ordered Ryan to get down spoke. "He's not one of them. He's just a dumbass." Then Ryan recognized the voice.

"Tommy Rivera? Graduated last year? Is that you? It's me, Ryan. I'm the guidance counselor. I helped you get into college."

"Oh shit," said Tommy. "Mr. Fullerton?"

"You know this guy?" asked one of the other men.

"Yeah, he was the college-man at school. Tried to make everyone go to college," Tommy replied.

“I didn’t make anyone do anything. I just tried to help people. Have you seen Donte? He came by my house about two months ago,” Ryan said, and slowly sat up.

“Donte Jackson? Not possible, man. Donte got bit on day one.”

“Can’t be. He came by my house. He said he was looking for survivors. We heard shots and he ran off before we could finish talking.”

“Sorry about this, Mr. Fullerton,” said Tommy as Ryan felt something hit the back of his head. His forehead bounced off the deck just before everything went black.

Chapter 6

Ryan woke up shivering. It was raining, and he was soaking wet. He was lying face down on asphalt, but the only sensation he could discern was the pain in his head; as if someone was pounding on his forehead with a large sledgehammer.

He took an easy breath and tried to relax. He could feel water lapping at his mouth as he breathed, and the sound of rain was intensifying. He got to his knees and looked around; he was in the parking lot just outside Thornton's hardware. They moved him the whole way across the town and left him with nothing. His pockets were empty; his gear was all gone, except for his wallet. Ryan struggled to his feet and stumbled towards the store, looking much like a zombie himself. He opened the door, stepped inside out of the rain, and was immediately beset by a massive sneezing fit.

When he finished sneezing, his nose was stopped up and his headache was renewed. He was having trouble focusing on anything farther away than his hands, any time he tried to look across the store his vision was blurry.

Ryan knew there was a small kitchen and break room in the back of the store. With great effort, he slowly made his way back there. It had been a long time since he'd been in the stock room, but for twenty years there was an old gold couch with dark wood arms back there. There had always been an afghan on the back of the couch, and as a single bright spot in what was otherwise the second worst day of Ryan's life, it was still there. He stripped off his clothes, hung them up on a shelf, wrapped up in the old musty smelling blanket and went to sleep.

When he woke up, he had no idea what time it was, but he was still shivering uncontrollably. He felt his forehead; he was definitely running a fever. As if to punctuate the thought, he was seized by another uncontrollable sneezing fit.

"Shit. Just what I need, a cold," he said to himself. His throat was raspy and hurt. Still wrapped in the old crocheted blanket, he got up to check his clothes. Still wet, and now they were cold. It couldn't be more than fifty degrees in the store. Ryan laid back down on the couch and spent the next two hours drifting in and out of sleep. All at once, waves of nausea overtook him.

He bolted for the bathroom. On the way across the storeroom he debated whether he should sit or face the toilet. At the last moment he opted for sitting, and was grateful he did. The force of the explosion from his rear end was so intense it seemed as though it might lift him off the commode. At the same time, he reached for the trash bag, and hurled his innards at the liner. He vomited until his stomach was empty, and sat there until the lower half of his digestive tract stopped cramping. Liquid snot poured out of his nose. There was no sense in sniffing it back; it would have been like trying to keep half a cup of water in his sinuses.

Every time Ryan sneezed, various bodily fluids ejected from whatever orifice happened to be nearby. After half an hour on the toilet, he tried to get up. As soon as he stood, his bowels were seized in a horrible cramp, and he sat back down to repeat the entire process. This time there was nothing to vomit; he just dry-heaved over the trash can as diarrhea filled the bowl beneath him.

He had to get home. There was simply no other choice. Ryan knew he would die of dehydration or hypothermia here.

Chapter 7

At first light, Ryan started walking. He moved slowly, lacking any kind of energy that would allow for even a leisurely stroll. In an hour, he'd gone almost half a mile. In that amount of time, he had to stop twice to relieve his bowels, and twice more just to rest. Thankfully, the rain had stopped, and his clothes were finally starting to dry. Ryan wondered if the heat radiating from his body was causing them to dry faster.

He mopped cold sweat from his forehead, stood up from his perch on a stone wall, and almost passed out. Even though his eyes were wide open, his vision had narrowed down to a tiny pinpoint, as if he was looking through a long tunnel. He staggered from a street sign to lamp post to an old mailbox, barely able to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

"Must get home. To Kelly," he said to himself. Although he would never admit it, Ryan loved when Kelly would take care of him when he was sick. "She'll know what to do."

He staggered on, at one point picking up a limb and using it as a walking stick. To stay focused on the present, he counted his steps. In an attempt to remain coherent, he tried to do the math in his head, but his mind kept wandering.

"Thirteen miles home. That's 5280 times 13. So, that's like 68,000 feet. At two feet per step, that's... I need to remember to repair that top step from the garage to the kitchen. It's been loose for a while, and if I ever get the garage cleaned out, Kelly might trip coming into the house."

For the next several hundred steps, Ryan's fever-addled mind wandered to all of the things he needed to do around the house. He was just past the last house in town, when Donte appeared in front of him in a swirl of black smoke.

"Hi, imaginary Donte."

"Hi, Mr. Fullerton. You don't look so hot," Donte casually replied.

"Oh, I'm hot. I'm about to sweat to death, I imagine." Ryan's voice was nearly jovial. "I need to get home to Kelly, and somehow I don't have my keys. Did you ever lose your keys? One time, I was at the beach, and forgot to take my keys out of my

bathing suit pocket. Like three hours later, I got to the car and did that panicked pocket-patting. You know that feeling?”

“I do know it,” Donte replied, walking backwards in front of Ryan, although Ryan didn’t notice. In his stupor, all he saw was the beach on a sunny summertime day. There were hundreds of people all around him. Beautiful girls in bikinis, children playing in the surf and way too many men wearing Speedo’s who shouldn’t be. All connection he Ryan had left with reality was completely severed.

“So, we had to call the rental car company and they had to bring us a new key,” he rambled. “The next day, Kelly was walking around in the surf and stepped on our car key! Can you believe the luck? That’s how she was, my Kelly. She always has a way of making things work out.” Ryan wasn’t even aware that he was speaking about Kelly as if she was still alive.

“Mr. Fullerton, you’re pretty sick.” Donte’s voice had no connection in the fantasy world Ryan created. He was merely a floating voice – the last remnant of reality.

“Nonsense, I’m perfectly fine. Just having a little stroll down the beach with my beautiful wife. Isn’t that right, Kelly?” Ryan said, turning his head. Just to his left, holding his hand was Kelly. She was walking barefoot along the beach in a red bikini, with a big floppy hat on top of her head. He felt warm and content.

“Yes, Ryan. It’s a beautiful day for a walk,” she agreed and squeezed his hand a little tighter.

Ryan walked along the beach with his wife. If there had been anyone left alive to watch the scene, they would have seen a man who was barely able to walk drenched in sweat, mumbling incoherently. Occasionally he would stop as massive coughing fits seized him. His body was running on auto-pilot; he turned at the right places to get home, but his mind was gone. The fever he carried was off the charts at 107. The flu virus ravaging his lungs had limited the oxygen supply to his brain.

As he started up the dirt road towards his house, the beach scene disappeared. The world seamlessly transitioned into a beautiful fall day, even if unseasonably warm. The sun was shining over his head and the leaves were gloriously colored. All around him, there were shining oranges and yellows with hints of red blowing in the light breeze. He was walking home, looking

forward to the chicken pot pie Kelly was working on in their kitchen when he left. He could smell it from here, and the smell quickened his step.

In reality, it was getting dark. A cold drizzle beat down on Ryan, soaking him to the bone. Ryan's body leaned on his mailbox, wracked with a coughing fit, spraying the side with bloody phlegm. As if to add insult to the cough, he sneezed twelve times, before letting go of the mailbox and starting his slow shamble up the driveway.

It was to Ryan's benefit that no one was left to see him walking. Had there been a single armed survivor at any point on his walk home, they would have shot him, thinking he was a zombie. As always, when Ryan topped the hill and started the last hundred feet to the driveway, the undead corpse of his wife started shambling towards him.

Slightly winded from the walk up the driveway, Ryan looked up and saw his wife, standing outside in a pair of blue jeans and a dark gray hoodie. Her hair was beautifully streaming behind her, glowing in the sun, and she was smiling. Kelly called out to him and waved her hand in greeting. She started towards him, and Ryan couldn't wait to kiss his wife. He was struck with the sense that he hadn't seen her in a very long time, even though he'd only been gone for about an hour. As he walked, it felt like he was dragging his legs through concrete – he just couldn't get to her fast enough. Getting to Kelly and finally embracing her became his ultimate goal. He just missed her so much and with a small, happy cry he reached towards her.

The two of them closed the distance. The shambling man and woman, both of them pale, dripping with water, clammy to the touch. The woman tripped over a stone, nearly falling to the ground. As she fell, her torpid limbs attempted to grab anything to arrest her fall. Her palm scrubbed down the trunk of a pine tree, coating it in heavy, sticky sap. The woman shuffled forwards.

Ryan was happy – something he hadn't felt in a very long time. A smile lit up his face as he walked. He embraced his wife. A flood of pure joy washed over him as they finally touched. "I love you. I love you, Kelly," he said over and over. Kelly's warm skin was so soft as he cupped her face in one hand. He brought the other hand up through her soft, golden hair and pulled her closer. The lovers kissed passionately. Ryan knew that he could

never live without her. Life was not worth living if she was not part of it. And then, very suddenly, there was intense pain. The pain was so strong; his eyes snapped open and reality came flooding back into view.

Kelly was dead - one of the infected. She was inches from his face, slowly chewing his bottom lip as the E'Clei she'd infected him with streamed through his blood towards his brain.

Her teeth had torn through the meat of his lip as she pulled back. She stared at him blankly, still chewing on his flesh. Blood ran down his chin and with a horrified shout, he tried to shove her away. He grabbed her hand to remove it from his shoulder. Even though he was pulling with all the strength he could muster, Ryan was too weak from the flu and couldn't get away. Not that it mattered - the infection had already taken him. The E'Clei shut down the pain center in his brain first, and he stopped screaming. Then he stopped fighting all together.

Donte Jackson watched the scene unfold curiously from the roof of the house as he released his control over Kelly. With a smirk, he disappeared in a swirl of black smoke. He was off to report what he'd learned about the human mind's capability to distort reality to his Lieutenant.

Minutes later, the corpses formerly known as "Ryan and Kelly Fullerton" shambled back towards Gander Valley, hand glued to hand by the thick pine sap. Finally together again, just like Ryan always wanted. Forever.

The End

Laura Bretz has been immersing herself in fantasy lands, apocalyptic settings and all things impossible since she was a child. Pretending to survive in a post-apocalypse world set fire to her imagination and teaming up with Kirk Allmond to co-author the "What Zombies Fear" series finally gave her an outlet to express and bring her characters to life.

Graduating from college with a focus in interior design has given her an excellent eye for detail. Combined with her love of

painting, that attention to detail allows Laura to create vivid pictures with words.

When she is not obsessing over tenses and punctuation, Laura is usually spending time with her dogs Marty and Teddy, painting, or singing with her local Sweet Adeline's International chorus in south-central Pennsylvania.

Laura's first solo novel project, "The Book of Kris" (www.thebookofkris.com) is coming along well. She also has a high fantasy project in the planning stages, and continues to co-author books in the What Zombies Fear (www.WhatZombiesFear.com) universe with Kirk Allmond. If you'd like to find out more about Laura and the status of her various projects, please join her on her Facebook page, www.facebook.com/LauraBretzAuthor.

Books in the What Zombies Fear universe:

- What Zombies Fear: A Father's Quest (2011) - 1st in the WZF Series
- What Zombies Fear: The Maxists (2011) - 2nd in the WZF Series
- What Zombies Fear: The Gathering (2012) - 3rd in the WZF Series
- What Zombies Fear: Fracture (2012) - 4th in the WZF Series
- What Zombies Fear: Declaration of War (2013) - 5th in the WZF Series
- What Zombies Fear: LEGION (Due August 2013)

Short stories set in the What Zombies Fear universe:

- Victor Tookes Adventures: The Farmer's Daughter

- The Ballad of Ryan Fullerton

Other Short Stories (As Laura Kirk)

- Will of the Dead

To purchase any of Laura's books in any format, please see visit www.whatzombiesfear.com/library for a complete listing of all available retailers.

Tonia Brown

Bob

Bob Fletcher never claimed to be the brightest bulb in the bunch. Nor did he want to be bright. At best, Bob tried to be a little less dim than the very dimmest, which kept him from being cast aside but also kept him from being called upon to shed light on anything. He considered the weakness of his character the strength of his character. Too feeble to rely on, but not so unreliable that he couldn't handle small tasks. Granted, the task wasn't too big.

Or required too much thought.

Or any actual physical labor.

Bob had made a fine art of this labor avoidance. For twenty-six years, seven months and three weeks, he had dodged, ducked and narrowly skidded past any real work. Especially *at* work. On a professional level, this left him as the assistant to the assistant manager of the office supply department for Sutter and Son's Inc. And that was after eight years with the firm. This might have depressed anyone else in his place, to know that so many years of dedication had produced so little result. But no, Bob was happy being a nobody. A nobody was neither the squeaky wheel, nor the grease, and thus no one noticed him sliding through life. And when no one noticed you, they couldn't lay you off, or size you down, or zip you up.

Bob's pitiful office, the one he shared with the assistant manager, was on the second floor of the Sutter Building, which meant he was one of the first to die when the zombies attacked that bright November morning.

Becoming a zombie wasn't much of a career change for the lazy slob in Bob. At first he worried that being dead, or rather undead, would require some effort on his part. But no, he quickly found that all he had to do was lurch about, follow the faster fellow undead folks, let them do the hard work of actually taking down

the living prey, then join in the feast afterwards. It seemed zombies were less hung up on sharing or hoarding than living folks were.

Hording, undead Bob thought. *Zombies like to horde, not board.*

Bob had a lot of thoughts lately. More than he used to. And a lot more than he supposed a dead man, or rather undead man (he just couldn't get quite used to that) should have. But who was he to question the ways of the world? One moment he's eating a hot ham and cheese at his desk, the next he's dead as a can of said ham. One minute he was living his normal office life, and the next he was dead. Or rather undead.

Office life, undead Bob thought. *Office unlife is more like it.*

And the more he thought about it, the more life as a zombie resembled life in the office. This mindless shambling from place to place with no clear objective. Taking directions from the lead zombies as they consumed everything in sight. Eating what was left, castoffs and scraps, while crawling over the carcasses of your enemies on your way to the top of the heap. But Bob was used to leftovers, as he usually bought a big takeout meal from one of the many local food chains at the beginning of the week, then ate off the thing until it started to smell a bit. And even then he might hang on a day or two longer to keep from having to talk to the takeout guys again.

So why did it bother him? This new undead life of his? It wasn't much different from the old one. He had spent a lifetime of being pretty much everything he was now. So why, now that he had everything as easy as he could ever want it, was he not happy? Bob knew he wasn't happy because when he was happy he had a very satisfied feeling all over, from head to toe, especially in certain tender regions. And even considering that his all over was missing an arm, and his right ear lobe, and a handful of teeth, and most of his intestinal tract, Bob was still sure that the all over left to him wasn't feeling satisfied.

He felt, in fact, very, very, empty.

Despite the three men he ate just under an hour ago.

"Can zombies be happy?" undead Bob asked, of no one in particular. This of course came out as a strained series of moans and grunts, which scared the bejeebus out of a teenager hiding in a trashcan on which Bob was resting his left elbow. But Bob ignored the trembling can in favor of turning his rotten mind to his dead dilemma. Or rather undead. (He really needed to get used to that!)

Bob tapped the can as he pondered the makings of a zombie's mind. What made the average zombie tick? And in this makeup, where there was rage and pain and hunger and hunger and more hunger. And hunger. And even more hunger. Did he mention hunger? Because hunger should be on that list, preferably at the head of the list, just after hunger. Wait, where was he? Oh yes, and in this makeup filled with various emotions, one of which was definitely hunger, could zombies feel happiness?

How about joy?

Delight?

Arousal?

Ugh, it was probably best not to contemplate that one. Bob shook the gruesome images of nude undead ladies—most missing their vital naughty bits thanks to his warped sense of worthlessness—from his mind and wondered if perhaps a handy catchphrase would help him get a handle on what he had become and why it irked him so much.

I lurch, therefore I am?

No, that just seemed silly.

I am zombie, hear me groan?

That was even worse.

Give me liberty or give me ... no, that wouldn't work in this case.

It was no use. Bob had spent twenty-six years, seven months and three weeks avoiding this kind of brainstorming, so diving into it headfirst wasn't effective for him. And that's when Bob realized what was wrong with his new unlife, aside from his being so very, very dead.

He missed the challenge.

For twenty-six years, seven months and three weeks he had avoided everything ever handed to him by everyone he ever met. He avoided his mother and her constant nagging about him never amounting to anything at the firm. He avoided making friends, because friends wanted to rely on you, and that was the last thing he needed. He even avoided baths when he could, which probably helped with the whole no friends thing when one thought about it.

But the point was this: it was work to avoid work.

Work he missed now that it was gone. He always thought of himself as a lazy slacker, but how was he to realize there was

such an art in knowing just what to say or do when the possibility of real work arose in his life? And now? Now all he had to do was follow the horde and eat when they ate and moan when they moaned and lurch when they lurched.

We all lurch to the beat of a different heart?

No, that was almost embarrassing!

The challenge of avoiding the challenges of life was gone, and with it, so was Bob's happiness.

Perhaps, undead Bob thought, this is why zombies eat people, because the dead are jealous of the living. Perhaps consuming the flesh of those alive is just an empty attempt to make myself whole again.

Now there was an idea! It didn't explain the unending hunger, of course, but philosophy wasn't supposed to explain everything, just some things. The important things. And Bob couldn't think of anything more important than himself.

Shuffling along with this new philosophical idea taking root in his rotting brain, Bob began to contemplate just how he could return to his previous state of bliss. Bob had loved his life. Most folks didn't, but Bob sure did. And he knew he loved it, because now that he was undead, he missed it. He didn't know at the time how much he loved his life. But who does? The whole thing was very much like not realizing how often you use a body part until it gets injured. Or goes missing. And since he was now missing a whole arm, Bob was pretty sure he qualified as an expert on that.

What was a depressed zombie to do?

There were no powers to be to fight. There was no head office at which to file a complaint. There wasn't even a random sacking or system-wide layoff to look forward to. One didn't get fired from being undead.

Fired, undead Bob thought. Ready? Aim? Fire!

That was it. There lay the solution to his problem. If being this dead was too simple, then there was only one answer for it. He had to get deader. He had to get dead for realies. It was going to be a challenge, perhaps even involving real work, but he thought that maybe, just this once, he was up to the task. There was just one problem he could see with the whole idea.

Bob was going to need help to re-kill himself.

He knew—from years of watching movies and reading books and just some inherent awareness that came with the job of

being undead—that the only way to die this time was going to include a hole in his head big enough to drive a truck through. On a normal day, he might be able to accommodate himself. (After all, he spent a lifetime handling his own head, of both varieties.) But here lately, Bob was feeling, well, a little shorthanded. As a result, he knew that he wouldn't have the strength required to end himself. Besides, what if another zombie saw him re-kill himself? It might start a movement, and then he would re-die knowing that his unique effort was for naught.

Why buck the trend and re-kill yourself if every other zombie was going to do the same darned thing?

He had to act fast, right now in fact. Bob moved along, picking up his pace from lurch to stagger, keeping his one good ear and both good eyes open for any signs of life that was willing to fight back. Maybe someone with a shotgun or a machete. Or maybe even a sexy, nubile, half-naked Amazonian with a machine gun and a thing for dead guys. Yeah. That would be nice. A nice, sexy way to die a second time. It would be much better than the way he died the first time: as the mid-morning snack for some zombified postal worker with a penchant for earlobes.

Bob got excited as he groaned and staggered and sought out his Amazon Queen to do him in. But he knew it wasn't just a living person with a weapon he needed; it was privacy too. He needed somewhere off the beaten path, so other zombies wouldn't see him willingly lay down his undead life. This was going to take some time, but that was okay, because he quite literally had all the time in the world. He'd searched high and low, deep and wide, and several other clichéd phrases about distances, when, after several hours of lurching, he came across a pair of teenage boys hiding at the end of a dead-end alley (how apropos!) with a single rifle between them. He knew they had a rifle because one of the kids fired it at him as soon as he saw Bob.

Fired, and missed.

"Hurry up, Randall," one said.

"Shut up, Jerry!" the other one said.

"Reload! He's going to attack!"

"What do you think I'm doing? It takes a second, okay?"

"We don't have a second. Kill it!"

To a zombie, this conversation was tantamount to a dinner bell. Bob's undead belly grumbled at the prospects of easy pickings.

He moaned and lurched ahead, his stomach on autopilot, while his mind continued to mull over his little problem.

Wait! his undead brain said. *This is what you're looking for, Bob! Let them reload and shoot you. It's either this or wander around for another couple of hours, and who wants to do that? That sounds like work!*

At the thought of this four-letter word, Bob stopped, arms poised for rending, teeth mid-gnash. Yes, yes this was what he was looking for, a weapon and a living person to fire the weapon. So there he stood, mid-lurch, waiting for the kid to reload and shoot him.

"What's it doing?" one kid asked.

"I don't know," the other said. "But I'm not going to find out."

The second kid, now having reloaded, lifted the rifle and fired at Bob. And somehow, at almost point blank range, firing at a single unmoving target, with no crosswind or interference, the kid still missed. Was the weapon old? Was the kid a moron? Why couldn't it be both? Bob panicked, wondering what he was going to do now. Should he eat them? If he did, how long would it take to find another armed and isolated person?

The slacker in Bob kicked in and took care of him.

As if hit, he grabbed his chest, groaned and teetered. Then Bob fell down—well, it was more like a slump to the ground—and there he did his best to hold still. He hoped, prayed, that the kids would make sure the zombie—he—was truly dead before they scampered away.

"Did you hit him?" one kid asked.

"Of course I did," the other said.

"It didn't look like you hit him."

"He fell down, didn't he?"

"Maybe you should shoot him again."

"Why waste the bullets?"

"Yeah, but in that movie they said to double—"

"That was a movie! Who has the gun right now? I'm not wasting the ammo. That thing is dead. D-E-D. Dead. Now stop harping on about it and light up another spliff. I lost my buzz killing that thing."

Bob rolled his undead eyes. That explained a lot. End of the world, and the stoners were still hiding out in an alleyway to smoke. Well, morons or not, they had his end in hand. He gave his

leg a little twitch, just to assure them that he wasn't quite as dead as they hoped he was. Or as dead as he wished to be.

"There!" one kid shouted. "It moved."

"No it didn't," the other said. "Those are just aftershocks."

"After what?" Bob asked, which of course came out as a low groan.

"It groaned!" the first kid shouted.

"No it didn't," the second said. "It's just gas."

"Gas?"

"Sure. When a person dies, all the gas caught up in the body releases at the same time. My dad was a mortician. He told me all about it."

Gas indeed. These kids were starting to sound more like lunch and less like his deliverance. Bob groaned again, just to prove his undeadness.

"It groaned again!" the first kid shouted.

"Did it?" the second asked.

"Yes! Now will you please shoot it?"

"No."

Great gravy! What did a corpse have to do to get shot in this town? Bob rolled over and sat up, facing the two as he let out an extra-spooky, gut-rattling moan that meant something along the lines of, "Just shut up and shoot me already!"

"Arrgh!" the first kid screamed.

The other kid didn't yell. Instead, he fired his rifle and missed yet a third time. Too high and too wide he fired, scattering buckshot all across the alleyway behind Bob. This kid couldn't hit the broadside of a barn with a bull. Even if the bull was less than an inch from the barn and all the boy had to do was nudge it. Bob slumped where he sat, frustrated and hungry and tired and hungry and hungry and hungry. And hungry. Boy was he ever hungry. What was he going to do now?

"What's it doing now?" one kid asked.

"I don't know," said the second, "I'm trying to reload."

"Who brings a single-cartridge buckshot rifle for defense against zombies?"

"Better than no gun at all."

"With the way you shoot, it's about the same."

The armed kid aimed his now-loaded weapon at his companion. "You're lucky I'm trying to save ammo."

“No, I’m lucky you’re a lousy shot.”

Bob growled, to remind the kids they were lucky he hadn’t eaten them. Yet.

The first kid turned the gun on Bob. Good, that was a start. Now if there were a way to guarantee that the kid wouldn’t miss. This time, the kid didn’t fire right away, and that was good too. At least he was taking his time, measuring his shot. Perhaps, fingers and intestines crossed, the boy wouldn’t miss.

“Look at it,” the armed kid said.

“I am looking!” the unarmed kid yelled. “Now shoot it!”

“I mean look, it’s just sitting there.”

“What?”

“It’s just sitting there. Why is it just sitting there?”

“Maybe you stunned it with your last shot. Finish it off. Put it out of its misery.”

Finally! A word of wisdom from Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber.

The armed kid shrugged away his worry and tried to aim his piece at Bob. And from where Bob was seated, he could tell the shot would once again go too high. So, to help the kid out—and not to mention save himself a whole lot of work trying to find another armed and isolated pair of idiots—he reached up and grabbed the barrel of the gun and pressed the end of it tight against his forehead. There was no way the kid could miss now. Bob closed his eyes and waited for the blessed end. The real end. The final end. All the kid had to do was pull the trigger. Just pull the trigger and that would be it. Just pull the trigger.

Pull the trigger already!

“Oh, my, God,” one kid said in slow, punctuated bursts.

“Did he just do what I think he just did?” the second asked in a quiet, awe-filled whisper.

“He just put the barrel of my gun against his head.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought he just did.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“You suppose he ... he ... he actually wants to die?”

“I think he does.”

“Does he?”

“Yes!” Bob shouted, which of course came out as a kind of squeaky grunt.

The kids jumped at his declaration.

"I think he just agreed," said one kid.

"You know what that means?" the second one said.

"Yeah."

At last, they were getting the big picture. Bob grinned as he realized that yes, zombies could feel happiness. He was feeling it right now. And even though the warm tingling didn't extend over the whole of his being, he was still pretty sure it was happiness he felt. Happy to be laid to rest at last.

"It means we can't kill him," said the first kid.

"No we can't," agreed the second.

"Waaa?" moaned Bob in confusion. What happened to the shooting and the killing and the joyful second death?

"A zombie that wants to die?" the first kid asked. "What's that all about?"

"I don't know," said the second. "Maybe the virus mutated and is making this one suicidal."

"We should catch him and take him with us. Maybe someone will know how to make the others be like him."

Oh boy! This day just got better and freaking better. Not only did Bob not consider himself suicidal—he just wanted what was rightfully his, a decent death, thank you very much—now these kids planned on leaking his slacking secrets out to every Tom, Dick and Harry zombie this side of the Rockies. Why was nothing ever easy? Why was everything one big conspiracy to make him work harder than he actually wanted to? Why was the kid with the gun screaming?

Well, the last one turned out to be the easiest to answer. The kid was screaming because, in his ponderings, Bob had grown hungry again. And in this state of hunger, he reached for the nearest snack, which happened to be attached to the hand, wrist and forearm of the kid aiming the single-cartridge buckshot rifle at him. Bob had the poor boy's index finger halfway down his gullet before he realized he was even chewing.

"Shoot him!" the second kid yelled.

"I can't!" the first screamed. "He gnawed off my trigger finger!"

"Then give me the gun." The second kid held out his hands. "I'll shoot it."

Bob supposed he hadn't heard anything so clever in all of his days. The second one was bound to be a better shot. Wouldn't he? Surely he would. An epileptic, blind, one-armed man with all the directional sense of a demagnetized compass was bound to be a better shot than that kid. And since he was missing his trigger finger, he had no choice but to let his friend-

"No!" the first kid shouted. "I wanna kill it!"

"But it ate your trigger finger," said his friend.

"I still have my left hand."

The kid held up the hand in question, as if showing it off. Bob put an end to that nonsense right quick. He snatched the kid by the wrist and sheared off the boy's left index finger with one powerful snap of his undead jaws. Pointer went from full-grown piggy to eaten sausage in a matter of moments.

"Why were you still standing so close?" the second kid asked over the agonized cries of the first.

"I don't know!" the first kid cried.

"Give me the gun."

"No!" The first cradled the gun in the crook of his bloody arms. "It's my dad's gun! He said not to let anyone else shoot it!"

"But you can't even shoot it," whined his friend. "You don't have any trigger fingers!"

The boy stared at the evidence before him, his face growing paler with each spurt of blood from either stump. Speaking of growing paler, Bob had no idea why the kid wasn't face down in the dirt already. All it took was a nip to the ear from a manic mailman and Bob was flat on his backside doing the obituary mambo. Then again, he always did take to easy chores like a fish to barrels. No that wasn't right. It was fish to something else, wasn't it? He couldn't remember.

"Okay," the kid finally said. "Take the gun."

"Good!" the second shouted, taking the gun. A few awkward moments passed as the kid acquainted himself with the firearm. Bob filled this time with thoughts of what a fish took to, and the probability that he could bite off rest of the boy's fingers before his friend fired a single shot. That probability was beginning to look really good, considering how long the new gunman was taking.

"What's wrong?" the fingerless wonder asked in a weak voice.

“How ... how do I fire it?” his friend asked.

“You point the hollow end at him and pull that curved bit. But watch out; it kicks like a mule. That’s probably why my shots have been so wild.”

“Sure. That and you can’t aim.”

“Can’t aim? You can’t even shoot!”

“I can too.” And to prove his point, the boy did just that.

Bob took the shot full in the face, blowing his brains out the backside of his skull and painting the end of the alleyway in delightful hues of putrid green and midnight black. As he fell to the ground his last thought was this:

Carpe Mortis.

Yes, that sounded about right.

To learn more about Tonia and her books, visit :

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Catt Dahman

Mr. Romero's Warriors

"George Romero was spot on."

"Dead on. Get it? *Dead* on? It makes it more witty."

"Wittier," She nodded. "You must be witty at all costs."

"He wasn't exactly right, but he was close."

"By far. He insisted they were slow," She nodded. "He is like a *Romeropedia*."

He smiled, "And thanks to him, we know better than to run over to the mall. No mall shopping."

"No. I was thinking that some things aren't exactly like he thought."

That wasn't the right line. Neal frowned, tilting his head and drumming his fingertips lightly on the arm of the chair. They had done this routine a thousand times, albeit with a few variations. Sometimes the routine was funny and sometimes it was grim, but it was always safely predictable. He tried to get her back on track, "The mall is closed."

"Not really closed. Closed to us, I reckon, but that's what he was wrong about. They don't just stand outside the mall doors forever and moan and shuffle aimlessly."

Neal sighed. This was becoming a conversation instead of a routine and he didn't like it. "Okay, let's do another routine. We can do the one about blondes being safe because they're brainless. That one is funny." But none of them were really funny; it was just better to laugh at something of your own doing than to start laughing as if you were insane. Some did that: laughed or cried until they sat down and refused to move even as the shamblers came around, laughing while they were ripped to shreds.

"Do you dream?" Jenny asked.

"No," he lied. Why had she asked that? It wasn't fair. They both knew Neal was lying because sometimes he whimpered in his sleep and she reached over to pat him.

Neal saw that some of the others were glancing at them, listening. Had they stayed with the nice, safe routine, no one would have looked up. They preferred a *witty* conversation, not one with meaning.

"I dream. Not like the dreams before or right after...not like those," Jenny said, "but other dreams. They dream too. Mr. Romero didn't know that, did he? He didn't know they slept and dreamed. He thought they would be just walking dead people.

Crawling dead if you shoot 'em in the legs, he thought. That was a line from their routine but Neal didn't say it. Why had she brought this up? Why did she mention that and make Neal think of how they appeared to sleep and dream, moaning and maybe human-like verbalizations?

In some ways, it was worse than when they chased him. When they dreamed, it made them seem almost, well, human. If he thought about it too long, he would....

"Scream," Jenny said. "I think sometimes they scream when they dream. We could add that to the routine but I don't think you like it."

"I don't."

Everyone was listening now, their eyes shifting with fear. We weren't supposed to talk about this.

"We should move on," she said.

"Not yet. In the movies...." I began.

"In the movies. The main characters die. I'm not saying we are the main characters, but he was spot on about the basics and he made the rules, and I think we may be at least some of the main characters. He never wrote about this part...some did but not him and only he can make the rules."

"But...."

"But nothing. We're on our own now. No one ever cares about the main characters past the initial struggles. No one cares what comes next. Mr. Romero never mentioned all the changes. For everyone"

Neal could handle it all. He had handled his worst nightmares, killed them and run from them, hid, and survived. He had learned to play witty word games. He had watched the creatures sleeping, and had seen a little girl mouthing the word *mommy* over and over in her sleep. Her shirt had been matted with dried blood and pus.

When the girl moaned and reached for him, Neal had felt nothing as he shot her in the head, because that was simply what they had to do, but he hadn't only shot her because she was infectious or would bite if she got close, but because he wanted her to stop dreaming. It was obscene.

Neal saw a few of the others inching for the doors, ready to run away. Neal wanted to scream; he wanted Jenny to stop talking. He was afraid she might say what Neal was thinking, and if she did, he might scream and scream forever.

She said those three words that terrified him to his very soul, "We are *all* evolving."

Want to read more from Catt? Visit her website to learn more about this author and her awesome books!

<http://www.cattd.com>

Mia Darien

Descent

Demeter.

The goddess. Not she who is mother to the earth, but she who is earth mother. Her compassion gave the people the knowledge of growing and cultivating, how to survive off the earth's bounty. Her anguish rent the world and shaded half the year in cold. She who held no fear to confront the god of death, to show her power to Mount Olympus itself, all to have her daughter Persephone back.

She whose steps nourish the ground, so that people might live from it. A powerful ally, a powerful enemy.

A powerful ancestor.

This is what my mother, Cyrana, told me: that she was the issue of a brief coupling between Demeter and a mortal man. It was where, she said, our power came from. I never found reason to question the story, for power we did have. We had power that others did not, or if they did, they hid it very well and more than we cared to.

The story that I shall tell took place in the twelve hundreds B.C. - twelve centuries before the birth of Christ.

I lived near the Black Sea at that time, in a region known as Thrace. I was not born there, as far as I know, but my mother had never told me where I had been born. She was dead, my mother, by the time I lived in that place. I chose it because, at that time, I was devoted to Ares, the god of savage war and blood lust. The mountainous areas of Thrace, with its war-like people, were said to be most like him. It was also said that he had been born of that violent land.

They did not call me witch then. In those days, I was simply Ioena. No one could tell my age and staying on my good side meant good things for one's crops and live-stock, particularly horses. Their crops and sheep I cared little for, but for what from those things they would pay me with. It was a way for me to make

a living. I could use my powers to encourage good growth in fields and easier tempers in animals. (Unfortunately, I was not able to use this power as keenly on humans, just animals.) Their horses, however, I was happy to tend. It was said that Demeter chose to run in the form of a mare and she has often been associated with horses by those who worshipped her. I suppose that would explain my affection for them, although I never spent much time wondering why.

It was a blessing, our ancestry, my mother had said, although it was weaker in me than in her, for my father had been mortal. This was as much as I ever knew or cared to know.

My life was a strange one, but it always had been. In every place I lived, I was a part of it and yet wholly removed. Thrace was no different, but I felt more at home there than anywhere else. People were good to me because they feared me, which is also why they stayed away except for matters of business. I did not mind that, though, as I liked my independence from other humans. This is a trait that has grown stronger in people in the years since, but it was not as common then. It only added to the aura around me that kept others away.

One morning in spring - when Demeter's daughter was with her mother for half the year and the earth bloomed again - I made a decision, the long term consequences of which I could not have begun to comprehend. I wanted to make a gift to Ares. I wanted to make a gift above and beyond all other offerings I had ever made, or that anyone else would give to him.

There were four mares in my possession. They were beautiful and strong, graceful in ways that only horses of their nature can be. They were pure black in color and their fur gleamed in sun and moon light. It would be hard to part with them, for I adored them above all else, but I wanted to give only the best to Ares. They would be wonderful gifts, perhaps even consorts for the four fire-breathing stallions who pulled his chariot. They would be as lovers, like Ares and I had once been.

I am sure that you wondered why I was devoted to Ares when I was a descendent of Demeter.

The problem was that the mares were completely docile and would be no match for Ares' steeds.

"A small change," I whispered to them as they grazed.

I stayed near them until night fall, exerting the full will of

my power. If my mares were to be given to Ares, they had to not only be strong, but fierce. They had to be as fire - powerful and consuming. By the time that darkness descended, they were precisely what I needed them to be: four man-eating mares. They were viscous, wild and untamable, though they did not harm me, for I was as their mother.

Speaking to Ares as if he were there - for I knew he could hear me - I told him of my gift to him. I fell asleep in that small field with my horses. In the morning, they were gone and I knew that Ares had taken them, for I had made them so only a god (and I) could handle them.

They were magnificent.

A lot of my power was wasted on such small things: helping bring a good harvest or calming the live-stock of farmers. In this, it felt good to create something great and strong.

It was some time later that I would encounter Ares upon the road. He simply appeared and I was caught quite off guard. It might seem odd to you, but in those days, gods walked among us when ever they chose. He chose to appear to me as he always did, and as he always would to others, for he was too proud to disguise himself. He wished to thank me for the horses, and I was very flattered, until he told me that his son Diomedes had them.

One does not simply argue with a god, but oh how I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to scream at him, curse, and rail against the lack of feeling that he had shown me. I was most devoted to him, so was I not worthy of more attention in my offerings than that? I had poured time and energy in to creating a gift worthy of him alone, and he had simply cast them off to one of his bastard sons. I did not care that Diomedes was the king of Thrace. He was not *my* king!

I said nothing of how I felt and watched as Ares departed, leaving me to contemplate the fickleness of the gods... and of one in particular.

Years would pass. I did not get to see my mares in all of that time, nor was I ever able to again create anything that was their equal, and I tried.

Then, during a day that was like any other, a terrible tale found its way to my ear.

One of Zeus' many half-mortal children, a man named Heracles, had slain King Diomedes and fed him to my mares. This

part did not cause me any significant alarm, for Diomedes was a giant and would make a good meal for them. No, I was not upset about that at all, for he should never have had my beautiful mares in the first place.

The part of the tale that bothered me was what came after. This Heracles had bound and stole my mares, who were then sated and calm from their meal, and he had taken them to some King Eurystheus - yet another king who was not *my* king but who had been given my horses! Then, this unworthy man had turned and offered these magnificent creatures to that arrogant pig Zeus, who did not wish them. I would have been glad for their survival and escape from sacrifice and would have gone any length to get them back, but Zeus had sent wild beasts to slay and eat them.

It was as though those beasts had eaten my heart. It was as though I was the one torn to shreds and lying in their bellies. I cannot define nor describe my anguish, or the level of my sudden and over-whelming desperation.

There was only one place that I could go to for help.

I wanted my horses back, but they were in the bellies of beasts and even killing those animals would not bring them back. If it would have, I would have hunted down each one and torn them apart with my hands.

No, this required stronger measures. I could not seek out Ares to help me, for this was entirely his fault in the first place. Besides, this was not his area. I had to seek out the divine assistance of one who knew of death.

I descended into Hades.

I... do not wish to tell about my time there, but to say that Hades is Hades, in both the place and the god who over-see it. Years passed above, though it did not feel like that long while I was there. It took me a great while, but I finally struck my bargain.

The details of the arrangement are unimportant and none of your concern, because I say that it is not. Suffice it to say that I managed the task I went down there for. It had really taken most of my time in that place to convince the god of the underworld that I would keep my side of the deal.

In the end, I got what I wanted: a way to bring my mares back.

Unfortunately, I could not simply give them life again. This was because they had been killed as well as consumed by

beasts serving a god's bidding. There were no longer any bodies to reanimate, and I could not even piece them together for they were locked in those animals by the will of Zeus. Hades could only give me their spirits. I had to supply the bodies.

It was not easy to seek out horses for slaughter, for the affinity that I have always had for the creatures, but this was so that my mares may live again. It was a necessary evil. I chose steeds from different places and in far reaching areas, so that their disappearances would not be suspicious. I used my power to lure them away to my home.

Once I had found and slain the four mares I needed, I was able to use my powers together with Hades' blessing to call their spirits back from the underworld. They slipped upwards like mist from the ground - pale silver clouds in a night sky. I guided the four mists to settle upon the bodies of these other horses, and one by one they did.

Watching with growing excitement, I waited for them to come to life, but my excitement became dread before too long. Nothing was happening! I moved to one and pressed my ear to the cold flesh and fur and I could hear no heart beat. I closed my eyes, and began to weep with my head resting upon the corpse's shoulder.

But then... the body twitched.

I jumped back at first, startled and terrified with primordial instinct. My heart beat painfully hard against the inside of my breast as I stared at the mare. She twitched again and then again. They happened more frequently as time seemed to creep by. I crawled closer to her head. The horse's eyes were open, glassy and wild and of a pale white color, as if there were some thin substance covering them, yet I knew she could see. She... was alive, yet not in the ways other things were. I did not then know the term or concept to describe these creatures. All that I knew was that something strange had occurred.

Tentatively, I laid my hand on the pale fur of her jaw line. She calmed a little and let me pull her head on my lap, stroke the soft fur of her nose and ears. She turned her milky eyes towards me and I found curious depths there. She was like a child, I thought, who had yet to learn how to make her body function in the way she wanted.

"You were fire itself," I whispered to her. "As if

Prometheus had brought you to the people and not the flame we warm ourselves by. You can be again. You will be again," I promised her. Looking in to her eyes, I thought that perhaps she understood and believed me.

The night grew long and I was tired, but I could not stop now. I concentrated on my mare with that part of me that held power, mind and spirit, urging her to her feet. She whickered a soft, muted noise through a thick throat and then shifted, twitching, stumbling laboriously to her feet. Once there, she swayed but stayed up.

One by one, each of them began to awaken and I did the same for them all until all four were on their feet. It was almost dawn by then and I lay down, exhausted. In their painful, wavering gait, each walked over to me, like children to a mother. Their noses were still cold, like death, as they sniffed me and touched my skin, but I did not mind.

I had them back.

Over the days and weeks to come, I spent most of my time with my mares. I kept them hidden during the day, lest anyone think wrongly of them and try to harm them. I took them out to roam at night, for they were most obedient to me and I had no fear they'd run away. They grew to frenzy when others came close to our home, however. This was how I knew that it was truly the spirits of my horses who were in these bodies, although they looked so different.

During this time, I could feel my power growing stronger, darker. I used it to help my mares learn better, to move better, although it only went so far. Plus, I still had other obligations to the Thracians that were a matter of my own survival, so this used some of my time and power as well.

What else occurred was my process of learning about them and what sort of creatures they were. The only thing that, at the time, I could think to call them was the 'living dead', for they were both living and dead. Their spirits were undiminished, but as time passed, I saw that their bodies were decaying around them. At first, they did not seem to notice, but every now and then, they would look at me in such a way as broke my heart - like they knew, but did not understand. At least they did not seem to be in any pain from what was going on around and inside them - not physical pain, at least. If it did hurt them in any way, they did not show it.

I would watch them when we would go out in the nights, moving through the sparse forests of this area of Thrace. Sometimes they would choose to roam and explore. Their movements were usually slow, but the glassiness of their eyes seemed to not affect their sight too greatly, for they did not often walk in to things. On the rare times they did, they'd pull back and look surprised. I had found that they seemed to be more emotive in death - showing more reaction and feeling than they had in life, even at their wildest. If they hit something hard enough, they would thread their way back to me and I would do what I could to ease them and that mare would stay close by me for a while, as if reassuring herself that it was all right. After a while, she would either get over it or forget it - I could not be sure which - but either way, the exploration would resume.

It was quite by chance that I discovered an interesting and important fact one night. I had learned early on that they did not need to eat to live, but I found that they could eat. Some small animal had died in their area and I happened to come upon them as they devoured it. I noticed later that the rate of decay slowed for a time after that.

I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself. It made sense.

The night following this discovery, I traveled for a time until I came to a village where they did not know me on sight. There was a man traveling along the road. He was alone and there was no one else for a good space in either direction, so I knew that I had found the one that I needed. I stayed behind, far behind, for a while and just kept him at the edge of my sight. It was a lot like tracking animals, which is what he was.

Since I had never killed a human, I had to think carefully about the best way to do it. I could not be deterred from my plan by lack of knowledge, though, because my horses needed me to do this. The day following the consuming of that creature, when the decay lessened, I could see it in their eyes. It made such a difference that I could not ignore this chance, even though this process would not be simple or easy, I imagined.

It turned out to be easier than I had thought.

I found a rock on the side of the road. It was heavy, but still of a size to fit in one hand as I walked a little quicker, balancing on the balls of my feet to silence my steps as I approached the

man. My power of soothing was weak on humans, but it was better than nothing. He did not turn around as I came up behind him and hit him hard on the back of the head, right where his neck met his skull. I had once seen a man of medicine use this on a soldier returned from a conflict who could not be saved nor spared. There was a slightly wet, thudding noise as the two connected. He made no sound as he crumbled on to the road way. I stared at the prone body for a moment and then knelt beside him. He was dead.

I next began the laborious process of dragging him to my home. I placed my arms under his, lifting him slightly and then pulling him over dirt and stone. He was heavy, but probably did not weigh much more than I did, so that made it easier. I kept to the very edge of the road, so that we could hide if any one else passed by.

Luckily, no one did.

When I reached my mares, I presented them with their meal and urged them to eat it, which they did, all descending upon it at once. It was food and that was all they needed to know. I was simply gratified to see their condition improve following that feeding.

When they nuzzled their noses against me, not as much of their fur and skin would chafe off. It was wonderful.

Quickly it became habit that every other night I would fetch them a fresh meal. They continued to improve, although their eyes never lost that milky sheen and their movements were never completely free of the awkward halting gait. They never breathed again, nor ever had their hearts beat again. I sometimes thought that they even seemed frustrated at times, as though their spirits and bodies were in conflict, but on the whole, they improved.

I did what I could to soothe them through out it all. I used my power as well as my simple presence. Eventually, I even began to sleep outside with them. They would gather as close as they could around me, their large bodies blocking each other some what, but not so much as to be a concern - they were close. I had no fear of them and they had none of me. It was like we held an unwritten promise that we would take care of each other... I at least knew that I promised them as much.

Unfortunately, I was so taken up with my care of them that I did not see what was happening around me. People knew I was hiding something and strange noises could be heard from the

area of my home during the night. They also saw that people were going missing. They put it together, although they did not understand it. They simply connected the things together and decided to act on it.

This was all information that I would come to learn by other means much later on.

It was near dawn when they came: farmers and hunters armed with tools and weapons of their homes. Thrace was a warrior nation, but the warriors all seemed to be elsewhere that night, yet even one man with a kitchen knife can be lethal if he had the will to use it as such, and it seems that they did have such will.

I only knew they were there because my mares sensed them and roused one another, as well as me, before the men could grab me. They, my horses, were rearing and dancing, biting and pawing at the men. Such grace! The noises they made were bestial, almost not like horses at all, but like the wild and magnificent animals that I had always known them to be. If no one else would be loyal to me, they would.

At first, the men tried to push their way past them, but to no use. My mares were powerful and fierce. Their teeth were sharper than the average horse's and they were unafraid to make that fact known. In fear, the men backed up.

"What do you want?" I shouted at them over the noises of the horses while I hid in their protective cluster. It was a strange turn of events, for they circled around me like I was the foal and they were the protective circle.

"We want you to leave and to never come back!" one of the men shouted back at me, brandishing some farming tool he used to cultivate the crops that I helped him to grow.

Leave? I was in shock at the idea, but the seriousness of their demand was quite plain in the looks on their faces and the stances of their bodies. I may not have been like everyone else, but I had done good things for Thrace and this was how they treated me? I only ever wished to take care of my mares, who had as much right as any other to eat and live - such as it was. I stared for a long moment, but I knew that it was no good.

I kept my eyes firmly on the mob before us as I started backing in to the darkness of the forest behind us, using my power and connection with the horses to keep them with me, although they continued to dance in halting, frightening and powerful steps

as we went. Anger seeded inside me once more as fear ebbed away and already I was adding these people to the list in my mind of those who would pay for what they had done to my horses, and to me. All things would come in time, but for now, there were more important matters to attend to.

When we were a safe distance away and there were no signs of our being followed, I turned to begin our escape in earnest and with greater speed. I only looked back once after that, only to see my home rising in flames.

It's been lifetimes since our arduous escape to Gaul, which we almost did not survive. We migrated through that land for a number of years that I do not now wish to count, but we survived - in what ways they survive anything, being that they are not precisely alive. I suppose I can only thank Demeter herself for my own survival, and longevity.

Later I would have my revenge, but that's another story and for another time. This one I must end here, for my mares are hungry.

* * *

About the Author: Mia Darien is an indie author of speculative fiction, and a New England Yankee transplanted into Alabama clay. No matter her geography, she continues to stubbornly and rebelliously live the life of her choosing along with her family and pets. She doesn't miss the snow.

You can connect with her at <http://www.miadarien.com> or on Facebook, Twitter or Goodreads!

* * *

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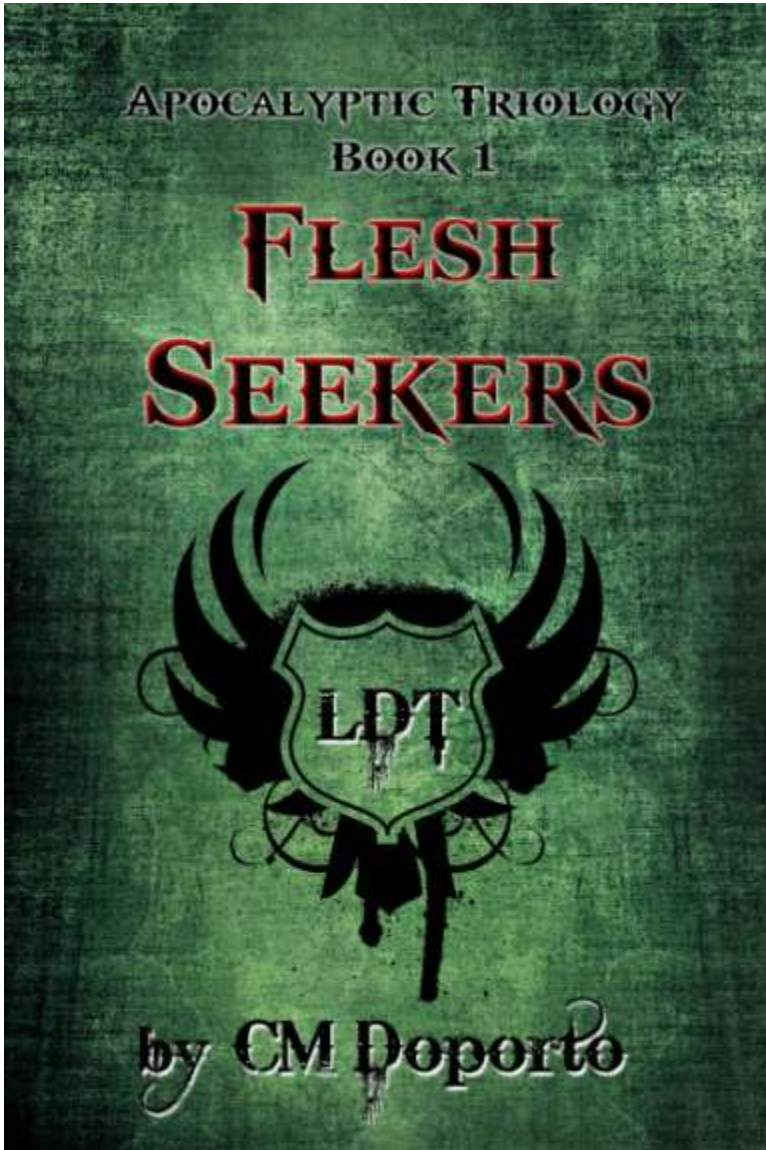
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CM Doporto



Flesh Seekers

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Flesh Seekers

My heart beat rapidly. Pounding furiously within my chest. Ready to explode at any moment. I heard people talking all around me but I must have been out of it because I didn't understand what they were saying and I couldn't make out their faces. Death waited for me. But I wasn't ready to die. It sucked because no one could help me since I was one of them. You know, a Flesh Seeker, and that meant the end for me.

At nineteen, I had too much to live for. A beautiful girl and a baby on the way. A baby that I might not ever see and may not get to live. I heard her voice, the cute high pitched tone with the little Texas twang at the end. Kait's voice. *Damn, I wish she was here with me now.* She was everything I had dreamed of and wanted in a girl.

Yeah, I can hear my mamma. "Are you crazy *muchacho*? She's a *Bolilla* and her family won't approve of you going out with her."

I knew it would be far-fetched to get Kait to go out with me, but what did I have to lose? I was a Mexican with good looks along with a slim, muscular body and a talent for drawing. She wanted me; I knew by the way her eyes watched my every move in history class. I just needed the right opportunity to convince her to give me that chance. I still remember the day, like it was yesterday.

"Josh Sanchez, you and Kaitlyn Richardson will work together. Toby Bentley you'll be with Susan Silverman." The history teacher went on, going down the list, pairing us with a member of the opposite sex to do a project on Women's Rights. I didn't give a damn about the project, but Kaitlyn... hell yeah. She was fine! The high school cheerleader, the hottest blonde in the school, the most popular and the richest.

Even though Kait came from money, she wasn't the typical stuck up, snobby bitch like most popular chicks. She was different and that's why I liked her. She always made it a point to smile at me and say '*hi*' when she passed me in the halls. I wanted to say '*hi*' to her first, but I have to admit that she did intimidate me. So instead, I would wait for her to say it first.

“Hi, I’m Kait Richardson.” She stood in front of me, holding out her hand and smiling.

I couldn’t help but notice her perfectly straight and bleached white teeth, blaring right at me. Next to her’s, my mouth looked like Jaws, teeth all crooked and pointed. So I gave a half smile, trying to hide my messed up chompers and shook her hand. “Hey, I’m Josh, Josh Sanchez.”

“Yes, I know who you are,” she said, taking a seat in the empty desk to the left of me. She crossed her long slim legs, blocking any chance of seeing up her tight denim micro mini skirt, even though she had on some type of leggings underneath.

My heart literally stopped. No way! She didn’t know me. Unless saying *‘hi’* in the halls as we passed each other, qualified as knowing each other. Then again, she *really* didn’t know who I was. After all, I was only a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks, trying to fit in with all the cool kids at school. Basically, a nobody. “You do?”

“Of course. You’re like one of the best artists in this school. I love how you draw.” She twirled a lock of curls around her fingers. Her nails sparkled, with each turn.

“Nah, I’m not that good. I mean... I guess I do okay.” What the hell? I couldn’t think for shit. All the words jumbled up inside of my head. Something about this girl made me lose it. I looked down and saw my hands shaking, so I shoved them under the desk and held onto my knees. If she saw them trembling, she’d think I was a coward.

“I think you do better than okay. You’re paintings have won tons of awards and I hear the teachers say really good things about you.” She batted her eyes at me, showing off the vivid colors of eye shadow that streaked across her lids. It hypnotized me and I pictured painting this beautiful girl somewhere in the Falls, the historic water gardens in downtown, Lake Vine, Texas.

I had to blink a few times to get my concentration back. “You do?” This girl had to be smoking something. The teachers hated me. They didn’t like where I came from or the fact that they had to let me in their *‘prestigious technical school’*. If they had it their way, I would be somewhere else.

“Yes. In fact I think you’re going to be a famous artist one day. There’s a special place for you within one of the regions, if not all of them.”

I busted out laughing at what she said. “What? Nah, I don’t think so.” She might have been right, but things weren’t the same since the World Wide Depression and the Great Regions of Freedom had formed. The GRF practically ran your life. Luckily, the citizens still had a choice in what they would do with their lives, if you call choosing one of the top three choices from the career assessments they made everyone take. Test, test, test. That’s all these administrators in this God forsaken GRF did!

“What about you? I’ve seen your work displayed and it’s good, too.”

She tilted her head down, allowing the waves of curls to cover half her face. Did I embarrass her? “Please. I draw clothes and you draw people and buildings. There’s a difference.”

She did have a point, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. I wanted to make her feel good about her drawings, make her feel special, like no one else could. We were only sophomores at the time, but it would be the start of a journey that I couldn’t imagine taking with anyone else.

Those great memories vanished the moment I felt a sudden coldness creep up over my body. The people in the background continued talking and I struggled to focus in on their words. Was I about to die? Maybe I didn’t want to know so that’s why I blocked them out. Time. I needed more time to remember all the great moments I had with Kait.

A bright light shined in my left eye. It vanished as blackness fell over it. Then the same bright light blared into my right eye before turning pitch black again. I knew they were checking me out. I felt them standing right over me. The warmth of their breath, telling me they were alive and human. Unlike the air that seemed to disappear from my lungs at times.

“His pupils are dilated. Tests show he has some brain activity, but not much. We can either wait and see what happens or go ahead and inject him.” A deep and rough voice said, tunneling through my ears as it reverberated through my mind. *End my life?* A life that I hadn’t even had the chance to live. Would my child suffer the same fate as me?

“I’ll inform Dr. Richardson and wait for his orders.” A lady spoke softly before fading off into the cold, dark room.

Why was it so dark? Why was I so cold? My body shivered on the inside, to the point of nearly convulsing, even though it

didn't move on the outside. My blood crawled through my veins, but crumbled before circulating again. Was my body breaking apart? Was I deteriorating to nothing? I knew it wouldn't be long now.

How did this happen? And why did this have to happen to me? That's what started to go through my mind as I lay there waiting, my fate based on the decision of one man. The man who I knew would hate me from day one. The man my mother warned me about. Dr. Stephen Richardson, Kait's dad. I knew it from the minute I met him that he would either take my life or destroy me somehow.

How did I know that? I'm usually right on when it comes to judging a person's character. That's what probably helped me stay out of trouble, even though I grew up around nothing but troublemakers. But I refused to be like my father. A no good, lying, cheating, worthless, s.o.b who left my mom with three small kids and ended up in prison. The last time I saw the man, I happened to be riding my bike outside when he drove past our house with some woman, younger than my mom, sitting next to him. Only ten years old at the time, I didn't say anything to my mamma about it, but that memory stuck in my head.

That's what Kait and I had in common. Dads we couldn't stand. Dr. Richardson was the exact opposite of my dad. Where my dad abandoned us, Kait's dad ruled her life. Maybe because he feared losing her like he had lost her mother. Unlike my loser father, Kait's ole' man was highly educated, smart, good-looking and worked for the dignitaries of the GRF. In his role as Director of Health Care, he had a lot of power. Primarily, he ensured all males between the ages of thirteen and forty got their monthly dose of Letumdotrophin.

I wanted to burn the tattoo off of my arm; the marking the medicine patch left on me and every guy that was forced to take it. The medicine that didn't work and allowed Kait to get pregnant anyways. I can still see the look on her face when she told me.

"What is it, Kait? What's wrong?" I stood in the doorway of her dormitory. Her face had turned three shades lighter. The sun-kissed California glow all gone.

"I... I need to tell you something." Her voice trembled as she started pacing the small room.

“Ookkaay.” I shut the door behind me and rushed over to her, taking her in my arms. Her body trembled as though coming down with the flu. Never had I seen her so shook up, except when her dad said she couldn’t go to school in California. But that time, she was mad more than anything. This time, she was scared.

“I... I don’t know how to tell you this.” She broke out in a hard cry, sobbing and mumbling words that I couldn’t understand.

“Kait... what is it, baby? You can tell me.” I stroked the back of her head, holding her close to my chest. My heart pounded inside of me, fearful of what she might tell me. “It’s okay. You can tell me.” I tried to get her to calm down, to stop crying, but she was so upset.

“I’m... oh no. How did this happen?” She managed to get out between deep sighs and cries.

“How did what happen? Kait... tell me. What is it?” I took a seat on the edge of her bed, pulling her into my lap. She held on to me, like I was the only thing she had left to hang on to. Then again, I was. Her mother gone and her father back in Texas.

She opened her hand and handed me a small oval stick. It shook in her hand, like it had a mind of its own. I took the stick from her and looked at it. “What’s this?”

Her tears stopped instantly and she looked at me like I was an idiot. But who could blame her? I grew up around boys and when it came to girly stuff, I usually learned it from Kait, not my mamma. “You don’t know what this is?”

“Am I supposed to?” I said looking at the strange cross on the front of it. In our time, in our world, commercials about family planning didn’t exist. They were replaced with either abstinence or prevention. Thanks to the depression, the GRF dictated who and how many children families could have. The higher your status, the more children they allowed you to have. Basically if you were poor, that meant that you couldn’t have any kids. Unless you proved that you could care for yourself and not be a burden to society.

The GRF did everything and anything to keep us from slipping back into another deep depression. They made it their number one goal to make sure we moved forward as a society. Reminding us constantly on issues we didn’t agree on, that it was for *‘the greater good’*. For the last seven years they took a dictatorial approach on controlling the birth rate. Even though it seemed to help with fewer people on government assistance and the economy

rebounding, people didn't like being told when or if they could have children.

Her eyes softened into an *I'm sorry*' look before she said, "It's a pregnancy test."

Everything stopped. The room, Kait, time, not to mention my breath. "Josh... Josh? Are you okay?" She had to shake me a few times before I came to.

"Ummm... yeah. I mean... no. No! I'm not okay and neither are you. We are not okay. Shit! How did this happen?" I squeezed the stick tightly in my hand as if that would somehow make the unplanned pregnancy go away.

"I don't know! Isn't that stupid medicine supposed to work?" Kait pulled up my shirt sleeve, checking my arm for the medicine patch.

I looked down at the shield surrounded by what looked like broken wings. The longer I stared at it, the more I noticed the skulls on each side of the design, indicating that all life stopped with this medicine. But for some unknown reason, it didn't with us.

I yanked my arm away, pissed that it didn't work. It wasn't her fault, but it made me mad thinking about the decision we were going to have to make. "Why don't you ask your dad!" I snapped, shoving her off my lap and standing to my feet.

I paced the floor, my arms crossed against my chest and my hands balled up in a fist. I needed to hit something, not Kait, of course, but I had to take my frustration out on something. But there was nothing I could hit, so I yelled.

"UGGGGHHHH!" I yelled, like a mad man. Not caring if I scared all the girls in the rooms next to Kait's or if security came running down the hall. I collapsed next to her on her small twin bed. All life sucked out of me.

She looked at me, her lip quivering with fear. "I'm so sorry."

Tears poured from her baby blue eyes and I felt bad for throwing her a low one about her dad, but it slipped out. *Damn!* "Come here, baby." I pulled her back into my arms.

"What are we going to do?" Her eyes pleaded for the right answer, which I didn't have.

All I knew was that this road wouldn't be easy, whatever we decided to do. "Don't worry. We will figure this all out."

In the background, I heard the beeping from one of the monitors pick up. It started beeping faster and faster as my heart rate stayed a beat ahead of it. My blood began to move quicker, picking up the pace as it flowed toward my heart, ready to be energized again. My tongue salivated and I smelled the sweet scent of skin, the flesh of the nurse in the room and the smell of another person, a guy nearby. I knew this feeling all too well. *Shit! Not again!*

The weirdest thing about breaking out into one of my flesh-eating episodes was that I really didn't remember much. Other than wanting, craving and desiring flesh like it was milk and cookies fresh out of the oven. You know the ones that are all gooey and dripping with hot chocolate. Mmmmm... yeah those kind. That's what flesh tasted like as it rolled across my tongue, sweeping across every taste bud before easing down my throat and into my stomach. Sweet. Tasty. Savory to the very last muscle fiber.

I had never really eaten a person, or at least I didn't think I had. I had only taken a few bites out of an arm or leg, or whatever I could rip off of them. Just enough to satisfy the craving and desires that filled my mouth. The cravings were more than a pregnant woman begging for a burger and fries from the fast food joint down the street. No, these cravings were beyond controllable. Deadly. Which meant I would stop at nothing to satisfy them.

It still freaked me out, thinking back to the first time it happened. Kait and I were going down an elevator, alone, after classes had finished. I hadn't been feeling good all day. She teased me, saying that I had sympathy symptoms. I kind of believed her because I had been eating like crazy and kept feeling sick to my stomach off and on. I also craved meat to no end. Even to the point that I had went to the store the day before and bought a whole chicken and ripped it open the minute I got to my dorm room and ate it raw. Yep, skin, gizzards and all.

"Josh? Are you okay?" Kait said, bracing me against the wall of the elevator.

"I don't know. I'm not feeling too good." Saliva ran out the sides of my mouth. Kait's skin smelled wonderfully sweet. Sweet like honey with strawberries and chocolate on the side. I wanted to lick her, like the way a dog greets his master. Fill my tongue with every bit of her innocent taste.

"You're sweating like crazy." She held her hand up to my forehead, checking my temperature.

I hid the truth of what was going through my mind. No way! I couldn't tell her about the twisted cravings I had been having because I knew they would freak her out. Instead I said, "I'm so hungry."

"Your eyes! They're turning dark. Josh what's wrong with you?" A look of worry washed across Kait's face and I knew something was definitely wrong with me.

"I... I..." I wanted to say *I didn't know* but for some reason, I couldn't speak. I had actually forgotten how to talk. How to say anything at all. All the words faded from my memory. I hung onto the railing in the elevator, watching the shiny steel walls around me narrow, closing in on me and fast.

"Josh! Oh my God! Your tongue... it's black. Put it back in your mouth!" She let go of me and took a few steps back. The fear that formed in her eyes made me feel like a demon of some sort. Like a vampire, wanting to suck the blood out of her. Only I wanted to rip the flesh off of her. Taste the rubbery meat filled with strings of veins. Most of all, I longed to gnaw on her tender bones and crunch my teeth against the crispy pieces of cartilage. The beast in me was coming out.

Thank God, something stopped me from doing that. Maybe it was the love that I had for her which was woven deep in to my heart, telling me not to do it. Or the fact that I wanted to protect her. Shield her from everything. Shelter her against her biggest enemy, me. Yet there was no escaping what I had become.

The lights faded out and my senses honed in on one thing and one thing only. Flesh. "Run! Run!" I managed to yell the moment the doors to the elevator opened.

"Help! Somebody help me!" Kait stumbled out of the small confined space, pushing the button to close the door behind her frantically. I guess Kait had an angel on her side, because I heard a voice, ordering me to push the button to close the doors from inside. That was the last thing I remembered. My finger pressed hard against the bubbled button, keeping me locked in the six by six holding cell that didn't allow me to tear the flesh off of anyone, at least that day.

I felt another surge of warmth, this time shoot up my arm. What was happening now? Why hadn't I turned into the flesh-eating freak that I was destined to be? Something had changed. What? I didn't know. I knew I didn't want to be this man-eating

zombie any more. I loved Kait and we were going to have a baby. We had a life ahead of us. I needed her. She needed me. Our baby needed us. No way could I be without her. Living or dead.

“Quick, give me 30 cc’s of methylphenidate.” A guy’s voice said. This was a different guy’s voice than the other one that had been in the room. Not only did he sound different, but he smelled different too. All of a sudden, my senses began to fade and I didn’t smell flesh any longer. Instead, the queasy smell of plastic bandages and bleach filled the room. *Hospital smell. Yuck!*

“Josh? Sweetie, can you hear me?”

“Kaaaiitt?” I struggled to open my eyes. I had to see her. Kait was here!

“Josh, it’s me Kait. Wake up.” She gave my face a light slap.

Oh no, what was she doing here? I’m too dangerous. Then again, I was happy to see her once again before they killed me. See her mesmerizing blue eyes, feel the softness of her skin, kiss her luscious peachy lips. Place my hand on her baby bump. *Kait. My beautiful, Kait.*

“Wake up, Josh. We gotta go!”

[To be continued in
Flesh Seekers
Apocalyptic Trilogy, Book 1
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Jacqueline Druga

ZOMBIE BATTLE:

Part One **OUTBREAK**

CHAPTER ONE

May 2nd
Carancus, Puno, Peru

It streaked across the heavens. Green and bright, as if God Himself used a fluorescent marker and created a colorful slash mark against the star sparkled clear night sky. It didn't make a sound, not at first.

Carlos Linderas was a simple man. He lived a modest life with only the focus of raising his young son. But on that night he focused on something else. Whatever it was that fell from the sky. He saw it. He was sitting by the window of his two room home, sewing, when he caught glimpse. He wasn't quite sure what it was, a shooting star, meteor, anything, but he was certain it landed with an impact. First the thunderous sound, then the vibration. It rocked his stance and then his inner being when he heard the rain of debris against his tin roof.

His six year old son, Juan sat on the floor and looked up. Carlos bolted to the door. "Stay put," he said with a point. "But Papa..." Juan stood. "Stay. I'll be back."

Even though it was only he and his son, Carlos didn't think much about leaving his small child alone. Not in their village, everyone watched out for everyone.

Apparently, everyone also watched the thing fall from the sky. Carlos and a few dozen others hurried to the landing site.

They had no clue how far away it was, it had to be close.

Some left on foot, others by truck. Not many drove there, not many owned vehicles.

A man named Ben led the way and a pack of others on foot. Ben was strong, fit and fast. He also owned one of the vehicles, so it was no surprise he was first to leave.

Carlos partnered up with Mr. Lund for the discovery journey, an old man who lived a few houses down. The conversation was nil in their quick pace to where the object had landed. The pace slowed down the closer they drew, Carlos attributed that Mr. Lund's age. He wheezed heavily, catching his breath often.

The taillights of Ben's truck glowed in a weird fog, they trudged only a half of a mile to the impact. There was a weird smell the closer they got, not pungent or strong, just odd. It tickled Carlos' nose. He couldn't tell if it was the odor or dust.

Ben was calling out for people to hurry.

Carlos looked at Mr. Lund who waved him to 'go on'. He left the old man, half bent over, holding on to his knees, catching his physical bearings.

Ben stood on a huge mound of dirt several yards head of his truck.

"Hurry," Ben said. "Look before it goes."

Carlos did. An object, rock like, had fallen into the earth creating a crater 100 feet around and at least twenty feet deep. At first, Carlos thought Ben was insane. Go where? Where would the object go? Then he saw the reason for Ben's concern. The rock, cracked and distorted, leaked a clear fluid. Water like, boiling, rapidly it filled the crater, burying the rock beneath the flowing liquid.

"Maybe it hit a well," Carlos suggested.

"No, it's coming from the rock," Ben retorted.

As if the rock would do something magical, the forty some people watched, watched the crater slowly fill up.

Another villager commented that someone had to call for help, and she ran back down toward the village to contact authorities.

But Carlos remained.

It wasn't long, though, that he started to feel badly. His head hurt, eyes, watered, nose burned and stomach turned.

He didn't want to come across as weak and refrained from saying anything until Ben turned his head and squeezed his eyes.

"Are you OK?" Carlos asked.

Ben shook his head. "No, my head hurts."

"Mine, too." Carlos whispered as if he were telling a secret.

His voice carried in the darkness, and a few others responded with their same symptoms.

"This is crazy," Carlos thought. "One person's illness is becoming another's. It has to be all in our minds."

Perhaps for the others it was, but Carlos knew his illness certainly wasn't mental. His stomach bubbled with nausea and to save himself from embarrassment, Carlos excused himself, claimed he wanted to find help as well, and walked from the mound of dirt. He knew he was getting sicker by the second.

He hadn't made it twenty feet and his body heaved outward, projecting a huge eruption of vomit. He bent over, holding his stomach, wanting for the heavens to cease. When they finally did, when the contents had completed their course from his stomach, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and lifted his head.

He had to put aside his own illness. For it was then he noticed Mr. Lund had collapsed, and Carlos ran to aid him.

Lund didn't respond, he lay still, breathing labored breaths as his face rested in a huge pool of his own regurgitation.

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It took two hours for authorities to arrive at the scene, and that included the skeptical Jorge Lopez, a lead official. He had seen it all, heard it all from the villagers who not one year earlier claimed a United States Satellite fell into their area contaminating them all.

So, when he arrived, he arrived with attitude.

Two local policemen were on the scene, one was already complaining of the same symptoms.

"I don't know how much longer I'll be here, I'm ill," said the one.

Jorge nodded, wanted to say 'yeah, yeah'. He listened to the policeman rattle off about his headache, vomiting, and dizzy spells. "How about you?" Jorge turned to the other officer.

"Same. Not well. Everyone is sick."

“Everyone?” Jorge asked with sarcasm. “That’s five hundred people. Five hundred people are ill right now?”

Both police officers looked at each other. “Almost everyone. Those who were inside are not ill. Not yet.”

With another passive, ‘A-hmm’, Jorge requested that the officer take him to the site where the supposed rock from the sky landed.

They did.

His first thought was that mass hysteria was contagious. Trails of vomit were seen everywhere at the circumference of the impact site.

The hole was filled with water.

Jorge was certain if it wasn’t a satellite; surely, someone hit a well.

A twinge hit his stomach.

Jorge winced.

Readying to admit defeat to the psychosomatic illness, in the midst of repeating that it was nonsense in his mind, he heard his urgent summoning.

He turned to his right and saw the waving flashlight. The voice calling from a distance of two hundred yards.

“Let’s go,” Jorge instructed the police officer next to him.

But that fell on deaf ears.

At least for the time being.

The police officer was vomiting.

Leaving him be, Jorge followed the directions of the call, making it there at a trotter’s pace.

The official that called had on a face mask. “Look!” he told Jorge.

Beyond his shoulder was the grazing field, and the official used the beam of the flashlight as a pointer.

“Look,” he repeated.

Jorge stepped forward and his eyes widened with horror.

There was no movement, but a weird sound did emanate. Almost moans, but they weren’t. They were sickly cries out from animals that were too ill to pick themselves up from the grass.

Animals didn’t suffer or fall victim to mass hysteria.

Jorge knew something was up.

“Shut down the town. Get authorities in here,” Jorge instructed. “Let no one in or out.” He pulled his phone from his

pocket. "Damn it. No signal." He began to move in a different direction.

"Where are you going?" The official asked.

"This is bigger than us. We need bigger help."

Jorge walked off.

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His father had resorted to keeping a bucket nearby. How many times did he vomit? Juan lost count. All he knew was that his father wouldn't let him near the windows or doors and he muttered over and over to a neighbor that something wasn't right.

His father slumped in a chair, eyes dark, face pale. Juan played with his only truck.

A commotion started outside and Carlos with as much energy as he could, stopped and looked out the windows.

Juan was confused. What was all the shouting, screaming?

The voice of a man from outside carried, "Check the house over there."

His father dropped the curtain and backed away when Mrs. Lund from next door cried out, "I'm not sick."

Panic? Was that the look on his father's face? Panic?

"Hide," his father instructed. "Hide, my son."

"But Papa."

A knock came at the door,

His father jolted a look at the door then raced to the storage closet. He drew back the curtain style door. "In here, my son. Now. And be quiet. Say nothing."

"Papa," Juan backed in with his father's shove.

"Nothing. Quiet it is for your own good."

He pulled the curtain closed and Juan huddled against the wall. The knocking was stronger, louder, and in the dark shadows of that closet, Juan could see what was happening.

"Yes?" his father answered the door.

"Take him," The man in the mask and clipboard said. "He is obviously ill. Detain him."

Two other men in what looked like space suits grabbed hold of Carlos.

"Anyone else in the house?" the one man asked.

"No, I live alone. I am a widower," his father replied.

“Take him.”

Juan watched his father with dignity walk with the suited men. He wanted to scream, protect his father, but he obeyed his father’s wishes.

The leader man with a clipboard walked in and looked around. Just as he turned, he stopped.

The truck.

Crouching down, he lifted the toy truck and shifted his eyes around.

Juan curled his body as best as he could when he saw the clipboard man start to search. Grabbing his father’s coat, Juan wrapped his small frame underneath and prayed he wouldn’t be discovered.

The curtain to the closet whipped open.

Juan didn’t know what would happen. He expected the coat to be lifted from him.

It wasn’t.

He didn’t move, breathe, or shudder. He just hid and stayed that way even when he heard the man leave the home.

How long though? How long did he hunch in the closet. He didn’t know. He had fallen asleep and dawn approached, the sky was slightly lit and the village was dead quiet.

He crawled from the closet, the door was open.

Juan was scared, too scared to even call out, make a noise or be seen.

As best he could, he snuck to the door and peaked out.

Nothing. No one. Just emptiness.

Where had they taken his father?

Where was everyone else?

Juan didn’t know, but he had to find out. At the very least, he had to get help.

Even though it was a good distance away, Juan ran. He ran as fast as he could to make it to the next small town.

CHAPTER TWO

May 3rd

Atlanta, GA

Irma Klein was a strong woman both in body and spirit. She covered her thickness with flattering garments. A thickness she attributed to age. Often telling people she wanted to gain weight as she grew older, it lessened the wrinkles and was cheaper than Botox. She walked up behind her husband as he sat at his desk chair and ran her fingers through his hair. Almost as if she were conveying some sort of compassion for his having to work. Her fingers grazed through, taking in the silk feeling of his curls. Twenty-seven years earlier, when they were first married, the curls were dark. Now they were gray. Saul often joked that she caused his gray hair, but Irma dismissed that, stating how could he get gray when she was the one who worried all the time.

And she did. She worried at that moment about Saul. He had been at the home desk since two in the morning. Computer to phone to files to computer. Now it was pushing nine am.

Poor Saul.

He didn't acknowledge her presence, but Irma felt he wanted her there.

The sun from the window reflected off the picture of Jeremy that sat on Saul's desk. Their first and only grandson. The one year old boy looked bubbly and happy in the photo.

One hand on Saul's back, Irma reached around for the picture frame and lifted it. "You know, precious, you keep working these hours you aren't gonna be around to see little Jerry's Bar Mitzvah."

"Eh," Saul shrugged. "God willing, I'll be happy to see him go to school."

Irma gasped out. "Saul. You're cranky. You haven't slept."

"I have to work on this."

"Can I get you something? Coffee, tea?"

"No." Finally, Saul turned his head and looked at her.

Irma gasped again. "Saul." Immediately, she grabbed a chair, sliding it to the desk. His eyes were dark; he looked more worried than she had ever seen. She sat down. "Saul, what's going on?"

Even though she had never seen him with that particular fearful expression, she hated that look on his face. She dreaded that look on his face. Saul was the director at the Centers for Disease Control, and since he started working there, she had waited for that look.

There it was.

"It's the end of the world isn't it?" she asked. "The big one."

"No. No-no." Saul grasped her hand. "It's just that..." he shook his head "It's confidential."

"You need to get this off your chest. You need to talk to someone. I see it on your face. I'm here."

"It's classified."

"I won't say a word." She hit her hand against her chest then rose. "I swear. Have I ever?"

"No, you haven't." He smiled gently.

"What's going on?"

"This one is sealed. I'm supposed to keep it sealed. Send only my best and highest level clearance people."

"Who is telling you to keep it sealed?" she asked.

"Who do you think? The bosses, governments."

"Governments as in plural?" She closed her eyes. "And you're saying this isn't the big one?"

"It's not the big one. Not from the info I'm getting. If it was, it has begun, like the last one, in a very remote area."

"Where?"

"Peru."

Irma chuckled. "Peru is not remote. How can you say Peru is remote?"

"The village is. It's thirty miles from the next village and most of the villagers don't have cars or phones. It's remote. Trust me it's remote."

"What is going on there? A virus?"

"I don't know. It baffles me. Something landed." Saul paused in a correction mode. "They say something landed and caused these people to get sick."

“Landed? What could have landed?”

“Meteor, satellite. I think, with this clearance, it’s a chemical weapon, I’m guessing.”

“In Peru?” she asked. “Who would hit a small village in Peru with a chemical weapon? Do they even have any enemies?”

Saul smiled with obvious enjoyment over her words; he laid his hand on her face. “I think it was an accident. You know the Soviets have missiles docked in space forever. One lets loose ...” He shrugged his shoulders with drawn words. “You have an accident.”

“That would make sense for the secrecy.”

“Exactly.”

“Are they dead?”

“Sick. We are going to see what they have.”

“Oh, Saul, you said we. You don’t mean ‘you’ do you?”

“No.” He waved out his hand. “I’m sending Katherine to meet Hans Riesman there.”

“I don’t like him.”

“Neither does she, she has valid reasons. You. You don’t like him because he’s German.”

“Nonsense.” Irma paused and breathed out. “So I shouldn’t worry?”

“No. Not at all. You can worry about Jerry and his teething. Worry about what to make for dinner. Worry that your husband will be too tired to make love to his wife.” He chuckled and grabbed her hand. “But worry about an illness and the end of the world?” He leaned to her and kissed her on the cheek. “Never.”

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Katherine Welsh tried to settle herself into a comfort zone; it was going to be a long flight. The wheezing engines aided to her annoyance, she just wanted to take off. Usually when the CDC sent her somewhere in an emergency, they sent her with a ton of data to review. It wasn’t the case with the Peruvian incident. A few sheets. Hans, who would be there hours before her, promised to start right away on sampling. Even though the WHO (World Health Organization) was already there and on it.

Where were the photos, the details? Nothing but basics was in the folder.

Hans commented on the phone that the 'top secrecy' of it all was probably the reason for the lack of information.

"We'll be taking off shortly," the stewardess said. "Can I get you anything?"

"Not right now," replied Katherine. "After we take off, coffee would be nice."

Politely, the stewardess smiled and went back to her business. Which wasn't much. The full size private jet had Katherine and a skeleton crew.

She was hungry, her stomach grumbled, and the scent of the pastrami sandwich in her brief case called for her.

Katherine didn't make or pack the sandwich; it was given to her by Irma Klein. Although Katherine was certain, Saul was gonna miss that sandwich come lunch time.

Irma.

Katherine had seen a few CDC directors come and go in her time, but none she liked or respected as much as Saul. Perhaps because she knew him and worked with the brilliant doctor as an understudy in Vermont.

At times though, she wondered if it was Saul as a director she liked or Irma's presence.

The fifty year old woman was a mother to all, or at least acted it. Anyone younger than Saul who worked with him she took a protective attitude. Even though Katherine was only twelve years her junior, Irma mothered her as well.

Katherine admittedly was nervous about the trip, armed with little information, she was relieved to see Saul and happy to see Irma as she prepared to board the plane.

The second car at the Klein household was in the repair shop and Irma drove Saul.

Saul had very little prep talk to deliver.

"Did you eat, you look pale?" Irma asked Katherine.

Saul shook his head.

"I didn't eat." Katherine replied.

"Uh, Honey, you should eat. Is there time to grab a bite?"

Saul held up his hand. "Irma, there's no time."

"It's a long flight. Saul, give her your lunch."

"What?" Saul acted shocked.

“Give her your lunch. I’ll bring you another.”

Katherine interjected, “Really, I can eat on the plane.”

“She can eat on the plane.” Saul repeated.

“She can’t rely on plane food. They give skimpy portions and who knows how long the food sets. The sandwich is fresh, give her your lunch.” Irma took Saul’s briefcase.

Saul argued with her, Irma ignored him and handed Katherine the brown sack. “There’s a nice pastrami sandwich in there, a kosher pickle and ...” she lowered her voice to a whisper as if the edible contents were a secret. “Pickled green tomatoes. Enough to tide you over. Plus it will make you smell enough to keep the Peru men away; I heard they attack blonde women.”

“Irma!” Saul scolded.

She waved her hand at him in a hush manner. “Go,” She said to Katherine. “Be safe. Come back and don’t catch anything.”

Was it embarrassed or annoyance at his wife’s behavior? Katherine couldn’t figure it out but she accepted the lunch with gratefulness.

What an ‘up’ to a downer send off. Katherine knew this was serious and seeing Irma helped. One never knew what Irma would say or do. Once at a get together, Irma asked Katherine that should she die would Katherine take care of Saul and the children. Added bonus, Saul was hung like a race horse.

Katherine responded that she wasn’t sure her husband would like that, but would keep the race horse thing in mind.

In her first class seat, airplane leveling from take off, Katherine laughed.

She didn’t even realize she laughed out loud until Bret Barret said something.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Oh,” Katherine briefly closed her eyes in embarrassment. “Just thinking back about something Irma said.”

Bret laughed. “I can only imagine. Irma is like a dose of good when you need it.”

Katherine nodded her agreement. Bret was right. Irma was like Alka Seltzer, a bubbly medicine that kicks in and makes you feel good. She only wished they marketed medicinal versions of Irma. A miracle cure. Something in side of Katherine told her, the situation in Peru, would need just that.

CHAPTER THREE

May 3rd

Carancus, Puno, Peru

It was hard for Carlos to distinguish who was asking him questions. Between his illness and the biohazard suits the doctors and military wore, he never knew if he were speaking to the same person.

It didn't matter. Carlos' story remained the same.

Why was it so hard for them to believe a rock fell from the sky? Why were there so many government officials? He could see if it were a satellite or missile, but Carlos saw it with his own eyes. It was a rock. Now, he was told there was no rock, there was nothing but water.

Whatever it was embedded itself into the earth.

And if that rock caused his sickness, how many more others would be affected.

At that instant, Carlos thought about his son and worried.

He took comfort in the fact that his son was nowhere near the rock. In addition, Ben's wife, who also was far away, was well. Carlos knew that, she had been taken into quarantine as well.

The questions were the same. What did you see? What time was this? Did you smell anything?

Carlos answered then Carlos ended it all with 'excuse me while I vomit'.

Another man from his village said he had eavesdropped and heard the doctors say there were 150 people affected. Anyone who went near the site turned ill.

'Stay away from the site', Carlos beckoned in his mind to his son. 'Just stay away.'

Carlos had thrown up so much in the last ten hours, there was nothing left but green bile. His stomach churned and twisted with pain. His head wretched and a fever raged.

He was told by the medical people it would pass. That he probably inhaled fumes from whatever it was.

If it was going to pass, surely Carlos would have been feeling better. Instead, like a raging infection, he just grew worse.

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Juan was hungry, but it wasn't time to eat. Not yet. He had gone back home to his village, to his home to get food and water for the trip. He knew it would take him days. But he would prevail.

His stomach felt funny, but he attributed that to hunger. At only six, he knew what it took to survive. Before they moved to the village, when his mother was alive, he and his father were lost in the forest for several days. His father taught him much.

Including being careful.

Juan was.

He knew he had better take the tree lined path, stay off the main roads, and move without being seen on the way to the next town.

That was evident. The police, military, and men in space suits were everywhere, even more so near the big hole when he walked by. He was able to sneak unseen and get a look at the hole that drew attention, but it only held water.

When a man shouted out for him to 'stop, don't move', Juan ran. He would keep on running, too, until he made it to the next town.

CHAPTER FOUR

May 5th

Carancus, Puno, Peru

If it smelled like normal vomit, it probably wouldn't have bothered Hans Riesman, however the regurgitation that erupted from the 603 patients was foul smelling, like death.

Hans was grateful the journey into the tents of the aid town, were infrequent.

He finished his report to Saul, the third and he hoped final one, typing it on the computer and preparing it to send. Hans who was a brilliant virologist was stumped as much as anyone.

None of the infected showed signs of getting better, in fact, they deteriorated. A wellness camp, courtesy of the Peru Health ministry, WHO, and CDC, was erected twenty-three miles from the nearest town in a remote field. They had divided up the ill. Those initially infected, then day two infections. There were no day three infections because the town had been cleared out, and those who remained wore respirators.

That told Hans a lot. Whatever it was wasn't in the air nor was it airborne. The initial victims were tended to by local doctors twenty miles away and those doctors didn't wear protective clothing, nor did they show signs of the illness.

Then the other test confirmed. It showed a viral bacteria in the blood stream that had taken over. Hans was hopeful, with it being a bacteria, that meant antibiotics, but this was resistant. Why wouldn't it be? It came from somewhere unknown.

That same bacterium was found in the soil, on the rooftops, grass, invisible to the naked eye but it was there. It was more predominant around the landing site. Traces of the bacterium dissipated the further from town they went. After a ten mile radius, no traces were found.

Hans and everyone else deduced, whatever landed in that hole released something that worked like a man made biological weapon. It affected everyone in an area, and diminished in time.

The scariest part of it all was somehow it was contagious. No contact victims had contracted it, yet. However, tests showed when healthy cells were introduced to the bacterium; the bacterium took over within four to eight hours. Blood to blood. Fluid to fluid. At least with that route of transmission and infection it was easier to keep under control.

Even though they no longer wore respirators, teams wore protective gear and exercised extreme caution when cleaning up.

Hans was confident, and he expressed so in his report to Saul. Contained.

No new cases, they were isolated, every person exposed was quarantined, and the impact site secure.

He ended his report stating, 'It is only a matter of time to finalize answers. The infected will either get well or succumb, and for that, we just have to wait.

CHAPTER FIVE

Atlanta, GA

The dining room table was all set for dinner when Saul came home, which was unusual. Irma usually set the kitchen table, seeing that it was just those two. But the addition of two place settings told him they were having company. Saul didn't want to ask about it, he just wanted to jump in the shower.

A napkin covered a basket of rolls, which Irma set on the table when a crisp smelling Saul returned.

"Saul, honey, please, put on a nice shirt."

"I'm home for the first time in nearly 48 hours. I'm not working. I'd like to be comfortable."

"Fine." Irma walked over and kissed him on the cheek. "I have a nice cheese plate made in the kitchen, do you want to nibble?"

"No, no, I'm good." Saul's hands gripped the back of the chair. "Who's coming to dinner?"

"Bill and Lacia."

"Who?"

"Bill and Lacia. Katherine's husband and daughter. I figured they could use a home cooked meal while she's out of town."

"Irma, I don't think Katherine cooked."

Irma gave a little wave of her hand. "I'm sure they had meal time." She glanced up at Saul as she fixed the table. "What's going on? Is it that Peruvian flu? I've been reading about that in the papers, the net ..."

"You shouldn't hear much about that after tomorrow morning."

"Over?"

"Contained Hans said." Saul remarked.

"So you're marking it contained."

"Actually, the news release is that it's mass hysteria causing it."

Irma's hand went to her chest. "Thank God. What wonderful news to be telling Bill and Lacia."

"What news?"

"That Katherine should be home. It's not a flu it's hysteria."

"No, Irma." Saul shook his head. "The news release is gonna say it's mass hysteria."

"It's not?"

"No."

"Saul why are you lying to the public?"

"To stop mass hysteria."

Irma tilted her head with a look that conveyed she didn't understand.

"What else can we do?" Saul asked.

"So there is a flu?"

"Oh, yeah. Not airborne, but a highly contagious fast moving flu."

"Deadly?"

"No one has died yet."

"Yet?"

Saul shrugged.

"But it's contained?"

"Yes. No more ill have come in, we have everyone that is infected."

"Saul, if it's contained. Why not say that?" Irma asked.

"Because how can we explain a flu or bacterial infection that we have never seen, that appears more and more every day to have come from outer space."

Irma gasped. "I've read novels about that."

"Yeah, so have millions of other people. It could be worse if the news of this thing gets out. No, no." Saul walked slowly from the chair. "It's better this way. This way everyone will forget about it. We can put it to rest and God willing." Saul peered to her with his tired eyes. "We'll never see this again."

CHAPTER SIX

May 6th

Carancus, Puno, Peru

Katherine rubbed her eyes. If she stared at the microbes on the computer screen another second, she would go blind and or crazy. Peering to the corner of her computer screen, she saw the time of 2 AM. Things had been quiet, too quiet. She didn't even hear many voices. She decided quiet time was the best time to check on things.

She left her makeshift lab quietly. Hans was sleeping on the cot and she pulled the door closed. A soldier was posted right outside her door. He stood diligently on his night shift.

"Evening," she said to him.

"Ma'am. Working late I see."

"Again," she smiled pleasantly at him. He wasn't young. He wasn't old, but he wasn't a baby face soldier. She was grateful for the protection that the Army provided. Of course, they had their own virology team there as well. Their trailer posted another mile or so away. They were there for research, not care. Katherine was there for both.

She said a good night, thanked him for doing his job and walked over to the first tent about fifty yards away. No soldiers were posted there. No need. There were four that sat by a perimeter twenty yards away. Too far to shout out to them, she didn't want to wake the ill.

The first tent contained about two hundred people, the first wave of ill; she'd walk through there on her way to the next tent.

She opened the flap. It smelled funny, sounded too quiet.

Stepping into the clerical and nurses' area, Katherine was surprised that the night nurse wasn't there. Maybe she was checking on patients.

With an extension of her arm, she drew back the curtain to the main sick bay. A place where cots upon cots were lined up.

Katherine stopped.

The tent was void of the hundred of patients. The cots were empty. Was she dreaming? Where were the patients? Just as she turned to find help, she saw a single patient lying on the bed.

Carlos.

He didn't move. Katherine walked hurriedly to the bed.

"Carlos." She reached down to this arm and he fingers retracted. Cold. His skin was hard and cold. Her hand moved to his wrist. "Oh my God," she wisped out. He hadn't a pulse. She turned to call for help when a hand clasped upon her forearm. She peeped a shriek at the tight grip and shifted her eyes.

Carlos stared at her.

"Carlos?" She reached for his grip. "Carlos you're hurting me."

A foul odor pummeled her when he widened his mouth and gasped.

She turned her head, aiming her voice outward with a shout. "Someone!" But she never got a chance to get out another word. A sharp tearing pain ripped into her arm like she had never felt, and a silent scream of agony escaped her. She looked to see Carlos, his teeth sunk into her flesh. Strands of bloody ligaments and veins extended from her arm to his mouth as he pulled hungrily.

Horrificed, Katherine fought to free her arm. Her screams were muffled with pain and fear, and her escape attempt was in vain.

From the cot, Carlos lunged. His flailing body careened into Katherine, knocking her into anther cot. Locked in almost a mad, fighting embrace, they fell to the floor.

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Like a child with night terrors, Hans sat straight up on the cot, tensioning, unable to move, unaware of his surroundings. It took him a few moments to come to. He controlled his breaths and his mind began to think clearly.

Was it a scream he heard? Yes, he heard a scream.

Wait. He thought, no. No only silence.

What was it that caused him to awake and sit straight up in bed?

The lights in the lab were still on and he looked at his watch.

Nearly three am.

Needing a cigarette, Hans swung his legs over the cot, stumbled to the door, grabbing his coat and smokes as he opened it.

The soldier on post looked over his shoulder at Hans and smiled.

“Son,” Hans said. Not that the soldier could be his son, Hans had him by maybe 15 years tops.

“Sir.”

“You seen Dr. Welsh?” Hans lit a cigarette.

“Yes, sir, she went to the tents.” The soldier nodded in a point at the tent area.

“Did you hear anything?” Hans asked, blowing out the smoke.

“No, sir, it’s been quiet.”

Cigarette clenched between his fingers he brought it to his lips and inhaled deeply bringing his head upward as he did.

Hans paused.

Through the corner of his eye, he saw a flicker of the light in the tent. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“The light in the tent flickered.”

“No, I didn’t. Maybe . . .”

It was clear that the soldier saw it at the same time Hans did.

This time the light truly flickered as if it were being hit.

“I’m going to go check that out,” Hans said, and started to walk toward the tent.

“I’ll come with you.”

The soldier kept up the pace and as they approached, they could hear the other group of soldiers talking and laughing.

Hans took that as a sign all was well.

Probably just a power problem.

He walked into the tent. Nothing. No sounds. He lifted the nurse’s clipboard, to check to see when she did rounds last.

He stared at it,

“Something wrong?” the soldier asked.

“Last notation was two hours ago. Where is the nurse? Katherine.”

“In there?”

Holding the clipboard, Hans parted the curtain. His steps were slow, as he was exposed to the same first sight as Katherine had been.

“Where are the patients?” the soldier quizzed.

“I ... I don’t know.” Hans stuttered. His body shifted to the right and to the left. “God.”

The shifting of his weapon startled Hans almost as much as all the blood by Carlos’ empty cot.

“What the hell happened?” Hans spoke his thoughts out loud. “Soldier, go get some help.”

“Yes, sir. I think you should come with me, though.”

“I’m fine.”

“Sir...”

“I’m fine. Go.”

“Yes, sir.”

The soldier backed up and left. Hans walked to the cot.

The bedding was still shimmering in blood and he stared at it in wonder. But he wasn’t going to stay long. After a quick examination he turned.

The light flickered and he saw her.

At the other end of the tent, Katherine stood there. He couldn’t see her clearly, she was a mere shadow.

Hans sighed out in relief. “Katherine.” He rushed her way. She didn’t move.

“Katherine. Are you all right.” He closed in on her. “What happened here?”

On his last word, Katherine stammered to him and into the way of the light.

Hans saw her.

Her head tilted, her body bloody, her neck was wounded, and from her stomach, a gaping hole appeared to seep her insides. Her lifeless eyes stared at him.

“Good God, Katherine.” In an instinctual leap to help, Hans grabbed on to her. His fingers touched her arm. He froze as he got a closer look.

Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. He felt it when he saw her. And then Katherine made this horrendous gasping sound. Her mouth opened and it lunged for his arm.

Hans drew back his arm quickly and Katherine moved in a slow attack mode. He shoved her back. "Soldier!" he cried out and she leapt for him again. Another shove, Katherine stumbled back, and returned in her pursuit.

He couldn't think of anything else, but to get out of there. But before she could touch him again, in order to make a clear escape, Hans swung out the clipboard, smashing her in the side of the head. He dropped it and ran out.

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It was a blur.

Hans took off from the tent with the mission in mind to call the CDC. Someone. He didn't know what happened, what occurred. He screamed for help as he ran from the tent, looking over his shoulder only once to see the soldiers scurry to aid.

But he kept on running.

He locked the CDC lab. His hands shook. Calm. Calm. He had to calm down.

He fumbled for his cigarettes and, against the rules or not, lit on in the lab and grabbed the phone. His fingers shook his badly as he dialed and inhaled his nicotine.

A couple hits, a ring. No answer. A voice mail.

Damn it.

Middle of the message he heard a few shots outside and it caused him to jump and topple the phone.

In a panic he spun around, double check the lock. As he did he noticed the blood on his hand. Heart beating out of control, Hans ran to the sink, rolled up his sleeve and submerged his arm under the power stream all with the cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Come on, come on," he beckoned out loud, watching the blood clear from his skin.

He breathed out heavily. A sigh. The injury was a speck bigger than a puncture would and wasn't even bleeding anymore.

After rinsing, he washed it, rinsed, and then scrubbed the wound with disinfectant.

He coughed from the smoke, dried his arms, and then finally took the cigarette from his lips.

His phone was broken on the floor, and he reached down for the pieces.

Telling himself to relax, he sat, smoked his cigarette and tried to fix his phone. Anything to take his mind off of the strange event that had just occurred.

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‘God, oh my God. Something’s happened. The bacteria. The virus...’ Hans’ words were rushed, panicked, and filled with static on the voicemail message. ‘Something’s happened to Katherine. She’s gotten violent. I think she caught it. Maybe it’s the virus. The patients are gone. Not dead gone, but gone. I fear they may be suffering from the same delirium. She tried to attack me. She ...’

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Silence.

End of message.

Saul had missed the call and by the time he woke, the phone stopped ringing. He tried with diligence to call back, but it went straight to voice mail.

All he knew was that a frightened sounding Hans called and there were gunshots.

He tried every line and couldn’t get through to the site.

Saul didn’t need to be a psychic to know something went awry. Hans never lost his cool. Ever.

First thing was first, Saul had to find out what was going on and get help if needed to the area. He couldn’t do that from his home, so praying that everything was fine, he began to make phone calls for that help.

CHAPTER SEVEN

4 miles out Carancus, Puno, Peru

Pedro was a farmer, or he liked to associate himself as being a farmer. He didn't grow much, and when his business as a carpenter folded, he moved his wife and two children to live with his mother. An ill woman of little means.

They made it through the hard times. Selling chickens and eggs, along with greens.

Pedro, a man of forty-five was a good man. People liked him. They counted on him. Strong and fit, dependable and wise.

Pedro had a lot to say about his teenage children. On the previous night, their late night sneaking wasn't a bad thing. They had gone out to the wooded area with others and heard a child crying. Sobbing, they said and they and their friends searched. Hours after they were supposed to be home they told Pedro of their search. At first, Pedro, like any father thought this was their excuse, until he saw the desperation on their faces.

Then he, knowing the area as well as he did, took up the search.

When he first entered the area he heard the crying and followed it, calling out for the child. The crying continued and Pedro worried for the child's welfare, and if he could get to the child before the elements did.

He searched for hours until the crying ceased. Pedro sat down to take a break, closed his eyes and fell fast asleep.

He dreamt of his search, how he kept looking, until he fell down a hill and broke his leg. The dream of the broken leg was so real he could actually feel pain. In fact, the pain woke Pedro.

Lying on his back, the early morning sun started to peek through the trees and he opened his eyes, wincing in pain. Had he slept on his leg wrong? It was when he tried to sit up that he looked down to this leg and screamed in horror.

A goat was gnawing on his calf. Blood seeped through. Pedro screamed, jolted his leg from the jaws of the goat, and

grabbed his walking stick. The goat sneered at him as if a mad dog and after bucking on its hind legs jumped Pedro's way.

Using the stick, Pedro careened down on the head of the goat. It moved back some then lunged again. This time, Pedro was ready. End out on his stick he rammed in through the open mouth of the goat directly through his throat into the back of its head.

The goat froze.

It took all of his strength to move the goat from him. When the goat hit the ground, Pedro stood. His leg ached and hurt worse than any pain he felt. He reached for his stick and got a closer look at the goat. Its entire side was removed. His ribcage and muscles were seen. Pedro didn't even bother for the stick. He hobbled back, wanting only to get back home and get help.

A scuffling sound caught his attention.

Pedro turned.

There behind him was a boy, no older than six. The child was dirty, blood caked around his mouth and jaw. Typically, Pedro would have reached out to the boy to help. But there was something about the child. His eyes were lifeless, white, skin pasty almost gray. And as the child extended his arms and stared at Pedro with a demonic look, Pedro spun and as best as he could with an injured leg, took off running.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fayetteville, NC

The CNN headlines read, 'Could Mass Hysteria Be the Cause?' It caught Lil's attention as her internet browser logged on.

She didn't think much about it until she saw the sub headline about a meteor or object landing in Peru. Then she was drawn in. A lifelong fan of phenomena, especially anything earth shattering, caught her attention.

Lil clicked on the link.

It didn't say much. An undetermined object landed in Peru. Hundreds were ill, or were they?

Not good enough. It did make her mind wander some.

She returned to task at hand.

Searching the history of the computer to see where her husband was.

He didn't think or wasn't techno enough to clear it. Never did. Not that she was spying on him, ok, she was, but not to find another woman, rather to find out whether or not he was going to divorce her.

He was on the phone the whole day before with Branch, she heard that. Only one end. He wanted to be deployed. No longer wanted to live on base, non-deployable position, teaching. They were, at least what she could gather from his end, not favoring his deployment choice.

He wanted to leave. Maybe that wasn't a bad thing. Leaving to go somewhere else didn't necessarily mean he was leaving her. Perhaps just taking a break, to think.

Who was she kidding?

Jack didn't believe in divorce, and was waiting on her to do so. In the meantime he'd make it unbearable. Or so Lil thought, make her want to leave him.

He didn't yell, scream, or was violent. He was quiet.

He spoke when needed to and that wasn't much. An instructor in the Army, he left early and came home late.

Lil tried. She tried with everything she had to make up for her mistake and it was a mistake.

After eight years of being together, she didn't know what got into her, but she was unfaithful to Jack.

The first and last time.

She tried to justify it. He was never home, didn't pay attention to what she did, and never told her anymore she was beautiful. She longed for the attention and she found it. She found attention and an abundance of guilt. Lil confessed right away. There was no justifying what she did to him or their marriage.

Jack handled it. Calmly. But he was never the same. He kept telling her it would take time, and that was over a year earlier.

Lil loved him and would wait. No matter what it took. Perhaps it would take a deployment. Jack hadn't said anything to her, but a late night phone call that same night after talking to Branch, took Jack not only from the house but out all night.

Lil knew she'd get her answer on where he was and what was going on, when she heard the door open. When she turned her head. The simple 'thank you' from the other room told her a lot, and when Jack's towering frame appeared in the living room doorway, she knew by the look on his face.

"I got a unit. It leaves tonight," Jack said. He seemed to look through her and not at her.

"That was fast."

"Seems there was an emergency that came in while I was on the line. They're looking for SF guys to go in." He turned. "I have to get my things ready."

"Jack? Do you know where?"

Jack paused, looked over his shoulder and nodded. He sputtered out the answer as he walked away. "Peru."

Questioning 'Peru', Lil watched him leave then turned back to the computer to look at the headlines. She whispered out, "Peru."

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"Peru?" Irma stood in the doorway of her bedroom watching Saul finish packing a small duffle bag. "Saul, this is why I agreed to move to Atlanta. For you to be director, so you didn't have to leave."

Saul didn't pack much. Two shirts, underwear, slacks and shaving kit.

“Saul?”

“Irma sweetheart, I have to go.”

“Under whose orders?”

“Mine.” He zipped the bag hard and fast. “I know this is short notice, but the plane is waiting. I can’t expect my people to put themselves in harm’s way if I don’t do it myself. They’ve already sent a team of special forces down there to ...”

“Special forces.” Irma gasped. “Saul, should you be going. It sounds more dangerous than fighting a virus.”

Saul lifted his bag.

“What’s going on? You got that call, went to the office, came home and packed. Talk to me Saul.”

Saul approached her, standing close. “Katherine’s dead.”

Irma shook her head. “The virus?”

“The virus didn’t kill her Irma. The soldiers had to.”

“What?”

“She got infected with whatever this bacterium is, and it made her mad. Like a dog.”

“Rabid.”

“We think it is a form of rabies. Something to that affect.”

“What about the others?”

After an inhale, Saul spoke. “We have about three hundred like that. Right now they are detained.”

“But what are you gonna do, Saul? What can you do? There is no cure.”

“No, there isn’t. My job isn’t to cure it or help those who have gone mad. My job, Irma is to do what I am best at. Trace it, and make sure every stone is turned. Every corner covered. Make sure that nothing or no one got out of the sick camp. Cause if someone did and we don’t know about it. God help us.”

Irma laid her hand on Saul’s cheek, leaned in and kissed him. “Come home to me. Call me. Please. Be careful.”

All Saul could do was nod, return the kiss, turn and walk out.

CHAPTER NINE

Carancus, Puno, Peru

Sgt. Jack Edwards arrived via Army transport plane, landing on a make shift strip in the middle of nowhere Peru. That's what the pilot said. It was just after dark, the journey to where he was needed would take a half an hour through dirt roads. He and seven other men. More would join them, but they were the first elite team to arrive. To aid and assist the soldiers already there.

He wasn't given much situation details. Just that health situation has erupted, rabies of some sort, and those infected were currently quarantined.

So why the need for Special Forces?

It was the first time in a long time he had been in the field and not been in charge. An E-8, but he had stepped back from the field missions to the textbooks. Three years prior he did so to make his marriage better, to be stable and at home. Little did he know it would make things worse.

Eight months earlier his wife cheated. For the first two months he ignored her as if she were trash, working all the time and going out after, just to avoid seeing her. He wasn't ready to end it, but he wasn't ready to make it work.

Even though his bitterness called upon him to strike out at her, betray her, indulge with someone else. He didn't. He remained, despite his anger, a hundred percent faithful.

He healed some in two months, stating he'd stay in the marriage, but admittedly Jack didn't do anything to make the marriage get better. They spoke briefly, not much nor meaningful, and the same was said for their sex life. Not much, brief, and not meaningful.

He knew she was sorry, he knew she tried, but it became easier to stay cold than it was to warm back up and chance the hurt.

The daily kisses and intermittent phone calls that were common place for years in their marriage were gone.

Half the time Jack was torn between wanting to give into to how much he loved her, and fighting it.

But undeniably he was still in love with his wife.

How long had it been since he told her?

Riding in the back of the covered truck Jack found himself in that percentage of time where he wanted to give into the love of his wife.

It had been years since he was away from home and years since they spent longer than a few days apart.

He had forgotten what it felt like.

He didn't know if it was being away or the mission that attributed to the weird feeling that crawled in his gut. Either way, he didn't like what he felt and he sought a sense of security, and possibly closure.

Before getting the 'phones off' order, Jack reached into his bag and grabbed his phone. He hesitated before dialing, but he did.

Two rings and Lil answered the phone hurriedly and with the word, "Jack."

"Lil," he whispered "I'm here. I don't know what's going on or when I'll be able to call again, I just wanted to call... you know."

Her gasp was loud, emotional and it carried to him, "Thank you so much for calling me."

"I gotta go."

"Jack, be careful."

"I will. Thank you. And I'll uh, I'll call you. I ... I promise."

She sniffed, possibly a tear filled snuffle. "Bye, Jack."

"Lil."

"Yeah."

A pause. "I ... I'm still in love with you."

Another emotional breath escaped her and carried to him. "I love you too, Jack. I love you too."

Jack closed the phone and closed his eyes before shutting it off altogether. He not only wanted to do that he needed to talk to his wife. A need he strongly felt. And as he approached his destination, Jack supposed he'd find out why that need was crying out to him.

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There were four of them and every hour on the hour they had to patrol the small town of Carancus, it was like a ghost town, cleared out long before when the 'sick' raid was made. But just to be sure, the Army had four soldiers ride through the town, to make certain no one returned.

One did an air sample reading, everything was normal.

But they took no chances and wore respirators.

The air sample soldier was a Captain. Steven Long had been a biological warfare expert for some time. Not the top in his field, but an active member of his specialty.

He walked ahead of the jeep, pacing the search. A hundred more feet they'd be clear, be able to turn around.

Steven looked forward to returning to his tent, make shift lab and checking out those samples. He wanted to bring to Dr. Manning's attention the attack rate of the bacteria and how it differed.

Steven himself wanted to know what was causing the difference, and the search of the town was a waste of time.

Or so he thought.

Several minutes earlier, he believed he saw a shadow, but it was so fast, small, it had to have been an animal. He didn't really think much about it until he heard that noise.

A clanking, like something dropping.

Holding up his hand first to halt the jeep, Steven then pointed to where he believed the noise was coming from.

He swung his air sample pack behind him and brought his weapon forward.

The jeep stopped, and two of the soldiers stepped from it.

Again the noise sounded and Steven was able to ear-zoom on where it was coming from. With a motioning twitch of his head, he pointed to the last small house.

The jeep inched its way up and the other two soldiers followed directly behind.

"Careful, Captain," the one whispered.

Steven nodded as he approached the door. It was ajar.

Knowing what he was dealing with or could possibly deal with he stepped back and opened the door with his foot.

"Light," he requested.

Through a thin layer of mist the beam of the light aimed in toward the single room. It illuminated a child, a boy to be exact. He sat on the floor, playing with a truck. Lifting it, dropping it, lifting it again.

“Son,” Steven called out. “You shouldn’t be here alone.”

The boy turned his head in a snap, his face caught the beam. His eyes were dead of life, his face drawn and white, dried blood laced his chin. He widened his mouth with a snarl.

Steven aimed his weapon.

He was going to shoot, and he almost did, until the child returned to playing with the truck.

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The Army set up was located about a hundred yards from the ‘site’. Jack and the other men disembarked from the truck. The platoon sergeant instructed them that they would walk the perimeter with the other soldiers until more troops arrived.

What was going on? There was an air of tension, a jeep zipped by him not even beeping. Four soldiers and a child. Jack didn’t pay much attention to who was in the jeep. He did however pay attention to the Specialist.

Jack found amusement in a specialist. The young man rattled on about space illness and how this was an alien thing brought in by the meteor.

Jack hadn’t even heard about the meteor, he thought the kid was joking until someone else confirmed it.

A meteor landed and people were ill. That was just nuts, Jack thought. Then his thoughts went to Lil, and how she loved shit like that. How if he had even spoken to her briefly, he probably would have been pretty informed. Guaranteed she would have rambled just like the specialist.

The tents were dark, no lights whatsoever and it looked like an abandoned concentration camp. Barbed wired fence high and doubled circled the circumference.

Jack didn’t say much. He just listened.

Another Sergeant. Sergeant Holmes led his Platoon Sergeant, Jack and the others to the fence.

“Just walk around the perimeter, until more arrive,” Holmes said. “Deter anything or anyone that comes near the fence.

Push them away, but use your weapons to do so. Should anyone escape, we have orders to shoot.”

Deter them from the fence? No one was near the fence, let alone escapees.

The Platoon Sergeant asked, “Sgt. What exactly are we dealing with. It looks pretty dead out there?”

Holmes snickered. “Dead. Yeah. Watch.” He gave a nod to a private who worked a huge spotlight and they tuned on the light.

The sight before Jack stumbled him back.

The specialist whispered out a ‘dude’.

Was he seeing what he thought? The center tent, hidden by the darkness was illuminated by the bright spotlight. The tattered flap was open and exposed not the whole inside but enough for Jack to see what was going on. From Jack’s view it looked like thirty or so people, white face and bloody, were engaging in a meal consisting of others that lay on cots. They looked up to the light, sneering.

“Dude, I mean, Sarge,” the specialist said. “They’re zombies.”

The platoon Sgt. shot a ‘get real’ glance at the specialist. “They’re not zombies.”

“I’m telling you, they’re zombies.”

A nod from Holmes and the spotlight went out. “Whatever they are, there’s about two hundred in there. Only a couple made it to the fence. None have escaped.”

“Zombies,” the specialist said.

The platoon Sgt. Snapped, “They’re not zombies.”

Finally, Jack thought, a topic he was pretty knowledgeable of. Granted it was a fictional topic like Zombies, but he had sat through with his wife, what he believed to be every single zombie movie ever made. Bad and good. Perhaps, even at the risk of sounding really insane, he could try to diffuse the situation with logic.

Logical zombie talk. That was an oxymoron.

But Jack tried. “Let’s say for argument sake they are zombies.” He cringed. “Why aren’t they coming for us?”

“Why would they?” the specialist replied. “They got enough right there to keep them busy. Only a few of us here. But

dude, when they are finished, they'll come for us. Imagine how many there will be then."

Jack couldn't help it. Hearing the conversation come from his mouth and then another, it was ridiculous.

Holmes made a huff sound, possibly it was a laugh, and said, "He's probably right. Make your rounds. I'll be back after I speak to the colonel."

And he walked off.

"You heard the Sergeant, make your rounds," the platoon sergeant ordered.

Jack started walking, like the others in the same circle. It was dark, freaky; he could only imagine what was occurring in the darkness. But he didn't need too much of an imagination. For with each step he took, through the darkness carried the sound of the gnawing and chomping of flesh.

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He was greeted by Colonel Manning the second he stepped off the helicopter. Saul extended his hand to the man he envisioned as being older, and taller.

"Colonel Manning," he introduced himself. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Klein."

"I wish it were under different circumstances."

"Me, as well, Sir. But I've been working on this nonstop since the transformation."

Saul tilted his head in confusion. "Transformation?"

"When they go from ill to, what they have become."

This description took Saul aback. "Colonel, how bad is it?"

The colonel whistled.

"Will you take me to the sick area?"

"I think you should get a look at what we're dealing with."

"I can't get that at the sick camp?"

"Oh, you can, but I'd rather you get up and close." The colonel led him to a metal structure, newer, more than likely recently erected.

"Have you pin pointed what we're dealing with?" Saul asked.

"It's a bacterium. Fast moving." The colonel nodded to the soldier as he reached for the door.

Saul stopped. His head cocked. Was hearing moans?
Where were they coming from?

The colonel continued. "The initial infected took days to come full circle, but once they infect someone, it's anywhere from 4 to 24 hours. Some instances, like with Katherine Welsh, much, much sooner. Instantaneously."

"What determines that? Do we know?"

The colonel cleared his throat. "Before I tell you, I want you to take a look. After you do so, then you can confirm my suggestions."

"I see."

"I think sir, after we rectify the current situation and send our troops out to neighboring communities looking for more infected."

"Did we have escapes?"

"Not that I know of. But, what if someone never checked in here."

"You have a point."

"Prepare yourself." The colonel opened the door.

A growl? Did Saul hear a growl? He stepped inside behind the colonel into a makeshift examining room. On the table lay a man. His skin tone reminded Saul of an apple, thick and off white. It didn't look real, as if he wore a pancake makeup. His lips, cracked and peeling. The man thrashed and growled. His eyes and pupils, nearly clear.

Bound to the table by straps, the man looked at Saul, widened his mouth and arched his head, struggling, as if he were trying to bite.

A soldier stood behind him, weapon ready.

The man on the table thrashed more violently.

"This is what we're dealing with?" Saul questioned.

"Yes, sir."

Saul's hand went to his mouth. As if did, the man shook. With a 'snap' sound, his arm, broke on the wrist and freed. He reached with his limb for the soldier.

The colonel nodded.

The soldier fired a single shot into the head of the man.

Saul jolted. "Was that necessary?"

"I'm afraid so. Yes," The colonel replied. "When they were first discovered, we learned how violent they were. Instinctual,

attacking. They got Dr. Welsh. And two of our soldiers were injured while we were trying to detain a few for research. Not severely, but bitten by them.”

“Two soldiers. Did you test them?”

“Right away. Initial testing didn’t show any infection in the blood stream. But after about thirty minutes to an hour, small traces were seen.”

“Where are they now?”

“They were sent to Washington, special hospital for research.”

“So they didn’t show signs of ... this.” Saul pointed to the man on the table. “This delirium.”

“No.”

“But Katherine did?”

“Yes. Right away.”

“And you’ve determined what causes an instant reaction and transformation to full blown infection.”

“Yes. We believe we do know what causes it to occur instantly.”

“What is that?”

“Like with this man, the delirium and violent rage sets in at the moment of death.”

Saul cocked an eyebrow. Had the colonel who was also a brilliant doctor, been working too much. “Colonel,” Saul said. “Forgive me, but that sounds absurd.”

“I know. I know. But they have no pulse, no breath, they don’t bleed. Some of them have injuries, like Katherine that are fatal injuries.”

“They can’t be dead, that’s impossible.”

“I know.”

“What does Dr. Riesman say about all this? Have you consulted him? I mean he has witnessed this first hand, right?”

“Yes, he has.”

“What did he say?”

The colonel stared at Saul for a moment. “Nothing. He locked himself in his trailer and ...”

“Then let’s go get him.” Saul turned to the door.

“We can’t.”

Saul stopped. “Why? Did something happen to him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you sir. When we went back for him, he was gone.”

“Gone as in dead or...”

The colonel finished the sentence. “No, gone as in gone. Took off.”

“Tell me he wasn’t infected.”

“Last our soldiers spoke to him he wasn’t injured.”

Saul breathed out in relief. “We have to find him, immediately.” He said, and then sank into concern. How frightened Hans had to have been to run away. And by what Saul witnessed, he could see why. He did take stock in the fact that Hans was a professional, and frightened or not, he would never hit the general populous if he were infected. Saul was certain. But just to be sure, they had to find him first. And wherever that was, it couldn’t be too far.

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Lima, Peru

Hans wasn’t thinking when he took off by foot, sneaking out of the lab and walking pretty much through the day, how difficult it would be. Fortunately, a little money went a long way and for fifty bucks he was treated like a king. Although the ride in the back of the truck was no ride in a limo, it was still a ride.

That ride took him to another, then another until finally he arrived. At the airport.

He was surprised no one came for him, or looked for him there. But judging by his phone, people were searching for him.

He didn’t care. Luckily he was able to get a flight leaving the country almost immediately for Germany. Germany wasn’t bad. He had family there and connections. In fact he called one to get him at the airport when his flight arrived. It wasn’t America, his first preference, but it wasn’t Peru. He had to get out of Peru, out of the country and away from what he had seen.

It was unnatural. The dementia was frightening, and fearful of not being able to feign off 600 people, Hans left.

He could do more in a safe location.

He was his own best test subject.

His head cocked at the call of his flight number and that they were boarding. With a handkerchief he wiped the sweat from his brow. His was feeling chilled, and not his best. Looking down to his phone he saw he had eight missed calls, three of which from Saul. He vowed to call him as soon as he landed. At that moment, though, he shut off his phone.

He glanced up to the boarding line, and decided to join. Wanting to know the time, he glanced to his phone, and recalled he turned it off. As he stood he looked at his watch. He had been awake nearly 24 hours. In looking at his watch he could see his arm, slightly swollen and the veins seemed like red road maps leading to the small cut that didn't want to heal.

He'd investigate when he got there, test himself. For that moment, he lowered his sleeve, prepared his boarding pass and got in line.

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The tubular building was flown in and placed not far from where the Army had its set up. A long tent precluded the entrance, nearly hiding it from view.

"And this is Captain Steven Long," Colonel Manning introduced Saul.

Saul visually gave a once over to the enthusiastic, but tired looking Captain. Young, fit, typical soldier, but didn't look a thing like a scientist. He was average height and looks, probably younger than he appeared.

"Captain Long has been working on our victims and came across something very interesting."

It was about that point in the conversation that Saul withdrew his hand from the introduction. "Is that so?"

"Yes, Sir," Steven replied. "I'm very intrigued by the rate of attack and how it differs in victim to victim. Basically sir, every single victim, initial and secondary has been the same. Delirium, violent, and then I came across this."

Saul just followed.

Colonel Manning led them into the tube building and to the first door. "We have a shoot to kill order out on all infected," he said. "So imagine my surprise when Captain Long brought this one back." He opened the door.

Saul was taken aback. A child, shackled, sat center of the room. He played with a truck. Clearly, he was like the others. "Is he?"

"Yes," Steven answered. "No pulse. No breathing, no blood pressure. Body temperature, sixty-seven degrees. We're still waiting for one of the healthy in town to give us his name. Watch . . ." Steven approached him. "Hey, there."

The boy ignored him.

"Amazing," Saul said. "He's not violent."

"Well, yes, to you, me and others. But . . ." Steve excused himself from the room, and returned with a cage. A chicken inside moved radically around. He set the cage down in front of the boy and no sooner did he open it, the child scurried to the cage, devoured the chicken mercilessly in less than a minute, and bloodied with a few feather, the boy went back to his truck.

Saul cleared his throat. "I guess we can rule out getting him a puppy." Another clearing of his throat to hide his chuckle.

"Thing is," Col. Manning said. "We don't know why he is like this. Why he is not attacking people like the others. He may hold some sort of key."

"We need to find out," Saul said. "But we're not finding out here."

"My thoughts exactly," Col Manning stated. "I think we all can agree on what needs to be done next."

The three men looked at each other and then to the child.

"Helicopter should be here shortly," Col. Manning told Saul. "Captain Long is getting his things ready. Not much. He just got here yesterday."

Like Saul, Captain Long hadn't even unpacked. Hadn't taken a single item from his bag. Saul knew he wasn't going to be in Peru long, but less than a few hours?

But it was vital they both leave and go back to the states, to Washington where the two soldiers who were bitten were quarantined. The chopper would take them to the airstrip where a government jet was already waiting.

"How is the Captain about returning to the states so soon?"

"He thinks it's a big mistake bringing this thing there, but we both know, that it needs to be done."

"I agree with both of you."

"Before you board, take a look at what just came in," Manning pulled Saul's attention toward the computer.

His attention was on the growing noise outside. "I thought you gave the order."

"I did. But I want to wait until the backup troops arrive. Better safe than sorry, it's getting crazy. After that's finished, I already assigned locations for our scouts. But for now, Doctor, please." Col. Manning maneuvered the mouse, and the hiss of the printer started. "I'm making you copies to review fully on the plane. Check this out."

Saul leaned into the monitor.

A picture of an arm with a small red gash appeared. The gash wasn't bad, or deep.

"This was taken one half hour after this soldier was bitten." Col. Manning switched the screen. "Two hours post bite."

A redness appeared around the gash, which also seemed to still look as if it seeped.

Another switch and the arm was swollen and turning dark. The wound looked bigger and open.

"How many hours?" Saul asked.

"This is twelve hours. Taken at the hospital."

"How is the patient?"

"Fevered. Not much. Starting to feel ill."

"The other one?"

"Interesting enough, at a slower rate with a bigger wound."

Saul folded his arms. "Adrenaline enhanced."

"We think," Col. Manning said. "Soldier one; small wound, was very hyper and worried. Soldier two was hit accidentally in the head and knocked unconscious. So therefore all body function slowed."

"As did the rate of the virus."

"Exactly. We're keeping him sedated and his vitals at minimal to see what happen."

"Comparable in time frame?"

"His bigger wound is at maybe soldier one's four hour post."

"Let me ask you this," Saul said. "When you first tested them you said there were no signs of the virus in the blood. Not for thirty minutes. Have you yet experimented with removing the infected area or even amputating?"

“We’ve theorized that. Perhaps maybe the wound generates the virus and getting rid of the wound may do it, but we’ve not been fortunate enough to catch it that early.”

“If it happens again, evasive wounds . . .”

“Then we will experiment.”

“Great.”

“I’ve placed those theories and other data in there for you.” Col. Manning grabbed the papers from the printer and placed them in a folder. He extended the folder for Saul as the sound of the helicopter came into earshot.

“Ah, my ride and your backup. Col. Manning, if anything arises, anything of interest before I leave, let me know.”

“I will.” Col. Manning pointed to the folder. “You can review those on the flight.”

“Seven hours,” Saul breathed out. “Makes you wonder what I’m gonna face when I land.”

Both men turned their heads when the sounds of yelling and moaning, damnation moaning rang out.

“Hopefully,” Col. Manning said. “We can do something so that ends here. Tonight.”

Saul gave a closed mouth nod. “Let’s hope.”

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“They finished their meal,” Specialist Carlson said. “We’re the smorgasbord.”

“They’re not zombies,” Jack blasted out.

“Then what are they?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

From tent two, the couple hundred hands multiplied and the barbed wire, fenced in area was like a corral of wild animals.

They moved slow, rigid, sloppy. Some carried body parts; all had that same dead-eyed look as they locked stares on the soldiers outside the perimeter.

As if they lost all reasoning, they aimed for the fence, reaching out. Some trying to walk through, getting jabbed and stuck. Others tried to climb with the same results. All of them gaping mouths, biting the air as if trying to consume a meal long distance.

Specialist Carlson snickered in a young way. “Dude, oh, my God. Look at that one.”

Jack turned to see where he pointed. A woman was diligent in her fence attempt, flesh tore from her with each caught up twisted turn, but she didn’t seem to notice.

It was a nightmare Jack had many times. Thought the reasonable man in him, verbally, and outright argued that they weren’t zombies, in his mind he couldn’t think of anything else they would be.

They looked dead. If they weren’t, some sort of nerve disease cut their ability to feel. Some of them had no limbs, no insides, eyes.

Yes, a nightmare he had many times. Every time his wife made him watch a movie, whether scary or lame, he had nightmares about them. The big man’s insides shuddered with disgust as his mind raced to comprehend what was happening. He couldn’t help but stare at them, watching them, taking relief in the fact that he was safe from them for the time being.

The call of the platoon sergeant, yelling out, “Orders are in. Do it.”

Jack knew what that meant.

They were just waiting for the shoot to kill order.

Specialist Carlson chuckled outward before blasting one single shot into the forehead of one of them.

Rapid fire rang out and Jack raised his weapon.

Be smart, he thought, you’ve seen enough movies. Just like Carlson, you know where to hit. Jack didn’t waste time. He performed head shots and that was it.

“Quit wasting ammo,” A soldier yelled out. “They aren’t going down unless you aim for the head. Aim for the head!”

How right that was. Those who randomly shot only caused the creatures to jolt a few times and keep on in their pursuit. A single shot to the head ended it.

There were hundreds upon hundreds, and maybe thirty soldiers to do the job. Jack knew there were plenty of troops to take them all out, as long as they shot carefully and with precision.

Jack’s big concern wasn’t in ending the current situation; it was more so on the fact was this it? Or God forbid, were there more out there. Even scarier, if there were, they certainly weren’t behind barbed wire fences.

CHAPTER TEN

May 7th

Hans was grateful he was seated in the back of the plane and that the person seated next to him had one too many cocktails before boarding. The overweight man snored loudly as he slept curled to the window, his hard outward breaths caused condensation against the pane of glass. It covered up the sound of regurgitation.

Pretty soon, Hans thought, he would stop throwing up. He didn't drink much, and the amount that spewed forth from his mouth was less and less with each upheaval. He kept his mouth buried to the bag and closed it quickly as to cover the smell. A smell that wasn't normal.

After vomiting, he hid the bag, cleared his throat, sat back and pulled the blanket higher. He was cold.

Feeling as if he could sleep, he closed his eyes.

"Sir, are you ok?" The gentle voice of Marian asked. He gazed upward to the stewardess, a woman considered 'older' for a stewardess. She offered a comforting smile.

"Air sickness. I suffer terribly from it."

"You should have taken something."

"I just did," Hans said. "Hopefully it'll knock me out for the flight."

"If you need anything," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you."

Another smile, and Marian turned, walking up the aisle, checking on passengers as she moved by them.

Almost half way through the flight, Hans counted down the hours. Sleep would make them pass by faster, and with that thought, feeling pretty lousy, Hans tried to sleep.

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Two soldiers were injured. One pretty severely in the camp cleansing. Saul directed those two soldiers, along with the boy and the two already transported to Washington, to be moved to Atlanta where a special quarantine and research center was being set up.

Number one priority was to stop the virus. If infected, they had to figure out how to stop it. The bacterium wasted away the person, then regenerated the cells without regenerating brain cells. Making them into moving monsters.

At least in Atlanta they could contain them, detain them, and hopefully try to cure them if not learn from them.

Col. Manning added one more specific to Saul's directive.

Not wanting to chance something happening during transport, any soldier fatally injured, would be spared the torment of a regenerated death.

Regenerated death. Saul couldn't believe that was what they were dealing with. Never in all of his imagination did he think he would be dealing with the walking dead.

But they weren't really dead. They couldn't be. Not if they were moving and acting.

He finished the phone call, and leaned back in his chair.

Before he released the grip on his phone, he placed one more call.

"Saul? Saul I didn't think I'd hear from you," Irma said concerned.

"I'm on a plane so we may not have great reception."

"A plane."

"On my way back to Atlanta."

She breathed heavily and the 'hiss' of it carried over the line. "Thank God. Thank God. Everything must be fine then. You're coming home."

"Actually, Irma," Saul paused. He wasn't going to say much, not at all. He couldn't. Not on a government phone, but he knew if he said the right words, the right way, that would tell Irma enough. "Actually they are about as strange as strange could be."

He ended the call, bringing the phone to his lips in thought.

A clearing of the throat drew him from that moment and Saul turned around.

Steven stood before him. He had been in the back of the plane with the infected that they were bringing back to the states. He looked drawn, something wasn't right.

"Captain? Are you okay?"

"I heard you mention the word 'strange'"

Saul nodded. "I was speaking to my wife."

"It's about to get stranger."

"I don't understand," Saul said.

"Neither do I. But that boy, Juan?"

"Did he get violent?"

"No, Sir." Steven shook his head. "He's crying."

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Medication that rendered a person semi comatose was shipped immediately to the site in Peru before scouting teams were sent out. Platoon leaders were each given ample injections of it.

The orders were simple. If a soldier became injured through bite or scratch of an infected, they were to immediately turn themselves into whoever was in charge, and receive the injection.

Slowing the cardio functions slowed the virus, enabling more time to be cured.

Jack scoffed at that, so did Specialist Carlson. Relying solely on movie information, both conveyed to each other that they didn't think anything could stop a zombie transformation. However that was fiction. It was never dealt with in 'real life'.

Or was it?

"How do we know?" Specialist Carlson asked Jack as they moved through a wooded area.

"True."

"I mean, it could have happened before. And it was contained. You just never know. Plus, we do have cool technology with medicine."

"True."

"What are you doing?"

Jack was busted. He gave a smile to Carlson. "Trying to get a signal." He held up his phone.

"Yeah, well, you just spoke to your wife."

"I know, sorry."

“Please keep focused. We’re up front, we don’t need something jumping out at us.”

Jack nodded. He was searching for a signal because he had to abruptly end his talk with Lil. He wanted to tell her so much. He was certain she knew he was worried. Telling her, “If I don’t come back” ... said a lot. But he had to end his call and he did so without letting her know what was happening. He wanted to.

Jack figured out a coded way to do so, he prepared a simple text. One that couldn’t come back negatively to him as if he let secret information out, and one his wife would understand with a little thought and know exactly what was happening. .

But he couldn’t get a signal to send it out. The text sat in his phone in the ‘outbox’ folder.

Specialist Carlson said something else. Jack didn’t understand. “What was that?” Jack asked.

“I said,” Carlson looked back. “I think there’s a village about two more miles from ...”

He stopped. Jack was only two feet behind him. Carlson stopped and didn’t move.

“Hold up,” Jack called out, lifting hand. “Carlson?”

“It broke the perimeter.” Carlson whispered. “I was hoping they contained it. But it broke.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked, then received his answer. Joining Carlson he saw the reason for his concern. A goat with a stick protruded through his mouth lay there. The goat’s fur was half off, its ribcage exposed, the flesh appeared to have been torn, and the body had already entered into a putrefaction stage.

Jack gagged and covered his mouth.

“See what I mean?” Carlson said. “Something ate it alive. Then it came back. Someone had to kill it.”

Jack swallowed the lump and turned around. “Keep your eyes open. We may have infected in these woods.”

For a while, Jack thought his worry and his wanted to forewarn his wife was premature. Until he saw that goat. Carlson was right it either broke the perimeter or was beyond the perimeter long before the virus was discovered to be deadly.

Mid stare at the goat, and whispering questions of the men, a ‘bleep’ caught Jack’s attention. He didn’t need to look. He knew what it meant. He had caught the scope of a signal and his message had been sent. Now he hoped she would figure it out.

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Despite the fact that Jack told her to get it all together, Lil couldn't bring herself to dig up his military papers that he had in the event of his death.

That told her something was wrong, but not as much as Jack calling her three times in the middle of the night to say he loved her and she had to know that in case he didn't come back.

She asked him three times what was going on, he said he couldn't tell her. He would figure out a way to tell her more.

That she understood.

The last conversation was twenty-nine seconds long and Jack said to her, 'You of all people are more prepared than anyone I know.'

Prepared. What was Lil prepared for? Jack's death? No, it couldn't be that.

She went on the internet and looked up Peru. The place Jack had gone. The news talked about a meteor causing mass hysteria illness. Maybe Jack went down to help restore peace. But a conspiracy site said it was more, it was illness out of control. Lil thrived on reading, watching and learning about end of the world scenarios. To her, that was what she was most prepared for.

Was Jack trying to tell her a virus was about to wipe man into extinction.

Just as she had that thought, in the midst of trying to find more internet information on the Peru illness, she heard the beep of her phone.

She lifted it.

Jack sent a text? Was that his way of saying what was going on?

She clicked on read and drew more into confusion.

It wasn't much. It was three letters. Three letters that added more to her mystery. What was Jack trying to tell her with the text, 'WWZ'?

Immediately, still in front of the computer, she typed the three letters into the search engine.

Lil wanted to kick herself when the results returned. She of all people should have recognized the three letters without a second thought, without confusion.

Jack had to be mistaken. But of all people, Jack wouldn't joke and would be the last to admit to what he was witnessing.

If Jack was meaning in his text to refer to zombies, then that was what Jack believed he was dealing with.

On that, Lil got up, locked all the doors and sought out her shotgun.

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Saul wasn't expecting the midflight phone call. He was just leaning back, reviewing documentation when the call came. He feared the worst. It had to be bad news. "This is Dr. Klein, what can I do for you, Col. Manning?" Saul asked.

"We've located Dr. Riesman."

Saul exhaled. "Great. Where is he?"

"Are you ready? About three hours outside of Berlin, thirty-thousand feet above the ground."

Saul sprang forward. "You're joking, right?"

"I wish I wasn't."

It took Saul aback. He had to grasp a moment and reason. Hans on a plane. There was no way he was infected. He knew better. He needed to be sure. Saul ended his call with Col. Manning, both men agreeing to use their resources to get in touch with that plane.

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Marian hoped she'd get fifteen minutes of sleep without interruption. No such luck. She was summoned to the Captain's cabin moments after she closed her eyes. She was in charge of their needs, but wished for once they'd call upon someone younger it was quite a hall there. Especially if they wanted something.

He didn't want coffee, he wanted something else. "Have some sort of VIP in hiding on the plane," the Captain said.

"How do we know?" Marian asked.

"US Government contacted us. Passenger in 65B. Familiar?"

"Yes," Marian nodded.

"Well, they want us to check on him. Report back, then move him up to first class."

“He’s probably sleeping. He was airsick. We have only another half hour of the flight.”

“I know. But, this is important. Could you go check on him and move him? His name is Dr. Riesman.”

“Yes, Captain.” Marian smiled, but it was forced. She didn’t feel like walking all the way down the steps then to the back of the plane. Row 65 was the last row.

But she did.

The main cabin was dark; the aisle lights were dim but give enough light for her to walk. She’d smile to the few passengers who were still awake, but most of them were sleeping.

She hated to disturb Dr. Riesman; After all, he had taken that medication.

Reaching into her apron pocket, she pulled out a small flash light.

Row 57 she heard something. It was a wet sound, squishing.

It grew louder as she hit row 62.

At Row 63, she heard a heavy, gurgling. A breathing that didn’t sound right.

Had he taken a turn for the worse? The odd sounds grew louder.

She arrived at row 64 and couldn’t see Dr. Riesman’s head. Perhaps he had gone to the rest room. Another step, a raise of the flashlight, Marian softly called “Dr. Riesman.”

The beam hit the empty seat of ‘65B’ only for a split second. Into the light, Hans raised his head with a snarl. His mouth opened wide, showing his teeth and blood along with saliva poured out. His eyes flared a deadly blank look.

Fear had consumed her so much, that she couldn’t get a productive scream.

Hans shook his head like an animal, shucking remains from his mouth.

The flashlight tipped from her grip as her hand shot to her mouth and backed up when she watched Hans returned to devouring the man in ‘65 A’.

Marion was frozen in fear and in shock. She wanted to scream, warn the sleeping passengers. She hadn’t a clue what to do. So she ran. She ran as fast as she could through the plane and up to the Captain’s cabin. “You need a gun.”

“Marion, what’s wrong?” The Captain spoke calming, standing as he did.

“A gun. A gun!” Marion screamed, and then broke into hysterics. “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

“Marion.” With a firm grip to her and a slight jolt, the Captain vied for her attention. “What is going on? Calm down.”

Marion cried out. A bone chilling scream, followed by sobs.

“Greg, I’ll be back.” The Captain moved to the door.

“Do you want me to go?” Greg asked.

“No. I’ll see what the problem is. In the meantime, notify Berlin and alert them that we may have a situation.”

As the Captain began to leave, Marion dove for him, holding on, begging and sobbing ‘please don’t go back there’ repeatedly.

The Captain pulled her from him, pulled the cabin door closed and walked out.

Marion dropped to the floor.

Greg’s radioing to Berlin was mere background noise as Marion weakly reached up and locked the door.

The cockpit was safe and secure.

No one could get in there. They would be fine until they landed and that would be long.

Something told Marion that the Captain wouldn’t be back. She was right.

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They arrived at a small village just after dawn. Chickens danced about in the orange hue of morning, people moved, but not slowly. They radioed in to let command know their position. Jack’s patrol was on foot, a vehicle would meet them there.

The woods didn’t bring anymore incidents. That was good. Jack believed he did overreact and that, really, there was no way it extended into the village. Another animal could have eaten that goat.

“Spread out, knock on doors,” The platoon sergeant ordered. “Try your best to convey that we are looking for people who are ill.”

Jack nodded his agreement; he was paired off with Specialist Carlson. The village houses lined a dirt road; he and Carlson were instructed to start at the last one.

They had just happened upon the home when the door opened and an old woman, maybe eighty emerged. She dropped her bucket when she saw Jack and Carlson, started rambling fast and insidiously in her native language as she ran to them, grabbing them.

Her face tear streaked her arms dirty.

As Jack tried to speak with her, he noticed her arms. Dirt? Blood. "Ma'am? Slow down. What is wrong?"

The door opened again and another woman emerged. High in the air she held sickle by its broken handle. Middle aged, thin. Her eyes widened, she lowered the sickle and she genuinely looked relieved to see them. She hurried to the old woman, pulling her from Jack.

"Come," the woman beckoned. "Come." She waved her arm and led Jack and Carlson around the small house.

The woman stopped and merely extended her arm to what looked like a small chicken shack. "Husband."

Jack asked. "Your husband is in there?"

She nodded. "Husband" She pointed with the sickle.

Jack glanced at Carlson and both men took a step.

The younger of the women, reached out, stopping Jack.

"What?" Jack asked. "We're going to go check."

She pointed to his rifle and reached for it.

Jack moved it from her way.

The woman pointed to the rifle, shook her head, then mimicked raising the gun.

"Um, Sarge," Carlson said. "I think she's telling us to raise our weapons."

"I think you're right." Jack lifted his and motioned his head. "Let's go."

The shack was only twenty feet away, but it seemed like a mile. Arriving at the door, Jack signaled Carlson to stand back and then Jack sprang open the door.

Nothing.

They looked at each other, then with weapons raised walked in.

It was quiet and dark. Another step then out from no where, with an inhuman growl, rushed a man.

His snarled and raged for Jack and Carlson, snapping to a stop inches before reaching them.

Jack stepped back. The man had been restrained by chains, but he fought and struggled to reach and bite him.

His face, his wounds, his coloring. All the same.

Jack didn't need to be a doctor to know, this man, in this remote village, was infected.

Jacqueline Druga is a native of Pittsburgh and a prolific writer of numerous novels. While she specializes in the Apocalypse, Jacqueline also writes Horror, Comedy, Romance, Mystery and YA. She is considered an authority on Bio-terror and was featured on the History Channel.

She welcomes your feedback and you can reach Jacqueline via her website at www.jacquelinedruga.com

Dana Fredsti

YOU'LL NEVER BE LUNCH IN THIS TOWN AGAIN

First time director Darren Zuber was having a hard enough time shooting his film *before* the dead started coming back to life and eating the living.

Mara Dubray, his leading lady and a well-known star of daytime soaps, was proof positive that most actors' IQs and egos were inversely proportional. Known more for her enormous bosom rather than any real acting talent, Mara was not about to let some first-time director tell *her* how to deliver lines. Her tantrums had already run the film well over budget and the words "completion bond company" had been bandied about more than once by Gerald Fife, the executive producer.

Never mind that it had been Fife's brilliant idea to cast a mediocre soap star as Lady Genevieve, a noblewoman in love with a priest (played by Derrick Stone, a minor name whose entire range consisted of stoically wooden) in the midst of a plague-stricken 14th Century Europe.

Darren had fought this casting — certainly the most ludicrous decision since Verhoven had cast Melanie Griffith as Elizabeth I ("I have the mind of a king and a bod made for sin") as vehemently as he dared. But with only a music video directing credit under his belt, Darren had to swallow both pride and common sense on a great many crucial details, such as casting and rewrites. It was the only way to get his film made, a project he'd dreamed of doing since his first years at UCLA. And it was only the success of *Game of Thrones* that had convinced Plateau Productions, headed by Fife, to invest the money.

Plateau was known for low-budget rip-offs of big box office pictures, as well as micro-budget exploitation films in every genre. If you rented a Plateau picture you could always count on four things: bad scripts, worse acting, one or two minor "name" actors for foreign draw, and at least one scene set in a strip club.

Explanations to Fife that 14th century Europeans did not have strip clubs were useless. To Fife, if a film didn't have topless dancers, it wasn't a film. "You gotta have tits and ass, kid," Fife had said during one of their many rewrite sessions. "And I don't give a shit what century we're talking here; you can't tell me that the men didn't want to see naked girls after a hard day plowing in the field, even if they hadn't invented boob jobs yet." Darren had given in, figuring he could come up with some sort of scene in a tavern with bawdy serving maids and a band of roving minstrels for the music.

But it was certainly a far cry from the idealism of film school and all of those vows Darren and his fellow students had made. *They* would never sell out to the commercialism of Hollywood. Their movies would be pure; art for art's sake. No stars (unless it was an older name, like Maureen O'Hara or a 70s sitcom star. Both had a certain cache that appealed to the idealistic — and pretentious — students in the UCLA film program); no more than one explosion per film, and *no* scripts by Roland Emmerich.

Darren wondered how many film school grads had their idealism kicked out of them by the steel-toed boots of companies like Plateau. He supposed he should be grateful to have won the battle against a rock'n'roll soundtrack. As he stared balefully at Mara while she finished butchering yet another speech, however, Darren found it hard to be grateful about anything.

The scene would have to be done again to get the master shot, and then there would be countless takes on key phrases, close-ups, reaction shots from the crowd of peasants as Lady Genevieve tried to convince them not to flee their village, and—

Shit! Was one of the extras wearing sunglasses?

Why the hell hadn't the extra coordinator or the wardrobe mistress caught that? And how had *he* missed it? And how could that asshole of an extra be so...so *brain*-dead? Several scenes would now have to be reshot, adding more to the already inflated budget.

Darren groaned and rubbed his head, trying to convince the nagging ache behind one eye that it did *not* want to become a migraine. Melissa, his assistant, silently handed him two Excedrin Migraine and an unopened can of soda. Darren mouthed a silent "thanks" and popped the top, washing down the pills with a mouthful of sickly sweet orange-flavored carbonation.

"Jeez, this stuff is crap." Darren handed the can back to Melissa. "Can't those P.A's get anything but this shit?"

Melissa shrugged. "Budget will only cover generic. Besides, the whole dead thing back east is really playing havoc with shipments."

"Jesus..." Darren turned to his first A.D. "John, call lunch. We'll take this scene again after that. And tell Zack to make sure none of the extras are wearing fucking sunglasses! Or watches, or any other jewelry, for crissake! These are 14th century peasants! And tell Linda I want more yellow on their teeth! They didn't *have* Crest in the 14th century! Jesus!"

Darren stomped off without waiting for an answer, unable to control his temper. He didn't like losing it in front of people. He had promised himself he wasn't going to be one of those abusive directors famous for their on-set tantrums. But he hadn't bargained for the reality of low-budget Hollywood.

At least Darren could trust John to handle the situation. Thank God for John, a fellow student from UCLA and one of the few people Darren could really count on. His producer, Phil, was another friend from film school. The three of them had shared many a late night pizza while watching *The Definitive Movie Masterpieces* as defined by their film prof, analyzing them to a degree that would have both amazed and amused the original filmmakers.

John still retained some of the purity of vision they'd once all shared, albeit tempered with an increasingly world-weary attitude now reflected by his newly tinted glasses. Phil, however, had not only happily tossed idealism out the window; he'd also thrown out imagination, courage, and loyalty. He made up for these gaps in his character by extra doses of brown-nosing and sleaziness.

Even now, instead of showing any interest in the increasingly disastrous proceedings, Phil was off in a corner schmoozing some buxom peasant girl; one wearing a pair of decidedly non-period earrings and far too much self-applied cosmetics, despite strict instructions from the makeup department.

Darren went off in search of something stronger than Excedrin.

The next day brought a whole slew of unpleasant surprises, including the news that Joe Pilate (one of the few actors Darren had actually cast himself) had been eaten the day before. Phil delivered the unpleasant news via telephone before Darren had a chance to sip his morning espresso.

"Eaten? What the hell do you mean, 'he was eaten?'"

"Had his guts ripped right out," Phil confirmed with ghoulish relish. "Joe was visiting his father's grave in Philly and a couple of deadheads had him for lunch."

"Jesus, that's sick." Darren was dismayed that even while he mourned the death of a friend, his mind was already going over possible replacements for the devoured actor.

"That's the east coast for you," Phil said. "By the way, Fife is really on my ass about the budget. Are there any more scenes we can cut?"

Darren swore. It would already take an editing genius to make a coherent story out of the amputated bits left from his original script. Not for the first time, he suspected Fife had a sympathetic ear in Phil.

"Forget it," he growled. "Any more cuts and we're going to have a 14th century music video."

"Hey, we could get a rock band and have them do a title song," Phil said enthusiastically. "Call it *Plague Years* or something!"

Darren closed his eyes. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Bottom line, no more cuts." He paused, finding his next words sticking in his throat. "And find me a replacement for Joe ASAP. We'll shift his scenes to Thursday. I'll have Melissa call the actors and let 'em know we're doing the love scene today."

Hanging up before Phil could argue, Darren sadly reflected that he'd just given Joe an extremely shoddy obituary.

As soon as he arrived on set, Melissa told Darren that Mara was refusing to do the love scene with Derrick unless provided with a bottle of Cristal to relax her.

"Relax her?" Phil, who had joined the pair as they walked towards the craft service table, snorted in derision. "If she'd lay off the coke or whatever other crap she's been taking, she'd relax just fine."

"I don't know." Melissa shrugged fatalistically; something she'd been doing a lot the past few days. "She says the whole dead coming back to life thing is really stressing her out."

"Oh, that's a load of crap," Phil snarled, grabbing a bagel and slathering it with cream cheese. "This is Hollywood, not Philadelphia."

Darren headed straight for the Excedrin.

"I don't know." Melissa shrugged again, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "They're saying it's spreading."

"'They?' Who are 'they', Mara? That's total bullshit." Phil bit viciously into his bagel. "She just wants to get loaded on good champagne on our dime."

"I guess," Melissa said doubtfully. "So what should I tell her?"

Darren sighed, deciding he'd better step in. "Get some Tott's or spumante and don't let her see the bottle. I doubt she'll know the difference. She only knows about Cristal because she's watched *Shongirls* at least twenty times."

Later, as he tried to coax some genuine emotion out of his two leads, Darren reflected that if the walking dead problem *did* spread out west, no one would be able to tell the difference between the zombies and his actors anyway, so who'd give a shit?

The next day, both the media and the general uproar in the city confirmed the fact that, like practically everyone else in the country, the dead had indeed migrated to the west coast. Traffic was abysmal; it took Darren two hours to drive from Culver City to the studio in Burbank. He wasn't sure, but he thought several of the scruffy street people he passed on the way looked...well...*dead*.

At the studio, for the first time Darren could remember, the large electronic iron gates were shut, a heavily armed security guard screening each new arrival very carefully before letting them in. Another guard, also packing what looked to be a heavy-caliber weapon, kept vigilant watch each time the gates opened and closed.

Melissa greeted Darren with the news that several crewmembers (two production assistants and a grip) were missing. They hadn't called in; they were just ... missing. "And we're short extras too," Melissa added. "Central Casting called and said a bunch of their people are afraid to drive anywhere."

John walked up, radio in hand. "I figure we'll have to do tighter shots to get the kind of crowd effect you want with the plague victims."

Darren set his mouth in a determined line. "Let's just do it."

He stalked towards the day's first set; the interior of a church where several hundred plague victims, both dead and dying, were gathered to seek salvation. About seventy-five extras, gruesomely made up to look like they were in the final throes of the Black Death, were sitting in the aisles and rough-hewn wooden pews, nervously discussing the more current plague of ravenous corpses. Crewmembers looked equally distracted. Very few were actually doing their jobs.

Darren thought they'd have to do some fast-talking to keep people on the film so he called a meeting with John and Phil.

"So what do you think?" he said after outlining his concerns.

"I just don't know, Darren," Phil replied. "I mean, you've got people scared to leave their homes. Businesses are shutting down. I mean, *Starbucks* was closed this morning." He stared at both Darren and John in turn. "*Starbucks*."

"Do what you can," Darren said, trying not to imagine a world without readily available coffee. "Offer bonus pay, whatever it takes."

"*Bonus* pay?" Phil sounded outraged. "Are you nuts? Do you know what Fife will say if I do that?"

"Don't tell him!" Darren slammed his hand against a chair in frustration. "Jesus, Phil, there's got to be something we can do!"

Phil was quiet; a sign that his mind was working furiously. After a moment of reflection he smiled broadly. "I've got it!" He lowered his voice. "We'll *offer* the bonus pay. But we don't have to actually *pay* them the extra money."

John nodded thoughtfully.

Darren, on the other hand, was horrified, both at the idea and John's calm reaction to it. "Jesus, Phil, that's totally unethical! These people are working their asses off!"

"Yeah, and we're paying them. There aren't any clauses in their contracts for a zombie plague."

"Look, Phil, they have every reason to demand more money if they're risking their lives to be here."

John nodded. "He's got a point, Phil. You know how much stuntmen get paid."

Phil brought his face close to Darren's. "Do you want to finish this film or not?"

John nodded again. "He's got a point, Darren."

Thousands of objections whirled around in Darren's mind, but all he could come up with was a feeble, "But we could get sued!"

Phil shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. But with all this other shit going down, who's gonna have time to deal with it?"

John shook his head doubtfully. "SAG isn't going to let a little thing like zombies stop them from fucking with the production if we screw their actors over, you know that. And the Teamsters..."

The three men shook their heads, differences momentarily forgotten as they contemplated the eternal enemy of the low-budget filmmaker: the Unions.

Taking advantage of the moment of camaraderie, Phil rested his hand on Darren's shoulder. "Let's get this film finished, buddy. This is what we worked for in film school, right? So we'll do whatever we have to do."

Darren felt a tiny piece of his soul die as he heard himself reply, "You got it."

The offer of hazard pay got about two-thirds of the cast and crew on set the next day. Darren had sympathy for the absentees. The commute to the studio had been even worse than the previous day. He'd definitely seen people—both living and dead—with large chunks missing from various limbs, all staggering around the streets. The kind of stuff nightmares were made of.

On the other hand, it was a definite solution to the homeless problem.

Darren's main concern was the number of armed soldiers and national guardsmen now patrolling the city. Certain broadcasts on radio and TV said the government was planning to impose a twenty-four hour curfew on the streets. That would make it impossible to get to and from the studio. Darren had brought an overnight bag just in case and had called to tell Phil and Melissa to do the same.

Melissa had been charged with the duty of calling as many other crew and cast members as she could reach and suggest they plan on staying over too. "People aren't going to want to leave their families," Melissa had pointed out when asked to make the call.

"They can bring their families with them," Darren had immediately replied.

Darren was gratified to see some people actually did bring their families (and pets) with them to the studio. When Phil pointed out this would compensate for the shortage of extras, Darren agreed, thinking it would keep their minds off the horrors outside of the studio walls.

Today was a key scene. Lady Genevieve accidentally reveals her love for the handsome priest in front of the townspeople when she seeks him out in the church so he can read the Last Rites over her dying father.

The scene was shot several times before lunch, Mara doing an abysmal job of conveying any real emotion. Whether she was trying to show fear, love, hate or indifference, Mara just looked as though she had a bad case of gas.

"I can't concentrate!" she wailed when Darren didn't bother to hide his impatience with her lack of talent. "There are *dead* people outside!"

"Well, they're not *inside*," Darren shot back coldly. "And they aren't paying your salary." He turned away, dismissing her before he said something he really regretted. "Now people, we're going to break for lunch and then try this again. The caterer did show up, didn't he?"

When Mara didn't return to set after lunch, Darren assumed she was throwing a tantrum because he hadn't treated her with the respect she didn't deserve. Everyone else was in place, waiting for the camera to roll. Derrick, playing the handsome young priest stood patiently at the pulpit, muttering lines that would all come out sounding heroically wooden.

Patience worn paper-thin, Darren stalked towards Mara's trailer, determined to drag her out by her hair if need be.

"Damn it, I hate actors," he muttered, rapping sharply on the trailer door with a closed fist. When no response was forthcoming Darren threw manners to the wind and flung the door open hard enough to send it smacking into the inside wall.

"Mara, get your ass out here! I swear, I'm going to make sure you never work in this town again if you don't stop this shit!" Aware that he'd just made an empty threat, Darren took the stairs in one long stride and stuck his head around the corner. "Mara, I mean it. I—"

Darren stopped short, confronted by the sight of Mara's prone body, still in 14th century garb, lying on the trailer floor, one

hand clutching a hypodermic, the other splayed lifelessly to one side.

"Oh, shit." Darren knelt by his erstwhile leading lady's corpse, taking a quick check on her pulse to see if he might just be wrong. Nope, absolutely nothing. Mara was dead.

Darren waited for the rush of grief one was supposed feel at the death of someone...well, not close, but certainly someone he'd worked closely with for several weeks. He was dismayed to discover that amongst his mixed emotions, the strongest was overwhelming annoyance. A new, darker side of Darren reflected that on any other occasion Mara's death might even be a cause for celebration. But now Mara was once again holding up his film.

Darren sat back on his heels.

"Oh, you dumb bitch. How the hell am I going to shoot around you?"

Darren walked slowly back to set, leaving Mara's corpse to be disposed of after he'd figured out how to salvage the film. Body double, using close-ups from previously shot footage? Might just work, although it would be tricky.

Darren joined John, Phil and Melissa by the camera. Correctly reading his expression, Melissa asked, "Trouble?"

"What?" Phil frowned. "She won't come back to set? I'll handle it." Phil strode towards Mara's trailer, obviously confident his powers of persuasion were more than ample for the job at hand.

Darren stopped him with a hand on one shoulder. "She can't come back on set, Phil. She's dead. Mara OD'd."

All three stared at him blankly. Finally Phil shook his head. "Jesus. Fife just isn't going to be happy about this." His voice took on an accusatory tone as he continued, "She was a *bit* part of the deal! You know that, Darren!"

Darren's response was forestalled by the appearance of Derrick, their male lead. "Are we going to get going soon, Darren?" The actor wiped sweat from his stoically handsome forehead. "Goddamn lights are melting the makeup off my face and that *always* makes my skin break out."

Darren considered several replies, discarding each one before it made its way from his brain to his mouth. He supposed he'd have to tell people that Mara Dubray was no longer among the living, but—

"Oh, shit."

The actor stared at him. "It's okay, Darren. I'll just see my dermatologist. It shouldn't affect filming or anything."

But Darren wasn't paying attention to Derrick. He was too busy staring over his shoulder as Mara Dubray staggered and swayed her way towards them, an expression of intense longing stamped on her face. Her mouth was open slightly, an ululating moan of desire emerging from it, along with a copious stream of drool running down one side of her chin.

"I thought you said she was dead," Phil hissed in a stage whisper.

Darren noted the slightly bluish tint to Mara's skin. "She is dead." He didn't bother to lower his voice.

Everyone on set had stopped what he or she were doing and were now staring at Mara's awkward yet determined progress towards the small group of people by the camera.

As the implications of Darren's comment hit home, Melissa, Phil and John scattered. The clueless Derrick stayed where he was. Darren was too busy watching Mara in fascination to do more than step to one side, leaving the path wide open towards the actor. Mara's attention focused specifically on her screen lover and she lurched towards him with outstretched arms, fingers opening and closing spasmodically. Before anyone could react, she threw her arms around Derrick with passionate intensity and took a distinctly unlover-like bite out of his well-muscled shoulder.

Chaos ensued as several hefty grips pried a snarling Mara off the screaming actor. Darren turned to Phil, his face alight with enthusiasm.

"Shit! Did you see that?" he exclaimed. "That's the best acting she's done since we've started. Let's get that on film!"

Darren sat in the screening room watching dailies with Phil, a contented smile on his face. For the first time since filming began he was actually happy with the way Mara played a scene. Granted, some fancy editing would have to be done to replace the look of abject terror on Derrick's face with a look of tormented longing, but that could be done. Come to think of it, it was the expressive Derrick had ever been as well.

It had taken some doing to restore enough order on set to continue filming. Convincing Derrick to play the scenes had been the hardest part, but an appeal to the actor's vanity, the promise of

more money, and the two big grips standing by to prevent a repeat of Mara's first attack had worked wonders. "Besides," Phil had pointed out, "It's not *that* big of a bite." And luckily one of the people who'd made it to the studio that day was the on-set medic.

Darren managed to console his own outraged conscience with this last fact.

The rest of the cast and crew had responded with amazing equanimity, and Darren suspected part of that had to do with needing the work to keep their minds off of what might be happening outside the studio. This thought also made Darren feel better as he watched the dailies.

He made the mistake of mentioning it to Phil, who replied, "Whatever. Just so long as they keep working."

Darren stared at his erstwhile friend in disbelief. "How the hell can you be so callous?" He preferred to forget his own reaction to Mara's death and the subsequent improvement of her acting ability.

"Oh, get off your high horse," Phil retorted. "You've got the best fucking acting you've had since we started so don't get all moralistic on me. A filmmaker's gotta do what a filmmaker's gotta do. It's the art that matters." Phil gestured towards the screen. "I mean, just look at that. It's beautiful!"

Darren looked. It *was* beautiful, damn it. Except for that one moment when Mara's attention turned from Derrick to one of the extras who'd gotten a little too close... Darren winced at the memory.

He turned to Phil. "We'll have to remember to keep the other actors far enough away to keep Mara's focus on Derrick. It distracts from the intensity of her emotions. And we had a few close calls today that I don't want to repeat."

"Yeah," Phil agreed. "We can't afford to lose any more of our extras. Those crowd scenes look pretty sparse as it is."

"I know," Darren sighed. "But we're not likely to get anyone else from outside so we'll just have to make due with what we've got, add in CGI later."

Phil shook his head. "The only CGI we can afford on our budget will look like crap. Maybe..." He paused and suddenly his eyes brightened. "Oh, man," he said slowly. "Have I got an idea!"

At first Darren had been totally appalled by Phil's brainstorm, delivering an unequivocal "No!" in response. How

could Phil even *think* of it? Didn't he understand the moral implications?

"What moral implications?" Phil was genuinely confused by the question. "These people are *dead*, Darren. They're not going to care. Most of them probably wanted to be actors anyway so you'd be doing them a favor. "

Darren's moral outrage sputtered a bit, then flared up again when he thought of new objections. "What about the danger? I mean, catching them in the first place. Who the hell is going to agree to do that?"

"Production assistants," Phil replied calmly. "Tony'd do anything for this film. He'll probably think it's fun. Besides, with the equipment I've got in mind it shouldn't be a problem."

"But what about the danger to the cast and crew?" Darren demanded. "How the hell are we going to handle that?"

"Have the set design folks come up with something to keep 'em separate from the others during the scenes. We can use handcuffs, hide 'em under the costumes, and..."

As Phil proceeded to counter all of Darren's objections with arguments that at least *sounded* reasonable, Darren allowed himself to be persuaded it really would be a *good* idea to use some of the newly ambulatory dead to supplement the crowd scenes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a little voice told him he was making a compromise even more Faustian than his deal with Gerald Fife. But the dailies in front of him and Phil's persuasiveness were better than a pair of earplugs. And once committed to the idea, Darren put his considerable energy into implementing it.

Even without the steady stream of media reports (and CNN was over the moon to have something this big to report on without the need to supplement it with brain candy filler), Darren had only to look outside the studio gates to see the situation was definitely worsening. There were more walking dead roaming around the area, lots of cars driving frantically up and down the surface streets, general chaos. Only one of the security guards remained at his post, steadfastly ignoring his erstwhile partner who was now banging on the gates from the outside, a large chunk of flesh missing from the side of his neck.

Darren approached the remaining guard. "You still letting people in and out of here?"

The guard nodded. "As long as they show their badges."
"Great." Something else occurred to Darren. "Any more guns here?"

"We have a few in the Security office."

"Do you think—"

The guard shook his head. "No way. That's against the law."

Using his most persuasive tone, Darren said, "C'mon—" He looked at the guard's nametag. "C'mon, Arthur. I've got to send some people out on a run and they need protection."

"I don't know..."

Darren played his trump card. "Y'know, I could use you in this film, Arthur. I've lost a couple of my co-stars because of these damn zombies."

The guard tossed Darren a key. "Just don't tell anyone where you got it. It'd be my ass."

Darren walked off to find the security office, thankful that everyone in this town really *did* want to be an actor."

Melissa listened carefully and jotted down notes as Darren gave her the list of items he wanted one of the production assistants to pick up on what might be their only run outside the studio. When he was finished, he had her read the list back to him. Phil stood to one side, nodding his head.

"Okay. Dry ice, lots of it. Any food he can find. The thickest sports padding available. Heavy-duty steel collars. Leather will do, but steel preferable. Chain leashes—" Melissa stopped and looked at both Darren and Phil. "Are you sure about this?"

Phil nodded. "Ought to be a piece of cake."

"Hmm," Melissa said doubtfully. "Okay. John's rifles plus ammo ... we're gonna need his house key and directions." She jotted down another notation. "Okay, I think that's just about it."

The on-set medic strode up, her forehead creased with lines of worry. "Are you sending someone outside?"

Darren nodded.

"Good. I need some antibiotics as soon as possible. Derrick isn't looking too good. That bite is festering and it looks like the infection is spreading rapidly beyond the wound."

Melissa made another notation on her list.

A shriek from Mara's trailer drew their attention. Linda, the rather temperamental makeup girl, came running out of it

clutching her hand. Her assistant, a mousy little thing whose name no one could ever remember, followed her closely.

"Darren!" Linda's voice was raised several notches above her usual petulant whine. "I absolutely cannot work under these conditions! I can only do so much with someone whose skin is naturally blue. And when I tried putting lipstick on her, she bit me!" Linda dramatically held up one hand to show a smallish bite mark. The medic looked at it worriedly.

"Add a mortician's makeup kit to that list," Phil said thoughtfully. "Hell, bring a mortician. Might make more sense and we won't have to pay Union scale."

Linda started to sputter in outrage and Phil snarled, "Listen, Linda. If you can't do your job, I'm going to get someone who can. Give me any shit and you'll be working Craft Services. And I'm not talking about behind the table."

"Maybe we could sew Mara's lips shut," the makeup assistant suggested with the air of one used to being ignored.

Darren considered the idea, grateful for even this token safety measure with which to salve his increasingly battered conscience. "Just might work!"

The makeup assistant looked absurdly gratified.

"Darren, it has to look like she's really talking," Phil protested. "How the hell are you going to loop in her dialogue realistically if her mouth doesn't move?"

Darren shot Phil a resentful glance, hating the fact that his producer was right.

"Okay," he amended. "Let's try sewing the corners so she can't get a good bite radius going." Phil nodded his approval and Darren continued, "Melissa, talk to wardrobe and see what they can do." Turning back to the mousy assistant he said, "Good thinking, honey. Do you think you can do something with Mara's makeup so we can get the next scene shot before we lose the light?"

The assistant nodded, eager to prove her worth. She scurried back to Mara's trailer as the protesting Linda was led off to be treated by the medic.

Darren resumed his conversation with Melissa and Phil. "We can sew the new extras' mouths completely shut. They don't have to talk. And make sure the PA – who are we using?"

Melissa checked her list. "Tony."

"Good. He's smart. Make sure he's got a decent gun."

"Got it." Melissa set off to make sure everything on her list was done with her usual efficiency. Then she stopped and turned back. "Darren, shouldn't we send someone to ride shotgun with Tony? They'd stand a better chance of getting back safely."

"Phil, can we spare the extra hand or—" Darren stopped abruptly. "Jesus, I don't believe I said that. Of course we can spare someone else. Whatever it takes to bring them back safely."

"And more quickly," Phil agreed. "It'd be hell to try and find more good production assistants."

Darren ignored that. "Okay, let's get moving."

"Yeah," Phil said. "We should get going on Derrick's death scene while he's still got some life in him."

The scene went well. Derrick shivered with a real fever no amount of acting (at least on *his* part) could emulate. His skin was pasty, sweat poured off of him in rivulets, and he seemed to be suffering from as much pain as a plague victim in the last stages of bubonic plague would have felt. Darren was delighted with the results ... on a purely artistic level, of course.

The medic stood at the sidelines throughout, wearing an expression that alternated between disapproval and downright horror. She had vehemently protested the decision to shoot a scene with the sick man but Derrick himself had insisted. He was a professional, by God, and he would act as long as he could breathe; a state lasting approximately ten minutes after they finished shooting his death scene. Darren immediately had someone from Wardrobe stitch the dead actor's lips partially shut, consoling himself with the thought that he'd given Derrick the chance to die with his acting boots on, so to speak.

"You are using buttonhole thread, aren't you?" he asked the woman pushing a needle in and out of Derrick's lips.

She looked up in annoyance. "Please. I *do* know my job."

Several hours later the production assistants returned from their run, loaded down with all the items on their list, including a dozen large coolers full of dry ice, several intimidating rifles, and a star-struck mortician. The mortician was sent off to see what he could do with Mara as the young assistant hadn't been able to make her look life-like.

The medic appropriated the medical supplies and immediately injected a shivering Linda with a hefty dose of antibiotics as she asked, "You're not allergic to Penicillin, are you?"

Linda shook her head and promptly passed out.

Darren, in the meantime, sent several coolers of dry ice over to Mara's trailer to try and slow down the natural rotting process. He figured three more good days ought to see the film finished. Then she could rot at will. He turned his attention back to Tony and the rest of the supplies. "You got the collars?"

Tony grinned and held up a handful of heavy steel collars. "I know a couple of dominatrices who didn't mind lending their gear. What are we using 'em for?"

By the time Tony and another P.A. rounded up a dozen extras from the outside and locked them in one of the steel-sheeted storage units, the mortician had finished his makeup job on Mara. He beamed proudly as the actress was led out on a leash by one of the heftier grips.

"One of my better jobs, if I do say so myself," the mortician bragged. "Doesn't she look peaceful?"

She did indeed.

Darren rolled his eyes. "That's just great, but I don't *need* peaceful. She's supposed to be reacting to the death of her lover, not going for a drive in the country. Get my drift?"

The mortician sniffed. "I'll see what I can do."

"All right, people," Darren yelled. "Let's call it for the night. We'll pick this up tomorrow. Call time is six a.m.!"

A brief listen to the radio told Darren that things were not getting any better. The ratio of dead to living in Los Angeles was rapidly favoring the dead. Citizens were advised to make their way to rescue shelters set up around the city. Darren thought the walled confines of Plateau Pictures were about as good a protected shelter as anywhere else, and the other members of the production seemed to feel the same way; no one had left the studio when they'd wrapped for the day. Darren was happy that he could offer some safety to his cat and crew. He figured they deserved some compensation for the notoriously long hours that low budget productions demanded.

Tomorrow would be another sixteen-hour grind. Darren just hoped he'd be able to tell the live members of the production from the dead ones by the end of it.

The next day's shooting went relatively well although controlling the dead extras proved somewhat difficult. Several of the live extras were scratched and a production assistant bitten

before all the ghouls had their mouths sewn shut. One of them ripped out the thread and managed to make a healthy lunch out of the makeup assistant. Phil took good look at her corpse and decided there was enough left to reanimate. "Someone put her in the extras pen."

Darren winced, but tried to look at it from the angle that it would save Tony from having to procure more bodies from the outside. He really didn't want to risk losing the kid to the extras en. Tony was the best P.A. Darren had ever worked with and he had that *spark*, the same sort of idealism that he, Darren, was rapidly losing. Darren wanted to see that spark (not to mention Tony's health) preserved.

All in all Darren was quite pleased with the acting jobs he was getting from his ghoulish thespians. They were easier to deal with than some of the crew, who were complaining about the smell. Wardrobe was especially vocal when it came to costuming the dead.

"Do you know how hard it is to get blood stains out of this material?" snapped the wardrobe girl who'd stitched Derrick's mouth shut. Darren hoped she'd become eligible for the extras pen. She wasn't that good of a seamstress either.

The medic, meanwhile, frantically tried to treat those who'd been bitten or scratched by the zombies, but the antibiotics didn't seem to be working.

On the upside, the dry ice was working well enough to prevent Mara and Derrick from degenerating too quickly. The hot lights were a bit of a problem, but that was what stand-ins were for.

Darren was coming to the reluctant conclusion that the zombie plague could be the best thing that had ever happened to his career.

At the end of the day Darren eagerly ran the dailies to see if they lived up to his expectations. Even Phil and Melissa were impressed with the improved quality of the stars' performances.

"Mara really looks horrified," Melissa commented during one scene.

"I think she was really hungry, " Phil said. "That was the scene we shot before lunch."

Darren felt a warm glow suffuse his entire being as the certainty that this, the end result, really was worth all of the ...

unpleasant things he'd had to do; the compromises he'd been forced to make. Sometimes true art could only be born out of the womb of horror.

Ignoring the pretentious tone of that last thought, Darren continued to watch the screen.

When they'd finished watching the dailies, Phil and Melissa headed off to get some supper while Darren resound the reel to view his masterpiece again in private. He'd only gotten through five minutes of footage, however, when the door opened and the light switched on.

Darren turned around in annoyance. "Didn't you see the red light?" he snapped before his eyes adjusted to the brightness. He put a lid on his temper as soon as he registered who'd entered the room.

It was Gerald Fife, dressed in his usual relaxed-fit jeans and silk shirt that did nothing to hide his middle-aged paunch or create the desired effect of borrowed youth.

"Gerald," Darren said expansively, confident that he at last had something of quality to show his executive producer. Have a seat and check out the dailies."

"Sorry, ain't got the time." Gerald sat down despite his words. "I'm just here to give you the news in person. Didn't want you to hear it through Phil." He pulled out a cigar and lit it.

Darren's heart plunged down into his stomach. "What news?" he asked, although he thought he knew the answer.

"I'm pulling the plug." Gerald took a long pull on his cigar, exhaling with obvious relish.

"What? Why?"

"This whole dead thing, Darren. It's depressing. The investors aren't going to want a movie about the plague when the viewing public is already down about the zombies. No percentage in it."

"Jesus Christ, Gerald, you've got to take a look at these dailies!" Darren gestured toward the screen. "We've really got something here!"

Gerald shook his head with finality. "Sorry, Darren. No go. We're in this business to make money. No one's going to want to see a movie with a bunch of rotting bodies when they can look out their window and see the same thing for free."

"But—"

Gerald held up one hand, sending a plume of cigar smoke wafting in Darren's face. "But me no buts, kid, I ain't got the time. I wanna get out of here while I still can. Traffic's a bitch out there." He took a puff of his cigar. "Sorry, kid. But you know what they say; when the going gets tough, the tough get going. And I'm getting the fuck out of Dodge." Gerald stood up. "Now where's Mara? I wanna give her the news myself."

Staring bleakly at the screen, Darren said, "She's locked in her trailer."

"Locked in?" Gerald's voice rose in outrage. "What the hell are you talking about, locked in?"

Darren started fumbling for an explanation. Suddenly his train of thought jumped to another track as something irrevocably snapped in his brain. He wasn't sure if it was his conscience or his sanity—maybe it was both—but it no longer mattered. Only the film mattered.

He stood up. "Sorry, Gerald. I meant she's locked *herself* in her trailer. Maybe you can help out."

"Jesus!" Gerald stubbed out his cigar. "What the hell did you do to her?"

"She's unhappy with the quality of the food we've had lately," Darren explained as he followed Gerald out of the screening room bungalow towards Mara's trailer. "It's been hard to get Cristal these days."

"On your budget it should be impossible," Gerald snapped. "Damn good thing I'm shutting this down. The investors would have my balls for breakfast if they saw shit like that on the budget sheets. Jesus, what the hell is that smell?"

They were passing the warehouse housing the extras. Despite the heavy steel walls, the smell and the noise of the rotting extras gave the area a distinctly charnel atmosphere.

"Some meat gone bad," Darren said vaguely.

"What the hell are they doing in there?"

"Rehearsing one of the big crowd scenes."

"What a reek! How can anyone eat around here?" Gerald stepped up his pace. Darren matched it.

Mara's trailer sat before them, a steady unsatisfied moan emanating from inside.

"Jesus!" Gerald exclaimed. "She sounds like she's starving!"

Darren bounded up the steps before Gerald could see the industrial strength padlock on the trailer door. As he inserted the key, he tapped on the door and called, "Mara, Gerald's here to talk to you about a few things. You're going to have to unlock the door and let him in."

A rising moan answered him, along with the sound of Mara lurching through the trailer towards the sound of fresh meat.

"Let me up there, you asshole." Gerald pushed his way up the stairs just as Darren managed to remove the padlock. Slipping it into his pocket, he retreated to the ground and out of Gerald's way.

"Mara, baby, it's Gerald. Open the door, sweetheart! Uncle Gerald will take care of you."

Mara scrambled at the door from the inside, moaning pitifully.

"Chris, she can't even talk!" Gerald said in horrified tones. He grabbed the door handle and turned it. "Don't worry, baby, I'll feed you."

"I bet you will," Darren said cheerfully as Gerald opened the door. He watched as Mara grabbed hold of the executive producer's arms and pulled him inside. Darren helped with a well-placed push on Gerald backside, then quickly slammed the door shut and replaced the padlock with a decisive snap.

"You know what they say," Darren called out as Gerald began screaming. "When the going gets tough, the tough get eaten!"

Darren smiled to himself. His first film, and it looked like he'd even get final cut.

THE END

Belinda Frisch

PAYBACK

ZOMBIE ANTHOLOGY EDITION

By Belinda Frisch

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Disclaimer:

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When those closest to you break your trust, the only option is
payback.

Six months before an outbreak of viral plague turned the residents of Strandville into a mob of flesh-hungry undead, Max Reid was a new father struggling to overcome a gambling addiction for the sake of his family.

Desperate to keep his secret, out of work, and on the losing end of a debt large enough to get him killed, Max turned to Mitch, a Nixon Center guard and the closest thing he had to a friend, to make the money he needed to break-even. What he didn't know was why Mitch was so eager to help him or how far he'd have to go for the cash.

Max Reid is about to find out a terrible secret that will change his life and push him to destroy others'.

Payback
A Strandville Series Short
Six months earlier...

Max Reid parked behind Devil's Ink, Strandville's only tattoo shop, and avoided eye-contact with Mitch who scowled at him from the passenger's seat.

Situated on a six store strip which was the closest thing Strandville had to downtown, Devil's Ink was the black eye on the small town's otherwise simple, country façade. Strandville was a rural, blue collar working town and those that lived there either worked hard for low pay, or compromised their morality to work at the Nixon Healing and Research Center, one of the few decent paying jobs within a fifty mile radius. Max had worked for Bill Jenks, the town mechanic, up until he was fired a week before. He'd yet to tell Jess, the mother of his newborn son, but knew that sooner or later, he'd have to come clean. He hoped the race would buy him time.

He turned off the engine, grabbed the betting slip from on top of his visor, and sighed. Jacob's Revenge wasn't a favorite to win, but he needed a long-shot's payoff and there was no better bet than a horse with his son's name.

Mitch hadn't said a word since the stop at the bookie, but it was clear he didn't approve of the bet. "When do you plan on telling Jess you were fired?" He adjusted his lanyard to sit under the blue collar of his Nixon Center uniform shirt. A photo ID badge marked him as a member of security. "She finds out everything eventually, believe me."

Mitch and Jess had dated through high school, a fact Max considered moot now that they had Jacob. Mitch had cheated on her and she had ended things. Mitch didn't have to say that he never got over her. He came around often and stayed too long.

Max took his keys from the ignition. "Come on, I'm late."
"You're going to get evicted."

"Anyone else, you'd be cracking homeless jokes. I can take care of my own family." The assertion made Max feel more normal

about things at home that, while he'd never admit it to Mitch, were falling apart. "This race will fix things. You'll see."

But the long-shot bet was double the losing one before it. Max was five hundred dollars down from a thousand dollar paycheck, his last from the garage, and it was less than ten minutes to post time.

He hurried inside and flopped down in the chair.

Mitch sat in the waiting area, massaging his furrowed brow. He picked up a water-stained Playboy off the milk crate table and flipped the well-worn pages, bouncing his leg to the thrash core beat coming through the speakers.

"Reid, man. I didn't think you were gonna show." Doug, the shop's owner, crushed out his cigarette in a coffee mug on the side of his work station and opened a fresh set of needles. He was a tall man, thin and fair-skinned with tattoos covering every inch of exposed skin except for his scruffy-bearded face. The black ink shapes bled together into a single, congested piece and other than the pair of praying hands on the right side of his neck, nothing stood out at quick glance.

"Had an errand to run." Max crumpled an empty paper cup and threw it across the room at Mitch. "Hey, put on channel twenty-seven, would you?"

Mitch muttered something under his breath and continued pretending to read.

"Come on," Max said.

Doug pulled his thinning hair into a low ponytail and set the stencil of a cross on Max's forearm. He sprayed down the paper to transfer the ink outline and held Max's arm when he wouldn't hold still.

"You're so fucking childish." Max gripped the chair's movable arm and prepared to stand up.

Doug, possibly sensing the tension, headed off the scuffle. "I got it," he said, turning on the television with the remote he took out of his drawer. "What number we rooting for this time?" He squeezed his large hands into a pair of black, latex gloves and poured several capfuls of ink.

"Lucky seven," said Max.

Doug lifted the stencil. "Good?"

"Good." Max didn't even look at the placement.

The Call to the Post sounded and the race was off. Max kept his eyes glued to the screen and didn't flinch when the needle broke skin.

Doug held Max's arm still and started the black outline.

The dull pain, hot like bee stings, soothed Max's frayed nerves as he watched for the green and white stripes of Jacob's jockey to move up the pack. Everything was riding on this race.

"And here comes Jacob's Revenge."

"Yes!" Max's hands trembled with excitement.

"And Jacob's Revenge is in the lead."

Mitch set down the magazine and leaned forward on the sagging futon, the wooden frame creaking under his weight.

Max couldn't tear his eyes away. The worries of being behind three months in rent and of having lost half of his final paycheck disappeared.

"Wait, what's this?" The announcer's voice lowered. "Lucky Louie is neck and neck with Jacob's Revenge. It's a photo finish."

Mitch snickered.

"Dammit!" Max slammed his hand down.

Mitch set down his magazine and pulled up a stool next to him. He rested his elbows on his knees, tee-peed his fingers, and held them to his lips. "Photo finish, Max, feeling lucky?"

Doug turned up the volume to hear the results.

"And the winner is Lucky Louie by a nose."

Doug shook his head. "Tough break, man."

Max clenched his jaw and balled up his fist. The mounting debt just got bigger, too big for there not to be consequences.

Doug excused himself for a convenient trip to the bathroom.

Mitch didn't move. "Another bust, tough guy." He smirked. "You ready to take that job now?"

As much as Max wanted to, he couldn't say no.

* * * * *

Five o'clock in the morning came faster than Max expected and he was exhausted, having been up most of the night with the baby. He rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb Jess, and checked on Jacob, sleeping in the bassinette. His tiny, pink mouth

curled around his thumb. He was sound asleep on his stomach, his back rising and falling with each breath. Max wanted to lift him up and rock him. To pretend he wasn't relying on old habits to keep their family together.

He grabbed his cell phone and contemplated calling Mitch to back out. The money was just too good. It was either do this or tell Jess about his mountainous debt and that they were losing their apartment. The thought of her taking Jacob to her mother's in Tennessee was unbearable. He stumbled into the dark kitchen with his pants and shirt in one hand and his boots in the other. His eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness and he felt along the wall with his elbow for the light switch. There wasn't time to make fresh coffee so he poured the last of yesterday's pot into a mug and sucked it down, black and cold.

"Why are you up so early?" Jess stood in the bedroom doorway with a blue, striped burp cloth draped over her shoulder.

He hadn't heard her get up.

"I tried to be quiet." Max stepped into his well-worn jeans, faded in the knees and stained from crawling around at the garage.

"The shop doesn't open until seven. What's going on?" Her eyes were half-closed and she had the gentle, sleepy look on her face that he loved; the dazed calm that said she wasn't awake enough to pick a fight.

"I'm doing a side job, rebuilding a transmission," he said. "Everything's fine. Go back to bed." The weight of the lie kept him from looking her in the eyes. His cell phone vibrated and if Jess noticed, she didn't say. He let the call go to voicemail but when the buzzing started again, he knew he'd better get out of the house. "I'll be home at the regular time." He kissed her on the cheek and rushed out the door to meet Mitch who waited two doors down in a white van with a phony power company logo on the side.

Mitch wore dark jeans and a button-down work shirt with the name "Bob" embroidered on the pocket. He leaned over and fed a training treat to a Doberman puppy sitting on a blanket in a cardboard box between the seats.

Max looked down at his own shirt--the uniform for the garage that any local would recognize—and shook his head. "What's with the dog?"

“He’s Amy’s.” Mitch reached back and tossed a shirt that matched his to Max. “She let me borrow him.”

Amy Porter was the niece of Strandville’s local convenience store and gas station owner. Her parents died when she and her brother, Billy, were kids. While Max never found Amy to be even remotely attractive with her stringy hair and acne-scarred skin, it was clear why Mitch liked her. The girl knew how to party and she’d do anything for attention. The week before, Mitch got into a fist fight with one of the locals after Amy overdid it on Tequila and began stripping on the bar. Mitch wouldn’t admit it because Max often teased him for her looks, but he knew that Mitch loved her.

Max squeezed into the shirt, which stretched tight across his broad chest, and fought to button it. Several threads snapped under the strain. The long sleeves rode a good two inches up his forearms and irritated his new tattoo. He rolled them up to his elbows and flexed until the shirt’s fit became bearable. He looked down at the puppy and after a long silence asked, “Borrow him for what?” His phone vibrated, and again, he put the call to voicemail.

Mitch kept his eyes on the road and refused to answer.

A sinking feeling set in as the bright orange sun peeked over the horizon. Max didn’t press, figuring Mitch was screwing with him. He thought, instead, about the non-stop calls from his bookie and feared it wouldn’t be long until he sent someone to make the house call that, given their strained relationship, would end things with Jess. The mental math to calculate his total debt had become too hard, but people had their legs broken over less.

Mitch turned off the headlights and took a left on Pike Rd. He passed the widow Hinkle’s place and pulled over. “There,” he pointed at a small, blue ranch house a few doors down. “That’s where we’re headed.” He slipped the tiny, red collar from around the puppy’s neck. “The girl comes out every morning at six to bring coffee to a pair of Strandville medics.”

Max took a deep breath, dreading the answer but having to ask the question. “Are we going to kill her?”

Mitch let a moment pass before answering. “No, Max, we’re not going to kill her. It hurts me that you think that’s what I do. We’re going to drop her off at an agreed upon location, leave, and never breathe a word about it.”

“Until the next time.” With something like this there was always a next time.

“As soon as the coast is clear, I’m going to let J.D. loose. I’ll try to lure the girl, but if she runs, you catch her and if we go into the house, you follow. You hear me?”

Max nodded, knowing Mitch was capable of things he didn’t want to be part of.

A white ambulance with the words Strandville EMS emblazoned in deep red pulled up on-schedule.

Mitch hooked the red collar to a leash and scooted down in his seat.

Max, realizing that Mitch was hiding, tried to do the same, but even hunched to the side, his broad shoulders stuck out above the dashboard. He moved as low as he could and J.D. lapped at his face.

“She’s coming out,” Mitch said.

Max repositioned himself so that his legs were as far under the dash as possible. His back ached as he shifted from bent over to straight. He let out an unintentional grunt that excited the dog and made him start barking.

Mitch bribed J.D. to be quiet with a handful of training treats.

The early-thirties woman emerged from the small house. Her light brown hair hung in tangles over her shoulders. Her well-worn pink bathrobe collected leaves from the sidewalk. She handed two disposable coffee cups through the ambulance’s passenger’s side window and engaged in brief conversation.

The medics waved thanks, bid their farewells, and drove out of sight. The woman turned to open her mailbox and Mitch waved for Max to get out of the van. He held a finger to his lips, telling him to be quiet, and set J.D. out on the sidewalk. As soon as the puppy’s paws hit the pavement, he ran off toward the hedgerow that partially obscured the van. Mitch waited until J.D. was far enough away and began calling him. The empty leash dangled from his hand for effect.

Max hid behind the van and watched for his opening.

“Excuse me. Have you seen a little black and brown pup?” Mitch asked the woman. “He slipped out of his collar and my daughter’s going to be crushed if I don’t bring him home.”

Max shook his head, disbelieving of how benign Mitch could look when he wanted to. The woman helped Mitch search for J.D. who was gnawing a dead branch on the other side of her property line. Mitch let her be the one to find him and after thanking her profusely, convinced her to let him inside to use her phone.

Max followed them inside the woman's house, uncertain what came next.

By the time he walked through the living room into the kitchen, a struggle had already started. Mitch had the woman face-down on the floor and was trying to uncap a syringe with his teeth. The woman bucked and kick, bit and screamed, and broke free twice before Max stepped in to grab her. She'd fought him, too, at first and clawed his face before he finally got a good hold of her. He held her still while Mitch plunged the needle into her arm and within seconds, her body went limp.

* * * * *

Jacob wailed, screaming at the top of his lungs in the bassinette. Jess' heart pounded and her full breasts ached. The strung-out, scruffy man with the knife over her son's small body didn't care that the infant was hungry. He wanted answers and was growing impatient.

"I'm going to ask you one last time, where's Reid?"

The larger, fat man who smelled of stale beer and onions held her wrists together behind her back in a way that made it impossible to move painlessly. His breath was hot on her neck and his sweaty hands repulsed her.

"I told you, he's at the garage." She sniffed the thread of watery snot about to run on to her lip. The two men had been holding her long enough that the tears had dried on her cheeks.

The man lowered the knife further, resting its pointed tip against Jacob's bunny blanket. Jess strained to see that he wasn't hurting him even though it sent a searing pain into both of her shoulders. "Please, don't hurt him." Her voice cracked. "I swear, I told you where he is. He went to work early."

The man behind her snickered and pressed his hips against hers. She shivered and swallowed the vomit rising up the back of her throat.

“Do you think we’re stupid or something?” the large man asked. “His boss shitcanned him a week ago. Now either you tell us the truth or cough up the twenty-seven grand he owes. Our boss doesn’t cover bad bets.”

Twenty-seven thousand dollars. Max had lied to her for the last time. The guilt of the secret she’d been carrying dissolved and all she cared about was getting these thugs away from Jacob. “What if I call him home? Give me two hours. I can get him here.” Her voice went hoarse from shouting over her crying son.

The men looked at one another.

“I can’t take much more of this shit.” The thin man standing over Jacob wagged the blade over his chest as he spoke.

Jess was thankful just to have the knife off of her son.

“Please,” she said, “Where am I going to go with a newborn baby? Two hours.”

The man holding her loosened his grip and eventually let go. Her shoulders ached and her hands were numb and cold. She ran to Jacob and held him to her chest. He turned his tiny face into her and rooted furiously for food.

“Two hours,” said the scrawny man. “And if Reid’s not here when we come back, that crying will stop being a problem, you understand me?”

Breast milk leaked through her nursing pads and bra and soaked the front of her shirt. “I understand,” she said and prayed she had enough time to run.

* * * * *

The morning sun glared off the windshield and Max lowered the visor. He flipped open the vanity mirror and examined the scratches extending from the corner of his eye to his jaw.

“What am I going to tell Jess?”

Mitch shrugged.

Max looked back at the woman, unconscious in the back of the van. “Where are we taking her?”

Mitch turned the corner, and the woman’s body rolled from one side of the van to the other. “*We’re* not taking her anywhere. You’re going home.”

He pulled up to Max’s apartment and gestured for him to get out.

Max looked, again, at the angry red scratches that looked clearly like four fingernails. He changed back into his garage shirt and waited for Mitch to say something. "What now?" he finally asked after a long, awkward silence. He stood half-in and half-out of the open passenger's side door.

"Clean yourself up," Mitch said. "I'll be in touch after I collect our payment."

Max shut the door and walked slowly down the crumbling sidewalk.

Mitch lingered longer than Max would have liked before pulling away.

"Here goes nothing."

The front doorknob wiggled and nearly broke off in Max's hand. He bent down to see the splintered jamb and the indentation in the wood that looked like the end of a crow bar. The door swung open and he rushed inside.

"Jess, are you here?" A large knife sat on the counter and he looked for blood. "Jess!" He swallowed hard and tried not to panic. "Jessica." Jacob's bassinette was empty in the middle of the kitchen. His blue, bunny blanket lay on the floor next to it. "Jess, answer me." Max frantically searched, listening for muffled sounds or crying. The silence scared him the most. He rushed into the back bedroom and found the bifold closet doors open. The right one he promised to fix was off its track. Jess's side of the closet had been emptied. Jacob's dresser, too. Max didn't know whether to smile or cry. Jess had left him, but at least she was alive. At least his son was alive.

He sat on the edge of the unmade bed and held Jess's pillow to his face. He breathed in the smell of the strawberry shampoo he'd fallen asleep to every night for two years and refused to cry. He set the pillow down and opened the blinds. He was soaked through with sweat and the air felt stale and stagnant. Preoccupied as he was, he disregarded the car parked across the street and focused instead on the square of folded paper sitting on the nightstand. The edges were worn, the folds nearly torn from excessive handling. Max carefully opened it and read the page three times before comprehending what it said. He hadn't been the only one keeping secrets. The results of a paternity test confirmed that Jacob wasn't his son. He was Mitch's.

A flurry of knocks came at the door.

“Open up, Reid.”

It was two of his bookie’s men, come to collect.

He had bigger problems to deal with and pocketed the results before making his way out the back bedroom window.

* * * * *

Mitch backed into the receiving entrance at the rear of the Nixon Healing and Research Center. Jim Lockard, the center’s maintenance man, met him at the roll up door with a gurney and a Hispanic orderly named Miguel. Mitch’s phone rang for the fifth time since dropping Max off. After sending the call to voicemail, he shut it off.

J.D. barked relentlessly inside of the van. He needed to go to the bathroom and Mitch hoped for a quick drop-off. When Jim approached, he knew he wasn’t going to get it.

Mitch rolled down the driver’s side window. “Where’s Dr. Nixon?” He closed his hand gently around J.D.’s muzzle so he could hear what Jim was saying.

“He’s not coming.” Jim passed two yellow envelopes through the half-open glass, one for him and one for Max.

Miguel opened the rear doors and grabbed the woman’s ankles, dragging her over the van’s bare metal floor. He turned her so that he could get his arms under her and transferred her to the gurney. She moaned, and after situating her restraints, he hit her with another dose of sedative. He banged on the side of the van and waved for Mitch to come help him.

“Now what?” Mitch pocketed the envelopes and stepped out.

Miguel babbled something in Spanish and pointed toward the lobby.

Jim shook his head. “Nixon wants you to take her downstairs. There was a problem earlier and this guy’s too shaken up to go down there. I had hoped you were bringing back-up.”

“I don’t want Max here. That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Then you’re on your own.”

Mitch slipped the collar over J.D.’s head and tightened it one notch. He lifted him out of the box and handed him to Jim.

“Fine,” he said. “But I need your elevator key and you’re walking my dog.”

* * * * *

Sun reflected off clear glass panels in the main lobby atrium that was the centerpiece of the Nixon Center. Staff shuffled in and out of the Ambulatory Surgical Center and none of them acknowledged Mitch as he moved past with the sheet-covered gurney. From the outside, the woman appeared as a corpse headed for the morgue. He approached the elevator, the only way down, and pushed the call button. A pair of elderly women turned away from him. A little girl with thin, blonde hair that reminded him of Amy's, stopped and smiled at him. Her mother rushed her away when she realized what she was looking at. The elevator opened and Mitch steered the gurney inside. He used Jim's key and the car descended.

The seconds from the lobby to the basement felt like minutes; the minutes walking down the hall where the test subjects were held, like hours. The air was thick with the unequalled stench of decomposition which burned his nose and made his eyes water. A year before, five patients with an unexplainable illness were air lifted to the center from a remote area of Haiti. Three of them were family--a father, mother, and their son. Two were male researchers sent to investigate the young boy that died and spontaneously resurrected in front of half of his village. Nixon intended to cure them, but when he couldn't, his experiment changed. Rumors circulated, but Mitch knew better than to ask for details. He kidnapped the women, took the envelopes, and whatever happened next, at least it didn't happen to him.

* * * * *

Max waited for Mitch's shift to start and parked on the edge of the Nixon Center parking lot. His muscles tensed and he rushed with adrenaline as if he'd just run a marathon. He pulled up his sweatshirt hood and walked through the row of parked cars, careful to avoid being seen by the cameras as he made his way to the locked, first floor security office and knocked.

"Mitch, open up." His instinct was to pound the door flat, to kick it in and drag Mitch into the hallway, but he knew better than to draw that kind of attention. He knocked again. "Mitch, you

piece of shit, I know you're in there." He spoke through clenched teeth, becoming angrier by the second. Each knock was progressively louder. "Dammit!" He kicked the door with the toe of his boot and let out a frustrated growl.

"Can I help you?" A small, thin guard wearing Nixon Center blues and a pair of black-rimmed glasses stood with his hand on his Taser. His nametag said his name was Brian Foster.

"I need to see Mitch."

Brian shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't help you."

Max checked to see that no one was watching and flashed Brian the pistol holstered at his side. "I'm not leaving without talking to him."

Brian went for his radio and Max grabbed his wrist. He spun him around easily and shoved him into the door hard enough to twist the glasses on his face. "Open it."

"I don't..."

"Before you tell me you don't have keys, realize that I know more about this place than you think."

"Is that so, Mr. Reid?" Dr. Howard Nixon walked up behind them wearing surgical scrubs and disposable booties over his shoes. Dried bloodstains splattered the sleeve of the white lab coat that appeared to be thrown on as an afterthought. He slipped the blue cap off of his head and smoothed the tufts of unruly gray hair.

Max took a deep breath and stood his ground. "I need to see Mitch." He tightened his grip on the guard.

"I wouldn't do anything rash if I were you." Nixon pointed at the mirror mounted in the corner. Max felt stupid for missing the nearest camera. "If you'll do me the courtesy of letting Brian go," Nixon said, "maybe we can help each other."

Max did as he was told and in the hour that followed, accepted a permanent position at the center, and his next off-site assignment.

* * * * *

Seventy miles wasn't far enough away to feel safe. Jess's phone rang; the tenth call since Max realized she was gone. His messages ranged from concerned, to apologetic, to angry. He told her he loved her. He called her a whore. He made obscure threats

toward Mitch, who didn't know he was Jacob's father or that Jess had dumped that news on Max in anger. She called several times to warn him, but those calls went unanswered.

One night with Mitch, a fling she only had out of spite when Max spent their last hundred bucks on a bet, had changed everything. She never meant for anyone to know and wrestled with the decision to have the paternity test done for the first two months of Jacob's life.

The secret was bigger than any Max had kept and she wished now, facing motherhood alone and on-the-run, that she'd handled the situation differently.

* * * * *

It was almost midnight and Max was running on a dangerous combination of adrenaline, paranoia, and anger, having looked over his shoulder every minute since he left his apartment. He turned off his headlights and pulled into the woods using an old access road that was overgrown with saplings and ferns. The thin branches scraped along the sides of his truck and the shrill sound pierced the late night silence. He parked out of sight of the ramshackle cabin a few hundred feet on the other side of the tree line and looked for a clear footpath. An old pick-up truck idled in the driveway and the smell of exhaust choked him as he made his way through the trees. He covered his mouth to stifle the cough and took slow, calculated steps, careful to avoid the snapping and breaking of branches.

A young, pimple-faced boy in a gas station attendant's uniform slammed the front door and took a drag off the cigarette pinched between his thin lips. He climbed into the driver's seat and tore out onto the highway with the hurriedness of someone who was late. Sparks trailed as the dangling exhaust connected with the pavement. The truck rounded the bend and one by one, the lights in the house, now only feet away, turned off.

Max took the syringe of sedative out of his pocket. Nixon insisted there be no signs of struggle and was upset to know how things had gone with the girl they'd kidnapped earlier that morning. His obvious disappointment with Mitch made it that much easier to negotiate terms for himself. Max had yet to make the connection between the infected men and the kidnapped woman, but whatever

research Nixon performed in the sterile, basement labs was not something anyone would want for their sister, wife, or *girlfriend*.

He made his way to the side of the house, keeping to the shadows in spite of the fact that the cabin sat in the middle of acres of woods and grass. He crouched beneath a half-open window and watched. Amy Porter tied back her stringy hair and dabbed some kind of cream on her spotty, red complexion. She brushed her teeth and adjusted the button-down nightshirt riding up the back of her underwear before heading toward the back bedroom.

Max pried the screen from the window. The blue latex gloves made it hard to maneuver the pins and the whole thing crashed at his feet. He held his breath for the seconds that followed. When Amy didn't appear, he pulled himself up through the ground-level opening with the syringe between his teeth. The wooden frame bit into his shoulders as he twisted to pass through.

The uneven floors creaked under Max's steps. He moved carefully and replayed every conversation he'd ever had with Mitch about Amy. Part of him believed that Mitch thought he was protecting her, belittling how much she meant to him. Part of him knew it was embarrassment. Max had known Mitch since he was six-years-old and some things didn't need to be said between *friends*. Against his will, he imagined Mitch with Jess, in his house and in his bed and able to face him afterward like nothing had happened. But something had. Something more betraying and terrible and cruel than even his mind could conjure.

He entered the bedroom and found Amy, eyes closed, listening to music through a pair of ear bud headphones. She was lying on her side, arm stretched overhead. The way Jess slept after her pregnant stomach became too big for her to lie on her back. He set the uncapped syringe on the nightstand and stood over her, unnoticed. The next thing he knew, he was on top of her, pinning her down and stuffing a wadded up tee shirt into her mouth to silence her screams. He tore off her panties, wanting to take from her what Mitch had taken from Jess. She thrashed and kicked and spit the gag out twice before Max buried it so deep in her mouth that she struggled for breath. He reached to unzip his pants and something told him to stop. Whatever Nixon planned for her would be worse. He plunged the needle into her bare thigh and her body wilted. Max let her arms go and imagined Mitch's reaction to finding her, restrained to a hospital bed in the Nixon Center

basement. He slipped the paternity test into the breast pocket of her nightshirt where Mitch would see it and slung her over his shoulder. Nixon said he needed a female of child-bearing age. Amy fit the criteria. It hardly seemed payback, but it was a start.

* * * * *

Follow Max Reid's descent into madness in *Cure: A Strandville Zombie Novel #1*, and *Afterbirth: A Strandville Zombie Novel #2* available in e-book or print from Amazon and B&N retailers. Coming soon to KOBO.

About the Author:

Belinda Frisch's fiction has appeared in Shroud Magazine, Dabblestone Horror, and Tales of Zombie War. She is an honorable mention winner in the Writer's Digest 76th Annual Writing Competition and her novel, CURE, is the runner-up in the General Fiction category of the 2012 Halloween Book Festival. She is the author of DEAD SPELL, PAYBACK, CURE, and AFTERBIRTH.

Find out more at: <http://belindaf.blogspot.com/>

April Grey

I'll Love Ya Forever, But...

You know, it was a marriage they said would never last.

Even I had my doubts. After all, I was a dancer—dancer, mind you, not a stripper—at the Pussy Cat A-Go-Go Club and he was this geeky post doc at his friend's bachelor party. But I became a good professor's wife. I hosted faculty teas and luncheons, kept the house spotless, made healthy meals, kept myself in shape and raised two beautiful boys—one now at MIT and the other at Cal Tech.

Still, it's supposed to be until death do you part. Death: the parting of the ways. This whole eternity thing—I never agreed to it. Faithful to a fault, that's my Fred.

And he wasn't buried three days when he showed up at the back door covered in dirt, and his feet, well, he had no shoes on, just socks. Wet, muddy, slimy socks! He should have told me, put it in his will or something, to bury him in shoes. I would have done it—I can be unconventional. He should have warned me, but he was always the typical absent-minded professor.

I was in such shock that I hadn't the presence of mind to shut the door on him. So now he was on my freshly washed kitchen floor, with moldering leaves and what have you, and he grunts at me.

"Huh?" I said, equally speechless. I kept that floor clean enough to eat off of and now look what he'd done.

He grunted again. Prior to his demise my Fred was a well-spoken man, and he had this amazingly plummy voice for his lectures.

"Fred, honey, I don't know what you're saying." He opened his mouth a bit wider and a few white crawly things, slugs, maggots, I don't know, fell out onto the floor. I shrieked and ran for the disinfectant and my cleaning gloves. While I was under the sink, trying to decide on straight ammonia or pine fresh, he shambled over. He was right there and tried to embrace me as I stood up with my supplies. Well, no way, I thought, though I was pinned to the sink. He smelled of soil and decaying things. Still I

tried to stifle my revulsion. This after all was the father of my boys, so I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Neither could I accept letting him get one inch closer. I put out both my hands, filled as they were with cleaning products.

He grunted plaintively, perhaps at the expression on my face, and turned around moving toward the living room—oh, my white shag rug! The one that I waited years for the boys to get old enough to head off to college before getting. The one that I made everyone take off their shoes before walking on. That one!

Well, yes, Fred wasn't wearing any shoes, but that only made things worse; there was already a trail of grime across my kitchen floor. I know that Martha Stewart claims she can get out dirt from shag, but can you take the word of a jail bird?

It was time to lay down some guidelines.

"Fred, Lovey," I said as I got out some chilled wine from the fridge. I froze. I had had that wine in the fridge chilling since before his accident at the lab. The dinner I had planned that tragic night was trout almandine with green beans and rice. Healthy meals, that's what I strived for. Pulling myself together, I found the corkscrew and opened the wine. "Please sit down and have a little. I know this has been a stressful time for us both. Why, the boys lost a week from their classes, and only flew back last night. I'm sorry you missed them."

I must have been getting through to him because he turned away from my shag and came back towards the kitchen nook where I had poured us two glasses of wine. I patted the wrought iron café chair, hoping he'd take a seat. I only meant to sip my glass of wine, but the sight of him, and his yellowing, hard boiled eyes, upset me. I downed it and poured a second glass.

"Sweetie-kins," I began, using the back of my hand to wipe away a dribble of wine from my chin. "This isn't going to work out. You know I adore you, and I'll love you always."

He moaned and the sound of it drove a cold chill down my spine. I forgot what I was going to say for a moment, while I wondered what that green and fuzzy thing was on the side of his nose. Was it growing there?

He was trying to say something, maybe that he loved me too. But did he love me enough to stop this insanity and head back to his grave?

"You know, you can't stay here. You're dead and your new home is in the cemetery. Remember? We picked out the grave site together. You really loved those cypress trees!" I tried to be as gentle as possible. "And the funeral, I guess you don't remember that, but the boys were there and all your colleagues from the University. And what would they all say after such a beautiful ceremony? It would be downright rude not to stay dead." I gulped down another glass of wine and felt the room whirl.

"And I promise to visit you every week. Won't that be grand?"

He didn't touch the wine, but grunting even louder returned to the entrance of the living room and my shag rug. I hadn't gotten through to him at all, and now my rug was about to pay the price! Where was that reasonable man I had married? Gone forever, I feared.

I didn't know how I would stop him but I ran past him into the living room and stood in front of him, wordlessly begging him to stop. But stop he didn't, instead he pushed past me and crossed my rug leaving a dank, black, oozing trail across it. But the rug was not his final destination, and he entered his study. I was tempted to shut the door behind him and lock it. But then what would I do? I had to somehow get him to understand his place in the world was the graveyard now that he was dearly departed.

Inside the study I found him tearing through his desk. He slipped a vial of some grey-green concoction into his coat pocket, and then continued to throw papers on the floor. His study was the one place in the house where I wasn't allowed to go while he was alive. After his demise, it had taken me hours to collect and sort his papers, but I didn't complain about this new mess. I can be noble.

With a happy grunt, he found his research journal. It was his habit to have two sets of notes, one in his study for him to pour over at night and the second one at his lab. I smiled and nodded-- maybe he just wanted some reading to take with him?

He brandished it at me. I read the cover, "Immortality Project." I sighed. Poor, poor Fred. I usually spent the time when he was talking about his work figuring out the dinner rotation or the week's grocery shopping in my head. Had I known, I would have told him what a dumb idea it was.

Immortality? Who would fund something like that?

"Is that it, Fred? You wanted to tell me what you had been working on? Well, I understand. It all went wrong, horribly wrong. You're dead now, and it's time to head back to Shady Elms. I'll miss you, but I'll come by every week with fresh flowers. You'll see that being dead isn't too bad."

With a howl he rushed forward and lifted me up in his arms. I shrieked, and then I kicked and pushed against him, but to no avail--he was walking on my beautiful shag again--this time headed for our bedroom. Now I didn't have just one filthy path to clean but two. I had to admire his strength though; lugging me around like that should have thrown out his back, but here he was carrying me without a moan or even a grunt.

I've always been careful with my husband's feelings. Scientists are like artists, sensitive, but he just wasn't getting the message. Something dropped off of him and wiggled itself down into the shag. I screamed and pounded my fists on his all too solid back, enraged that not only would I have to get it cleaned but fumigated as well.

But just when you'd think it can't get worse, it did. He crossed the threshold of our bedroom and I realized that he was about to violate the pristine ambiance of our bedroom.

"Put me down, Fred. I'm not going to make love to you. No, means no!" He ignored me. Crossing the pale pink and beige carpet of our bedroom, he tossed me on the bed like a sack of turnips.

"Please, in the name of all that is holy, there are 400 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets on this bed."

Sex, great sex, had been the mortar of our marriage. In the bedroom together, we were frenzied, exotic animals pounding out our differences, but I draw the line at necrophilia.

I opened my mouth to tell him no one last time, but he grabbed my jaw. With surprising deftness, he unstopped the vial I had seen him put into his pocket, and poured the stuff down my throat.

It was as if liquid nitrogen had been poured into me, instantly freezing my mouth, jaw and neck. I felt it slide down my throat into my stomach, and an intense iciness enveloped my torso and spread through my limbs.

The only heat remaining to me were my tears pouring down the sides of my face. As my vision faded, Fred leaned over and mouthed some words.

I can't be sure, I can only hope, but I think he said, "Trust me."

Well, maybe Martha was right about getting dirt out of shag....

For more stories and information, please visit :

<http://www.aprilgrey.blogspot.com> and
www.aprilgreywrites.com

*Michelle Kilmer and Rebecca
Hansen*

***EXCERPTS FROM THE SPREAD:
A ZOMBIE SHORT STORY COLLECTION***

Written by Michelle Kilmer and Rebecca Hansen

THE PRICE OF CONVENIENCE

After the healthiest snack he could find at a mini mart – a snack pack of apples and grapes – Paul was back to his delivery route. His health had not improved and he was looking forward to finishing early. When he checked his clipboard for his final stop, he felt like going home immediately instead: it was Thea Mathes.

“I have to get rid of this route,” Paul said to himself as he pulled his vehicle to the curb. Before he had even loaded his hand truck with her groceries, Thea was at her window watching his every move.

Even if Paul could forget about this crazy woman, her doormat would remind him whose house he was at. It read “Wipe your feet three times before you hit the chime!” As he did, he could swear that Thea was counting. What would you do if I only wiped once? He wanted to ask her.

Once his feet were clean she allowed him in. The entry hall was long and Thea had installed a large hand sanitizer dispenser on either end. She pointed to the one closest to the front door.

“I have gloves on!” Paul protested.

“I saw you blow your nose out there, Paul. What’s wrong? Are you sick? You know I don’t allow sick people into my house,” Thea said nervously.

“No, I’m fine,” Paul lied. “I just had a tickle in my nose. It’s from all the cardboard boxes.”

“Gloves off, sanitizer on.” Thea crossed her arms and stood watch until he’d done as she asked.

“Ok, I smell like I’ve been drinking on the job now. Can I finish this up?” He nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

“All right, but if I hear so much as a snuffle from you, you’re out and I’m calling your manager,” Thea declared. “It is a biological hazard to be sending sick people all over the city.”

He pushed his hand truck down the hall, eyeing the second hand sanitizer dispenser as he passed by. “Hey Thea, this one’s running a little low,” he snickered.

Thea appeared immediately with a refill bag but was disappointed to find that Paul had lied. “I knew I’d just refilled that one! Public health is not a joke, Paul!”

Upon hearing his name used so casually once again from the mouth of a near stranger he became more irritated. “New company policy,” he said to himself in the kitchen, “no wearing nametags in crazy people’s houses.”

Back near the front door, Thea was on her hands and knees wiping the wood floor where the hand truck had rolled with a cloth and a disinfectant spray. “Paul, I can’t allow you to bring that cart in here again. It tracks too much dirt.”

Her voice was sounding distant to him and his balance was wavering again, but with more intensity. Paul moved quickly to unload the boxes. This was more than a cold, possibly the flu. He pushed his hand truck into the hall and quickly slipped on a wet puddle of the spray that Thea had laid down. His head hit the floor with a thud.

“Oh myword!” Thea yelled and rushed to his side. His eyes were closed. “Paul! Paul, wakeup!” She shook his shoulders and gingerly grabbed his chin and moved his face side to side in an attempt to rouse him. She put her face close to his chest. He wasn’t breathing and she could hear no heart beat.

Thea stood up and ran to the dispenser on the wall. She filled her hand with a small pool of the sanitizing goo. She smeared some around his mouth and on his lips and for good measure, smeared some on her own face. “Ok, Thea. As soon as he starts breathing you can stop,” she comforted herself.

She checked again with the hope that he had started to breathe on his own, but he hadn’t. Thea leaned toward Paul’s face; her lips approached his slightly parted set.

Maybe it was the touch of skin on skin or just part of the reanimation process but as soon as she’d made contact, Paul

returned to life. Thea screamed as his arms gripped her in a hug and he bit her lip.

With a strength she didn't know she had, Thea struggled free of his hold, opened her front door and ran from her house.

This time Thea was absolutely certain that something was wrong with her. Others had called her a hypochondriac in the past, but this was different. A man had drawn her blood with his mouth, a mouth that had been god knows where.

Two years prior she had a cancer scare, that no one else (not even the doctor!) thought was real. She had the weird looking mole removed just to make sure. Seven months ago she suffered severe burns to her lower legs, brought on by a close call with spontaneous combustion. The paramedics told her she had been sitting too close to a space heater. In between those two major incidents she was sick all of the time with any number of sneezes and sniffles that were floating around the neighborhood. That is why she had the dispensers installed and why she carried facemasks in her purse.

Blood ran from her cut lip and she was panting heavily after running three blocks. I must look insane, she thought. She pulled one of the masks from her purse and put it on. It would at least cover the wound; whether it made her look more psychotic she didn't care.

She neared the police station but kept walking. Before she could report the attack something had to be done to protect her body. There was a drug store just a few more blocks down the road; she could get what she needed there.

The door glided open for Thea and an employee in a red vest immediately greeted her.

"Can I help you find anything?" he chimed.

Thea felt she couldn't answer the question. Small talk would only allow the disease to spread faster through her body. Ignoring him, she grabbed a cart and moved with purpose to the personal health and hygiene aisle. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. When she was certain he'd moved on, she started chugging bottles of cough syrup.

Next, Thea picked up a bag of cough drops, ripped it open and unwrapped no less than ten of the herbal lozenges. She put the entire handful in her mouth and dropped the wrappers to the floor.

A security guard appeared at the end of the aisle. The man was bulky and an entire foot taller than Thea. He walked confidently but slowly toward her.

“Ma’am, I need you to put the merchandise down and follow me to the office,” the guard calmly stated. Thea looked up at him in terror and shook her head in declination.

“I haf ta be helfy!” she cried out, cough drops spilling from her overstuffed mouth. “Healthy!” she yelled more clearly, collapsing to the ground amid the scattered lozenges, wrappers and empty plastic bottles.

The guard mumbled something into a radio he’d unclipped from his belt. Without warning he grabbed Thea and escorted her to the office. Thea was made to sit at the worn, Formica-topped table in the middle of the room while the guard called the police.

“Hi, uh, non-emergency. Yeah, I’d like to report a theft. Yes, the suspect is in custody. Yes, that’s the address. Ok, thank you,” the guard said into the office phone. He hung up and turned to face Thea. “The police are on their way.”

Out in the drugstore, a manager and employee surveyed the scene of the crime. “Stanley, grab some gloves from the sales floor and clean these up,” the manager directed as he nudged one of the sticky lozenges near his left foot. “And take this cart back to the front.”

The employee did as he was told. With gloves hugging his hands he picked up the discarded cough drops and then found a mop to get rid of the tack they’d left on the floor. Just as he put the bucket and mop away, the police arrived to escort the woman to jail. He followed behind them, pushing the cart back to the front.

She struggled against the handcuffs and yelled at the policemen to wipe off the backseat before putting her into the car.

FREE CANDY

“This isn’t preschool, mommy.”

“I know. Mommy forgot to pack you something to share for snack time. We’ll go to preschool next, Maia,” Annette explained.

She pulled her station wagon into the drugstore parking lot. After parking, she walked to the back door to help her daughter out of the car.

As they crossed the lot to the entrance, Annette noticed a police cruiser parked parallel with the curb in front of the store. Stupid shoplifting kids, she thought. But, as they walked into the store, two cops staggered by with the struggling culprit in their arms. Annette was surprised to see that it was a middle-aged woman with something red smeared on her face.

“Do you need a cart, ma’am?” a sales person asked as he approached, pushing one.

“Do you want to walk like a big girl, or ride in the cart?” Annette asked Maia, though she knew what her daughter’s answer would be.

“Cart!” Maia screamed a bit too excitedly.

“Inside voice,” Annette calmly reminded her daughter as she accepted the cart and lifted Maia into the child seat.

Annette walked aimlessly around the aisles. She maneuvered around a ‘caution, wet floor’ sign near the Band-Aids. “Hmm, what happened here?” she thought aloud.

“Something got spill-ded,” Maia answered.

Annette smiled and focused on finding shareable foods. In the snack section she quickly passed by the pretzels because every other mom always brought them. Coming up with nothing suitable, she went to the refrigerated section to pick up some yogurts.

While Annette left the cart to hold open the door to the cooler, Maia found something stuck to the child seat next to her. It was red and round and looked like candy. “Mommy, can I have this?” Maia asked with the sticky cough drop already in her fingers and nearing her mouth. But Annette couldn’t hear her daughter over the noise of the refrigerator, especially since the yogurt hadn’t been restocked, forcing her to climb halfway inside to reach anything.

Maia put the cough drop in her mouth and was happily sucking away on it when Annette returned to the cart.

“What’s in your mouth?” Annette asked.

“Candy,” Maia said quietly.

Annette held out her hand and Maia knew that meant she had to spit it out. The cough drop fell onto Annette’s hand. She

searched her purse for a tissue to wrap it in but had to settle for a gum wrapper that barely encased it.

“Where’d you find it?” Annette asked, but she didn’t really want to know the answer. Kids were always putting objects in their mouths, no matter how dirty they appeared to be.

“Here,” Maia touched a tiny finger to the seat. Her finger stuck a little to the residue as she pulled it away.

“Uuugh,” Annette moaned. “What have I told you about eating things?”

“Ask mommy first,” Maia recited. “I did.”

“Well Mommy has to hear you ask the question and she has to answer you, ok?”

Maia nodded and Annette pushed the cart to the checkout lanes.

“Just the yogurt for you, ma’am?” the sales person asked from behind the register.

Annette nodded and smiled. She didn’t want to sound rude so she said as politely as she could, “Do the shopping carts ever get cleaned?”

Stanley wasn’t sure so he thought for a second and replied, “I could ask my manager, if you like?”

“No, that’s ok. She’s late for preschool. Could you throw this away for me though? My daughter found it in the cart and put it in her mouth.” Annette handed him the partially wrapped cough drop.

“Oh, I’m so sorry about that! Sure thing. Have a good day, ma’am.” Stanley smiled his best smile as the woman and her child left the store. He looked down at what she’d given him. He could see the red of the cough drop peeking out through the silver of the gum wrapper.

“I sure hope that crazy lady wasn’t sick or anything. That’ll be a lawsuit right there.”

SOMETHING TO SHARE

“Alright! Now that all of our friends are here we can get started! Does everyone have their buddies?” Veronica Peters

asked, as she looked around the room at the bouncy, messy-haired heads of ten 4-year-olds.

"Yes," the group of preschoolers responded as they calmed down and sought to hold their buddy's hand.

It gave Veronica the creeps when all the kids answered at the same time, especially when they did it holding hands. All Village of the Damned like, she thought. She was a non-traditional teacher and an even more non-traditional person outside of school, preferring the company of animals to people and spending hours reading about witchcraft and serial killers. If the parents of the preschoolers knew anything about her personal interests, they wouldn't bring their kids to her. She snapped a smile back on her face. "Let's all sit on the center rug and we can start sharing time. Does anyone have something they'd like to share?" she asked.

Most of the children were shy but she could always count on one or two of them to eat up the time by describing a toy they had lost or an animal they had seen at the zoo. A small hand shot into the air. "Danny, go ahead," Veronica invited him to speak.

"My doggy runned away," he said as he picked his nose. He then sat down, offering no more information on the absent pooch.

"I'm sorry to hear that. That's sad, isn't it?" she asked the other children. Many nodded in agreement. One girl, who was rather emotional on most days, started crying.

"It's ok," her buddy said to her.

"Does anyone else have something to share with their friends?" Veronica asked.

Without raising her hand, Maia stood up and started talking. "A lady got rested from the yogurt store."

"Miss Maia, we don't talk until we raise our hand and get called on, right?" Veronica gently reminded her, though she had little patience for Maia as the little girl often ignored rules. "You can spend five minutes in time out while everyone else plays."

Maia stomped to the time out corner while the other children scattered to different learning tables around the room. After five minutes, Veronica retrieved her.

"Go ahead and join the others," Veronica said as she watched the girl slowly rise and retreat to the empty finger painting station.

After thirty minutes of activities, Veronica called the children back to the center rug. "Today we are going to continue learning about animals. Does everyone remember the animals they chose yesterday?"

The children nodded.

"When I say 'go' I want everyone to pretend to be their animal. You can walk like your animal and make noises like it. Now, go!"

The children milled about on the center rug and slowly traveled to all corners of the room. One of the girls had picked a pigeon, which she called a 'pig-en', after having seen them in the park. She waved her arms around excitedly. Another child, a boy, was a bear. Danny, the boy who'd lost his dog, was a lion but he was copying the movements of the bear. Maia had picked rabbit, but she hadn't moved from the center rug.

"Aren't you going to hop around like a bunny, Maia?" Veronica asked her, but the girl looked tired. "Do you want to start nap time early?"

Maia shook her head and started to gently hop around the room. After a short time she too started copying the bear child's movements. Danny saw this and became angry.

"I'M the LION!" he yelled at her.

Veronica had been watching one of the smallest girls pretend to be a goldfish, but her head instinctively whipped toward the yelling voice. "What's wrong, Danny?"

"I'm 'posed to be the lion. Not her!" he yelled and pointed at Maia, whose fingers were gnarled into pretend lion's claws.

"Let's all pretend to be our own animals, children," Veronica said calmly as she looked at the clock on the wall. "Well, time's up anyway. Who wants a nap?" I know I do, she thought. She quickly laid out ten blue mats on the floor and watched as the kids picked one and closed their eyes. Veronica turned down the lights and exited the room into an inner hallway of the small building to find coffee.

Being so young, Maia didn't notice the changes her ill body was undergoing as she napped. She was sweating but goose bumps crawled along her arms. She tossed and turned until her body went numb and her breathing stopped.

Naptime was usually fifteen to thirty minutes depending on how long it took Veronica to get rid of her daily headache. Ten

minutes into her midday peace she heard a scream from the classroom. She was about to open the door but Danny burst through it, crying.

“What’s wrong?” Veronica asked him. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“I’M THE LION!” he yelled.

“I know you’re the lion, Danny. Is Maia still pretending?” Veronica asked. Sometimes the children didn’t go to sleep during naptime, instead choosing to wander the classroom and disrupt the others. The boy nodded his head and lifted his small arm to show her what Maia had done.

“The lion bit me!” he cried as the other children began screaming.

“Go to the first aid box by the sink, ok?” Veronica directed him as she opened the door to the classroom and turned the lights back on. There were a couple of children still lying on the mats, motionless. The rest of the class had sought refuge underneath the activity tables. Maia stood with one of the goldfish girl’s arms in her hands.

“Maia, time out right now!” Veronica yelled at the girl.

At the sound of the teacher’s loud voice, Maia started toward her. Her teeth were bared and she still held her hands out in front of her like lion’s claws.

“Stop this!” Veronica screamed but Maia kept moving in her direction. The teacher knew she could overpower the child if she needed to but she feared a lawsuit from the parents. Indecision left her when Maia’s tiny teeth bit down on her arm. Veronica picked up the girl and walked to the bathroom. She set Maia down inside the small room and closed the door as quickly as she could. She could hear the child clawing at the wood of the door but she felt nothing for her. Maia’s lack of respect for her authority had gone on too long.

“Rose, can you bring me my purse?” she asked the goldfish girl. Dutifully, the child brought it to her. She pulled her cell phone out of the bag and with trembling fingers she found the contact listing for Maia’s mom.

“Hi, Annette,” Veronica said when the familiar voice answered on the other end. “You’ll have to pick up Maia. I’m not sure if she’s sick or something but she is acting very strange. She bit some of the other kids and then me...No, I haven’t called any

of the other parents yet...No, I can't put her on the phone. She's in the bathroom and I'm not letting her out until you get here...I told you, she attacked us...I don't know what's wrong! I'm not a psychologist. Please, just come get her." Veronica hung up and started down the list of other parents.

"Hi, Barry. Can you come back to the preschool and pick up Danny? I don't want you to be alarmed but another child bit him on his forearm...No, no, he'll be fine. It isn't bad at all."

Michelle Kilmer is a writer and designer living in Seattle, WA. When she is not writing she can be found playing video games, designing websites, singing and playing guitar, sewing, or dressing up in "full gore" to attend zombie events.

She is working on several projects including a follow-up to *When the Dead*, a super secret zombie story geared toward young adults, and a handful of sci-fi short stories that give her the creeps.

She lives with her husband, an attack hamster and a fear of the dark.

Rebecca Hansen is twin sister to Michelle and lover of everything zombie. *The Spread* is her first contribution to the genre.

When she isn't plotting gruesome fictional deaths she fancies hiking, painting and watching low budget and foreign horror movies. A seasoned special effects make-up artist, she turns willing subjects into the walking dead on the weekends.

She lives just north of Seattle with her boyfriend, three attack cats, a gun, axe, machete and small collection of knives.

Find out how Paul the deliveryman became infected and follow the plague as it continues to spread. Look for *The Spread: A Zombie Short Story Collection* and Michelle's full-length novel *When the Dead* on whenthedead.com and Amazon.

EXCERPT FROM : **WHEN THE DEAD**

By MICHELLE KILMER

THE INFECTION

It starts with a cold sweat then a swift drop in body temperature that makes the teeth chatter. The skin feels itchy and hot but the insides are dying from the cold.

Then the numbness starts in the extremities. Finger tips, toes, up through the feet and hands into the legs and arms and finally the core. It cannot be rubbed out as the hands do not work anymore.

It reaches the chest and the ability to control the breathing is lost. Just before the last breath of air escapes the lungs, numbness reaches the head.

The eyes go crazy, the tongue limp. One cannot call out for help as the head falls on the chest. There is but a single moment for the dying self to think a final thought...

Why me?

But then . . . you aren't you anymore.

FUCKED

"I can't understand what they're saying," Edward said as he slammed a fist down on the radio.

"You could try another station. That sounds like French they're speaking," his wife Moira suggested. She had wanted a television for a long time but Edward preferred the way the voices came floating from the speakers into the apartment. This meant that in the current situation though, they had to rely on the radio show hosts' graphic descriptions to give them any idea of what was going on in cities across the globe.

“The other stations keep replaying the same stuff. It’s not getting any better; only worse,” Edward grumbled.

“Then there’s nothing we can do but make some tea and wait to see what happens next.”

“It’s happening everywhere,” Isobel said to her mother over the phone. She had spent the morning reading news articles online. She had watched a clip of someone succumb to the infection on a CDC table, surrounded by plastic and strapped down like a criminal or lunatic.

“Things will be ok, Isobel! They have a carrier. It really is only a matter of time. If they can study it, they can find a cure or at least a vaccine. Try to keep this thing from spreading any further.”

“It’s too big already. The world is fucked. I’ve got to go.” She hung up the phone not knowing it would be the last time she’d speak to her mother.

“On and on for three days, man; can’t they talk about something else?” Vaughn turned off his television angrily. “Could have been aliens, maybe the government, maybe bio- terrorists? Shut up.” He chucked a drained beer can at the black screen. “Just fix it and forget it!”

Vaughn was alone, as he often was, unless he paid for company. He was talking to himself. He probably couldn’t even pay someone to listen to him. Especially when he was drunk and that was most of the time.

“Couldn’t be bio-terrorists, they’d a laid claim to it. Been proud of the trouble they were causing. Pretty fancy stuff making dead people come back to life. It has to be the government; only group with enough funding and closed doors to pull this shit off.”

The infection was quickly spreading. It had reached terrorist groups and government groups alike. It lay in thousands

of sickbeds, it rode the bus, and it lived next door to many already. No one was immune from this unstoppable plague.

The number one cause for the spread of the disease was denial. It made no sense to anyone. News media could be blamed for the lies with headlines like It's impossible! Death is death, the final breath, and People Don't Come Back. They stay wherever it is that they went.

WILLOW BROOK APARTMENTS

Willow Brook is a three-story building, four if you count the basement. Each floor has six two-bedroom apartments with identical floor plans.

The kitchen is to the left of the entry. It has an island that looks out on the dining room and living room. The first room on the right down the hallway is a second bedroom. Next is the laundry closet with a stacking washer/dryer unit. The last room on the right is the bathroom. At the end of the hall is a closet and the master bedroom is on the left.

All of the apartments look more or less like this save for differences in décor and varying levels of tidiness. The Willow Brook building is controlled access, meaning that if you don't have a key, someone has to buzz you in, or not.

THE FIRST DAY

On the morning of the first day, the day that things would start to change for the residents of Willow Brook Apartments, things looked normal. When Isobel Shiffman looked outside it was almost too normal, right down to the happy thieving squirrel in the tree nearest her living room window.

Northgate is at the northern edge of Seattle and the nearest reports of the disease were further north in Everett and south in Tacoma, still far enough away for Isobel to brave the outdoors. Her mother had told her to stock up on food just in case things didn't clear up as quickly as she hoped. Isobel had gone shopping on Sunday and it was only Tuesday but her mother insisted.

Like Isobel, the rest of the city driven by nagging mothers, packed into the grocery stores and left them in such a state of disarray that it was hard for her to navigate. The cart, even without the help of the wobbly right front wheel, kept running into things: cans of food, a bag of chips, some nylons, and other items strewn about. All of which were displaced far from their original aisle and shelf. She struggled with it until she found the secret to making the cart move was to put pressure on the left side of it with her foot. She went for some of the fresh food that everyone else was ignoring, figuring it could be eaten first and when it ran out or started to rot, whichever happened first, she'd break into the non-perishables (of which she had a lot).

She made it up to the only open checkout lane.

"How long did you buy for?" the nervous cashier asked.

"Um . . . I don't know. A week?" Isobel wasn't good at estimation or small talk. Her cart was full with what she knew was affordable for her budget and, more importantly, what she could carry up to her second floor apartment on her own. She hadn't been thinking about timelines.

"That won't be enough. The world is coming to an end."

"Ok. Well how long do you buy for when the world is coming to an end?" Isobel snapped at the cashier.

"Don't know," the cashier shrugged. "Do you want your receipt?"

"Sure."

On the way back home, the radio still reporting news from all over, documented the plague's movement. It crept slowly closer. Isobel turned the radio up and listened.

"Early this morning, a ferry full of people trying to get home to their families left Whidbey Island alive and well and arrived at the Edmonds ferry dock infected with the mysterious disease we've been seeing. They had somehow contracted the disease on the passage over the Puget Sound. Ferry officials at the Edmonds Pier heard no reports from the captain of the vessel that anything was wrong on the boat. The captain routinely steered the ship into port and the infected disembarked and started attacking people in the parking lot. It is suspected that at least twenty of the infected passengers made it out of the ferry terminal and into downtown Edmonds. Efforts to locate and apprehend them in order to contain the spread of the infection have been

unsuccessful. Several injured passengers made it safely onto lifeboats before the ferry made it ashore, but they did not survive their wounds. The captain of the vessel has been detained for questioning at this time.”

The program switched to weather and Isobel changed the station, desperate to find out just how close it had become.

“- determined that the perpetrator of a street fight in downtown Seattle, described by witnesses as a “drunken transient”, was actually a person suffering from the infection. Police shot the man after he attempted to attack them. It is unknown how he came into contact with the disease. Attempts to identify the individual are ongoing, as his body appeared to be in a state of decomposition. The flesh of his fingertips was gone, rendering fingerprinting useless. Investigators are working with dental records-”

Isobel changed it again, looking for another news story and its location.

“A group of students started a riot on University Avenue in the U-District just after eleven a.m. Over fifty college students were injured in the event, four fatally. The group seemed to have no agenda and was only intent on causing destruction and harm to individuals. Sources at the scene noted that the group was not involved in looting or property damage. Most of the students fled the scene before they could be arrested and interrogated. Campus police had great difficulty dealing with the problem and are not commenting at this time. It is still unknown whether the perpetrators were rioting in response to the disease, or as a result of being infected with it.”

Isobel’s heart beat faster.

“A bloody scene at the Helene Madison Pool greeted Shoreline Police investigators midday today. A lifeguard interviewed said that a man had emerged from the men’s locker room at the start of Public Swim and started attacking children in the shallow end of the pool. It took two lifeguards on staff to remove the man from the water and hold him while a third employee called the police. All of the children involved suffered only minor injuries. The pool has been shut down for investigation and sanitation reasons and will remain closed until further notice.”

“That’s just up the road,” she said to herself.

Initial reports thought the disease spread and made people psychotic and violent; that the infected were living people with altered minds and an inability to differentiate right from wrong. Whatever the process, it only took one infected person to ruin everybody's day.

Approaching from all directions, the disease was soon upon Isobel's neighborhood and suddenly it was right in front of her in the form of a traffic accident. Someone had destroyed a bicyclist with an SUV. A deep cut in his abdomen sat open, displaying his intestines. One of his legs had been almost completely severed near the hip joint. He had not survived his injuries. The driver of the vehicle, a pale young woman in hysterics and leggings, was leaning over the dead man when he sat back up, guts spilling from his body, and bit her face, taking a chunk out of her cheek as she screamed for help. Isobel wasn't the only driver that swerved around the mess. She could still hear the woman's yelling as she sped the last three blocks home. There was nothing I could do to help the man or the woman, she thought over and over again, trying to calm her nerves and her conscience. The world was feeling much smaller to her; the troubles of it more her own now.

She pulled her car into the parking lot of Willow Brook and quickly lugged her two bags of groceries from the lot to the front door.

"Whroah roah wroooah! Roah!" A giant black poodle jumped into her making her scream and drop her food.

"Kiki, no! Get down! Bad dog, BAD DOG!" Sheila Brown from apartment 201 yelled, tugging roughly on her dog's leash and dragging it up the stairs.

"Oh, it's ok. I can pick it all up myself. Really, don't worry about it!" Isobel said to Sheila who was already out of earshot.

"Thanks for the apology too, bitch."

Upstairs she put the groceries away with what was already in the cupboards. Her food situation looked much better to her now so for the rest of the first day she sat alone in the living room in front of the television, eyes glued to news report after bloody news report; ears listening intently to the speculation. Several times she hopped up to check that the door was locked. She was still having trouble mentally digesting what she'd seen on the road earlier. Maybe the bicyclist wasn't dead? Perhaps he was just knocked unconscious and when he came to, in all his pain and

bewilderment, he lashed out? No story she made up explained how the man could be alive after suffering wounds so horrific, nor why he would want to bite the driver who shattered and shredded his body.

His guts were on the road, she kept coming back to this single sight, this undeniable fact. No one sits up with his guts on the road.

S.O.S.-LESS

Many people still had a very strong sense that things would be ok because they had no contact with the disease yet. They were viewing the plague on televisions and computer screens, not in person. Their faith in the police force, that the uniformed men and women in affected areas could get things under control, was strong. Stronger still was the idea that all of the world's best scientists would be gathering in a sterile room at an undisclosed location, working day and night until they found the cause and then the cure. Hollywood had showed the citizens this response so this is what they demanded; what their minds had decided would happen - was happening. The population waited for quarantines and white-suited specialists with giant mobile labs but they didn't come. Many CDC labs had already been overrun with the dead.

As the day disappeared and night came, things were falling apart fast as the spread of the infection continued from one complacent and unprepared house to another. In Northgate strange noises filled the air, mixed with relentless emergency response sirens. Isobel turned off the television, filled the bathtub with water just in case it stopped running, cooked some pork chops and drowned out the horrible cacophony with her mp3 player.

Slowly she fell asleep. Around one in the morning the gunshots picked up and tore her from her rest. Unable to regain unconsciousness over the noise, Isobel turned the television back on. The dead weren't just coming back; they were definitely coming back hungry. Her mind returned to the bicyclist. He wasn't lashing out in anger; he was trying to bite her! The confirmation was terrifying. The attacks had spread so quickly that the infection had reached uncontrollable levels. With one eye open, Isobel barely slept at all the rest of the first night.

THE SECOND DAY

The second day of the plague was noisy. All this death is so much noisier than the daily grind of life, Rob Pace thought. Midday brought a motorcycle accident in the street out front of the building. He heard the bike speeding up the street, then a horn honk, some metal crashing on metal, and then yelling.

Rob looked outside. He saw the motorcyclist lying on the ground a few yards from his bike. He was dragging himself along the ground; his legs made useless in the crash. Rob noticed he wasn't yelling from the pain. The dead people that had appeared on the street overnight were slowly moving towards the maimed man.

"Get away! Stay back!" Rob heard him yell. "I have a gun!" And he did. The biker pulled it from inside his jacket and started recklessly shooting into the growing crowd. He took two down easily but he realized he wouldn't have enough bullets to kill them all. He turned the gun on himself.

"No!" Rob yelled from his apartment balcony. The man pulled the trigger before he was killed by one of the undead.

"What is it Dad?" Gabe, his seven-year-old son, had run to his side. Rob quickly threw a hand over his eyes.

"Something you shouldn't see."

"But I want to see it."

"You are only saying that because you don't know what it is."

"Well . . . yeah."

"And you'll never know." Rob found it within himself to laugh as he pulled his son away from the window.

TISSUE THIN

It was easy to stay inside if you were anyone other than Jeff Brown. He hadn't been out of the apartment for almost a week due to the combination of a nasty cold he'd caught and then the infection that everyone else was catching. His desk job, providing technical support for a major software company, always drained his energy. He should have felt rested from the time off but he was tired.

His marriage to Sheila was crumbling; if you could call it a marriage to start with. She'd forced him into it ten years ago and he'd regretted that every day since. There was no communication

and his wife loved her dog more than him. All this he was ok with though. The issue lay with being stuck inside with her for a week and for an indefinite length of time to come. He blew his nose into one of the last tissues they had in the house.

“Do you have to blow your nose so loud? It’s disgusting!” Sheila yelled from the other room.

He could feel his patience grow thinner with every remark she made and every tense conversation they had; thoughts tugging at his brain of leaving or asking her to go instead. She could take her untrained dog with her, he fell asleep on the couch dreaming of it, used tissues scattered across his sick body.

THE DEVIL’S WORK

“We just have to survive this. Please be patient, Edward. Life has thrown us more difficult things in the past,” Moira tried to comfort her husband who had been pacing their first floor apartment for two days.

“Have you looked outside today? There’s blood on the street and people everywhere.”

“They aren’t people anymore. Maybe you should stop looking if you don’t like what you see.”

“Folks on the radio are saying we should try to get somewhere safe.”

“No place is safe! The army bases started turning people away and now they are dying at the closed front gates. The mega churches asked their congregations to gather for mass prayer in order to cast out the demons that possess everyone. Then they all got trapped in the buildings with the infection. The pews are covered in blood just like the street. NPR said the best course of action is to stay inside and lock the doors.”

“That isn’t action; that is inaction.”

“So we don’t change a thing then. Sit down and read your book.”

A PROMISE

Ben had been waiting for his girlfriend since yesterday. She lived a few cities away and he'd asked her to stay with him. He waited to hear the front door buzzer all day. He heard it a lot but when he answered the phone to see if it was Anna it was someone else. Today, all he heard was growling.

He waited without hearing from her the entire day. The sirens grew further and further apart. How many ambulances were still capable of responding? How many paramedics now needed medical help themselves? Ben imagined a lone ambulance racing from incident to incident; brave medics fighting to save lives and to stay alive themselves but eventually even that siren stopped wailing.

He hoped Anna made it safely to him. He had insisted that she come. She had made him promise that everything would be fine. He had.

COPING MECHANISM

Molly Mathay was out of the program. She'd completed it and was eating healthily for almost six months. But she was still on probation in a sense. A mentor would come by once a week to check on her. Now things were getting more difficult than she'd ever imagined they could. The treatment center staff hadn't trained her how to handle apocalyptic situations and she knew that her mentor wouldn't be able to come by with the plague that was spreading.

She was alone with it and the thought of losing easy access to food made her anxious. Her anxiety made her more food obsessed. She started to binge and purge again to cope.

Her apartment wasn't stockpiled with food; she wasn't allowed to shop for more than one normal week at a time. She wanted to ask for help but she barely knew anyone in the building. She'd spent a small amount of time with Rob Pace and his son but that was an awkward situation for other reasons.

It would be difficult if not impossible in the new world to find either enough support or food to settle the urge.

THE PLAGUE IN PIXELS

Markus was left with his mind, filled with endless questions, all of the second day. He sat around and browsed the Internet to try to distract his busy brain. The infection was everywhere though and he couldn't escape it. YouTube had terrifying first-hand accounts:

A father's hands trembled as he recorded his wife eating their son in the backyard. Two minutes passed by and his wife started to come straight at the sliding glass door for him. The double-paned glass protected him and she could only paw at the slider, desperate for her next meal. The video ended with a tribute to the consumed child: "R.I.P. Elijah." Comments showed that viewers were touched by the heartache, others disgusted that the man posted such a violent video detailing the death of his child.

A video shot from a high window showing a street in Everett full of bodies. Someone with a sniper rifle across the street was taking out the infected as they wandered into the area. Markus watched the video until the end where he saw that the shooter didn't discriminate between infected and uninfected people. Trigger Happy was the video's name. A comment listed the street address of the shooter and a warning: "Don't travel this street unless you want to die." Comments included minute markers in the video for viewers' favorite kills, mostly the headshots.

One of the last videos Markus watched was of two teenage boys, both around 15 years old, looking for the infected and then messing around with them. Pouring soda on them, taunting them to chase after one of the boys, tripping them, etc . . . It was kind of funny to him - almost like a prank show he'd seen on MTV- until the taller boy recognizes his mom in a nearby group of infected and the recording ends. Comments listed request after request for more "episodes" of "They've Got No Brains!" (Which Markus thought was a clever title they'd given the video). Many offered suggestions for content.

Twitter too had been infected. It was full of sad stories, told in snippets. Never before had 140 characters or less been so depressing, so full of the woes of a nation and world.

Markus didn't feel so lonely and he felt much better off when he read what others were tweeting.

@Jen is Twenty: I went to class yesterday but half the kids stayed home. I wonder if anyone will come back? Should I even go in tomorrow?

@heismine43: stay away from the hospitals. My husband contracted the infection at one and never came home. It was a madhouse.

@ncallaway: My dad's got a fever and his feet are numb. I looked it up on WebM.D. and it says he might have lupus. Anyone dealt with anything like that?

@lordLover2010: Jesus will come for me and my fellow Christians. Fear the rapture, praise the Lord! Your time is now, you sinners, burn in hell!

@margareet: I have a few extra swords and weapons if anybody needs them. I'm in McMahon Hall at the University. Safest place I know. Stay safe friends.

@haro_kitei: Trapped in my room because my sister is trying to kill me. I don't know what to do. Can any of you guys send help? I can pay you.

How could anyone help? No one even knew where she lived, what her house looked like, who her sister was. And pretty soon, no one would care.

Twitter was full of tweets with the simple words: the infection is here. With a search for '#infection' one could track its spread and if you really paid attention, you could tell when someone was exposed to it. They would tweet less and less, perhaps more desperately. Some would say their goodbyes and most would say their "fuck yous". They'd end up typing gibberish as their hands went numb and then they'd disappear. The last tweet gathering digital dust as time continued without them.

BEN ON THE THIRD DAY

The phone lines cut in and out on the third day or maybe, Ben thought, they were just flooded with calls. Ben had tried to reach emergency services off and on all day but he either got a busy tone or nothing.

Anna had made it to him in the late afternoon but she'd been attacked along the way and had a wound on her leg. She needed help but due to the spotty phone connection and his anguish at seeing her hurt, he wasn't able to help her very well. He had her on the bed in the second bedroom of his place with the

injured leg elevated and he kept trying to feed her but she was getting sicker and sicker.

A knock on his door pulled him from her side. He was surprised to see that it was Isobel, the neighbor from down the hall, because she was only an acquaintance.

“Hey,” Isobel said, looking lonely and hoping for an invite inside.

“Hi Isobel. How are you holding up?” Ben asked her. He kept the door mostly closed. There was some blood in the entry from Anna’s leg that he didn’t want to explain to Isobel. Besides, Anna was a jealous person who’d get the wrong idea if she knew another woman was at his door looking for company. The blood loss and shock would only have made her more temperamental. Ben was about to give Isobel a gun and tell her to go back to her apartment when Anna stumbled into the living room.

“Who -” Anna mumbled.

Ben rushed to her as she collapsed. Isobel opened the door enough to see the blood on the floor.

“What’s wrong with her?” She asked.

“Stay there! Don’t come in! I’ll be right back.” Ben picked Anna up and carried her back to the bedroom. When he returned he gave Isobel a handgun.

“What happened to her, Ben? Is she infected?”

“I don’t know yet. She’s not well, that’s for sure. Stay safe Isobel. Don’t come back here.”

He closed the door on her.

Anna was dying in front of his eyes. Ben had heard news reports of how bad the hospitals were and even though Northwest was just up the road, it would have been a death sentence for him. If he wasn’t injured on the way, there were bound to be hundreds of wounded on the hospital grounds, all seeking similar aid. Casualties there would be high. Ben decided that Anna would fare much better with his one on one attention in the secure environment of Willow Brook.

The topic of people-eating people is never very appetizing and the stress of taking care of Anna had kept Ben unaware of his growling stomach. He had some toast and juice. The television was the only distraction that Ben had from Anna’s moaning. That evening it confirmed to him that the infection was contagious. Bite

wounds were fatal and the disease could be spread through saliva and other bodily fluids.

“Fuck,” he said aloud as a thought occurred to him, I have to find out if she was bitten.

Michelle Kilmer is a writer and designer living in Seattle, WA. When she is not writing she can be found playing video games, designing websites, singing and playing guitar, sewing, or dressing up in "full gore" to attend zombie events.

She is working on several projects including a follow-up to When the Dead, a super secret zombie story geared toward young adults, and a handful of sci-fi short stories that give her the creeps.

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To continue reading, look for When the Dead on whenthedead.com and Amazon. Michelle also has a short story collection available entitled The Spread.

Lori R. Lopez

The Fruit Of Thy Womb

by Lori R. Lopez

The end of the world began with a rotten banana. Ziggy Boyle stood in an alley on a blistering day and nonchalantly peeled the piece of fruit — then noticed to his disgust the white interior had dissolved to a dark slimy pulp. “Gross!” Dropping it, he wiped sticky fingers on the front of a black shirt and ground the heel of a loafer over the squishy mound. He next spent a full minute scraping mashed banana off the bottom of his shoe onto the pavement. The peel had still been yellow. It was the last time he would steal a snack from that supermarket. Imagine if he paid for it! Indignation seethed. Out of habit, he suppressed his annoyance. Couldn’t denounce the corporations, even under one’s breath. It wasn’t wise.

A mass of cockroaches scuttled to mob the smeared fruit, a common sight. You couldn’t go anyplace without seeing them. Must be the heat. Temperatures kept breaking records. It was all people yakked about on the tube. That and storms. There were always bigger storms than the last. Not to mention the massacres. Terrorism was on the rise. It might be a hate group. It might be the meltdown of some suicidal nut-job with a grudge and a bag of bullets and guns or homemade bombs.

He figured they were all just too warm.

Fans no longer did the trick. You had to have air-conditioning or risk dying of heatstroke. He didn’t, and some days he could feel his brain literally boil in his skull. It was like Hell on Earth.

Water was becoming scarce. Nations feuded over that instead of land. Starvation was rampant. Plagues were expanding in biblical proportions.

Tempers were on the rise along with the temperatures. Everyone was hot under the collar. And it was only going to get worse. That's what they predicted on T.V. More gloom and doom. He finally hauled the offensive device off the wall, sick of hearing bad news. Then he kicked it, hurled the monitor against another wall, and finally heaved it through the window of his apartment. Lucky it didn't hit someone or he could have been arrested. He wondered if the jail had air-conditioning.

Before Ziggy came into the world, his parents had stopped on a lark at a palm-reader's house to ask if their baby would be healthy. The woman, Lady Zsa Zsa (whose real identity was Jolene Snork) didn't fit the role. She had bobbed Peroxide curls and smoked constantly, as if fueled by tar and nicotine. Sharp features regarded Adele Boyle with one eye closed, plunking regally into a seat across the round kitchen table. Fingers scrabbled in a package for her subsequent cigarette, the stub in her mouth burned to the filter. Coral lipstick stained the butt as she tapped it in an overflowing ashtray at one elbow and fumbled with a disposable lighter. The flame glowed an eerie shade of orange-red, blazing upward to ignite the end of a new cancer stick.

"Pay now?" the oracle barked.

Ziggy's father Zeke forked over the cash. It disappeared. The blonde impatiently held out a hand. Adele nervously passed hers across the scarred wood surface, and the mystic seized it to pry open and thud palm-up on the tabletop. The puffing lady's head leaned forward at such an angle, Adele was afraid she meant to burn a hole in the palm rather than read it. A clump of ash let go. Adele flinched, attempting to retract her hand. The fortuneteller gripped it hard and lifted green orbs like Adele's to glare belligerently, not letting go till she had earned her twenty bucks.

The expectant parents waited, convinced from the trappings and the woman's demeanor that she was a charlatan and would merely pretend to study the creases on Adele's inner hand. Scrutinizing the lines, however, the clairvoyant's head jerked up in an abrupt attitude of shock. Fear was etched in the wrinkles of her

blanched visage as she whispered hoarsely, a barely audible hiss:
“Cursed be the fruit of thy womb!”

Adele blinked. “What did you say?”

The woman recovered and shook her head. “Get out.”

“What was the prediction?” Adele inquired.

“We’re done. Get out!” the lady snapped, crushing a half-smoked cigarette on the tabletop, missing the ashtray in her haste to leave the table.

Adele raised an exasperated look to her husband, who calmly ushered her from the residence. The couple walked swiftly to their car at the curb. Inside, the windows rolled up, doors locked, Zeke confirmed what the palm-reader had uttered. It had to be nonsense, he assured. The woman wasn’t even a Gypsy.

They avoided her street from that day. Ziggy was born a nine-pound two-ounce baby with no defects. His parents had considered themselves blessed. Until the afternoon Ziggy wandered out of his yard. His mommy only diverted her eyes a few minutes, hanging wet laundry, and he was gone.

Bored, the child abandoned his toys on the rear stoop and toddled to the sidewalk in the front, which he followed for several blocks, crossing streets in the neighborhood, roaming to a green house with a sign in the yard shaped like a hand. This captured his interest, reminding him of the story his daddy liked to tell at Ziggy’s birthday parties.

A woman slipped onto the porch and stared. “I know you!” she howled, and the boy started crying. “Go!” She aimed a finger down the street. “Do not return!”

He trotted a blurred route and never saw her again. But two siblings saw him. The pair initially planned to turn him over to the authorities. Then debated collecting a reward, or a ransom demand. Yet he was cute and darling and won their hearts. That was the tearful confession of the one he called Uncle. “These things happen,” the old fellow said, as if that explained it. They had visited relatives the day he vanished and driven off with him like he was a stray cat needing a home. The one who insisted he call her Ma had died when Stevie (what they named him) was

seventeen. A year later Uncle revealed the lad's true name. It had been on T.V. They weren't bad people, stated Uncle. They just didn't do the right things.

Being so young, he had forgotten his parents. Memories with them had been replaced by a squabbling makeshift family and that became his reality, seasoned with twinges of confusion. An idea popping into his mind. A brief image, like the flash of a camera. Or something unfamiliar fuzzily seeming familiar for an instant.

Stevie Dunham, gradually switching to Ziggy Boyle, searched for his parents as he wished they had searched for him. News archives at the Public Library provided snippets of stale information; nothing current or conclusive. Working his way, he traveled to the city where he was born and traced his father to a cemetery plot. The man had died when Ziggy was ten. He couldn't locate his birthmother. He went to the graveyard every evening for a month. When he married, he had hoped she would read the announcement in the newspapers online and be there. Standing next to his bride, his eyes distractedly drifted to the door. Sadly, it was as if his mother had dropped off the planet.

Ziggy's jaw sagged. Eyes bulged, witnessing a swarm of little flies appear out of nowhere above the banana. He swatted brumous air and coughed. There was a perpetual haze that smelled like poison. Bugs had taken over the city and to counter the infestation, experimental "safe" pesticides were periodically sprayed by teams wearing black hazardous-material suits. The Extermination Squad. If it was so safe, they wouldn't need the suits. He tactfully kept such opinions to himself. Most of the time.

Loudly stomping, the man succeeded in chasing the roaches away, flattening a few in the process. He had to clean more muck off the base of his shoe: banana and bugs. It wasn't even a real banana. There was no such thing. That whole organic movement way back when? These days everything was manufactured. Big Business held the power. They owned the world . . . lock, stock, and barrel.

Where the heck were those guys? Zig moodily contemplated the ends of the alley. He was alone. Except for the hum of flies. "Get outa here!" He kicked a leg, attempting to shoo the swarm to no avail. If anything, there were more.

He paced up and down the stretch of pavement, then across the lane. Folding his arms, he leaned on bricks and hooded his eyes. Oh yeah, he was supposed to be the lookout. Why couldn't he remember stuff anymore? It must be the heat. He endeavored to stay alert. Difficult when it was so hot.

Ziggy tugged his shirt, ventilating his chest. "Come on, guys!" he muttered, pacing in a lather. He wasn't always this uptight. As a kid he built models, cars and planes and whatever; later, intricate designs for houses, which required loads of patience. Maybe the glue and paint fumes had fried his brain.

No, it had to be the heat.

Once upon a time Ziggy wanted to be an architect. Dumb idea. The Housing Market slid into a sinkhole and disappeared. Almost everyone lived in condos, rented or owned. The land belonged to corporations. It happened before anyone realized — bank liens and foreclosures, government fines and land-grabs, tax increases, seizures by Homeowners Associations . . . By the time the dust settled, it was too late.

Perhaps he should go and look for them. How long did it take to hijack a computer? They were activists, not thieves, but still . . . "You hack the thing and run! How hard is that?" he petulantly grumbled. Then sealed his mouth. Loose lips sank ships. Maybe he said too much. They couldn't get caught until the transmission completed. His job was to call if the heat showed up. There was plenty of heat. And he felt conspicuous.

Peace Corpse, the organization he worked for, wanted the secret formulas of the pesticides being pumped all over. They wanted to publish on the Internet how bad it was for humans along with bugs. Who knew what the long-range effects might be? Illnesses and suicides had already inflated. The government blamed it on the heat.

Ziggy was racked by coughing. Two years ago he had watched his wife and baby cough up blood, their lungs congested, membranes thinned to bursting. Losing them turned his heart cold. He joined a group that was striking back, opposing the

heartless bureaucracy of elitist moguls who lived above it all — not because he cared about helping the world. He wanted revenge.

A droning cloud hovered by his face and he waved a hand, then felt a pinprick of pain. He smacked his cheek. Did one of them bite him? He gaped at a squashed insect in his hand. They didn't look like regular Fruit Flies. These were fatter and appeared to have mutated. Ziggy squinted. No way, the things had teeth, rows of them on bony horns! Flies didn't have teeth!

It must be heatstroke. He was hallucinating. He brushed his palm on his trousers.

The hum escalated to a furious keening. Did Fruit Flies usually sound like that? He didn't remember them making noise. Other flies hummed. Fruit Flies were quiet, except right beside his ear. These were buzzing like an unhappy bunch of bees. More sting-like pricks from a unit of scouts. "Hey!" Ziggy's arms flailed.

The remainder of the swarm attacked as if by a cue from their advance guard. Ziggy wailed, slapping himself belatedly as he fled. The insects greedily nipped flesh. Normally vegetarian, they had evolved into carnivores. Gobbling like tiny winged piranhas, the multitude gnawed exposed parts. Still he charged, yelping, and bumped down a corner prophet ranting about the signs of The Apocalypse.

"Here's your doom!" squalled Ziggy. That's when they got inside his mouth to feed on his tongue. It didn't halt his screeches. Or his steps, until his tattered limbs grew weak. Then the flies swooped to the sky in a roiling cyclone of black and departed.

The prophet never had a chance, sprawled on the pavement in a long bedraggled gown. Ziggy scrambled to her on all fours, trembling and maimed. The woman screamed too — being eaten alive.

Wow, I dreamed I was attacked by Fruit Flies. That was crazy. Ahhhhh, why does my face hurt? And my hands? They're torn up. Oh no, oh no, it's true! It wasn't a nightmare, it was happening . . .

I have to — find help. That's what I need to do. Find a hospital, a doctor or cop. A psychiatrist. Somebody. This kind of thing shouldn't be happening. It has to be fixed. They'll fix it. They'll know what to do. I just need to find someone who will know what to do.

I hear people. There, protesters, in front of the skyscraper we were here to rob. Idiots. Do you really think they'll listen? We're ants to them, gazing down from their ivory and steel towers.

"Help! Please help me! I was bitten by a pack of man-eating flies! They have teeth!"

Look at their expressions. They think I'm a lunatic. Can't blame them. I'd think so too. Ohhhhh, what's that feeling? My guts are curdling. My lungs ache. It hurts to breathe. It's such an exertion. Maybe I can't breathe! How can I walk? How can I even stand?

That growling, it's coming from me. My stomach. My throat. I sound like a wild beast. I feel . . . so empty. I'm suddenly starving. Oh man, it's too intense, I can't take it. I feel like I'm dying of hunger!

Why are my veins throbbing? Did I get a disease? From the flies? Or the poison? God, what's happening to me???

No, oh no. I can't. I won't. I can't control it, can't stop myself. I need . . . no, please don't make me . . . I need, I need . . . them.

Ziggy lumbered toward the protesters, who backed away, frightened by his deranged expression, the vicious sounds that emerged from a fly-pecked monster. He grimaced in a garish toothy smile, the lips in fragments. Marble-skinned, his flesh ragged, the hulking man clutched a wide-mouthed woman who had frozen to an ice statue while her comrades scattered. Despite the frigid pose, she was pleasantly plump. His eager bite sank into a soft round shoulder.

The woman's shrill voice rankled him. He silenced her with his teeth. Warmth doused his cold torso. He had never felt so cold. Strange he wasn't shivering. It was simply a deep burning chill that exuded from his very core.

His banquet cascaded to a splattered sidewalk. The man knelt to pillage a bountiful midriff of flesh and organs. He binged with cannibalistic gusto, thoroughly enjoying a meal that a day earlier would have horrified him. He didn't pause to dwell on what could be wrong with him. It hadn't diminished his appetite, and that was all that seemed to matter.

He straightened from the dead woman, feeling a sense of fulfillment that yielded to fleeting energy. As he retreated to the building's corner, drawn toward the alley where his transformation began, the nourishment subsided into the dark void at his center. Dwindling faculties alternated between flickers of residual intellect and an avid animalistic craving. Satisfaction had evaporated, lingering sufficiently to propel him onward in a greedy quest for more flesh. Ever more.

Behind him arose the growls of two holey unhallowed disciples, the remnants of prophet and protester shambling in his wake, like instruments of a merciless Old Testament God.

Adele frequented the playground, huddled on the ledge of a low stone wall with the other mothers, watching the little kids joyfully romp amidst happy squeals and giggles. It was her ritual to check the swings and sandbox where she would often bring him. Hope kept her alive, the hope that he would return, that he would remember this cherished haunt. Yet disappointment and the laughter of children impaled like a blade through her heart and soul. Would she even recognize him now? She felt certain that she must. He was her son, and a mother never forgets. How could she when her child was a part of her own body?

She perched there for hours, humming a lullaby and rocking slightly, unaware of the women scooting away from an unkempt homeless lady who stared dreamily into space.

This was her home. This was where she belonged. This and the house on Evermore Street, which had sheltered other families since destitution forced her eviction. The sites were her only ties to a blissful past. To the precious baby and family she once had, long gone, stolen by a cruel sword-thrust of destiny . . . a curse reflected in the terrified eyes of a psychic.

Police canvassed the neighborhood. Jolene had been brought in for questioning due to a suspicious statement when informed a boy was missing and shown his photograph: "Of course he is." She claimed to never have seen the child. Adele wondered. Had she glimpsed what would happen to him in her palm? Or in a vision? Did the woman hold clues or the key to her son's whereabouts? Zeke had begged her to let it go, but she took to spying on the clairvoyant. Trailing her to stores. Then accused her in the aisle of a market, "You must have some idea, some critical detail. Tell me everything you know!"

"He's cursed and will always be. But I already told you that," leered the psychic, blowing smoke in defiance of the NO SMOKING signs. "He's like a black cat, that boy. You do not want him to cross your path."

Adele reeled. What an awful thing to say! The witch cackled and pulled free. Her laughter rang up and down the aisles. Adele had wafted from the grocery store in a fugue.

If only they listened. If only they had believed and taken precautions, been more careful. She would have never let him out of her sight, not for an instant.

Grief, regrets, guilt . . . these led to her husband's death. He had taken to drinking at bars on the way home from work. One night he never made it home.

Adele wasn't a drinker. She had internalized, burying the pain then crawling into the hole, hiding from Life. But one day Life intruded and yanked that hole out from under her with more loss, and she found herself on the outside of everything, wandering past windows and looking in. Hoping to see her son. Hope was all she had left.

He bet she was pretty in another lifetime. Not that she was alive now. Her gray teeth gnashed at his cheek. Thrashing, he freed himself and his elbow bashed her nose, knocked it sideways. She looked worse. The prophet had looked sufficiently harsh before he mutilated her. Age combined with madness. Some women matured gracefully, accepting their skin with pride and dignity whatever their age. He would observe them,

subconsciously examining the faces of crowds for his mother. The little boy inside of him pictured his mommy that way. He had a vague impression of a beautiful lady smiling, hugging him. It had to be her that he remembered.

The prophet clawed at Ziggy. She and the protester wouldn't leave him alone. He shoved his followers, snarling, and tromped away. The rabid stalkers tagged after him.

A door slammed open. An alarm jangled. Three guys in black burst out of the fire exit. As the door latched, they froze at the specter of three ghouls in the alleyway. The men were prepared to be apprehended. They were not prepared to be eaten.

"Ziggy?" asked the tallest. The computer caper's leader. "What happened to you?" His face was incredulous.

The other two merely gawped, speechless with revulsion.

"Bub," rasped their tongueless cohort. He meant bugs. He gestured. Like those.

The trio cartoonishly turned as a gathering hum crescendoed. A thick purple-black swarm blocked the alley.

Ziggy shrugged. He wasn't even curious about the mission.

Girlish shrieks ensued. The human savages feasted.

Three bodies lay strewn, grisly leftovers. And then they twitched, sitting up, clambering to their feet to sway. The revived activists groaned.

Their leader's name was fuzzy. Tim? Ted? Ziggy frowned. His mind functioned slower, thoughts torpid, bogged down in wet cement like mental quicksand. His grasp of mundane connections faltered, yet he might recall dining on his friends.

Was he alive? He still had enormous trouble to draw air into his lungs. The effort was similar to ramming a dozen forks in his chest. And equally effective. Were any of them alive, these walking wounded with their flesh ripped apart? How could they be? What kind of affliction was this that reduced them to mangled corpses who could still think and feel on some crazed demented level, and have boundless appetites like voracious beasts?

Like zombies.

But weren't zombies supposed to be mindless, driven by an instinctive desire for brains? Or brought back from a near-death state by a powder that rendered them obedient to a voodoo sorcerer's spell? There was no magic or hypnosis, no comic-book

fantasy involved here. Just poison, Global Warming, and Evolution. He wasn't himself, that was obvious. He didn't know who or what he was anymore. It strained his brain to sort it out, to put coherent words together. He refused to go stupid and relinquish his surges of rational thought. It was part of living to adapt to change, but Ziggy could not resign himself to becoming less than human. He would fight this thing, resist with everything he had left!

His companions, male and female, ravenously assailed a duo of security guards tracking the thieves to the exit door. The raucous feeding revolted Ziggy, and he staggered from the scene of carnage with bile in his throat that tasted petrified.

Hearing grunts and klutzy footfalls, he ducked into the concealment of shrubs. A flash of exhaustion overwhelmed him. He crumpled to his knees and closed weary eyes.

The lids snapped up. Out of the alley hobbled a gang of blood-stained brutes. Swerving past his hideout, they clattered down the street demonstrating the light-footedness of slapstick cops chasing robbers. Hunched in the bushes, Ziggy loitered in case they altered direction. Man Zero, the first infected, the source of their ailment, he held a sort of sway. The cretins were drawn to him, like a master.

The insects, too, and from them he couldn't hide. A throng accumulated behind where he crouched. Their irritating whine threatened to reveal his position. Ziggy's head swiveled. They had been fruitful indeed and multiplied. The swarm was huge. What was he, Lord Of The Flies?

Cuffing them midair, he hunkered as low as possible without lying prone. Growls alerted him that his flock of faithfuls had arrived. The male and female zombies raked at him but he dodged them and dashed forth, loping as fast as he could. It wasn't devotion. He sensed they might turn on him, finish him off. When he hurried so did they, a silly shuffling race. And wherever he went, the flies hounded his heels.

It would be dark in an hour. She ought to seek a refuge for the night, yet Adele was unable to budge. The other mothers

had gathered their toddlers and strollers and bags of essentials. The park was eerily desolate. And she was half-desperate, half-crazy enough to believe that if she stayed here a miracle could happen. If she left, disappointment was certain.

Wind ruffled an uncombed lock of hair on her forehead. She recalled brushing fine strands of a lush and shining mane, feeling quietly content. It had been a long time ago, but she could slip inside that younger version of herself and see out of her eyes the unblemished features in a dressing-table mirror. It was a grim contrast to this weathered sun-blotched complexion, the lines streaked by worry and time, engraved like rivers of tears from the deepest of sorrows. Round and chiselled in the wrong places. A stranger's countenance; a mask of regret.

She had been a vibrant individual. Now she was like a damaged toy. Hollow, useless, discarded and alone, having lost her purpose, her function: to make a child happy. It was what she needed to do, fulfill that promise, perform that duty, yet it was too late. It couldn't be fixed. Her heart was broken and could not be repaired. She didn't know how others could go on, why they bothered. She must possess a flaw, a manufacturer's defect.

Adele hugged herself and rocked, cold, so cold. It eluded her that the world was warming. In her secluded atmosphere, the climate was an ice age, somber as a windswept frost-coated plain where the sun never shone and the clouds wept splintered shards of glass.

That was close! I should have been more careful. Shut my eyes a minute and they're on me like ants swarming a dead beetle. I can't rest. Can't let down my guard. I can't even blink unless it's safe. Unless I'm in a secure location they would have to break into, which would provide some warning.

I can't be sure what's powering them, but they look like you-know-what warmed over. And I don't think it's the heat. They should be deceased, not walking around. They act like they would eat anything that moves. Anything. Unlike me, I don't think there's a scrap of life or humanity in them. I'm hanging on to mine with a death-grip.

This plague of Fruit Flies, or whatever you could call it, seemed to originate with me. Or next to me. I just happened to be standing on the X, the wrong spot at the right time. I don't know why. It doesn't seem fair to have so many misfortunes in one lifetime. What did I ever do to deserve being abandoned by my family and kidnapped, to watch my own family die of poisoning, and then to be the first one doomed, the first carrier of an epidemic?

I have to keep going. Can't get sucked into despair. Can't let it win. I won't allow it to defeat my spirit and get the best of me. I've been lost before, but never totally, and I won't be vanquished now by fears or flies or walking stiffs.

An open door . . . does it lock? There. That should hold for a while. Nice. Very nice.

I need to avoid everyone, living or dead. I have to assume a scratch could transmit the illness. I've seen that it's contagious through the swarm or contact with its consequences, me and them. I'm just not sure if a scratch or bite alone would be lethal, or merely morph someone to my state. Maybe you need to actually die to be like them. I'm trying to decipher the rules, if this thing has any. It's insane. It just suddenly began, as if Nature had a spasm. Like a bull quivering to throw a fly off his back. I'm not planning to stick around and find the answers. If someone's infected, I'll leave them to fend for themselves. Call me a coward. I prefer the word loner.

I've always done this, talked to an imaginary audience on my very own private stage. More accurately, in the circus ring of my brain. As if I'm important, the main attraction. As if my life amounts to something. That's a good one. I'm about as worthless as they come. I couldn't even protect my wife and child. Other than them, I don't think I've made a difference to anyone, made the tiniest ripple with my presence on this planet. I just kind of watched from the sidelines and let things happen to me.

Is it any wonder? My mother, whoever she was, ditched me. She let me get lost or stolen and never came to find me. That smiling portrait of her in my head was probably fanciful thinking. I have this notion of her burying me like a turtle egg in sand. It would explain why I developed a shell for protection as a child. When Ma and Uncle were boozing, when the house reeked of

bourbon and gin, I pretended I was a turtle with a strong shell in which to hide. Psychological child's play, perhaps.

Did I mention I was so average before today, I was invisible? At least my mother seemed to think so. I wonder if it's her I've been addressing my whole life. Hey, Mom, thanks a lot! Great job of being there!

When I say average, I don't exaggerate. Fair to middling, no more, no less. I have set no example for others; I didn't rate above average at anything. If they get me, it won't be a great loss. Yet there is something within me that won't be conquered. Maybe it's what kept me going thirty-odd years.

I hear them, rattling the door, thumping the exterior wall, scrabbling to get in.

I am trying, I am really trying to make sense of everything. Nobody will believe this until it's too late. The heat has made us all mad, including the insect population. Or is this to settle the score after we killed off the bees and butterflies, disrupting the Food Chain? Seemingly minor, that colossal error steadily caused things to unravel. It may start with a single loose thread. You tug it and the world comes undone.

My arms itch. Oh jeez! I'm rubbing them together like a fly! Am I turning into one???

Absurd. It was nothing. I guess I'm entitled to some awkward behavior considering the circumstances.

Corporations created this mess. They had the money, so of course they had control. They continued to tinker, engineering stronger species, like they manipulated crops. Only it didn't stop at bees or butterflies, it spread. And what resulted was about what you'd expect when tampering with the natural order. One mistake led to another and another and another, until my family died and with them my heart.

Bitterness and self-pity are all I've got. I'm basically waiting to die too. And I don't mean from old age. What chance do I have? They're going to keep paying it forward, and there will only be more of them, folks turning, devolving into grotesque shambling nightmares.

It's the screams that make me cringe.

And fear. The fear of dying but not dying.

Being a zombie, if that's what in fact I am, has its advantages. I won't have to worry about rules. Or if my hair is thinning, I can wear the same clothes for a year.

I can't believe I once cared which side scored more goals or baskets, more touchdowns or runs. I can't believe I wasted so many hours of my life drinking beer and feeling sorry for myself.

I'm so hungry. I can't stay here. I'm shaking again.

The street looks clear. I need to keep going. Dawdle too long and I'll find myself surrounded. The one thing I seem to be good at is surviving. I'm still kicking. But what for? Another opportunity to die? Maybe that's all we really live for, the chance to cling to life.

I need to find somewhere to hole up, before those things are everywhere. I'm jumpy from stress. How I yearn to curl up in a warm bed and slumber without tension. What I wouldn't give to simply relax. Amazing how life can change just like that. There were signs but we ignored them. Like symptoms of Cancer. It doesn't go away when you tell yourself it isn't real.

What's that? Footsteps. Run!!!

My legs are so heavy and slow. Am I dreaming? I wish I were. I could slap myself a thousand times and behold the same madness. There is no going back.

Faster . . . One was hiding in a doorway. Striving to enter a building. He grabbed me to sink his teeth into my face. I panicked and punched him. There are more now. It won't take long. Several months, a year, and whatever isolated individuals are left will take their own lives at the sheer fruitlessness of going on, the futility of barren hopes.

The wretch is stumbling after me, way too energetic for a corpse! How it manages to hunt and feed while decaying by the minute is a mystery. They go through the motions of living, yet most are dead. And I am merely delaying the inevitable.

Ahhhh!

Oh no. No! Stay away, you stinking rotter! What dismal luck. My ankle twisted stepping off a curb, and the ripe stiff (who probably already stank before dying) is only a few steps from munching my remains.

I have to limp as best I can, laboring to pour on steam, but the thing back there is advancing. I may as easily succumb to a solitary biter as an entire horde. The slightest weakness could be

fatal. A single mishap and I'm done for. It's survival of the fittest and I'm falling apart! I'm in shreds, the walking leftovers of a flesh-eating virus! Was that a whimper? If I start blubbering, it's all over.

The worst part is losing hope. I just can't picture a future. I'm hanging on and I don't know why or how. The world is barbaric and crude. There is nothing of value, only chaos. It was that way before this calamity ever began.

Ha, that was rich! The echo of footsteps sent a shudder up my spine until I perceived they were mine.

A snort, perilously near. That wasn't me. Uhhhh! Great, peering behind I stubbed a toe and tripped. This is it, this is all it takes!

Stay calm. Take a breath. Ahhhhh!!!

The thing clumsily pounced. I rolled to meet it. These things are sure tough for being dead. Yuck, strings of slobber and mucous are dripping to my eyes. I'm struggling for my life and a distant memory surfaces: wrestling in Gym Class, the coach yelling that I was as useless as a fish on dry land. Yeah, I would never be an Olympic athlete I knew, so why bother? Wish now I had trained for this. Again though, why bother? My ma and uncle used to tell me, "If humans were meant to be heroes, they'd be born with capes. Don't be a hero, just stay out of trouble."

They were right. It seems ironic to me as I'm tussling with a dead guy. The lengthy hours spent studying . . . then slogging away in a career that no longer exists or bears significance. Rendered moot — not by the collapse of a civilization that neglected to learn from History — by a simple shift in culture. My livelihood was replaced, after years of producing windshield wipers, by glass that doesn't need to be wiped. Rainproof Glass, resistant to water. For every step forward, it seems, someone or something gets trampled underneath.

Add unemployment to my list of achievements.

I'm brilliantly trying to choke the cadaver and he claws my cheek. It isn't like I was uninfected, but I'm far from thrilled. I'm alive and he isn't. What's the difference? My brain grapples with the question, mentally mimicking my physical plight, and an epiphany strikes with a bell's ding, signalling the round's end. Zombies don't pay attention to bells, so we keep brawling until I

heft a chunk of brick and dent his skull. It's a trick I picked up from watching the dead lurch and lunch on the screen.

Humor, my trusty Defense Mechanism.

In the excitement I almost forgot I had an epiphany. That's how dim-witted I've become. What was it? Squinting, I can glimpse the tail of a frail wisp, a transparent inkling . . . Oh yeah, I was nibbled by Fruit Flies, whereas my fellow infected were chomped by humans. The Fruit Flies didn't kill me. Technically I'm not a zombie, I just look like one. It's a good disguise, but it hasn't fooled them.

This scourge is one of many. We tipped the balance, and we are the victims of our own undoing. Most of the survivors of this plague will doubtless suffer from any number of maladies. Contagions have been springing up daily. Skin lesions and breathing disorders. New cancers. None of us can endure unscathed. None of us are intact. And we did it to ourselves. Cheerful, isn't it?

Pushing aside the contused cadaver, I'm barely able to stand. Ohhh. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh . . . Ohhhhh.

That was fun. Dizzied, my legs flaccid, I tumbled down a flight of concrete steps. More pursuers bumble past above. I'm curled in a ball, the fresh gashes on my elbows and knees scarcely noticeable amidst the numerous festering fly wounds. I'm sure that I'm a sorry sight, blending in with The Deadbeats, these rank remnants of humanity prowling the streets without a pulse.

Tears are flowing. What can I say? I'm human.

I can't subdue the tide. Unashamed, I'm overcome by wrenching sobs.

She cried abjectly, alone in the park, arms embracing herself, a poor substitute for the child she had yearned decades to hold. She couldn't bear the pain, couldn't go on this way. Her life was a bleak expanse of sorrow. To have known him so briefly, his expressions, the small trusting hand in hers, and to have lowered her guard — to have failed him for even a second . . . It was too long. That was the time it took to lose him.

She couldn't allow herself to live without her baby one more day. One more hour. It was too long. Too long. Too long. The words chanted in her mind, taunting, inviting, accusing. She clamped hands to ears but couldn't shut them out.

Digging in the folds of shabby garments, she reverently smoothed the stained and creased photograph of a smiling family. Father, mother and son. But that was a long time ago. Too long. It was too long to believe he would be back. She wasn't crazy. Quite the opposite. Insanity would have been a blessing, a reprieve from guilt and regret. She had to accept that she would never see him, touch him, again.

She had encountered the palm-reader in recent years. The woman was like her, a homeless denizen of the street. Jolene occupied a corner and spewed dire end-of-the-world messages. Adele had squeezed her arm to demand, "How did you know?"

The psychic's eyes cleared for an instant. Recognition flared. "I gazed inside your soul, down to your pith!" she rancidly spat. "Where the devil dwelled!"

Adele had rushed from the corner, bile scalding her throat.

"You can't outrun them!" bade the harpy.

Did she mean the cult? Adele fretted for weeks, paranoid of every face, every person she met on sidewalks, crossing intersections. It was in the past, she eventually realized. She was safe. As safe as a woman could be without a roof overhead.

Adele withdrew a rusty chipped knife discovered in an alley behind a dumpster. Its blade held the brownish bloodstains of battle. She traced the steel edge with a fingertip. The dagger would serve as a fitting instrument to end her world, her private Hell . . . this tragic bereft existence into which she had been deposited by her own tainted birth in a devil-worshipping cult. It was there she met her husband, Zeke. They had escaped together when they learned she was pregnant. After the Midnight ritual where she was drugged and laid out on an altar as one of Satan's brides. Desperately praying the baby was Zeke's, Adele had refused to believe anything else, rejecting the fortuneteller's words. In her heart she knew the truth.

Maybe the black sedan that picked them up along a highway had been a little convenient. Maybe the house, car and cash inherited from a relative she had never heard of seemed a bit serendipitous. Then the luck soured. Their boy vanished. Zeke

died. She lost the house to a corporation over property taxes. The psychic had been an omen.

Lifting the knife, blade down, she braced herself and murmured an appeal for mercy. Soon her torment would have to end.

Reduced to the most primitive of needs, Ziggy utilized supreme effort to scale the stairway. His stomach craved sustenance. Yet food would not replenish his will or hope. It could only fuel and satisfy the body. Perhaps lend false comfort. Without hope, there was no nourishment for his emotions. Depression must overpower the instinct to survive.

He scratched at his sores. The man's skin crawled from within. He wanted to bay in agitated frustration. He was a wreck.

At street level, listening for danger, he detected a scuff. Then a rustle. Moist eyes scoured the vicinity, seeking to identify the furtive sounds. His proximity was a hot zone; he had to stay alert. Posture rigid, he pondered whether to duck back down the stairwell or attempt to flee. Before he could decide, a figure hove into view with a mane of tangles and disheveled layers of clothing. Their eyes locked. The prophet halted. Her jaw went slack. An arm elevated like a shotgun to point at him. "You!" she hissed.

The condemnation sliced through internal organs. He buckled as if stabbed, hands to his belly. Remorse tied innards in knots for not sparing his wife and child. For callously not caring about the world, letting all of this happen. Everything. He felt that somehow he was the cause. It didn't make sense, couldn't be true. Yet he felt that he was a vessel of death and destruction. He shouldered the cumbrous weight of responsibility for the world's demise.

Absolute silence shifted to noise, a flurry of commotion. Fruit Flies revolved around him, blanketing the air. Their hum vibrated like mini-bombers as they clogged ears, filmed eyes and skin, streamed in and out of his nose and mouth.

Above the buzzing of insects, a grunting and gnarring of beasts echoed. He knew they would find him. Blindly the fly lord confronted ranks of zombies, numbed by the circulation of his

puny minions. Mute, he couldn't address the monstrous horde. Instead he gesticulated broadly, arms wide as if in welcome. He surrendered to their justice.

A shroud of flies funneled toward the sky and churned there like thunderclouds to witness Armageddon.

The prophet was first to reach him, growling with the ferocity of an insatiable appetite. Self-preservation unleashed a violence that Ziggy had believed himself incapable of, and he slashed her visage with fingers curved to talons. He threw her to the pavement by the hair and rendered the harridan null as if she were a roach. Whatever abominable darkness lurked in his depth, it was a surprise to him. This ruthless yen to stay alive at all costs seemed foreign. He had regarded himself as neither good nor bad, a man without distinction. But here he was combatting a legion of goons bent upon rending him to pieces. Was saving yourself heroic? What if he inadvertently saved the world too?

He stood erect, huffing, and faced the ghouls. Save the world? Not a chance. He retreated.

Adele chided herself for hesitating. Coward! She commanded herself to plunge the blade and quit behaving like a wimp. "Do it!" the woman lamented. She had no reason to live. Her arms tensed. This was it. Mind focused, breath composed, channeling a state of peace, she drove the knife downward.

A grating unintelligible shout interrupted her arc of triumph against the twisted threads of Fate.

The woman winced, blade suspended, and glanced aside in aggravation. A large man sprinted across the park to the playground. He collapsed in the sand at her feet. A pathetic croak issued from a dry throat pitted by innumerable bites.

Adele sighed and lowered the knife. It would have to wait. "Hey." She nudged the guy with the toe of a worn shoe. "Are you okay?" Of course he wasn't okay! He had been lacerated from top to bottom. He looked like a dog's chew-toy! The injured man lay moaning and panting. "You need some help?" She didn't know what she could do, but it was polite to offer in these situations.

Ziggy's hands groped sediment. The woman was alive. They would follow him directly to her. What had he done? He tried to push himself up. One fist clasped something other than sand. The man blinked at an object, a faded toy. He experienced a pang of nostalgia. An obscure recollection. It meant something. The sentiment evaporated.

Her knife fell. "That's mine!" The homeless lady tussled over the plastic wind-up turtle.

Ziggy couldn't let go. He didn't know why, but he just couldn't release the turtle. It stirred something profound.

Weeping, Adele pleaded with the man to give back her son's favorite toy. She would bring it to this park where she had brought him, arranging the turtle on the sand where he liked to bury it. The toy made her feel close to him. It was a connection, like this square of symbolic land that she visited religiously . . . a pilgrim traveling to a holy shrine. A public place, it belonged to everyone yet was special to her.

And to him.

Ziggy had come here guided by a little boy seeking consolation, running to his mommy. The shattered man squinted at this crying lady. A smiling young woman's ghostly image superimposed upon her haggard countenance. A wave of pent-up hostility frothed to the surface. He bellowed "Mime!" — garbled without a tongue — and reclaimed his most prized possession. Knocking the lady aside, he climbed to his feet in a victorious stance, the toy aloft.

Adele sat up gasping. She clapped jittery hands to her mouth. It couldn't be, it couldn't be! Strangled hysterical laughter spouted as she rose grinning with glee. Arms apart, she stepped to wrap her child in a hug. "No, I can't believe it! You're my son! My dear sweet boy!"

Ziggy whirled, eyes enraged. She had lost him! Allowed him to be taken, abducted by strangers! She had no right to call him her son! His jaw flapped. Beads of heartache glittered in his cold eyes. He couldn't explain the hurt he had borne inside for most of his days. His exterior wounds were nothing by comparison. He warded her off, features conflicted.

"I love you. I always have," she whispered.

Ziggy shook his head.

"I'm sorry." Fingers to her neck, eyes limpid pools of anguish, Adele stared into the face of the boy she had wanted more than anything to find. He was tall now, like his father. He had the shape of his mother's chin, her cheekbones and hair. And his father's sheepishly handsome smile; Zeke's blue-gray eyes. "We both loved you so much," she told their son. "You were ours and no-one else's."

Tears poured from Ziggy's eyes. His obstinate betrayed expression washed away and he resembled that little boy. It was the happiest day of his life.

Adele cried out with joy and submerged him in her arms. The man's height made no difference. He was still her child.

Ziggy's arms engulfed her, tentative, then forgiving. They hung on to each other as if they would never let go. What really connects us? Blood? Or something deeper? Something less tangible? Ziggy's muddled brain flowed like a river in search of a new path. Maybe it was who we touched in this life that counted, who we interacted with and made the world better for in grand or modest ways. Even if we ultimately failed them.

As a gathering army of mutants ringed the park, a cursed man vowed to defend a treasured lady with his final breath. The zombies barged forth in a frenzy and Ziggy valiantly countered them, kicking, circling, lashing in vain. There were too many. And then the flies descended. Their hum amplified. The itching beneath his skin magnified in response. His flesh swelled, and movements became sluggish. He was sweating tubs.

It occurred to him at the last that he was an incubator. The Fruit Flies planted eggs; their growth cycle must have accelerated. Maggots hatched and were consuming him, compelling him to attack others, to cannibalize and infect them.

When they reached his brain, Ziggy lost his mind. And his temper.

In horror, between billows of flies, Adele ogled her son bloating to impossible dimensions. His skin bubbled. Then he screamed, on and on. The creatures around him tumbled back as the man erupted in an unrestrained spate of head-bashing limb-breaking mania.

Her stomach and teeth clenched. The woman harbored no further hope. They were surrounded by a gruesome melee of fiends, and there was nothing she could do to protect her son. The

time to do so was past. He strove to protect her now but it was futile. She swallowed. A rueful smile shaped her lips. At least they were together. At least they had that much.

Ziggy's flesh ruptured, sundering to jigsaw bits, and more flies emerged. Adele was jolted to the grass by a crowd of zombies pawing her.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!" Her fingers coiled. She had located the knife. She had survived a cult of wicked freaks, endured losing her husband and only child, then found her child just long enough to lose him again! She might not win, make that would not win, but she was not going to die like some flimsy skittish female in the movies! Roaring, she stood up green eyes ablaze, nostrils flared, and commenced killing the dead. Who probably didn't feel anything, but it made her feel pretty darn good as zombies toppled with holes in their heads.

A knife was no match for the flies. The insects invaded cavities, clogged her nose, teemed to her lungs. Their clamor stifled dreadful cries. As the zombies joined in, she mercifully suffocated while myriad tiny and big mouths devoured her flesh.

It's hot. You're bathed in perspiration although it's early. Wearing goggles and a gas-mask, you venture outside into polluted air that is now black with flies. The world is deteriorating before your eyes, everywhere dark and humming, a drape of madness and mayhem like the final curtain on a play with a cast of fools. Where did they come from, this latest plague? It's lucky you're so paranoid, cloaked in a thin white hood, long sleeves, boots and slacks. An insect pinches your hand and you ball your fists, shoving them into pockets, but your ears are vulnerable within the hood. You didn't even know a Fruit Fly could bite! Your ears are on fire from pain. Perhaps they're another insect, some new species. You've never seen anything like them. You pull the hood tighter. A hand is exposed to their nicks, the rapacious nips. Is that blood? Upset, you cram the fist in its pocket, having skipped gloves due to the high temperature.

Hastening along a sidewalk, you notice a group of people approaching. It's apparent there is an oddness about them.

Weaving, oafish, milling together yet not conversing. Maybe they're just weird. On second thought, you doubt it. They're weird but that isn't it. That isn't what makes you step from the curb and cross the street.

They might think the same about you for donning a gas-mask, but the style is catching on since the Global Government began blatantly poisoning the public. Fashion, however, is the last thing on your mind at the moment.

They're looking right at you. Groaning in a peculiar manner. Like they aren't human. Kind of bizarre. And they're crossing the street, diagonally, making a beeline toward you. Creepy! You speed up to maintain a cautious distance, glancing at them repeatedly. On closer inspection, they are extremely foul and mangy. You would definitely not care to meet them.

Well, it's inevitable at this pace. Time to run.

Briskly you scurry, aiming for a populated area.

Unfortunately, the streets are vacant. Besides the bugs. Your goggles are getting steamed; you wipe them on your clothing, hands tucked into sleeves. The insects are so thick, you're crashing into them rather than the opposite. You adjust the fogged and smeared lenses with your cuffs and scrub at the flies spattered on the glass.

Peering over, you note that the too-friendly or malicious creeps are still angling to intercept you. They've shortened the gap. You can discern their aspects are grossly mauled, and the skin that isn't missing has a pallid unnatural hue. A tremor of fear passes through your soul. Unsympathetic, cordial or not, you want nothing more than to get as far away from them as possible.

Where is everyone? Between the gory characters and bugs, the empty streets, a heavy atmosphere of anticipation, you feel like you've stepped into another universe. Or woken up the last person on Earth.

You can't be dreaming, your ears sting. Your fists too.

Exploring the rim of an ear, you discover it bloody. The back of your hand contains gouges! Removing your all-purpose E.T. (Every Thing), you weigh the pros and cons of activating the gadget and being tracked, monitored, to check the news — which is owned by the corporations and will tell you as much or as little as they deem necessary.

You're being monitored by cameras anyway, and sensors, in practically everything. You need to learn if there's an emergency, dictates logic. Pressing ON with a beep, fanning the buggy air, swirls of soupy mist undulating, you link to the rest of the world. Article headlines and videos leap off the screen, cryptic apocalyptic messages about zombies and mutant flies. Uh-huh, sure. This has to be a joke, some kind of prank or hoax. Zombies!

Reading an article, your optimism sinks. You feel like you're the only one who didn't know the world has ended . . .

It's true. Your gait lags. You remember the unsavories and pick up your stride. A solemn Asian anchorwoman intones, hair mussed, her complexion damp: "The Fruit Flies mutated to carnivores by retaining teeth from their larval phase. They appear to be immune to the pesticides and will lay their eggs in the living or rotting flesh of humans. The zombies may have been a result of this fly infestation — or a separate parallel affliction. These are the facts at present. We will update you as details and events —" The video cut off. That was hours ago.

What isn't being discussed in the news is what initiated the mutations, the underlying causes of these threats. Culpability lies with the corporate structure of society. Everyone who isn't Somebody grumbles this below their breath, but none of the masses are empowered to do anything about it. There was a time when speaking out mattered, when people everywhere could raise their voices together and inspire change. Now it was dangerous to disagree. Dangerous to complain, criticize, think differently. Those freedoms had led to war, it was taught. Now people are content. There is peace. If they don't like the way things are, they will be sent to Transition Camps. Basically, forced labor.

Perhaps a collapse of civilization wouldn't be so bad.

Your reverie has allowed the gimps to gain ground. You're grateful for the gas-mask. They must reek. Darting into a park, you are anxious to get rid of them. Should you go home? They might follow. The park seems tranquil, deceptively ordinary. A woman is seated on a low wall by a play area. You lope toward her. Maybe she's like you were, oblivious, out of touch.

Something isn't right. The flies appear to be orbiting her. You bustle to the center of the insect maelstrom and grasp her shoulder, then uneasily eye the matted hair and dirty garb. A face swings in your direction. She has lines, too many lines, but she

seems okay. The face turns farther. Half of it is hideously ravaged. Her belly protrudes beneath a stretched top, a pregnant quaking mound. You scream as her abdomen detonates in a torrent of flies. A visage ripe with welts and tumors showers you. Blood and bugs. The insects penetrate your clothing. Zombies, attracted like sharks, stagger to the feast.

What did you expect, a happy ending?

Your E.T. tumbles out of your hand. On the screen plays a video filmed from a corporate office. A man in a black hood announces that Peace Corpse wants you to know what harmful substances people are breathing and ingesting. The contents of the “safe” pesticides are published. A list of toxic chemicals and sickness-causing contaminants liberally scrolls.

The video goes dark. A fly lands on the screen and merrily cleans its teeth.

Lori R. Lopez writes poems, short stories, novels, songs, and nonfiction as well as a dark often-humorous column called “Poetic Reflections”. Her books include CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, DANCE OF THE CHUPACABRAS, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, OUT-OF-MIND EXPERIENCES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS and THE FAIRY FLY (ages twelve through adult). Her stories and verse appear in anthologies such as MIRAGES: TALES FROM AUTHORS OF THE MACABRE, MASTERS OF HORROR: DAMNED IF YOU DON’T, I BELIEVE IN WEREWOLVES, SOUP OF SOULS, THIRSTY ARE THE DAMNED, and SCARE PACKAGE: 14 TALES OF TERROR. Fifteen of Lori’s poems were published for an anthology titled IN DARKNESS WE PLAY (Triskaideka Books).



BIO

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Suzi M



Scarred

by Suzi M

Staring at your own headstone is no way to start the evening, most people will tell you. Depending on the time and circumstances, I find staring at your own epitaph on your custom-made grave marker can really put your night in perspective. Nothing says you wasted your life quite like the old cliché ‘so-and-so will be missed’ sort of thing that distantly related relatives will slap onto that piece of rock. And if I have not yet had my cup of coffee to wake me up before staring at the hard gray truth... well, that makes for a shitty night for everyone.

I kicked my feet up onto the scarred surface of my desk--an ancient wooden model with drawers that protested doing their built in duty more than a john paying for a trick. Staring at the tips of my shoes, I considered polishing them up for a more professional appearance; then decided it would be easier to just get a new pair of shoes. Ones without holes in the soles and along the uppers. From my reclined position I could still make out the curved top of my tombstone lurking in the shadows. I pulled open the bottom drawer of the desk and decided the best thing to do to set things right would be to American up my whiskey with a shot of coffee.

This is usually around the time that the hot chick walks into the noir detective’s office and flounces more tit and ass than a guy can say no to, but I am sadly not that noir detective nor would the tactic work. I look good in a suit, sure, but I like the men. On an optimistic note, I am told that it is fairly normal behavior for women to feel that way. Whatever passes for normal, anyway. I am sure I still pass for a woman, but beyond that, I am totally at a loss.

Coming back from the dead was my first mistake. Going back to work instead of cashing out my sick days was my second mistake. After all, death was a very plausible excuse for not going to work. I think they may even give more time off if the person who died is you. As I said before, I am sadly not a noir detective, and this is not a noir detective story. I refuse to go sleuthing

amongst the offices of human resources to find out how much time off I should be taking to mourn my own passing.

I could hear footsteps in the dingy hallway outside my office door, and then in walked a very agitated model of masculinity. His eyes darted here and there, then fell onto my desk and its little placard with my name and title.

“What can I do for you?” I asked casually while lighting a cigarette.

He looked to protest my smoking and I arched an eyebrow that said ‘now was not a good time to talk about my bad habits.’ I sucked in a breath and blew the smoke away from us, not that it helped in the small office.

“This is going to sound crazy,” he started.

“You died. From the looks of you, I’d say it was by car accident.”

He looked amazed. “Yes.”

“And now you’re wondering what the hell you’re doing back amongst the air-breathers.”

“Yes!”

“Mmmmm-hmmm.”

“How did you know?”

I nodded to my own gravestone, squinting against the smoke. “Join the club, Hon. I’ve been getting calls off the hook since I came back.”

He seemed genuinely disturbed by my office decoration. I have to admit, I could not remember how I had gotten the thing from my grave and into the office with me. Something in the back of what I assumed were my now maggots for brains told me I really should not investigate further into my demise; nor should I try to solve this undead Honey’s case.

“Do you know what happened to us?”

“Nope. Not a clue.”

“Will you find out for me? I need to know what’s going on.”

“Sorry, guy, I have my own worries. Since the resurrection I’ve decided to live a much more in the now life. That means I don’t worry about the past, and I don’t think about the future.”

“I can pay....”

It sounded almost like a question, I had to smirk. I shook my head as I dropped my beat up shoes off my beat up desk and onto an even more beat up floor.

“Money’s passé. I’m not quite sure what happened, but I don’t want to know.”

He stared at me as if I had died and come back from the grave. I sucked another drag off my cancer stick and regarded him for a moment, regretting my choice even before the words were out of my mouth. I have always been a sucker for blue-eyed frat boys and a man in uniform.

“Fine. I’ll see what I can do.”

In the end it all turned out to be a fluke. The dead started to drop off again and were quickly buried in vaults that were sealed. Accusations about government experiments flew, but no country stepped up to take the blame for it, and so there was no donkey on which to pin the proverbial tail.

Blue Eyes came back to my office looking hopeful. My poker face is not a good one, and he quickly got the idea that I had some bad news.

“Sorry,” I began, “No answers.... We’re just an accident.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means we’ll be sorted out in about a day or two.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll be taking another dirt nap again real soon.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I broke a tooth trying to bite into someone’s skull.... This isn’t the movies. We’re starving back to death.”

“Shit.”

“Indeed.”

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Tara Maya

The One in the Basement

Except for the banging on the basement door, it's the kind of Sunday mornings Marlie likes best. Never mind the noise, it's no bother. Best she was up anyway, it's almost half past seven. The kitchen smells like coffee and formaldehyde.

Outside, it's not too hot, yet still sunny. Beams of light illuminate the plants in her kitchen window. The plants are plastic, which are easier to care for than real plants. One only need keep them dust-free, and they're just as pretty as real flowers. The ceramic planters are adorable: a cotton-candy pink bunny, a lemon-meringue-pie colored ducky, an adorable elephant the exact same shade as a blueberry lollipop her mother gave her for her sixth birthday. There's a picture of pig-tailed Marlie with that lollipop in one of the photo albums, which are all lovingly enclosed in hand-sewn denim-and-lace covers.

Mama made those. Like Marlie, mama knew that keepsakes are important. Mama's memory isn't so good anymore, but Marlie keeps the memories for the sake of them both. Frank always complains about the clutter, and once he dared suggest she throw away the shelf of photo albums. Frank has never got along well with mama. But then, what man likes his mother-in-law? Marlie knows better than to heed to his grumbling about her mother. It's better to focus on the positive.

Marlie has just popped the toast, when Frank shuffles into the kitchen, still wearing his dingy gray robe and slippers. The toast is perfect golden brown. Marlie slathers the crusty bread with butter, which melts right and proper as you like.

"Gonna set fire to that woman one day," Frank says. He glowers at the basement door.

Although mama can't hear him and couldn't understand if she did, the banging stops. As if she knows Frank wants to destroy her and some instinct for self-preservation has kicked in. Not possible, sadly. Mama's mind is gone. Marlie considers it a blessing, really; she can no longer be offended by Frank's constant hostility.

Frank and Marlie are eating breakfast when the banging starts up again.

He starts to rise from his chair, scowling.

"Ignore it," says Marlie.

He harrumphs, but settles down again, without ever having stood completely. At his size, lugging his middle around is not done on a whim.

The door to their basement shudders from the pounding.

It used to be such a nice room, their basement. They insulated it and finished it off over three decades ago, back when Frank liked to DIY around the house; now he's too old and fat. Speaking of his weight, Marlie frowns to see that he has ignored the toast and coffee she's set out for him, and pillaged the fridge for donuts and soda instead.

"That'll be the death of you," she says.

"Maybe it will," says Frank. "There are worse ways to go."

"Did you take your heart medication? You always forget."

"Don't harp. You know the one thing I can't stand is a woman who harps."

What Frank doesn't tell her is that he is out of his medication. He thinks Marlie doesn't know, even though she keeps track of these things on her Kittens Calendar right next to the fridge. He never looks. He has been out for more than a week. She's worried, and wonders if she should pick them up herself. But going out to get more is getting harder and harder these days.

"When my time comes," he says, even grimmer than usual, "Don't let me become one of them."

The banging stops and the silence is startling. Almost worse.

"How about a cup of coffee instead of that dreadful soda?" Marlie asks.

"Promise me, Marlie."

"Don't be morbid. You know I can't abide that sort of talk."

Frank grunts. He turns on the TV, a small black and white, almost as old as their marriage but still able to get one channel. The only thing on is news, droning about the situation in Europe.

"I hate how these journalist fellows always exaggerate."

Marlie. "They just want to sell newspapers."

"No one buys newspapers anymore, Marlie. It's all PooTube and Twatter."

"...more zombies in twenty European countries now than people..." says the TV. "You can vote on your favorite zombie attack video...."

"Damn PooTube," says Frank. "Another sure sign everything's gone to hell."

True, she thinks, feeling old. Everything has changed. We never had zombies before. People died and stayed dead.

Renewed banging on the door makes her jump.

Don't dwell on it, she reminds herself. Happy thoughts.

Now the TV shows some story about how people are using social media to report zombie sightings real time. "Here's the hashtag you can use..."

What's a hashtag? wonders Marlie. *Is it a kind of hashbrown?*

"Damn Twatter," says Frank.

"The zombie problem is even worse in Asia," says a TV anchor wearing an expression of studied concern. "China, Japan and Vietnam have two zombies out of every three animate persons. Will America suffer the same zombie meltdown as Europe and Asia?"

"Damn zombies," says Frank.

Marlie pities them. They can't see, can't hear, can't understand and can't die. They stagger around, seeking, always seeking, never finding. They destroy the lives of the ones they once loved the most, unfeelingly, unknowingly. There are days when Marlie feels she is no more useful than the zombies.

But she mustn't be negative about it. She hates negativity. Frank has enough for them both.

The banging is background noise to her thoughts, so much taken for granted that it takes Marlie a moment to realize the timbre has changed.

It's not coming from the basement, it's coming from outside.

Suddenly terrified, Marlie clutches the edges of the table until her knuckles whiten. “Frank! Do something!”

“Why me?” he says “You know who it is!”

“Please Frank!”

Going outside isn’t so easy these days. He puts on the needed things: Long sleeved shirt, tough jeans, leather jacket, heavy boots. Thick leather gloves and a fencing mask. He also takes an ax, which he doesn’t let Marlie see, though she hears the closet creak open and knows he’s taken it. He borrowed one from Mr. Tucker (the son) last month, and why would he have borrowed it if he didn’t intend to use it?

But he won’t need it, surely, she tells herself. Just to be sure, she edges toward the window to watch through the miniature forest of plastic plants and ceramic planters.

At first, Frank is out of sight, around the corner behind the garage, not in the front yard. All she can hear is shuffling, moaning and banging. She props open the window to hear better.

Then she sees Frank backing away from two zombies who are rushing him, in their pitiful but inexorable way. Their stink is overwhelming. She shouldn’t have opened the window. She can smell it despite the formaldehyde used to keep their dead flesh firm. It’s not formaldehyde, Frank says, but Marlie can’t remember what it’s called. Nano-plasma-something. The immortality serum. The thing that started the zombie craze in the first place. It didn’t preserve the higher functions. Just re-animated corpses with a pseudo-life that is, on the face of it, she has to admit, though she doesn’t like to speak ill of the undead, rather ghastly.

Where will end? She wonders and briefly panics. *Will we all become zombies? In a world of zombies, who will pour the coffee and butter the toast?*

Marlie pushes that unpleasant smudge of thought into a corner and dabs it with a napkin. No sense being negative.

The front lawn, boarded by rose bushes near the house and by ceramic gnomes near the white picket fence, is now the arena for an indecorous battle between Frank and the zombies. One of the zombies—surely that’s Mr. Tucker (the father) from two doors down?—tries hard to bite Frank. He chops off Mr. Tucker’s arm. Pus oozes from the gray, bloodless arm. The zombie and the arm both continue to flop toward Frank.

Marlie shakes her head. *Was that really necessary? Why must Frank be so hostile?*

Frank has an unreasoning fear of becoming a zombie.

The young Tuckers, a middle age couple named Laura and Will, run onto the lawn. They apologize to Frank for the deprecations of old zombie Tucker – Will's father, Marlie thinks, but she can't remember—though they look annoyed that Frank cut off the arm. They pick up the arm and guide old Mr. Tucker back toward their house. They also have a basement.

The other zombie is distracted and now attacking a telephone pole. Frank walks up behind her. He lifts the ax.

He really intends to do it!

Then he notices Marlie watching from the window.

Frank sags and lowers the ax. He guides the zombie back inside, holding her at arms length because she tries to bite him. As they pass, Marlie pastes on a smile.

"Did you have a nice morning jaunt, mama?"

"Oh, mama zombie had a wonderful morning," mutters Frank as he locks mama back in the basement.

He always hated her mother even before mama died and was infected.

When he comes back, he's flushed and furious. "Did you see that? That old bat almost bit me! We can't keep taking care of her! We need to put her in a home!"

"You know how those places are, and anyway there's not enough to keep up with the demand."

"That's because fools like you keep the zombies around rather than burning them to ash! Every time an old person croaks, we zombieify them until the undead are outnumbering the living, as in Europe and Asia! No one can afford to take care of children anymore, we spend all our money on the undead! It's not immortality! It's a curse! It's a nightmare!"

"What do you want me to do? Kill my own mother?"

"She's already dead!"

"But not completely, so how can I abandon her?"

His face purples, his veins throb. He opens his mouth to rant more, but his bark comes out like a strange cough. He clutches his chest.

Marlie rushes to him, but she can see it is too late. He's having a heart attack. She could call 911, but these days they are so

busy dealing with zombie escapes that they take an hour to answer a call.

“Mama! Mama!” she rushes to the basement door. Opens it.

Mama staggers out and without being told what to do, bites Frank vigorously on the shoulder.

At first, the bite seems to have no effect. The body emits odd noises, and an unpleasant smell fills the air. The bowels have voided their contents for the last time. But otherwise, Frank doesn’t stir, even when Marlie returns with towels and fresh pants.

Nearly an half hour has passed before Frank stirs again. Marlie hears gurgling from the back of his throat. He staggers to his feet. He throws up blood. He won’t need it anymore. What good luck she already has the towels and disinfectant out.

Frank has a blank look on his face as he tries to bite her.

But she’s already put on the leather gloves and fencing mask. She guides him back to the basement. Then does the same for mama, who has escaped while Marlie was dealing with Frank. She kisses mama on the cheek. Mama tries to bite her ear.

She now has two of them to watch and tend and above all keep safely locked away from biting any young person. Washing is a must to combat the smell, but no need to feed them. Zombies don’t eat. Not even brains, despite the jokes by late night comedians. They gnaw anything, but just from some misfiring in their nano-plasma filled brains. They aren’t exactly alive, just kept animate by the nano-mush, however *that* works. Neither living nor dead, they just...subsist. Forever. Or as long as their living relatives, or government welfare programs, care for them.

At least the bill for donuts and soda will go down.

Must focus on the positive.

For more information on Tara Maya check out:-

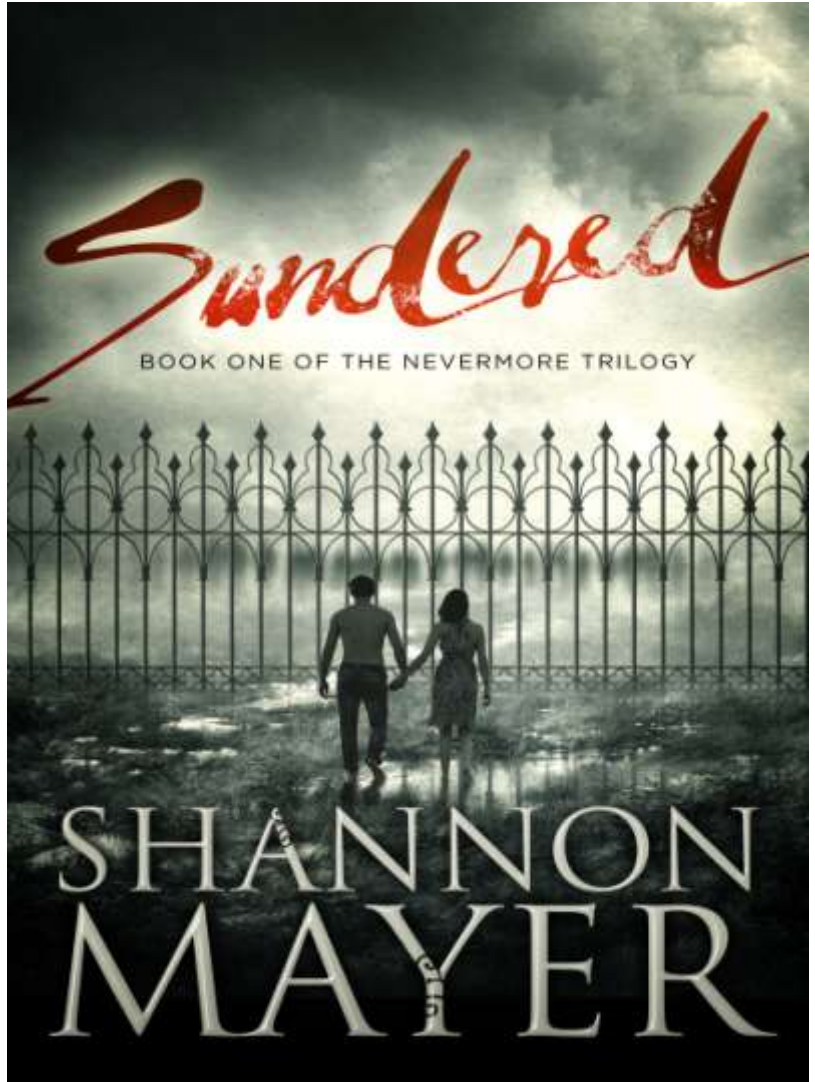
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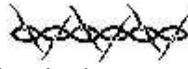
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Shannon Mayer



Sundered

Love is something eternal; the aspect may change, but not the essence.
—Vincent Van Gogh



I walked slowly, my hands above my head to keep from touching the scotch broom. My eyes watered, my throat and nose itched, and the patches of bare skin the plant leaned in to kiss were bright red and swelling. Fanny Bay was famous for a lot of things, but when we moved here three months ago I didn't realize it was a breeding ground for my most hated nemesis.

"You coming, babe? I really am sorry. I didn't know the trail was full of broom," Sebastian, my sweet and usually thoughtful husband, yelled back to me. He wasn't allergic to the brilliant yellow plant, so he didn't have to worry about the branches that hung on all sides, and he made good time on the trail. I could just make out his broad back and dark brown hair over the tops of the broom ahead of me. At 6'4" he towered over most people and living things, noxious weeds included.

I grunted a reply, not wanting to take in any more air than I had to. The walk through the tunnel of broom wouldn't kill me—it wasn't that bad an allergy—but hell, it wasn't something I enjoyed, either. Breaking out in a rash and blowing my nose continually for the next few hours would be what I had to look forward to after this little excursion. But the bottom line was, and even I could admit it, I needed to get out of the house and get some fresh air. I'd been holed up for far too long grieving, and this little hike and visit with the neighbours would get me moving. God love the man, Sebastian knew me better than I knew myself sometimes, and this excursion had been his idea.

"Mara?"

"I'm coming, Bastian. Don't expect me to run through this crap," I said, shifting sideways to slip between two overhanging branches.

A stick jabbed me in the belly and I snapped it off with a quick twist. "Stupid plant," I muttered, thinking of all the things that had been jabbed into me of late; it was the least painful, both to my body and my heart.

I blinked away tears that threatened, and wiped my hands across my eyes to my immediate regret: they were covered in pollen from pushing the broom out of my way.

“Son of a bitch, I’m an idiot.” I blinked furiously, trying to keep the tears flowing to rinse my eyes out.

The doctors didn’t know why we were having such a hard time getting pregnant, and the miscarriage only confirmed that it was something wrong with me. I sneezed and rubbed my nose with the back of my hand, the minor explosion jarring me out of my depressing thoughts.

“Hurry up, woman. I told Dan we’d be there ten minutes ago. Last thing I want to do is upset the new neighbours.”

Sebastian’s voice was even further ahead of me now.

“Yeah, I’m coming, O white knight of mine, who considers a walk in the broom a nice time out for his highly allergic wife!” I wasn’t angry with him; this was part of the way he dealt with his grief. It was the same when his father and brother died in the boating accident; at least, that was what his mother had shared with me. His motto was ‘buckle down and move on; push forward and don’t look back’. Although even with that attitude, he sweated the whole way across the Georgia Strait, despite the fact that the ferry we were on was the size of a cruise liner.

A rustle in the bush stopped my feet before I thought about what I was doing. “Sebastian?” He had a nasty habit of scaring me; jumping out from the place I least expected him. The rustling drew closer and I pulled away, pressing my back against a wall of yellow and green, my heart picking up speed. I didn’t think it was Sebastian. A musky odour floated past my nose, and whatever was making the noise, it was an animal. A flash of black in the bush across from me and I nearly wet my pants. Bears were more than common on this part of Vancouver Island; they were considered pretty much part of the neighbourhood and one of the few things I was truly terrified of.

Crap. Mouth dry, I tried again, whispering as loud as I dared. “Sebastian!”

The black thing in the bush that I was sure was a bear, grunted and shuffled closer and I slid my way toward the spot where I’d last seen my husband. Maybe the bear wouldn’t attack us if we were together? Sweat popped out on my forehead and I no longer cared how much the broom brushed against me; I just didn’t want to be eaten. I pushed my back against the wall of plants, not caring that they scratched across my bare skin as I slid sideways up the trail, keeping my eyes trained on the rustling behind me.

One step forward and something grabbed me from behind sending me into a flailing mass of arms, legs, and grunts as my heart threatened to burst out of my throat.

"Whoa, whoa, babe, settle down," Sebastian said, laughing at me, his blue eyes dancing, his hands resting on my shoulders.

I didn't care he'd scared me. Not this time.

I gulped in a breath. "Bear," I said, pointing down the trail, my hand shaking.

"Really?"

I nodded. Then the stupidest thing I've ever seen that man do happened right in front of my disbelieving eyes. Sebastian started back the way we'd come, toward the bear.

"What are you doing?" My fear turned to anger as I thought of myself widowed before I'd even turned thirty.

"I just want to see it. I've never seen a bear up close before," he said.

"There's a first and a last time for everything," I snapped and then contrite at the thought of my last words to him being snotty I changed tactics. "Please come back. We need to keep going. I thought you said we were almost there."

Sebastian didn't answer me except to wave backwards. As if I was going to get any closer to the bear. Yeah, right. He kept moving forward, his movements slow and steady, as if he was afraid to spook the animal. I didn't think that was going to be a problem.

I wanted to scrub my hands over my face with frustration, but had to settle for gripping the edges of my shorts. There had to be a way to get him to come back.

"Sebastian, I'll divorce you if you keep looking for the bear." Maybe that would work.

"You're too poor to pay a lawyer."

I snorted. "So are you." I thought a moment more, knowing I had the answer.

"I'll tell your Gran on you."

He stopped and turned to face me. "You wouldn't." The look on his face said it all, and a twitch started in the corner of my lips. I knew I had him. I let out a sigh of relief and put my hands on my hips.

"I would, just you wait and . . ."

A huge black bear burst out of the bush behind Sebastian with a roar and I bit down on a scream, my worst nightmare unfolding before my eyes. Sebastian stumbled back toward me and fell over a rut in the ground. I grabbed a rock and cocked my arm to throw it, when a hand dropped on my shoulder and shoved me to the ground. The smell of cigar smoke curled through the air, slicing through the sweet musk of the broom and the heavier musk of the large predator ready to eat my husband.

"Stay down, girl," a throaty voice said and I looked over my shoulder to see our sort-of-crazy neighbour Dan above me, a gun levelled at the bear. "You too, boy, stay down." I wasn't sure if he was talking to Sebastian or the bear.

We both stayed low on the ground and Dan walked toward the bear, his gun never wavering.

"Come on, Bob, you know you aren't allowed to be eating the locals. Specially these city folk so new here, they're practically a biohazard with all the toxins and chemicals they've been living in."

"Hey, we eat healthy," I said, then thought about the situation and shut my mouth. A crazy man with a gun and a bear in the middle of a forest trail that no one knew we were on. *Quiet Mara, you'll live longer.*

I watched in disbelief as the bear—Bob, I guess—dropped to all fours and let out a long low snort.

"Yeah," Dan said. "I feel the same about these imports, but we got to give them a chance before we run them off."

The bear grunted and pawed at the ground a mere foot away from Sebastian's bare legs. I whimpered in fear, wishing I had the gun in my hands. Why wasn't Dan shooting the bear? He wasn't truly having a conversation with the animal; he had to know that, didn't he?

"Go on now, Bob. Come around the back of the house later tonight and you can have one of the salmon I thawed out this morning." Dan lowered the gun. Bob gave one last snuffle and turned away from us, heading back down the trail toward the ocean.

I scrambled to my feet and ran to Sebastian, catching him in a—dare I say it—bear hug.

"I'm okay, babe," he said into my hair.

“No, you’re not.” I stood up and kicked him in the shin, pleased with the wince it produced. “You idiot! I told you not to go back. That bear could have killed you!”

“Lower your voice, girl, or Bob will come back to see what all the shouting’s about, and to be honest, I’d sooner shoot you than him. He’s better company than most people.”

I turned to face him, our kind-of rescuer, at a loss for words. Did I say thanks for saving us, or thanks for not shooting us, or was I supposed to be mad that he preferred a bear over people? Dan stared at me as he chewed on the stubby cigar clamped between yellowed teeth. His salt and pepper hair was military short and yet still managed to be messy, and his army fatigues were rumpled and stained. I didn’t know what to make of him. Was it an act, or were the other locals right and he was off his rocker?

Sebastian took the lead, exaggerating his limp and rubbing at his shin before holding his hand out to the gruff older man. “Thanks, Dan. Much appreciate the intervention with your friend. We were on our way to your place. You put an ad on the mailbox that you had some old gardening stuff you want to get rid of? I spoke with you this morning about coming by?”

Dan stared at Sebastian for so long I started to get nervous. The man, after all, had a reputation for eating Crazy Flakes for breakfast and he was packing a large gun. Not really a good combination. I cleared my throat.

“Things like old pots, and maybe even some veggie starts,” I said, wanting to break the awkward silence.

Dan took a drag on his cigar and blew out a string of smoke. “Yup, come on then.” He turned his back to us, put his gun over his shoulder and led us down the yellow and green tunnel.

We followed, Sebastian taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed to me.

I smiled and squeezed his hand, mouthing back, “Okay. But I’m still calling your Gran.”

Sebastian winced again, and I nodded. There was always a consequence for being dumb, even if it was just having your Gran rip a strip off you.

As the adrenaline stopped its headlong rush through my body, I became acutely aware of my bare legs and arms—all the parts I’d shoved up against the broom. By the time we reached

Dan's, a fortress of a home that looked as if it had once been an army barrack, every visible inch of me was covered in hives. I stared around me, absently scratching at my arms. Dan's yard wasn't fenced, but it didn't really need to be, not with the way his house was built. What looked like steel plate covered the doors, and the windows had rebarred grills over them. I ran my fingers over the rough textured exterior of the house—it seemed to be a combination of bricks, mortar and cement—my curiosity for a moment overwhelmed my itching. What was the point of all this?

"Make this quick, Bastian. I'm blowing up like a puffer fish," I whispered to him as I deposited myself on the only chair in the yard. Dan brought me a prickly cactus looking plant and stuck it on the ground beside me.

"Aloe Vera. It'll help with the sting till you get home," he said as he broke off a thick green stem and handed the goopy end to me.

Surprised at his kindness, my opinion of him shifting again, I broke off a second piece of the plant and rubbed it onto the worst patch of hives with a sigh. It was cool and soothing. I was going to have to get me an Aloe Vera plant.

It was nice in the shade; this corner of Dan's garden was already up, the bright green shoots sticking through the ground. I didn't recognize any of them. I was still pretty new to the whole concept of gardening. I could see what I thought were peas climbing a section of netting, large rubber tires housing a creeping plant of some sort, and several raised beds with strawberries in them. Those, at least, I could pick out easily. It was very strange to see such a mixture of old-school gardening life next to the military feel of his home.

Next to the house, a battered old radio played while Sebastian talked planting, tools, and seeds with the old nutter.

After a few minutes, Dan walked to the radio and turned it up just as a female announcer came on, her voice breathy and completely unsuited to radio.

"Bet she got the job by doing a few jobs of her own, eh?" Dan gave me a lecherous wink and walked back over to where Sebastian was digging through an old pile of pots.

I grimaced and shook my head. That was an awful thought, no matter that it was probably true. I reached down to rub

at a particularly large hive with the Aloe Vera on the back of my calf, when what the announcer was saying sunk in.

“This is a miracle drug boys and girls. Not only can you eat whatever you want and not gain weight, but it does all sorts of great things, but I can’t remember all of them. You can’t buy it over the counter . . .”

I got up and moved my chair closer to the radio, and a second, male, announcer came on, his voice highly animated and almost as feminine as the woman’s.

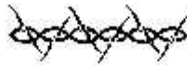
“So Phillipa, you’re telling me there’s no downside, no side effects to this—what was the drug called again?” he said.

Phillipa’s irritating voice came back on. “They’re calling it Nevermore, as in, never more gain weight, never more get sick, or disgustingly fat, never more get cellulite, or any sort of weight gain.” She giggled and the high pitch and redundancy of what she was saying made me shiver. It was a wonder the speakers didn’t blow. She took a breath and continued, “It’s amazing, one shot is all it takes, and yes, it is expensive, but that’s it. One shot and you’re good for life. I’ve lost ten pounds and I’ve been eating burgers, cake, and totally noshing on chocolate.”

The male announcer came back on. “Reportedly, this Nevermore truly is a miracle drug, as it also prevents Parkinson’s disease, works in tandem with heart medications to stop arrhythmias, and has a host of other beneficial side effects. One that will be of interest to many is that helps tremendously with fertility, more so than any of the current fertility drugs, with less side effects. As it’s derived from an all-natural source, the body can—”

I turned the radio back down and looked over to Sebastian, still deep in conversation with Dan, who was nodding and even giving the occasional smile. Sebastian was not only tall, but a little on the large side. Okay, a little more than a little on the large side. Not that I had anything to preen about. I easily had an extra twenty-five pounds on my 5’5 frame. Maybe even thirty, but it was still less than I’d been carrying a year ago when we decided to start our family. That was when we began to realize there was a problem, and that we might not be able to have a baby. I lost weight, ate healthy, took my vitamins, but getting pregnant was nearly impossible and the one time I did, I miscarried.

I scratched at my collarbone, feeling a welt swelling rapidly under my finger; I had a sudden urge to get moving. Not only did I need to get a second dose of Benadryl and a shower to wash the broom pollen off, I had to get on the phone to the doctor. What if this Nevermore drug was what the radio said it was? It seemed almost too good to be true: fertility and weight loss, all rolled into a single shot. My heart thrummed with excitement. This was what we'd been waiting for. I could hardly wait to tell Sebastian what I'd heard; I could hardly wait to finally be a mother.



As soon as we got home, I ran upstairs to shower, hoping to diffuse the pollen on my skin. We'd bought a rambling two-story farmhouse on three acres that was at least a hundred years old that I was completely in love with, along with all the history it represented. It was heated with a woodstove and even had an old wood-burning cooking stove that was now on the back porch, having made room for my new convection oven. The old woman who owned the farmhouse had been on the property her whole life, ninety-eight years, and had not only been raised in the house, but had raised her own children in the house.

I'd hoped to raise my own children here too.

My hands slowed in the soapy water as my thoughts wound back to the hospital, the nurses and the doctor telling me that I had miscarried. At five weeks, still in my first trimester and within the real danger zone, I'd woken up in the middle of the night to cramping and blood on the sheets. Since then I'd not gone back to my job as a real estate agent, taking a leave of absence to deal with the grief and to give my body time to heal.

Sebastian worked from home as a web designer, something I was intensely grateful for as he was able to help me out of the depression I'd fallen into after the miscarriage, not to mention pay the bills that never stopped coming.

The bathroom door clicked and I poked my head outside the curtain. "Hand me the new shampoo."

Sebastian held it just out of reach before finally letting me take it, a grin spreading across his face, his gorgeous dimples framing his mouth.

I ducked back in and lathered up, smiling to myself. He might be a little chubby, but my man was good looking, and that smile—even now it made me weak in the knees.

"It's probably a hoax. You know that, don't you, babe?" Sebastian's voice was muffled as I stuck my head back under the running water, the cool shower sluicing off the last of the pollen. It didn't, however, make the hives go away. I was covered in them from head to toe, the bumps starting to develop even where the plant didn't touch me, its infection of my skin spreading like some horrid disease.

“You don’t know that and neither do I,” I said, soaping my body up. “You aren’t a doctor last time I checked.”

“These sorts of things come and go. It’s either a hoax or it will turn out to have some horrible side effect. Like, your boobs will shrivel up, leaving me nothing to play with, and then I would die.”

I laughed, turned the water off, and reached for a towel. The shower curtain slid open and Sebastian lifted an eyebrow at me, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips, his clothes having mysteriously disappeared. His eyes roved over my naked and still-wet body. Heat curled in my stomach, still now after four years of marriage he could set my skin on fire and my heart racing with a simple look.

“The towel, please.” I held out my hand, trying to look uninterested. He shook his head and stepped into the tub, his bare toes touching the tips of mine. Without a word he started to dry me off, starting with my hair and working his way slowly down my body, his hands massaging as he dried.

I bit back a groan, the moisture from my skin disappearing, the heat intensifying. I closed my eyes and let the sensations wash through me, the scratching of the itch from the hives almost heavenly as he scrubbed the towel over them.

“Stop,” I whispered, not really meaning it. Sebastian chuckled and I peeked out from under my eyelashes. With a single, swift movement he scooped me into his arms and took me to the bedroom and our very small bed.

With more gentleness than one would think from a man his size, he laid me on the bed and pressed his body into mine, our hearts beating in time with one another.

“I love you, Sebastian,” I whispered as he slid into me, completing me, making us one.

“I love you too, my bumpy, hive-ridden woman,” he whispered into my ear.

I slapped him half-heartedly on the shoulder, and the sweet love-making quickly turned into a laughing romp that ended as it often did: in each other’s arms, tears prickling at the back of my eyes as my emotions filled me up and spilled over in physical release.

“You okay, Mara?”

“Yes,” I said, curling deeper into his arms, trying to think of something smart to say and coming up empty-handed, so I settled for the truth. “Sometimes I just love you so much it makes me cry.”

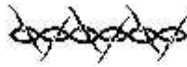
“Hmm. I am quite the hunk. Really, you are very lucky to have snagged me. I was planning on playing the field till I was at least sixty before you came along.” He spread his big hands over his chest and leaned back against the headboard, a self-satisfied smile across his face.

I smiled up at him, laughed, and shook my head. The size of his ego never ceased to amaze me.

Sobering, I sat up, pulling the sheet around me. “I’m going to ask the doctor about that Nevermore shot. I think it’s what we’ve been waiting for. I mean, we could be fit, trim, and then have a baby too. It would be amazing.” I stared at him, willing him to catch my excitement.

It didn’t work. Sebastian frowned, and then shrugged his big shoulders. “I still think it’s some sort of hoax, but you go ask him. See what he has to say, but don’t get your hopes up.”

I wrapped my arms around him and snuggled into his arms. I could be excited enough for the both of us; in fact, I already was. My eye lids drooped when the second dose of antihistamines kicked in. I let them close completely, my heart light with the hopes and dreams of a family, already forgetting Sebastian’s warning.



The doctor's office was full. And I don't mean all the seats were taken, I mean there wasn't even standing room. I ended up halfway down the hall leaning against the cream-coloured wall next to one of the office doors.

"Excuse me, are you Mara Wilson?" a voice behind me asked.

I turned to face a woman who looked vaguely familiar. She was in her late thirties with beautiful blond hair and eyes the colour of the Caribbean ocean. I cocked my head to one side. "Yes, I'm Mara, have we met?"

The woman laughed and patted me on the arm. "Only briefly. I'm Shelly Gartlet, I live on the road above you, and we met at the mailbox when you first moved here."

I smiled and nodded. "That's right. I remember now." Really, how could I forget? The woman had grabbed me in a welcoming hug, spilling all the neighbourhood gossip in less than five minutes, and in a single breath. I'd made a mental note never to confide in her. "Are you here for the Nevermore shot?"

Shelly smiled. "Yes and no. My husband, George, and I got the shot last week, but Jessica here" –she half-tugged a younger looking clone forward– "wasn't able to get the shot, she was sick with that flu that's been going around."

I put my hand out. She was a very pretty young girl, with the same long blond hair as her mom and the same stunning eyes. She looked to be about sixteen years old, but could have been younger; it was so hard to tell nowadays. No doubt the boys went crazy for her at school. "Nice to meet you, Jessica." She gripped my hand lightly, ducking her head.

Shelly patted her on the arm and gave me a wink. "Jessica, weren't you telling me about Mara's husband, and about how good looking he is?"

Jessica flushed from her chin to the roots of her hair, her eyes widening as our gazes connected.

"I didn't mean . . . it's not like . . . mom, how could you say that?" she finally spit out.

I laughed, warmed by the thought, knowing that my husband was an attractive man, so much so that even teenagers had

crushes on him, despite the extra weight he carried. Tall, dark, and handsome with confidence and a wicked sense of humour, he'd had women swooning over him in every age bracket. "It's okay, Jessica. I'm sure Sebastian would love to know that he had an admirer."

"Please don't tell him," she whispered.

We were interrupted by a woman who pushed her way in to our conversation. "You here for that miracle drug?" She was a chubby woman in her mid-forties standing behind me. A quick glance, and from my experience and time in Weight Watchers, I knew she had to be at least eighty pounds overweight.

"Yes. You too?" I asked.

"Hell no. I'm perfect just the way I am." Hands on her hips, her purple and red muumuu fluttering around her thick ankles as she glared at me, daring me to call her out. I smiled and bit my tongue. She continued her rant. "And all you yahoos coming in for some quick-fix are going to get what's coming to you. There's no such thing; it's ridiculous to think one shot can do all that. Fertility, heart stuff, making bones stronger—foolishness that you've all bought into."

Shelly and Jessica backed away from the woman, and I gave them a smile as I, too, gave the riled-up woman some room.

"Come over for coffee," I said over the muumuu woman's head. "And we can get to know each other. Anytime, I would love some company."

Shelly and Jessica smiled and they gave me identical thumbs up. This was one of the nice things about where we lived. Yes, we were in the country, but there were still neighbours close enough if you needed some sugar or a helping hand, or maybe just a cup of coffee with the local gals. I smiled to myself. I loved it here; the island was everything I'd hoped for.

"Mara Wilson?" The desk nurse called me and I followed her directions into the doctor's room, happy to get away from the woman on her tirade. I glanced back and she hadn't paused for a second, now laying into a pudgy teenager on the other side of the hall. The doctor's room was close enough that I could still hear her with the door not completely closed, her voice rising with intensity.

"Exercise and diet. Kids, when I was young, were outside playing and working. None of this TV and computer crap." There was a pause and I imagined a nurse speaking to her. "No, I will not

lower my voice; I think you all have lost your minds. This is some government conspiracy to plug you all full of tracking devices and drugs so they can better control us.”

I shook my head, why couldn't she just let us be? It was obvious she was delusional. She could use the shot and lose a few pounds, and she'd probably live longer. There was a large thump that rattled the wall and made me jump. Then came a god-awful screech that sounded like a parrot being strangled, followed by a dull cheer from the crowd. “You can't kick me out!” the woman screamed. “I have an appointment!”

Ejection from a doctor's office, that had to be a first. I laughed at the absurdity of her claims. Health Canada and the FDA wouldn't allow a drug to be given to the masses if it hadn't been tested. They knew it was safe and there was no way it could get to the public unless it was good to go.

“Hello, Mara.” Dr. Cooper stepped into the office, his grey hair and stooped shoulders making me wonder how much longer I would be able to go to him.

“Hi, Dr. Cooper.” I smiled, unable to suppress my emotions. This was it; this was the moment I'd been waiting for.

“I suppose you're here for the Nevemore shot?” His face held a mask of concentration.

I smiled wider, my excitement spilling over into my words. “Yup. It's perfect! I can lose the last of the weight that you said I should to be at an optimum size for getting pregnant, and the shot will make me more fertile, right? That's what I heard on the radio and when I looked it up on the internet, it confirmed that. And then maybe Sebastian should get it too? Because you weren't sure if the fertility issues were with him or me, we could both take it and then we'd be sure to get pregnant, right? Sorry about the pun—I'm so happy; I can't believe this is finally going to happen. I'm going to be able to have a baby.”

Dr. Cooper didn't answer me right away; his eyes stared at the screen of his computer as he scrolled through it, page by page.

“Dr. Cooper? This is a good thing, right?” A wave of fear rolled up through my body, trepidation I couldn't push away. God, don't let Sebastian's pessimistic view be the truth; what if this was all a hoax? No, there were too many people in the waiting room. If it were a hoax, it'd be all over the internet and news.

“Mara, the drug does all that and more. Strengthens bones, prevents skin cancer, and increases fertility. Parkinson’s and arrhythmias are virtually wiped out. It truly is a miracle, of that I have no doubt, and I’m encouraging as many patients as possible to take it.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding in a huge sigh of relief, my heart slowing back to a normal rhythm. I folded my hands on the desk and leaned forward. “You scared me. I thought you were going to tell me it was a hoax. That’s what Sebastian thought it was, some scam to get money out of people.”

Dr. Cooper shook his head, but he still wasn’t smiling, and that made me nervous all over again. “It’s no hoax, Mara, but my dear, you can’t take the shot.”

A loud buzzing filled my ears, and though Dr. Cooper continued to talk, I couldn’t hear a word he said. I blinked once, twice, as I grasped what he said. “Why not?” I whispered.

He let out deep sigh and pulled my hands into his, cupping them like a grandfather would. “Nevermore is derived from *cystius scoparius*.”

I stared at him, confusion rushing through me. “I don’t know what that is. Is it bad?”

“Scotch broom. The concentrate within the drug would kill you at worst, and at best you would be in a constant state of agony, hives, sinus infections, swollen glands, and hypersensitivity to the mildest of irritations. There have even been some reported cases where people who were allergic to broom took Nevermore and now they’ve lost their eyesight.” He squeezed my suddenly ice-cold hands. “You can’t take Nevermore, Mara.”

My mind whirled, hopes thrown about in a tornado of emotions before they crashed and burned. I pulled my hands slowly away from him and folded my arms across my breasts, at a loss for words.

Dr. Cooper leaned back in his chair and slid a sheet toward me. “Here’s the chemical breakdown, Mara. Every aspect of the broom has been used in this drug, not just part of it.”

“Why are you giving this to me?” I tried to keep the venom welling up within me out of my voice, my hand gripping the paper tightly, almost to the point of crumpling.

“Because I know you, Mara. I know how much you want children, and how hard you’ve worked to lose the weight that was

preventing that dream. I know that you're going to try and find a way around this, and I don't want you to die. There is no way around this." His voice was so soft, gentle, that it broke down the last barrier of strength I'd propped up, and a sob slipped out.

"I'm so sorry, Mara," he said.

I bit back the next sob that was bubbling up. I stood and ran to the door, pushing past the horde of people that filled the hallway, running till I reached my car. I leaned against it, head against the hot metal, and let my heart slow down. It wasn't the end of the world; it really didn't make it any harder for Sebastian and me to have a baby. At least, that's what I told myself.

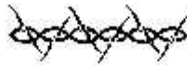
"Got the shot did you?" a rather familiar voice threw the question at me.

I spun on my heel to face down the chubby woman who'd been tossed out of the clinic. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, I didn't," I snapped at her, forcing back the urge to punch her in her doughy face.

She nodded. "Smart girl. I'll tell you now, it was the best decision you ever made. The government won't get you now." She reached out and patted me on the arm. I shrugged her hand off me and bit my tongue, the four-letter words on the tip that would leave me screaming and ranting at the unsuspecting woman.

I unlocked the car, slid into my seat, and started the engine. The rear view mirror gave me a perfect picture of the purple muumuu waddling through the parking lot, the woman on her way to accost another person leaving the clinic.

"It wasn't a choice I made; it was a choice taken from me," I whispered to her retreating figure. I took a deep breath and headed home to Sebastian and the farm.



Days turned into weeks and before I knew it, I'd spent the next month alternately hiding in our tiny bedroom, watching daytime talk shows and, in general, allowing myself to fall back into the depression that had found me after the miscarriage.

I told Sebastian I didn't feel well, had a fever, my joints ached—anything that would give me time to hide from the world for a little longer. The sunlight hurt my eyes on the few days I dared to peek out into the yard, and that became yet another excuse. Sebastian did his best to console me when he wasn't working on his new client's project. He brought me flowers from the fields, told me funny stories, and even baked cookies for me, something he'd never done before.

On the twenty-eighth day of my—self-imposed—confinement, a booming rattle shook me awake, the bedroom door flinging open.

"That's it, I've been patient and done what I could, but you've got to get up," Sebastian barked as he whipped the blankets off me.

"Leave me alone," I grumbled, grabbing at the blankets.

He snatched them out of my hands. "Nope, time to grow up and get with the program."

Bright sunlight streamed into the room as he opened all the curtains. "There's no use crying over something you can't change." He sat down on the bed and pulled me upright to sit beside him.

"It isn't fair," I said, hating how childish I sounded. "Every crackhead and addict out there can get pregnant, and they can't even take care of themselves. We would be able to give a child a life, a family, and a home."

Sebastian nodded. "I know, babe, but you're not doing yourself any good by wallowing in this."

I frowned at him. "I'm not wallowing."

"Yes, you are. I have something for you; it's down in the garden, so you'll have to haul your butt down there. I've got to go into town; I'll be back in a couple of hours."

I stood and stomped my way to the bathroom, brushing past him. "What do you know anyway, you're just a man; you don't

have an internal clock like I do,” I snapped as I turned on the shower and got in the steaming water.

Stupid male, what did he know about really wanting babies? Or losing weight for that matter? The man thought he was a Greek god with the way he strutted through the house naked, preening in front of mirrors. I snorted to myself. My anger faded as I worked the soap through my hair, the hot water rinsing away the last of the tears. Damn, now I was feeling grateful for his intervention. I’d have to be careful about how I thanked him, or I’d never hear the end of it.

Fifteen minutes later, I was heading out the back door to the garden when a soft woof met my ears. I blinked, stared, and couldn’t believe what I saw. Sitting next to the freshly dug earth, with a giant red ribbon tied around its neck, was a tiny yellow Labrador Retriever.

I clapped my hands over my mouth and the puppy woofed at me and started to wiggle, his entire body wagging as if his tail alone wasn’t enough. I ran and fell to my knees in front of the little guy, scooping him up and holding him close as he licked my face, his still-sweet puppy breath tickling me.

“Oh, you devil of a man,” I said as I cuddled the bundle of fur. “What are we going to call you, hmm?” I rubbed his velvety soft ears and he settled down, resting his nose on the crook of my neck. I pressed my cheek against him. “How about Nero?” I’d grown up with a big yellow Lab that my grandparents had rescued and he’d been my companion and best friend for years.

A voice called from the front of the house, “Hello? Mrs. Wilson?”

Standing up, Nero in my arms, I walked around the house to see Jessica carrying a basket filled to the brim. She smiled at me over the basket, her eyes lighting on Nero.

“You’ve got a puppy? Oh, he’s so cute. Can I hold him?” I handed him to her as she handed me the basket of goodies.

“It’s a belated welcome-to-our-neighbourhood gift,” Jessica said as she snuggled with the wriggling puppy.

“Thank you, that’s really sweet.” I placed the basket on the porch railing. “Do you want to go for a walk with me and Nero?”

Jessica nodded and put him down. We headed out the front drive, past the heavy iron gates that had hung for as long as the property had existed. They were heavy and sturdily built when

the farm first was started. Each panel was taller than me, and easily weighed a hundred pounds. The supports were cemented into the ground on either side, and there was a huge rusting metal bar that slipped into place to lock it. Scrolling leaves and grape clusters were welded on in an attempt to soften the hard steel lines, to make it look more artistic than utilitarian. It didn't work that well. At the best of times, it was a major effort to close the thing, which is why we left it open, and why the bar was nearly covered in vegetation.

Jessica chatted at me the entire time, her bubbly personality yet another stamp of her mothers. I didn't mind; she was a sweet girl. I wondered several times why she'd taken the Nevermore shot; she didn't seem to need to lose weight, but I didn't think it was a question I could ask her. Maybe when her mother came over for coffee I would broach the subject.

Jessica pointed out the neighbours who were nice, weird, and neutral quite effectively. As we passed one house we could hear shouting from inside, then a crash of something heavy. I glanced at Jessica, and she shrugged.

"They're always fighting. We all just ignore it."

I couldn't help but stare backwards as we kept moving past the house. The shrieks rose to a crescendo, and then stopped suddenly. I shivered, a feeling of dread creeping along my skin. Once we were fully past that home, Jessica continued her tour of the area.

Though the properties around here ranged in size, they averaged at five acres a piece with a few undeveloped properties scattered around. On our road alone there were only four homes; the roads on either side of us boasted two and three, respectively. With being this rural, it was almost like being in our own little world. If not for T.V and internet, the world could end and we probably wouldn't even know it.

Which was just fine by me, I like the quiet.

The walk took us about an hour, and by the end of it, I was packing Nero. I didn't mind; he was tiny, and the walk and visit left me feeling invigorated and more alive than I'd felt in weeks.

"Hey, that was fun. Would it be okay if I came and walked with you and Nero again?" Jessica asked as we stood in front of my place.

“Of course, anytime, you don’t need to call. I’m not going back to work for a while yet so just pop in.”

Jessica waved and jogged off toward home.

The car was back which meant that Sebastian was home. I smiled and headed toward the house. I didn’t care how grateful I sounded or how he might try to blackmail me with it later, he was a good man and I was lucky to have him.

“Sebastian?” I called out, Nero sound asleep in my arms. I wanted to apologize for being a jerk.

“Here.”

I clutched Nero close and kissed the top of his down-soft head, and made my way to the living room where Sebastian sat glued to the TV.

“Really? After the talk you just gave me about not wallowing and being out in the sunshine?” I said, tapping him on the shoulder. “I can’t believe you bought me a—”

“Shhh,” he cut me off and pointed to the TV.

On the screen was a reporter standing in front of VGH, Vancouver General Hospital. “It appears that the miracle drug, Nevermore, wasn’t such a miracle after all. Early reports are that the toxins thought to be strained out of the main component of the drug—cystius scoparius, better known as scotch broom—were not eliminated.” The reporter choked up, her eyes misting over, and I wondered if she had taken the drug or knew someone close to her who had. “The toxins attack the part of the brain that makes us human, whole sections of the cerebral cortex are eaten away until there is nothing left but a base animal instinct.” Someone stumbled out of the hospital and the reporter turned and ran toward the man who clutched at his stomach. “Sir, can you tell us why you’re here today?”

“I’m so hungry, I can’t stop eating. Nothing fills me up.”

His eyes were glazed and his skin had a strong golden yellow hue to it, as if he were jaundiced.

“Sir, did you take the drug Nevermore?” she asked, sticking the microphone close to the man.

He stared at the microphone for a moment, opened his mouth to answer, and chomped his teeth around the fuzzy piece, growling and snarling. The sounds sent chills all over my body. The reporter backed away, the cameraman keeping tabs on the man attempting to devour the microphone. Then he looked up, right

into the camera. His pupils twitched as the camera focused in on them, sliding from a perfect, human round, to a horizontal rectangle, reminiscent of a goat's eye.

I gasped and grabbed for Sebastian's hand. He gave it to me and I clung to him. That could have been me if I'd taken the shot—would have been me if not for the main ingredient. I pressed my nose into Nero's fur and breathed in his scent as Sebastian's hand went clammy in mine.

The man stood and opened his mouth. I couldn't tell if he was trying to speak or if he was roaring at the camera. By the cameraman's reaction, he was roaring. The scene jiggled and jogged as the cameraman and the reporter fled, but in her heels and tight business skirt, the reporter wasn't fast enough. The camera turned in time to see her get tackled from behind, her body slamming into the ground under the weight of the Nevermore man.

He reared up and slammed his mouth into her back, ripping a chunk of flesh as if she were a loaf of bread. Her screams were audible from whatever mic was left on the camera, then the camera was dropped and the screen scrambled, and then went black.

"That wasn't for real," I said, though I knew already in my gut that it was. It was like watching a hurricane rip apart a house. You didn't think it was possible, didn't think they would air it, but in your heart you knew it wasn't staged.

Sebastian didn't say anything, he just flipped the channel. They were all breaking news and bulletins. The Nevermore drug had been taken by what officials were estimating was close to ninety percent of the North American population over the last two months—street versions and FDA approved versions—both of which were having the same effect.

We watched in stunned silence for over an hour, the reports coming hard and fast at first, but then slowing as people were cautioned to stay within their homes and avoid all contact with the outside world while the outbreak was taken care of.

"I never thought I'd see the day a zombie apocalypse would happen," I said as Sebastian turned the TV off.

"They aren't zombies," he snapped at me as he rubbed his left arm. "They can't bite you and turn you into one of them. The doctors on TV said that already."

“I didn’t say that they could bite you, I just said that they were zombies,” I said, confused by his sudden turn of mood.

“No, you didn’t. I’m sorry; this has just really freaked me out,” he said and pulled me into his arms, Nero squirming in between us.

“It’ll be okay,” I said, “We’ve got each other and the farm. We should be good for a while, right? It won’t take long. Someone will have this straightened out in no time.”

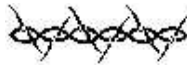
Sebastian untangled himself from me and strode to the kitchen. “We have to be ready.”

I followed him. “For what?”

“I think we’re going to be on our own for a while,” he said as a loud thumping footstep echoed through our little house.

My adrenaline soared as I thought about the scene on the TV. The reporter hadn’t had a chance. I could still hear her screams and the peeling of her flesh from his bite . . . I swallowed hard and put Nero in the bathroom on a makeshift towel-bed, shut the door, and headed back into the kitchen. I didn’t want to believe that we were already going to face down one of the Nevermores, but it was all too likely. I stepped to my knife drawer, pulled out the biggest blade I had, and gripped it tight. Sebastian nodded and pulled out a knife of his own. Together we crept through the house to the front door, reaching it as another thump rumbled through the floorboards. What the hell was out there? I didn’t want to know, really I didn’t.

Sebastian held up his hand and with his fingers counted to three. I nodded, and he held up one finger, two, and as he held up the third, he gripped the doorknob and snapped the door open.



We both stumbled back in relief, Dan staring at us with bushy grey eyebrows lifted high. He had his gun slung over his shoulder and a strap across his chest that was full of ammunition, long gold and silver cartridges. They looked big enough to drop an elephant.

“You two need some lessons in surviving. First off, don’t go investigating a strange noise without some serious firepower. This is not a horror movie, there’s no hero going to come rescue you. You want to survive this outbreak of idiots who took some new drug and turned into animals, you’re gonna have to do it on your own.”

He stepped across the threshold and sauntered into our house, casual like, as if he belonged here. I lifted an eyebrow at Sebastian who shrugged and said, “Dan, what’re you doing here?”

“Don’t you listen, boy? You need a lesson or two before I go and lock myself in the bunker.” He paced around the living room, peering out the curtains of the bay window.

“Dan, they’ll have an antidote in no time and this will go down as one of the greatest blunders in history and everything will go back to normal,” I said, desperately wanting to believe my own words.

“You really believe that, girl?” He turned his steely eyes on me.

I froze, my mouth dry as he made me face the reality with a single look. I shook my head ever so slowly.

He mimicked me. “Didn’t think so.” He flopped himself onto our couch. With a sharp motion of his hand, he beckoned us to come closer. Sebastian obeyed, but I stayed where I was, near to the open door.

“Second thing.” Dan leaned forward, elbows on his knees and lowered his voice. “Food and water. Next is weapons. Then you got to have a way to keep them out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I snapped, my fear making me surly. “There isn’t going to be any horde or pack or whatever you think there’s going to be.” A breeze blew in and I spun to close the door, gasping at the person standing on the edge of the doorstep. I vaguely recognized him as the portly clerk from Tom’s Grocery.

But he was no longer chubby. He was lean, the excess flesh hanging off his arms and face, the skin a sickly yellow like the man on the TV. Worst was the way his pupils had become a horizontal slit that stole his humanity from him.

"Hungry," was all he said as he launched himself at me. I stumbled backwards with a grunt, striking out with my knife and getting nothing but air. We hit the ground and I rolled, trying to remember my distant Judo lessons, failing miserably. The clerk ended up on top of me, but didn't pin my knife hand; I suppose he was too focused on eating me. Before I knew what I was doing, I had my left hand wrapped around his throat, keeping his snapping teeth off me, and I slammed the knife upwards into his heart, blood spurting out around the blade and down the handle.

I blinked and his body was suddenly gone; yanked off me with a growl. Sebastian stared down at me with a look of horror across his face.

Dan stepped up next to him. "She's got a good survival drive. That'll serve you well. If she were a screamer, you'd be dead in no time."

I lay on the floor staring up at them, my brain trying to process what just happened. I'd been attacked, and I'd killed a man. In a less time than it took to take a breath of air, my life had twisted itself inside out. My hands were slick with his blood, and as I stood, a wave of vertigo washed over me.

"She's gonna puke."

Hands were suddenly on me, guiding me outside where I did indeed puke, heaving till my stomach was empty and sweat beaded on my forehead. Dan turned the hose on and I washed my hands clean and sprayed the cool water over my face. I had killed a man. My stomach clenched again and I dry heaved.

"Oh shit," Sebastian said, his voice off to my right, his hands tightening on my arms.

"I'll be okay," I said.

"Not you, babe." He turned me to the front of our property and the open gate. "Them."

Maybe it wasn't a horde, but there was close to twenty people walking our way, the distinct yellow of their skin visible even from here.

Sebastian let me go and ran for the gate.

“Bastian, don’t!” As a unit, every single one of the Nevermore’s heads snapped up, their slitted eyes focusing on the source of the scream. Me.

“Damn it, girl, I told you no noise,” Dan growled as he walked past me, putting his gun to his shoulder and taking aim at the running horde, though he didn’t pull the trigger. Sebastian reached the gate the same time as the first of the Nevermores and he flung the heavy panels shut, slamming the lock into place as they hammered their bodies up against it, screaming and howling, their eyes wild and hands reaching for Sebastian.

I ran down the porch, jumped across the flowerbeds, and ran to where Sebastian stood panting, staring at the horde in front of us. “Why aren’t they trying to climb the gate?” I whispered.

Sebastian shook his head, breathing hard. That had been a quick sprint for a man of his size, faster than I’d seen him move in years.

Dan strolled up next to us, casually, like he was out for a Sunday visit, and except for the gun slung over his shoulder and the horde of Nevermores at our gate, he could have been.

“Interesting, that. They don’t seem to be able to figure it out. Like animals penned up.” But even as he spoke, one of the Nevermores pushed his way through to the front of the group and began to fiddle with the gate, his fingers clumsy and far from dexterous. He didn’t seem to be able to use the finer points of motor skills, which was better for us. All the same, he was still trying to open the gate.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Sebastian said, pulling me with him as he backed away from the gate.

I didn’t need a lot of encouragement. I was not interested in facing down that horde anytime soon. Thank God our place was fully fenced.

“We’re stuck here for a while, boy. Might as well get used to the idea, unless you’ve got a tank in that shed over there.” Dan pointed to the dilapidated chicken coop we’d partially knocked down in preparation for a garden.

“We don’t need a tank.” I surprised myself by speaking my thoughts out loud to a virtual stranger. “We’ll just take the car. They can’t stop us, and we’ll just run them over.”

I could barely believe the words that came out of my mouth and apparently neither could Sebastian.

“You’re kidding me, right? Those things out there are people underneath it all, and you want to run them over?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, they want to EAT us, not play Parcheesi,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. A sharp rattle snapped all three of our heads toward the gate in unison. The horde was leaning into the steel gates, the hinges groaning. Every last one of them had their mouths open, teeth showing, saliva dripping and hanging from loose lips.

“We need to get out of sight,” Dan said, walking back to the house.

“We need to get out of here!” Hysteria bubbled up. I’d just killed a man and we had a horde of drug-induced zombies on our doorstep. I clapped my hands over my face and tried to block out the moment. The sights were gone, but the groan of the gates, the growling of the horde, still reached me, denying me my moment of escape.

A hand on my arm snapped my eyes open. Sebastian dragged me toward the house. “We’ll talk about what we’re going to do inside. The last thing we need is to go off half-cocked and get ourselves killed.”

I let him direct my body, but I couldn’t help but stare over my shoulder at the writhing mass of things that had until very recently been human. “This can’t be happening.”

A sharp shake brought my eyes up to Sebastian, fear and the denial of that fear making his eyes those of a person I barely recognized. “It is happening, Mara, and you need to get used to the idea,” he said, his mouth a thin hard line. I jerked my arm out of his hands.

“You’re an ass, you know that, don’t you?” I stomped toward the front door, slamming it behind me. All I wanted was a little comfort, a white lie or two to get me through the initial shock. After that, I could come to terms with what was going on.

The living room was dim, the flickering of the TV the only light, as the curtains and blinds were drawn down. Dan sat on the couch, his feet propped up on the hand-carved coffee table we’d bought for our first place.

“Feet off,” I said, shoving his feet off before he could remove them himself. “I don’t care if this is the end of the world, I don’t want your feet on my coffee table.”

The door opened behind me and shut with a soft click. I kept my back turned to Sebastian, my spine rigid, my breathing slow and deliberate as I tried to rein in my anger. A whine came from the bathroom, and I stomped down the hallway and swung the door open. Nero tried to scamper between my legs, but I scooped him up and held him tight. A minute passed and the anger started to drain out of me. Taking one last deep breath, I carried Nero into the living room. I stared at the TV and came to a sudden stop, unable to take my eyes off the screen.

Dan leaned forward. "I'd hoped they'd have gotten it under control in the bigger cities, at least."

"I don't think that's the case," I said, my hands trembling as I stroked Nero. Lists of major cities that had been overrun and were considered uninhabitable flashed on the screen in no particular order: Toronto, Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Edmonton, Brisbane, New York, Atlanta, Ottawa, London, Perth, Paris, Frankfurt, Berlin, Glasgow, Mexico City, Venice, Lima; the list went on and on, scrolling for a solid two minutes.

"Every continent has been hit by this catastrophe, though some obviously worse than others." The male announcer's voice blared to life on the screen, and I jumped involuntarily. Nero gave a squeak. I kissed him on the top of his head.

The camera panned to a reporter in what looked like a bare-bones room, cement walls, and shelves of strange scientific-looking paraphernalia.

"Dr. Josephson, what can you tell us about the events? Will the drug wear off? What can we do about this situation?" the reporter asked, turning to the camera every few words, as if to gain permission from the viewing audience to ask the questions.

"It's simple, even for a nincompoop like you, Blaine," Dr. Josephson said.

"It's Bruce."

"Whatever. The drug was skipped through the FDA testing as well as Health Canada; money greased the wheels to hurry it to market. In the two months since it's been out, it made over 1.6 trillion dollars. You can imagine how that would make a company eager to get it to the public."

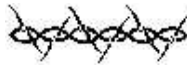
Bruce leaned in. "Those numbers can't be right."

Dr. Josephson snorted. “337 million people, give or take a few thousand, get the shot through legal means. That’s in North America alone. Five thousand dollars per shot, one hundred people a day per clinic. You should do your research before you go on air, Bruno.”

The doctor sat down on a ratty old stool and looked up into the camera, as if Bruce were no longer worth speaking to.

“There is no cure. There is no chance it will go away. It won’t wear off, it is designed to link permanently to the molecular structure of human bones, organs, and most importantly, brain. It cannot be transferred by a bite, as the modern movie culture would have you believe. These are not zombies, these are people gone feral, wild. They are acting as packs, not unlike a pack of wolves with an Alpha male and female, and the rest working as a group for food and protection.” His pale blue eyes bore into me and I shivered with the intensity. “To the public who have not taken Nevermore, I will say only one thing,” He paused, dropped his head and shook it slightly before looking back up into the camera.

“Survive.”



With that, the TV went blank, and the screen turned into a warning system of striped colours. The silence in our little home was overwhelming and I wanted to say something to break it, but didn't. I couldn't think of anything to say that would mean anything, and since screaming hysterically was out of the question, I was out of options.

Dan stood, drawing our attention. "That's it then, I'm headed back to my place."

"What?" Sebastian asked. "You can't get out of here alive, there's no way you'll make it."

He strolled to the back door, ignoring Sebastian's assessment, glancing over his shoulder at us. "There's a back trail, goes up and around, it's a great view of the ocean at the top. I think these things—"

"Nevermores," I said softly.

Dan nodded at me. "These Nevermores seem to be sticking to the main routes right now, so if you come to my place, come the back way. I'll put a red flag next to it. Other than that, plant a garden, grow yourself some food, mend your fences, and keep quiet."

He put his hand on the door and I grabbed the back of his grubby shirt. "Hey, you can't just leave us here."

Dan laughed and half-turned back to me. "You city folk are going to be the first to die off—not prepared, no survival instinct." His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "You might make it; you got some good reflexes on you."

Sebastian stepped up and I didn't let go of Dan. "You could help us. At least we could be working together," I said.

Again Dan laughed. "I don't work with anybody, it ain't my style. Too much drama when you get more than one person in a room."

"So," Sebastian said. "We're supposed to be grateful you showed up for a belated house warming, and you didn't even bring us a gift? You happen to visit in the middle of a crisis where you don't even help? I don't know why you bothered at all."

I let go of Dan's coat, feeling my own anger build. What the hell was Dan's reasoning, or was he truly just as crazy as we'd heard?

Dan straightened his coat and lifted an eyebrow at us, then nodded slowly. "If you can make it to my place, I'll let you have a weapon, but this is Mother Nature's way of weeding out the weak. Only the strong will survive this, and that's how it should be. To tell you the truth, I came here to take what you had and add it to my stores. But you were still here, still alive. Mores the pity."

We stared at him in disbelief, the reality of the situation hitting us both at the same time.

The door clicked softly as he left without even saying goodbye, or better, good luck. I wondered if he meant for us to mend our fences around the property, or the proverbial ones between us. I looked over to Sebastian, took in his drawn face and worried eyes. My heart gave a thump and I put Nero down before I all but threw myself into Sebastian's arms.

Between sobs and 'I'm sorry' on both sides, our lips met and we caught the edge of a mania that perhaps other survivors were feeling. Glad to be alive we stripped each other out of our clothes and stumbled upstairs to the bathroom. The water still ran, we hadn't lost power yet, and we drained the hot water tank showering off the sweat and remnants of blood, wrapping ourselves around each other, washing the fear away for a moment or two.

We made love in the shower and then again in the bedroom, our frantic need to touch and feel overwhelming any common sense—like locking the doors.

Lying in each other's arms, we dozed off, dreaming perhaps that this was all a nightmare, a shared fear come to life in the night, but gone when the light of day streamed through the windows. Not so much.

The bedroom door creaked, the knob clicking against something; perhaps nails, or perhaps what we later learned was skin hardening into a hide like leather. I woke, chills rippling over my body, the sensation of being watched heightened by a disorientation of time and place.

"Bastian," I whispered, my eyes picking out a figure silhouetted in the doorway.

"Hmm," he grunted.

I placed my hand lightly over his lips and whispered into his ear. "We didn't lock the doors."

Sebastian's eyes popped open and he slowly moved my hand from his lips. Keeping as still as possible, I frantically searched the room with my eyes, seeking a weapon of any sort.

"Help me." Her voice was raspy and though she didn't move, I knew we didn't have much time.

I jumped up out of bed, recognizing the voice as our neighbour's teenage daughter.

"Jessica?"

"Help me, please," she said, her body twitching. I flicked on the overhead light and Sebastian cursed.

"We're naked here, woman," he said as he yanked on some clothes. I did the same, keeping an eye on Jessica the whole time, her eyes were semi-glazed and she didn't seem to notice that we were naked. Thank goodness for small blessings.

"Honey," I said slipping a t-shirt over my head, "Your parents, where are they?"

"Gone, they turned into monsters."

I froze in mid-zip.

"Shit."

"My thoughts exactly, wife."

I moved toward Jessica and wondered again why she had taken Nevermore. Thin as a rail, pretty, and yet she'd had the shot, as had her mother and father. Her Caribbean-blue eyes were still human, not yet sliding into the realm of the feral horde outside. How long would it be before they turned colour and she became one of the monsters?

I touched her arm and she flinched. "It's okay, let's go downstairs and see what we can do."

"The TV said there isn't a cure," she said, her voice breaking up with a sob.

I nodded. "I know, but that could change. I'm sure they're working on a cure right now."

Sebastian made a rude noise, and I shushed him. I knew when to tell a white lie. This was a teenage girl who was terrified and alone; the least I could do was try and comfort her.

Once downstairs, seated around the kitchen table, a hot tea in front of her, Jessica told us what happened.

“Parkinson’s runs strong in our family, so my parents wanted to make sure I never had to deal with it. They insisted I take the shot with them. You got the shot too, didn’t you?”

I leaned forward and put my hand over hers. “No, I didn’t.” I said.

It took some effort not to flinch as she twitched underneath my fingers, but I wanted her to be calm so that she would keep talking. “When did your parents . . . ?” I wasn’t sure how to ask when her parents went crazy and turned into zombies.

“Today, after I got back from our walk,” she whispered, staring into her tea. “I don’t have very long, do I?”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I blinked them back. I didn’t know Jessica well, but it was hard to see someone so young cut down by something that should have helped her live a long and healthy life. It was hard to know there was nothing we could do to help. Nero whined at our feet, and I stood and fixed him a bowl of food. I felt bad for ignoring him, but he wagged his tail and seemed to have forgiven me already.

I thought about the fight we’d heard in the home as we’d walked and shivered. No doubt that had been no normal fight, but a neighbor shifting into a Nevermore. Crap, how close had we come to getting run down by a wandering Nevermore?

“How long ago did they take the shot?” Sebastian asked, leaning in toward her.

“Five weeks; I was about a week later,” she said, her eyes flicking up to him twice, maybe intimidated by his size, the way a lot of people were. Then I remembered that she had a crush on him. I could only imagine the embarrassment of finding her crush in bed naked with his wife.

Sebastian stood up and stomped out of the house. I ignored him, knowing that Jessica needed comfort right now. “You can stay here, sweetheart. It’ll be okay.” Then I frowned. “How did you make it past the horde out front?”

She gave me a wobbly, tear filled smile. “They know I’m one of them. They let me pass, I climbed the gate, and they . . .” She shrugged. “There’s no other way to say it, they cheered for me, like they were happy I could get in here to you.” Dropping her head to her arms on the table she let out a sob.

I reached over and put a hand on her head, fighting with my own rising emotions: sadness, fear, and then relief. It could

have been me waiting to be turned into an animal. If not for the damn scotch broom, it would be me. I would have taken the shot in an instant.

I ushered Jessica to the back bedroom and tucked her into bed, giving her three Benadryl, which would knock her out for the night. I took one for myself, not to sleep, but for the reaction I was having to some airborne allergen. My skin tingled all over my body, my eyes watered, and the back of my throat was itchy—sure signs I'd gotten hit with something I didn't like. Then I went to find Sebastian, Nero at my heels, my fear beginning to turn into resolve. We could survive. We were smart, young, and in love. There wasn't anything we couldn't do.

He was out on the back porch leaning against the railing, staring out at the star encrusted sky.

I stepped up beside him slipping my arm around his waist. "I haven't had the chance yet to thank you."

He gave me a quizzical look.

I pointed down at the puppy sitting on my foot and smiled. "You didn't have to get me a puppy, but I'm glad you did." I gave his waist a squeeze and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"We've got to lay out a plan, Bastian. Food, water, fences, weapons. Maybe get some sort of radio up in case there are notices once the electricity is out." I looked up and my breath caught in my throat. Tears streaked his face, dripped off his chin and plunked onto the railing.

He wrapped his arms around me. "It isn't fair, Mara, that girl is losing everything because she wanted to have a life, to not pass on a disease she had no say on in the first place." His voice was thick with emotion.

I held on to him as tight as I could, fighting my own tears, shocked at what I was seeing. Sebastian was usually so stoic. In four years, this was perhaps the second time I'd seen him shed tears—and the first time I wasn't entirely certain it wasn't just a hard wind causing his eyes to water.

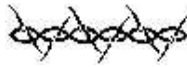
"Go to bed, babe. I'll stay up and watch over you two. I don't think I could sleep anyway."

I kissed him softly on his lips, holding his head in my hands. "I love you, Bastian, more than anything."

He kissed me back and swatted me lightly on my butt as I turned to go inside.

I went upstairs to bed, snuggling Nero down in with me. I listened to Sebastian pace on the porch, muttering from time to time. I didn't sleep much that night, my mind whirling with plans. In my head, I sketched out the best place for a garden—the current spot was far too rocky—where the fence needed to be reinforced, and what we could use as weapons besides the knives we had. Dan hadn't even left us a single weapon, though he'd said he had lots at his place.

I yawned and closed my eyes, Nero snuggling in tight next to me, his warmth a steady comfort, then finally drifted off to a fitful sleep.



The dreams that haunted what should have been a restful sleep left me wishing I'd stayed up with Sebastian. The clerk was attacking me again, but this time I was on my own, Sebastian in a pool of blood beside me, Dan nowhere to be found, Nero barking madly, and I was pregnant. In the dream, when I realized I was with child, I snapped, a mother bear's ferocity coming from a place I never knew existed within me.

The clerk never had a chance, his heart once more pierced by my kitchen blade, his eyes glazing over as death settled on him. A boom from the other side of the house and the back porch door swung open, a wave of Nevermores pouring in. Yanking my blade out of the clerk's chest, I reached for the front door and pulled on the handle. It was locked and my hand slid over the mechanism to unlock it over and over, unable to grasp it. I screamed and turned back to the horde. They rushed me and I fought like a mad woman, protecting the child within me, blocking hands and mouths, slicing off fingers and stabbing eyes. Nero barked and bit, but they flung his little body aside like a rag doll, disappearing into the maw of one of the Nevermores. The horde howled and swelled, slamming me into the ground, pinning me as they shook me.

I screamed, or tried to, and a hand covered my mouth.

"You're dreaming, babe. It's just a dream. You're okay." Sebastian's deep rumble in my ear slowed my heart rate as I came fully awake.

"What . . . time . . . it?" I mumbled.

"What?" He lifted his hand off my mouth.

"Time?"

"It's just after seven. Jessica's still asleep."

I got up, still in my clothes from the day before. "I guess I should shower."

I plucked at my sweat-soaked t-shirt.

"Might as well, at some point we're going to lose electricity, and then no more hot showers." He kissed me on the cheek then bent and scooped up a yawning Nero. "I'm going to make breakfast for us and the little man here." He ruffled the puppy's hair and disappeared into the hallway.

I showered, taking my time in the hot water. It was hard to imagine being without the simple parts of life, the day-to-day luxuries. It looked like we were about to embark on the camping trip from hell that wouldn't ever end. Not really the most pleasant of thoughts for a newly-relocated city girl.

Downstairs, Sebastian was indeed making breakfast: waffles, eggs, bacon, hash browns, oatmeal, sausage, and French toast. Nero was munching on a sausage quite happily.

I shook my head. "Holy crap, what are you doing? Shouldn't we be saving the food?"

Sebastian flicked his head toward the hallway where the guest bedroom was. "She's going to be hungry and, let's be honest, this could be one of her last meals."

I swallowed my irritation. "You're a good man, my love, I hadn't thought of that."

The guest bedroom was painted bright yellow, including the door; something I hadn't gotten around to changing yet, though it seemed fitting that she was there. I knocked three times.

"Jessica, are you awake? We've got breakfast ready."

A shuffle, and then a groan. I backed away from the door, thinking we'd made a serious mistake in letting her stay with us, even for the night.

The doorknob turned slowly and Jessica peeked out, yawning. "Is that bacon I smell?"

I let out a breath, relief rushing through me. "Yup, Sebastian's been slaving over the stove all morning, just for you." I smiled at her and patted her back.

She flushed and ducked her head as she passed me and headed into the kitchen.

What happened next was like nothing I've ever seen before. Jessica, who couldn't have been more than 5'4 and weighed maybe 110 pounds, ate at least as much as Sebastian, who was a full foot in height taller than her and was at least double her weight. To top it all off, it looked as if they were racing, popping sausages and bites of waffle in as fast as they could chew. The whole scene was more than a little disconcerting. It was kind of fun, though, to watch her face when she peeked under her eyelashes at Bastian, her blushing and head ducking almost comical in their lack of subtlety. The best part was that Sebastian was completely oblivious.

I had a single helping, keeping it to oatmeal and a banana, then splurged and had some bacon with it. What the hell, if it was the end of the world, who cared about counting calories?

“What’s the plan today?” Sebastian asked, looking from me to Jessica, and then back again.

“Oh. Well, I thought that we should make a tally of all the food in the house, plant the garden, and check fences.”

“We just had the new page wire fence put up! And haven’t even pulled down the old barbed wire on the other side,” Sebastian said, his irritation filling the room.

Jessica slouched in her seat and stared at her plate.

I rubbed my face with both hands. “I know that. And maybe it’s good that we have a double fence line, but the deer can still get in. I know the deer can jump, but what if there’s a little hole somewhere? One at ground level? The Nevermores maybe can’t jump, but I bet they can crawl.”

At that Sebastian paused, his mouth open to argue, and then he snapped it shut and nodded. The thought of a horde of Nevermores pouring through a small hole was all too possible and all too frightening to take the chance that there was even one small opening on our first line of defence.

“We also need to find some way to store water,” I said, leaning back in my chair.

Sebastian nodded and leaned back in his chair, mimicking me. “We can draw water from the well even when the power’s out, but you’re right, we should store some anyway.” He stood up. “I’m going to start with the fences and I’ll throw another chain and padlock on the front gate. Why don’t you come with me, Jessica?” He glanced at me, and I gave him a slight nod. Neither of us said what we were both thinking. The Nevermores saw her as one of their own and wouldn’t hurt her, and it might keep Sebastian safer too, having her at his side. Jessica nodded and took another bite of a sausage, her face glowing with pleasure. I smiled to myself, it would be good to keep her distracted, and having her crush all to herself was a perfect way for a young girl to have her mind taken off the scary parts of life. It didn’t bother me, Sebastian was not the type to wander or stray, especially not for a sixteen-year-old girl.

As they headed out the back door, I grabbed Sebastian by the hand, pulling him back to me and planting a kiss on his lips.

“Don’t forget to reinforce the gate. I saw some extra bars in the grass beside it.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” He saluted me sharply and headed out, following Jessica’s lithe figure.

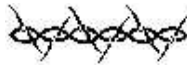
After they left, I spent the morning going through all our cupboards, charting out canned food and preserves, cleaners, toiletries, and perishables. Once I had them stacked in order of how fast we needed to use them, my heart sank. I’d never really been a person to buy in bulk and it showed. There were three bags of pasta, less than two dozen cans of soup, one large bag of rice, eight cans of pasta sauce, seven cans of tuna, fourteen cans of fruit of various kinds, three boxes of Jell-O, one bag of flour and sugar each, a small bag of brown sugar, a half box of tea, one of each of my favourite spices, and that was about it for food of the non-perishable sort.

I scrubbed my hands over my face. The fridge was full of fresh veggies and fruit, milk, cheese, half a dozen eggs, and two cuts of beef from dinner two nights ago. The freezer was not so full, but there were a few bags of bread, ground beef, one package of bacon, a package of chicken drumsticks, and two frozen pizzas. How the hell were we going to make this stretch?

“We are so screwed,” I said softly, needing to break the depressing silence even if it was with a depressing statement. Nero woofed softly in seeming agreement. I laughed and rolled a ball for him across the floor, which he bounded after. I sat on the floor rolling the ball, enjoying the normalcy of the moment. After ten minutes of playing, Nero yawned, and I scooped him up, grabbed a towel, and made a makeshift bed in the tub. At least there he wouldn’t get into trouble if he woke up and I was outside.

A huge rumble reached my ears as I tucked Nero in, a rumble that I recognized and had cursed most mornings as the neighbour and his god-awful diesel minus-a-muffler truck headed to work. Scrambling to my feet, I ran to the door, flinging it open in time to see the horde out front of our house get scattered by the black Dodge mowing them down.

Bodies flew in all directions, screams of pain and rage coming from every side. I shouted and pumped my fist in the air. I knew we could get out with a vehicle, I just knew it.



My jubilation was short-lived. The Dodge lurched to a stop just past our house.

I frowned. Sebastian and Jessica came running in from the far field, tools in their hands, worry written across their faces.

“Mara?” Sebastian yelled.

“I’m here. The guy with the noisy truck!” I pointed to the front of the property.

We stared as the truck rumbled, coughed, and fell silent, choosing this moment to protest its rough usage. The horde of Nevermores swarmed around the truck, scratching and screaming, their nails on the metal making my skin jump and twitch.

“What’s he doing?” Jessica asked.

“I think his truck stalled out,” Sebastian said.

The back window slid open, hands emerged, and our neighbour squeezed himself out into the truck bed.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Little help?” He flapped his arms and pointed around him like we hadn’t noticed the Nevermores surrounding him, or like we had some magic wand that would carve a path for him through the horde.

“What are we supposed to do? Walk out there and ask them if they would mind not eating him?” I said, not really expecting an answer.

Jessica was nodding though. “They let me through once; maybe they’ll let me through with Tom.”

Sebastian and I stared at her. “Jessica,” I said. “You don’t know that they won’t attack you.”

“They didn’t attack us on the back of your property when I was with Sebastian. They just stared at us, swaying, and kind-of-like singing under their breath,” she said, her voice far more confident than I felt.

Chills rippled over me at the picture that came to my mind, the scene I could see in my head even though I hadn’t been there. What Dr. Josephson on the TV had said slid into place along with what Jessica had said, and my mind filled in the missing bits. The horde would be working like wolf pack with an Alpha male and female, the rest acting together as hunters and protectors. A final moment of understanding came to me and I sucked in a

lungful of air, the simplicity of it making more sense than I would have thought. The pack, or whatever it was, wanted Jessica, if that Dr. Josephson from the TV was right, and the Nevermores were working like a wolf pack, they'd be looking for females to increase their numbers.

Oh. My. God.

More pieces slipped into place. The drug made people more fertile, made them territorial, ravenous, and made them disease resistant. The population of Nevermores was going to boom. And if the genetics didn't pass the drug to their young and make new Nevermores, I had no doubt what they would be eating for their next pack meal.

"No," I said, startling both Jessica and Sebastian. "You can't go out there." I stood in her way. "They want you, the pack—pride, whatever it is, they want you." I swallowed hard.

Sebastian stood behind Jessica, frowning. "What are you talking about, Mara?"

"Hey, come on guys, don't leave me hanging here," Tom yelled, and the pack went wild with the sound of his voice.

"In a minute," I yelled back, turning only my head to them, and then focused back on Jessica. "A breeder, that's all you'd be. Something to make babies and those babies will be just like them." I flung my arm out behind me. "And if they aren't, you can guess what's going to happen to the babies."

Jessica paled and Sebastian frowned at me. "They'd eat them," she whispered.

I nodded.

"You don't know that, Mara," Sebastian snapped at me. "And you're scaring her."

"It's the truth," Jessica said. "I can feel them pulling at me, wanting me to come to them. Especially that one there." She pointed to a big male who stood back from the rest of the pack, overseeing their efforts. The leader stood with his hands on his hips, his eyes narrowed as he grunted and barked what seemed to be orders to the rest of the group. He was taller than the rest, but not as big as Sebastian, with light blond hair that had seen better days. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, but it was hard to tell with the changes the drug put them through. The male had a definite air of command around him, and I had no doubt who was in charge of this pack. Trouble, that's what he was.

Jessica stared at him, her eyes not moving away for even a split second, it wasn't a look of fear that washed over her face—but desire. Shit.

She walked past us, heading straight toward the gate. "He won't eat the babies. I'll come back after I get Tom out. I don't have to go with the pack yet," she said certainty strong in her voice as she climbed the fence and dropped lightly on the other side. The pack made room for her, touching her lightly, stroking her hair. She walked straight up to the big male, brushing her fingertips against his. He stared down at her and she shook her head, and then pointed at Tom.

Sebastian shifted on his feet. "Is she negotiating with him?"

"I guess," I said, not sure this was a good idea at all. The big male shook his head and roared.

The pack scattered, leaving the truck clear.

"Tom! Hurry your ass up, man," Sebastian yelled when Tom hesitated. Another breath and he jumped down from the truck and started to run toward our gate. "Shit, I forgot my stash," he yelped and turned back toward the truck. He grabbed the handle and I grabbed Sebastian's hand.

"Forget your weed, man! Move it," Sebastian yelled.

"He's not going to make it," I whispered.

"He'll make it," Sebastian said.

One of the pack members crept forward, sniffing the air. It was too much for the creature's desires. It lunged at Tom and I stifled a scream. Tom screamed for us both. Like unleashing a tidal wave, the pack rushed back in and Tom disappeared under a flurry of bodies and mouths.

Jessica screamed and tried to run toward Tom, but the big male held her tight against his chest until she stopped squirming, her eyes glazing over with resignation.

"Don't hurt him," she yelled, but the pack didn't listen to her anymore than they listened to Tom's pleas for mercy.

I buried my head into Sebastian's shoulder.

"Look," Sebastian said.

I turned to see the pack retreating with their prize; none of it even recognizable as human, and Jessica and the Alpha male were walking to the gate.

As if in a dream, we met them there, just out of reach.

“Thank you. I wish I could have stayed with you longer,” she whispered, silver tears pooling in her quickly shifting eyes. She reached through, and though Sebastian grunted at me, I took her hands and held them with my own, rubbing my fingers over her knuckles. If she were my daughter, my child, I would want her to have this last moment of humanity, touching one of her own kind before she forgot everything she was and could have been.

“I wish we could’ve done more.”

Sebastian stepped closer and the Alpha male growled, his grip tightening on Jessica. Sebastian held up his hands, then slowly lowered them to my shoulders, squeezing me almost painfully tight.

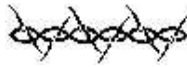
I ignored the pissing contest and stared at Jessica. “Be safe, sweetheart,” I whispered and lifted her hands to my lips, kissing the back of them.

The skin underneath my lips was spinning into a dusky yellow with faint lines that looked like veins, but weren’t. They were images of yellow teardrops like a poorly drawn tattoo of a broom flower. The plant was taking hold of the humans it inhabited like it did all the areas it was introduced to.

The Alpha male pulled her away, but not before giving Sebastian one more glare, one filled with hatred so intense that I was surprised he didn’t try to come over the gate.

“I don’t think he likes me.”

“What does it matter? He’d kill either of us,” I said. I turned away from the gate, heart heavy at losing Jessica, though I’d known it would happen. I just didn’t think it would be so soon. I reached up, took Sebastian’s hand off my shoulder and wrapped it around me, taking some comfort in the warmth. If only I could so easily ward off the chill in my heart.



The next week was spent digging the garden, watering it daily, checking fences, and drinking lots of water to keep our hunger at bay. Nero romped at our feet oblivious to the danger all around us, though he quickly learned to stay far away from the fence line. Only once did he stray close to the front gate; the growling and fury, along with a set of hands reaching for him, sent him running back to safety.

We phoned family and friends, trying to find out who had taken the shot, and who hadn't. Of them all, only Sebastian's Gran was still answering her phone, and she was in London.

"You two take care of each other. I'll be fine here, I have a flight to—" She was cut off, the line going dead, but at least we knew she was still alive and well. It was a small ray of sunshine.

We argued about whether or not to go to Dan's, but I won out.

"Fine, Mara. Fine. We won't go to Dan," Sebastian said, his body slumped on the couch.

"We can't trust him, Sebastian. He came here to raid us, not help us. He said so himself. We're safe here; the Nevermores can't seem to get in. If it comes down to desperation, then yes, maybe then we could go to Dan, but he's a last resort." I went back to attempting to hand-stitch a patch on a shirt.

The pack left us alone for the most part, sending out what seemed to be a scout once or twice a day. He was smaller than the rest, and slightly hunched over with angry red slashes on his upper body and face, with one that went right across his forehead. The scout, who we simply started to call Scout, would attempt to rattle the massive gate, give us a growl, and then wander off.

The long hours, hard work, and emotional stress taxed us, making us both edgy and out of sorts, not even leaving us enough energy to make love, which was unusual for us. The day before the power went out, we checked the TV as we did each morning and each night. For the first time in over a week there was an announcement of sorts.

"Mara, come here, the TV's on," Sebastian called out.

I ran downstairs, a towel wrapped around my hair.

There was no announcer, just a single picture like a page out of a book that scrolled up on a continual loop.

I read it out loud as it went. “All areas of North America are now considered dangerous territory, as is the North and West of South America, all of Australia, Europe, and much of Asia.”

There was a long stretch of blank screen and then a last warning.

I read it slowly, disbelief and a low thrum of resignation settled over me.

“All remaining residents from these named continents are now considered independent of any government, agency, or military command. We consider . . .”

That’s where it ended. The screen blinked and slid into white fuzzy static, reminding me of the twilight zone. I grabbed the remote and turned the TV off.

“What does that mean?” I already suspected the answer, but wanted Sebastian to say it out loud.

He reached up and took my hand. “We’re on our own, babe. That’s what it means. No one’s going to come help us or try to get us out of here. They’re going to let nature take its course, just like Dan said, and hope the Nevemores die off.”

I squeezed his hand and slid onto his lap. He circled his arms around me and we held each other tight, the fear surrounding us.

“We’ve still got each other,” I said.

Sebastian didn’t answer me, just laid his head against my breast, his breathing uneven as if he were holding back tears.

The next day, two weeks in, the power finally went and we had to break out the flashlights and candles, hoarding them, using them only when necessary. At that point, we realized we needed to dig a latrine of some sort. Shit—in the most literal sense of the word.

Worse than that realization, was the fact that we were through half our food stores—not that we had much to begin with—and our garden was a long way from producing.

“We’re just going to have to cut back some more,” I said, staring at our already meagre meal of pasta and a half a can of tuna cooked over the barbecue. Come winter we could use the wood stove and the old wood-burning stove I’d thought to replace for heat and cooking. But there were so many things on the list of

needed items: candles, seeds for the garden, and canning equipment, just to name a few.

Sebastian scrubbed his hands through his hair, his wedding band catching the last rays of the setting sun. I watched as it slid around, bumping up against his knuckle. The weight we were both losing was a testament to our hard work and lack of nutrition.

I started to laugh at the irony of the situation.

“What’s so funny?”

I gulped the laughter down enough to answer him. “We’ve wanted to lose weight for so long and all it took was for the world to shut down.” Another peal of laughter ripped its way out of me, leaving me shaking and gasping for air, tears running down my cheeks. Hilarity rarely gripped me, and now I seemed unable to shake its grasp.

He frowned at me, which only made me laugh harder; lack of food, poor sleep, and hard work making me giddy. I sat on the floor and the laughter rolled out of me, Nero dancing around my head woofing, and making me howl all the louder. Sebastian got up, left his plate of food and went outside, the back door slamming behind him.

I lay on the cool tile of the kitchen floor till the laughter subsided and the tears threatened to start. I forced them back, refused to let them get a hold of me. I wouldn’t let the fear rise again. We weren’t going to die here, we were going to live and survive. Nero lay down beside me, ever attentive, the perfect puppy, and I was grateful he took to his sit-stay commands so well. I couldn’t have handled an unruly dog with all that had been happening. I let my hand rest on his quickly-growing body for a moment. What were we going to do about him? We could barely feed ourselves and the dog food was diminishing as fast as our own.

I stood slowly, wobbling a little, the distant thud of axe and wood telling me where Sebastian was. I ate half my meal and covered the rest with plastic wrap, something else we were nearly out of.

Crap. I knew I’d made a mess of it with Bastian. I headed outside, Nero at my heels and Sebastian’s plate in hand to find him chopping wood, sweat dripping down his rapidly slimming frame. He would always be a big guy, but it was scary to see how fast he, especially, was losing weight.

"I'm sorry. I've pulled it together," I said in between chops. Sebastian lowered the blade and half-turned to me.

"It's okay. I suppose from time to time you're going to have breakdowns. It's to be expected. As long as you can always pull yourself up and out of it," he said.

I handed him his plate and he sat down on a log to eat.

"Well, it's not like I'm going to be here by myself, right? You're not planning on doing a walkabout in the middle of the night, go for some sort of marathon run to see if you can outdistance the pack, are you?" I smiled at him and he gave me a half-hearted smile back.

"No, not planning on it."

I blinked hard, wondering at the sudden fear that gripped me. Was he trying to say something without saying it?

"What's wrong, Bastian? I know this is a crap situation. I know it's not how we planned our lives, but we are alive and we still have each other. That's all that matters." I sat down beside him. A rattle drew our attention to the gate, Scout making motions at us, more than usual. He grunted and pointed at the food on the plate.

Sebastian stood and walked to the gate without a word, Nero whined the closer he got to the Nevermore. Scout backed off, obviously intimidated by his size, until Sebastian held the plate of food out to him.

"What are you doing?" The scene disturbed me. Why was he showing kindness to the Nevermore? Why would he give him food that we had so little of, which we so desperately needed?

Scout slunked forward cautiously, his eyes downcast until he was right at the gate with Sebastian towering over him. One shaking hand reached out to grab some noodles, streaking back to his mouth so fast I could barely track it with my eyes.

A second time he reached out to grab the food and as his hands grasped noodles, Sebastian's big hand clamped down on his arm. Scout squealed—setting Nero off, barking like a mad dog—and tried to pull away, but couldn't. Sebastian held onto him, not doing anything but holding. Scout squealed and screeched so loud and high-pitched, I found myself on my feet, heart pumping and ready to run.

"Bastian, he's calling the others," I said, fear blooming once more. We'd been almost back to normal; I could almost

forget the scene of Tom's death, of the pack surrounding our property, of Jessica going off with the Alpha.

"I know."

Two words, so simple and yet, they meant so much. He wanted Scout to call the pack in, but, why?

Rustling in the bushes was the only warning we had before the Nevermores exploded onto the road, screaming and gnashing their teeth. They were thinner than the last time I'd seen them, but they didn't seem worse for wear, their energy still high.

I searched the group, standing on my tiptoes and finally standing on a log to see if Jessica was with them.

"She's at the back," I said. "She looks okay." She was thin, her clothes ragged, but unlike some of the others who had scars and missing pieces of hair, she looked . . . like the queen of the pack. The Alpha male stepped out of the bush and put his hand on her shoulder, claiming her while he stared at Sebastian.

"What does he think? That you're going to fight him for her?" I asked more to myself, but Sebastian heard me.

"That's exactly what he thinks. I'm bigger, stronger, and younger. A threat to his position in the hierarchy of the pack," he said.

"But you aren't."

Sebastian turned to look at me, his eyes sad.

My heart dropped.

"Mara, the results from the fertility tests came back while you were out of it. It wasn't you that had fertility problems, it was me. The day I gave you Nero, when I went into town . . ."

I started to shake my head, backing away, half-falling off the log and stumbling over Nero.

"No, no you didn't, you wouldn't have. You said that it was stupid, that there was no way you would ever . . ." The world swayed around me and I fell to my knees, grabbing at the axe for support.

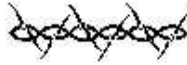
Sebastian walked to me, and turned me so that we both faced the gate and the pack beyond it. His hands were hot on my bare flesh and I began to itch, the concentration of broom in his body coming through in his sweat. It finally made sense, and I understood my reactions at strange times, after he kissed me or we made love. My body responded to the concentrate within his

system and I had to take antihistamines. I was allergic to him, to what he was becoming.

I let out a moan and he held me tight.

“I’m sorry, Mara. I took the shot.” He looked me in the eye, his own beginning to tint a light yellow that I’d been telling myself was just the way the light reflected on his iris.

“I took Nevenmore.”



I sobbed into his chest, pounded on it in a fit of rage that he could do this to me, that he would be leaving me, forgetting that if I'd had it my way, it would be the other way around.

The pack dispersed, once more stymied by the gate and their inability to climb it or unlock it, melting back into the bush as if they had never been there.

All that was left was Scout, who stared at us with his slitted eyes and rattled the gate to get our attention. In less than three weeks, that would be Sebastian, outside the property, an animal who no longer loved me, an animal who would as soon eat me as make love to me.

I stood up, pushing away from him, anger and pain at war with one another inside my heart. "I need to be alone."

"You're going to get a lot of that in the not-too-distant future, probably more than you want. I would take advantage of the time we have."

I spun on my heel, ready to slap him. "You asshole! Why didn't you tell me you'd taken the shot?"

He frowned and shook his head. "I didn't want you to worry."

"It's my right to worry! I'm your wife. If anyone should know that you're going to turn into an animal, it's me!" Nero whimpered at my feet, upset by the yelling. I bent and scooped him into my arms.

"The right time didn't come up. And I wasn't sure at first. I didn't feel any different. I wasn't losing weight, but at the clinic they said that might not happen as fast to me because of my size," he said, shrugging and lowering his eyes.

I stomped off toward the backyard and the garden, the sudden urge to kill something leaving me only one option. Pulling weeds. Over my shoulder, I yelled. "The right time was the minute you figured it out."

I froze at the sight in front of me. Three deer stood in my garden neatly pruning every last shoot of a vegetable that had come up in the last week, their ability to jump the fence giving them the edge over the Neve-mores who also wanted in. I wanted to cry, I wanted to yell and scream and throw things. I put Nero down, and

as I did, I scooped up a rock, hurling it at the four-legged interlopers. I missed by an easy mile and had to settle for running at them full speed down a slight slope, Nero woofing and running full-tilt, which wasn't any faster than me, and following them well into the open field. As they scattered, I slipped, tumbling the last of the way down, coming to rest on what had been my pea patch.

"Mara, are you okay?" Sebastian lifted me gently to a sitting position. I nodded tucked my face into the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent, trying hard not to think about what was coming.

"I'll help you get ready, babe. I won't leave you here without the things you're going to need."

"That gives me little solace when I know that you won't love me anymore," I whispered.

He was silent for so long that I wasn't sure he heard me. It was the shuddering that started deep in his body that made me sit back. Tears streamed down his face, washing lines of dirt and grime away, leaving streaks of almost-clean skin.

"I will always love you, no matter how far my mind goes, no matter what I become; my love for you will never change. I couldn't imagine my life with anyone else, Mara, and these last four years have been the best part of my whole life. I wouldn't change a thing."

At my raised eyebrow he conceded.

"Well, maybe one thing."

He stroked my face with his hands and whispered against my lips, "I didn't tell you enough how much I love you, didn't always cherish you the way I should have, but I will always, always love you, no matter what comes."

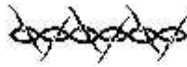
He kissed me softly and I leaned into it. If this was all I had left with him, I would take every minute of it. My anger washed away in a wave of love so strong I thought my heart might burst. We clung to each other until the tide of emotion swelling around us receded and we could both breathe a little easier. I leaned back from him to stare into the face that I would love no matter what it looked like.

"What are we waiting for then?" I pulled him to his feet.

He cocked his head and stared at me.

I winked and started to slide my shirt over my head. It took him a brief moment, then he was there helping me undress, as

I helped him, and we made love in the garden. It wasn't like we were going to be damaging the crops or anything. We took our time, savouring each touch, each kiss, as if they were our last, breaking up only when Nero came romping back, woofing and leaping at us as we held each other tight.



"I'm going, Mara. I have less than a week, a few days maybe, and it's a window of opportunity we can't let pass," Sebastian said as he dressed. It was early, pre-dawn, and we'd been arguing about this subject most of the night.

"Bastian, the Alpha male, if he catches you outside the gate he'll attack you. Maybe he'll even be able to turn the whole pack against you," I said, shadowing my husband as he searched our closet for the extra knapsack.

"That's why I'm going so early, you know that Scout's never been here before the sun is up. I'll raid as many of the houses as I can. You need the food, and you can't go. It's like with Jessica, they won't touch me, I'm one of them."

I snorted. "Nobody wants to get laid by you. That's what they wanted from her, and you know that."

"Hey. That's not nice, or true. I can think of at least one person who wants to get laid by me." He bent and kissed me on the lips, the tingle not all due to our chemistry. Mostly now it was due to the drug I was so allergic to, rushing through his system.

I followed him downstairs where he grabbed the flashlight, a hammer and the big kitchen knife. In the dim light he looked like a burglar, which was appropriate, considering what he was going to do.

"Did you write me a list at least? I don't want any complaints that you didn't get everything you wanted." He smiled at me, trying to ease the tension, I suppose.

I let out a breath, knowing he was going to do this whether or not I wanted him to. I was losing the battle in large part because I knew he was right. I needed him to get food and supplies, and he needed to do this one last thing for me, to be my husband and knight in shining armour.

I sat down and lit a candle so I could see enough to write. The list was simple, any preserves he could carry, batteries, feminine hygiene products, Benadryl or other allergy medicine—any medicine for that matter—bow and arrow set, garden seeds . . . I tapped the pencil against my teeth. What else was there?

I shrugged. "I can't think of anything else."

Sebastian took the list from me and tucked it into his pocket. "I don't know how long I'll be, babe, but try not to worry." He bent and kissed me goodbye, patted Nero on the head, and then blew out the candle. As he left, the door clicking behind him, a sense of finality settled over me. This was it, in little more than a week I would truly be on my own. This was like a test run on what was about to be the rest of my life.

I sat there till the sun rose, warming the room and forcing me to admit in the light of day that I was on my own.

I cleaned the house, pulled weeds in the defunct garden, checked fences, pulled water from the well, picked rocks out of the lawn and small pasture, and washed the clothes by hand, hanging them to dry on a makeshift clothesline. By late afternoon, I had done a lot and was eyeing up the axe and woodpile. Sebastian was right. I was going to have to learn to do this on my own.

Never having chopped wood in my entire life left me wondering if there was a technique or a method to the process. I scratched my head a moment, then pulled out a fir log that needed to be split, standing it up on end as I'd seen Sebastian do. Before my first swing I pulled the tennis ball I kept in my pocket out and threw it into the field for Nero. He blasted off after it and I had my chance to swing without fear of hitting my pup. I held the very end of the axe handle and gripped it like I would a baseball bat, then with one swing I brought it down, missing the log entirely and burying it into the dirt at my feet.

Rough laughter reached my ears, and I spun to see Scout watching me, sitting at the gate. The dirty little bastard was laughing at my attempt. I flipped him off and he flapped his hands at me, as if egging me on. It was strange to see glimpses of a human personality inside what I viewed now as a large, predatory animal. They weren't zombies and they weren't mindless. They really did seem to act like a pack of wolves, hunting their food and sharing it amongst them. I'd even seen them eat shrubs and berries, though it didn't seem to satisfy them any more than eating large amounts of meat. I let out a snort and tried again, this time giving the log a glancing blow. That'll teach it. Yeah, right.

I took a deep breath, stared at the log right where I wanted to hit it and brought the axe down for a third time. The axe bit into the center of the fir, dividing it cleanly in half. I dropped the axe in surprise and then did a dance around the two pieces. Again,

laughter reached my ears, but I ignored Scout. This was a great moment, one I could be proud of. But with no one to share it with, it was more than a little bittersweet.

I chopped a few more pieces, gaining proficiency until my hands began to hurt and blister, and then proceeded to stack the wood in with the rest, throwing the ball in between stacking to keep Nero busy. Washing up with the water I'd pulled out of the well earlier, I went inside as the summer sun set, the horizon sliding from bright blue to a faded purple with hints of pink. I caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror, and I paused, really looking at myself. A few short weeks ago my life had been about ease and getting pregnant and now, I looked like a . . . I didn't even know what I looked like. I was deeply tanned, something I'd avoided the last few years, my hair had already lightened, the dark brunette getting a good dose of red highlights, and from the mirror it looked as if I'd lost fifteen or twenty pounds. My clothes hung off my frame, no longer fitting me, something I hadn't noticed with all the chaos. Even my face had slimmed, my cheekbones becoming more prominent, the shape of my face more defined.

I shook my head, what did it matter now? It wasn't like we were going to have children or go on vacation somewhere warm where I could show off my body in a two-piece.

Three glasses of water and leftovers from breakfast—cold oatmeal and half of what was my attempt to make pancakes the day before—was what made up my lunch. Yummy. Exhausted, I dropped onto the couch and fell asleep in minutes. But, not before I made sure my knife was tucked into the cushion beside me, and Nero was curled up behind my knees.

I dreamed about Sebastian, that we were on our long-awaited honeymoon. There was a beautiful blue ocean, clear to the bottom. Maybe the Caribbean or somewhere in Hawaii—I didn't know and didn't care; he wasn't sick. I could see that, even though he was down the beach from me, his skin was tanned and healthy, not a single yellow tinge on him.

I looked down at myself in, hell yeah, a two-piece and a white gauzy sarong around my now-slim hips, the kind the super models wear on a beach shoot. I looked up and Sebastian was gone.

"Bastian?" I said, my voice eaten up by the waves and the sound of the crashing surf.

“I’m here, babe.” He was behind me, his arms circling around my waist.

I leaned into him. “I thought you were gone.”

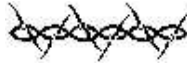
He kissed my temple and let go of me, I spun in the wet sand, but he was already down the beach, walking slowly, bending every now and then to pick up something from the sand. I laughed and ran toward him, sprinting to cover the short distance. But no matter how hard I ran, no matter that he was only walking, I couldn’t catch him.

“Sebastian, wait for me,” I yelled, out of breath and no longer feeling so sexy.

He didn’t turn back, just kept on walking as if he couldn’t hear me, his broad back quickly disappearing into the distance.

“Sebastian!” I threw myself out of the dream and off the couch, thumping hard on the wooden floorboards, Nero waking up with a snort.

Footsteps pattered on the porch out front, multiple feet running. Shit, shit, shit. I gulped down a breath and slid to the window, peeking up over the sill. There were four of them and one of me. This was not good, not good at all.



What felt like an eternity passing, yet was probably only ten seconds, I tried to come up with a plan. The doors weren't locked and the Nevermores didn't seem to have the fine motor skills it would take to work the handle. But I had no doubt they would break glass trying to get at me.

"Thought you said there were people here."

The man's voice startled me, and I nearly popped up and waved at what I realized with great relief were humans, not Nevermores. A tingle in my stomach held me to the ground though, waiting, Nero let out a low growl and I clamped my hand over his nose. "Shh."

"I saw the bitch in my binoculars, she's here somewhere. The big guy left this morning."

A second man with a deeper tone spoke. "Come on, let's get inside, that one at the front gate is staring at me and it's creeping the bejeesus out of me."

"Fine, you pansy."

I slithered along the floor and crawled over the couch to hide behind it, the gap just large enough for me to fit. Nero wiggled in beside me. No doubt he thought this was a new game.

As I slid into my hiding place, the front door creaked open.

"Honey, I'm home!" They all laughed.,

I hugged my blade to my chest. I was trapped. As soon as they started looking, I had no doubt they'd find me, at least the Nevermores would have just tried to kill me. I wasn't fooling myself about what these men were after.

Footsteps drew closer and I tensed. A body flopped onto the couch and the rank smell of sweat and blood assaulted my nose. Nero started to growl, his wicked sharp puppy teeth showing under a curled up lip. I put my hand over his nose again and he quieted.

"Marty, go see if there's any food in the joint—and make it snappy, I'm famished. Den, you go upstairs and find us our lady friend, and remember, I get first dibs," the one with the deeper voice, the one on the couch, said.

Footsteps and grumbles receded and the leader leaned back resting his head on the well-padded cushions. He let out a fart, a belch, and then another fart, settling himself deeper into his seat.

I pinched my nose, the smell was worse than the pig farm I'd visited last year. I held my breath, and then resorted to breathing through my t-shirt till the worst of it passed.

"Hurry up, boys, I'm getting mighty hungry for dinner and desert. Luscious sweet pie." He laughed.

I crouched. I had a chance if I could catch them off guard, and if Scout was still at the gate, maybe I could use him. A plan started to form, and I knew I would have to act fast and use the element of surprise if it was going to work.

I stared up at the longish hair hanging over the back of the couch. Before I thought better of it, I stood, grabbed a handful of the greasy mop, and placed the blade of my knife up against the leader's neck.

"I wouldn't move or say a word unless I tell you. Got it?" I hissed at him, adrenaline pumping, nerves jangling like a trip wire.

He swallowed and his Adam's Apple bobbed against the knife.

"Very slowly get up. Nothing tricky or I'll slam this into you." I leaned forward the same time he did, coming over the back of the couch without losing my grip on him or the knife. I had no intention of actually cutting him; I just wanted to get him close enough to the gate for Scout to grab him. After that, well, it was going to be dicey, but I thought it would work.

"Hey boss, found some . . . son of a bitch!" The one I surmised was Marty stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, his hands full of our canned food that was left, his mouth hanging open.

"Don't just stand there, do something," Leader Boy said.

I yanked his hair, pulling him back toward the front door, glancing at the floor. Thanks be that Nero was a loyal pup; right at my feet, heeling as if he'd already been trained.

I laughed. "Really, you think that's a good idea?"

Marty dropped the canned food. "What do you want me to do?"

"Good question," I said. "Follow us outside, nice and slow like."

More footsteps and Den joined his buddies. I shook my head at him as he reached for his belt and what I assumed was a weapon.

“Don’t,” I said. He dropped his hand and I tightened my hand on the knife.

I inched us out the door backwards, drunk on adrenaline. That’s my excuse, anyway, for forgetting the fourth man.

Something hit me from behind, my shoulders and upper back taking the brunt of the blow, but it didn’t make me let go. I instinctively tightened my grip, but as I stumbled backwards, the blade pulled through the leader’s neck with a clean slice and a low gurgle. I didn’t have time to react to the fact that I’d just killed a second man in less than a month.

I wobbled a few feet away, the stunned silence from the other men giving me only split second to make my next move. No doubt, the men still standing couldn’t believe what had happened anymore than I could, and it took them a moment to recover. I spun and ran, blade still in my hands, dripping blood, Nero right beside me.

“Get her!”

I don’t know which one of them yelled it; doesn’t matter, not with what happened next.

I ran to the gate where Scout crouched in the shadows, his eyes glittering at me as I sprinted toward him. The three men were closing in on me, fingertips brushing the back of my shirt as I panted for air, hoping for enough oxygen to make the desperate jump and climb over the metal gate. As I drew close Nero veered off, running to the garden, his fear of the gate the only thing that would drive him from my side.

The gate was cold and I struggled to get my hands on it, the bunches of metal grapes and leaves biting into my flesh. I managed to get half way over before the closest man grabbed my ankle. I pulled hard and tumbled to the ground on the other side of the fence, knocking the wind out of me. Even so, I made myself get to my feet and jogged to the center of the road, the three men following me over the gate, cocky and swaggering as if they knew something I didn’t.

They had their backs to Scout, but I could still see him and I gave him a slow nod. His eyes widened and then a grin spread across his face. With a blur of speed, he hamstringed two of the men

with his bare teeth before they knew what hit them. They fell screaming, the sound echoing around us. It wouldn't be long before the pack showed up for this banquet. The last man standing half-turned to see what had happened, and I rushed him. With a swift move, Scout took him down, snapping his neck in one clean twist.

Marty rolled on the ground. "Bitch!" Scout jumped on his chest, ripping at his neck, blood spurting every which way. I gagged at the smell and sight, and forced myself to unfreeze my legs and move. I was shocked by what I'd done, essentially leading the men into the lion's den. Finally, my semi-paralysis broke and I jogged to the gate, deliberately not looking at what Scout was doing as he sniffed around the flailing body of the one man that still lived.

"Help me," he yelled, reaching for me. I avoided his fingers and put my hands on the cold metal piping that made up the gate.

As I climbed back over to my side, I turned back in time to see the pack emerge from the bush around us.

I walked slowly back to the house, the screams of the final man only lasting a brief moment before they were cut off. This was a moment I wasn't proud of. I was horrified deep within that I could essentially kill four men and feel nothing. No, that wasn't true. I didn't want to do it, but the world was now literally dog-eat-dog, and I would go down fighting every time.

I climbed the steps to the house and stared at the leader's body, blood pooling around it and slipping through the cracks to the ground below.

It was then that I lost it, the shakes starting deep within my belly and spreading throughout my entire body, forcing me to the ground. I sat, leaning against the house, the body beside me as I waited for the shock to pass. When I was sure I wasn't going to pass out, I let out a whistle. Within a few moments, Nero came running up on the porch and leapt into my lap.

"Good dog," I said. When he went to sniff the body, I reprimanded him lightly. "Leave it." I stood slowly, and with my hand against the house for support, I stood over the leader.

"I can't let Sebastian see me like this," I whispered. I bent and picked up the man's feet, dragging him off the porch and toward the gate. It was hard work, the body floppy and uncooperative, and I was sweating hard by the time I was only

halfway. I paused and caught my breath, and stared down at the body at my feet, really seeing it, the open gash across the neck; the surprised expression on his face. Emotions started to well up and I pushed them back down. There was no place for that, not anymore.

With a heave I started to drag the body again, this time getting it all the way to the gate before considering a major flaw in my plan. How the hell was I going to get it over the gate?

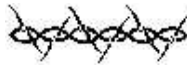
A grunt brought my attention to Scout, crouched back in the shadows. He stood slowly and approached me, his hands outstretched. We were going to have to work together if we were going to get this body over to him.

I lifted the feet up as high as I could; panting and breathing hard, a squirm of fear that Scout might make a grab for me while my hands were occupied. He reached over the fence and grabbed one boot, then the other, and yanked, snapping the body through the air and onto its side.

With a grunt and a smile, he dragged the body behind him to the edge of the bush and started in on it, his back hunched over the chest, and a loud crunching rolled over me followed by a wet ripping sound that I chose to ignore.

I made myself watch as he feasted on the body and thought about Sebastian, how soon it would be him eating whatever he could get his hands on. I hoped he was okay, hoped that he hadn't been hurt. A part of me, though, hoped I didn't ever have to see him shift, turn into a mindless eating machine, see him become like Scout, or Jessica or the Alpha.

Which would be worse, to lose him now and not know what happened, or lose him to the drug and forever have that image of Sebastian as a monster engrained in my mind?



The next morning was all about cleaning up the blood and hiding the evidence that the raiding party had ever been here. I didn't need it as a reminder of what I'd done.

Exhausted from a long night of sleeplessness and hard work with the cleanup, I fell asleep around noon on our bed, Nero once more cuddled up behind my legs. It was a heavy sleep, dreamless and surprisingly restful. A light touch on my cheek snapped me awake and I lashed out, reaching for the knife under the pillow before I even opened my eyes.

"Easy, babe, it's me," Sebastian said.

I gasped and let go of the blade, and threw myself into his arms. All my thoughts of not telling him what happened broke under his presence and the words tumbled out of me along with the tears that I hadn't been able to shed for the men that died, and the part of me that died along with them.

Sebastian stroked my hair and let me confess to him without a single word. Gulping back a final sob, I looked up and had to force myself not to react. His skin had changed in the short time he'd been gone and the patterning under the skin up his neck looked a great deal like a faint tattoo. Exactly as Jessica's had right before she left.

"There's nothing I can say that will make this better for you, babe," Sebastian said. He continued to stroke my hair, never breaking eye contact with me. "You've got to be strong now. There's no guarantee that more raiders won't come, that you won't be attacked again. In the past, there was always someone to call for help, the police or neighbours. We have to take care of each other now, whatever that means and whatever that takes."

"It scared me how little I felt," I whispered. "Like their deaths didn't matter, when I knew they should have meant something."

Sebastian frowned and shook his head. "Babe, you are going to have to fight to make it. Don't let your fear stop you from surviving. I think it's just your way of not losing your mind. Bad shit is going to happen, there's nothing you can do about it but be strong."

He pulled me tight into his arms, held me close, and I let out a sigh of relief. "I was scared you would think I was an awful person for what I did."

"I'm going to try and eat people soon. I don't think you have to worry about getting that bad," he said.

I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, but he failed miserably, the shadows of what was coming for him lay heavy on us, a physical weight we both tried to ignore but couldn't. I saw an image of Scout in my mind eating the body and it morphed into Sebastian, feral and nasty.

Sebastian stood up. "Come on, let me show you what I found."

I followed him downstairs, prepared to be dazzled. Boy, was I disappointed. The kitchen table was covered, but most of it wasn't food. There were a number of different drugs; he'd found me some allergy medicine, batteries, and then some canned food of miscellaneous types. Nothing that would last much more than a week if I stretched it.

I forced a smile. "Looks good, how far did you have to go for all this?"

"All the way down to Bowser. Most of the homes have been ransacked and I was chased by a few smaller packs, but it was quiet for the most part."

"What about Dan's? Why didn't you go there?" I brushed my fingers across the package of batteries, wishing they were edible.

Sebastian shook his head. "I went there first, but he . . ."

A grimace crossed over his face, twisting it into a parody of the man I loved. I reached out and he pushed my hand away, stumbling toward the front door.

"Bastian."

He didn't turn around, just kept walking, using the furniture for support. I followed, knowing what was about to happen, wishing there was some other way, wishing I could help him. Wishing I could take his place. I let out a sob, it should have been me, I should have been the one to turn, not Sebastian.

He turned at the door, his pupils shifting, sliding into the vertical slit that was becoming so familiar to me. Tears dripped off his chin, the last tears he would cry as a human.

"I love you."

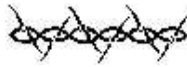
I ran to him; he tried to push me away. I wouldn't let him go that easily. I pulled his head to mine and, pressing my lips to his, our tears sealed what would be our last kiss.

"Always Bastian, you will always be my love. Forever," I whispered against his mouth, and then he jerked himself away from me and ran for the gate, climbing clumsily over it. As his feet touched the other side, he let out a roar, guttural and wild. I slid to my knees, tears streaming down my face. The pack emerged from the bush, Scout creeping forward first, the Alpha and Jessica at the back, like always.

They milled around him, sniffing and grunting, and he pushed them away easily, making them keep their distance. When one got too close, Sebastian snapped his foot forward catching it in the mouth and sent it flying backwards. After that, they easily gave him the distance he wanted. As they turned to go, the pack slipping back into the bush, Sebastian stayed, standing in front of the gate like a sentinel.

He turned his head and looked back at me, his now-foreign eyes meeting mine. With a low moan, he dropped to the ground, tucking himself into the shadows that Scout had previously occupied. With my own moan, my head dropped forward till it touched the wooden railing.

Sebastian wasn't going with the pack. He was staying to guard me. I didn't know what was worse, having him gone completely and knowing he had no memory left of his life before, or knowing that he was trapped inside a body with unnatural desires, and still remembering me and our love.



I spent the better part of the next three days hiding inside, sleeping and wishing I had the courage to take my own life, only moving when Nero whined for food or to go out. I dreamed of blood and death and knives, Sebastian making love to me, our child we never had, the men who broke into our house, and Jessica with her sweet smile. The dreams left me moaning and tossing, my own cries waking me up only to let the sadness swallow me down again.

On the third day a rock banged on my bedroom window and I leapt out of bed, half-dressed and completely confused, scrambling for a weapon of some sort. Nero was on full alert, his hackles high and a low growl rumbling past his lips.

“What the hell?” I made my way to the window to peer outside. Sebastian stood at the gate, a rock in his hand, arm cocked back and ready to throw.

I lifted the windowpane and hung my upper body out. “Okay! I’m up, stop throwing rocks, you nut,” I shouted at him. He blew a raspberry my way that I could hear even from this distance and sat back down in the cover of the bush, disappearing from view. But he was still there, he hadn’t left me, not completely, and he still had some of himself left, enough to still care about me.

Cold water makes a good bracer to wake you up in the morning, and I scrubbed my body clean in the back yard with a bar of soap and two buckets of water. I even found the energy to play with Nero, splashing him with water as he ran around the yard. Clean clothes next, and I felt more awake and ready to face whatever this day would bring me.

Suddenly ravenous, I went to the kitchen and pulled out a can of beans. I cracked it open and ate the whole thing down without a breath. A can of peaches was next, followed by a jar of maraschino cherries. The sweetness of the cherries slowed me down, and I took my time to savour the thick juice they were in, licking every finger to get the most out of the jar. I looked at what I’d done when I finished, and even though I knew that it was no more than I would have eaten had I been awake the last few days, I still felt bad for eating so much in one sitting.

“Damn,” I muttered for no particular reason except to say something to break the silence. I put away the supplies that

Sebastian had brought home, organizing the quickly diminishing stocks. There wasn't much here and soon, I'd be the one heading out of the property to get food stuffs. I wasn't sure if it was better to wait or to go right away.

The next few days went like the last few weeks had: water, garden, fence checking, splitting wood, wash some clothes and hope they last a while yet, and keep an eye on the gate. Through every chore, every necessary task, I wondered what the hell I was going to do with the next fifty years of my life alone on a farm surrounded by a pack of wild humans with nothing more than a yellow Lab for company.

More than a week had passed, maybe even longer since Sebastian had left me, and I found myself talking to Nero, having full conversations with the puppy. He would cock his head and listen, his pink tongue hanging out as he stared up at me. It was in the middle of one of these conversations that our three acres suddenly felt terribly claustrophobic, so much so that I started to tremble.

I scanned the back property for where Dan had gone into the bush. A spring of hope whispered through me. Of course Dan was still alive! He had a freaking bunker full of guns and food, Nero and I could go and get food and a gun. My rational self tried to remind me that Sebastian had gone to Dan's and come away with nothing, and that I didn't trust Dan—but my need to see and speak to another person was driving me beyond what was rational.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" I asked Nero. He gave me what I chose to believe was an affirmative yip. The trek would require me to put my life on the line to reach a man I barely knew and wasn't entirely sure of, yet I was ready to do it if it meant having someone to talk to, even for a just a little while. I justified my idea with the thought that I would be able to get food from him and maybe even a weapon, if he held true to his word.

"It's all I've got," I said.

I went inside, and grabbed the three empty knapsacks tucking them inside one another till there was only the one for me to carry. I couldn't take them all full, but it was a nice thought to think that I would be filling them up.

I wanted to bring my knife so that it was at hand without me holding on to it the whole time. It was a forty-five minute walk, maybe longer if I had to duck for cover. I paused in my

preparations; maybe it would be shorter, if I had to run the whole way. I put the backpack on backwards and lifted Nero into it, his head sticking out along with his tongue. I laughed at him and he gave me a doggy grin, licking at my face. He was getting bigger, but I didn't think he could walk the whole way, and I didn't want to leave him here on his own in case I didn't come back. At least out there he might have a chance at finding food and surviving.

An ungodly screech filled the air and the hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention. I ran to the front door, skidding to a stop on the threshold. The pack was in a giant circle on the far side of the gate, screaming, hollering, and otherwise making as much noise as possible. In the centre of the circle was the Alpha male and, I let out a low moan, Sebastian.

Pulling myself together, I slid off the pack and put Nero on the ground then ran to the gate, my knife clenched firmly in my hands. What I thought I was going to do about this was anyone's guess; I sure as hell didn't know.

The pack ignored me, focused solely on the two men in the circle as they jabbed and struck at one another. I knew it was a fight for dominance, but it was hard for me to see my usually passive, nonaggressive husband with his lips curled back over his teeth, growls emanating from his mouth.

They rammed each other; grappling for the upper hand, and I found myself yelling along with the pack, screaming at Sebastian to finish the Alpha off, Nero barking and jumping at my feet. The energy around us swirled, bringing us for a moment into their world, swept up in the fight for the stronger leader. If it was a battle to the death, there was no doubt in my mind who I wanted to win, even if Sebastian was no longer himself.

The clash of bodies caused a huge dustbowl, the dry dirt road and wind making perfect conditions for it. The two men were soon caked in a fine dusting of powdered earth, the sweat rolling down their bodies, catching each particle and sticking it to them. Their bodies now a strange shade of yellow highlights and red-brown mud only added to the animalistic surrealism of the scene. I took a step back and really looked at what was going on. The pack was split, half on one side of the circle and half on the other. I had a feeling that Scout would be on Sebastian's side. I scanned the crowd and spotted him on the left, Jessica next to him. I frowned. Wouldn't she want to be on her mate's side? A strange squirming

feeling settled in my belly. She would be, unless she saw Sebastian as the better mate for her, stronger, younger and better able to care for her and any babies she had.

“You stay away from him!” I surprised myself by yelling at her. Not that she paid me any attention; she was totally focused on the match, her eyes never leaving the two men.

I took a step back and a deep breath. What did I think was going to happen? I closed my eyes and tried to slow my ever escalating thoughts, tried to banish a sudden image of Jessica and Sebastian rolling on the ground, their bodies naked and intertwined, wrestling in a far different way than he was now entangled with the Alpha. He wouldn’t do it. I had to believe there was enough of Sebastian left that he wouldn’t have sex with Jessica. My stomach rolled and I swallowed on the bile that rose in my throat, an unexpected burn of anger starting. He hadn’t even done anything and already I was feeling the effects of jealousy and bitterness at the thought of Bastian and Jessica together.

A crack of bone and I opened my eyes to see the Alpha male on the ground, his ankle twisted at the wrong angle. He let out a moan and dropped his head, defeated by his younger opponent. The pack swirled around, hopping and thumping the ground with their hands and feet, some of them diving into their fallen leader and taking pot shots at him.

The pack stepped back; their eager grunts and gestures making it clear even to me that they wanted Sebastian to finish him off. This was the final moment of his humanity and I knew it. The minute he killed the man helpless at his feet would be the minute I had to say goodbye to him forever. If it had been a battle to the end, that would have been different, survival, but not this killing of a defenceless creature at his feet.

Sebastian walked over to the Alpha and stared down at him, not moving, just looking. The Alpha kept his eyes down and held perfectly still. He knew as well as the rest of them what was coming.

“Sebastian.” I said, not truly thinking he would heed me. To my disbelief, he turned and looked me in the eye. “Don’t do this. Don’t let them take the last of what makes you you.”

My eyes filled, but I didn’t cry. I put every emotion I could into my next words, hoping he would listen.

“Don’t kill him.”

The pack, perhaps sensing my interference started to grumble. They milled toward the gate and I stepped back out of reach, but I never broke eye contact with Sebastian.

Something flickered in those alien eyes—an emotion that was so achingly human—a piece of my husband I thought was gone forever. Compassion.

He stepped away from the Alpha and growled at the pack, which then froze in their advance on me and the gate. A second, lower growl and they backed off, slinking into the bush from where they had come. All except for Jessica, who hovered close by, her rail thin body swaying to music I couldn't hear, and the previous Alpha, who pulled himself to his feet and, dragging his broken ankle, limped down the road alone, away from the pack's territory. Jessica didn't even look at her mate as he passed her. She had eyes for only one person.

Sebastian stared at Jessica and I recognized the look; he'd given it to me more than once. His eyes were dark with desire, his lips parted and a steady pulse throbbed at the base of his neck. She preened under his gaze, a noise similar to a purr bubbling out of her as the swaying intensified, her tiny hips rocking faster and faster, side to side.

I didn't want to see this, it was bad enough knowing it would happen right outside the home Sebastian and I had started to make for ourselves. I turned my back and started to walk for the house, feeling like if I ran it would somehow make things worse. A low grumble from Sebastian and an answering purr from Jessica sped my feet up. But I didn't run. Around the back of the house I went, straight to the garden.

I stared at the ground, far enough away that I couldn't hear anything. A girlish shriek made me jump. On second thought, the back fences needed checking. I ran now to where they couldn't see me, Nero right behind me, his panting giving him away. Through the tall grass that would have one day been pasture for the kid's pony I'd hoped to have, past the tall maple we'd tied a rope to for a tire swing, all the way to the back fence where I collapsed to my knees.

Breathing hard, my blood thumping in my ears, I strained to hear any more while at the same time desperately wishing I wouldn't. My blood slowed, heartrate settling back to a steady beat, and nothing but the birds in the trees and the occasional song of a

frog reached me. Nero plunked himself down beside me and rolled on his back, luxuriating in the cool grass. I wish I could be as nonchalant about life, could enjoy even the little moments.

"I can't do this, not on my own, not by myself," I whispered, lying on the ground, staring up at the blue sky with the tall, brilliantly green stalks of grass surrounding me, making me feel like a child again. In a daze with my heart numb, I struggled with the jealousy, anger, and pain that warred for my attention. In the back of my mind, I'd thought he would snap out of the drug's effects, that because he still watched over me, still remembered me, he would come back to himself. That hope was dashed against the reality of what was happening outside the gate.

My head knew that it would be unfair to judge him; he would never have pursued Jessica if he were in his right mind. But that knowledge didn't change how I felt, or how much it hurt me to see him want her.

I closed my eyes and lay down next to Nero, and when I opened them again, I knew I was dreaming, knew it wasn't real, but I wanted it to be.

Sebastian stood across the field from me, the summer season having slipped into fall and the grass golden in the fading sunlight. "What are you staring at, babe?"

I laughed and stood, my balance off kilter, and when I looked down I realized why. I was pregnant, and not just a little bit, a lot. I ran my hands over my belly, the babe rolling under my fingertips. "We're pregnant," I said, looking to Sebastian for confirmation of what I felt inside me.

He smiled and started toward me. "Of course we are. That's why I took the shot, remember?"

My elation faded. "No, you didn't take the shot, couldn't have, it turns people into monsters."

Sebastian laughed, and then was suddenly at my side, his hands on my belly. "No one turns into monsters, babe. We are the future, the others, those who didn't take the shot, they're the past." He held a mirror up to my face, and I gasped.

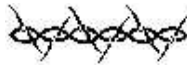
Yellow eyes stared out at me from what looked like my face, a gaunt, emaciated version of me with jaundiced skin pulled tight over the bones. I stared at my arms as the flesh shrunk and the skin stretched showing every sinew and ligament in clear relief.

Horror rippled through me, my mouth dry. I clung to my disbelief like a life raft in rough seas.

“No. I can’t take the shot, I can’t,” I said as I backed away from Sebastian.

He didn’t change, didn’t look any different, and then he smiled, a big toothy grin that showed me row upon row of shark teeth glinting down on me. He lunged. I gasped as I sat bolt upright in the long grass, my hand going to my stomach.

Sebastian and I had made love several times since he’d taken the shot. Was my subconscious trying to tell me something, or was my mind playing tricks on me?



I walked slowly back to the house and peeked around the edge to see the front gate still standing, with no one there, not even Scout.

That was it then, Sebastian was gone with them now, Jessica and him a pair. I let my mind sit on that, accept it for fact, and then slipped into the house, going straight to the bathroom. I flipped open the calendar and looked at the little “P” that I’d put on the dates that I had my period and my breath caught in my throat. With all the upheaval, I hadn’t noticed that not only was I late, I was almost due for a second period.

I threw myself to my knees and ripped open the bathroom cupboard. Toilet paper, towels and bars of soap went flying out behind me. Nero yelped when something bounced off him, but I continued my search for the pregnancy test I knew was in there somewhere.

“Where the hell is it?” I yelled just as my fingertips brushed up against a rectangular box that I knew was pale pink before I even pulled it out. I ripped the package open and stared at the instructions. I knew the drill, drop your pants, pee on the stick, and wait for two minutes.

The waiting was the hardest part. I sat on the edge of the tub and stared at the stick resting perfectly flat on the edge of the sink, counting to 120 under my breath.

“... 115, 116, 117, 118. Close enough.” I stood, walked to the sink and looked down to see a perfect pink plus sign.

I didn’t know whether to be happy or terrified; both emotions rushed through me, swinging from one to the other and back again. I placed my hand on my stomach. I had to figure out how far along I was. The first time we’d made love after he took the shot was . . . I counted back in my head, using the calendar for a reference. It was six and a half weeks ago.

“I can’t go to Dan’s. I can’t risk you little one.” I touched my stomach as a new and even more terrifying thought assailed me. The baby had been conceived when Sebastian had the Nevermore drug flowing through his system. What would happen to him or her? Would the child be born as a Nevermore or as a human? I shook off the questions that, at the moment, didn’t matter. Until

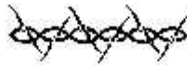
the baby made it here safely, there was no point in borrowing trouble.

I made my way downstairs and counted the food I had, already knowing the outcome, but needing to see it anyway. There was no way it was enough to see me through nine months of pregnancy and the first few months of motherhood that I would need it to. If I was careful I could make it stretch for a few more weeks, closer to the end of my first trimester. At that point I would have to make a supply run, several in fact, if I was going to make it.

Resolve filled me as I considered the alternative. A certainty that I could do this, if not for myself then for the child I was carrying, the last connection I had with Sebastian. I sat down and started to make a list of all the things I would need, not just for myself, but for the baby too: diapers or cloth to make diapers, bottles, formula, blankets, and clothes. Crap, baby clothes might be hard; we lived in an area of retirees.

“Not that I’m complaining little one, but your entry into my life sure has turned things upside down.”

I smiled, thinking about having the baby, tried not to think about all the things that could go wrong or that I would be by myself for the delivery. I scrubbed my hands over my eyes, exhausted despite the nap I had in the field. Climbing the stairs, my legs feeling like lead, I snuggled into bed. Nero curled up beside me as I breathed in the scent of Sebastian’s aftershave on his pillow, for the first time in days, not feeling completely lost, feeling like there was a purpose to me being here and a reason to fight to stay alive.



Over the next three weeks, I was careful not to do anything too strenuous while still attempting to keep things going. I hauled water every day, just smaller amounts; I checked fences still, only slower. I even managed to get some carrots to grow. They were a long way from edible, but the piss-poor fencing job I'd put up around the small garden patch was at least keeping the deer and rabbits out. Not to mention Nero ran after everything that moved; rabbits, crows, and deer included, which helped with the critter control.

I looked back on the calendar to see how far along I'd been when I miscarried the first time. Only about five weeks, which I was well past now. There was a small bump by late evenings from the bloat, that if you didn't know me you'd think I'd been slacking on my workouts and had developed a bit of a paunch.

I told stories to the baby every night, mostly about Sebastian and how we'd met, and then I'd sing until I fell asleep, my bedroom window open and the cool summer night air breezing in. The pack was remarkably silent during this time, so much so that it was easy to forget they were even there. Scout only checked on the gate once, and I found myself smiling and waving at him, happy to see someone other than the local wildlife. Of course, I suppose he was part of the local wildlife. Even Nero had given up barking at Scout, settling for a minor growl and a lip curl. I didn't correct him for that, as far as I was concerned at some point he would be a big dog and it was good for him to learn now who to mistrust. Everyone but me.

Three weeks and two days into finding out I was pregnant, I was down to the last two cans of food, both beans. It was early in the morning, just as the colour was beginning to change the sky. Today was the day.

"This is it," I said. "Okay, baby, we have to make a hard trip, probably several, and I don't want you to be afraid. I'll protect you, no matter what." I ran my hands over my belly, stroking the hard bump, wishing I could hold the little one.

I took my list and tucked it into the back pocket of my jeans, grateful now more than ever that there was some weight loss

before I got pregnant; otherwise, I'd be looking for fat clothes for me along with food and clothes for the baby.

My kitchen knife slid into a homemade sheath that went on my belt for easy access, one of those projects I managed to do while essentially waiting for the food to run out. Then the last two cans of beans went into the bag along with a can opener. I was worried I might have to stay in other homes where there was no food. Better to be over-prepared than caught out in the open like a fool. I patted Nero on the head and left him in the house. This was not going to be a walk he would join me on.

I peeked out the front bay window before leaving, hoping the pack was there, but not expecting it. If they were at the gate, I was less likely to run into them on the back trail. Movement at the gate surprised me.

Sebastian leapt from the shadows where he'd sat the first few days after he'd removed himself from the farm, his eyes wide as he stared at me. I stepped out onto the front porch, my heart pounding in my throat.

I swallowed hard, aware that my emotions were even closer to the surface with all the hormones rushing through me. I had to stop thinking of him as my husband. Sebastian was gone, even if his body was still here. Even so, I had to say something to him. I had to more for me than for him.

"Sebastian, if you're still in there, it's okay. I don't like that you and Jessica . . ." I had barely said her name when he started to shake his head.

I frowned, wondering if it was just a nervous tick. It had been over four weeks since he had turned; I didn't want to fool myself into believing he was still in there, still Sebastian underneath it all. I didn't want to go through that pain again of losing him.

"Jessica is a good girl. It's okay, I understand." It wasn't okay, and I didn't understand, but I could keep those thoughts to myself.

Again, though, he shook his head, this time adding a frown for good measure. Did he mean what I think he did? As if to punctuate that he didn't, Jessica took that moment to come screaming out of the bush, half naked, hands flailing as she attacked Sebastian. The ferocity of her attempt shocked me, and Sebastian shoving her hard was even more of a shock. She tumbled

to the ground and lay there breathing hard, her bare breasts heaving.

Seeing me, she screeched and snapped her teeth at me, and I gave an involuntary step back. A sly look slid over her face and in a flash she was completely naked, the rest of her clothes strewn about the ground, swinging her hips and touching her own body as she tried to entice Sebastian. He looked at her and shook his head. Turning his back on her, he faced me, again shaking his head.

When she wouldn't leave, he turned and roared at her, making her cringe away from him as she scooped up her clothes and ran back to the bush, snarling and snapping the whole way.

"Bastian?" My voice was soft as I could make it without whispering. I don't remember walking to the gate, but suddenly I was there, well within reaching distance. Sebastian stepped close, his eyes strange and yet, somehow, I could see that he was still my husband, the man I loved and the father of our child. Fear tickled at the back of my neck, but I pushed it away and focused on the love.

I reached out and he flinched. "Please," I said. "Give me your hand."

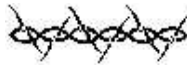
Sebastian stood still for so long I wasn't sure he understood, until ever so slowly he raised his hand, offering it to me. The back of it was covered in the faint lines that shadowed so much of the bodies of those who took the drug, designs that look suspiciously like the flower on the broom plants.

His skin was cool to the touch, far cooler than it should have been, but I revelled in the touch of skin on skin.

With a suddenness that sent me reeling, Sebastian snarled and snatched his hand out of mine, slicing his own arm as he ripped it back through the gate. I stumbled backwards and fell, instinctively rolling to protect my belly.

Tears filled my eyes, not from the pain in my body, but the pain in my heart. "Bastian," I whispered, choking on his name.

His eyes softened, and he crouched down and reached once more through the gate. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't trust him. With a sob, I stood and ran to the back of the house, gave Nero a pat and grabbed my backpacks. I brushed the tears away and took a deep cleansing breath. There was no going back. Sebastian might have been fighting his natural inclinations, but even I could see that the drug was too strong.



The broom was mostly out of bloom now, the seed pods hanging heavy on the branches, ready to germinate for next year's crop of hateful plants.

I walked as swiftly as I could, not wanting to run and crash through the bush unless I had to, knowing that every sound I made could draw the pack down on me. Stepping lightly, I avoided twigs and piles of branches, pushed overhanging limbs out of my way, and gently let them go back into place.

Twenty minutes into my hike, a shiver went down my spine and I froze. I'd only felt this way once before, when Sebastian and I had gone to Dan's and the bear had jumped out at us. I turned slowly to see Bob, as Dan had called him, on his hind legs sniffing at the air. Bob was thin, far thinner than he should have been for the middle of the summer season. No doubt the pack was direct competition for him and his regular food sources.

"Now, Bob, I know you don't like me, but remember what Dan said." I hoped I could talk my way out of this, though my body was trembling, the adrenaline coursing through me.

Bob grunted and dropped to all fours, again sniffing the air. Maybe the pack smelled different than regular humans? It would make sense. Bob took one step toward me, and I took a step back. He gave a snort and pawed at the ground. With great care and slow movements, I took my bag from my back and took out one of my precious cans of beans. The can opener clicked as the lid popped off and the scent of molasses covered legumes filled the air.

"See, Bob, I'm a nice girl. I'm going to give you these beans and then I'm going to leave." I put the open can on the ground. It was a sacrifice, but I had to make it if I wanted even a chance at more food.

Bob sniffed the air and let out a low grunt. As he padded close to the can, I backed up, grateful his attention was solely on the food. I kept backing up till I rounded a corner, then turned and ran. I pushed myself as far as my adrenaline and legs would take me then stopped to listen, my ears straining for any sound. No bear behind me, and the birds were still chirping. That had to be a good sign.

Another five minutes and I came to a six-way intersection, the trail to the right flagged with a red kerchief. "Thank you, Dan, even if you were a miserable old coot," I said and headed down the marked path. What I found though was something less than what I was hoping for.

Dan hadn't made it home from our place, at least that's what it looked like. His army boots, shredded pants, and tattered shirt were spread around a veritable pile of bones. His rifle had been pushed to the side, untouched and unused for fear of drawing more Nevermores. Or maybe he'd been hit from behind and never had a chance. I would never know.

"I'm so sorry, Dan," I whispered as I bent to retrieve the rifle and ammo belt, quickly looking for any other useful things on his body. It wasn't a nice task, but necessary.

In the one intact pocket of his pants was something that let me know I did have guardian angels watching over me. Dan's house key.

Crouched over Dan's bones, I again had a feeling of being watched. "Come on, Bob," I said, "I only have one can left." I turned to see not Bob behind me, but Sebastian.

We stared at one another, no gate between us, nothing to stop him from attacking me, as his pack would do if they found me out in the bush.

I took a deep breath and stood slowly, my one hand still holding the rifle, the other gripping the key. Sebastian watched me, his expression not changing or giving me any hint to what he was thinking. I looked up the trail the way I was headed, then back to Sebastian.

I licked my lips. There was nothing between us now, no gate to save me, only the rifle, if I dared use it. I set the rifle on the ground and walked slowly toward Sebastian, my heart pounding, my head screaming for me to run. There was one thing that might keep Sebastian from attacking me, but it was a roll of the dice.

I put my hands on my belly and said, "I'm pregnant."

Sebastian blinked, then frowned and stepped toward me. It took everything I had to hold my ground as I thought of his face as he snarled at me at the gate.

With slow, deliberate steps, Sebastian approached me.

I watched his eyes as he reached for me, and I held perfectly still. With the softest of touches, his fingertips rested on

my bump, the slight frown of confusion swiftly followed by the flush of understanding. His fingers trembled across my belly and I lifted my shirt so he could touch the skin and feel the changes in my body. His hand brushed across my belly button and then cupped the small swell of our child within me. I looked up to see his eyes wide and sparkling with unshed tears. In that moment, I knew that Sebastian would never truly lose himself, he was too strong for that and he loved me too much to forget me.

"I love you, Sebastian." My words, simple and true as they were, sparked something in him.

He let out a low keening wail as he slid to his knees, pressing his cheek against my stomach. A flash of fear warmed my skin, but I put it out. I couldn't truly be afraid of my husband, he didn't have it in him to kill the Alpha, and there was no way he would hurt me or our child.

"I have to go." I pulled away, and Sebastian looked up, his eyes betraying his every emotion. "I have to get more food, clothes, and things. I'm going to Dan's first." Maybe that was too much hope on my part, thinking he could fully understand, but I had to believe.

I tucked my shirt in and adjusted the backpack. I trailed my fingertips across his face and then stepped back from him. I smiled, then turned and started walking, trusting that my heart was telling me the truth and I was not being another fool in love.

Footsteps from behind sped my pulse, but he wasn't running. He was keeping pace with me. As we walked, twenty feet between us, I thought about what it was that compelled me to trust him. Was it the love we shared? Yes, somewhat, but I think more than that—

Sebastian growled and the tension around us rose. I glanced over my shoulder to see him snarling at the bush where a bird suddenly took flight. I shook my head and picked up my train of thought again. More than the love, it was that I knew him; I knew the person he was, and how set he was in his own beliefs and standards. He hadn't just been a good man; he'd lived his life as a good man, what he said and what he did always matched up. Even though he was a Nevermore now, I could still see those qualities in him, and they were what allowed me to trust him.

Ten minutes, and I pushed my way through a small clump of huckleberries and found myself in Dan's backyard. I pulled back

and peeked out through the bush. No need to go running into Nevermores at this point in the game.

For several minutes I waited, breathing in the sweet and intoxicating scent of the flowers on the huckleberry bush. A soft shuffle from behind me, and I went very still, a warm breath whispering down the back of my neck. Sebastian's hands circled around me, brushing first my belly, then my waist and sliding up to cup my breasts. I tried to think straight as he pressed his lips to the back of my neck, nuzzling the tender skin behind my ear. He let out a low purr and then pushed me out of the bush and into the garden.

I gasped in a lungful of air and spun to hear a soft chuckle from the huckleberry bush. I couldn't help but smile. Damn, even now, even this way, he wanted me and I wanted him. That was love; it had the power to overcome any physical change in each other.

Dan's key was cool in my hand, but I didn't need it. The door was unlocked. Stepping into the dim interior, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the low light before going any further. I shut the door behind me, locking it for good measure. It was musty and warm, the windows all shut tight and the air stale from no movement. Eerie, and with more than a measure of feeling haunted, the house echoed my footsteps as I started my search.

The obvious places were first, kitchen and pantry, both of which were full to the brim with food, preserves, cans of fruit, and pasta. A bag of dried milk. My mouth watered at the thought of dairy, even fake dairy, and I scrambled to find myself some water to mix it with. I didn't have to look far. Dan had stacks upon stacks of individual-sized bottled water in the pantry. I pulled one out and mixed in the evaporated milk, shaking it for good measure.

I downed every last drop of it, the chalky texture and faint milk flavour heavenly to my deprived taste buds. The stress of the walk, my moment with Sebastian, the fact that I was pregnant and already tired, along with my huge guzzle of milk left me more than a little sleepy. I shook the feeling off, though. I couldn't dawdle here, there was too much chance that the pack would come looking for Sebastian—or worse, Jessica would come looking for him.

I climbed the stairs to the upper level, the weight of the air seeming to grow heavier with each step. On the top step, a creak sounded from inside the house and it wasn't me.

Frozen to the spot, I strained my ears, listening till they were ringing with the silence. After several minutes with no more noise, I convinced myself to take another step and that's when the gun was shoved into my face.

"What the hell are you doing breaking into my house, woman?" Dan snarled, as he stared down his rifle at me.

"Dan. I thought . . . I mean, I found . . . bones," I stuttered out.

He lowered the gun. "Well, at least you ain't one of them." Dan brushed past me and clomped downstairs. "Come on, woman, I told you I'd give you food and weapons if you made it here, and you did."

I followed him, my mouth dry, and my heart not sure if it was going to gallop away with me or stop completely. It seemed to settle on an unsteady rhythm that left me more than a little wobbly of leg.

"I see you've made yourself at home," Dan said as he pointed to the open bag of dried milk.

I shrugged, determined not to feel bad. "I thought you were dead."

He grunted and went to packing my backpacks with food. "This should last you for a while. Come back when you need more." He handed me one pack full, two empty. That wasn't going to be enough, not by a long shot.

"I'm pregnant, Dan. I need to take more than that; I need to stockpile the food at my place. Unless you want me to move in here with you."

"Shit." He spit on the floor. "Why'd you go and get knocked up? I sure as hell hope it ain't by that infected man of yours."

I sucked in a breath. "How do you know about Sebastian?"

"One of those things was following him, a young female. She wasn't interested in eating him. So I shot at him."

"What?" That was what Sebastian had been trying to tell me about Dan, that he'd been shooting at him. A tap on one of the windows brought my head around.

Sebastian peered in through the dirty glass, his head cocked to one side. Dan snapped his gun up, and I pushed it down.

"No! Stop, he's not like the rest of them!" Sebastian snarled at Dan and I put my hand up on the window.

The snarl faded and he mimicked me, putting his hand against mine. Dan's eyebrows rose. "Well, I'll be buggered."

"He remembers me, Dan, I don't know how or why—but he does. Please don't shoot him."

"For now. But if he shows even the slightest inclination to attack, that's it, he's done."

I nodded and let out a breath. "Thank you." I looked around the pantry. "Now, can we please fill the other backpacks?"

"I ain't helping you move this stuff, woman. I ain't stepping outside this house except for my own needs, no one else's," Dan said.

I put a can of tomatoes in. "That's fine, Dan. I thank you for the food; I don't expect you to help me pack it."

We filled the packs with the heavier stuff, cans, sauces, and rice. I could make more trips this way, bringing home the lighter loads the more tired and pregnant I got. I stepped outside, one backpack on and one in each hand, and Dan raised his gun, pointing it past me.

"I hope you're right about your man, for your sake, woman," he said as he slowly shut the door in my face. Sebastian's hand came down on mine, startling me. I looked up, and he motioned at the bag on my back.

"It's all I can take. I'll have to make more trips anyway," I said.

He shook his head and pointed to his own back.

"Are you sure?"

Again, he nodded, and I helped him to position two of the packs on his back, his fingers unable to even tighten or loosen the straps.

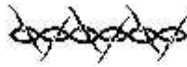
The trip back to the farm was uneventful, which surprised me. I thought maybe Bob would be waiting for another can of beans at the least. When we got to the back gate, Sebastian twenty feet behind, I slipped through and beckoned him in.

"Come on. You aren't going to hurt me. I know that," I said.

He shook his head and shrugged out of the bags before slipping off into the bush, as if he'd never been there.

Maybe I trusted him, but it looked like he didn't trust himself. That was enough to give me pause, to make me consider the fact that even though he was my husband, I'd been truly foolish to let him so close to me, no matter how much I loved him.

If only I'd remembered that a week later, then perhaps things would have turned out differently. Perhaps I wouldn't have had to turn my knife on him and do what no woman should have to.



For the next week, I made two to three trips a day and the routine was well set. I took three bags, my can opener and a can of beans. Bob would meet me halfway to Dan's, and I would give him the can of beans like some offering a knight errant would give to a bridge troll. Sebastian followed me and packed a bag back so that by the end of the week we'd moved twenty-one backpacks full of food and necessities. Dan even had a good stash of drugs squirreled away: antibiotics, over the counter pain killers, and some pill forms of morphine. I took it all thinking of possible complications and pain during the labour that I would face in a few short months.

Dan grumbled fiercely that I was taking his offer to the extreme, but when I pointed out that I'd barely made a dent in his supplies, he settled down. It didn't hurt that on the third day I managed to bake cookies and I took some to him, though they were burnt around the edges. I was still trying to figure out the ways of baking with a wood burning cook stove. I suppose that even a grizzled old man likes homemade goodies, burnt on the edges or not.

On the seventh day, Sebastian was more than a little edgy, his eyes darting and his mouth clicking from time to time. I'd offered him food as I always did, and he pushed it away at first, in the past few days never once taking from the stores we were collecting.

"Eat it," I said, the open can of peaches smelling positively delectable.

Sebastian groaned and took the can from me, swallowing the peaches and the juice without a single gulp. I put the can into my bag. I could get rid of it at Dan's.

We walked up the well-worn path, gave Bob his beans, and continued on. As always, I paused at the huckleberry bush and waited. Not just to see if the coast was clear, but to let Sebastian come closer, to touch me, even if it was only for a moment.

This time was different, though. His hands went to my belly first as always, but he slid them under the shirt, over my bare skin and up to my suddenly taut nipples. He rubbed the flat of his hand over them, unable to tease them with his fingertips, the lack

of dexterity not slowing him down for a moment. I let out a low moan. This was torture of the best kind. He pulled me tight against his him and slid his body up and down mine as he rubbed my breasts, his breath hot against my neck, his teeth grazing the skin. I knew I should be afraid, at least a little bit, but the emotions rocketing through me didn't leave room for fear. Love, desire, skin, hunger. They left me trembling and useless in the way of thinking straight.

Sebastian nipped my earlobe and I started to reach back for him. He pushed me forward, knowing better than I did the limits of his control.

I stumbled to the door and let myself in, nearly gasping as I tried to get my hormones and emotions under control. I banged my hand against the door, suddenly angry and embracing the heat that burned off some of the desire.

"It's not fair!" I whispered.

"What's that, woman? Not fair that you're stealing all my food from me?" Dan asked.

I turned and leaned against the door. "No. Just, I don't know, everything isn't fair. Nothing is the way it should be."

He grunted and helped me packed my bags, more baking supplies, chocolate chips, raisins, coconuts, walnuts, flour, and sugar. I smiled to myself. Dan surely wanted more cookies; there was no subtlety in his methods.

I gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, Dan. I'll bring more cookies next time."

"Get out of here, woman," he growled at me, waving me off as he tried to hide a smile.

I stepped outside with the three bags and started down the slight slope to the edge of Dan's property. I hefted one bag into place and packed the other two to the huckleberry bush where Sebastian was. Except it wasn't Bastian waiting for me.

It was Jessica.

She launched herself at me, and I was barely able to step out of the way, stumbling to my knees as I slid in the grass. I dropped the bags of food and slid the bag off my back. I ripped them open and hoped the same trick would work with her as it had with Bob. Marshmallows and chocolate chips sprayed through the air, the scent of sugar drawing Jessica's nose to the food stuff instead of to me.

More members of the pack spilled forward, filling up Dan's garden and forcing me to the front of the house and onto the main road. The backpacks were shredded and the baking supplies were everywhere. I kept backing away. Jessica stared at me, her hatred palatable, but the food a stronger pull than killing me, at least for the moment. I knew that as far as she was concerned, I'd stolen her man.

A loud boom rattled the air, and the Nevermore closest to me dropped to the ground. I looked up to see Dan shooting at the pack from the top floor of his house.

"You'd better run, woman," he yelled. The pack swarmed through the yard, mostly focused on the food, but some were trying to get into the house, ending any chance I had at getting into safety.

I backed up until the pack was out of sight and then I ran. Okay, jogged, but I knew that I had to move. In my belief that I was safe, and in the concern for how much weight I should carry, I'd been leaving the rifle at home. All that stood between me and the pack was one measly knife. Deep shit did not even cover the depth of trouble I was in. Two more loud booms, then nothing more. Dan was giving me a chance at least.

I ran for fifteen minutes before I got a stitch in my side and had to slow down, but I was getting close to the halfway mark. Next up was the tunnel of broom that had nearly done me in, where we'd first met Dan and Bob.

I pushed my way into the thick greenery and found myself face-to-face with Bob. And I had nothing to give him. Again, deep shit seemed so understated.

"Bob," I said. "I'll bring you two cans next time, just please let me by." I couldn't back up; I didn't dare to with the pack coming my way. Already their voices were screaming and getting closer. A Nevermore hand shot through from behind me and I spun and slashed at it with my knife, opening a deep wound. Bob roared and stood up on his hind feet, even taller than Sebastian.

He roared again and the screaming and hollering stopped. Bob stepped forward, and I stepped to the side to let him pass. Apparently beans were the right commodity to keep him friendly to me, and I thanked my lucky stars.

Bob shoved past me, roaring and growling, the scent of his musky coat heavy in my nose. I ran down the trail, so close to

home that I could almost taste it. One hand instinctively on my belly, the other hand holding my knife. I ran, pushing through the broom and bush, no longer caring how much noise I made. The pack knew I was there. The only thing I hadn't counted on was Sebastian.

As I hoofed it up the street, our house in view, the gate a blessed sign that I would be safe in a matter of moments, Sebastian burst out of the bushes, breathing hard and eyes wild.

"Bastian!" I said, trying to speak while I was out of breath making his name come out as a whisper.

He snarled, his mouth open wide, his hands clenched in fists, and he ran at me, all the animalism that the rest of the pack exhibited every day coming home to roost on him finally.

"Please God, no," I said, scrambling backwards, holding my knife out in front of me, my husband advancing faster than I could back up. At the last second I slashed at him, opening the skin of his chest in a scarlet red line from left to right.

It didn't stop him. He slammed into me, taking me to the ground as he howled, his body hard and his ferocity terrifying me. If ever I thought I had been safe with him, I knew now I had been wrong. Maybe he'd been slipping slowly, but he'd still been moving away from me, moment by moment, step by step.

"Please don't make me do this," I whispered my knife arm free. Sebastian's body pinned mine to the ground in a mockery of the intimacy we'd once shared. With my left arm, I pressed against his throat, keeping his teeth as far away from me as I could. There was no longer any trace of the man I loved left in his eyes. Tears spilled down my cheeks and I felt him pause, felt him muster something from deep inside.

He opened his mouth, I thought at first to growl or bite.

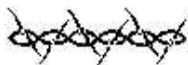
"Do it," he said, his eyes softening for a brief moment as he stared at my hand holding the knife.

I let out a cry of pain, gripped the handle with my right hand, and knew that if it were the last thing I did, I would love him forever.

There was no time; the pack was coming and they would kill me, Sebastian along with them for the ride, if I didn't do something—and do it fast. For me, for our child, I had to do it; I had to kill the one man I loved more than any other person in my life.

A deep, gut-wrenching sob ripped out of me. With a last effort I raised the knife, holding it above his back, right over his heart.

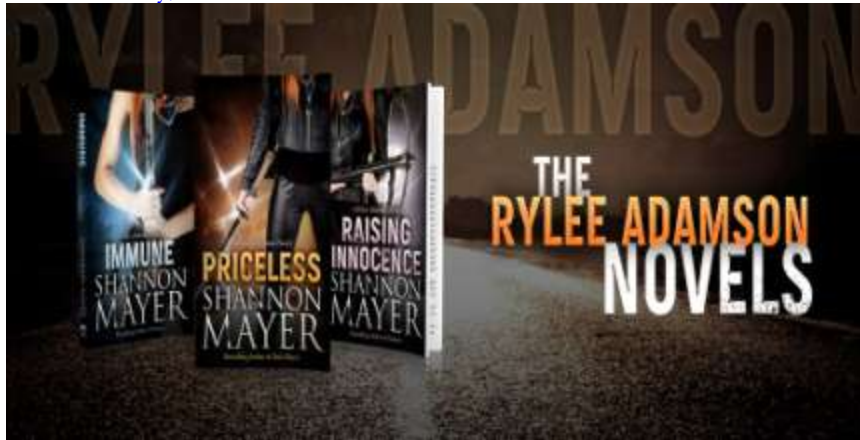
“I love you, Bastian,” I said and brought the blade down.



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"My name is Rylee, and I am a Tracker."

When children go missing, and the Humans have no leads,
I'm the one they call. I am their last hope in bringing home the lost
ones. I salvage what they cannot.

I'm on the FBI's wanted list. I have a werewolf for a pet, a
Witch of a best friend, and I have no need for anyone else in my
life.

But when a salvage starts to spin out of control, help
comes from a most unexpected direction.

One that is dangerously dark, brooding, and doesn't know
a thing about the supernatural.

One whose kisses set me on fire.

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Lyra Mcken



Finn

A Zombified Short

One day you're minding your business thinking about how much you hate PE and wishing the fire alarm would get you out of there, and the next you get bit. It's a strange feeling to have a human latch onto you with animal-like strength and rip off part of your leg. It is even stranger when they growl like a rabid dog and claw at your face. The weirdest thing was that he was my PE teacher at one time, and now... well, now he looked different.

I'm lying on my belly in the dirt beneath the school. From here, I can see the parking lot and the front lawn. I'm not really sure what my plan is, but this is where I ran after I was bitten. The chaos in the gym was too much for me. The school has a very old foundation, and I knew I could belly crawl beneath it because I had hidden there from a bully two years ago. He transferred out to be a delinquent somewhere else long ago, but it stuck with me.

I have been lying here since yesterday afternoon when I was bitten. The sleep I had fallen into was neither comfortable nor restful, but it had lasted off and on throughout the night.

My leg is starting to hurt a little, and it probably doesn't help that it is pressed against the dirt. The part of my shirt I ripped haphazardly to tie onto it will have to do for now. I am almost scared to look at it for fear I will see the black, rotting flesh I witnessed on those that were biting on others in the gym. I'm not really sure how long I've been tucked underneath the building, but it's not really that much fun down here.

Right after I had hidden in my dirt sanctuary, I had heard gunshots and screaming. The slow moving feet of what I'm calling the black flesh were visible, and I saw a couple of them fall.

One in particular had struck me as odd because he clearly had a broken arm. It had hung lifelessly at his side. The strange angle at which it had hung made me sick, so I had averted my eyes. There had been a loud gunshot, and when I had looked back, his head was gone.

As far as I can tell, I have been under here for hours. There really is no way to know. I wish wearing a watch was one of my things. No, I had to try to be cool with the power bracelet. It is a leather strap that snaps around my wrist, making me feel like a bad ass. I don't feel too bad ass right now; in fact, I feel defeated. I'm pretty sure I have been bitten by a zombie, and since I don't

believe they exist outside of some of my favorite movies, I am having a hard time wrapping my head around it.

I wish I had done so many things while I was alive. Third base with a girl sticks out in my mind, and now it's never going to happen. Why did I have to be so shy? Speaking of third base, there's my classmate, Cassie. I always thought she was pretty; I should have talked to her more. I wonder why she is running like that. I am going to get out and talk to her now.

I see stars as I drag myself forward because the pain in my leg is almost unbearable. Sweat beads up quickly all over my body, but I will myself not to black out. I'm glad it took me awhile to get to the edge of my hiding spot because Cassie is pulling Nancy Drake out of her car and tossing her on the pavement. Either Nancy has a wound, or she has someone else's blood on her. Cassie tells her to get back in the car and has taken off walking, so maybe she has had a change of heart and reconsidered.

A pair of hands grabs me from behind. I can feel nails digging in through my pants. The scream I let out is less than manly. Who the heck is under here with me? Turning my head as far as I can, I see a man with dirty, red hair and a bloody mouth. He is unforgivingly sinking his fingers into my wounded leg. Scrambling through the pain, I manage to get out from under the building, but he is right on my heels not far behind me.

A nearby zombie that looks a lot like my math teacher—but is missing half of his face—has spotted us and is coming toward us. Great, now I have to try to run. As I move, the t-shirt bit that I had tied around my leg falls off, but I am not moving fast enough. The math teacher is coming from one side, the red-headed blood face is coming from behind, and now it looks like Nancy Drake has come over to the black flesh side because she's slow walking towards me from the parking lot.

I am pretty much trapped. If I could run, then escaping would be no problem. It is time to face the fate I have been dealt: bitten by my gym teacher, and eaten by my math teacher and the girl who likes to wear the cat sweaters.

To my surprise, the redheaded man starts walking away from me, and Nancy Drake sniffs me as if she's some type of pretty dog. My math teacher walks into the side of the building, hitting his head repeatedly. He no longer seems interested in eating me, either. Now I know something is wrong with me.

I look down at my leg to find the angry, black wound has spread around the teeth marks, and the flesh of my thigh is missing. Could it be they don't want to bite me because I am infected? The realization hits me like a ton of zombies. I suddenly feel sick and spill the remnants of my lunch all over the ground. That square pizza and apple juice probably weren't the best choices for lunch.

I have a decision. I can crawl back beneath the school and just wait to turn into one of these black-fleshed, gray-skinned scary things, or I can walk into town and look for others like me. Cassie looked like she still had her thoughts about her. I wonder if I could catch up with her. She had a pretty good head start, and I am moving pretty slowly. I could just hang around here. Checking in with myself, I don't seem to have a craving for human flesh, so that's a good thing.

My body feels compressed from lying underneath a building in a tight space for hours. Stretching feels good, except for my leg, which is throbbing. Pains shoot through me with every step.

Moving into town seems like it will take too long, so I head back into the building to see what has transpired there.

My body feels compressed from lying underneath a building in a tight space for hours. Stretching feels good, except for my leg, which is throbbing. Pains shoot through me with every step.

None of the men who came in with guns is standing guard anymore, and there is literally blood everywhere. My Adidas shell tops slide as I attempt to hobble into the lobby to look around for any signs of life. There isn't a place my eyes fall that isn't riddled with body parts, blood, and intestines. What appears to be a teacher with a leg missing is crawling across the floor with an arm in her mouth. Gross! The whole world has gone mad.

Making my way to the quad, I can see the carnage doesn't end there. I stumble over football players, geeks, cheerleaders, pretty girls, and half the track team. I wonder how many people must have been turned in order to reach this number of bodies.

I slide over to sit on one of the ugly orange benches so I can stare at a vending machine as I contemplate my next move, but then I catch movement behind it. A small girl jumps out holding what appears to be a plastic knife.

“Back off, zombie, I mean it.”

She trembles, which makes her less terrifying than the plastic knife she’s holding. I recognize her as Sissy, a pretty redhead who’s a year younger than me. Her face has been bitten, and for a minute, I wonder if she doesn’t know. I think she has to know because half of her bottom lip is missing. The bite marks are huge, the bite is large, and it took half her bottom lip.

“I’m not a zombie, at least not yet,” I tell her. I don’t bother to raise my hands above my head because the knife isn’t threatening. Seeming to relax a little, she looks down at my leg.

“That looks nasty.”

“It doesn’t feel too good, either.” I avoid saying anything about her face in case she is sensitive about it. The black flesh is already starting to show up around the graying skin as it dies. The smell of rot coming from us would be unbearable if we hadn’t already grown accustomed to it.

She motions for me to follow her, and we head to the other side of the quad to sneak into the hall. I watch her look back and forth nervously. I want to ask her if she knows they won’t bite us, but she grabs my hand, pulls me quickly into the hallway, and then into a classroom, shutting the door and pushing the desks closest to it up against it. I open my mouth to ask her what her plan is, and she shushes me with a finger. At the back of the classroom, she opens the supply closet.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” My voice echoes in the empty classroom, and panic overcomes her as she pushes me inside.

“You want them to hear you, Finn? You have to be quiet.” She shuts the door behind us and turns on the overhead light, then, having second thoughts, turns it off again. The closet is bigger than it looked from the outside. It’s a small room with junk in it, such as school supplies, easels, and decorations for various holidays.

“How do you know my name?” I just realized she called me Finn, and I don’t remember seeing her, outside of passing her in the halls.

“You know mine, don’t you?” She blushes and looks everywhere except directly at me.

“Yes, Sissy, I know your name.” I knew it because we had gone to the same school since she was in kindergarten and I was a first grader, so I assume that’s how she knows my name, too. I feel

stupid for asking, and am back to wondering what the hell the plan is. "What's the plan here?"

She slides down the wall to sit on the floor, and I do the same.

"Hide from the zombies until we are rescued."

Should I tell her I don't think there's a chance for us? I go with trying to find out how she was bitten instead.

"So, tell me what happened when you saw the black flesh."

"The black flesh, that's an interesting way of putting it."

Leaning her head back on the wall, she closes her eyes. "We were in Ms. Lewis's English class. I was nodding off, and a gunshot brought me back to reality."

I nod, encouraging her to continue.

"Some strange looking guy came in and grabbed her, dragging her to the ground. Once he sunk his teeth into her neck, blood went everywhere. It was so violent and just... horrific." She shivers, keeping her eyes closed as if she is reliving the moment. "Then someone shot him in the head, came into the classroom, and shot her in the head. I watched it explode because I sit near the front."

"That's tough." I feel my leg start to tingle, and when I finally get the nerve to look down, I see the wound has spread even more. Feelings of doom and thoughts of dying are coming back to me. Changing the subject seems like a good plan.

"You know my sister, Melanie, she's in your grade."

Melanie was out sick today, thank zombie for that. Have I started to think in zombie terms already?

"Finn, I used to come over to your house when I was younger. Melanie has gotten too popular to hang out with me now." She looks down at her feet sadly.

"Cecelia?" No wonder she knew my name; I saw her every day when she and Melanie were best friends. I have to learn to be more observant. "Why did you change your name? I like Cecelia."

"People just started calling me Sissy," she says as she shrugs. "I can't believe this is happening... a zombie apocalypse. I am really worried about my family." I'm not going to tell her I'm sure it'll be fine and that there's nothing to worry about because I have no clue if that's the truth.

"I'm still going to call you Cecelia." She smiles, and we have a nice moment in the middle of Hell.

I hear the groans of recently dead people as they pass, and we look at each other. I know she thinks they are coming for us, but they aren't.

"You know, I never even got to kiss a boy." She looks at me sadly and appears almost hopeful. Normally, I would be happy to oblige a pretty girl her first kiss at the end of the world, but this pretty girl has half her lip hanging off and a huge black wound above it.

"Does that not hurt?" I am doing it. I am addressing the black-lipped elephant in the closet.

"What? Does what hurt?" Great, she doesn't know. Here goes all the peace.

"Cecelia, I don't want to alarm you, but you have a huge bite on your face, and some of it is missing." I wait for the scream. It comes, but she flees the closet, throwing the desks out of the way while doing it as she rushes for the door. I guess her fear of zombies was taken over by her vanity. I follow behind her slowly, watching her dash into the ladies' room. Her scream ricochets off the lockers because it is so loud. How the hell could she not feel that? Was she in denial?

I sit in the hall and listen to her swearing about someone saying he slapped her awake, not that he bit her while she slept. Not understanding any of it, I doze a little. I'm not sure how much time is passing as I fade in and out of consciousness. I dream of my family being eaten... not a cool feeling.

When I wake, it is dark again. I can tell by looking through the windows on of the double exit doors where there is no sun shining through. at the end of the hall . I don't hear any crying from the bathroom, so I assume Cecelia has finally passed out.

I sense something coming down the hallway. I don't know what it is, but I know it's delicious, whatever that means. I stand from the ground as my stomach rumbles for the first time in two days. My mouth waters as I move toward it. I sense it is afraid, and that it is running. Why not chase it?

Catching it isn't hard. It's hurt, but it hasn't been bitten by one of us. I latch my teeth onto her neck before I realize what I'm doing. It's one of my classmates, but I rip a hunk out of her neck because I need to feed. What the hell is wrong with me? Cecelia yells and runs at me.

“Finn, stop! Stop eating her!” I am horrified as I drop the poor girl on the floor. I can feel her blood run down the sides of my face.

“I’m sorry, Cecilia. I don’t know what came over me.” Cecilia doesn’t answer. She plunges her face into the stomach of the girl even though the girl is still alive. I realize there’s no hope for either of us.

ZOMBIFIED

By
LYRA MCKEN

GRIMIORE PRESS
Great Minds Think Aloud

Prologue

"You know, it just makes me mad that the news thinks we aren't people too," I said to Neil.

Of course, my words were spoken in what we Zombies affectionately call "Slopar," so he did not understand me. To him, it sounded like lots of moaning and noises, but I continued anyway, as I determined what part of the leg was the meatiest. I normally don't like the drumstick of a man, but I was feeling particularly hungry today.

In the days before I was completely transformed, I had heard the news stories about us, saying we were monsters. They said lots of things but the ones that stood out to me now were soulless and evil.

"We are people," I continued, as I sunk my teeth into his thigh, ripping off a piece, despite his protests. "Just because we are a little dead does not mean we are any different than you, Neil. Can I call you Neil?"

I was talking through mouthfuls of him. When he didn't respond, I continued to snack away on what I assumed, by the build, to be an athletic thigh.

"Are you a runner, Neil? You taste like a runner." Happy with my choice of dinner, I continued my rant and made myself comfortable on the cement of the parking lot where we had stopped.

"Like, how they say that we lumber about in groups with no order, and that is just not true. We actually lumber around with our friends. The lady right over there, with only half of her arm, is my favorite person to walk slowly through an abandoned town with."

I was fairly certain that Neil was almost dead. The color had drained from his face and the blood had stopped spewing from the artery in his leg. In case he could still hear me, I continued to ramble. "There are exceptions. There is this one guy who has to walk in the back of the mob because he drags his leg behind him and it slows us down. We dated in middle school. I tolerate him, but his breath always smelled like cheese and he called me 'tart.' I hated both of those things."

I nudged Neil at my joke, but instead of laughing, he fell over. I debated staying there while I waited to see if he would become zombified, as well. Since my body did not move fast anymore, I figured it could happen before I made it across the parking lot, so I began my slow march toward my friend, Rose. She seemed to be enjoying herself, as I could see her happily eating the brains of a young blond lady.

As I passed by a car window, I caught a glimpse of my slow moving form and stared for a minute. "Zombie life does absolutely nothing for my complexion," I yelled, over my shoulder to Neil, as I took in a gray face with sunken in eyes.

Continuing on my path to Rose, I tried to push my appearance from my decaying mind. I wondered if it was just my imagination that I could hear parts of me rotting. I remembered my mother always telling me to take care of my body.

"Your body is your temple, Cassie." She would correct my posture by jerking my shoulders back. "You should make sure you treat it as such."

"If only my mother could see me now." I was still talking to Neil, as my progress had not taken me out of his earshot. "She would really be proud of her baby girl."

Of course, my mother was dead, and she would never be able to see my current state. She had been in the first round of the infected and they had disposed of her and hundreds of others before they had a chance to spread the disease. That is what they called being zombified in the beginning. They called it a disease.

As I continued to drag myself across the parking lot, I wondered how things could have been different.

Chapter 1

The Longest School Day

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, and it was the age of foolishness. . . .” The teacher was reading the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities* while I was attempting to construct a note to my best friend, Ellen, about how good Brett Nathan’s hair looked that morning. He was the love of my twelfth grade life. Having just turned seventeen, I was now a woman. It was time to make my move. I was getting up the nerve to ask him out, but right now I needed to tell Ellen how fantastic he looked when he got out of the car that morning and the sun hit his perfectly shaped coif.

Horror filled me as I felt the paper slip from beneath the pen I was writing with. I looked up into Ms. Hamrick’s stern eyes, behind impossibly large glasses, and knew that my life was over. She was not happy with my note writing, and I knew for a fact she loved to read notes out loud. I prepared myself for the embarrassment of my innermost desires being revealed to a classroom full of Neanderthals.

She pursed her lips, which only made the fact that she had a hairy upper lip stand out. This woman had never seen a wax strip or a pair of tweezers in her life. I found myself momentarily mesmerized by the amount of hair in between her very unkempt eyebrows. The look of bliss on her face meant I was in for a big humiliation.

“Well, Ms. Williams,” here it came, “while I am sure that Ms. Davis desperately needs to know that Mr. Nathan is way hotter than Leo, with an ass you could just cling to; we have a book to read through. Start at the third paragraph.” She walked back to the front of the classroom, as the idiots around me erupted into laughter, and I felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

I pulled my dark brown hair around my face to hide. I was thankful I had opted to wear it down that day. Too bad it was summer and I was wearing my favorite baby blue tank top instead of a sweatshirt. I wished the worst things ever on my teacher as I began to read from the book. I was just thankful Brett was not in

the classroom to hear that display of teenage puppy love. How ridiculous it sounded when she read it out loud that way. There was no doubt in my mind it would get to Brett. I felt like the bathroom would be as good a place as any to eat my lunch today.

I stumbled through the third paragraph, my face burning with embarrassment. The smug look on the teacher's face made me angry, and I couldn't wait to get out of there.

Ellen gave me a sympathetic look when Ms. Hamrick finally called on someone else to read. I shrunk down in my seat and willed time to go faster.

I looked at my oversized, white Fossil watch and saw the time was five until two. One more class for the day and I could go home and relax with my favorite book.

When the bell finally rang, I rushed out of the classroom, to my locker, as fast as I could. Ellen was there shortly after and I rolled my eyes at her as I slammed the locker shut. I jammed my hands in my distressed dark jeans and looked dejected. I was glad I had worn my favorite pair of tennis shoes, with the pink laces, so I could make a quick get-away if I saw Brett coming.

"Ms. Hamrick is a mean old witch." I was angry and taking it out on the teacher was the best thing I knew to do.

"She is, and that was beyond embarrassing." Ellen lowered her voice to a whisper. "You wrote me about his butt." She tilted her head and we both giggled at her statement.

I sighed loudly and hoped like hell people would just forget about it, and then something amazing happened. An announcement, from the principal, came over the speakers telling everyone to get into a classroom and lock the doors. The school would be on lockdown until further notice. Ellen and I locked eyes, standing still for a minute, not sure what we should do.

Panic ensued, and there was talk of a shooter in the building, or some type of wild animal; no one knew what was going on. Of course, Ms. Hamrick's classroom was the one we were closest to, so we all got ushered inside.

I was horrified to see that not only were most of the kids I had just experienced the single most humiliating moment of my life with were there, but so was Brett. He must have been caught in the group of students Ms. Hamrick pushed into her classroom. He caught me staring at him and flashed an adorable smile. His teeth could be the stars of a tooth paste commercial. Getting out of my

head, I pulled my gaze away from him, knowing I had stared too long. I thought the day could not possibly get any worse, but I could never predict how wrong I was about that.

I checked my watch and it was almost three o'clock. An hour had gone by and we still hadn't heard anything from the principal. We were all supposed to be quiet and Ellen and I were writing notes back and forth to pass the time.

I squinted at her chicken scratch across the page. *Brett is in here.*

I wrote her back. *Duh, I am not blind; I see that.*

Just then, a guy caught my eye outside the classroom window. The blinds had been pulled shut, but I could see him through the cracks on the side. He looked bloody and his movements seemed slow. He reminded me of an ant that had just been stepped on, the way he jerked almost as if it were painful to move.

I stared for a minute before I drew attention to him, trying to figure out what he was doing. I raised my hand and watched Ms. Hamrick look at me and look back down. Why was she acting like that?

I nudged Ellen. "Look, something is wrong with that man."

The clothes he wore looked torn and his shirt was hanging open. I wondered if he had come from the street and been in some kind of accident. His skin was a little gray-looking and his cheeks were sunken in like he had been hungry for a while.

Putting my hand back down, I watched him walking slowly towards the classroom. The look on his face was scary and his eyes stared straight ahead. I couldn't be sure, but I didn't think I saw him blink. He kept coming at the same steady pace like it was difficult for him to walk.

He didn't stop when he got to the window; he pressed his face up against it and opened his mouth wide, revealing blood inside. There was definitely something wrong with this guy, and I was scared. He started to bang on the window of the classroom, and I began to scream.

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Emily Walker loves creating worlds and stumbling around in them. She writes under her name and the pen name Lyra Mcken. She is constantly losing her chap-stick, and has an obsession with the color pink. Currently a resident of the mountains and loving the view she writes mostly paranormal fiction, and horror. Her small family consists of her red bearded other half, a rat terrier named Rebel, and a cat called Mr. Creepy.

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Cynthia Melton



ZOMBIE AWAKENING
(A Zombie Short Story of what happened before
and during The Darkening)
A Prequel
By Cynthia Melton

“Lock it down!” Rachel Moore raced down the halls of the government facility building. “Meteors are striking all around us. If that thing gets out, we’re all dead.”

She pulled a card key from her lab jacket. If she could destroy the lock on the cage so the, she couldn’t bring herself to say person, escaped, then maybe, just maybe, she could save the world from an unimaginable horror. A horror she had a hand in creating. Sometimes scientific experiments of germ warfare went horribly wrong.

The door opened with a whoosh just as the building shook with an explosion. Rachel screamed and fell to the floor, covering her head with her hands. Another hit and the building shook as if rattled by a giant child’s hand. She smelled smoke and glanced up.

The door to the thing’s cage buckled. It snarled and reached blood-stained hands through the bars. Rachel had known for a while now that the live chickens they tossed it would not be enough to sustain its hunger. Even now, feathers stuck to its lips.

She got to her knees and scrambled out of the room. She needed a gun—fast! One more hit and the building would come tumbling down, unleashing the monster.

Plaster and ceiling tiles rained on her head. Screams filled the halls.

Rachel glanced over her shoulder. It was loose. The zombie, the closest thing she knew to call the man who’d once been a prisoner on death row, grabbed a fellow scientist and bit off the man’s nose. The building’s janitor hit the zombie over the head with a metal trashcan, transferring its attention to him.

While the zombie bit into his forearm, the scientist on the floor twitched, died, and climbed to his feet. The nightmare had begun. Rachel ducked into a corner and vomited. She’d had a hand in unleashing hell.

She thought of giving herself over to it. After all, she deserved nothing else, but the human’s will to survive was stronger than her guilt. She shoved away from the wall and ran as the building continued to be battered by falling fireballs from heaven and screams rose as one after the other her co-workers fell. A few

escaped into the horrors outside, as she did, and not one of them armed.

Taking refuge in a cement culvert, she covered her ears and cowered, praying for it to end. What had she done? God, forgive her.

By the time the firestorm ended, a semblance of night had fallen. Thick clouds obscured the sun, casting the afternoon into dusk. The meteorologist had warned it would take months for the ash and dust to clear after the meteor shower.

The hands on Rachel's watch were frozen at two p.m. under the cracked lens. The groans from inside the fallen building rose and fell like the swell of waves. There were many of them now. Like cockroaches they'd spread across the continent, even possibly, the world once they dug themselves free.

She couldn't stay where she was. Crawling from the culvert, she merged with a group of escaping living.

"They can't get out," one woman said. "Their brains are dead."

"They'll push free from their sheer need for food. Their forward momentum will carry them across the debris," a man answered. "Some will have been crushed, others too maimed to continue, but some will get out and create more of the walking dead. I should know. I created the virus that made the first one."

Rachel recognized her boss under the blood-covered face. The man with the genius to recreate something that only previously existed in books and movies. Genius or fool? And she'd known all along and said nothing. It had been her job to record the thing's actions and how much it ate. It never wanted to stop eating. Well, she wouldn't keep the secret any longer. If she ran across someone who could spread the word of the danger, she'd tell them everything she knew.

She paused to glance back at the building that housed a basement designed to protect them from the meteor shower. What had happened to the man responsible for alerting them once the shower started? Had he fled to protect himself and left the rest of them in a building with no buildings? Left them blind? "They're coming!" She turned and raced down the road, hoping, praying for an undamaged vehicle she could take.

The facility was in a deserted section of the desert. Although the parking lot behind her was full of cars, she couldn't

go back to search for one that would start. Not with at least twenty zombies shuffling in their direction. As long as she continued forward, she could stay ahead of them. Until someone fell and they descended upon them.

Her steps faltered. “Bill? Did you destroy the virus that made the first zombie?”

He shook his head and covered his face with his battered hands. “No. I know I was ordered to. But, damn it! I worked for years on that assignment. I couldn’t just toss it away.”

“You’ve condemned us all.” Tears ran down her face. “If we aren’t overcome by them, we have a good chance of succumbing to the virus. Some of us here are already infected, if not all of us.” Her stomach rolled.

How long would it take the virus to spread across the country? It had taken the first zombie less than three hours to change over. She looked at the group of survivors around her. She needed to hide out. Find somewhere she could be alone. Either she would change or be unaffected. If she survived until morning, she’d find a way to get from Nevada, where she was, to Colorado where another underground bunker waited, designed ‘just in case’.

They’d experimented on four death row inmates. All but one had turned. She had a slim chance.

“Go.” A large man she didn’t know pointed behind them then gave Bill a shove. “You’ve killed us all. Go meet your subjects, Zombie King!”

“No.” Bill held up his hands. “You can’t do this.”

The man hefted a tire iron from next to a crushed car and swung it, effectively breaking Bill’s leg at the knee cap. “If nothing else, you’ll slow them down for the rest of us.”

Bill screamed and crumbled to the ground.

Rachel raced down the highway ahead of the others.

As the sun disappeared over the mountain, Rachel snuck into a roadside motel and holed up in one of the rooms. By morning, she'd either be one of ... them, or unaffected and in a battle for survival. It was a definite toss up as to which she preferred.

She dropped her lab coat on the floor of the bathroom. She'd never wear it again.

Disrobing the rest of the way, she stepped into a frigid shower, not caring that she hadn't waited for the water to heat. She needed cleansing, of more than dirt and sweat. She needed to wash away the crushing weight of guilt.

Maybe she hadn't created the monster virus, but she'd kept the discovery a secret. She'd kept records on the experiment. Inmates or not, they'd subjected humans to an experimental virus. In her book, that was a close second to actually being responsible.

Something banged against the window. Rachel froze, straining to hear over the sound of the shower. Another thump, louder than the first, then a scream. She jerked the handle to off and thrust aside the shower curtain.

From the alley behind the motel, a scream bust forth, then the frenzied sound of ravenous eating. Rachel clamped a hand over her mouth and plastered her back against the wall. The cool tile caused goose bumps to rise on her wet skin.

Could they smell her? Hear her heart beating? There was so much left undiscovered about the furious eating machines. The certainties were ... a bite left you infected, and the only way to kill the things was to scramble the brain.

She gathered her clothes in her arm and moved out of the bathroom, closing the door behind her. The thing she'd studied had never learned simple motor skills such as opening doors. She doubted it had enough brain waves left to squeeze through the small bathroom window, but Rachel wasn't taking any chances.

Once dressed, she moved every available piece of furniture in front of the large front window and the door. Then, she found the few sheets of paper left in a drawer and the cheap ink pen to make a list of things she would need.

Food and water were her first priority. Then...a weapon. Loud noises attracted the beasts so she'd prefer to stay away from guns if she could. Then, warm clothing and a permanent place to hide. Possibly, a vehicle of some kind. Something large enough to carry other survivors, if she had the courage to pick them up. By morning, the immediate area would either be infected or showing those immune to the virus.

There was a large chance she wouldn't need her list come morning. It was also possible that she'd barricaded herself into a room where she'd spend eternity as one of the undead unless some poor unfortunate soul broke through the door. If so, she wanted to stay a non-dead prisoner in the room. She didn't want to prey upon the living, even if the human side of her no longer existed.

When she'd finished her list, she wrapped one of the blankets around her and scooted into the corner. Sleep would be a long time coming.

*

She woke lying on the floor wrapped in the blanket like a cocoon. No groans reached her ears from the other side of the door. She crawled to the window and peered out. The street swarmed with shuffling undead. Some whole, others missing limbs. One woman, missing the lower half of her body, pulled herself along the sidewalk on her elbows. A child, missing half of its face and dragging a dirty doll, glanced toward the motel.

Rachel let the curtain fall and sat back. She was alive. Immune, at least to the airborne part of the virus. Sobs burst from her, and she covered her face with her hands. Why had she been spared when so many others, innocents and *children*, were not?

Peering out the window, she searched for a way out. Several cars sat mere feet away from her room. She doubted any of them had keys left in them. Could she hot wire one if it were an old enough model? She tried to remember how. It'd been so long since she'd gone for a joy ride with her brother as a teenager. There. A 1962 Chevy pickup. That shouldn't crumble under the onslaught of zombies.

God, what if it weren't unlocked? A broken window would do her no good. She needed to move before anymore zombies wandered into the parking lot. One small child should be easy enough to dispose of.

Rachel went to the bathroom and shattered the mirror with the shower rod. The longest piece of glass should suffice to stab something through the eye. She shuddered at the thought and tied a wash cloth around her hand to keep from cutting herself.

After moving the furniture, she opened the front door and stood still. When nothing paid her overdue attention, she stepped out and crouched behind a concrete pole. Potential safety was only feet away. She took a deep breath and gagged. The air was filled with the sick, sweet smell of death.

Now breathing through her mouth, she ran, doubled over, for the truck. Thank you, God! It opened. She leaped inside and slammed the door, instantly realizing her mistake. The dead little girl lurched in her direction, its nose sniffing the air like a hound dog. Two other undead glanced toward her and came closer.

Stupid. She locked the doors and lay on the bench seat to see under the steering wheel. She cut the wires with the piece of mirror, then set her makeshift weapon on the dashboard.

Several touches of bare wires together and the engine turned over. Yes! It might only be a ride to the next stop, but she wouldn't be stuck at The Motel of the Dead.

She sat up and screamed. Zombies surrounded the truck, their hands swiping along the windows, covering the glass with blood and slime. Her scream whipped them into a frenzy. The truck rocked under the onslaught of their bodies.

A sound like a shot from a gun echoed.

A crack appeared in the front windshield.

Rachel slammed the gear shift into reverse and stomped on the gas. The truck roared backward with so much force one of the undead flipped over the tailgate and into the bed. Others were not so lucky. Instead, they became nothing more than speed bumps.

Gulping back sobs, Rachel whipped the steering wheel straight, pushed into drive and sped away. She couldn't care about the bodies being crushed under her wheels. They were no longer human. If she said it enough times, she might actually believe it.

The zombie in the back banged on the rear window. Rachel shrieked and almost drove into a ditch. She took a corner fast, watching in her rearview mirror as the undead man flipped out of the bed and to the asphalt.

She laughed the laugh of the insane. The sound of it hurt her ears. She'd done it. Survived the night and successfully outmaneuvered a small throng of shuffling, ravenous undead. Her laughter turned to tears, and she coasted to the shoulder of the road.

By the time her tears stopped, her eyes felt heavy and she had the hiccups. What Bill and the other scientists had intended to use as a weapon against their enemies, once the virus was perfected of course, instead became their demise. It turned people's brains into mush all right, and made them hungry for living flesh. Instead of a simple-minded people, easily controlled by a powerful government, they now had a horde of undead that couldn't be controlled by anyone.

She steered back to the highway. Not another living person was anywhere in sight. Cars were crooked on the side on the road, some crashed into trees, other with blood smears on the windows. The signs of undead feasting were everywhere. Was she the last living person on the planet? Wouldn't that be ironic?

By mid-day, the gas needle showed less than a quarter of a tank. Rachel had no money with her, not that it would matter, and sweat poured down her face and back. Since no zombies were in sight, she chanced opening the passenger side window and lowering the driver's side an inch.

A gas station loomed on her right, and she steered toward it. Since electricity still worked, she'd fill the truck with gas, and if the coast were clear, see what food and water she could find in the truck stop convenience store. If there were other survivors, they wouldn't have had time to clear the place of anything useful. The same might not be said in a few weeks.

She idled at the pump for a few minutes. When nothing appeared from inside or from around the building, she scooted out, leaving the door open and the keys in the ignition. To hell with the warnings of shutting off a vehicle before getting gas. Blowing up was the least of her worries.

Tank full and no unwelcome visitors coming around, Rachel headed into the convenience store. A rack of backpacks with gasoline logos on them stood by the front door. She grabbed a hot pink one and a matching baseball cap. Then, she headed for a back room. She'd need boxes to carry as many things as possible. The backpack would be in case a quick getaway was ever needed.

She filled the truck bed with as many boxes of food and beverages as possible. Then, moved back to the counter where a display of knives was displayed behind glass. She went to the back of the counter, and...Hallelujah, a shotgun! She rummaged, found a few shells and broke the glass. She grabbed a wicked looking machete type thing with a sheath that could hang on her belt.

The truck stop even had knock-off Harley jackets. She grabbed one to match her hat, a few tee-shirts and toiletries and headed outside with lighter spirits than she'd had an hour ago. The sound of groaning halted the good feelings fast enough. She sprinted for the truck. She'd no sooner slid behind the wheel and slammed the door before a man erupted from the nearby tree line.

"Wait for me!" He looked to be about her age, although it was hard to tell under the dirt covering his face. He dove through the passenger window as three undead emerged from the same spot he'd come running. "What are you waiting for? Get us out of here."

Well, damn. She couldn't leave him, but having another person around would cut her food supplies in half. She sped back to the highway and wondered where all the truckers had gone.

"Thanks." The man straightened his six foot body into the proper position. "I'm Eric King."

"Rachel Moore. Did you work at the stop?"

He laughed. "One of the truckers actually." He brushed at the dirt on his jeans. "Thought I could cover my scent with grease and dirt. Didn't work too well." He motioned his head to the stuff in the truck bed. "Mind if I grab one of them waters? It's been a while."

"Grab me one, too."

As he knelt on the seat, she caught a glimpse of a 44-magnum in a belt holster. "Do truckers always carry guns?"

"The ones who want to get a good night's sleep do." He settled back on his seat. "You're the first live person I've seen since the shit hit the fan yesterday. I'm glad to see you're one of the good guys."

She tossed him a glance. "What do you mean?"

He chugged the water. "In times like this, a person's true colors come out. You being a woman, well, you need to take care while picking up strangers."

"I can take care of myself. If you try to take what's mine, I'll cut your throat."

Rachel and Eric hunkered down in an abandoned garage. With grey clouds still blanketing the sky, she depended on her watch and her body's tiredness to alert her when it was night. They chanced a small fire, and she stirred a can of beef stew.

One week after the outbreak and she'd bet she'd lost five pounds. Not exactly the type of diet she'd recommend. She and Eric had spotted other survivors, skittish people who hid at the first sight of them. That suited her fine. Especially with Eric's warning about intense situations bringing out the worst in some people.

They'd managed to kill plenty of the undead in the last week, but Rachel didn't think she could actually bury a hatchet in the head of someone living or put a bullet between their eyes, despite her threat to Eric a few days ago.

"Man, I wish we had some beer." Eric removed his can and used a plastic spoon to fish out a bite.

"We can try to find some, but that will mean going into town." Unless the back road they traveled had a Mom and Pop store. Maybe they'd find some more shotgun shells stashed behind a country store counter.

Eric motioned his head toward a truck with a camper shell. "How do you feel about switching vehicles?"

She glanced over. A headless corpse hung from the open door. "There's a dead body."

"Yeah, but I'm betting most of the blood is on the ground outside of the truck. And," he wiggled his eyebrows. "I bet the keys are in the ignition. I'm thinking it might be nice to sleep on a mattress."

With her, he meant. He hadn't kept his attraction to her a secret, and Rachel would be lying if she said she wasn't tempted. The touch from another human that didn't want to bite off her face would be worth a million cans of stew. But...contact brought intimacy which brought caring, and she didn't want to have feelings for anyone. Not in the world they now lived in.

A can clattered across the concrete.

Rachel bolted to her feet, one hand on the wicked weapon hanging from her belt. She wanted to call out a warning, but noise

brought the living and the dead. She glanced at the low burning fire and sighed. The lure of a hot meal could be their downfall.

"Put your back next to mine," Eric said. "We can't be caught unaware that way. We'll protect each other."

She nodded, her heart in her throat. *Please, only let there be one.* They hadn't had to fight more than three at a time since joining together. Their good luck couldn't last forever, but Rachel's strength was failing. She needed a night of worry-free sleep. "If we get out of this alive, I'll take you up on that offer of a mattress."

"For more than sleep?" He chuckled.

"In your dreams."

"Every night."

She grinned and watched as a man in a janitorial cover-up and a woman wearing a suit and one high heel lumbered their way. "I'll take the business bitch."

"You got it." Eric stepped away from her and meandered toward their company. "His name is Fred."

"I don't want to know what their names used to be." She handled the situation better if she didn't look at them as having once been human. She raised her weapon and cleaved the woman's skull. Stupid things. Couldn't even fight back. Shuffled forward day-by-day in their never-ending quest for food. Rachel wasn't much different, if she thought about it. Sustenance meant survival for both species.

She wiped her knife clean on the woman's suit jacket then marched toward the camper while Eric tossed the bodies onto the fire. With any luck, they'd burst into flame and disintegrate.

Rachel yanked the headless man from the cab. Yes, the keys were in the ignition. "Welcome home. Let's transfer the supplies."

"Yes, ma'am." Eric jogged to the truck. "I'm getting a good night's sleep tonight."

The poor man on the ground must have turned, then had his head severed almost immediately. Which meant...there were others out there, living and breathing, who knew how to fight. Should they try to find them and hope they could band together? A large group of people would have a better chance at surviving. The zombies seemed to congregate together, the living needed to follow their example.

Eventually, the zombie bodies would deteriorate, right? And the world could recover, if anyone was left to rebuild.

She moved to the back door of the camper and opened it. A woman fell out, then immediately reached for Rachel's leg. "Back off, bitch." Rachel jabbed her knife through the woman's open mouth. "This is my home now."

"Heartless." Eric approached with a case of water in his arms.

"Yeah, well, nowadays a person needs to be. Let me check the inside before you come in." Knife at the ready, she climbed the two metal steps and peered into the dark recesses of the camper. A suspended mattress over a table with two bench seats. A small sink. A closet that was most likely the toilet, and a few cupboards. A real penthouse. "Come on up. There's nowhere for anyone to hide in here."

Eric climbed in and stacked the water next to the sink. "Not a lot of room."

"All we need is the bed," Rachel told him. "Pile the supplies on every available surface. I'll shove what I can into the cupboards."

Supplies transferred, Rachel stared at the Chevy. Such a beautiful truck. "I hate leaving her behind."

"We'll find you another one once we settle someplace." Eric put an arm around her shoulder and planted a kiss on her cheek. "We'll find a cute little place in the country where you'll finally succumb to my charms. Maybe, we'll find a couple of kids that survived and have our own little apocalyptic family."

Rachel laughed and squeezed his hand. "That sounds wonderful."

"I'm going to see if the toilet works." He stepped into the camper and helped her up. Then—opened the closet with a flourish. A child stumbled out and latched its teeth onto his forearm.

Eric yelled and fell back.

Rachel grabbed her knife and rammed it through the little girl's head. The zombie let go and fell.

Eric raised wide eyes. "Well, damn. She bit me."

Rachel raised her knife, barely able to make out Eric's features through her tears.

He raised his hands. "Wait. Please. Don't kill me yet. Wait until I die. Talk with me. I want the last thing I see to be your face. The last sound to be your voice."

"Oh, Eric." She set her knife on the floor and knelt beside him. "I'm so sorry."

"It was my own carelessness." He pushed to his feet and eyed the mattress. "It still looks mighty fine, but I don't want my blood on it when you put a bullet through my brain. Take my gun when I'm gone. It's handier than that shotgun you carry on your back."

Rachel nodded and swallowed back tears. She wanted to give him the kiss he'd been asking for, make love to him, but held back. She didn't know when the contagion started. Maybe it was after the reanimation, maybe it was when first bitten. The only thing she did know was that once a fever started, the person was dead.

Did the flu-like symptoms still plague people or had they run their course? She swiped her hand across her eyes. "Can I get you something? Water? A bite to eat?"

"No. Don't waste any of your supplies on a dead man." He scooted into the small amount of seat left on one side of the table, then waved a hand for Rachel to sit on the other end. "When I start getting feverish, I'll go outside to sit." He reached across the table for her hand. "You shouldn't have to clean me up."

The tears started again. "I wouldn't mind." She cupped his cheek with her free hand. "Thank you."

"For what?" Sweat beaded on his upper lip.

She shrugged. "Everything. Helping me, keeping me from going insane, showing me life was still worth living."

"Find that safe place, Rachel." He stood. "Don't leave people behind. Save as many as you can." He pulled her into his arms. "You're holding onto a big secret, and it's eating you alive. Let it go. The past is gone. We can only forge ahead."

She rested her forehead on his chest. "I had a hand in all this, Eric. I'm partially responsible for you dying." She raised her

head and stared into his eyes. "I was a research assistant at the facility where they created this virus. When the meteors hit—"

He put his forefinger over her lips. "It's not your fault. The meteor shower was an act of God. A tantrum of an angry Mother Nature. Call it what you will, but it was *not* your fault. I've got to go outside now."

She nodded and choked on a sob. She'd felt his temperature rising from the simple touch on her lips. She wanted to hold him back, beg him to stay, scream her anger and frustration at God. Surely, there were people on this earth that were immune. People that could survive a bite. It couldn't be the end of the human race.

Once outside, he slumped against the wheel. "Make sure you do it right, Rachel. I don't want to come back as one of those things."

"I will." She knelt in front of him, his gun in her lap. "I wouldn't curse you to that type of existence."

He stared at the feeble light showing over the wall. "Sure would've liked to see the sunset one more time, you know? I'm going to miss its return."

"It'll be beautiful." Rachel forced the words past her clogged throat. "Shades of eggplant, mauve, and pumpkin, streaking across the sky with the sun a glorious yellow orb in the middle of it all. After the darkness, the sky will be such a brilliant indigo as the sun sets, it'll blind you."

He closed his eyes. "I can see it."

She wiped away the tears. Would they ever stop once he was gone? She didn't want to forget him. Life shouldn't be easy for her. This was why she didn't want to be around people. She couldn't afford to get attached. Life was cruel now, bent on a personal vengeance against humankind.

The sound of a diesel engine rose on the night air. Out on the nearby highway, life went on. Rachel would, too. She'd merge back onto the main interstate and take her chances. She'd keep her promise to Eric to keep living.

She watched his chest rise and fall, ready to pull the trigger the moment he remained still. She knew the signs. After all, she'd witnessed them several times in a laboratory.

His breathing slowed, yet didn't stop. Rachel leaned forward, planting a kiss between his eyes, marking the spot she'd put the bullet.

Eric grasped her hand. "Not yet. I'm still...here."

"I won't. I promise." Only a few moments remained. The touch of his hand seemed to sear her skin. How could he be so hot and still coherent?

"When another guy comes along, someone nice to you, give him a chance. You deserve happiness."

"Okay." She didn't want someone else. She wanted Eric. If she'd known that one week could lodge a comedic, confident, arrogant man so firmly into her heart, would she have let him in the truck that day? Yeah. Yeah, she would have.

His body jerked, then spasmed. He groaned, but continued to breath. What was happening? Rachel frowned. Normally, a person just closed their eyes, and left. He jerked again.

"Eric?" She stood and took a step back, aiming the pistol at the spot she'd chosen. "Can you hear me?"

He held out a hand to her.

The End

Dear Reader:

I hope you enjoyed the prequel to my *Zombie Awakening* series. Join a young group of survivors as they fight through a hostile world. Learn more of what happened after meteors unleashed a monster.

Book one: [The Darkening](#)

Book two: [No Sanctuary](#)

Book three: [The Long Road](#)

All 3 in one: [Zombie Awakening](#)

Look for book four late 2013

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Kristen Middleton

Hope

For A Happy Ending

~A Zombie Games Short~



"Henry, open the door!" yelled Mary, one of the attendants at the Pine Valley Nursing Home.

"Hold on to your britches!" he answered and then lowered his voice. "Ginny, Barbara Jean, I'm sorry but we're going to have to finish this game later. I think we've been ousted."

Ginny threw her cards down on the table. "Oh, phewy. I think I may have gotten a royal flush this time, too. All I needed were two more cards."

Barbara Jean snorted. "You've been saying that all day. The only thing you've *gotten* is down to your brassiere and panties."

"Ain't nothing wrong with that," cackled Henry, as he pushed himself away from the table. "You're still in mighty fine shape for a woman in her sixties."

Ginny waved her hand, blushing. "Henry, you know I'm eighty-four, you sweet talkin' devil, you."

"Yeah, but you've got the figure of a fifty-year old, and these days, fifty is the new forty," he said, picking her robe off of the floor. As he stood back up, he winced. "Oh, I only wish I could say the same thing about me. This back of mine is giving me a lot of trouble, lately. I may have to ask one of you to give me a massage once I get rid of Mary."

"Certainly," said Ginny, smiling up at Henry, who was still a very handsome man at eighty-nine. He kind of reminded her of Clint Eastwood, always wearing a Stetson and a pair of cowboy boots. Of course, with his tall, lanky body, and full set of teeth, he was definitely the best catch at the nursing home.

Barbara Jean smirked. "I've heard about you and those massages, Henry. Nancy James told me all about that 'happy ending' you were trying to talk her into the last time your back 'went out'."

His watery blue eyes sparkled mischievously. "I don't rightly recall the ending being happy or what that particularly means, Barbara Jean. Maybe you could explain it later when the two of you return to my room and work out some kinks."

Barbara Jean rolled her eyes. "Oh, you're kinky alright-."

"Henry!" hollered Mary, pounding on the door, much more loudly this time. "Open the damn door. This is serious!"

He sighed. "Oh, hell. Well, I can't believe I'm saying this, but Ginny, you'd better put some clothes on before Mary somehow pushes that chest away from the door and starts going *ninja* on us. When she gets riled up, she's a handful, by golly."

Barbara Jean, who hadn't yet lost a hand of poker or an article of clothing, stood up and reached for her cane. "Well, I guess this party is definitely over. Perfect timing, I suppose," she said looking at her watch. "I think they're running some old reruns of *Matlock* on cable, later."

"Oh, I'll bring the popcorn to your room and we'll watch it together," grinned Ginny, zipping up her housecoat.

"You're on."

"You girls want to help me move that chest out of the way, first?" he asked, walking over to the door. "Before you trade me in for Andy Griffith?"

"Oh, Henry. Andy could *never* replace you," said Ginny, eyeing him appraisingly. The man still looked good in Levis. She only wished she would have known him back in the day, when he was still in the rodeo, riding those bulls.

"Speak for yourself," said Barbara Jean. "Back in the day, nothing beat a bottle of Chardonnay, a Matlock marathon, and my B.O.B." She sighed. "Boy do I miss those days."

"What's that, you say?" asked Henry. "B.O.B.?"

Ginny giggled. "She means her *battery operated boyfriend*."

His eyebrows shot up.

"Henry! Please," yelled Mary, her voice frantic.

"Hold tight," said Henry as he and Ginny began pushing the chest away from the doorway. Unfortunately, the staff had removed the lock on his door after he'd gotten his hand slapped for a few minor escapades, like the naked pillow party he'd inspired the week before after his grandson's visit. Tiny had slipped him a bottle of his favorite bourbon. After sharing it with a couple of his friends, both female, they'd all gotten giggly and a little frisky, tossing more than just pillows. Now, the staff made it a habit to check up on him throughout the day. It didn't stop Henry from doing what he wanted, however. Nothing was going to keep him from enjoying his last days above ground.

Mary burst through the door with a frightened look on her face. She slammed it shut and then motioned towards the oak chest. "Henry, hurry up," she said. "We've got to block this door."

Henry smiled. "Oh, why didn't you just say you wanted to join in the fun? Hell, Ginny, take off your robe again. We've got us some more hands to play."

Mary, who was the spitting image of Paula Deen, before she stopped eating fried foods, shook her head vehemently. "This isn't a time for jokes, Henry. Something is happening. Something horrible!"

"Calm down," he said, raising his hands in the air. "Or you're going to hyperventilate, Mary."

A loud thud on the outside of the door made her cry out. "Oh my God!" she shrieked. "They've gotten to this floor, already! Help me hold them off!"

"What in tarnation is going on? *Who* has gotten in?" he asked as she put her weight against the door.

"Dead people!" she cried.

"It's a nursing home," said Henry. "Obviously, some of us are close to death, but that's what old age does, Mary. It drains us of our youth and leaves us shells of what we used to be. It's part of life. Now, you of all people should know that. You've been working here long enough."

"No! I mean zombies. Dead people that shouldn't be walking!"

Ginny's face turned white. "What?" she asked, covering her mouth. "What are you talking about?"

Another loud thud made them all jump.

"Help me!" pleaded Mary, as the door handle began to jiggle.

Henry rushed over to help as the door shuddered against Mary's weight. Leaning against it they stared at each other in stunned silence until a low, guttural moan broke it.

"Did...did you hear that?" whispered Barbara Jean.

"What?" asked Ginny.

"Turn your hearing-aid up," hollered Henry.

Something began snarling loudly outside of the door.

"Good going," said Mary. "They can hear you. They can probably smell you, too."

Barbara Jean smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I think I may have peed a little. That last growl caught me off guard. Scared the hell out of me."

"It's okay, Barbara Jean," said Henry. "It happens to the best of us."

"What are we going to do?" asked Ginny, ringing her hands.

"I know one thing- we can't let them trap us in this little room. Whoever these people are, they'll get through, eventually. We've got to make a run for it."

"Are there a lot of them?" asked Barbara Jean.

"Yes," said Mary.

"How did this happen?" asked Henry. "Do you know where they came from?"

Mary shook her head. "No. Some soldiers came to the nursing home earlier and said to keep everyone inside. Said there were some riots going on downtown. That's the last I heard until a group of crazed, dead people wandered into the entrance and began attacking everyone in sight. Biting, scratching...God, it was horrible."

"You're sure they're dead people?" asked Barbara Jean.

"Sure as we're still alive."

"Well, what's happened to the others? Maggie, Jeff, Betty? All of the other residents?" asked Henry.

"Most of them have been sick with the flu," she said, blinking back tears. "Oh, Henry...I'm not exactly sure what's happening. I just ran to your room. To make sure you were okay."

"Thanks Mary," said Henry, squeezing her shoulder.

"You're a mighty good woman."

The zombie, or whatever it was on the other side of the door, made a crazed screeching noise and began scratching and clawing at the door. This was followed by a growling from a new creature who was apparently now joining in the fun.

"Give me your cane, Barbara Jean," said Henry.

"Why?"

"Because, as soon as we open this door, I'm going to kill me some zombies," he said grimly. "Just be prepared."

She snorted. "Right. You're going to kill someone."

"I'm serious. We've got to get out of here and it's the only way. Now, give me your cane."

Barbara Jean sighed and handed it to him. "Fine. Just don't break it. It's my favorite."

"If I break it, I'll buy you a new one."

"You break it, you get me your grandson's autograph," she smiled. "Love me a picture of Tiny in his speedos."

"The wrestler?" asked Ginny.

"The one and only," she replied.

"I think the zombies are gone," whispered Mary, listening against the door. "I don't hear anything."

"Only one way to find out," replied Henry. "Open the door."

Mary's eyes widened. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"We have to make our escape. There's no other way."

She bit her lower lip. "Okay. I'll go first."

Henry stared at her in surprise. "You?"

"Obviously, I'm the youngest and the most agile."

His lips tightened. "I may look older than dirt, but there is no way in hell I'm letting you go first. Just cause I'm living in this place doesn't mean I'm no longer capable of being man. Now, you open that door so that I can get you ladies to safety."

After a long pause, she relented. "Fine."

Henry opened the door.

"Oh my God," gasped Ginny as they stared in terror at the horrifying scene in front of them. Two mottled, disfigured men were lying on top of another resident, chewing on pieces of what was surely, the man's intestines.

"Is that Ben Smith?" asked Barbara Jean, her voice strangled.

"Looks like it might have been," mumbled Henry.

The two zombies ignored them and continued to tear into their victim, who stared up at the ceiling, mercifully, with lifeless eyes.

"Let's go," said Henry, holding the cane in front of them as they moved away from the gruesome scene.

"Someone's coming," whispered Ginny as she pointed down the hallway to something moving in the shadows.

"It's Lizzy," sighed Mary in relief.

"It *was* Lizzy," mumbled Henry as the woman, now obviously a zombie, shuffled out of the darkness, and towards

them with a look of glee. Before she could get too close, Henry raised the cane towards her. "You stop, right there."

Instead of obeying, Lizzy lurched towards him, her hands outstretched. Before she could reach Henry, who was in the front, he hit her in the stomach with the cane.

"That's not nice, Henry," said Barbara Jean, stepping around him. "She was a nice woman."

"*Was*, Barbara Jean, *was*," sighed Mary.

With a growl, Lizzy lunged at Barbara Jean and they both toppled to the ground.

"No!" screamed Ginny, rushing towards them as Henry and Mary stared in shock. Ginny grabbed Lizzy's arm but instead of releasing Barbara Jean, the zombie turned around and bit her on the top of her hand, tearing off a chunk of skin. She made a guttural moan and began chewing, a satisfied grin on her face while Ginny howled in pain.

Henry sprang into action, hitting the dead woman in the head as hard as he could with the cane.

Stunned, the zombie fell to the side.

"Ginny? Are you okay?" he asked, pulling her away from the creature.

"It hurts," she moaned. "Feels like someone threw acid on my hand."

Lizzy, who'd obviously recovered, let out a screech and crawled towards Barbara Jean, who was still sobbing hysterically, on the floor.

Swearing, Henry raised the cane, hitting the creature on the head several more times, until she finally stopped moving.

"You okay Barbara Jean?" he asked, pulling her up off the ground.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm fine."

Mary grabbed Ginny's hand and examined it. "This looks bad. God, you poor thing! We'd better find you a bandage and some peroxide."

Ginny tried to swallow, but found it was difficult. Her entire mouth was dry and her tongue felt thick. "I feel so warm and...I just..."

"Watch out!" screamed Barbara Jean, backing away.

The two other zombies, who'd obviously finished feeding on Ben, were already upon them. Before anyone could react, one

of the creatures grabbed Barbara Jean, tearing into her cheek with its teeth while the second, reached for Mary, who screamed at the top of her lungs.

“No!” hollered Henry, raising the cane, towards Mary’s attacker. He slammed it into the back of the zombie’s head and it dropped to the floor.

“Oh, no....Barbara Jean!” gasped Mary.

Henry turned back towards the woman, who was already dead from the glazed look in her eyes. The zombie was greedily attacking her bloody neck with vigor, ripping and tearing at her skin with teeth and fingers.

“Lord... have mercy,” choked Mary, backing away.

Horried, but sensing that Barbara Jean was beyond help, he grabbed Ginny’s good hand. “Come on, Ginny. We have to get out of here.”

Instead of obeying, she fell to her knees. “I...I have to lie down,” she whispered breathlessly.

“No. Get up! I can’t carry you, woman. Not after that hip replacement last year. You’ve got to get up!”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. You know...I’m just going to take a little nap.”

Tears filled Henry’s eyes. “Mary, you have to help me lift her.”

Mary nodded, but before she could move, two more zombies turned down the hallway and began staggering towards them.

“Forget leaving the building. Let’s get her back into my room,” said Henry.

“Yes, quickly,” agreed Mary.

They pulled Ginny up and grabbed her around the waist, when the other zombie, who was snacking on Barbara Jean, decided to intervene. It grabbed Ginny’s housecoat from behind and bit her on the back of the leg.

“Henry!” she cried out, as the zombie ripped a piece of skin from her leg. Blood gushed out of the wound and she fainted in their arms.

“Damn you to hell,” snarled Henry, glaring at the zombie as they tried pulling Ginny out of its reach.

But the zombie wasn't finished yet. It got on its feet and then lunged towards her, biting Ginny on the back of her neck, its teeth gnashing and tearing at her skin.

Mary screamed in horror and released Ginny, who toppled to the ground.

Henry turned around, raised his boot and kicked the zombie in the pelvis with his boot.

The monster fell backwards, but instead of lying still, it quickly crawled towards Ginny, viciously biting and tearing into an exposed thigh.

"Ginny!" cried Henry.

"Watch out, Henry!" gasped Mary as the two other zombies arrived, joining the one on the ground feeding on Ginny.

Henry, horrified and defeated, turned to Mary. "We have to get to Neil's room. He has a gun. I almost forgot!"

"He does? How in the hell did he hide it?"

"In his guitar case," said Henry, grabbing her hand. "I'm surprised nobody noticed when there was never any music coming from his room."

"This is insane," moaned Mary, taking one last glance at the two older women who'd been alive and playing strip poker less than five minutes ago.

"Try to focus on getting out of here," mumbled Henry, wiping a tear from his cheek. "Can't help them now."

They raced towards the elevator and found it wasn't working.

"The electricity must be out in the entire building," said Mary, pushing the button several times. "I thought it was just a fuse or something."

"The stairs," he pointed to the stairwell. "No other choice."

"At least Neil's room is on the main floor. Let's go."

They went down two flights until they reached the main floor.

"There were several zombies on this floor, the last time I checked," she whispered as they stood outside of the doorway.

"Let's hope they've scattered."

Fortunately, there weren't any zombies when they opened the metal door and glanced down the hallway.

"Let's go," said Henry, pulling her out of the stairwell.

They snuck down the hallway and rounded the corner, when Mary sucked in her breath. "Zombie."

"Oh, hell," sighed Henry, recognizing the man whose gun they were about to borrow. "It's Neil."

They watched as zombie Neil shuffled down the hallway, away from them. When he rounded the other corner, Henry and Mary made a run for it, rushing to his room and slamming the door.

"Dammit," groaned Henry, limping. "These hips aren't made for speed anymore, Mary."

"Are you okay?" she asked, looking concerned.

His eyes twinkled. "Well...nothing a little T.L.C. couldn't cure. Unfortunately, there's no time for that. If we make it out of here alive..."

"If we make it out of here alive," she said. "I'll massage your hip and even let you cop a feel. This time I won't even slap your hand away."

He grinned, remembering the last time he'd tried touching one of her breasts. She'd cussed him out, but there was something in her eyes that told him she'd been a little flattered. Angry, but flattered. "Oh, you've just given me something else to live for, by golly. We're getting out of this place- you can count on it, Mary. I won't let you down."

"Good. Now, let's find a gun and get the hell out of here. I don't understand why there hasn't been anyone out here to help us?"

"It's the zombie apocalypse, Mary. I told you it would happen someday."

She nodded solemnly. "Yes, you did. As crazy as it sounds, you might not be too far off. I've heard rumors....Anyway, I've tried calling nine-one-one, and they aren't even answering. That right there tells me, things are bad all over."

Henry shuffled over to Neil's closet and opened it. Finding the guitar case, he pulled it out and set it on the ground. "Well," he said, opening up the case. "We have a couple things on our side."

"What?" she asked, kneeling down next to him.

He pulled out the gun. "A loaded rifle," he said, checking it and nodding. "Some extra bullets... and us still breathing. I call that pretty damn lucky."

"I never thought I'd be happy to see a gun in a retirement home. But as far as I'm concerned, this is a gift from God."

He snorted. "Well, I doubt God had anything to do with this, Mary."

"No, but if you had died and I'd have never known about this gun..."

"Can't argue with you there. That means I'm the gift, though Mary, not the gun." He grinned lecherously. "Feel free to unwrap me later, if you'd like."

She shook her head. "You just never give up, do you?"

His face became serious. "Laughter gives me hope, Mary. If I can still make you laugh, then there's hope."

She patted his arm. "I understand. Now, let's gather some things and then drive to my house."

"Sounds like a plan."

She stood up. "Um, Henry?"

"What?"

"You ever fire a gun before?"

He stood up. "Damn tootin', I've fired a gun! Now, my eyes aren't what they used to be, but I can still shoot."

"Okay. I just had to ask."

"Don't worry. I've got you covered. And Mary?"

She looked up into his eyes. "Yes, Henry?"

"I want you to know that I appreciate you coming for me. You risked your life to save mine and I'll be forever grateful."

"Of course, Henry. I'd do it again. You and I have become really good friends. There is no way I'd leave you behind."

"Same goes here. Now, let's saddle up and get out of Dodge. Something tells me we have a dangerous ride ahead of us, Mary. That what we've just seen here is nothing compared to what we're going to be involved with later."

"You think it's worse out there? That it'll be even more dangerous?"

"Damn right I do."

"Then...why are we leaving?"

"We have no other choice," he replied, staring off into space. "And, something tells me...we're needed somewhere else. I don't know how or why, but I feel it in these old, rickety bones."

"Oh."

He turned back to her. "That reminds me- I need to get something for the trip. Something back in my room."

"It might be too dangerous, going back up there."

"I need my pills, Mary. You forget, I'm almost ninety."

Her eyebrows shot up. "What pills? You're the only one here not on pills."

"Just some vitamins, to keep me going strong."

"Well...okay. If they mean that much to you."

As they walked towards the doorway, she reached into her pocket. "I almost forgot...I took the bus today, but I found someone's car keys on the ground when I was running to your room."

He reached for them. "Oh, Cadillac, good going Mary."

"I think they're Lizzy's," she said somberly. "That poor woman."

He nodded. "Well, she certainly won't be needing them anymore."

"I know."

As they stood next to each other by the doorway, he turned to her and cleared his throat. "It's just us now, Mary. I can't promise you that we'll make it out of here alive, but I can promise that I'll fight tooth and nail to keep you as safe as an old cowboy like me, can."

She smiled. "I know, Henry."

"Do you believe in happy endings, Mary?"

"I'd like to think so."

"Happy endings come in many shapes and forms. If I die tomorrow, the fact that you came to my room when all of this was happening, that for me isn't just a happy ending, it's a chance for me to pay you back."

"Oh, Henry...you don't need to pay me back."

"Believe me, Mary. There isn't anyone who can give you a happier ending like old Henry can."

She stared at the shit-eating grin on his face and smiled in disbelief. "You are one sick individual, Henry. Nancy James told me all about *your* happy endings."

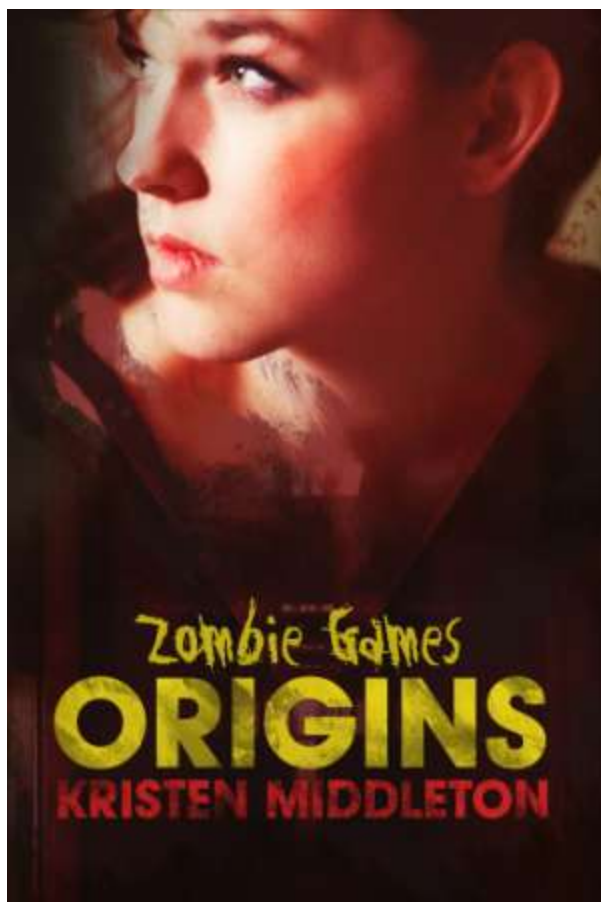
He winked. "I made you smile, though, didn't I?"

"Yes, you certainly did."

"Like I said before, smiles mean hope, Mary. It keeps us all going."

She touched his cheek. “That it does, Henry. That it does.”

To learn more about Henry and Mary, you'll need to read *Zombie Games Two (Running Wild)*. But first, read *Zombie Games (Origins)* for free, which is coming up next ☺



Zombie Games
(Origins)

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are
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Zombie Games (Origins)

Seventeen year old Cassandra Wild thought living in the chaos of her mother's home daycare and dealing with her developing feelings for Bryce, her new Martial Arts' instructor, was a struggle, until the night her world turned upside down.

When an untested vaccine kills more than just a rampant flu virus, Cassie learns how to survive in a world where the dead walk and the living...run!

This YA story is a lighthearted adventure filled with zombies, butt-kicking teenaged girls, a man obsessed with video games, an annoying but totally HOT karate instructor, and humor when needed.

This is a young adult fictional story that includes some language, violence, and mild sexual situations. Recommended for ages sixteen and up.

Chapter One

“Cassie, take out the garbage.”

“Why can’t Allie do it?” I asked, closing the refrigerator door, pickle jar in hand.

“Because it’s your job,” replied my mother, who was sitting at the kitchen counter, leafing through the mail.

I pulled out the largest dill I could find and crunched down. “Mom,” I said between chews, “come on, she needs more chores. She’s twelve.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Sorry.”

She peered at me over her glasses. “Tell you what...you can do the dishes and I’ll have her take out the garbage.”

“Fine, I’ll take out the garbage.”

“I thought so,” she answered with a wry smile.

I rolled my eyes and swallowed the last of the juicy pickle. Before I could reach for another, she pointed to the trash can.

“The pickles will still be here when you return.”

“I still can’t believe you’re making me do this in the middle of the night,” I pouted, glancing out the window into the darkness.

“That’s funny, coming from a seventeen-year-old who keeps begging me to extend her curfew.”

“Yes, but not to go wandering alone in the dark.”

Her eyes softened. “Honey, there’s nothing to be afraid of. We live on a quiet cul-de-sac in the suburbs.”

Even though my mother was trying to comfort me, I just couldn’t shake the feeling of dread or quiet the niggling voice inside, whispering of something wicked lurking in the darkness. But then again, it could just be the fact that I’d been watching a horror flick earlier and it’d totally freaked me out. “Ok, well, if I’m not back in two minutes, send dad out.”

“Right,” she snorted. “Little Ms. Black Belt.”

I couldn't help but grin. Last week I'd received my Black Belt after four years of intense discipline and training. It took a lot of patience and commitment, but earning the Belt was worth it.

As I stepped outside, a warm breeze lifted my brown hair, blowing it across my face. I glanced up at the sky and shrugged off my anxiety; it really was a peaceful evening. The stars glimmered brightly and the moon was full.

As I rounded the corner of the garage, Charlie, one of the neighbor's dogs, began to bark; which was a pretty common occurrence. As annoying as it typically was, tonight it was somewhat comforting to know I wasn't alone.

"Hey, it's just me, Charlie!" I called, my voice echoing across the dark cul-de-sac. A lone streetlight flickered on his side of the circle.

Charlie's barking increased and he tossed in some obnoxious growls. As far as I was concerned, this dog had some serious trust issues.

There was a sudden loud crash from behind the Hendrickson's rambler and the motion-detector light flickered out. Charlie growled angrily in the darkness for a few seconds and then, without warning, let out an ear-piercing yelp.

Oh crap, that can't be good, I thought.

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach as I began to panic. Really, I wanted nothing more than to take out the garbage and hurry back inside. I also knew that if I ignored Charlie, and he was hurt, I'd never forgive myself.

Dropping the garbage bag, I started walking towards his house when I heard a deep, strangled moan. I froze in my tracks; that wasn't Charlie.

I shivered. "Hello? Mr. Hendrickson?"

A tall shadow emerged from the darkness and my breath caught in my throat. I watched, motionless, as the figure shuffled through Charlie's yard, towards me. It was about a hundred yards away when the figure stopped directly under the streetlamp. I sighed with relief when I recognized Scott, a guy from my karate class, who I'd dated a few times. It certainly was creepy, though, that he was lurking around the neighbor's yard in the middle of the night.

"Scott, what are you doing out here?" I called out.

He just stared at me, swaying slightly.

“Is everything okay?” I tried again, wondering if he was drunk. He’s my age, seventeen, and I’ve never known him to drink alcohol or use any kind of drugs, so his behavior was odd. I stepped closer and noticed that he held Charlie in his arms. An alarm went off in my head, and I froze. “Um, is Charlie hurt?”

Scott growled and then dropped his face down towards Charlie, who lay motionless. When he lifted his head back up, there was a dark red stain covering his mouth. He smacked his lips and moaned in some kind of twisted pleasure. I shuddered in horror as my brain finally registered what was happening. Scott was feeding on Charlie!

“Oh...my...God!” I choked, backing away. Bile rose in the back of my throat as the guy I once kissed assaulted the dog again with that very same mouth.

I turned to run, stumbling over the garbage bag I’d dropped, my ankle twisting in pain. I cried out and struggled to stand when something grabbed my leg firmly. I looked back and froze in shock; it was Scott, only it wasn’t him. His green eyes were now black as death, cold and lifeless. His skin was gray and riddled with bloody sores. His mouth, which still dripped with Charlie’s blood, twisted into a grimace and he let out an unearthly screech.

“Scott?!” I screamed as his teeth tore into my skin.

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I opened my eyes and drew my comforter up to my chin. Reminding myself it was just a dream, I released a shaky sigh and forced myself to chill out. Yes, it was definitely time to stop watching horror flicks before bed. Forcing the last of the disturbing images from my mind, I turned over and let out a real bloodcurdling scream.

“Jed, what are you doing in my room!?” I gasped. It was the third time this week he’d snuck up on me. Apparently, it was now a special game.

Three-year-old Jed giggled with delight. “Hi, Cassie,” he said, licking a thick layer of green slime from his nose. Even in the dark I could tell the sleeves on his Spiderman shirt were crusty from dried-up snot. “Hey, want to see my new caw?” he said. Jed has a hard time pronouncing his R’s. He removed something from his jeans and lifted it proudly into the air; a small, blue convertible that had seen better days.

“Nice,” I mumbled, plumping up the pillow.  
“Now... please, go find Kris. You need a tissue.”

Instead of leaving, however, he opened his mouth and began coughing, hurling millions of invisible germs towards me.

I backed away in horror and yelled, “Mom!” Sure, he’s adorable with his big blue eyes and dimpled cheeks, but I’ll be the first to admit; I have a major phobia of germs. My room is off-limits and the daycare kids are forbidden to enter it; especially, the little “germy” ones.

My mother popped her head into my room and cringed. “I’m sorry, Cassie. I didn’t know he snuck in. Come on, Jed, time to clean you up.”

I snorted. “Clean him up? What about my blankets? He just infested my whole bed with his nasty cold germs.”

Jed’s lower lip began to tremble and his eyes welled up with tears. “Sowwy, Cassie,” he whispered.

My heart melted immediately. I reached over and ruffled his curly blond hair. “Hey, it’s okay, Jed. Just cover your mouth when you cough.”

His face lit up. “Huggies?” he asked, raising his crusty arms.

“Um, later, okay?” I replied as I beckoned my mom with my eyes.

She grabbed him and placed him on her hip. “Come on, Jedster. Let’s go wipe your boogies and get something to eat.”

“Thanks. Make sure nobody else waltzes in here.”

She motioned towards my alarm clock. “Hey, Wild One, it is time for you to get up for school. Start going to bed earlier and you won’t be so grumpy every morning.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m not grumpy. And quit calling me that.”

My last name is “Wild” and my family thinks it’s amusing to call me The Wild One, because I was such a handful as a kid.

My mother frowned but left my room without another word. As she closed the door, I could hear the chaos taking place in other areas of the house; kids were chasing each other, someone was screaming about a lost toy, and a baby began to howl. We live in Wolf Creek, a small town in Minnesota, and my mom runs a daycare in our house. What was once a calm home, is now hectic zoo. It was only Monday and I already yearned for the weekend.

I dragged myself out of bed, grabbed my favorite white Henley T-shirt, and a pair of jean shorts, then snuck into the bathroom to take a shower. Unfortunately, I have to share it with the daycare kids, so I have to be stealthy about it. If they realize it's me in the bathroom, they'll do things to torture me, like wiggling their fingers under the door, jiggling the knob, or repeating "Wild" over and over, annoying the heck out of me. Today was no exception.

"Enough," I warned, combing through my thick, dark hair. I pulled it into a ponytail and looked closely at my reflection in the mirror. Brown eyes, pug nose, and extremely dry lips. I rummaged through the medicine cabinet and found some of my sister's "plumping" lip gloss. I applied it gingerly to my lips and then frowned. Now they looked swollen, like I'd been punched. I tried wiping it off, but it didn't help. My eyes widened in shock as they continued to puff out.

Seriously, I thought, why would anyone intentionally do this to their lips? It was embarrassing and my lips were starting to sting.

I threw my hands up in defeat and stomped into the kitchen. To my dismay, I noticed three other kids, sick with colds. They all smiled at me, matching snot dripping from their noses.

"You have got to be kidding. What is it with everyone dropping off their kids here when they're sick? Shouldn't they be home taking care of them?"

"I know, nothing I can do about it, unless they have fevers," mom replied wearily as she grabbed several tissues and began wiping noses. "Everyone seems to be getting sick with this horrible cold. Some parents even dropped off their kids just so they could go back home and rest."

"Figures," I mumbled.

I pulled out my cell phone to check my messages when, Daniel, a five-year-old boy who pretends he's my shadow, sneezed all over it. I turned to my mom in horror, who winced and quickly handed me an antibacterial wipe.

"Daniel, why don't you go and draw Cassie a nice picture?" she said, guiding him away from me.

Frantic to escape, I grabbed a cereal bar and my truck keys. "I'll eat this at school. I've got a karate class tonight."

My mom nodded and then wrinkled her nose. “Megan? Do you have a poopy diaper?”

I turned and fled the kitchen before I could smell the answer. Just then my dad shuffled by in his robe on the way to his “Man Cave” in the lower level of our home. He calls it his sanctuary from “Daycare Hell.” Right now he looked like he’d just stepped out of Hell himself, with the dark circles under his eyes and hair that stuck up in every direction.

“Hi, dad,” I said. “Let me guess, you were up late again blasting zombies?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Heh. I actually finished the game.”

My dad is addicted to video games. Before I was born, he once spent thirty-six hours straight, playing Everguild, a very addictive Internet game, surviving only on caffeine and buttery pretzels. When my mom became pregnant, she lost her patience with his harmless addiction and brought a group of his friends together for an “Everguild Intervention.” Now he’s only allowed to play games on his Wii or PlayStation, which he has only a slightly better handle on.

“Do you have to work today?” I asked him. My dad sells cars for a living, which isn’t particularly his dream job. Unfortunately it’s something he’s really good at, so although he grumbles about it endlessly, he never changes it.

“Not until this afternoon. You ready to try out my new Beretta?” he asked, his face lighting up. His other addiction has to do with guns. Almost every Saturday since I turned sixteen, has been spent at the gun range with my father and grandfather. Both avid collectors, they own about thirty different guns between the two of them. When I began showing an interest last year, they were both delighted and started teaching me everything they could about guns. Now my aim is almost as good as my dad’s.

“Sorry, dad, I can’t make it to the gun range for the next couple of weeks. I have to study for final exams,” I answered.

“Plus, prom’s coming up. I’m just too busy.”

Folding his arms, he gave me a stern look. “That’s right. You’re going with that Scott kid, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Remember, no pre-prom parties, no hotels, and definitely no alcohol.”

I snorted. "Hello? Does that really sound like me? And you do realize that Scott and I are just friends? I've told you this so many times."

His eyes softened. "Good, keep it that way."

"Well, I'm just lucky he's going with me. I didn't go last year and probably would have skipped the senior prom as well if he hadn't volunteered to take me."

"Are you kidding me? He's the lucky one!"

I bit back a smile. My dad's having a difficult time with the idea of me dating, anyone, which he shouldn't; my love life is as dead as the zombies in his games. Scott and I are only friends, but it always seems to slip his mind. The last time I went out with Scott, my dad had insisted on chatting with him before we left for the movie theater; all the while cleaning three of his guns. My dad found it amusing; I was horrified. But Scott thought my dad's guns were "awesome" and missed the entire point.

"Wait, Cassie!" hollered my mom from the top of the stairs. My stomach clenched when I saw she was holding a dirty diaper. I swear there was steam radiating from the putrid bundle.

"What?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What's wrong with your lips?"

I released a deep sigh. "Allie's plumping lip gloss."

She bit the side of her lip. "Oh. Well they'll probably shrink down soon. Anyway, could you please pick up Allie from her dance class tonight?"

I groaned.

"Please? You're going to karate anyway, just swing by on your way home."

"Okay, fine."

"Thank you, honey."

I nodded then sprinted out the front door before she tried to volunteer me for anything else. Allie's my twelve-year-old sister, and since my parents pitched in to help me purchase my truck last year, I'm her personal chauffeur. I didn't mind at first, but since she's started middle school, her social life is busier than mine. Sometimes I have to fit my plans into her schedule.

Glancing across the cul-de-sac, I noticed Charlie following Mr. Hendrickson to his mailbox. We waved at each other and Charlie stared at me instead of blasting me with his usual obnoxious barking.

I hopped into my truck, a red '98 Chevy S10, which has seen much better days, and prayed silently that it wouldn't give me problems; it's been finicky about starting recently and I really don't have time to get it checked out; especially with prom coming up. When it turned over right away, I sighed with relief and drove over to my friend Paige's house.

"Hi. You're early. Oh...my...God...what happened to your lips!?" Paige cried, covering her mouth.

"It looks that bad?"

"It just looks...painful."

Paige, as always, looked perfect. With her long, blond hair and startling green eyes, half the guys at school are in awe of her. Some people at school call her Skipper, Barbie's younger sister, because of her sun-kissed skin, high cheekbones, and carefree spirit.

"My lips were dry, so I tried using one of Allie's lip gloss tubes. Bad choice."

"I guess," she replied, trying to hide a smile. "Do they hurt?"

I pursed my lips and nodded. "They burn a little."

"Just use Vaseline next time. That's all I use."

"Oh."

She pushed her hair behind her ears. "Did you watch the news this morning?"

"Are you kidding? In my house you won't find anything but Dora or Elmo's World on the television."

"Well, the media is all over this flu virus. It's amazing how fast it's spreading. Many people are actually getting so sick they're being quarantined in different countries. It's like the Black Plague."

"Most of the little kids in my house are sick. If this keeps up, I swear I'm moving out."

"Hah, you wish. Anyway, it's getting so bad, that in Europe, they've closed down a ton of schools. Wouldn't it be awesome if ours was shut down? We could hang out at the mall and check out hot guys all day long."

I laughed. "Yeah, fat chance of that happening. They won't even close when we have ten feet of snow."

"Well I, for one, am sick of school; sick of all the uptight bitches, juvenile jocks, and dumb-ass tests. Seriously, I wouldn't mind if school shut down for the rest of the year!"

I raised my eyebrows. "Wow. Having a rough week?"

She shrugged and stared out the passenger window.

"Ok, spill it. What's wrong, Paige?"

She looked at me, her eyes moist. "Eva King. She's such a lying, two-faced bitch. You know, she pretended to be my friend just so she could get closer to Kyle."

Kyle used to be Paige's boyfriend until he broke it off with her last month. I thought she'd gotten over it already since she seemed to have a crush on someone new every week.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw them kissing in the halls yesterday. She is such a conniving bitch!"

Eva is actually one of the most popular girls in school. Although Paige is much prettier and likeable, Eva's mother is a famous news anchor and she gets treated like she's some kind of a movie star herself. Eva's also head-cheerleader and owns this super turbo-charged Mercedes convertible. Most of the guys at school are hot for her car.

"And he's a prick...they deserve each other."

She wiped away a tear and sniffled.

"Well...anyway...there is this new guy, Jeremy, who's really cute. He sits next to me in Biology."

I chuckled. "I can see you're truly heartbroken."

Paige placed her hands over her heart. "I'm sure Jeremy could help mend it."

We both burst out laughing. Little did we know that in the next couple of days, our lives would turn into a living nightmare, and that we would have given anything to have such trivial problems.

## Chapter Two

I spent most of the day at school trying to avoid those who were sick, which was almost everyone else. Many kids were absent, and the halls were unnaturally quiet, except for the consistent coughing and nose-blowing.

During last period, my math teacher, Mr. Hogan, a balding man in his fifties, blew his nose loudly and said, "Keep taking your vitamins, everyone. This flu takes no prisoners!"

In answer, many of the students wiped their own noses or coughed. I shrunk down in my desk and took out a small bottle of antibacterial gel, rubbing some on my hands. A girl next to me noticed and snorted.

I glared at her. "It's called keeping your hands clean. You should try it sometime."

She gave me the finger, muttering something obscene under her breath.

Towards the end of class, our principal, Mrs. Davis, made an unexpected visit and handed Mr. Hogan some forms. They spoke quietly for several minutes and then she left, grabbing a tissue on the way out. I watched as Mr. Hogan removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose while examining the paperwork she'd dropped off.

Finally, he looked up and cleared his throat. "Listen up, people," he called. "This week, the school is giving free flu shots to all of the students. I am going to hand out all the information regarding the vaccination. Take it home, have your parents read it, sign it, and then bring it back as soon as possible."

A few of the students moaned in protest.

He smiled wryly and leaned back in his chair. "I understand your enthusiasm. You may not be excited about getting vaccinated, but it's for your own good. The school is urging everyone to have this flu shot. In fact, anyone who doesn't get permission will be required to stay home the following week, until we get this influenza epidemic under control. So, this vaccination is necessary if your parents want to keep you in school and out of the



house. And...for those of you who don't get permission, we can email you your assignments."

Great, I thought. My mother will never agree to this flu shot, so I'll be stuck at home next week. My parents don't believe in messing with "Mother Nature." They feel that flu shots lower the immune system, making one more vulnerable to other illnesses. That could also explain why our family has avoided this particular flu. My mother's daily handful of vitamins and my green-peach tea addiction doesn't hurt, either.

The bell rang and I stopped into the bathroom to wash my hands. I glanced up into the mirror and found Eva King standing right next to me. She looked miserable.

"Hey, Wild. God, I hate this frigging cold," she mumbled and blew her nose, which looked painfully red.

Trying to forget the way she screwed over my best friend, I forced a smile. "Bummer you're sick, too, huh?"

She nodded and smoothed down her long, red hair. "Yes. You know," she said, turning to me, her blue eyes wide. "Sometimes I wish I were more like you. Your mom's not famous and you get to blend in with everyone else at school. Nobody expects you to look perfect when you walk in every single day. It must be nice. I mean, I have to look amazing all the time. It's a lot of work having my background and social status. Even this sick, I don't get a day off."

I bit back my laughter and replied, "Yes, I don't think I could handle living in your world, Eva. It must be very stressful."

Her eyes narrowed, but before she could respond, Nora Biggs slammed out of a bathroom stall, an unlit cigarette hanging from her mouth. Nora was fairly new in the school and most people shied away from her because of her unusual punk style, short temper, and rebellious attitude.

"Hi, Nora," I said.

Nora nodded and then began washing her hands. We have karate class together and I've driven her home a few times. We weren't exactly friends, but she was civil to me.

Eva stared at Nora's nose. "Nora. Wow, I just love your nose ring! Is that a real Zirconia?"

Even sick, Eva was a complete bitch.

Nora's eyes burned with fury and I waited for the explosion. Instead, she removed the cigarette from her lips and

smirked. "No, it's a diamond. Your boyfriend gave it to me last night after we made out."

Eva's lips formed a tight line. "Classy," she mumbled, grabbed her purse, and turned to walk away.

"Hey, Eva," Nora said, grabbing a paper towel.

She turned around and snapped, "What?"

Nora smiled coldly. "You do realize that this is only high school? Being popular here doesn't matter in the real world."

Eva scowled and stomped out of the bathroom.

I giggled. "Nice."

Nora shrugged. "Well, she deserves it. She thinks she's so much better than everyone else. What she really deserves is to get knocked on her ass. I just wish I could be the one to do it. But hey, you know that code of honor thing-a-ma-jig."

One of the principle rules of karate is that you can only use it for self-defense. Ever since Nora joined the class, she's stopped getting into fights. I'm sure it's been challenging for her.

I nodded in agreement and picked up my backpack.

"You sick?" she asked, running her fingers through her long, black hair. Streaks of bright blue framed her pale face. I imagined without the heavy Goth makeup, dyed hair, and various piercings, she might look like the girl next door.

"No. Not yet, anyway."

Nora threw her head back and laughed. She knew about my phobia. "That must drive you insane; being around these germy bastards. I'm not sick yet either, but my old man is."

Nora normally lives with her dad, Ivan Biggs, who's a guitarist for Death Row, a popular rock band. Unfortunately, he's on tour in Europe right now, so she sees very little of him. Instead she stays with her grandmother, Iris, who has some kind of dementia and is frightened of leaving her house. She can't even take a step outside; she's so scared of something awful happening to her.

"I heard almost everyone is sick in Europe."

"Yeah, he's in Germany right now. They've all been getting vaccinated. I don't know what the big deal is, it's just the flu. Tell you one thing; nobody's giving me a shot. My old man isn't around to sign the sheet and I would rather take a week off from this crap-hole. What about you?"

I cleared my throat. "I won't be getting the shot, either. My family never gets flu shots."

Nora jaw dropped. "No shit? With you being so paranoid about germs and your mom being a Daycare Lady, I thought you'd have gotten your shots for next year's flu season by now."

I stared at her. "Um...I'm not that paranoid."

She snorted. "Whatever, Wild. Listen, I'll see you at karate class later."

I watched as she strutted out of the bathroom in her heavy black boots and then looked in the mirror. I'm not paranoid, I reminded myself, just very cautious...

### Chapter Three

My stomach was growling by the end of the day, so on the way to karate class, I stopped by a McDonald's drive-thru and ordered a cheeseburger, extra pickles. As I handed the cashier the money, she sneezed all over the bag without apologizing. As horrified as I was, I held my tongue and choked down the food; I was that hungry.

It was just after four o'clock by the time I made it to the dojo. Nora and Scott were already there, joking around and stretching out. I thought back to my dream where Scott had turned into a zombie, killed my neighbor's dog, and viciously attacked me. Fortunately, his skin was clear and his green eyes were as lively as ever. He caught me staring at him and smiled curiously.

"Wow, small class today," stated our instructor, Master Jordan, as he entered the room. He's a sixth-degree Black Belt and has trained for over eighteen years.

"Everyone must be sick," replied Scott. I noticed he'd gotten a crew cut, which didn't surprise me because I knew he had plans to join the military after graduation. We'd been really good friends for the last two years, and although we'd gone out on a few dates, both of us agreed that we were more comfortable in a platonic relationship.

Master Jordan sighed. "Well," he replied, rubbing his chin. "Since it's such a small class, why don't we just practice sparring?"

All three of us love to spar, so we naturally agreed. I quickly stretched out and then suited up in my dark gray sparring gear, which consists of a helmet as well as mouth, shin, foot, and chest guards.

"Nora, you and Scott will partner up. Cassie, you'll be sparring with Bryce De Luca. He should be arriving any minute."

I removed my mouth guard. "Who's Bryce De Luca?" I asked.

He smiled. "Bryce is a new instructor from our Hugo location. They've shut down because of the flu."

I glanced through the large window facing the parking lot just as a guy in a weathered leather jacket pulled up on a

motorcycle. He removed his helmet, ran his fingers through his wavy black hair, then hurried inside carrying a sports bag.

Master Jordan patted him on the back. "De Luca! I was starting to get worried about you."

Bryce was tall with intense blue eyes. When he smiled, his dimples heated my insides.

"Sorry, the traffic was bad. If you'll excuse me for a minute, I just need to change," he replied.

"No problem," said Master Jordan.

I stole another glance as Bryce walked towards the bathroom. He was just as interesting to look at from behind.

Nora strolled by me casually, a smirk on her face.

"Hey...wipe your mouth, there's drool," she teased.

My cheeks burned. "Whatever," I mumbled turning away from her.

When Bryce stepped out of the bathroom, Master Jordan motioned him over to where I was warming up. He stood several inches taller than me, had broad shoulders, and lean, muscular arms. Intricate tattoos of dragons peeked out from under his black sleeves. He caught me staring and rolled up his sleeves to show more.

"Very cool," I said, admiring the details of the dragon's scales, face, and fiery breath.

"Listen, Bryce, after you warm up, I'm going to have you practice sparring with Cassandra Wild here. She just received her Black Belt last week."

He nodded with approval. "Congratulations, Cassandra, you should be proud of yourself."

"Um, thanks," I replied, trying not to blush. His belt reflected that he was a third-degree Black Belt and I prayed that I wouldn't embarrass myself by forgetting anything I'd learned up to that point.

Bryce looked at my instructor. "I can't tell you how relieved I was when I found out you were open today. I have a tournament next weekend and really need to practice."

"After this class, stick around and I'll practice atemi with you," replied Master Jordan. "I've heard you've pretty much mastered it."

Bryce shrugged. "Yeah, I have to admit...I've got a pretty good grasp of it but could always use more practice. I'd appreciate it."

Atemi is an advanced type of martial arts technique that involves blows to different areas of the body; to break an opponent's concentration or balance. I had personally never used it, but Master Jordan promised to incorporate it into my training this summer, especially if I was interested in entering the more advanced tournaments.

"That's what I'm here for. Just remind me after class."

Bryce nodded and then turned back to me, studying my face. "Cassandra Wild, huh? You know, I don't recall seeing you at any of the tournaments."

I shook my head. "You probably haven't. It's been awhile since I've competed. Now that I'm a Black Belt, though, that'll probably change."

"Great. You'd be a good distraction for some of my opponents."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just smiled.

"Okay, you two. Better get going, time's-a-wasting," said Master Jordan. "Bryce, if you could work with Cassie on some of her kicks? She may need a little encouragement keeping those legs high up in the air."

I just wanted to fade away when I noticed Bryce's devilish grin.

"You know, I'm just going to let that one go," he replied softly. Unfortunately, it wasn't soft enough because Nora snorted from across the room, and oh how I wanted to punch her.

"Keep it clean, De Luca," said Master Jordan. "You don't want to mess with that one, her kicks are lethal."

He chuckled. "Sounds like an interesting challenge."

"Well, just never say I didn't warn you, buddy," replied Master Jordan. He then winked at me and stepped into his office.

I think Bryce must have thought I was anxious about sparring with someone more advanced, which wasn't really the case. It was the way he looked at me that started my heart pounding madly in my chest.

"Hey, Cassandra, I was just kidding. I'll go easy on you," said Bryce.

"No, don't. I can handle it," I replied breathlessly.

His piercing blue eyes met mine. "Look, I don't want to hurt you. I'm obviously twice your size and much farther along in my training. You don't have a chance against someone as formidable as me."

My fantasy of him being a total Adonis crumbled, and I stared at him in amazement, wondering if he was for real. I cleared my throat. "You're serious? You think I'm not going to be challenging enough for you?" I asked.

"Most women aren't," he stated confidently.

His arrogance irritated me. I'd worked hard on earning my Belt and prided myself on being just as good if not better than many of the guys in my class. Chauvinism was something I simply had no tolerance for. I stomped out the small fire he'd created in my stomach and ignored how cute his butt looked in his uniform. "Well, I think the only thing you should go easy on is your own ego."

He gave me a surprised look then chuckled. "Ouch. Man...you are a little wild one aren't you?"

You're going to soon find out, I thought as I put on my helmet and mouth guard.

Bryce took his time putting on his own gear, glancing at me occasionally with a wry smile. I refused to let him bother me, though. I couldn't wait to wipe the cocky grin from his face.

"Ready yet?" I snapped impatiently.

"Oh, I'm ready alright. The question is, are you ready for me, Wild?" he replied, jumping fluidly to his feet. I had to admit, with his height and combat gear in place, he was intimidating.

"I've been ready. And by the way, I prefer to be called Cassie."

He laughed at that, adding more fuel to the fire. I pushed aside my anxiety and let his irritating personality feed my adrenaline. We tapped gloves and I charged after him before he had a chance to study my fighting style. I started with a burst of fast charges and strikes, which took him a little by surprise. I bit my lip to keep from smirking as I circled around Bryce, waiting for his move.

Bryce nodded his approval then came at me with a roundhouse kick, which I quickly blocked and countered with a couple of moves that would show him how challenging I could be. I jumped up and did a combination roundhouse with an ax-kick. I

swiftly followed that move with a hard side thrust kick. This time I couldn't hide my satisfied grin when I heard him grunt.

"Okay, not bad," he said.

"Told you," said Master Jordan, who was now standing outside of his office, watching us. "She may have just gotten her Black Belt, but she's always been a natural martial artist. Her strikes are quick and solid."

I opened my eyes innocently. "Bryce, next time don't hold back. Give me all you've got. Or aren't you man enough?"

He gave me a crooked smile and opened his mouth to respond when Master Jordan interrupted. "Like I said, keep it clean over there, Mr. De Luca. She's a minor."

"I'll be eighteen next month," I countered.

Bryce stared at me for a moment, his face crestfallen. "Sorry," he said. "I thought you were older."

"So?" I shrugged. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He frowned and took a sip of water. "Forget about it," he said. "Let's just keep practicing."

We spent the rest of the time practicing front, roundhouse, and tornado kicks. I could tell that Bryce still wasn't being as aggressive as he could have been, but by the end of the class, both of us were sweating and out of breath. When we were finished, he removed his helmet and wiped his forehead with a towel.

"Wow, I'm really impressed," he said. "You snap those kicks quickly and your balance is right on. Plus, I haven't met that many other opponents with as much power in their roundhouse kicks as you."

"So I was a little bit of a challenge? Even for a girl?" I asked.

His smile fell away. "For anyone. Cassie, I'm sorry for sounding like a complete ass earlier. You obviously put me in line."

"You weren't a complete ass," I said dryly.

He bit back a smile. "Really, I'm not such a bad guy once you get to know me."

I shrugged. "If you say so..."

"I'll be back tomorrow evening, if you want to stop in and practice again."

"I'm not sure if I'll be here tomorrow, but thanks." I replied, removing my chest plate.



“Okay, well maybe I’ll see you around.”

I nodded. “Sure. Good luck with your next tournament.”

“Thanks.”

I grabbed my gym bag and started stuffing my sparring gear into it. Mae, Master Jordan’s girlfriend, walked over and congratulated me on getting my Black Belt.

“Thanks,” I said.

As usual her makeup was flawless and she was dressed like she’d just stepped out of a fashion magazine. Her exotic Asian eyes glinted with amusement.

She motioned towards Bryce. “So...you like that boy?”

“What?” I shook my head vehemently. “No...he’s just an instructor.”

I could tell by her expression that she didn’t totally believe me. Neither did I for that matter.

“Cassie, you...very pretty girl. You should let me shape your eyebrows and give you manicure. I will do it, no charge. Men like beautiful nails and tidy eyebrows.” Mae owns the nail shop in the same mini-mall as the karate studio.

“Oh, no...that’s okay, Mae,” I replied, now feeling self-conscious about my eyebrows. I realized my nails were a lost cause, but I thought I’d done a pretty decent job plucking my own eyebrows.

She unexpectedly grabbed my hand and looked at my nails. “No. You come and let me do this for you. Your nails are...ugly. This is my treat for earning your Black Belt. Tomorrow night?”

Embarrassed and defeated, I accepted her offer. “Um, okay. Thank you?”

Master Jordan joined us and put his arms around her.

“Better listen to Mae. She won’t accept NO for an answer.”

“Either do you,” she replied firmly.

“What can I say, Mae? I didn’t want you to miss out on having such a great guy. Besides, you know you couldn’t resist me. You finally said yes.” He was actually pretty good looking for someone in their thirties. Blond hair, blue eyes, and kicking body, he kind of reminds me of Paul Walker, from the “Fast and The Furious.”

She chuckled. “I gave in so you’d stop embarrassing me at my shop. How many times a week did you ask for both pedicure and date?”

"I thought you liked massaging my feet?"  
She looked down at his feet. "I got tired of looking at your corns."

Master Jordan's face fell, but I could tell he was amused.  
"Corns? Mae, you're killing me!"

Mae and I burst out laughing. She then grabbed him around the waist and dragged him away while he pretended to pout.

I walked through the locker room and into the entryway, where Nora was standing. "So, that new instructor was smoking hot," she said. "Did you get his number?"

I scowled. "No! Are you kidding? He's an instructor. Besides, he's kind of annoying."

She smiled. "Well as annoying as he was, he certainly couldn't keep his eyes off of you."

I rolled my eyes. "That's because we were sparring, Nora."  
She shook her head. "No, it was more than that."

Her words pleased me, though. I was a little intrigued with him; there was no denying that. But he was an instructor and too arrogant for my tastes.

"You need a ride home?" I asked her.

"No, Scott's going to give me a lift." This time Nora's cheeks turned bright pink. "It's no big deal. I guess he doesn't live far from my grandma's. Anyway, I was wondering if you'd want to hang out this weekend? My dad sent a copy of his latest CD. We could listen to it and order a pizza or something. If you don't have anything else going on?"

That was surprising. "I might be able to Saturday night. I'll call you."

Just then Scott walked up and hip-checked me. "Hey, girl, you ready for prom?"

"Almost," I replied.

Nora's face fell. "You guys are going to the prom together?"

"Just as friends!" we both said at the same time.

Her face brightened immediately. "Oh, well that's cool! Have fun."

"You're not going?" Scott asked Nora.

She shook her head and began picking at lint on her karate uniform.

“Why not?” he asked.

Nora sighed and lifted her arms up. “Are you kidding me? Could you picture me at prom?”

“Actually, yes I could. I’m kind of shocked that nobody asked you,” replied Scott.

Nora rolled her eyes. “Don’t be. It really isn’t my thing anyway. Look, we’d better get going. I have to check on Grams, make sure she’s okay.”

“No problem,” said Scott. He turned to me. “I’ll talk to you at school tomorrow.”

“Bye, you guys,” I said. “I’ll catch you tomorrow, Nora.”

She nodded and I watched as they left together. When he opened the passenger door for her, she appeared surprised, then flashed him one of her rare smiles. It suddenly all made sense to me; Nora was totally into Scott, and seeing the way Scott responded to Nora, he probably felt the same way.

## Chapter Four

When I picked up Allie from her dance class, she was unusually quiet.

“Is everything okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she replied, laying her blond head back against the seat. Normally she was a chatterbox, so I knew something was bothering her.

I turned down my radio. “Spill it...what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

Allie and I didn’t always get along, but she’s still my little sister and I don’t like seeing her glum. “Okay. But if you need my advice on anything...”

She let out a dramatic sigh. “Well, if you really want to know...” Then she rambled on about some boy she had a crush on at school. Apparently he teased her in front of everyone, completely humiliating her. “He actually said I was high maintenancel”

It took all my will to hold back my smile. Obviously he knew Allie pretty well. “Listen, boys your age are clueless. Forget about him and focus on something else, like getting good grades, or hanging out with your friends. In a couple of years, the guys will be following you around like puppy dogs.” It was true, with her blond hair, blue eyes, and radiant smile, she had absolutely nothing to worry about.

“You sound just like mom,” she pouted.

I cringed, although I agreed with my mother on this one. “Well this time she’s right.”

Allie fell silent again and took out her cell phone. A minute later she was on the phone with Kylie, Paige’s younger sister. They were close friends. They chatted for a few minutes, making plans for the weekend. When she hung up, she was her usual upbeat self.

“Kylie wants to see a movie this weekend and have a sleepover.”

“That sounds like fun,” I replied.

Allie's eyes lit up. "Hey, you should come over, too. We could order a pizza and swim in the indoor pool at night. It's so cool."

Paige and Kylie's mother, Kristie, just recently married this rich guy named Dan. He owns several restaurants in the area and they now live in a huge mansion with two swimming pools, a tennis court, and a shooting range. Allie spends more time there than she does at home.

I narrowed my eyes. "Kristie is going to be gone? That could lead to trouble."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking cross.

Kylie is a nice girl, but she tends to attract trouble, even when she isn't looking for it. My mom says that Kylie reminds her exactly of Kristie when she was little. Our moms had played together as children, and I guess Kristie had been a real hell-raiser growing up. Frankly, she's still pretty feisty and you never know what she'll say or do next. Kylie has the same fiery spirit as her mom and it's gotten both Allie and herself in trouble in the past.

"Forget about it. Well, it sounds interesting but I promised Nora I'd hang out with her Saturday night. She's depressed about her dad being away. She lost her driver's license a few months ago and doesn't have many friends."

"Nora? Awesome, invite her too! I'm sure Paige will be fine with that."

I snorted. "Unlikely. Nora scares the crap out of most people. I can't imagine Paige being thrilled about her coming over."

"Just check," Allie pleaded. "It would be so much fun! I haven't been to a real slumber-party in ages. It's usually just me and Kylie."

Shrugging, I said, "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"It's going to be so much fun!" my sister replied all giddy. She turned on the radio and started singing and bouncing around to the music. "Hey, it's your song!" Ironically it's called "Wild Ones" by Flo Rida, and she's always playing it for me on her iPod.

"Allie, don't forget to check with mom, too!" I yelled over the music

She nodded, then leaned over and gave me an unexpected kiss on the cheek. Unlike me, she wasn't shy about showing affection to anyone. "I get to hang out with my sister," she sang. "The Wild One!"

I smiled at her. Allie was growing up quickly, but to me, she'd always be the mischievous imp dancing around in her crooked tiara and Little Mermaid gown.

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Later that night, when my mother read the information about the flu shot, she was furious. She crumpled up the permission sheet and tossed it into the garbage. "It's ridiculous. They can't enforce this. I'm calling the school."

I rolled my eyes. "Mom there's nothing you can do. Maybe we should just get the stupid shot."

Mom put her hands on her hips. "Are you kidding me? Absolutely not! Did you notice how our family hasn't come down with anything yet? It's because we don't get those stupid flu shots. If we did, we'd probably be as sick as everyone else."

"Sorry..." I mumbled.

Allie pouted. "Mom, I have to go to school. There's a major test next week." I also knew she didn't want to be away from her friends or the guy she was crushing on.

Mom put her arm around Allie's shoulders. "Don't worry about it, sweetie. I'll make some calls and get this taken care of."

I got up off the couch and stretched. "Well, if I can't go to school, I'm definitely not hanging around Daycare Central," I said.

"I'm sure you'll find something to do. Otherwise you can run some errands for me, like picking up your prom dress."

Although I wasn't thrilled about wearing a dress, my mother had helped me choose one that I actually liked; a strapless, coral-colored chiffon gown that made my waist look smaller and my skin look tan.

After dinner, as my mom disinfected the daycare area of the house, I took a shower, then retreated to my bedroom and turned on the television. There were news reports on every channel covering the flu epidemic. On channel eleven, Eva King's mother, Veronica, was interviewing a spokesperson from the Centers for Disease Control Prevention (C.D.C). I actually like Eva's mother, who I'd met back in grade school at a birthday party. Although she's somewhat of a celebrity, she never once acted snooty or cold. In fact she was really sweet to everyone, unlike her daughter.

Veronica definitely wasn't herself today; she looked sick and miserable. Her normally tan face was pale, her nose bright red, and her blue eyes watery. Usually she looked so professional, with no red curl out of place.

"This is Veronica King, and if you're just tuning in, I have Dr. William Blake from the Centers for Disease Control on satellite. We've been discussing this new flu virus that people are referring to as 'The Creeper', because it starts out slow and then hits its victim pretty hard. Does that about sum it up, Doctor?"

"Correct," replied Dr. Blake stiffly. He was over fifty, slim, with little round glasses and wispy grey hair that didn't quite cover the bald spot.

"Thank you again for joining us, Doctor. As I mentioned, this virus has been spreading at an alarming rate. It's affected the entire country," she croaked and then cleared her throat. "Excuse me. I mean the entire world. The big question tonight is, how do we control this growing epidemic?"

"That's easy, Ms. King, we control it by making wise decisions; like getting vaccinated. It's imperative, especially for our elderly and small children."

Veronica's eyes narrowed. "And you stand behind this vaccine one hundred percent? Earlier we heard from other medical experts stating that they don't feel the vaccine is having a significant enough effect on this particular virus. Millions of people have still contracted severe flu symptoms even after getting vaccinated. Emergency rooms have been flooded and can't even care for their patients properly. They've had to turn people away. Let me ask you this, is the CDC working on improving the current vaccine?"

Dr. Blake cleared his throat. "Yes, well, our scientists are working around the clock to evaluate and improve the current vaccine. But, these things still take a considerable amount of time. I cannot stress enough, however, how important it is to get the current vaccine that is available right now."

Frowning, she replied, "What's the point if it doesn't seem to be working? What about those people who've been hospitalized? Countless numbers of patients who've slipped into comas; reports indicate they'd all received the vaccination."

Dr. Blake smiled smugly. "I can assure you that if they hadn't been vaccinated, they would have probably perished. We are

quite confident that the vaccine has lessened the symptoms and has saved many lives thus far.”

She released a heavy sigh. “I hope you’re right. One last thing...there have been accusations from certain leaders of the United Nations, claiming the virus was created by terrorists, specifically targeting countries the U.S. supports. What are your views on this?”

He laughed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Utter nonsense. Come on, a terrorist virus? It’s just another strain of the seasonal flu. In a week or two we’ll have a more powerful vaccine available to the public and this won’t seem like such a crisis. It’s just the flu, nothing more.”

Veronica sniffled and grabbed a tissue. “Excuse me.” She dabbed at her nose then smiled weakly. “A flu virus on...steroids?” “If that’s what you want to call it.”

“Okay. Thank you for joining us tonight, Dr. Blake. This is Veronica King with WCCL, reminding everyone to keep taking your vitamins and stock up on tissues.”

I sighed and turned off the television.

There was a soft knock on my door and then my mother peeked in. “Cassie, Paige is on the phone,” she said.

“Wow...nice look, mom,” I snorted. Pieces of brown hair stuck out of a plastic cap and her face was covered with thick, green slime.

She smiled and patted her head. “Oh, you like this?”

“It’s awesome. Dad’s going to love it, seriously.”

Her hazel eyes sparkled with amusement. “You think? Your dad and I are going to a party this weekend and I’d hate to embarrass him.”

“He’ll be the envy of all the other guys with you on his arm.”

She left and I could hear her giggling all the way down the hall.

I picked up the phone. “Hi.”

“Hi, Cassie.”

“So I heard about the slumber-party.”

“Yeah, but unfortunately I made plans with Nora for Saturday night.”

"Do you think she'd want to hang out with all of us? I don't have any plans yet for this weekend and my folks are going out. As long as she behaves herself, we should have fun."

I cracked up. "Honestly, Nora's not that bad. She told Eva King off in the bathroom earlier today; it was awesome! You both might have more in common than you think."

"Really? In that case, she's definitely invited. Let me know what she says."

After I hung up with Paige, I called Nora to find out if she'd be willing to go to Paige's Saturday night. Fortunately, she liked the idea.

"So she has a swimming pool? That sounds cool. I'll hang," said Nora.

"Okay. I'll let Paige know."

"Sweet!"

I hung up the phone right as Allie rushed into my room.

"Excuse me? Knock before you enter," I said.

Her eyes were large. "Oh, my God...you have to watch the news! Some hospital in France was attacked by a bunch of crazy patients. I guess they were acting like cannibals, eating each other's flesh! Can you believe it? How gross is that?"

I made a face. "Really?"

We turned on the television. Sure enough, every channel was reporting about the incident. On one station, an anchorman stood outside of the French hospital where their local police surrounded the building.

"So far, there have been reports of at least fifty fatalities during this bizarre attack. The building has now been secured and everything seems to be under control. At least ten people have been arrested and detained; all were patients that were being treated in the hospital when this madness occurred. We'll have more updates for you in just a minute."

"Okay, that's enough," I said, turning off the television. "I don't want to hear any more. This stuff gives me nightmares, so if you want to watch the news, do it in your room."

Allie blew on her freshly painted nails. "No, that's okay. It's too freaky for me to watch, too. Anyway ...did you talk to Nora yet about Saturday?"

"Yes, she's interested," I said, picking up my iPod.

"Cool. I like Nora and I really love her tattoo."

Nora had several tattoos, but the one Allie was referring to was of a small fairy on the back of her neck. A blue fairy covered in chainmail that was scowling and stood ready to kick ass.

I looked at my sister in surprise, as far as I could remember, she'd always been a girly-girl. "Isn't that a little dark for your tastes?"

She looked at me like I was an alien. "No. In fact I'm going to see if I can get my nose pierced for my birthday this year."

I snorted. "Good luck with that. I'd like to see dad's expression when you run it by him."

She put her hands on her waist and scowled. "Mom will let me."

"Right..."

Allie mumbled something and then left the room.

Twens, I thought. They think they know everything.

Chapter Five

I woke up Tuesday morning without Jed sneaking up on me or any remnants of a nightmare where someone was trying to eat my brains. When I made it to the bathroom without any kids charging after me, I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. The house was so unnaturally quiet that it put me on edge and I just couldn't enjoy it.

When I made it to the kitchen, my dad was eating and reading the paper.

"Well, this is kind of a nice change," commented my dad as he finished a bowl of cereal. Normally he brought his breakfast downstairs to his Man Cave.

"Nice? It's weird. Megan is the only one here and it's too quiet," I answered.

"I'll take the weird and quiet any day," he said then glanced at his watch. "Shoot, I'm running late. Bye, sweetheart." He stood up and kissed the top of my head.

"See you later, dad."

Just then two-year-old Megan came barreling into the kitchen, giggling. "Hi, Cassie!" she shouted.

"Hi, Megan," I answered as she flung herself at me, wrapping her arms tightly around my legs. We'd watched her since she was a baby and I had to admit, she held a special place in my heart.

I kneeled down and tugged her hair. "Oh...your hair looks so cute today!" Her short blond hair was pulled tightly into two little ponytails. She touched them proudly and smiled with her big doe eyes.

"Where Jed?" she asked.

I poked her playfully in the tummy. "Don't know."

She giggled and then asked, "Where Daniel?"

"Don't know," I said, this time tickling her.

She laughed hysterically as I continued to tickle her. When she'd had enough, I put her on my lap and she asked about the remaining daycare kids.

I sighed. "Sorry, I really don't know. I think most of them are sick and stayed home with their mommies to get better."

Just then my mom walked into the kitchen and informed me that everyone was sick with the flu. Except for Megan and her mother, Sara, who was six months pregnant.

“Thank God Sara’s not sick with this virus,” I replied.

“And she’s not getting that vaccination, either. I talked her out of it,” declared my mom proudly.

“Daddy sick,” Megan said, matter-of-factly. She then raced back into the toy area.

“Oh. Well hopefully he doesn’t get either of them sick,” I said.

“I heard that Kevin is just miserable and wants her to stay away from him. I told Sara she could stay here if she wanted to, since her folks live a couple of hours away, and she still has to work. At least until after Megan’s dad gets better. But she declined. She just doesn’t want to impose. Plus, she really wants to take care of him.”

“Oh,” I said. I looked at my mom’s hair. It looked pretty with the new highlights and colored gray. “Your hair looks nice, mom.”

She smiled at me. “Thanks, honey.”

“And have you lost some weight?” I asked.

“Maybe a little,” she replied, looking down. “I haven’t had time to eat much this week with all of the kids being sick. I’m actually relieved that most of them are gone today.”

“So am I,” I replied. When the kids were here, my germ phobia was on high alert. Lately, it’s begun to recede.

My mom turned on the small television sitting on the kitchen counter. She poured herself a cup of coffee and began flipping through the channels.

“I’m going to karate class again tonight, mom,” I told her.

“Um?” she replied, not really paying attention.

I raised my voice. “I said, I won’t be home until after eight this evening. I’m getting a free manicure from Mae and then I’m going to karate.”

She turned to me and put her arm around my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, honey. I wasn’t trying to ignore you. I was just trying to see if there are any updates about the crisis in Europe.”

I grabbed a fresh blueberry muffin that was sitting on the stove. “Crisis? Are you talking about that attack at the French hospital?”

She took a sip of coffee. "Well, there's been a string of violence and rioting in other countries as well. France, Germany, Italy, everywhere. It's kind of crazy."

"Are they terrorist attacks?"

"That's the thing... nobody is really sure who is doing it or why it keeps happening. The government isn't releasing any information and the media is bewildered. It's just really...bizarre."

"I'm sure it will all blow over," I answered, dismissing it. To me it seemed that violence was pretty normal all over the world at any given moment.

She shrugged and then turned off the television. "Could you pick up Allie tonight at Kylie's? They are working on some science project. That way her mom won't have to drive her home."

"Fine, but it won't be until after eight o'clock."

"That's fine. I'll let them know. Thanks, honey."

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My truck sputtered to life and then made some weird puttering noises as I drove over to Paige's house. When she got in to the truck, she looked at me nervously.

"Are you sure we're going to make it to school in this rig? It sounds pretty bad."

I raised my eyebrows and lied through my teeth. "Ye of little faith...of course I'm sure!"

"Well...okay."

"You worry too much, Paige."

She shrugged and then her eyes became really round. "I forgot to tell you! Guess what?"

"What?" I asked.

"My mom got a tattoo on her lower back! A butterfly tattoo."

I smiled. "Your mom got a 'tramp stamp'?"

That's what some of the guys at school liked to call lower back tattoos.

She nodded. "Oh, my God... yes! Dan made her do it."

"I'm sure your mom had some say."

Kristie isn't exactly what I'd call a pushover. She has a sharp tongue and the body of an amazon to back it up.

"I don't know, but if she starts getting piercings on odd places of her body, I'm not sticking around."

I burst out laughing, trying to imagine Kristie with a tongue ring and a new lisp.

"It's not funny," said Paige, trying to stop the smile threatening her lips.

My eyes were watering I was laughing so hard. "Oh, come on. It's funny!"

She folded her hands across her chest. "Okay, think about your mom getting her nose pierced or something further south."

I grimaced. "Okay, that's totally not funny."

The truck made some weird snorting noise and we both looked worriedly at each other.

"Just please...get us to school," begged Paige.

I nodded and we drove in a nervous silence. Miraculously, we made it with minutes to spare.

"Great, it's Eva," I muttered, watching as her red car pulled up next to ours. To make matters worse, my truck backfired as she was sliding out of her car.

Eva ignored us completely, which was a pleasant surprise to us both. The way she was blowing her nose made it obvious as to why.

The entire school day was pretty much uneventful, although there were even less students than yesterday. Many brought signed permission slips, and the line leading to the gymnasium, where the shots were being administered, was never-ending.

Because I wasn't getting any kind of vaccination, I did what I could to avoid getting sick by sucking on vitamin C lozenges throughout the day and drinking bottled green tea. When the final bell of the day rang, we were almost the last vehicle in the parking lot and someone had to give us a jump.

"See you tomorrow?" I asked her.

"I might get a ride from Jeremy," she answered. "Call me if you want one as well."

I nodded, hoping that my truck would hold up a few more days. It was probably time to talk to my dad about getting it fixed.

When I arrived at the nail shop, Mae greeted me with open arms then stared at my eyebrows with disapproval.

“Eyebrows first,” she announced and then dragged me to the back of the shop where she pushed me into a high-backed leather reclining chair. She reclined it until I was looking straight up at her. Taking a small eyebrow comb, she brushed my eyebrows then carefully spread something warm above my eyelids.

“Wax,” she murmured staring intently at my unruly eyebrows.

“Oh.”

“Relax,” she demanded, pressing firmly down on them. I closed my eyes and she ripped away a strip of eyebrow hair.

“Ahhh!” I gasped.

She gave me a wry smile. “Not that bad.”

When Mae spread wax above my other eye, I grasped onto the arms of the chair and waited as she counted.

“One, two...” and then she tore it off.

I flinched and looked up at her. “Hey! What happened to three?”

She patted my arm and laughed. “Better this way. Hair comes out easier when you don’t tense up.”

Mae then picked up the tweezers and began plucking away. When she appeared satisfied with the results, she applied some kind of gel that immediately soothed my irritated skin. She handed me a mirror; my skin was bright pink above my eyes, but I had to admit, my brows definitely looked more sophisticated. I grinned and nodded my approval.

“No more bushes,” she stated proudly.

“Yes, thank you.”

Next, Mae took me over to a nail technician.

“This Ming,” she said and turned to the young girl.

“French nails. Sports length.”

Ming nodded and gave then me a sympathetic look as she examined my nails.

“Pretty bad, huh?” I asked.

She shrugged and then began transforming my stubby nails into something less pathetic. Forty-five minutes later, after thanking Mae profusely, I left the shop, unable to stop staring at my new French manicure. My fingertips had never looked so clean and white.

## Chapter Six

I was ravenous when I left Mae's shop, but there wasn't enough time to stop anywhere for food. I remembered a vending machine in the karate studio, so I scrounged around in my purse and found some loose change.

The studio is located in the same mini-mall, just two doors down from the nail shop. As I stopped by my truck to grab my sports bag, I noticed Bryce's motorcycle parked nearby, and the butterflies in my stomach began to flutter. I took a deep breath and walked through the door.

The front viewing room was unoccupied, the receptionist gone, but the vending machine was full, luckily, with one of my favorite snacks. I purchased a bag of dill pickle potato chips and washed it down with a bottle of water. Knowing I was alone, I released a silent burp but then panicked; my breath was horrible! I scrounged around in my jeans and found enough money for a pack of mints. At least I wouldn't be attacking anyone with my rancid breath.

Slipping into the locker room, I brushed my hair back into a ponytail, applied some mascara, and put on some lip gloss that my sister had given me last night. With my new eyebrows, I had to admit I looked pretty darn good.

Glancing at the time, I noticed that I was running late, so I rushed to put on my uniform. I tied my belt quickly and then respectfully entered the dojo.

Bryce and Scott were off in a corner practicing with Bokkens, which are wooden Samurai training swords. I caught Bryce's eye briefly as he leaped over Scott's Bokken, and counter-attacked. My heart raced as I watched them swinging, jumping, and striking at each other so sinuously. Although I could see that both guys were extremely talented with their Bokkens, there was no denying that Bryce was the expert.

When they finished up, Scott greeted me with a warm smile while Bryce barely acknowledged my presence, offering only a curt nod as he put his equipment away. It was unnerving, especially after the way he'd teased me only the day before.



“Cassie,” said Scott, kneeling next to me while I stretched my legs. “I’ve been meaning to ask you...what do you think of Nora?”

I’d completely forgotten about Nora. “Nora? Where is she? She was supposed to be here.” Come to think about it, I hadn’t remembered seeing her at school earlier in the day either.

He ran a hand over his face and sighed. “Well, I went to pick her up earlier and she was upset. She can’t get in touch with her dad, doesn’t know exactly which city he’s in, and with the violence going on in Germany, she’s really freaking out. She stayed home with her grandmother to comfort her and find out what’s going on.”

I stood up quickly. “Oh, shoot! Maybe I should give her a call and see if I can help, somehow.”

Scott shook his head and laughed wryly. “I doubt she’ll be very receptive. I tried sticking around to see if I could help, but she basically told me to ‘get lost.’”

I sighed. “I’m sure she’s just upset.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway, that’s why I wanted to ask you about her. I really don’t know her aside from this class. It seems to me that she comes around as some kind of tough ass most of the time. She has this prickly wall around her. Then other times she throws me for a loop by acting normal, almost sweet. I think she actually flirted with me yesterday.”

I smiled. “Maybe she likes you?”

He snorted. “She has a strange way of showing it.”

“Seriously, Scott, I know very little about her myself. She hasn’t made many friends at school; she either scares people away or just blows them off. To tell you the truth, I was shocked when she asked me to hang out with her this weekend.”

Just then Bryce stormed over, interrupting us. “Hey?”

“Yes?” I answered.

He studied my face for a minute. “You two going to sit here and waste time, or did you actually want to learn something today?”

His rudeness surprised and irritated me. I glared at him. “Sure, but who put you in charge?”

Bryce put his hands on his waist. “Excuse me? That’s no way to talk to an instructor, Wild,” he answered gruffly.

“Respect is earned,” I countered.

A muscle twitched in his jaw as we stared at each other. Before I had a chance to catch my breath, he stalked away. I looked at Scott. "What crawled up his butt?" He shrugged. "I don't know. He was fine earlier." I glanced towards Bryce, who was now on his cell phone. From the expression on his face, he was in the middle of a very heated discussion.

Master Jordan took that moment to step out of his office, up-beat as usual.

"Hi, guys! Listen, Bryce is going to assist you tonight with training. I promised Mae I'd take her to dinner tonight."

I released a heavy sigh. "Great."

Master Jordan took my arm and pulled me aside. "What is it? Is Bryce giving you any trouble?"

I shook my head. "Not really, he's just...grouchy."

He scratched his closely-cropped beard and said, "Well, I came down hard on him this afternoon for his performance yesterday. This is a respectable karate studio, not a dating service."

I looked at him blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, I heard the way he was flirting with you yesterday."

Embarrassed, I lowered my eyes. "Oh."

He touched my shoulder. "Cassie, if he gives you any trouble, let me know right away. Call me, text me, whatever you have to do. But sincerely, I don't think you have to worry about him; he really is a decent guy. He just needed a little reminder of whom and what he's representing here at the studio."

"Don't worry about me. I can certainly take care of myself."

Secretly I hadn't minded the banter between us yesterday. In fact, his taunting blue eyes were all I'd thought about since then. It was one of the reasons I'd showed up today.

"By the way," Master Jordan said as he lifted my hands and examined my fingertips, "your nails look very lovely...for a killing machine."

I giggled. "Thank you, Sensei."

"Now, my dear Cassie, I think they're waiting for you," he said, releasing my hands and turning me around.

Bryce avoided eye contact, which made me even more irritated. I hadn't done anything to deserve his cruel attitude today.

“See you guys next week!” waved Master Jordan as he walked out of the studio.

As I waved, I caught Bryce staring at me again. He looked away and took a drink of water.

“Ready, guys?” he asked finally. Then he had us form a line to do several push-ups and sit-ups.

The next half hour we practiced several difficult kicks and punches which I normally enjoy. Today it was pure hell. Bryce was so intolerable that even Scott noticed and started getting frustrated.

“Dude, what is your problem? Ever since The Wild One got here, you’ve been riding our asses!”

I wanted to kick Scott for saying that. He liked to tease me about my nickname, too.

Bryce’s face grew hot. “Look,” he said, “you’re both Black Belts now and I’m here to teach you, not make things easy or comfortable.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to be a dick about it,” replied Scott.

Bryce smiled coldly. “If you can’t handle my way of teaching, then feel free to leave.”

“Best thing you’ve come up with all night. I’m outta here,” said Scott, grabbing his gym bag. He muttered something under his breath and stomped out of the dojo. Deep down, I knew he’s wanted to leave earlier, to check on Nora. I could tell he was already falling for her.

Bryce turned to me with a stony expression. “What about you, Wild One?”

I stuck my chin out defiantly. “What about me?”

“You think I’m too demanding?”

“You’re a little...intense.”

Bryce’s mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. He ran a hand through his wavy hair then gazed candidly at me. “You know, there’s something different about you today. You’ve done something...to your hair or face.”

I shrugged. I certainly wasn’t going to tell him I had my eyebrows waxed. Instead I said, “Could it be the way my eyes are glaring at you? Oh, wait! They were doing the same thing yesterday.”

He looked away and chuckled.

His moods were so up and down, I wondered if he was even aware that he was slightly deranged. "Are we done here? Because I don't think I want to spend another half hour with someone who's obviously got an issue with me."

Bryce gave me a confused look. "I don't understand what you mean."

"You've been shooting daggers at me since I got here. I'm not even sure what I've done to offend you so much," I said and started walking away.

He grabbed my arm. "You don't offend me at all."

"Really? You have a strange way of showing it," I said looking up at him.

His eyes searched mine and softened. "Your eyes are so...fascinating," he said, still holding onto my arm.

I've had compliments on my eyes before, which always puzzled me since I thought they looked like pretty average brown eyes. My mom says it's because my lashes are so thick and long.

He stepped back and cleared his throat. "Well, listen it's getting late and I've got to get home. We should call it a night."

I nodded. "I have to pick up my sister anyway."

Bryce started shutting off the lights in the dojo and I went into the locker room to wash up and run a brush through my hair. When I walked out of the locker room I found him waiting for me in the entryway, dressed in faded jeans and a tight blue T-shirt. He was on his cell phone, clearly frustrated with whomever he was talking to. I waved at him and he hung up the phone.

"Hold up, I'll walk you out," he said, throwing on a brown leather jacket.

"Okay," I said.

He locked the front entrance door, set the alarm, and walked me outside. "Nice night," he said, looking into the sky.

There was a soft breeze and the stars twinkled above us. "Yeah," I replied.

He followed me to my truck and stood watching me fumble in my purse for my keys. "Listen," he said, clearing his throat. "I'm sorry about earlier. I was being a little bit of a jerk I guess."

"You guess?" I asked dryly.

He shrugged. "I just...there's stuff going on at home," he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

“And then there’s Master Jordan bawling you out.”

Bryce chuckled. “He told you, huh? Well, he was right. I was out of line and should have been more professional.”

“It wasn’t a big deal. It really didn’t bother me.”

“Good, because I wasn’t trying to bother you,” he said, looking away. “You just...intrigue me I guess.”

I blushed. “Intrigue you?” I couldn’t believe a guy found me intriguing. Especially one that was incredibly hot.

He turned to me again. “Yes...but I’m one of your karate instructors and probably too old for you.”

I searched his face, trying to decipher how old he actually was. He had a strong jawline with a five o’clock shadow and thick, dark eyebrows that emphasized the blueness of his eyes. He was definitely good-looking, but not the type of perfection that you read about in sappy romance novels. Bryce’s nose was slightly crooked and there was a white scar near his chin cleft. “So, how old are you?”

He smiled. “Twenty.”

That wasn’t so bad, although I knew my parents wouldn’t be excited about me dating someone almost old enough to enter a bar.

His cell chirped and he frowned. “I better let you get home. I’ve got to take this call; it’s probably my mother, again.”

“Ok. See you around,” I said, getting into my truck.

He turned around and began walking towards his motorcycle.

I admired his derriere again as I stuck my key into the truck’s ignition. There was a loud click when I turned the key, but unfortunately nothing else. After a couple more attempts to start the engine, Bryce noticed and jogged back over. I rolled my window down.

“Pop the hood,” he said.

I obeyed and he began fiddling around with things in the engine.

“Try it again!” he called from under the hood.

Again, nothing happened.

He rubbed the back of his hand against his forehead and looked down again.

“Okay, now try it!” he yelled again.

This time it fired right up.

He smiled and gave me a thumbs-up. Closing the hood, he walked over to my open window. "I think you might need a new carburetor," he said, wiping his fingers on his jeans. He had a smudge of grease on his forehead and I smiled, but didn't tell him.

"Is it safe to drive?"

"You should be fine. But let me give you my cell phone number, just in case you have any problems. I'd follow you, but I really need to get home," he replied just as his cell phone began to ring again. He checked his phone but didn't answer.

"Thanks," I said as he gave me his number.

"Good thing I was still here. This place is like a ghost town."

I glanced around the dark shops and streets. It was totally deserted. "It's the flu, I bet. Nobody is going anywhere."

He nodded. "I know what that's like. My mom has it, too. That's why she keeps calling me, hounding me to get home."

I smiled at him. "Well, then you better go. Thanks again, Bryce."

He slowly leaned forward and brushed a strand of my hair away from my lips. The smell of leather and his aftershave was intoxicating. I held my breath as he stared into my eyes. "Call me when you get home so I know you made it, okay?" he asked, his voice husky.

I knew right then and there, that I'd never met anyone who'd taken my breath away as much as Bryce did. "Sure," I replied softly.

"Okay, well goodbye again, 'Wild One,'" he said, turning away.

I watched as Bryce jogged back over to his motorcycle. He put on his leather jacket and helmet then straddled the bike. He waited until I started moving then followed me for a couple of blocks. When his bike turned away and he was no longer in my rearview mirror, I was already missing him.

## Chapter Seven

My phone began vibrating as I headed to Kylie and Paige's to pick up Allie, which I'd almost forgotten about. I grabbed it out of my pocket and read a text from my mom telling me that school was cancelled for the rest of the week and I didn't have to pick up my sister since she was staying overnight.

Nice, I thought. That was one less thing I had to worry about.

I changed directions and started heading home. I noticed most of the roads were completely deserted, which wasn't as surprising as the fact that many of the fast food restaurants and gas stations I passed were also dark and closed. The flu was destroying profits for many businesses.

My mom was reading a book in the Man Cave when I got home. "Hi, honey," she said, setting it down on the end table.

"Hey," I replied.

She smiled. "Your eyebrows look very...chic."

"Thanks – and check out my nails," I said, holding out my hands.

"Very nice," she replied, lifting them up.

I sunk into the oversized couch next to her favorite chair. "So, school's closed. That's a first."

"Yes, it's on the news. All of the schools have been shut down temporarily, due to the flu." She stretched her arms and stood up. "Are you hungry? I could make you a sandwich."

"Yes, I'm starving! Thanks, mom."

I got up and followed her into the kitchen where she began making me a tuna and pickle sandwich. I washed my hands and sat down.

Just then my dad walked into the kitchen.

"Hello, ladies," he said, kissing us both on the cheek.

"Hi, dad," I said.

My mom smiled. "Hi, honey, how was your day?"

He gave us a despairing look and sat down by the counter. "It was a complete waste of time, with absolutely no customers. It's

almost the end of the month and they still expect us to move cars. Everyone has the flu. How do I overcome that obstacle?"

"I'm sorry," said my mom as she moved behind him and began rubbing his shoulders.

He closed his eyes and smiled. "Thanks, that feels good."

"Maybe business will pick up tomorrow?" asked my mom.

"Doubtful. Damn, I just need to find a new job."

My mom and I both looked at each other but didn't say anything.

He grabbed my mom and hugged her. "Can we switch jobs for a day? Let me corral the daycare kids and you can sell cars. Come on, hon."

My mom smiled sympathetically. "You wouldn't survive a day."

"I could put them in kennels? Lock them up and feed them when they get hungry," he said, smiling.

"Very funny," my mom answered.

My cell phone began to ring. It was Bryce! I'd forgotten to call him back.

"I'm sorry!" I answered into the phone.

My parents stared curiously as I hurried out of the kitchen.

"You should be. I was getting worried about you," Bryce said sternly.

I smiled with pleasure. Bryce was actually worried about me.

"I made it. I survived," I said.

He chuckled. "So, did you notice the roads? How deserted they were? I thought maybe I was in one of those old episodes of the Twilight Zone or something. It was really weird."

"It was totally odd. This flu virus must be really getting out of control," I said.

"Tell me about it. My mother is so sick, I don't know how she's going to care for my brother tomorrow," he muttered.

"I didn't know you had a brother. How old is he?"

"Bobby? He's six."

"Well, my mother runs a daycare. She might be willing to watch him until your mom gets better."

I could almost see the smile spreading across his face. "Wow, really? I have to work tomorrow, otherwise I'd just stay home with him," he paused. "I work for a construction company



and we have this major deadline coming up. My boss already called me tonight to make sure I was still coming in. Most of the guys on this job are sick and he's frantic."

"If you promise to be nice to me, I might ask her to watch him."

Bryce laughed wickedly. "Really? Well, I can be extremely nice if it gets me what I want."

I groaned. "You're such a...man."

"You didn't notice before?"

"Believe me...everyone notices."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I blurted. I'm not sure where it came from but I was dying to know.

He paused then said, "No, not at the moment."

I was glad he couldn't see my face, because it was burning. I couldn't believe I'd asked him like that, out of the blue. Like a little schoolgirl.

"You still there?" he asked softly.

I took a deep breath, "Um...yeah. So...your brother, does he have any allergies?"

"No...but I suppose I should mention that he has Down's Syndrome. He's a great kid; really friendly and gets along with everyone. But, obviously he needs special attention sometimes."

"My mom's great with children. She'll take really good care of him."

"Okay, if you could talk to her and let me know. I'd really appreciate it."

"I'll call you right back."

"Thanks, Cassie."

I hung up and talked it over with my mom, leaving out the fact that Bryce was gorgeous and my heart raced every time he came near me. She agreed to talk to him and work out the details. I called him back and told him the good news.

"Thanks, I'm so relieved," he said. "You're such a lifesaver! I was going crazy, trying to figure out what to do with my little brother. My mom's so sick that I'm probably going to have to find time to bring her into the clinic tomorrow as well."

"Maybe she'll be better by tomorrow and you won't have to. Listen, my mom's going to be calling you soon, so I'd better let you go."

“Okay. Thanks again.”

“Glad I could help.”

It was the first time ever that I was happy that my mom was a daycare provider. Now I would definitely get to see Bryce again.

## Chapter Eight

I learned that Bryce would be dropping off his brother Bobby around seven o'clock, so I made sure to be up and dressed. I threw on a pair of jeans, a new coral tank top, and some lip gloss.

My mom looked at me curiously when I walked out of my bedroom. "Wow, you're up early. It's only seven o'clock, you know, in the morning."

I shrugged. "I know."

There was a soft knock on the door and I rushed down the stairs to answer it. Bryce stood outside, holding the hand of a little boy with similar features. Both of them had damp hair, blue jeans, and matching white polo shirts. Bobby was grinning from ear to ear. He held his hand out to me.

"Hi, I'm Bobby!" he said. "I brought my backpack!"

"Hi," I answered, shaking his hand.

My mom knelt next to Bobby. "Hi, Bobby! My name is Kris. Are you ready to have a super fun day?"

His eyes sparkled. "Yes. Bryce said I was going to have lots of fun today."

She smiled warmly. "Well, he was right!"

"Okay, Bryce, you can go now," Bobby waved to his big brother.

Bryce chuckled. "Hold on, Buddy. I have to talk to Kris and Cassie here before you kick me out just yet."

"Okay, Bryce," he answered.

Bryce held out his hand to my mother. "Hi, I'm Bryce."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kris," she answered, shaking it.

"Do you have a few minutes to fill out some paperwork and go over a couple of things before you leave? Cassie can show Bobby around."

He flashed one of his dimpled smiles and I melted, again. "Certainly."

I showed Bobby around the house and then spent a few minutes in the toy area with him. He was giddy and jumped from toy to toy.

"Wow, I love your toys!" he announced.

I smiled. "They're pretty neat, aren't they?"

"Bobby," my mom said, entering the toy area with Bryce. "Your brother has to leave for work now."

Bobby jumped up from the floor, ran over to his brother, and threw his arms around him. "I love you, Bryce."

Bryce held him tightly. "I love you, too, big guy. Be a good boy today, okay?"

Bobby stood back and crossed his heart. "Cross my heart," he said solemnly.

"Thank you again, Mrs. Wild," Bryce said turning to my mother. "You're a lifesaver."

"No problem. I'm glad I could help out. It was very nice meeting you."

"Nice meeting you as well. I'd better go. You both have my number if you need anything," he said.

I nodded and told my mom I'd walk Bryce to the door. When we approached the entryway and before I could react, he pulled me into his arms and hugged me. "Thanks, Cassie," he whispered into my ear. The heat of his breath made me tremble all over.

"Um, you're welcome," I answered breathlessly. My heart convulsed in my chest as he released me and I longed to feel his arms wrapped around me again.

He cleared his throat. "Wow, I'm sorry..."

"Why?"

The next thing I knew he turned around and was gone. A trace of his cologne lingered in the air and I closed my eyes, thinking of how exhilarating it had felt to be in his arms.

"Ahem," my mother said. She stood at the top of the stairs, her hands folded across her chest.

"What?"

She arched an eyebrow. "He's certainly a very good-looking young man."

I shrugged. "So?"

"He's a little old for you, so forget about whatever it is you're daydreaming about."

I snorted. "Whatever, mom...we're just friends."

"Okay. I'm just saying..." she said, her eyes searching mine.

I was about to respond when Megan and her mother, Sara, walked through the door. Sara appeared disheveled and upset. My mother noticed it as well and asked me to show Megan our new guest.

Megan took off her shoes, hugged her mother, and then followed me into the toy area. When she saw Bobby, she stopped and her eyes opened wide.

“Hi,” Bobby said, grinning broadly at Megan. He was sitting on the ground and playing with Legos.

She was bashful and held firmly onto my leg. “Hi,” she answered softly. I grabbed her hand and sat down on the floor with both of them. Soon they were building something with Legos together and I was able to break free to find out what was going on in the other room.

“You can lie down in the guest room,” my mother was murmuring in the hallway. “You must be exhausted.”

“Yes, I am a little, thank you,” she replied, following my mom to our extra bedroom, which was next to mine.

When my mother returned alone, she appeared troubled. “Sara and Megan will be staying with us for a few days,” she said.

“Why?”

Mom sighed. “Her husband is very sick and demanded that she take Megan and stay somewhere else until he gets better. He’s terrified of her getting the flu and having complications with the baby. I guess the last time she was pregnant, with Megan, she ended up in the hospital with pneumonia. Anyway, he was so upset about her being at home that she finally agreed to stay at a hotel for a few days. When she told me that, I suggested that she stay here instead.”

“And she agreed?”

“No...not at first. She didn’t want to impose, but I finally talked her into it.”

“Wow. Okay.”

Just then my dad shuffled into the kitchen, yawning. He poured himself a large bowl of cereal. “Good morning,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Okay, dad, you really need to quit with the late night video games. You look exhausted.”

He cleared his throat. "I couldn't sleep last night and the cable wasn't working. What else is there to do in the middle of the night?"

"Oh I don't know...read a book? Rub the bunions on mom's feet?"

Dad grimaced. "I don't know which sounds scarier," he answered.

"Ha ha...very funny, you guys. My bunions just might be too sore to make dinner tonight," she said dryly.

My dad laughed and put his arm around her. "Just messing with you, honey. You know I'd rub your bunions or warts anytime."

She elbowed him in the ribs playfully.

"By the way," said my dad, "I won't be home until late this evening. I'm working until close and then I'm taking one of the guys out for dinner after. He's leaving the dealership and all of my coworkers were going to have a 'going away party' for him, but of course everyone's got the damn flu. So, it's just us two guys." He looked at my mom. "Would you want to meet us at the restaurant? Or I can bring you back some wings tonight if you'd like?"

My mom craves Buffalo wings almost as much as I do pickles. This time she stunned us both. She shook her head.

"No thanks on both counts. I really should stay home tonight. I've got some laundry and cleaning to do. As far as the wings go," she said, touching her stomach. "I'm really trying to be good. I've got to start changing my diet; those things are just loaded with cholesterol."

My dad and I looked at each other. We both knew she'd change her mind before the end of the night. She'd be texting and reminding him to bring them home until he pulled into the driveway.

"If you change your mind, just let me know and I'll bring you some tonight," he replied, biting back a smile.

She shrugged and then began telling him about our new houseguests. I wasn't sure how my dad was going to react to that little tidbit of news, so I left them and went to my room, where I collapsed onto my bed. It was still early, and there was no school, so I closed my eyes, counting the minutes until I'd get to see Bryce again. Eventually I fell into a dreamless asleep.

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It was just after ten when I finally crawled back out of bed. I was hungry, so I made a ham and pickle sandwich, turned on the television, and found that the cable still wasn't working. Frustrated and bored, I decided to rearrange my bedroom. After an hour of moving heavy furniture around, I stood back only to realize that everything had worked better in their original positions. Defeated, I gave up and sent a text to Nora, to see how she was doing. Unfortunately, she didn't respond, so then I sent one to Scott, who didn't get back to me either. I knew there wasn't much I could do to help find her father, but then I started wondering if I should just drive to her house and offer a little moral support.

"Cassie," my mother said, interrupting my thoughts. "Bryce called. He's going to try and bring his mother to the clinic tonight when he finishes work. So, Bobby might be spending the night with us."

"Oh," I answered, a little disheartened that I probably wouldn't be seeing Bryce tonight.

Looking pensive, she strolled over to the bay window in our kitchen and stared out. I knew that something else was bothering her.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

She turned around and folded her arms across her chest. "Well, Bryce was kind of concerned when I spoke to him. He claimed that a buddy of his, who's a radio dispatcher with the Wolf Creek Police Department, gave him some alarming information. I guess there've been several reports of violence in town and they're urging people to stay inside; lock their doors."

I frowned. "Wow, that's...scary."

She sat down by the kitchen counter. "Tell me about it," she answered, tapping her fingernails against the counter, absently.

My stomach clenched; Allie! I grabbed my cell phone.

"Mom, I'm going to call Allie and make sure she's okay."

She grew pale. "Oh, God, I forgot she wasn't home! Good thinking, honey. I better call your father, too, and see if he's heard anything."

Allie was oblivious to everything going on in the outside world when I called her.

“We’re swimming and Kristie’s going to make us a pizza later. She said she’ll bring me home sometime tonight.”

I sighed. “Okay. The cable is out here so if you hear something about rioting or violence, let me know right away. Make sure you tell Kristie about it, too,” I told her.

“Yeah...well the cable’s not working here either. In fact, the radio stations are down as well. There’s nothing but static.”

“Okay, now that’s really weird.”

“Tell me about it,” Allie replied and then began shrieking with laughter. “Kylie! Oh, my God...you are so bumming! She’s going to...hey, Cass, I have to go. Kylie just pushed her mom into the pool!” Click.

Leave it to Allie; nothing outside of her world bothers her.

“Great! I can’t get a hold of your father,” my mom announced shrilly. “I sent him a few texts and even left him a voicemail.”

“Calm down, mom! I’m sure he’s with a customer. You’re worrying too much.”

She sat down and rubbed her forehead. “You’re probably right.”

“Did you call the main business line?”

“Oh, I didn’t even think about that!” She picked up her phone again and dialed. I watched her frown and then leave a message.

“Mom, if everyone has the flu, there’s probably nobody available to answer the main lines either.”

She nodded in agreement, but I could tell her mind was still racing. She was one of the most paranoid people I knew.

Sara walked into the kitchen, looking bewildered. “You’re not going to believe this, but something seriously BIG is going on!” she exclaimed, then dramatically lowered her voice, as if somebody was listening in. “A friend of mine from the military just sent me a text. They’re issuing a nationwide emergency warning. He wouldn’t get into details, although I’m betting on some kind of terrorism. Anyway, everyone is supposed to stay indoors. They’re even sending out military forces everywhere to limit travel.”

My mom’s mouth dropped open. “What? How can they keep everyone in the nation from leaving their homes or driving anywhere? That’s ridiculous.”

Just then someone rang the doorbell.

We all stared at each other.

"I suppose one of us should answer that. I'll be right back," said my mom.

Sara and I followed her to the door.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," said the friendly young soldier standing outside. He was dressed in full military garb with a 9MM handgun holstered on his side.

"Um, hello," replied my mother, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "What can I do for you?"

He noticed me and Sara, with her pregnant belly and smiled apologetically. "My name is Lieutenant Austin Smith and I'm really sorry to bother y'all. I'm not sure if you've heard, but there have been some disturbance in town and we're securing all of the neighborhoods now to make sure there are no further issues."

"Oh, well we're fine here," my mother replied. Her eyes narrowed. "What sort of violence are we talking about?"

The soldier cleared his throat. "Nothing too major, I reckon, a few squabbles, some vandalism."

"Who was it?" I blurted out.

He shot a fleeting glance up and down my body, then his brown eyes met mine. His smile made me blush; I crossed my arms across my chest.

"I'm really not sure who they are or why, if that's your next question. My platoon's duties are to scout surrounding neighborhoods and advise everyone to stay indoors for the next twenty-four hours."

"What about people who are working or traveling? My husband's at work and my youngest daughter isn't home from her girlfriend's yet," complained my mother.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "They'll certainly be allowed to return home, we're just advising folks from venturing out of the safety of their homes until we have everything under control. We have some roadblocks in place but will definitely allow people to go home if that's where they belong."

"Sounds a little extreme, doesn't it?" asked Sara.

"Believe me, Miss, it's for the safety of the public. We'll let y'all know when it's safe to leave your homes." His radio went off and he stepped away to respond to it.

"This is too weird," Sara whispered. "I don't like it. They're being vague but basically ordering us not to go anywhere."

They can't expect people to just stop their lives and hide out at home without giving us more information."

My mom was about to respond when the soldier returned.

"Well," he said, this time looking rushed. "I've got to keep making my rounds. Just remember, ladies, stay in and lock your doors. If someone besides a military official visits your property, don't interact with them. We'll be monitoring the neighborhood pretty thoroughly, so there shouldn't be problems. Just heed the advice and everyone should be fine."

"Okay, thanks. Just let us know when the curfew you've forced upon us has been lifted," I said, unable to hide my sarcasm.

We stared at each other a minute, then he smiled. "Y'all have a nice day."

I let out an exasperated sigh when he left.

"You are such a smartass," my mom said.

"What?" I asked with a cocky grin.

"You know, I don't like the way he was checking you out," she stated. "Between him and Bryce, I'm going to have to watch you like a hawk."

I snickered and shook my head.

Sara sighed. "I wonder if I should leave and check on Kevin."

"You heard what the officer said, you can't leave. It might not be safe," replied my mom.

She shook her head. "That's crap. They can't keep me from seeing my husband."

"Have you talked to him?" asked my mom.

"We spoke earlier. I better call him and see how he's doing." She grabbed her cell phone out of her pocket and walked away.

"I'd better check on the kids," said mom.

I ran upstairs to my room and took out my cell phone. I hadn't communicated with Bryce since this morning, so I decided to send him a text.

Hi Bryce-how are you?

Hello Wild, I was just thinking about you.

Oh? I smiled, laying my head against my pillow.

Yes-you guys doing okay?

I sighed and typed. Yes, military stopped by to say we can't leave.

Yes, I heard about that, he typed. My aunt is caring for mom. She's going to bring her to clinic. I'll be at your house for Bobby ASAP.

They might not let you through!

They won't have a choice.

Lol...okay, see you tonight!

Count on it.

Chapter Nine

Sara was able to reach Kevin and he was still feeling miserable. He'd also been approached by a military official and they promised to send out someone from their medical staff to check on him before nightfall.

Mom spent the rest of the afternoon calling our family and friends as well as trying to reach dad, who was still M.I.A. She also spoke with Kylie's mom, Kristie, and they both agreed that it was much safer for everyone to stay put. Allie would be sleeping over another night.

Around six o'clock, I volunteered to grill hamburgers on the deck. As I stepped onto the balcony, I noticed several soldiers stationed throughout the neighborhood, some carrying automatic rifles. One of the soldiers, presumably the cowboy at our door earlier, waved at me while I flipped the patties, but I played ignorant.

"I'm sorry, I just can't think about food right now," complained my mother, pushing away her dinner plate. She put her head in her hands and sighed wearily. "Your father still hasn't responded to any of my calls or texts; I'm seriously getting worried. This is unusual, even for him."

I stood up and started clearing away the dishes from the table. "I'm sure he's fine, mom. There could be a dozen reasons that he hasn't called back yet. Maybe his cell phone died, or he left it in the car? Just...quit worrying so much."

She raised her head and let out a deep sigh. "I hope you're right, honey."

I put a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you just go and lie down for a while? You've been pacing around all day, upsetting yourself. I'll come and get you if there's any news".

"Maybe you're right," she said, rising from the table. "Just for a little while. Keep an eye on Bobby, will you?"

I nodded. "In fact, I'll go check on him right now. He was playing dolls with Megan just a little while ago."

Mom went to her bedroom and I found Bobby with Sara and Megan. They were finishing a board game. I sat down and watched as Bobby won.

"I won!" yelled Bobby as he pumped his fist. "Yes!"
Sara smiled at him then looked up at the clock. "Megan, it's time for a bath."

"Sara, do you know where the towels are?" I asked, standing up.

She nodded. "Your mom showed me earlier."

Megan was pretty excited to be taking a bath at "Daycare" and I could hear her chatting about it all the way up the stairs.

"I feel like watching a movie. Do you want to watch Peter Pan with me?" I asked, settling myself next to Bobby on the couch.

"That's my favorite movie!" he announced.

"Hey, I thought you said your favorite movie was Beauty and the Beast?"

"That's my favorite, too," he replied.

I smiled at him and ruffled his soft brown hair.

"Where's Bryce?" he asked.

I looked at my watch, it was almost eight o'clock. "I think he's still working. He'll be coming soon to take you home, don't worry."

Bobby's face turned grim and he looked at his hands. "I don't want to leave. I wish Bryce and I could stay here forever."

"Oh, really? Don't you want to go home and see your mom? You must miss her. I'm sure she misses you."

He smiled sadly. "No. She only likes her juice."

"Her...juice?" I asked, puzzled.

Bobby nodded. "Yes. Her brown juice. It smells yucky," he said pinching his nose. "I don't like it when she drinks it. She says mean things."

I placed his hand in mine and took a deep breath. "Has she ever hurt you when she's been drinking her juice?"

He shook his head firmly. "No, not anymore. Bryce made her stop. He loves me the most."

I reached over and gave him a hug. When I finally let go, he gave me a lopsided grin. "You're nice. I wish you were my mom."

"I'm a little young to be your mom, but, you want to know a secret?"

He nodded.

I whispered into his ear. "If you were my son, I'd love you the most."

His face broke out in a huge grin and my heart ached at the thought of anyone being intentionally cruel to such a sweet kid.

I stood up to put the movie in the DVD player. "Bobby, do you want some popcorn?" I asked.

"Popcorn is my favorite!" he shouted.

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Bobby fell asleep during the movie, sometime after nine o'clock. I covered him up with a warm fleece blanket and went upstairs to find that I was the only one still awake. I also was having a hard time trying to keep my eyes open.

I yawned and shuffled into the kitchen for a drink of water. As I raised the glass to my lips, something in the window caught my eye. I leaned forward for a better glimpse and saw sporadic flashes lighting up the night. Puzzled, I flipped off the kitchen light and rushed over to the dining room balcony to step outside. Just as I slid the door open, I heard gunfire. Terrified, I slumped down on the ground.

"You hear that too?" whispered Sara next to my ear.

"Jesus," I gasped. "Don't ever sneak up on me again!"

"Sorry," she said. "I was in the bedroom when I heard the shots."

"I'm calling nine-one-one," I stated, pulling out my phone. I quickly dialed and was put on hold for few minutes before the line went dead.

"Let me try," said Sara, pulling out her phone. After a few seconds, she hung up. "This is crazy. The line is temporarily out of service. It's nine-one-one! How does that even happen?"

There was more gunfire, this time followed by loud screams.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Sara, frantically closing and locking the door.

"Did...did someone just get shot?" I asked her in horror.

She touched my shoulder and nodded. "I think so. Your dad, he has guns, right?"

"Yes," I said, trembling. "Yes, in the gun safe."

"Show me," she said.

We hurried downstairs to the cellar and I opened my dad's gun safe.

“Wow, he doesn’t mess around, does he? There’s got to be over twenty guns in here.” She pulled out a Smith and Wesson ten millimeter gun and nodded with approval. “This will do.”

“You know how to fire a gun?” I asked as she loaded it.

“Sure, I own a couple guns myself. I’m in the Reserves; you didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t. Nobody ever told me.”

“Now you do. Your mom’s mentioned that you can shoot. Maybe you should be armed, too, just in case. Pick one out and follow me.”

I grabbed my dad’s ten millimeter Colt Delta and some ammunition.

“What’s going on?” asked my mom in a strangled voice. She stood on the stairs with terror in her eyes.

“Mom, we heard some gunfire and screaming outside.”

“What?” she cried and raced up the stairs.

I scrambled up the steps after her and crouched next to her by the family room window. She slid her hand between the blinds and tugged the window open.

“It looks pretty deserted out there,” I whispered. “I wonder what happened to all of those soldiers who were supposed to be helping us?”

She held up her hand to silence me. “Do you hear that?” she whispered.

My heart stopped as I heard the faint sound of a man moaning for help.

## Chapter Ten

The front door slammed shut and we both jumped.

“Sara,” I pointed out the window as our pregnant houseguest bolted away from the safety of the house, her white maternity shirt a beacon in the darkness.

“What is she thinking? It’s not safe!” protested my mother.

I felt a sudden surge of fear and adrenaline. I stood up and raced after Sara, determined to keep Megan’s mom and her unborn child safe.

“Cassie!” my mother shrieked. She bolted down the stairs after me and grabbed my arm before I could make it out the door. “Where in the hell do you think you’re going?!”

I tried pulling away. “Mom, Sara may need help! You have to let me go.”

She shook her head vehemently. “I don’t think so! Give the gun to me, I’ll go after her.”

“You don’t know how to use this thing. You won’t be able to help her!” I hollered.

Her hazel eyes hardened. “Bull crap. You give it to me, young lady. Now!”

Frustrated, but unable to defy my mother, I reluctantly handed her the gun.

“Okay, now stay away from the door and windows. I don’t want you to get shot if there are stray bullets.”

I groaned. “Mom...”

“I’m serious,” she said, shaking her index finger at me before she raced out the door.

This is nuts, I thought. I felt like pulling my hair out. I was not only terrified for my mom, but also for the kids sound asleep in the house; which, reminded me.

I ran back upstairs to the guestroom, where Megan was still sleeping peacefully. I checked the window to make sure it was secure, then hesitantly snuck back out.

Next, I scurried back downstairs to find Bobby still sleeping on the couch. He looked so peaceful. I sighed at his innocence and then thought of his brother, who should have



arrived by now. I pulled out my phone and tried calling Bryce but he didn't answer. Neither did he respond to a text.

Bryce, where are you? I wondered, trying to stay calm. And where in the heck was my dad?

I went back down to the cellar and grabbed my dad's new Beretta, which he'd been so proud of. It was a nine millimeter and held seventeen rounds. Perfect.

"Cassie!" hollered my mom from the upstairs landing. "Grab the first-aid kit, quickly!"

I sighed with relief, then grabbed the kit from the laundry room and rushed back up the stairs. I skidded to a halt at the hellish nightmare before me; Sara sat on the steps trying to use her phone, tears streaming down her cheeks, while my mother knelt on the floor, pressing a bloodied towel over a young soldier's shoulder. His face was pale and he was choking on some of his own blood.

"Just breathe slowly," murmured my mother.

The soldier looked up at me and I recognized him, it was Austin. He tried to say something, but his face contorted in agony and he clamped his eyes shut.

"What...what happened to him?" I whispered in horror.

She shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. He was like this when we found him. Hand me the first-aid kit."

"Where is everyone?!" sobbed Sara, throwing her phone down. "Nobody is answering the damn phones, all of those soldiers from earlier...just disappeared?!"

"Okay, calm down, Sara. Everything's going to be okay. We'll get through this, somehow," said my mom as she opened a bottle of iodine. She poured some on her hands.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"It kills bacteria," she replied. She then put on some plastic gloves.

When my mom lifted up the towel from the soldier, I almost threw up. His flesh was mangled with blood oozing out of the wound.

"Oh, God," Sara whispered covering her mouth. The next thing I know she was running up the stairs gagging.

Mom examined the wound and shook her head. "This isn't working. It's too deep. We have to get him to the hospital. He'll

never survive if we don't do it right now." She poured some iodine on the wound and the soldier moaned.

"Sorry," she said.

"I'll go," I stated. "I'll take him to the hospital."

"No, I've already decided. I'm doing it," argued my mother.

"Well, then I'm coming with," I said defiantly.

"No. I'm going by myself, and that's final. You stay here with Sara and the kids. Lock the doors, keep the guns loaded, and watch for your father or Bryce."

It was pointless to argue with her. I sighed. "Okay, fine, I'll help you get him into the SUV."

My mom had somehow managed to stop most of the bleeding with gauze and bandages. The weakened soldier had passed out while she was tending to his wound, which made it much more difficult for us to carry him through the garage and into the backseat of the SUV.

"Now," my mom said, breathing heavily after getting him secured. "I'm going to find help for all of us. If your dad comes back, have him call me immediately."

I nodded. "Okay."

She stared at me with a terrified look in her eyes and then pulled me into her arms. "You be careful, Cassie. I don't understand what's going on. Just stay inside and be...strong."

I swallowed back my tears and nodded.

Mom pulled away and brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. "And...check on Allie again. Make sure your little sister's safe, too."

"I promise. I'll do it right away."

She grabbed one of the guns and shoved it into her purse. Taking a deep breath she said, "Okay, I'll be back."

I tried to remain calm as I watched my mom open the garage and leave in the SUV, but I was terrified. I had no idea what was going on outside or in town, whether it was random violence, terrorism, or something even worse. I felt like I was in a nightmare. I closed the garage door.

"Um, Cassie?"

"What?" I asked, turning around. I felt like throwing up.

Sara held up my mother's cell phone, her face pale. "Isn't this your mom's?"

## Chapter Eleven

I called my sister's cell phone, but she wasn't answering. It was after eleven and I figured she might have fallen asleep, but I didn't want to take any chances so I called Paige, too. When she didn't respond, my stomach contracted like a tight fist.

Sara squeezed my shoulder; she knew I was on the verge of losing it. "They might all be asleep by now."

"I hope so," I replied in a strained voice.

"Or it might be possible that they don't have their cell phones nearby. Does Paige's mom have a landline?"

I wasn't sure. I ran downstairs to find the phonebook, as I began flipping through the pages, the power went out in the house. Crap!

"Cassie!" called Sara from upstairs. "Do you have a flashlight?"

I used the lights from my cell phone to find my way back up into the kitchen where I knew my mom kept a flashlight and candles.

"Thank God my mom is a candle fanatic," I said, placing lit candles of all shapes and sizes throughout the house.

"Did you hear that?" Sara whispered.

I froze. "What?"

She grabbed her gun and hurried over to the balcony door. "I'm going to sneak on the deck, see if someone's out there. I thought I heard voices."

I felt a prickling sensation go up my spine. "Be careful." We didn't have steps leading from the deck, but that didn't mean someone couldn't somehow climb up from below. It was heavily wooded behind the house, a great place for someone to hide.

She crawled out on her hands and knees and peered through the slats.

"Do you hear or see anything?" I whispered loudly as she looked over the side of the wooden railing.

She held up her hand to silence me.

A loud scream ripped through the darkness, startling both of us. Sara gasped and scurried back inside. Her face was a mask of terror.

“Who was that?!”

“I don’t know,” she said in a strangled voice.

“Did you see anything at all?”

She shook her head. “It’s too dark out there.”

There was another terrifying scream, this time much closer to the house. It sounded female.

Sara took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m going to check it out. Stay here, I’ll be back.” Before I could respond, she rushed down the steps to the front door.

I picked up the Beretta and hustled after her.

“What are you doing? Stay here,” she demanded, slipping on her shoes.

“No, I’m coming with you. You might need my help.”

Sara sighed. “Fine, but you do exactly what I tell you to do and stay close.”

I nodded and she opened the door. As we stepped outside, I could hear faint cries somewhere on the other side of the cul-de-sac, behind one of the houses. Strangely, Charlie wasn’t outside barking his head off.

“This way,” said Sara as she rushed across the street, heading towards the Hendrickson’s dark rambler.

I froze in my tracks; it was starting to feel a lot like déjà vu. My palms grew clammy as I tried to find the courage to keep moving.

Sara turned around and waved her hand frantically. “Come on,” she whispered loudly.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and hurried across as she started moving again. She was really fast for being pregnant, which I contributed to her military training. I thought I was in fairly good shape but I struggled to keep up with her.

We went around the Hendrickson’s fence to the next yard over and paused behind a small wooden shed.

Sara’s eyes widened with alarm. “Over there,” she pointed through the darkness.

I could barely make out the three figures, but it looked like a woman and two soldiers. The three were less than a hundred feet

away. She was crying hysterically and appeared to be running from the men.

I turned to Sara in shock. "This seem wrong to you? They're supposed to be the good guys."

"Something's definitely wrong," muttered Sara, unconsciously rubbing a hand over swollen belly.

We slipped through the trees towards the men, who were focused fully on the desperate woman. The soldiers were staggering, as if they were wounded and the distance began to widen between the woman and her pursuers. As we inched our way closer to the soldiers, I gawked in disbelief.

"Oh, God," I whispered.

The two soldiers looked like something out of a horror movie. Their clothing was torn, they were filthy, bloody, and missing some very important body parts; one man an arm, the other a hand and part of his face. But they were still moving, and fairly quickly for being so injured.

How? I wondered incredulously.

The taller of the two must have somehow sensed something, because he stopped and turned towards us. Then he opened what was left of his pitted face and made a screeching noise, one that chilled me to the bone.

I swallowed. "Um...Sara?"

The other one whipped its head around and growled.

"Get your gun ready," demanded Sara.

Suddenly the two hideous men charged towards us and I gave a startled gasp.

Sara raised her pistol. "Stop, right there!" she yelled. "Don't come any closer!"

They ignored her and kept stumbling towards us.

"Cassie, shoot them if you have to," she said.

As they moved closer, I felt as if I was losing my mind. Blood dripped from open wounds on the soldier's skin, their eyes were red and unfocused, and their mouths...they seemed to be almost salivating.

Sara's lips curled in disgust. "God, they stink."

The taller one lurched towards Sara and her gun went off. Blood and brain matter sprayed everywhere as he dropped to his knees, falling on what was left of his dreadful face.

"Watch out, Cassie!" yelled Sara.

The second man was almost upon me. I raised my trembling hand and fired, hitting him in the shoulder. He paused for only a second and then charged at me again. I fired a second bullet, this time taking out his ear.

"Damn it!" I cried. I'd never had to shoot anything but inanimate objects before.

Sara shot him in the leg. He grunted and then fell to the ground.

"Stay back, Cassie," she demanded, inching slowly towards him.

His face was grayish in color and mottled with weird patches. Something green bubbled out of his nose and I had this sudden urge to find him a tissue.

"What happened to him?" I asked, staring with fascinated horror.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before."

He growled and reached out towards Sara with his one good arm, the other one just a stump of flesh.

The sound of branches snapping made us jump and the woman the soldiers had been chasing stepped out of the darkness. Her eyes were filled with hate. "Kill that bastard! He killed my Paul and he'll kill you both if you let him live! He's...he's not human, he's a monster!"

Before anyone could react, the man grabbed Sara's ankle. She screamed and shot him in the head.

The woman sighed in relief. "We've got to leave and go somewhere safe." Her voice quivered when she spoke and her eyes darted around the trees. She was about my mother's age, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, which were both ripped and dirty. There was some dried blood on the side of her face and matted into her short, brown hair.

"Are you hurt?" asked Sara, pointing to her face.

The lady shook her head and then touched the side of her face. Tears welled up in her eyes. "It's my husband's blood," she replied bitterly. "They attacked us and killed him."

Sara's eyes widened. "Okay, let's get back to the house. We've got to make sure the kids are okay, and try getting ahold of the police again."

I'd forgotten about Megan and Bobby! We'd left them all alone in the house.

I took one last glimpse of the dead men as we started walking back towards the house and felt a pang of shame. They were U.S. soldiers and they looked like they'd lost a war, only they'd been fighting for the wrong side.

"Those couldn't have been soldiers," Sara said, brushing a dark strand of hair away from her face. "It just doesn't make sense."

"They weren't soldiers...anymore, they weren't even human. They were some kind of...demons," replied the distraught woman.

"They certainly looked like something from hell," I said.

"Maybe they were criminals; dressed as soldiers," said Sara.

The woman shook her head. "No. They attacked us, like violent animals. The taller soldier ripped...oh, God!" she cried, covering her face. "He ripped out Paul's neck, with his teeth!"

Sara put an arm around the woman's shoulders. "Don't worry. You're safe now. We'll help you."

She nodded and wiped the tears from her face. "We'd better hurry. There are more of those things around. It's not safe."

There's more? The thought of there being more insane soldiers wandering around in the dark chilled me to the bone. I tightened my grip on the gun.

As we hurried across the cul-de-sac, it was eerily quiet, no sounds but the echo of our feet across the pavement.

"How can anyone sleep through the commotion back there?" muttered Sara shaking her head in disbelief.

I looked around and noticed the power was still out in the entire neighborhood, finding it odd that not one person had stepped out of their homes to see what was going on. Not even with the gunfire.

We entered the house and checked on the children; thankfully they were both still sleeping soundly.

"Thank God they're safe," said Sara.

"I'll be right back," I said, going to the bathroom to wash my hands, which suddenly felt dirty. I stared in horror at my fingers; one of my new French tip nails was completely cracked!

Are you kidding me?!

I was so angry. The one and only time I get a professional manicure and I'm caught up in some crazy shit that ruins the beauty of my nails. I glared at the cracked nail and cut off the tip.

Still disgusted, I went down to the cellar where Sara and the stranger were.

"What's your name?" Sara asked the woman, who was staring off into space.

The woman released a shaky breath. "Hannah," she replied thickly.

"So, do you mind starting from the beginning and tell us what happened? I think we need to know, especially since I've killed the two men who were after you."

Hannah nodded and then sat down on the steps. She cleared her throat. "Um, we were busy at work, Paul and I. We own a liquor store on Main Street, The Liquor Depot? Anyway, that's where we first encountered one of those...monsters."

Sara frowned. "You saw more of them in town?"

"Yes, earlier in the evening. They weren't soldiers, either. Just regular ol' people," she shrugged, "Or they used to be people. Anyway, the store is normally busy, no matter what hour it is, but the past couple of days, there haven't been many customers. The flu, you know? It's hurt our business too, if you can believe it."

Her voice was getting hoarse, so I offered her a bottle of water.

"Thanks," she said. "Anyway, I was leaving the backroom of the store when I heard Paul yelling at someone by the register, so I hurried to the front, to see what was going on. Well, it was one of those...freaks and it was making these weird garbled noises, and trying to grab on to Paul's arm. From the back, I thought it was just some angry fellow, so I hollered at him to leave the store," she sighed. "But instead of leaving, he turned around and tried attacking me! Thank goodness Paul was there...oh Paul!" she cried bitterly.

Sara handed her a tissue and squeezed her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. It's just the thought of never seeing him again, you know?" she sniffled.

We both nodded. Sara handed her more tissues.

"Anyway, Paul grabbed the thing before it got too close, and it bit him in the shoulder!"



“You keep calling it a thing. What do you mean? Are you sure it wasn’t just some crazy lunatic?” asked Sara.

Hannah snorted. “I wish it was. No...this thing’s eyes weren’t...normal. Something was wrong with the pupils. And its skin looked grayish-white, almost like skin when it’s decomposing. In fact,” she said, sitting up straighter. “That’s what these things remind me of...dead people.”

“Dead people...like zombies?” I whispered.

“Exactly like that! You know, my father owned a funeral home back in the seventies. Once I snuck down to the basement and saw a couple dead bodies,” she shuddered. “Yep, that’s what those things reminded me of tonight; dead people walking around, without their souls.”

I’m not sure why, but I believed her. From Sara’s expression though, she wasn’t convinced.

“What happened after your husband was bit?” asked Sara.

Hannah sighed. “Well, Paul smacked it on its head, repeatedly, until it finally let go of his shoulder and fell to the ground. Then the damn thing got back up and rushed at Paul, growling at him.”

“Did you kill it?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“Hell yes. I grabbed the gun behind the register and shot the thing in the head,” she declared proudly.

Sara and I looked at each other, not sure what to say.

“Did you call the police?” Sara asked.

“We tried calling the sheriff, but the lines were busy. So, Paul called a buddy of his on the police force, Jim Nielson. Jim was around, amazingly. He said these things were attacking people all over town.”

I shuddered. “All over the entire town?”

Hannah nodded. “Yes. And what’s even more disturbing is that the ones that turned into these...zombies, they were normal people just a few hours ago, people who live here in town.”

Sara rubbed her forehead. “So, what you’re saying is that normal people are turning into zombies?”

Hannah’s eyes narrowed and they darted back and forth, looking at both of us. “First, let me ask you something. Did either of you get the flu vaccine?”

We both shook our heads.

Hannah released a sigh of relief. "Good, then I don't need to worry about either of you turning."

Sara frowned. "Turning? Hold on. You're saying that the people who are turning into...zombies...are doing so because they received the flu vaccine?" she shook her head. "You can't be serious."

Hannah laughed bitterly. "I am as serious as a heart attack. I wish it weren't true, that Paul was still...alive. But Jim, he told us everything, the entire ugly truth. The truth the government is desperately trying to conceal and now fix. They've even shut down most of the power to try and contain these things."

"They're responsible for the power being shut off?" asked Sara.

Hannah nodded. "Personally, I think someone high-up was already losing their mind when they approved 'that call'".

"Nothing makes sense," mumbled Sara.

"What exactly are they trying to hide?" I asked breathlessly.

She touched my shoulder. "Right now, anyone who's been vaccinated is doomed. They've all been issued a death warrant. Only it's their soul that dies, their bodies live on."

I expected to hear a clap of thunder after her terrifying revelation. Instead, Sara laughed out loud.

"That's ridiculous! There's no way the government would release a vaccine that would create millions of...zombies!"

"Well, that was our reaction when we heard the story. But you see, the newest vaccine was never tested thoroughly before it was released. The FDA actually never even approved the vaccine, but it was still released."

"How can that be? The FDA would have had to have been involved in order for the drug to have been released."

"I'm not sure the specifics of what happened, dear. That's just the story I heard, and after seeing some of these walking dead things, I believe Jim."

"How could a drug cause a person to make decisions without a conscious soul?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm just hoping those lost souls are with their maker," replied Hannah softly, drawing a cross upon her chest.

This was too much for me to fathom.

"How many more of these zombies did you run into tonight?" Sara asked.

"After we got done talking to Jim, we closed up shop so we could high-tail it on home. We didn't really believe Jim at the time, not until we saw the horror of what was happening around town."

"What did you see?" I asked.

"Innocent people were getting attacked by these...zombies. Right on the streets! I felt like I was in some sort of scary motion picture. My mind wanted to believe that all these people were actors, that the blood and gore wasn't real. That it was just a scene they were shooting for a movie." Hannah's eyes filled with tears. "But it was real."

"How did you guys make it out of there?" Sara asked.

"We own a Dodge Ram," she sniffed, "with a Hemi! I tell you that thing just plowed through those zombies. They didn't even know what hit 'em."

I looked at Sara in horror, picturing the bodies getting hit by the truck.

"If you made it out of town, what happened to Paul?"

Hannah shook her head sadly. "There was a little girl, about ten years old. Only a couple blocks away from here. Well, she was running and some soldiers were chasing her. We had to stop. We could see that the little girl wasn't a zombie, but the soldiers...they'd already changed."

"Why would the government allow soldiers who received the vaccines to monitor everything?"

"I don't think they know exactly who's been vaccinated, even with the military. You can walk up to the local drug store and receive a vaccine. Anyway, the soldiers you killed tonight were the two chasing the girl. We hit them with our truck, and they were pretty messed up, you saw their missing limbs. But that didn't stop them from coming back at us. The taller of the two is the one who got Paul. He was fast and strong. I couldn't help my husband," she said, the tears flooding all over again.

"What happened to the little girl?" I asked.

She shrugged, and wiped her eyes with the tissue. "I don't really know. Hopefully she made it somewhere safe."

"What do we do now?" I asked Sara.

Sara looked pale. She walked away, speechless.

I felt like throwing up. The idea that my mother, sister, and father were in this nightmare, probably trying to survive, was horrifying. I didn't know if I could believe this stranger. Were there real-live zombies combing the streets, looking for their next victim?

I turned to Hannah. "Um, what about the people who aren't zombies? What happens if they get bit or hurt by one?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't know, dear. I was too busy running for my life to find out."

## Chapter Twelve

I was overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted from everything that had happened. Needing a burst of caffeine, I walked into the kitchen to grab a can of soda and noticed that there was a message on my phone.

Bryce? I hadn't allowed myself to think about him, it was just too painful to consider that he might be among the walking dead. I had no idea if he'd had the vaccine or his brother for that matter. It might be a good idea to keep a close eye on Bobby!

I picked up my phone and sighed with relief, it was Allie. I quickly dialed into my voicemail but my happiness was quickly shattered.

"Cassie," whispered Allie, I could tell she was in tears. "Oh, my God...we need help! Dan is trying to...kill us." Next, I heard her scream in terror and then the phone went dead.

Horrificed, I tried calling her back but there was no answer. Then I sent her several texts and waited. But she didn't respond. I threw my phone down and started crying; I couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to Allie. Dan must have turned into a zombie!

Then it hit me. I knew exactly what I had to do; save my little sister.

Wiping away my tears, I stood up and grabbed my truck keys. There was no way I was going to sit back and allow her to be a victim to Dan or any other zombies. If she was still alive, I was going to find her.

Suspecting that Sara wouldn't let me leave the safety of the house, I decided not to tell her of my plans. Instead, I grabbed a piece of paper and wrote her a note. I also asked her to keep a careful watch on Bobby. Finally, I added Paige's address, just in case my mom or dad came home.

I went back down to the cellar and nonchalantly grabbed more ammunition near the gun safe. Sara didn't even notice, she was too busy trying to console Hannah.

Yawning, I said, "I'm going to lie down for a little while."

She looked at me and nodded. "Okay, Hannah and I are going to figure out what in the heck we're going to do next."

I said goodnight, then ran upstairs to grab the Berretta and my sectional staff, which is something I'd never used away from my karate class. It could inflict a lot of pain; if there was ever a time to use it, I knew it was now.

My truck was parked on the other side of the garage. With my heart hammering in my chest, I took a fearful breath and snuck outside, locking the door behind me. It was deathly quiet except for the sound of an old barn owl hooting somewhere in the distance. Thankfully, I was alone, nobody waiting for me in the shadows. I hopped into my truck and locked the doors.

"Please start," I begged my persnickety truck. And just like that, it started.

With a renewed surge of hope, I put it in gear, backed out of the driveway, and took off down the street, not putting on my headlights until I was far enough away from the house.

As I drove through the neighboring streets, I'd half expected to see dead bodies, but instead was surprised by how calm everything was. No bodies, no walking dead, not even any neighbors coming or going, which really wasn't that odd after midnight, although tonight, everything felt ominous.

I relaxed a little and turned on the radio, but there was still nothing but static.

Should've brought my iPod, I thought.

About four blocks away, I noticed Hannah's truck parked recklessly in the middle of the street. It was yellow with streaks of blood splashed across the bumper and hood. I drove around it cautiously, expecting to see her dead husband jumping out of it and coming for me. But thankfully, it was empty.

As I neared the first major intersection, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I really didn't think too much about it until I slowed down for the stop sign and a bushy-haired male zombie rushed my truck. It then crawled onto my hood while I watched, totally transfixed by its actions.

The zombie's face contorted grotesquely and it let out a dreadful moan. I recoiled in horror as it stared hungrily at me with its insanely red eyes. He then pressed his mouth against the window and began licking the glass, as if it were trying to somehow taste me through it. The slimy residue its blackened tongue left

behind was enough to make me gag as well as get me moving. I stomped my foot on the gas, thinking I might be able to shake him off, but my truck had other ideas; it gasped, sputtered and then stalled.

I locked eyes with the zombie, who seemed aware of what just happened. Its grayish lips curled up into a sneer, as if mocking me, which made me furious. I raised my middle finger and flipped him off, hoping he'd understand what that meant, too.

When that obviously didn't get me anywhere, I restarted the engine, this time pressing much more gently on the gas. When the truck started moving I wanted to cheer, but the zombie was still holding onto the hood of my truck, putting a damper on my victory.

"Get off!" I screamed, but the zombie only stared at me with a cannibalistic yearning.

I gave the pedal more gas and watched the speedometer go up, but the zombie still held tight, its brown hair blowing wildly in the wind.

Screw it. I pressed the gas to the floorboard, not too worried about oncoming traffic. This time I felt a surge of exhilaration as the zombie tumbled off the side of the hood and onto the pavement. I held my breath until I couldn't see it in my rearview mirror and then let out a shaky sigh. I'd just survived round two against the zombies.

I calmed myself down and continued on towards Paige's, noting several abandoned vehicles on just about every road I took to get there. It was so surreal and I started feeling as if I was the lone survivor in a bad horror flick. Even though I was terrified, thoughts of my little sister kept pushing me forward.

When I finally arrived at Hillshire Commons, the posh gated community where Paige lives, I noticed the security station was vacant and the entrance was open. I drove through it warily, searching the streets for zombies, not wanting any more leaping onto my truck. I held my breath for the entire four blocks, and heaved a sigh of relief when I made it up Paige's cobblestone driveway without any obstacles.

The house appeared dark and ominous. My hands began to shake uncontrollably, imagining what I might possibly find inside. As I grabbed my truck keys out of the ignition, they slipped out of my quivering hands and fell onto the floor mat, so I bent

down and picked them. When I sat back up, two pairs of red, bloodshot eyes stared at me through the window. I screamed in holy terror.



## Chapter Thirteen

When I finally stopped screaming my head off, I took a deep breath and assessed the situation. Two zombies were feeling around the outside of my truck, trying desperately to get to me. They were hideous and hungry; they were also out there and I was still somewhat safe in my truck.

“Scat! Go away!” I hollered, raising my gun.

One of them, an obese zombie wearing pajamas, cocked his head, staring at me like I was some kind of delectable appetizer. Blood coagulated from where his nose used to be and I shuddered in revulsion.

The other zombie was frothing at the mouth. She was a rail-thin, revolting creature who must have been taking a bath or something when she changed into a zombie. I could only presume this since she was stark naked, wearing only a plastic cap. This creature was growling and clawing frantically at my driver’s side window. She didn’t appear to be wounded, but she had the tell-tale zombie eyes, and her skin was gray and mottled.

I knew my situation wasn’t good, so I decided to wait a few minutes, to see if the two zombies would lose interest and eventually wander off. But then the skinny female started beating on the window with her hands and I became paranoid about the window shattering. So I decided to try a different approach; I screamed at them, to see if they’d get confused and possibly leave me alone. It was a shot in the dark...that totally missed.

Both zombies froze and stared at me as I screamed with all my might. I thought I was doing good and kept screaming until the female let out a high-pitched screech that made my cries sound like whispers. Then, in horror, I realized her screech caught the attention of other zombies in the area who were now coming to join the party.

Cursing, I moved to the passenger side of my truck and opened the door.

The male zombie began slobbering on himself as he staggered around the truck towards me. I aimed my trembling right hand and shot him in the head. Rancid zombie brains colored the pavement.

“Oh, God,” I shuddered, resisting the urge to vomit. I looked towards the female, who was also moving towards me. “Listen, you’re next if you come any further,” I warned her.

She snarled and then leaped at me, but not before I shot her between the eyes.

Sensing the other zombies in the neighborhood getting closer, I grabbed the flashlight from my glove compartment and rushed towards the front door. Unfortunately, it was locked.

Ring the doorbell? It was certainly worth a shot. I figured a zombie wouldn’t have enough sense to open the door, let alone unlock it. Plus, if one of the girls were still alive, she’d open it for me.

A hairy chested, boxer short sporting grandpa zombie growled at me from the edge of the lawn and I knew I couldn’t wait any longer. I ran to the side of the house and tried the tall wooden gate. Luckily it was unlocked. I entered the backyard and did a quick scan of the swimming pool, using my flashlight. There was no sign of blood, just wet towels, snacks, and a couple of floating chairs still drifting in the water. I decided to check out the house and went through the open patio door to the kitchen, where I found a cast-iron frying pan lying on the ground and a few missing knives from the butcher block. Then, I caught something dark and red splattered on the marbled kitchen island. As I moved closer to the stain with my flashlight, I let out a shaky sigh of relief; pizza sauce.

Wiping the perspiration from my forehead, I decided to move on. Their house is massive, over ten thousand square feet, and I knew I had a lot of ground to cover, so I started with the obvious: Kylie’s bedroom. Right away, I found Allie’s pink leather purse and overnight bag sitting on a futon, but no other signs of either girl.

Next, I made my way to Paige’s room, which she likes to call her “wing.” She has her own bathroom with a whirlpool tub, walk-in closet, and even her own personal reading room. By chance I found her new iPhone sticking out from under the bed, as if she’d carelessly dropped it. I put it in my pocket and continued searching the entire house with the flashlight. After I scoured every room in the house, including the theater room and upper level where Kristie and Dan slept, my eyes began to fill with frustrated tears; the place appeared deserted and I had no idea what to do next. As I

trudged back downstairs to the kitchen, my phone began to vibrate. I cringed when I saw who it was.

“Thank God! What in the hell were you thinking, girl?” yelled Sara.

I cleared my throat. “Look, I have to find my sister, she needs me. If it was your sister, you’d do the same. You know I’m right.”

She was silent for a minute then sighed. “Yes, you are. So... have you found her yet?”

“No,” I replied sadly.

“Maybe they’ve all escaped?”

“God, I can only hope so. Listen, have you heard anything at all from my mom, dad, or Bryce?” I asked.

Another pause, then, “No, Cassie, I’m sorry.”

I closed my eyes and let out a shaky breath. “Okay, well look, I’m going to keep searching. Call me if you hear from anyone in my family. Bye.” I hung up before she could start in on me again about returning home.

I put my head in my hands and tried thinking about where Allie and the others could have possibly went. I felt like I was missing something and it was driving me crazy. Then it hit me like a sledgehammer, the new safe-room! It was a family shelter that wasn’t supposed to be finished for a couple of months, but it would still be a good place to hide. Paige had mentioned that it was in the wine cellar, so I ran back downstairs to the lower level and began looking. It was supposed to be hidden at the very back of the wine cabinets.

“Yes,” I squealed when I located the entrance, it looked like an ordinary panel wall with a keypad attached. As I raised my hand to pound on the wall, it opened.

## Chapter Fourteen

“Thank God!” I cried, standing face to face with my best friend. Although it was obvious that Paige was relieved to see me, the haunted expression in her eyes spoke volumes. She collapsed into my arms and sobbed.

“Paige, where’s Allie?” I asked, trying to look beyond her into the safe-room. Unfortunately, she appeared to be alone.

She shook her head as the tears streamed down her face. “I...I don’t know!” she cried.

I wanted to shake her but instead forced myself to remain calm; we’d all been through our own kind of hell the last few hours. “What do you mean?” I asked slowly.

“I don’t know! Allie and Kylie ran away. They were going to try and get help,” she cried through her tears. “I don’t even know where my mom is!”

“Okay, calm down and start from the beginning. What happened?”

Her light green eyes grew large. “It was my stepdad, Dan. He turned into some kind of freak! He tried to fucking bite me. Then my mom...she whacked him with a frying pan. But he...he kept coming towards me with these...horrible red eyes. Mom told me to run, so I did! I ran away and have been hiding here ever since. God, I’m so scared!” she sobbed.

“Paige, I didn’t see anyone else in the house.”

“Well, where’s my mom? She just wouldn’t leave me. They’ve just got to be here somewhere!”

“Paige, it’s okay. We’ll find them, somehow,” I replied softly. “Listen, do you have anything to drink? I could really use some caffeine.” I’d been up for almost twenty-four hours and was finally feeling the effects.

She pulled me inside. The hidden room was larger than my entire bedroom. It held a black leather sectional, an arsenal of electronic equipment, and a fully-stocked refrigerator. I grabbed a soda and walked over to the surveillance cameras.

“Do these things work?” I asked.

"No, I've already tried. They hadn't finished installing them yet.

I sighed. "At least you've got the generator, and didn't have to sit in the dark."

She nodded and then stared vacantly. "What should we do?"

"Do you have any weapons?" I asked.

"What...what do you mean?"

I pulled out the Beretta I had tucked behind my back. "I lost my sectional staff when I was searching your house, but I still have this. You're going to need something to defend yourself, too, just in case."

Her eyes narrowed. "From...Dan?"

Crap. She didn't know about the zombies.

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"Paige?" I'd just recounted my last few hours to her. The expression on her face was unreadable. "Are you okay?"

"You've got to be kidding," she finally said. "That's just plain nuts."

"Believe me, I wish I was. Do you really think I'd make something like that up?"

Paige shook her head but I could tell she was still having major doubts. It was crazy for me to imagine and I'd lived through it.

I shrugged. "Well, you'll find out soon enough. Do you have a baseball bat or something you can hit zombies with?"

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

"In my room," she muttered.

We grabbed a second flashlight and hurried to Paige's bedroom. She took out a metal baseball bat and two softball helmets, one pink and one black.

"Great idea!" I said, putting on the black helmet. "Okay, now stay close to me. I haven't seen any zombies in your house but there's a ton of walking dead on the streets."

She put on the pink helmet and I handed her the bat.

"Wow, I love your nails," she said suddenly, grabbing my left hand.

I looked down. "Yeah, they look really sexy when I'm shooting at a zombie," I replied dryly.

Her jaw dropped. "Oh, my God...you really had to use the gun?"

My cell phone started to ring. It was Sara again.

I sighed. "Hi, Sara."

"It's Bryce. Where are you at?" he demanded.

I was racked with so many emotions that my knees gave out. I sank to the ground. "Oh, thank God!" I gasped. "I...I didn't know what happened to you."

"I'm fine," he replied sternly. "Stay where you are and I'll come get you. Are you still at Paige's?"

Before I had a chance to respond, Paige gasped in horror and backed into me.

"What?" I turned and dropped the phone.

Two zombies stood at the entrance of her bedroom. The smell emitting from them rose like a wave of rotting garbage.

"Holy crap," said Paige in a strangled voice.

The moon was shining through her bedroom window, giving us a pretty good view of the zombies. One of them, a skinny half-naked man with white curly hair, made an ugly gurgling noise and then curled its lower lip, as if smiling. There was blood dripping from his rotting face and he held what looked the remains of someone's arm. He tossed it to the ground and staggered towards us.

The next thing I knew, Paige let out some kind of ferocious battle cry, then lifted the metal bat and swung high, bashing the zombie smack in the middle of its skull. Before I could react, she raised it again, this time hitting a solid home run on the creature's head. It dropped to the ground with a loud, sickening thud.

The other zombie, a muscular bald guy with skull tattoos all over his head, growled at us.

I raised my gun to shoot him, but the Berretta jammed. "For the love of God," I mumbled trying repeatedly to shoot it.

"Hold on!" Paige snapped as she tried to dislodge the bat from the other zombie.

But skull-head just couldn't wait; he staggered eagerly towards me, white froth foaming from his mouth. Fortunately for me he was terribly slow, with very little coordination. I stepped out

of his line of attack and he fell to the ground. When he finally lifted himself back up, I jumped into the air and did a hard side kick; my foot catching him in the throat. He fell backward onto Paige's jewelry box and that's when all hell broke loose.

Paige's face turned red and she screamed in fury. "Get your ugly ass off of my grandmother's jewelry box, you piece of dead rotting meat!!!" Then she kicked the zombie onto the floor and stomped the sharp heel of her new Jimmy Choo boot onto its face until it was just a bloody mass of gore.

I stared at her in shock as she wiped the perspiration off of her forehead, then grabbed a towel and began cleaning off her boot.

When I finally found my voice, I said, "So, I guess you believe me now?"

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. "You know, all I could think about when I saw them was that I wasn't ready to die. Not by their hands."

I nodded. "I've felt the same way all night."

She looked at me. "So, who was on the phone?"

"Bryce!" I groaned.

I knew before I picked up my cell phone that he was gone. I hit redial and waited but nobody answered, it went straight to voicemail. I left a message.

"Nothing?" asked Paige.

"No," I stood up and sighed. "Let's go." I picked up my gun and sure enough, chipped another nail.

Chapter Fifteen

Paige and I went over every inch of the house again, but couldn't find signs of anyone. Not even Zombie Dan.

"Did you check in the back by the pool?" she asked.

I nodded. "That's where I entered. The patio door was open."

"Let me guess, you didn't close it after you entered and that's how dead and deader found their way in?" she asked with a wry smile.

"At least there were only two of them. You should have seen how many are prowling the streets outside."

Her smile faded. "Great."

We stepped cautiously through the kitchen and over to the sliding glass door. To our dismay we found the pool area climbing with zombies. There had to be a dozen walking aimlessly round the pool, some falling into the water and sinking to the bottom. Fortunately, none of them took any notice of us.

I snorted. "This could almost be funny if it wasn't really happening to us."

"Holy crap," she mumbled. "I think I'm going to puke."

The smell of rotting skin was overwhelming. Resisting an urge to vomit myself, I slid the door closed and looked at Paige. "Wow, you didn't invite me to your pool party. That hurts."

Paige groaned. "All jokes aside, we're screwed."

"At least the sun's starting to come out, they're easier to see."

She shivered. "And how's that supposed to make it better for us?"

"Yeah, they aren't pretty, especially the ones who've been dead for a while."

Paige's eyes lit up. "Hey, did you ever check the cabana?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't even think about checking that place, I just wanted to get inside the house."

"We'd better check it out, now. How do we get past those things?" she asked.

“Maybe we can create some kind of distraction in the front of the yard to draw them away from the pool?”

Just then we heard the faint sounds of gunshots. The zombies must have overheard as well, because they began moving idly towards the gate. When the last of them were no longer in sight, I nudged Paige.

“Let’s go,” I said.

I slid the glass door open and we stepped outside. The cabana was on the other side of the pool and we could hear more gunshots as we made our way to the entrance. Paige pulled open the door and we crept inside. It was empty.

Paige took off her softball helmet and sat down. “I thought for sure...Oh, God...where in the hell are they?” she moaned, putting her head in her hands.

I knew her pain. All I could think of about in that moment was my little sister. A memory flashed through my mind of when she was three or four years old, how she would follow me everywhere in her beat-up pink cowgirl boots, that were usually on the wrong feet, begging me to sleep in her room. I’d eventually relent, then grumble the entire night about having to watch her princess movies and the way she’d toss and turn as she slept, kicking me in the back. But right now, I would do anything to go back to that time.

I released a breath and squeezed her shoulder. “Let’s go and find out where that gunfire was coming from.”

Paige nodded, brushing away the tears from her face.

We opened the cabana door and stared in horror; the zombies were back and they brought dates. We were trapped and surrounded.

“Okay, now what?” she whispered.

Just as I opened my mouth, I saw a figure stepping through the sliding glass door. My heart leaped with joy when I recognized the loveable scowling face. Bryce! He’d actually come for me!

“It’s Bryce!” I shouted.

The shuffling and groaning of the zombies ceased; you couldn’t hear a bone drop. Everyone, including the zombies, turned towards us.

“Nice going,” said Paige dryly.

Bryce lifted his automatic rifle. “Get down!” he demanded.

Paige and I crouched down as he began shooting at the zombies. I pulled out my gun and aimed at the ones nearest to us. Blood, mucous, and body parts were flying everywhere as we watched all of the carnage in a twisted kind of glory. The dead got deader and we lived another hour in this hideous nightmare.

Paige shuddered. "Okay, this is totally disgusting."

"I can't believe he's actually here," I said, reloading the Beretta. The butterflies were going crazy in my stomach again. I didn't even care that I broke a third nail. I flicked it aside and decided the rest would come off immediately when I got home.

"Only you would fall in love during a zombie massacre," said Paige.

I shook my head. "I'm not in love with him. I hardly even know him."

"Face it! You've definitely got a thing for him."

I took off the softball helmet. "He's cute, sure, but he's also a little annoying."

She shrugged. "He's a guy."

When the last of the zombies lay twisted and broken on the ground, Bryce jogged over to us. He was still wearing what he'd had on the last time I'd seen him, but it was now covered with blood and gore. Part of me wanted Bryce to sweep me up into his arms and carry me to safety, while another part wanted him to burn the disgusting shirt first.

"Are you girls okay?" he asked in his deep voice. I'd almost forgotten how amazingly blue his eyes were.

"We're fine. Still haven't found Allie or Paige's mom and sister, though," I answered.

Bryce looked up at our helmets with the hint of a smile. "Nice touch."

Paige's eyes grew wide and she nodded. "It was my idea, so they can't get to our brains."

He bit the side of his lip to keep from cracking up then looked at the house. "So, you've checked everywhere, the entire house; basement; garage?"

Paige and I looked at each other.

"Garage," we said in unison. Neither of us had even considered the garage.

"Missed the garage? Okay, stay behind me and do exactly what I tell you."

Bryce started walking towards the side door to the garage, which was next to the cabana.

Paige checked out his rear and gave me a “thumbs-up” approval.

I smiled and shoved her forward.

Bryce twisted the doorknob to the garage. “It’s locked. Stand back,” he said. He then lifted his rifle and blasted a hole into it.

“Sorry, I’ll pay you back for that,” he said with a cocky grin. He then kicked the door open and the smell of decay hit us like a sledgehammer. It was also dark, so he grabbed his flashlight and raised the gun.

“Oh, my God, it’s Dan!” screamed Paige.

Zombie Dan was hovering around two Escalades, one a pearly white and the other black. His gray face was sunken and his skin was beginning to rot. He started shuffling slowly towards us, his dried-up lips pulled back in a deathly grin.

Bryce aimed the gun at Dan, wiping away the creepy smile. He toppled to the ground, hard.

“I never liked him,” muttered Paige. “He was really a pompous jerk.”

“Looks like he was alone,” I said, looking around.

“No, someone’s in the white SUV,” Bryce replied, stepping towards the vehicle. “Yep, a couple of females.”

Paige and I rushed over; it was Kristie and Kylie! The windows were up and they were lounging in the front seats. There wasn’t any sign of Allie.

“Mom! Wake up!” Paige cried removing her helmet. She began pounding on the window but neither of them budged.

“Hold on,” said Bryce. He went to the back window and broke the glass. Unlocking the door, he climbed in and shook Kristie’s shoulder.

Kristie’s eyes flew open and she screamed at Bryce, who probably looked like a mad serial killer in his bloody shirt.

Bryce chuckled as he climbed back out of the SUV. “Wow, I’ve never had that reaction from a female before.”

Kristie’s face lit up when she noticed Paige through the window. She removed the iPod earphones she wore and shook Kylie, who was also listening to music, until she was awake. Then

she got out. Drawing her arms around Paige, she cried, "Oh, thank God you're okay!"

"Um, where's Allie?" I asked in a strangled voice.

"We don't know," Kristie said, letting go of Paige. "Dan attacked us and she took off running."

I heaved a sigh. "Alone?"

"Yeah, I don't know where she went. I ran after Kylie who ran towards the garage. That's when Paige disappeared, as well as your sister."

I turned away and the dam broke. The pain of losing my sister was so great that I couldn't stop the tears. I knew it would be nearly impossible for Allie to survive on her own in this nightmare. There were so many zombies in the neighborhood and Allie was no match for them. She couldn't fire a gun or fight them one on one. She definitely wasn't strong enough.

Bryce pulled me into his arms and held me while I cried. When I finally ran out of tears, I remembered that everyone standing before me had lost someone within the last few hours, maybe even Bryce. I'd never even asked about Bobby.

"I'm sorry," I hiccupped, pushing Bryce away. "I didn't even ask about your brother. We're all going through this, not just me. I'm really sorry."

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it gently. "Bobby's fine and so was everyone else when I left them at your house."

"What about my parents? Where they home?" Deep down, I already knew that answer. They were both lost somewhere in this nightmare.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Cassie; they weren't around when I got back there. But they're very capable people from what I've heard. Don't give up on them, okay?"

I nodded slowly.

Kristie walked over and wrapped her arms around me. "I'm so sorry, honey. Dan just went nuts and chased us into the garage. I had to lock him out of the SUV so he wouldn't hurt me or Kylie."

"It's not your fault," I sighed.

"Yes, it is," Kristie stated and threw up her hands. "You know, I just have the worst luck with men. The first one I married was a jerk and this one turned out to be a psychotic maniac."

Anyway, we'll find her. She got away from Dan. He's been here the entire time so he couldn't have hurt her."

She looked so optimistic that it hit me; she had no idea what was happening in the outside world. "Oh...you don't know," I said breathlessly.

Kristie shrugged. "Know what?"

"Show her," said Paige.

Bryce grabbed his gun and walked back to where we'd come in. He opened the door and motioned for Kristie.

Kristie walked over and had her first glimpse of the carnage that was left from the zombie pool party massacre. She placed a hand over her mouth in horror. "Holy shit!

Chapter Sixteen

Bryce and I locked the gate this time to keep any other new zombies from wandering in.

"I wonder how they happened to know we're here?" I said to him as we watched more begin to navigate towards the house.

He shrugged. "Not sure, but I think we should get going soon. It's too dangerous staying here."

I nodded, trying not to breathe in the horrible smell. The smell of the rotting flesh was so pungent that I decided to ask Kristie for some Vicks to rub under my nose. I'd heard it was great for masking raunchy smells.

We returned to the house and closed the blinds so we wouldn't have to view all the corpses outside. It was getting warmer outside and now the flies were beginning to hover around the dead.

"Nothing on television yet," mumbled Paige, throwing the remote control. Bryce had been able to locate the house's main generator, so there was power again.

"Anyone hungry?" asked Kristie as she opened up the fridge. "I'm starving. Even those nasty zombie bodies outside can't ruin this appetite."

I wasn't really hungry but needed the energy from the food. "Sure," I said.

"The ham still looks good," she commented as she sniffed it. She placed it on the counter and took out some bread. "I can make sandwiches. Sorry, Wild, I'm out of pickles."

I smiled. "That's fine."

Kristie made sandwiches for everyone while I gave her a recap of what I understood about the zombies. They were insatiable cadavers who would do anything for a good meal. And we were definitely the main course. At least that was my version.

Bryce's reasoning was a little more scientific and straight from one of his military buddies. Those millions of people who received the flu vaccine were given a death sentence. The theory was that the vaccine caused some type of severe neurological damage; destroying what is the humane part of the brain.

Eventually it begins to destroy tissue in other parts of the body including muscle and other major organs; basically, creating a walking vegetable. One with a ravenous appetite for protein, lots of it. He wasn't sure if they were really considered zombies, but they were definitely something out of a horror movie.

"Is the military going to be able to contain these things?" asked Kristie.

"Most of the military are zombies by now, they were pretty much required to have them. The few remaining soldiers who didn't get the vaccine have their hands full as it is. The point is, we're pretty much on our own."

"How long does it take for someone to turn into a zombie?" whispered Kylie. It was the first time she'd spoken since we'd found them. Kristie put her arm around her.

"Not sure, although I think everyone is different, depending on their body mass. My aunt received the vaccine and it took only twenty-four hours for her to change, she's pretty small. I've heard that others took much longer."

"Wasn't your aunt caring for your mom?" I asked Bryce.

His lips grew thin and he nodded.

"Did you see your aunt when she was a zombie?" asked Kristie.

"Unfortunately, I did. After work, I went to check on my mother to see if she was doing any better. She'd refused any medication at the clinic, including the vaccine. She never believed in the flu vaccinations, that's why Bobby and I have never had shots either. Personally I think she just avoided any kind of medical attention because of her drinking problem. Anyway, when I got home, let's just say they were both gone, but for different reasons."

"I'm sorry," I replied softly.

He shrugged then got up from the table to grab a bottle of water. His eyes were misty and he gazed out the window while the rest of us finished our sandwiches.

"So, can the zombies infect others?" asked Paige, breaking the silence.

Bryce cleared his throat and looked over. "The military believes that they can infect others. So try not to get bitten."

"God, I'd give anything for a cigarette right now," mumbled Kristie as she rubbed her chin.

Paige's jaw dropped. "Mom, you quit two years ago. Control yourself."

"I think there's a better chance of getting killed by a zombie right now than dying of lung cancer," she replied dryly.

I pushed myself up from the table. "I need to use your bathroom. Do you have any Vicks vapor rub?"

Kristie looked at me strangely. "Go ahead. There's some in the vanity."

"What? It helps mask the smell of rotting dead people," I explained.

She smiled with amusement. "Good thinking. How'd you come up with that?"

"CSI," I said matter-of-factly.

"I see. Did you know that cigarette smoke can also mask different types of smells? Bryce...do you happen to smoke?"

"Mom!" groaned Paige.

I smiled as I went to the bathroom down the hall. When I closed the door, I noticed Allie's favorite T-shirt was hanging on the back. It was bright pink with the words "Dare to Dance" scrolled on the front. She'd worn it constantly at home.

I sighed. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, I thought, grabbing the shirt. When I closed my eyes, I could still smell her favorite lotion, some type of strawberry scent. I slid to the ground and closed my eyes, trying not to cry. Before long, someone began knocking softly on the door.

"Cassie? Are you okay?" asked Bryce.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, sorry. I'll be out in a minute."

He paused. "Okay."

I stood up and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair was in disarray, streaks of mascara lined my face, and my tank top was covered in something I didn't even want to consider. Sighing, I washed my face, neck, and hands, then removed my tank top. I slipped on my sister's shirt, wanting to be closer to her. Then, I combed out my hair, grabbed the jar of Vicks, and went back into the kitchen.

Kylie smiled sadly. "That's Allie's shirt."

I touched it and nodded.

Bryce looked down at his own shirt and frowned. "You wouldn't happen to have anything I can change into?"

Kristie snorted. "You could definitely use a new shirt. Let me find you something. I have some new T-shirts in the closet down the hall. Throw that nasty thing away and follow me."

"Thanks," he replied, removing his shirt, displaying perfectly defined muscles and a hard, flat stomach.

"Work out much, Bryce?" asked Kristie as she led him out of the kitchen.

I couldn't help staring as he walked away. The word "chiseled" didn't do him justice.

"Wow," whispered Paige. "That dude's got one smokin' body."

I shrugged. "Yeah, it's not bad."

Paige snorted and pushed me playfully. "You're such a horrible liar."

"Fine, okay, it was pretty...spectacular."

"You know, I think he's graduated from being your karate instructor. The rules have changed." She sighed and looked out the window. "The world's changed."

I pushed my hair behind my ears. "Well, a relationship isn't really at the top of my 'to-do' list right now."

"I'm just saying..."

Bryce and Kristie walked back into the kitchen. This time he was covered in a new white T-shirt.

"Sorry, girls, I had to cover him up so he wouldn't distract the female zombies."

"Or the gay ones," replied Kylie.

Kristie's jaw dropped.

"You know, you ladies are starting to make me feel really uncomfortable," said Bryce with a straight face.

"Kylie? What do you know about being gay?" asked her mother.

"Mom, I learned about sex in fifth grade. Come on!" she replied.

"Okay, seriously...what do we do now?" asked Paige.

"Well, I want to check around the neighborhood," I stated. "I need to find out what happened to Allie. Find out if she's trapped out there, somewhere, and needs help."

Bryce nodded. "I'm coming with you."

"I think we should all stick together," said Kristie. "If there are zombies walking the streets, we need each other."

“That’s a good idea,” replied Bryce

Kristie grabbed her keys. “Let’s all pack into Dan’s Escalade and go for a drive then.”

We found a large cooler and filled it with water, soda, chips, and granola bars. Bryce and I grabbed our guns while Paige grabbed her metal bat.

“This might come in handy,” said Kristie, holding up a war hammer she’d found in the garage. It had a sharp spike in the back and hammer head. It looked pretty deadly.

“Yeah, that could do some damage,” I agreed. “Where’d you find that thing?”

“From this renaissance convention that Dan visited last year. He collects medieval stuff like that. Or...he did, rather,” said Kristie. Her eyes became moist and she smiled sadly. “Poor Dan. He was a little bit of a dork, but I loved the man. He didn’t deserve to die this way.”

“Nobody deserves this,” I said.

Kristie cleared her throat. “I’ll let you drive,” she said to Bryce, handing him the keys. “I’m not sure how rational I’ll be if I see one of those things on the street.”

It turned out that the street was crawling with zombies, some of them walking around aimlessly in a state of confusion, while others were actually attacking their own kind. From what I could tell, the zombies that were at a farther stage of decomposing seemed to be the most vicious. They’d actually feed on zombies that looked like they’d just turned, somehow sensing that their victims still had some fresh protein available.

“How in the hell are we going to get out of here? I can’t imagine they’ll just move out of the way for us,” said Kristie.

“We’re not going around them,” said Bryce tightening his grip on the steering wheel. “We’re going through them. Sorry, Kristie, but you may need a little body repair after this.”

Kristie snorted. “Just get us out of here safely, screw the paint job. Dan’s not going to be around to complain about any scratches.”

“Okay, everyone, keep your windows up and lock your doors,” he said.

We started driving slowly onto the road towards the crowd of zombies who were beginning to take notice of us. As we

approached, some actually did move out of the way while others decided to get a closer look.

"It's odd how some are pretty docile while others are so violent," Paige said.

"I think it depends on what stage there at," I replied. "The ones who are crazy and more violent have probably been zombies longer. At least that's my opinion."

"Now we know why some of them are so bloody and torn apart. They've been attacking each other, too," said Kristie, who looked rather ill.

When we reached a point where we couldn't move the SUV anymore, zombies were standing all around the vehicle, running their hands all over it. Some stared with longing at us and eventually began climbing onto the hood.

Bryce sighed. "Okay, I've had enough of this. Close your eyes if you have a weak stomach, kids."

The SUV barreled forward, jerking some of the zombies off of the hood. I covered my ears to block out the groans of the zombies and the sounds of their bones crunching under the tires.

"Oh, my God," gasped Kristie, holding firmly onto the dashboard. "This is...I'm going to throw up!"

"No!" cried Kylie. "Don't throw up or you'll make me do it too."

When we finally got past the mob of zombies, we drove down several streets to try and find my sister. Most of the neighborhoods were quiet, without any signs of life. Even the park was empty. It was frustrating and I knew there was no way we could search all of the homes, it was too dangerous. When our gas tank started getting low and the zombies started getting even more zealous, we had to leave.

"Sorry, Cassie. I wish there was more we could do to find your sister," said Bryce.

"Me too," I sighed, looking out the window towards the community's front entrance gate.

"Hey," Kristie gasped, pointing ahead of us. "There's someone trying to run over there. Oh, my God, it's a girl and she needs some help!"

My heart began to pound and I opened my window to see if it was my sister. Unfortunately it wasn't, but I did recognize the mass of vibrant red hair.

“Eva King,” I mumbled.

Chapter Seventeen

“Is she a zombie?” asked Paige, lifting her bat.
I snorted. “No.”

Paige sighed and laid her head back against the seat. “Do we really have to stop?”

“Paige...” said Kristie, looking back at her. “That’s not nice.”

Two zombies were edging closer to Eva, who looked annoyed more than anything. In one arm she held a pink dog carrier and in the other an oversized Louis Vuitton tote bag.

“Stay here,” Bryce said as we skidded to a halt. He jumped out of the SUV carrying his rifle, and in less than five seconds, both zombies lay motionless on the ground and Eva looked like she’d just found Jesus. She stared with adoration at Bryce as he lowered his gun and moved towards her.

“Would you look at Eva? She’s smiling at your man like he’s a bowl of cream and she’s a cat dying of thirst,” said Paige dryly.

“Paige, he’s not my man. Besides, she’s just thanking him,” I replied. I had to admit, though, I felt a twinge of jealousy when she threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

Paige raised her hands in exasperation. “There you go! She just left her nasty, smelly mark on him.”

Kristie chuckled. “Okay, enough, Paige.”

I watched as Bryce took the dog carrier and she leaned on him for support as they made their way back to the SUV.

“Hi, Eva,” said Paige with a smirk when Bryce opened the back door. “Did you hurt your ankle?”

Eva blinked in confusion. “Paige?” she said, biting her lower lip. “Yes, I think I sprained it back there.”

“You can sit in the third row seating,” Paige said as she adjusted the seat to let her in. “With your cat.”

“Oh, okay. This is Chi Chi, he’s actually a Chihuahua,” she replied, climbing in.

I turned around and faced Eva, who, as usual, was draped in expensive designer clothing and overpriced heels. She must have

gotten up early to do her hair and makeup, because she looked the total opposite of me; fresh and feminine.

"Hi, Eva," I said. "Poor little guy's been through a lot I bet." Chi Chi appeared to be trembling more than any animal I'd ever seen.

"Oh God, yes," Eva said, rolling her eyes. "This has been the worst morning of my life! My mom's chauffeur was supposed to pick me up a half hour ago and take me to the airport. Obviously that incompetent idiot didn't show up. My mom isn't answering any calls, which is so typical of her when something goes wrong and I need her. I was so frustrated that my eyes started watering and I lost both contact lenses. Then, finally, I almost get mugged by those two creeps! I was so scared. I don't know what would have happened if you all hadn't shown up."

"So you didn't get a good look at those two guys?" I asked incredulously.

She wrinkled her nose. "No but they smelled horrible and were making some really disgusting noises. Thank goodness your cute friend stopped in time. If you ask me, they deserved what they got." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You know, I think they were going to rape me."

I looked at Paige who was biting her lip to keep from laughing. I shot her a look and then turned to Eva. "Eva? What were you doing over in this area anyway?"

"We just moved into my mom's fiancé's house across the street over there," she said, motioning to a giant colonial. "I was on my way to speak with the security guard in the booth when those two hoodlums started racing towards me. I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life."

It was clear that Eva had no idea what had happened in the last twenty-four hours. I knew someone had to let her know, and Paige was having too much fun listening to her to set her straight. I took a deep breath and began telling her the truth.

She interrupted me right away. "Excuse me? Have you completely lost your mind, Cassie?"

"No, she's telling the truth," replied Bryce from the front seat.

Eva stared in alarm at Bryce and then closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and then released it slowly.

“Okay...” she replied breathlessly, “well, I would be more inclined to believe you since you were carrying a gun and clearly saved my life. Plus, those freaks did smell absolutely horrible. What was your name again?”

“It’s Bryce,” I answered for him with clenched teeth. The fact that she thought I was lying really pissed me off.

Eva’s attention turned back to me. “You may as well continue with your little story.”

“Story? It’s the facts, Eva,” snapped Paige.

“Okay, let’s just relax,” said Kristie. “It’s hard to accept what has happened and we’ve seen it with our own eyes. So imagine how difficult it is for Eva to believe.”

Paige shrugged.

Kristie’s eyes softened. “Honey,” she said. “Here are the facts; that new flu vaccine has created zombies, okay? You’re lucky we found you because you and Chi Chi...you were next on the menu. If not for the two zombies, then for the dead army coming up behind us. Holy crap! Bryce, step on it!”

We all turned to the back window as Bryce peeled away. Hundreds of zombies were heading our way.

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We decided to drive back to my house to check on Bobby and the others.

“Well,” said Kristie, shutting off her phone. “Thankfully my brother was in town visiting my mom when the zombies struck because she would have been all alone. They’re at the cabin now and didn’t have a clue as to what was going on. I told him the girls and I would head out there after we drop everyone off.”

“Are you sure you want to risk driving around by yourselves?” asked Bryce.

“You’re all free to join us if you’d like. It’s only about an hour north of here.”

I didn’t say anything. My mom, dad, and sister were all missing and that’s all I could think about at the moment.

“Eva? Are you okay?” asked Kristie.

Eva was staring out the window. After replacing her contacts and getting her first real glimpse of the zombies

wandering the streets, she'd been horrified of how close she'd been to death.

I touched her shoulder gently. "Eva?"

She turned to me with tears in her eyes. "Um, sorry...I just don't really know what to do at this point. I'm just so worried about my mom."

"Do you have anyone else you can call? Your dad or a grandparent?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. My father is somewhere in Asia. I haven't spoken to him in years. All my grandparents are dead. It's just me and Chi Chi."

"Did your mom get the vaccine?" I asked.

"No. Neither of us did."

All of a sudden Bryce slammed on the brakes and we all lurched forward in our seats.

"What the heck?" I yelled at him.

"Stay here," he said and jumped out of the SUV with his rifle.

"Oh, good God! Look at that poor puppy!" cried Kristie.

Several zombies were closing in on a young golden retriever. The dog was on a leash that appeared to be tangled on a rickety fence in front of an old church. Its frantic barking must have temporarily confused the zombies because they were staying back, although I knew it wouldn't be long before their hunger drove them closer.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Bryce will save that poor little dog," said Eva.

Bryce raised his rifle and started shooting.

"Look!" pointed Kylie. "More zombies are coming from behind that trailer!"

A motorhome was parked in a neighboring driveway and Bryce was about to be attacked by a larger pack of zombies.

"I'm going to help. Lock the door behind me," I said.

Luckily Bryce had fixed my gun and it was ready to go again. I opened the door and jumped out. "Bryce, watch out behind you!" I yelled and started firing it at the new group of zombies. By the time I used all my bullets, however, I'd only hit two in the head. The others were getting back up.

Bryce hollered at me. "Just get back in the truck!"



I watched in horror as another wave of zombies approached Bryce from the other side of the church. I knew he didn't have enough ammunition for all of them. He started shooting again and it didn't take long to empty out his rifle.

"Shit!" he raged, tossing it to the ground. The next thing I knew he was striking out at the zombies with his feet and hands, sending them crashing to the pavement. Unfortunately, they were getting back up almost as quickly.

I ran to the SUV and grabbed the metal bat and the war hammer.

"Here!" I screamed, throwing the bat towards him. He picked it up off the ground and began swinging. Decaying zombie brains began paving the sidewalk in front of the church; which seemed so immoral and sacrilegious. Then I remembered how badly these things wanted to eat us, and held firmly to the war hammer.

I took a deep breath and then moved in to help Bryce.

"Oh, God!" I groaned as I brought it down on the first zombie's skull. Zombie blood sprayed everywhere and I gagged. Shooting them was by far a lot less gross.

"Get back into the SUV!" barked Bryce, bringing the bat down on a zombie who was dressed all in Goth and had jet-black hair.

I dislodged the hammer and swung it at a tall, skinny zombie woman who was missing half of her face. Now the other half matched.

"You need my help!" I screamed, raising the hammer again, this time I swung it at a dead cheerleader that I recognized from school; we never had gotten along.

"I've got this!" he replied angrily as he rushed towards another zombie closing in on the dog.

"Yeah, I can tell," I mumbled, heading towards someone who was about to rush Bryce from behind. I stuck my tennis shoe out, tripping him. He then flopped face down onto the ground where I quickly finished him off.

"Cassie! Watch out!" screamed Kristie from the SUV.

Three new zombies were staggering hungrily towards me while I was attempting to dislodge the hammer from the zombie's brain.

“Shit!” yelled Bryce when he noticed the stooges. He had his hands full with two others coming at him.

The next thing I knew, Kristie punched the gas on the SUV, crushing the three under her oversized Goodyear tires.

“Six points!” cheered Paige and Kylie from the open window.

Kristie backed up and smeared another small group wandering towards us.

“Ten points, mom! Woot! Woot!”

When we’d finally taken out all of the zombies, both Bryce and I were exhausted.

“Next time...do what I tell you. You could’ve...been killed,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my arm. “First of all, quit telling me what to do; secondly, ‘you’re welcome’ would’ve sufficed.”

Bryce stood up straight and gave me a lopsided grin. “Kind of reminds me of the first time we met. Both of us exhausted and doing hand-to-hand combat.”

“I remember. You were just as humble then, too,” I said.

His eyes met mine. “You know, something about the way you swung that hammer was incredibly sexy.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re extremely warped.”

“I never said I wasn’t,” he replied. He took the war hammer from me and examined it. “This worked great. I’ve definitely got to get me one of these.”

“Sure, if you can get past the real nasty part of dislodging it from the zombie’s heads. I had to fight from throwing up each time I used it.”

The dog started barking and we both rushed towards it, almost forgetting why we’d risked our lives fighting zombies in the first place. It was a female and she had a tag with the name “Goldie” engraved on it. Goldie showed her appreciation by licking my face while Bryce worked to free her from the fence.

“What a beautiful dog,” said Bryce, petting her soft, golden fur. She appeared to be smiling back at him with her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth.

“Yes, sweetie, you were worth the battle,” I told her as she rolled around on her tummy.

“Looks like we have another soldier on our team,” smiled Bryce.

Goldie barked in agreement.

## Chapter Eighteen

We returned to the SUV with Goldie and she immediately jumped into Kylie's lap, who was delighted. The puppy must have been excited to see warm-blooded humans because she couldn't stop moving around to greet everyone.

"She's adorable!" giggled Paige, who received a hello slurp from Goldie.

"Those horrible zombies," said Kylie in a cooing voice to Goldie, "nobody's going to hurt you now, puppy."

Bryce opened the driver's side door.

"Wait, shirt first, Bryce," said Kristie, holding up another clean T-shirt. "I'm not sure how you manage to get so full of gore while Cassie hardly gets a spot of blood on her."

"Easy, I hit much harder," he replied, removing his shirt.

"You were so awesome, Bryce," declared Eva, who was staring at his pecks lustfully.

I rolled my eyes.

"Thanks, Eva," he replied, pulling the new shirt on. He jumped back into the SUV and we began moving again.

"Sorry I couldn't help you guys," glowered Paige. "My mother forced me to stay put."

Kristie turned to look at her. "Face it, Paige, you're just not the fighting type. You probably would've gotten in the way more than anything."

"Actually, Paige proved herself to be a pretty good zombie destroyer this morning, when we were cornered in her bedroom. She took care of both the dudes," I replied.

Kristie turned to Paige in disbelief. "You had boys in your room?"

Paige rolled her eyes. "Yes, but they won't be back."

I smiled. "Yes, and let's just say she'll probably never quite get the cartilage out of the heel of her Jimmy Choos."

"Oh, my God, that is so nasty!" squealed Kylie.

As we neared the middle of town, we noticed several abandoned cars along the side of the streets and were forced to

slow down to maneuver around them. Fortunately, the zombies wobbling by ignored us.

"Bryce, do you have any more rounds left for the rifle?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. I used the last of my ammunition saving Goldie."

I felt warm breath next to my ear. "Wow, I had no idea you had such cute relatives, Cassie," whispered Eva.

I stared at her. "He's my karate instructor."

Eva's eyes lit up. "Karate instructor? Oh wow. That's hot."

"Stay away from him, Eva," hissed Paige. "He's already taken."

"Paige," I warned. She just couldn't take a hint that Bryce and I were just friends.

Eva was silent as she sat back in her seat, a small smile settling on her lips.

"Check out the zombies hovering around McDonald's," said Kylie.

There had to be thirty or more wandering around the abandoned building, some of them actually going inside.

"At least they're not paying us any mind," said Kristie.

"Wonder if some of them are still having a Big Mac attack," I joked.

"I'll bet they can smell raw patties in the back. It might be drawing them here. They're probably spoiling by now with the electricity off," said Bryce.

"Hey, stop at the next gas station you see. We need to fill up," said Kristie.

Two blocks later, Bryce pulled into a small abandoned station and then hopped out to fill the tank. I followed him, clutching the war hammer tightly.

"Be right back!" yelled Kristie, as she jumped out of the truck holding the metal bat.

"Mom, are you nuts?" Paige hollered out the window. "What in the heck are you doing?!"

"Thirsty," she called back.

"We packed drinks," muttered Paige, crossing her hands across her chest.

I sighed. "I'll go follow her."

“Be careful,” said Bryce. “It looks empty from out here, but you never know.”

When I stepped into the filling station, I found Kristie behind the counter, opening a pack of cigarettes.

“I should have known,” I said.

Kristie smiled and took a drag. She exhaled and a steady stream of white smoke curled out of her mouth. “Oh man, I needed that.”

I smiled. “Paige is going to flip out.”

“That’s okay. Let her,” she answered. “It’s so worth it.”

I stretched out my arms and yawned. “I’m so tired. I’m going to grab some energy drinks. Want anything?”

She nodded. “Grab me a diet soda, please.”

I walked to the back of the station and grabbed a couple of energy drinks out of the cooler. When I turned around, one of the former employees stood two feet away from me, drooling.

“Crap,” I groaned throwing the cans as hard as I could at her gray, mottled face.

The zombie growled and rushed towards me but not before I caught her stomach with a roundhouse kick. She flew backwards into a stack of cereal boxes.

As I raised the hammer to finish her off, something grabbed me by the back of the hair and pulled. I quickly smashed my head backwards with all my might, hitting a second zombie in the nose. It screeched as it released my hair and its horrible smell actually made it past the Vicks coated under my nose. I shuddered and then kicked back with my foot, hitting it hard in the shin.

“Back for more?” I snapped at the first zombie who’d since gotten back up and was now staggering towards me. This time Kristie was behind her, swinging wildly at the zombie with the metal bat. She hit it in the skull with a loud “clunk”, and the zombie dropped, this time for good.

She looked up at me, her face pale. She pointed behind me and gasped, “Zombie!”

The other zombie was coming at me with its mouth wide open. I slammed the hammer into its grotesque face and it dropped to the ground.

“Thanks, Kristie,” I said, dislodging the hammer. I noticed that I was starting to become a little impervious to all of the

zombie blood and gore. Whether it was a good thing or bad thing, I wasn't even sure anymore.

Bryce walked through the door at that moment. "What's taking so long?" When he noticed the two dead zombies and Kristie lighting up another cigarette, he sighed. "Next time let me do the shopping."

"Actually, I think we did a pretty fair job staying alive in here," I said, grabbing two bags of dog food.

He smiled as he grabbed some beef jerky. "I wouldn't want you on the other team, that's for sure."

I grabbed two more energy drinks and Kristie stuffed several packs of smokes inside of her shirt.

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We took off again as I sipped from my can. I stared out the window at the houses and businesses we passed and it was hard to imagine the kinds of nightmares that were hidden inside. Everything seemed so...normal. But I knew without a doubt it was a lie. "Normal" was gone forever and we were now only left with zombies and broken hearts.

When we finally made the turn onto my street, I felt a gnawing fear about what we'd find in my house. My cell phone was completely dead and we hadn't been in contact with Sara since Bryce left them early this morning.

"You okay, Cassie?" asked Bryce.

"I'm okay," I said, although my palms were sweating and I had to wipe them onto my jeans.

"I'm sure they're fine," Bryce said, knowing my fears. "Sara knows how to use a gun and Hannah seems like a pretty strong woman. They were going to lock themselves in the basement with the kids until I returned."

"And...what if you hadn't returned?" I asked.

He sighed heavily. "Have a little more faith, Cassie."

My faith was pretty brittle at this point. I'd basically lost hope in ever finding my sister, and both of my parents were still missing. Then there was my grandparents, I didn't even want to consider what kind of hell they were going through.

"Uh oh, looks like we missed out on your spring neighborhood block party," mused Kristie.

We stopped at the end of the block. Several of my neighbors were wandering around the cul-de-sac, some attacking each other while others just looked confused. We'd never been very close to any of them when they were alive, but it was still horrifying to view them now as zombies.

I shuddered. "I wonder if they smell the others."

Bryce nodded. "It wouldn't surprise me if that was the case."

"They are starting to congregate towards us, so you'd better get us out of here," demanded Eva.

"We're not leaving; there are women and children in that house who need us. Kind of like you needed us awhile back!" snapped Paige.

There were about five zombies approaching the SUV. "Listen, we should go through the garage. There's a keypad by the side of the house that I can probably get to. Once I enter it, pull in immediately."

"I'll cover you," said Bryce.

"Seriously, that's all you've got for a plan?" asked Paige as the zombies closed in around the SUV.

"You have a better plan?" I asked.

She shrugged and then sighed deeply. "Nah, I've got nothing'."

Bryce grabbed the metal bat from Kristie. "When the garage door opens, get this thing in quick. Plow right through any zombies you have to."

Kristie's face grew pale. She nodded and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm ready, Freddy."

"Got your hammer?" he turned and asked me.

I held it up.

"Okay, let's do this," he said.

I pushed my door open and quickly kicked one of my neighbors in the stomach. I hurried out of the truck and slammed the door shut, wielding my hammer. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bleechman. No offense."

He growled and rushed towards me but I sidestepped him. He slammed into the truck face-first.

"You things aren't very graceful, are you?" I said.

"Cassie! Quit playing and get over to the keypad!" hollered Bryce who was busy holding off two other zombies.

I took a deep breath and ended Mr. Bleechman's short life as a zombie with a solid strike to his head with my hammer. As he fell to the ground, I heard an unearthly screech.

Mrs. Bleechman!

She seemed to have appeared out of nowhere and was now moving towards me with her mouth open and long, red, acrylic fingernails, raised.

"Wait, Lois, he was cheating on you, I actually just did you a favor?" I yelled, still trying to dislodge the hammer from her husband's dead skull.

She snarled and kept barreling towards me.

"You're wasting time," grumbled Bryce as he grabbed her by the back of the hair and swung her to the ground. She twisted around to attack but his bat split her rotted skull in two.

I shuddered. "Now that...that...was really gross."

He motioned towards the house. "Keypad. Now."

I ran to the side of the house and punched in the numbers for the garage. Unfortunately, nothing happened.

"Crap," I groaned, forgetting about the electricity, being out. Feeling foolish, I ran over to the small door on the side of the garage and squealed with joy when I found that it was unlocked. I pushed it open and manually opened the large garage doors, the way my dad had showed me last summer.

I could hear the sound of Bryce's metal bat striking more zombies as it lifted, and cringed. Even though they were now monsters, it still felt wrong to be killing my neighbors.

The SUV made it inside with only one zombie who managed to follow us, and Bryce took care of him quickly.

"Can you bag him or something? He's going to stink up the garage," I said.

"Maybe later if there's time," said Bryce. "You're not planning on staying here, are you?"

"I don't know what my plans are yet," I replied.

"How about this...stick with me, we're a pretty good team," he said and slapped me playfully on the butt.

My jaw dropped but I didn't say anything.

Just then everyone else piled out of the SUV. Goldie barked with excitement then began sniffing around the garage.

Eva got out with Chi Chi still in her dog carrier. "Little Chi Chi needs to make a little wee wee," she said in her cutesy voice. The dog barked.

"Are you kidding me?" snorted Paige.

Kristie rolled her eyes and I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

Chi Chi, who was shaking violently again, moved to a corner of the garage and peed. Goldie peed on the zombie.

"Good girl," I said, bending down to pet Goldie's head.

Eva flipped her hair and then batted her eyelashes at Bryce. "By the way, Bryce, you were so incredible out there. I don't know what we'd do without you."

Bryce, who I've learned thrives on gushing females, beamed her one of his dimpled smiles. "Someone's got to take care of all you women."

"Oh, puke," muttered Paige as she slammed the door to the SUV.

"Is it safe to go in there?" asked Kristie as she grabbed the doorknob leading into my house.

"Better let me go in first," replied Bryce, "just in case there are surprises waiting inside."

Kristie looked at Bryce with amusement. "Fine by me, Bruce Lee."

Bryce grabbed the bat, then opened the door and stepped inside. After about a minute he stuck his head back into the garage. "It's clear."

I walked in with Goldie, who took off immediately to wander throughout the house. "Looks like Goldie's giving the 'all clear' sign, too." Although, it seemed much too quiet in the house. "Hello? Anyone home?" I yelled.

Goldie bolted downstairs and I could hear the squeal of Megan's laughter.

Sara raced upstairs, her face full of relief. "Oh, God!" she cried, wrapping her arms around me. "I'm so glad to see you guys!"

Bobby ran upstairs and flung himself at Bryce. "Yay, Bryce is home!"

Bryce picked up Bobby and held him tightly in his arms. "Told you I'd be back, Champ," he said softly.

"Hi," Megan said to me as she peeked around the corner of the basement door, "whose puppy?"

“Ours now,” I replied with a smile. “Her name’s Goldie,”
Eva was holding Chi Chi who whimpered to get down.
She finally released her and Chi Chi trotted after Goldie.

“Two dogs?!” screamed Megan in delight.

“Err...well, the Chihuahua is mine,” said Eva. “But he’s a nice doggy and loves kids. You can play with him.”

I was surprised to see Eva acting like a civilized human being, especially after the way she treated most people at school. Then of course we’d just saved her life and she didn’t have anywhere else to go.

Kristie’s mouth dropped when she saw Hannah. “Oh, my God! I didn’t know you were here, Han. Where’s Paul?”

Hannah started crying and Kristie went over right away to console her. Then both women went downstairs to catch up and talk about the loss of their husbands. Apparently Kristie and Hannah knew each other well.

“Have you heard from my parents?” I asked Sara.

Sara looked at me sadly. “No, neither of them. I take it you didn’t find Allie either?”

I shook my head and sighed. “Look, I’m really tired. The energy drink didn’t do anything for me. Think I’m going to have a shower and then maybe take a nap,” I said. “We still have water, don’t we?”

“For now,” replied Sara.

I still wasn’t sure why the government had shut down the power so quickly. I couldn’t imagine that it would be easier to contain the zombies in the dark.

My hair was sticky in some places and I fought an urge to puke as I washed it away with shampoo. I’d never felt so incredibly dirty in my life. Although I had to admit, I hadn’t even thought about germs in the last couple of days. Being exposed to so much blood and guts had made me numb to everything, including my phobia.

When I got out of the shower, I cut the tips off the rest of my fingernails and sighed, wondering if Mae was safe. Then I pushed it away from my mind. It was too horrifying to think about all the victims caught up in this nightmare.

Where are you, mom? I wondered as I laid my head on my pillow and closed my eyes. It was bad enough not finding my sister and not knowing where my father was. But my mother...she’d

promised to come back quickly, and hadn't. I knew exactly what that meant, I wasn't naïve or stupid. I just couldn't allow myself to accept the fact that she was probably gone forever.

Chapter Nineteen

“Mom, where’ve you been? I was so worried about you,” I cried as she walked into the kitchen. I ran up to her and threw my arms around her.

Smiling, she stroked my cheek fondly. “I told you I had to take care of that soldier,” she replied. Her hair was a mess and there was blood splattered on her shirt.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pulling away. She looked pale and tired.

“I’m fine, honey,” she replied and took me into her arms again. “You know how much I love you, don’t you, my little Wild One?”

I closed my eyes and laid my head on her shoulder. “I love you, too, mom. God, I missed you so much.”

She squeezed me harder. “I need you, honey.”

I could hardly breathe she was squeezing me so tightly in her arms. “Sure, mom. Just don’t hold me so tight. I can...barely breathe.”

“I really do need you. You understand, don’t you, baby?” she whispered into my ear.

I gasped for breath, trying to free myself. When I finally pushed her away, our eyes met and my heart screamed out in anguish.

“Come back to mommy,” she rasped, holding her gray, mottled arms towards me. “I need you so. I love you, Cassie.”

I nodded. “I love you, too.”

Then I closed my eyes and sobbed as I let her have me.

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I woke up to someone gently shaking me.

“Cassie?” whispered Bryce softly.

Sighing, I opened my eyes and found Bryce staring down at me. His dark wavy hair was damp and he wore nothing but a pair of soft, gray lounge pants. I stared at the dragon tattoos on his forearms. They blazed with fire as did something inside of me.

"I just stepped out of the shower across the hall, and heard you crying. I was a little worried."

"Oh," I said, sitting up. Remembering that all I had on was a thin tank and boxer shorts, I pulled my blanket up higher.

He smiled and sat down on the edge of my bed. "Listen, you were really fantastic earlier. It took a lot of courage to do what you did."

I shrugged. "It wasn't so bad once I reminded myself that they were already dead."

Bryce chuckled. "Still, it was pretty impressive."

"Thanks."

He brushed a strand of hair away from my cheek. "I think we make a pretty good team."

I stopped breathing when I gazed into his smoldering blue eyes. Bryce slowly leaned towards me and I felt the heat of his breath on my lips.

"Bryce! Where are you?" hollered Bobby from somewhere else in the house.

Bryce shut his eyes and swore under his breath. "Hold on, Bobby!" he called.

With my heart pounding frantically, I released a shaky breath.

Bryce opened his eyes and licked his lips. "You know, you're pretty amazing," he whispered, staring at my mouth.

"Bryce!" yelled Bobby again.

Bryce groaned with frustration and then stood up. "Coming, buddy!"

When he left my bedroom, I felt a mixture of disappointment and relief. I wasn't sure how I would've reacted if he would have kissed me passionately right here, in my bed. Normally I would have been paranoid about my parents walking in. But things had changed, and at this moment, I didn't have anyone to answer to.

I got up, slipped a hoodie over my tank top, and pulled on a pair of shorts. I'd slept for almost eight hours; it was well after midnight, and I was starving.

Sara was feeding Megan dry cereal when I entered the kitchen. "Hi," I said. Goldie sat at their feet waiting for bits of food to drop.

She looked up and smiled wearily. "Hi."

“Where’s everybody?”

“Kristie and Hannah are on watch duty, to make sure none of the zombies make it into the house. Kylie, Paige, and Eva are sleeping, I believe.”

I nodded and then sat down next to her at the table. “I’m sorry, Sara; I haven’t even asked if you’d gotten a hold of Kevin.”

She paused for a moment and her eyes filled with tears.

“No, my cell phone doesn’t work.”

I covered her hand with mine. “It’s possible he’s getting the medical attention he was promised by the military.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she replied looking away.

“If you want, we can go look for him later,” I said.

She wiped her eyes. “You’d come with me?”

“Of course I would.”

“Mommy, I want to play with Bobby,” Megan demanded.

I tickled Megan’s tummy. “Isn’t it a little late for you to be up playing?”

Megan giggled and shook her head “no.”

“Her schedule is totally messed up,” said Sara.

“I’m sure. Mine is too,” I replied. “I can watch her if you want to get some sleep. You’re pregnant and need it more than anyone.”

She released a deep sigh. “Would you? I could use some sleep. I’m so exhausted.”

“It’s settled. Go to bed and get some sleep,” I replied with a smile.

Sara gave Megan and I both a hug, then left the kitchen.

I had a peanut butter sandwich, gave Goldie some fresh water and dog food, then took Megan downstairs so she could play with Bobby, who I figured was probably still awake. What I actually found stopped me cold. Eva was dressed in a skimpy nightgown with her arms around Bryce’s neck and her lips pressed firmly against his.

“Hi, Megan!” cried Bobby who was on the floor playing with Legos.

Bryce turned towards me and sighed.

“Um, I’m sorry,” I said, backing away.

“Cassie,” said Bryce, pushing Eva away. “It’s not what it looks like. She was just thanking me for getting a painful kink out of her neck.”

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh, really?"

Eva's smile was smug. "Yes," she said, putting her arm through his possessively. "He has such an amazing touch."

Shame and humiliation twisted inside of me as I saw them standing together, both of them so damn good-looking. I turned around and left quickly.

"Cassie," said Bryce, following me up the stairs. "Can you just wait a moment?"

"Listen," I said turning to him. "You don't have to explain anything to me, okay? Even if she was coming on to you, there's nothing going on between us. You're free to do whatever you want."

Bryce grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him. His eyes searched mine. "Really? If I'm free to do whatever I want, then this is it." His lips came down on mine before I could protest and then the world stopped moving. I felt myself go limp in his arms and as he pulled me in closer, I couldn't help but kiss him back. A rush of desire swept through me as he held me against the hardness of his body. He moved his tongue into my mouth, caressing and exploring with an urgency that made my head spin. I slid my hands up behind his neck, into his hair and he groaned against my mouth, lighting flames inside of me that I hadn't known even existed.

"Excuse me?!"

Kristie and Hannah stood at the top of the stairs scowling at us. We were in the entryway of the split-level, our hands all over each other. I'd never been so embarrassed in my life.

"Um, sorry," I replied as we broke away from each other. My heart was still pounding madly in my chest.

"You don't look very sorry," Kristie said with her hands on her hips. "And you," she pointed to Bryce, "You definitely don't look sorry. And please put on a damn T-shirt!"

Bryce smiled and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Since your parents aren't around, I'm appointing myself as your personal watchdog, young lady. You both better behave yourselves and control your...raging hormones," she said with a smirk. I knew Kristie though, she wasn't being totally serious. Although, if she caught us doing anything more than this, she'd have a conniption.



“Whew!” she said, turning towards Hannah and fanning herself with her hand. “After witnessing part of that little interlude, I think I need a cigarette!”

Hannah chuckled and they both walked into the kitchen.

I glanced at Bryce and the look in his eyes made me blush.

He grabbed my arm. “Hey, this thing between us, it isn’t over,” he said softly.

“Um...I have to...get something to drink,” I said, turning away.

He smiled then released my arm. “I’ll go check on Bobby.

## Chapter Twenty

Eva strolled into the kitchen as I finished drinking my water. I tried to ignore her but she started talking.

“So, I spoke to my mom,” she said, twirling her hair around her finger.

I turned to her, genuinely happy for her. “That’s great! Where is she?”

“She’s at a Crisis Unit that’s been set up at the St. James Hospital. She’s going to send someone for me as soon as they have things under control.”

St. James is the closest hospital to our home. My mom would’ve taken the injured soldier to that hospital.

“Did she mention if there are there many survivors there?” I asked.

“She said there were less than a hundred right now, but more keep arriving. They’ve set up a security force to hold off all the zombies, but they keep coming as well.”

I grabbed her arm. “Can you call her back?” I had to find out if my mother was there.

Eva sighed. “No, she called me using someone else’s phone. I didn’t even get a chance to talk to her very long.”

“I have to get ahold of someone at St. James. Can you hit redial, and then we can call whoever’s phone she used last? They might be able to tell me if my mom ever made it to the hospital.”

Eva shook her head. “Sorry, it’s not working anymore. I tried texting one of my friends after talking to my mom, and the battery completely died.”

The fact that there were living people at the hospital rekindled my hope. It was possible that my mother was still alive at the hospital.

“Okay, once Sara wakes up, we’re leaving to check on Kevin. Then I’m going to St. James to find my mother.”

Eva shook her head. “Listen, my mom said there are hundreds of zombies surrounding the hospital. They believe the zombies are drawn to the Crisis Unit because the scent of blood is so strong. It’s going to be next to impossible to get through.”

"It's only going to get worse; it's now or never. If the zombies are running out of food on the streets, many more will show up at the hospital."

"I'm with you," said Bryce, walking into the kitchen, followed by Kristie. "We overheard and I agree; if we wait too long, then we'll miss our chance to find out if your mom's alive."

"I'm coming, too," replied Kristie, putting her arm around me. "If it wasn't for you rescuing me and my children from 'Zombie Dan', we might've never made it out of there. Besides, I want to help you find your mother because she's also a good friend."

"What about the others? I don't want to risk them getting injured. Do you think they'll be safe here without us?"

"Hannah, Paige, and Kylie can stay here and watch the kids until we get back," replied Kristie. "They'll be fine. The zombies haven't been very aggressive. They're not even very smart. Unless someone opens the door and invites them in, I don't think we have anything to worry about."

Eva touched Bryce's arm. "I should come, too. My mom's at the hospital and I'm not spending another night in a daycare."

I gave her a scathing look. "It beats being alone on the streets where we found you."

Eva had the decency to look embarrassed. "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. I'm just worried about my mom. I'm coming, if that's okay?"

"Just stay out of trouble," I muttered.

"Is it okay if I leave Chi Chi here, for now? She seems so happy with Goldie and I can pick her up when it's not so dangerous out there."

"Yeah, she can stay," I said.

Kristie tapped her nails on the counter. "It's settled then. As soon as Sara wakes up, we'll leave."

I nodded. "Okay. Let's go look through my dad's guns and ammunition. Kristie, can you shoot a gun?"

She sighed. "Well, let me tell you; I can pull a trigger, I just don't know if I can hit anything with the bullet."

I bit the side of my lip. "Okay. How about you wait until a zombie gets close enough for you to hit it, but not close enough for it to bite you. Aim right between the eyes and pull the trigger," I replied.

Bryce rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Maybe we should just let her use the bat."

"What about me?" pouted Eva as she traced circles on Bryce's bicep using a perfectly non-chipped fingertip. "What should I do?"

"Just stay out of the way, so you don't get hurt," I snapped. I really wanted to hurt her myself right now. It irritated me how Bryce just let her touch him so casually. He was so clueless.

Eva scowled at me then looked at Bryce. "Fine, I'll just stay close to Bryce. I don't think I've ever been in such capable hands."

He shrugged. "Considering what we're up against, I think it's wise if we all stay close together and be prepared for anything. Every one of us should have some kind of weapon, too, whether it's a bat, a shovel, or a gun. Which reminds me; Cassie, let's go look at your dad's and figure out which ones to bring with."

"Eva, why don't you get dressed," said Kristie, putting an arm around her and guiding her out of the kitchen. "I don't think your little nightie is appropriate for where we're going."

Eva was still wearing her slinky baby-doll nightgown that barely covered her rear. She smiled coyly at Bryce and licked her lips. "Sorry, I didn't have anything else to wear. I wasn't planning on doing a slumber party when I packed it. I'll change it so I'm not a distraction."

For the love of God, I thought. Why did we have to save her irritating life?

Bryce looked amused but didn't say anything as he followed me downstairs to my dad's gun safe; he almost fell over when he saw all the guns.

"Wow. Lucky for us your dad loves firepower," he said.

"Yes, he's obsessed with guns," I replied, pulling out a semi-automatic rifle. I'd never fired the gun but it seemed pretty impressive.

"Have you tried all of these?" Bryce asked picking up different guns.

"Almost; not this one, though," I said, opening the chamber. "My dad and I go to the shooting range every weekend so I've had a chance to try many of them."

He took the rifle from me and examined it. "I've been around guns all my life, my dad was a cop. Wow, this is an SKS. It's good for long-range shooting. It will definitely come in handy. Let's bring it with."

"So, where's your dad now?" I asked.

Bryce sighed. "He died about five years ago, trying to stop some asshole from butchering his wife."

I felt terrible for bringing his dad up. "Wow, I'm sorry. That must have been horrible."

He nodded. "It was. Good news is that the wife survived a gunshot wound to her chest. It barely missed her heart. They both had little kids at the time."

"What happened to your dad and the shooter?"

He looked me in the eyes. "My dad made a bad decision that cost him his life. He thought he could stop the husband from killing his wife, all by himself. The negotiator had pissed the shooter off and would no longer answer any phone calls. So my dad snuck into the backyard to try and get in. What he didn't realize was that the man had hidden surveillance cameras and he was shot before he even made it through the window."

"I'm so sorry," I replied softly.

He smiled sadly. "It's okay. It's been awhile and I've learned to accept it."

"What happened to the husband?"

"He thought he'd killed his wife and blew his own brains out."

I shuddered. "How...tragic."

"Yeah it was pretty tough to handle back then, especially for a fifteen-year-old kid. That's about the time I really got into the martial arts, to help me focus on something other than my old man's death."

"And now you also have a passion for guns like he did?" I asked.

"They're impressive, what can I say? I still have my dad's collection, but nothing compared to this assortment. But I still go to the firing range a couple times a month, have friends in the military who keep me up-to-date on the latest gadgets, and I have a magazine subscription to Gun Digest."

I laughed. "So you're an expert on both firearms and the martial arts. Kind of a deadly weapon yourself, aren't you?"

Bryce smiled wickedly. "I'm an expert on other things as well. Let's just say I'm not just a fighter, Ms. Wild."

"Okay, lover boy," said Kristie, walking down the stairs, an unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth. "Keep your mind on the weapons."

He saluted her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Pick out a gun, Kristie," I said, attempting to change the subject.

Kristie walked over and grabbed a Smith and Wesson handgun. "I've shot one of these before at the gun range with Dan. This will do; just load it for me and show me how to remove the safety."

"Wow, that was easy," I said.

She nodded and smiled "I'm a no-nonsense kind of gal, Cassie. I just need a gun to shoot and a target that's less than twelve inches away."

I shook my head and giggled.

We loaded Kristie's SUV with the guns and ammunition. She yawned and stretched her arms. "I'm bushed and it's still pretty early. I'm going to lie down for a while if that's okay?"

"Go ahead. You're driving and we need you alert," I said.

Kristie left and it was just me and Bryce staring at each other.

He yawned. "I'd better get some rest, too," said Bryce. "So...care to join me, Wild?"

It was tempting but I knew it probably meant trouble. "No, I've got to watch Megan. You can sleep in my room though. There won't be any distractions there," I replied, thinking of Eva.

"Thanks. How about tucking me in?" he asked with a little smile.

I blushed. "Maybe...next time."

"I'll remember that," he said, yawning again. He then brushed my lips quickly with his own and both of us parted, smiling.

## Chapter Twenty-One

"This is going to be tricky," said Bryce as we stood in the garage several hours later. There were still a number of zombies stumbling around the driveway and we didn't want to let them in. "I'm going to have Kristie drive and then I'll take out any zombies that try to get into the house through the garage."

"Don't forget to toss that rotting one out with them too. The horrible smell is starting to get into the basement," I said.

Bryce sighed. "Fine, I'll drag it out...if you cover me."

I nodded my head. "Sure."

"Okay, are you feeling all right, Sara?" asked Bryce.

Sara looked both frightened and determined at the same time. It had been almost two days since she'd spoken to Kevin and we all knew the chance that he was still alive was pretty slim.

"I'm fine," she said. "Let's just do this before I change my mind." She'd been nervous about leaving Megan but Kristie had reassured her that the zombies would never figure out how to get inside.

"My hair looks so dull," complained Eva looking at herself in a mirror she'd pulled out of her tote bag. I couldn't believe she was worried about her hair while we were worried about making it out of the garage alive. Although, truthfully her red hair looked so shiny it was grating.

"Your hair does not look dull," replied Kristie.

"It's so shiny that I'm sure you'll draw all types of unwanted attention," I muttered.

Bryce chuckled. "Okay, everyone's hair in place? Everyone use the bathroom? Noses powdered?"

"Wait, I need my cigarettes!" Kristie said, running back into the house. Seconds later she returned with two packs. "Now, I'm ready for anything."

"Good thing you volunteered Paige to stay behind," I remarked.

She shrugged but I didn't miss the gleam in her eyes.

Everyone got back into the SUV but Bryce and me.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I nodded. I had the gun out and my hammer in a utility type of belt that I'd concocted from an old leather belt and holster.

"Wait," he said, coming towards me. He grabbed the back of my head and pulled me towards him, stealing a quick kiss. He released me and looked into my eyes. "Just in case I don't get a chance to do that again."

His words were like a splash of cold water as the reality of our situation set in. We were heading right into serious danger again and it was more than feasible that any of us could be killed by a zombie.

"Hey, Bryce," sighed Kristie from the truck. "They don't have any more like you at home, do they? Cause I got to tell you..."

I chuckled. I knew Kristie was a hopeless romantic and it wouldn't be long before husband number three would be in the mist. If there was anyone left.

Kristie turned towards the back of the SUV and snapped, "Oh, Eva, would you just chill the hell out." I knew then that Eva must not have enjoyed the kiss as much as I did.

"Okay," Bryce said, raising his gun and walking towards the garage door opener. "Get ready, everyone."

Kristie started the engine and rolled up her window.

Bryce pressed the garage door opener, grabbed the dead zombie by its clothing, and started dragging him towards the opening. When the garage door was all the way up, Kristie pressed firmly on the gas and backed out, crushing two zombies who were staring stupidly at the SUV. I ignored the now-familiar bone crunching and moaning of the zombies and began firing my gun at the new ones coming toward us.

"Behind you, Bryce!" I yelled as dead and rotted Mr. Hendrickson appeared behind Bryce.

Bryce snapped his head back, hitting the zombie in the forehead. He turned around, kicked it in the stomach, then blew off Mr. Hendrickson's slackened zombie face. Bryce scowled and brushed off the back of his head, trying to remove zombie brain particles.

I shuddered. "That was...so nasty."

"To your left!" hollered Bryce.

The crazy old lady from up the street was snarling and coming right at me. She'd always been a cruel and hateful woman,



screaming at anyone who'd ever gotten too close to her yard, and God forbid if you should accidentally kick a ball onto her lawn. She wouldn't just keep it; she'd destroy it while you watched, smiling smugly and daring you to say anything. Needless to say, my mom had weathered many heated arguments with the old broad and I still couldn't stand her, dead or alive.

"Sorry, Hazel," I said, raising my gun, "but your days of being a bitter old bitch are now over."

Hazel growled angrily and then fell backwards as the bullet entered her rotting skull.

We killed the last two zombies trying to get into the garage, then closed it and jumped into the SUV.

"Those things smell awful! God, I could smell them from inside the truck," complained Eva.

"That reminds me," I said, pulling out the small jar from my pocket. "Vicks, anyone?"

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Zombies must have been waking up all over the city because even the rural areas were plagued with them.

"I had no idea," whispered Sara, staring out the window in horror.

The streets were like obstacle courses and it was difficult to navigate the SUV around both the abandoned cars and zombies. Fortunately, most of the zombies ignored us, staggering aimlessly with no real apparent destination.

"Watch out!" said Bryce as a zombie stepped in front of our moving vehicle.

Kristie cringed in revulsion as the zombie bounced off the front grill and over the hood. "That was...unpleasant," she muttered, grasping the steering wheel a little tighter.

We drove past the karate studio and noticed the large plate-glass window in the front was smashed. Zombies wandered around the entire mini-mall, shuffling through broken glass...paper debris...and other dead zombies.

"I hope Master Jordan survived," I said.

"I know he didn't get the vaccine," replied Bryce. "Neither did Mae; both of them are into natural herbal remedies. I'd bet

anything that he's alive somewhere. He's definitely one guy who's not going down easily."

"He's a great guy. I hope you're right," I said.

Sara's place is located in a newer development where many of the homes are still under construction and thankfully, we didn't run into any zombies.

"Listen, Kristie and Eva; honk if you see any zombies approaching."

"Okay," replied Kristie. She picked up the Smith and Wesson and placed it on her lap.

"Can't I come with?" asked Eva.

"No, it's too dangerous. You're much safer in here," he replied.

It wasn't the answer she was looking for. "Fine," she sniffed.

"Let's go, I can't wait anymore," said Sara. She opened the door and jumped out of the SUV. Bryce and I got out and followed her to the front door.

Sara pulled out her keys, but the door was unlocked.

"Kevin?" she called, opening it. "Kevin, it's me, Sara!"

The house was eerily quiet when we entered. Like my house, it was a split-level, but much larger and newer.

Sara tossed her keys onto a new granite counter and turned to us. "The bedroom is upstairs. He's probably sleeping," she said.

We followed Sara upstairs where there were three bedrooms and a bathroom. One of the doors was shut and that's where she headed.

Bryce grabbed my arm. "Be ready," he said into my ear.

I nodded as we followed her into the master bedroom.

The room was huge with a built-in fireplace and cozy chenille chaise off to one side of the room, a private bathroom with a built-in whirlpool bath on the other. It was the nicest bedroom I'd ever been in considering its current state. Discarded clothing, used tissues, and empty food containers lay scattered all over plush carpeting.

"Oh, God," moaned Sara, staring at the bed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

We followed Sara to the large maple sleigh bed where Kevin lay. As we gathered around the bed, she let out a sigh of relief.

“He’s just sleeping,” she said quietly, brushing the sandy brown hair from his eyes.

I turned to look at Bryce, who was frowning. He pulled me aside.

“Do you smell that?” he whispered.

I nodded; it was a smell I was getting all too familiar with.

Sara sat on the bed. “Kevin? Sweetheart, wake up. It’s me, Sara,” she said softly. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

I took a step closer to the bed and noticed that Kevin’s face was gaunt, his lips pale and dry. There was movement under his eyelids, as if he was dreaming.

“You’re so cold,” Sara mumbled, touching his forehead. She stood up and lifted a goose down comforter from the floor that must have fallen. She spread it around him on the bed and tucked the edges under the mattress.

My heart was hammering in my chest. To me, he didn’t look like he was sleeping; he looked stiff and white, like a corpse. I cleared my throat. “Sara, maybe you should step back.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No, I know what you’re thinking. He’s just sleeping, Cassie. He...he’s...fine.” She glanced at me and I could see that her eyes were brimming with tears.

“What’s that?” I asked, grabbing a piece of paper from the nightstand. At the top of the page were the words Vaccination Side Effects. It listed the typical side effects of a regular flu shot. I showed it to Sara, who turned very pale.

“No...he didn’t get the vaccination. I don’t understand,” she said, scanning the flyer. She looked up and shook her head. “This just doesn’t make sense.”

Bryce took it from her and examined it. “Didn’t you mention the military was sending someone from their medical staff to check on him? They could have given it to him then.”

A deep moan escaped Kevin's lips and his eyes slowly opened.

"Oh, God," I whispered, putting my hand over my mouth. Kevin's eyes were blood-rimmed and cold as death. They stared emotionlessly at Sara, who appeared oblivious to the truth.

"Hi," she whispered, smiling down at him. She stroked his hand.

"Sara, don't touch him," demanded Bryce, pulling her away.

Kevin sat up and began making deep guttural noises. He started flailing his arms around and greenish-red foam bubbled from his mouth.

"No, Kevin," she moaned, trying to reach out for him. "I'm here for you, honey."

Bryce grabbed Sara and pulled her away just as Kevin lurched towards her, making hideous smacking noises with his mouth. When he noticed that he'd missed her, he let out an alarming screech that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

"Leave me be, Bryce!" Sara screamed as he tried to push her out of the bedroom. She eventually broke free and then rushed back towards Kevin, who was beginning to growl at her like rabid animal. She took a step back and stared at him in horror.

"He's a zombie now, not Kevin," I said.

Tears streamed down her face as Sara stood staring at the man she'd fallen in love with. He was now just an animated corpse, devoid of any human emotion. Shaking her head in sorrow, she raised her gun and pointed it at his face. "Oh, God," she cried, her hands trembling. "I...I...can't do it." I watched in horror as she dropped the gun, leaving herself vulnerable to the zombie, who was prepared to leap at her.

"Watch out, Sara!" I yelled, raising my gun.

Kevin lunged towards her, his mouth open and arms outstretched. Before he reached Sara, there was a loud explosion and he was blown backwards by the impact of Bryce's bullet.

"No!" screamed Sara as he fell to the ground, blood streaming out of the large hole in his skull. She rushed over to him and lifted his hand to her cheek.

I knelt down next to her. “Sara, it wasn’t Kevin anymore,” I said softly. “His soul wasn’t there. He was gone before we even got here.”

She looked at me, her eyes full of misery. “Do you think that makes it easier? Two days ago, I left him here to die, alone. If I would have listened to my heart and stayed with him, he’d still be alive.”

Bryce stepped towards her and touched her shoulder. “No, if you would have stayed here with Megan, both of you would have been killed. You didn’t even know about the side effects of the vaccine until it was too late. Kevin would have probably still received it and you’d be dead, along with Megan and your unborn child.”

Sara touched her belly and lowered her eyes. “Maybe, but he’s still gone and I don’t know if I will ever forgive myself,” she said huskily. Sara stood up and took one last look at Kevin before she hurried out of the room.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The ride to the St. James Hospital was very solemn. Kristie didn't ask any questions and even Eva had the sense to keep her mouth shut.

Zombies were everywhere and they were getting more violent. Older and newer ones wrestled each other, trying to feed. It was maddening to watch. I closed my eyes to block out as much horror as I could as we drove. I'd seen enough in the last couple of days to give me nightmares for the rest of my life.

As we neared the hospital, I prayed silently that my mother was alive. She'd been armed with a gun but I still didn't know if she'd been attacked by the soldier she'd been trying to save or someone else. I was tearing my hair out to know the truth, and soon I'd be closer to it.

When we finally approached the hospital's parking lot, it was crawling with zombies. Most of them wandered around in a muddled state, not doing much of anything. Others, who appeared more grotesque and rancid from decomposing, acted like rabid dogs. I watched in horror as they also attacked each other.

"This is totally revolting," whispered Eva, turning green.

I couldn't agree with her more; it was worse than any horror flick I'd ever watched on television, and it was real. Blood and body parts covered most of the pavement of the hospital parking lot. It was like a bloody aftermath of an explosion, only this devastation was much more than any of us could have ever imagined.

"Careful on the left," pointed Bryce. A group of zombies were snarling and tearing each other apart. Thankfully, they hadn't quite taken notice of us yet.

"Jesus," mumbled Kristie as the SUV struck a zombie who'd stepped into our path. The sound of the zombie's corpse crumbling under the tire made me gag. "Sorry, this isn't easy, driving through this shit."

"Kristie, you're doing fine," reassured Bryce.

He was right. There really was no way to avoid driving over the gore in the parking lot. The sound of bones crunching and loud thuds was enough to drive me mad. "Do you have any music? CDs?" I asked Kristie.

"Hey, great idea! In the back, under the seat," she said.

I pulled out her CD collection, which consisted of a lot of older bands. I pulled out a CD of Metallica, which seemed appropriate for the moment.

"Haven't heard this one forever," she said. She stuck it in and the sound of heavy metal blared through speakers.

Eva scowled. "Don't you have anything else?"

"It beats the sound of bones smashing under the tires," I said.

Eva scowled and looked out the window.

We were going very slowly towards the hospital entrance and some of the zombies were starting to take notice. Before I could say anything, two zombies rushed the side of the SUV and started scratching at the darkened windows.

"Can't you go faster?" cried Eva as one of them stared at her through the window. It let out a horrendous screech and Eva practically jumped out of her seat.

"Sorry, I wish I could," said Kristie, her hands tight on the wheel.

We were going very slowly, in fact some of the zombies were staggering faster than we were driving.

"Shit," muttered Kristie as more zombies began surrounding the truck.

"Can't you shoot them?" whined Eva.

"No, we aren't wasting our bullets on hundreds of zombies too stupid to even find a way in here. We need ammunition for when we're on foot," I said.

"Bryce, how in the world are we going to get into the hospital when they're following us this close?" asked Sara.

"Look," I said, pointing to the emergency entrance. "There are some people with guns getting ready to do something."

As we got closer, about five military soldiers ran outside of the emergency doors and started picking off the zombies that were following us. As we got closer, one of the men motioned us over to a separate ambulance entrance, big enough to drive the SUV into. Once inside, they closed the door and approached us cautiously.

"Have any of you been vaccinated lately?" asked a tall, humorless-looking soldier holding a gun.

"No, sir," replied Bryce, raising his hands in the air. "None of us have."

The soldier nodded and then introduced himself. "I'm Captain Brent Lufkin. Does anyone here need medical attention?" he asked, looking specifically at Sara who'd stepped out of the truck holding a hand over her protruding belly.

"No, not yet anyway," said Bryce. "We're here to try and locate a couple of people."

"Really, who?" asked the Captain.

I spoke up. "Veronica King, the news anchor, and my mother, Kristen Wild."

"Veronica King left a couple of hours ago to help pick up some survivors who'd radioed in. She should be back within a few hours. Got to say, that woman surprised the hell out of me. She's as tough as nails."

"What about Kris Wild? Have you seen her?" interrupted Bryce. "She's fairly tall, light brown hair, somewhere in her forties. She would have arrived with a wounded soldier."

He shook his head. "Kris Wild? Sorry, it just doesn't sound familiar but you're welcome to take a look around," he said. "We have over one hundred survivors. Most of them are staying close to each other in the children's wing of the hospital. Come on, I'll show you."

The hospital had generators, so luckily there was electricity. As we neared the children's wing, I noticed many of them eating warm meals and talking quietly to one another. Surprisingly, there weren't many children around.

"I wonder what happened to the children that were in this wing of the hospital," I said softly

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not sure."

The captain turned to me. "Most of the children that were already staying in the hospital received the vaccines. We had to place them in special holding cells so they wouldn't harm anyone."

"They're still here?" asked Kristie.

He nodded. "Yes, they are. Unfortunately some of them are getting so violent that we can't get near them without the risk of getting bitten."

I shuddered. “You’re just keeping them locked up until they die?”

“On the contrary, we’re studying them to find out if we can halt the process or find an antidote. We’ve had some communication from the CDC in Atlanta,” he replied.

“There are still researchers left from the CDC?” I asked in shock. “I would have thought they’d all gotten the vaccine.”

“Not all of them agreed with vaccinations either,” he replied, “lucky for us.”

“Do you mind if I take a look around?” I asked him. “I need to find out if my mother ever arrived. Maybe someone else saw her.”

“Go ahead, I’ll ask around for you, too. Don’t forget to check some of the private patient rooms,” he replied.

We all split up and began asking around. Bryce said he’d check some of the patient rooms in Urgent Care. Curiously enough, Eva volunteered to tag along with him and he reluctantly agreed. I trusted him but there was no way in hell I was going to allow her back home with us later. I crossed my fingers that Veronica would come back soon and take her daughter off our hands.

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I started checking the rooms in the children’s units, hoping beyond hope that maybe my mom was there, resting. Unfortunately most of them were unoccupied and the few that had people in them hadn’t heard anything about my mother, so I decided to venture farther away from the children’s unit. As I approached the birthing wing, I heard a man talking in one of the rooms. The tone of his voice sounded familiar and my heart skipped a beat. I rushed towards the sound of his voice.

“Ever hear of knocking first?” drawled the soldier, who was on his cell phone. He wore only a pair of army pants and a bandage around his shoulder.

“Austin!” I cried. “Thank God! I’m so glad to see you.”

A huge smile lit up his face. It was the soldier my mother had rescued! Words couldn’t express the joy I was suddenly feeling. If he wasn’t a zombie, she had to be still alive, somewhere.

"How in the world did you make it here?" he asked, hanging up his phone.

"I got a ride," I said, looking around. "Where's my mother?"

The smile on his face fell away and he sighed. "She's not here."

"I see that. Where is she?"

"Your mom went for help," he said.

"Went for help? What do you mean?" I asked, stepping closer to him.

"She went to find special help for your sister."

My heart soared. "My sister? She's here, somewhere? I don't understand. Where are they?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore, they're both gone. You're mom picked up your sister from her girlfriend's house yesterday, and they ran into some trouble coming back; zombie trouble. Here," he said, walking over to the counter where he lifted a piece of paper. "She wrote you this letter. I was going to try and get it to you."

I snatched it from his hands. My own began to tremble as I read the letter.

*Dearest Cassie,*

*I pray that you get this letter and you are okay. I've tried calling you but I realize the power is out everywhere and your cell phone is more than likely dead. I have Allie; I picked her up as soon as I found out about the zombies. When I finally found her, she'd been attacked and wasn't doing very well. She had a high fever and her body was racked with seizures, it was very frightening. I quickly brought her back to the hospital where they were able to finally lower her fever, but there was nothing more they could do for her. They suspect she is turning into one of those creatures now and suggested that I bring her to Atlanta, where scientists are working on an antidote. They even let us catch a lift with their medevac helicopter unit. And that's where we're heading now.*

*I hope that you're safe and that you get this letter. I love you so much and I wish I could be with you right now. But your sister is very sick, and I have to do everything I can to find help for her. I have to try and save her. I know you'll understand, my Wild One.*

*All my love,*

*Mom*

*P.S. I will try and contact you when I'm in Atlanta. Try and get your cell phone charged if you can. I have been given one to use by the Army and will keep trying to call you.*

## Chapter Twenty-Four

I closed my eyes and released a heavy sigh. Although I was relieved that both my sister and mother were alive, I held no illusions of there being a happy ending in all of this, especially if we were still separated and my sister was turning into a zombie.

"Now what?" I mumbled to myself. I sat down on a stool and put my head in my hands.

"I reckon you could just stay here and wait for your mother to call," he replied.

I lifted my head and faced him. "No, I have to get back home with my friends. Besides, there are so many zombies attracted to this place, seriously, I don't feel all that safe here."

Austin nodded his head. "Okay. Well then I'm coming with you."

I stood up. "What do you mean...you're coming with me?"

He knelt down next to me and placed his hands upon my shoulders. His eyes reminded me of warm caramel. "Your mother saved my life. If it wasn't for her, I don't know what would have happened. I made a promise to her that I'd find you and help protect you. I'm not breaking that promise."

I pulled away. "Thanks, Austin, but I can take care of myself. I made it here, didn't I?"

He shrugged. "Yeah you did. But you haven't made it out of here alive just yet. Come on, Cassie, let me help you. If anything, I can help you get in touch with your mom. I know where they've taken her."

My eyes narrowed. "What about your family? Don't you have anyone at home that might need you?"

Austin smiled and folded his arms across his chest. "Darlin', my family lives in Texas and it doesn't look like I'll be traveling there anytime soon. In fact, I just radioed my brother and they're together and holding up okay, so far. So, the answer is no, there's nobody who needs me at this moment as much as you do."

I pointed. "What about your shoulder?"

“It’s doing better. They stitched it up and it’s tender, but I’ll survive.”

“I thought for sure you were bitten by a zombie.”

He shook his head. “I was shot; a woman. I don’t know, she may have thought I was a zombie.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Well, if you want to tag along, I guess that would be okay. We could always use an extra shooter.”

Austin smiled and I found myself returning it. With his southern drawl, blond hair, and rugged good looks, he actually reminded me of some cowboy I’d watched on television as a child. One I’d had a small crush on.

“Excellent. I’ll just find the rest of my clothing and we can shoot out of here.”

“Austin?” I said, trying to swallow the lump forming in my throat. “How was my sister when you last saw her?”

His eyes clouded over and he took my hand. “She was struggling, I can tell you that.”

I looked down so he wouldn’t see the tears in my eyes. “I hope they can help her. I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose either of them.”

He lifted my chin up and stared into my eyes. “Your mom’s a fighter, you’re obviously one, too. If Allie takes after either of you, then the odds are in her favor.”

I nodded but the tears still escaped, the enormity of my family’s situation was overwhelming.

Austin wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. “Shh...it’ll be okay. We’ll find a way to contact your mom. Shit, if I have to take you to her myself, I will.”

“Cassie?” interrupted Bryce as he walked in the door with Eva trailing close behind.

I moved away from Austin and brushed away my tears. “Um, this is Austin. He’s the soldier my mother had rescued.”

Bryce frowned. “Okay? So, where is she?”

I explained everything that Austin had told me. When I told Bryce that he’d be joining us, he shook his head.

“No, he should stay here. The zombies are getting pretty out of hand out there. They need soldiers to protect the crisis unit.”

“Sorry, but I’m coming with y’all. I made a promise to Kris that I’d find a way to keep Cassie safe, and I’m not going back on my word.”

Bryce and Austin stared at each other and you could cut the tension in the air with a knife.

“I think that’s a great idea,” said Eva as she stepped next to Bryce. She looped her arm through his. “We need all the help we can get fighting off those zombies.”

I scowled at Eva. “We? You’ll be staying here. You don’t have to worry about fighting zombies, not like you helped much anyway.”

Eva glared at me. “You don’t have to be such a bitch.”

My mouth dropped open and before I could show her how much of a bitch I could really be, Bryce interrupted. “Eva’s coming with us. Her mother’s been bitten and they’re flying her to Atlanta, too. She has nowhere else to go, Cassie.”

A wave of guilt rushed through me. “Oh, I’m sorry, Eva. I didn’t know.”

Eva shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

“Why doesn’t she just go to Atlanta to be with her mom?” I asked Bryce.

“They said she couldn’t. They are quarantining all bite victims,” he replied. “They won’t even allow her near Veronica to say goodbye.”

“Oh, well she should stay here so they can keep her updated on her mom’s condition.”

Bryce shook his head. “The zombies are getting too out of hand for this small group. It’s not safe to stay here anymore. In fact, we’d better get moving now before we end up getting stuck here.”

Just then Kristie and Sara walked in. “Oh, thank God you guys are here. Look, we have to get out of here...now,” said Kristie. “The zombies are either getting smarter or their just plain lucky. They’ve broken through the entrance now and the soldiers won’t be able to hold them off too much longer.”

Austin pulled on a T-shirt. “Let’s get going,” he said. “I’ve got some grenades, we might need them.”

Kristie smiled at Austin. “Hey there, soldier. I take it you’re the newest member of our team?”

He shrugged. "I'm just coming along to protect Cassie. I made a promise her mother."

Bryce scowled. "That's very noble but she doesn't need your protection, she has me."

Austin nodded towards Eva. "Looks like you already have your hands full with that one."

Bryce took a step away from Eva and folded his arms across his chest. "We've done fine without you."

"Hello? Guys, I can protect myself," I said, walking towards the door.

The two men stood glaring at each other, neither of them saying anything.

Kristie snorted. "Okay, everyone, time to leave. The testosterone in this room is going to either make me go nuts or grow a pair; frankly I don't want to do either."

I walked out the door and started towards the location of our SUV. Sara and Kristie caught up with me quickly.

"Men, you can't kill 'em...unless they try and eat your brains," said Kristie with a wry grin.

I stopped walking and turned to Sara and Kristie. "I just wanted to say thanks to both of you. I know each of you lost your husbands and yet you've still found the strength to help me try to find my mom. I don't know what I'd do without you."

We were still hugging each other when Eva, Bryce, and Austin caught up.

"You boys work it out?" asked Kristie, pulling away.

Bryce shrugged and Austin smiled. "Nothing to work out, darlin'. I'm coming with whether Billy likes it or not."

"It's Bryce," he muttered, walking ahead of him.

"Southern boys," said Kristie as we started walking. "I once had me a cowboy. Oh, the things he could do with that rope..."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

There were several dead zombies lying around as we neared the parked SUV. Three of the soldiers were repairing the glass on the door where the zombies had broken through.

"You guys leaving?" asked one of them. "Through this mob?"

"Yes," replied Bryce.

"They are getting pretty damn restless out there," said the soldier. "Be careful."

We got into the SUV and the soldiers reluctantly opened the garage door. Kristie was in the driver's seat again so that Bryce would have his hands free to shoot, if needed. Bryce sat next to her with his gun ready.

"Damn, those zombies stink," muttered Austin sitting close to me.

"Vicks works wonders," I said, handing out my jar.

He nodded in approval and rubbed some under his nose.

"Look! Sweet Jesus, they're getting in," said Eva as two zombies barreled through the garage door before it was closed all the way. The soldiers shot them in the head and they dropped.

Bryce opened his window and shot two more that tried sneaking in.

"You have a gun, cowboy?" Kristie asked Austin.

"Lost it a couple days ago. I found a couple of grenades, though," he said, holding them up in the air.

"Careful driving," mumbled Bryce.

Zombies were definitely getting more ferocious as we drove through the parking lot. The smell of blood was drawing more of them towards the hospital and now there were hundreds attacking each other.

"How in the hell do we get out of here?" growled Kristie.

"I guess now is as good of time as any," said Austin as he opened up his window and leaned out. "Get ready."

He launched the grenade at a crowd of zombies blocking our path. Less than ten seconds later, body parts were falling from the sky and landing on the SUV.



“Drive!” yelled Bryce.

Kristie hit the gas and we drove over the remaining mutilated zombies, all of us bouncing around in the SUV.

Eva closed her eyes. “Lord help us,” she said softly.

Another group of zombies were coming straight for us and Austin threw another one, clearing the path yet again with a loud explosion.

“Yes! Well, thank God Austin decided to come with us. Otherwise we’d have had a hell of a time getting through these bastards,” said Kristie.

Bryce looked out the window and mumbled something expletive.

When we finally made it out of the zombie-infested parking lot, I wanted to scream for joy. But I knew we weren’t out of danger yet. Zombies were still wandering the streets, looking more aggravated and alert than ever.

“What’s going on with these guys?” asked Kristie. “They seem like they’re in some kind of frenzy or something.”

“They are,” said Austin. “They need blood to sustain, and if they don’t get it, they actually become more violent and ferocious. Once they start to lose more of their body mass, though, they’ll eventually slow down.

“Great,” I sighed.

“What makes you an expert on these things?” asked Bryce.

Austin shrugged. “Bits and pieces of things I’d heard from other soldiers. They’ve been studying their behaviors.”

“Do they know for sure if you’ll turn into one if you’re bitten?” asked Eva.

He nodded. “They believe you will. Some of the people who’ve been bitten are showing signs of very erratic behavior, similar to the zombies. Some have just...died,” he said, his voice getting quieter as he glanced at me.

I looked out the window and sighed heavily. It sounded pretty hopeless for my sister. I was thankful that my mom was with her, but I could only imagine the agony she was going through in Atlanta. I only wished I could get out there somehow so she wouldn’t have to face it alone.

When we’d finally made it back to my house, everything seemed surreal. There weren’t any zombies wandering in the

neighborhood or even the yard, just a shiny black GMC Sierra parked in our driveway.

“Were you expecting company?” asked Bryce, getting out.

I shook my head and ran up the steps. As I put my hand on the doorknob, it burst open and I gasped in surprise.

“Daddy!” I screamed, jumping into his arms.

“Oh, thank God,” he replied, holding me tightly.

“Where’ve you been?” I cried.

He put me down and grimaced. “It’s a long story. Let’s just say the traffic was bad coming home.”

I smiled and wiped the tears from my face.

“Did you...did you find anything out about your mom or sister?” he asked sadly.

We went inside and I told him everything I knew while he sat in silence. When I was finished he didn’t say a word, he just stood up and went downstairs.

“He needs some time,” said Kristie softly.

I nodded. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to my room to be alone for a while.”

Bryce squeezed my hand as I stood up. “Let me know if you need me, Wild.”

On my way to my bedroom I stopped in the kitchen for some water. Eva was sitting alone at the counter, staring at her clasped hands. She looked up. “Oh, it’s you. Tell me, what...what do we do now?” she asked, her face a mess of tears and make-up.

I was about to respond when my dad stepped into the kitchen. He was dressed in military camouflage and carrying two very impressive rifles that I’d never seen before. The determined look in his eyes gave me the chills.

“What next?” he asked, setting the guns down. “We go find them, all of them.”

“But is it safe?” I breathed.

He looked at me. “Cassie, we’re a family and I won’t be apart from any of you, ever again. We’re going to Atlanta as soon as possible.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” he said, a half-crazed look in his eyes. He lifted one of the guns back up and smiled humorlessly. “Let the games begin...”

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## End of Book One

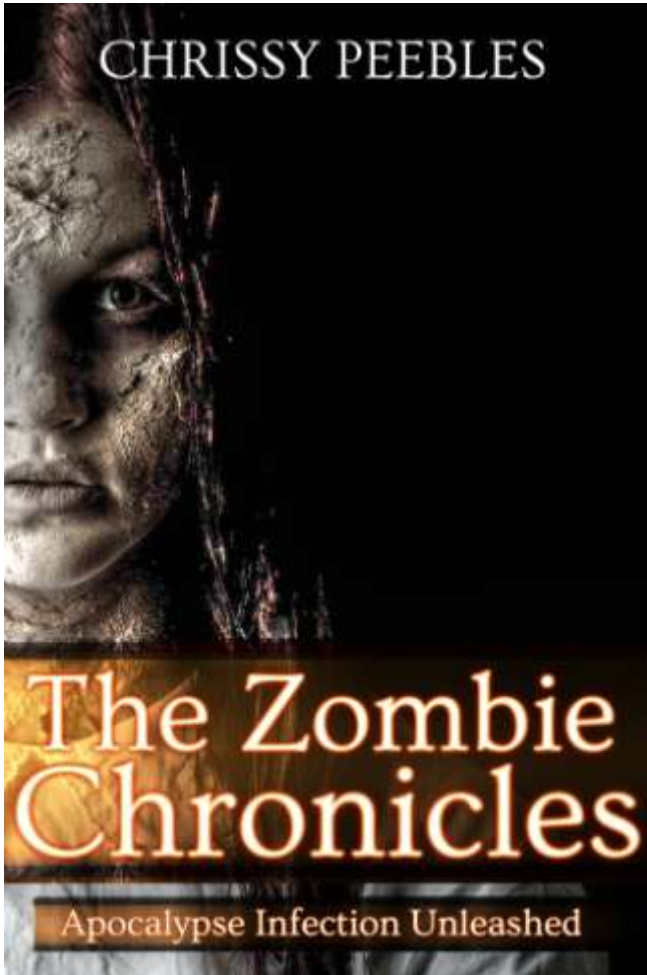
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*Chrissy Peebles*



*The Zombie Chronicles*  
*Apocalypse Infection Unleashed Series*  
by

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## Chapter 1

One year earlier...

It had been a long day in July, with heat waves rampaging throughout South Carolina. Even though nighttime had long fallen and the temperatures had cooled down noticeably, my shirt still stuck to my back. I wondered what good that shower had done that I'd taken before meeting Sherry.

A rush of wind blew through my hair as we rode to the top of the Ferris wheel and then stopped, hovering in midair. I breathed in, relaxed, and listened to the distant screams, music, and laughter echo below us. Sherry set down the stuffed pink pig I'd won for her in the ring toss and folded her hands in her lap, enjoying the silence. I dared a quick look at the stuffed animal, fighting with myself whether to be proud or sink into the ground. The guys back at school surely would've suggested the latter, but I didn't care. Granted, it wasn't the giant teddy bear I'd spent twenty bucks trying to win, but Sherry seemed happy with her little plush pink prize nonetheless. She squeezed my hand, and I smiled.

I rocked the cart back and forth with my legs.

"Hey! Stop it," Sherry said, twining her fingers through my hair.

“But you told me you loved it when somebody shook the cart at the very top. And I do too. Love that adrenaline rush.”

She smiled and batted her lashes at me. Her whole demeanor screamed flirty, so I inched closer and wrapped my arm around her to pull her closer. “Do you want to play games or make out?” she whispered suggestively.

Her eyes sparkled like big onyxes as I gazed into them. We had liked each other for months, and we’d been shamelessly stealing glances at each other until I finally plucked up the courage to ask her out. It was our first big date, and I’d been dying to kiss her all night. “What do you think?” I asked with a smile.

She inclined her head as though in thought.

That same moment, a piercing scream echoed from below us. Forgetting our first intimate moment, I peered below into the darkness to the gathering mass.

“What’s going on down there?” Sherry asked.

“I dunno.” I squinted to get a better view, but the steel rods of the Ferris wheel blocked most of my view from where we were dangling. All I could make out were red and blue lights flashing in the distance, blinking in rhythm to the sound of blaring sirens. I leaned out until I could count five police cars speeding toward the midway.

“What’s happening?” Sherry asked again, this time more quietly, as though she was talking to herself.

I paid her no attention as I continued to scan the commotion below. A man tumbled to the ground. The same moment, a group of people pounced on him. From up above, they looked like they were attacking him with their bare arms and legs.

Sherri grabbed my shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze to get my attention. “Oh my gosh, Dean! I think a gang of thugs are attacking the people in line.”

I shook my head. It can’t be. We lived in a family tourist town, its biggest crimes consisting of kids pick-pocketing sweets from the local supermarket and old ladies complaining about Friday night litter on their porches; the crime rate was so low that misdemeanors made the front page. I couldn’t even remember the last time there’d been a public beating or any kind of vicious attack. “Maybe it’s nothing,” I said, my brain trying to justify the picture before my eyes.

"It sure doesn't look like nothing," Sherry said. "You think they're on drugs?"

I shrugged, hesitating. I wasn't naïve enough to think there were no drugs where I lived, but to see their effects creeped me out big time.

Bang! Bang!

Before I could answer, shots echoed from the nearing cars. I wrapped my arm around Sherry and forced her head down the way I had seen on television and in all those action movies. "It looks like the police are firing into the crowd!" I yelled.

"No! They can't be." She clutched her chest. "My sister's down there. I hope she's okay."

The ride jerked forward. As we started to descend, Sherry leaned over me to peer at the blinking lights on the bar that rotated inside the wheel.

I gripped her hand. "We'll find your sister. I promise."

"Thanks, Dean."

A scream tore through the air, followed by growls and hisses.

"What's that noise?" Sherry asked, frantically glancing below us.

Peering past the yellow bulbs twinkling all around me, I tried to see what was happening below. My senses were on full alert because of the danger we were in. I knew a stray bullet could hit us, or one of the drug-crazed people might decide to attack us. We had to get out of there, fast, before something happened. A cold chill rushed through me as the cart stopped at the wooden platform.

I scanned the area for the best possible escape route. Crazed weirdoes were biting and tearing into the flesh of screaming, innocent bystanders, their blood staining their clothes and the asphalt beneath their feet. My stomach protested, ready to hurl up all the greasy hotdogs, funnel cakes, and cotton candy I'd eaten. My mind screamed, This can't be true! People just don't go around biting each other like cannibals! It has to be a joke. But I knew from the grotesque salty-metallic smell wafting through the air that the blood was all too real. It wasn't a joke...but the grossest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

"Dean, what's happening?" Sherry asked, shaking my shoulder frantically.

"I have no idea, but we've gotta get out of here."



The possessed people shuffled toward us. My pulse pounding in my ears, I spun quickly in hopes of getting out the other way, but the entrance was blocked with more people flooding in. The silver line dividers dropped to the ground with a loud clang.

“We’re trapped!” Sherry said, grabbing my arm tight.

“No!” I shook my head vehemently. “Don’t even think that. We’ll climb up the Ferris wheel.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

I hesitated, considering my words. “Then we fight,” I said, suppressing a gag at the rotten smell.

Guttural sounds—strange growls—emanated from the group as they stared us down like they wanted to rip through our flesh. They had greenish-looking, cracked skin, torn clothes, and white eyes. Contacts? A wicked case of cataracts? Liquid latex? Special effects? I had no idea, but I was ready to take them on.

A girl with long blonde hair inched closer. She looked dead, her head unnaturally askew. Sudden recognition hit me with a jolt: Sherry’s sister!

“Jenny!” Sherry shouted; her voice overwhelmed with emotion. “Oh my gosh! What happened to you? You’re creeping me out.”

Jenny suddenly lunged at me, snapping her jaws like a rabid dog. She came within only inches from sinking her teeth into my carotid when a policeman fired shots. Jenny—or whatever she was—crashed down to the ground.

Shocked beyond all belief, Sherry leaned over the cart door, letting loose of her stuffed animal. It fell to the ground, right next to the thing that looked remotely like Jenny. Her gaze darted to the policeman holding the gun. “You shot my sister!”

“I’m sorry, miss, but that’s not your sister anymore!” he shouted back. “She would have killed and eaten the both of you!”

More of the possessed group shuffled toward us. My heart raced. I clenched my fists, ready to take down anything in my path. I slid my leg over the bar, preparing to jump out of the cart and fight when one of the policemen fumbled with the controls. We took off with a jerk. I fell back into Sherry’s arms, and we shot up about five feet in the air.

The beings lunged after us, shaking the bottom of the cart so violently we nearly fell out. Sherry clung onto me with a death

grip. The group continued with their guttural chanting, and I swore I was trapped in some kind of lucid nightmare.

“What are they?” Sherry screamed in my ear. “What’s going on? What happened to Jenny? Why was she...like that?”

I steadied myself by holding onto the steel bar with one hand and wrapped the other around her as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Below us, the group of possessed people seemed to have multiplied, holding up their arms as if they wanted a ride too. I dared another peek over the edge and regretted it instantly. The whole gathering looked like something out of a horror flick, blood covering their clothes and caking their skin.

Some started to stumble toward the officer, who shot anyone—or anything—who got too close. “Hang on, kids!” the officer said. With another yank, we sped up into the sky, stopping at the very top. This time, shaking the cart for thrills or making out was the last thing on my mind.

“That policeman...he...that cop shot my sister!” Sherry said between gasps. She buried her face into my chest and wept. I pulled her close, not sure what words of comfort to give her. More shots were fired, followed by ear-piercing screams and then...nothing. Panic ensued from other riders still stuck on the wheel at various positions. Better to be up here than down there, I figured. We had to be at least 150 feet up in the air, and that made me feel safe from whatever was happening below.

My cell phone rang jolting me out of my stupor. I fumbled in my pocket and answered the call.

“Dean?”

“Dad!” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, son, thank God you’re alive. There’s no time for explanations. Where are you?” he asked, his voice betraying an edge.

“I’m on a date with Sherry. We’re stuck on top of the Ferris wheel at the beach. It isn’t moving. Dad, I think everybody’s dead down there! I-I don’t know. It’s all just so...it’s crazy, Dad, like some kind of horrible movie!”

“We’re coming to pick you up, and then we’re getting the heck out of town.”

“It’s too dangerous,” I said. “I know this is going to sound absolutely crazy, but you gotta believe me. People are turning into some kind of cannibals...and they’re attacking people.”

"I know. Don't worry. I'll be armed. I'll get you out of there, I promise. Got it, son?"

"Where are we going?"

"Your brother's flying us to the island with Grams where we'll be safe. These things are attacking everybody in Myrtle Beach. We've gotta get far away from here as fast as we can."

On the other end of the phone, glass shattered with a crash, followed by my mom's piercing scream. I gasped as the line went dead. "Dad!" I shouted. "Dad?"

## Chapter 2

One year ago, a deadly virus decimated the world leaving swarms of brain-eating zombies in its wake. Survivors rushed to the makeshift fortresses, walled-in cities protected by towering concrete walls and a military force to be reckoned with. I managed to make it to one of these safe havens with my brother and parents, and that afforded me the chance to spend the last year sheltered from the gloom that rocked the land. My brother, on the other hand, decided to leave the safe confines and continue fighting with the U.S. Army to fight the onslaught of the undead. He became a top-notch zombie-hunter, but my parents and I didn't see much of him after that. My mother feared he might not come back alive, if at all.

Initially, the virus immediately turned anybody into zombies who had type O+ or A+ blood. The rest of us seemed safe as long as we didn't get exposed through broken skin. We never knew what really caused the outbreak. And when scientists thought they had it figured out, the rules would change slightly. The virus mutated, and now if somebody was bitten or scratched, it could take up to five days before they turned...unless they died which meant the change came immediately.

I tried to make the best of the situation. It wasn't that bad. Our house had electricity and water, and I led a fairly normal teenage life—right up until I had to leave and jeopardize my safety (and consequently my future) for the sake of a girl I'd only just met. But I really had no option. She was scheduled for a lethal injection, and I could not stand by and watch that happen. I planned on

stopping the execution, even though I knew the stakes were high. After all, if I'd have been caught by the authorities, they would have promptly booted me out into Zombie Land. It was a fate I did not want to subject myself or my parents to, but after pondering it and considering my options—and the girl's, which were none—I realized it was a chance worth taking. I had to save her, no matter what, and I could only hope my parents would understand.

My plan was bold, daring, and sneaky, as a proper rescue mission should always be. I knew that getting her out of the clinic fast, before anyone noticed, was the key to success. I smoothed my hands down my crisp white scrubs, smirking beneath my “borrowed” surgical mask as I adjusted it. I knew I would need a good disguise in order to get past the soldiers, and I was proud of myself for so easily snatching the medical uniform from the linen room.

Lucas, a friend of mine, laughed at the sight of me in the baggy cotton get-up. “I thought this was some kind of James Bond mission, not a pajama party.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” I muffled out from beneath the mask.

He eyed me up and down. “Well, you look ridiculous, but you definitely fit the part.”

“Well, secret agents have to hide their identity somehow, right?” I punched him in the arm, and he grinned. Lucky for me, Lucas had the security clearance to sneak me into the isolation area of the clinic, and he'd owed me a favor for a while. It's about time he paid up, I thought, and I knew I could always count on Lucas. He was a fitness buff with huge arms, and he was the one who fit the part: He made for a perfect soldier with his camouflage uniform, Army boots, and buzzed head.

“This is a huge risk you're taking, but I completely understand.” Lucas swiped a card over a control panel, and the door opened with a loud click. “Be careful, though, and whatever you do, don't underestimate her. That virus is flooding through her veins. They have good reasons for putting her in quarantine.”

“Don't worry. I don't plan on joining Bite Club any time soon, I promise.” With a last glance back, I walked in through the heavy steel door. As soon as the door closed behind me, it hit me:

There is no turning back now. I took a sharp breath and focused my gaze ahead.

The room looked just like any other sickbed, complete with sterile-looking white walls and the strong, bleach-like aroma of a plethora of medicines. On the far right was a huge lamp that cast an unnatural glow on the tiled floor. On the far left, a narrow bed with white sheets that were arranged around a frail woman told me I had the right room. I took a hesitant step forward, then stopped, suddenly unsure of whether or not I really was doing the right thing. What if she's already turned? What if it's too late to help her and I'm risking my safety for nothing? Fighting with myself, I took a step back.

Suddenly, Val rose to her feet. Her fists were clenched, and her eyes were wide with terror.

I pulled down my mask before she got the chance to pound me. "Hey! It's me."

"Dean!" she said. "You know I've been...bitten. But why are you...? Look, you shouldn't be in here. You know being anywhere near me is a death sentence."

I slowly unwrapped the bandages from her arm and cringed. The zombie bite looked worse—far, far worse—than I had anticipated. Green pus drained from the open wound on her lower arm, and it reeked of dead, rotting flesh.

"That bad, huh?" Val asked when she saw my ghastly expression, her voice echoing off the white walls in the confined isolation room. She brushed back her disheveled, long brown hair. "It's funny how fate works. I spent so long trying to find you..." Her voice quivered as tears welled up in her blue eyes. "And now that I have, we won't even get to spend one day together."

I let out a long breath. "Don't talk like that. We'll have plenty of time together—so much time that you'll probably get sick of me."

"How do you figure that? And for the record, I don't think I'd ever...I would never get sick of you."

"Because I have a possible cure?"

She cocked a brow. "You mean the experimental serum?"

"Yeah, I snatched a bag of vials from the lab."

She gasped. "Do you know what woulda happened if you'd been caught?"

“I don’t care. I’ll do anything to save you.” I wasn’t lying. I’d barely known the girl a few hours, but there was something about her, something worth saving, even at the risk of imprisonment or death. The funny thing was; I never thought I had that kind of sacrificial savior in me—especially for a girl I wasn’t even in love with. But after hearing her story, I knew there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her. She needed me, and I was going to be there.

“I can’t believe you’d go through all this for me, basically a stranger. It’s impressive. Thank you.” She softly touched my arm. “But those vials haven’t been tested, so there’s no guarantee.”

“Doc was sure this batch would work. He told me they’re on the verge of a major breakthrough, so it’s worth a shot—no pun intended.”

She smiled at my accidental joke. “Okay, if you say so. Give me the medicine. I’d rather be a guinea pig than one of those brain-munching things out there.”

“I can’t, Val. It’s too early. The virus has to be in your system for...well, for a set amount of time before the medicine has a chance to work.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the medicine couldn’t be given to her until after she turned into a zombie, a process that usually took about five days with the mutation of the virus now. Yeah, she has a right to know, but just not now.

“A set amount of time? How long before you can give it to me?” she asked, sounding a bit more panicked and demanding.

“Just a little while more.”

“You know I don’t have that kind of time.” She threw the bandage back on and pressed firmly on the tape. “Be realistic, Dean. You know the rules. I’ve been compromised. They’ll be in any minute to kill me, humanely of course.”

Her words pierced my heart, especially since I knew they rang of truth; if I didn’t intervene, she was doomed. “That isn’t happening! I’m here to break you out.” My plan was to sneak Val out, take her to the next sheltered city, and then give her a secret potion that the doc had been working on for months—the supposed cure to the nasty Necrotina virus that had spread across the U.S. and the globe, turning men, women, and children into zombie-like beings with the burning desire to feed on human flesh.

“Really?” She grabbed my arm as if I was kidding.

“Really.”

“Well, in that case, what’re we waiting for?”

“We can’t go until Lucas comes back and gives us the go-ahead. If we run into the general, our plan is screwed. It’ll just be a minute.”

She nodded and then placed her hands on her hips, her gaze imploring. “Is your brother going to help us?”

“I haven’t told Nick anything about you. He’d just flip out, and right now, we need him focused if we want our little plan to work.”

“I want to meet him. I need to meet him.”

“You will. I begged him to take us to the next city, told him we have to deliver some antibiotics for the doc.”

“Great. Think your smokin’ hot plan will work?”

“Trust me, nobody will suspect a thing.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“For starters, we’re flying.” Making it up to the roof was the only way to get past the heavy security. Nevertheless, even though flying was the safest option, in those days, nothing was a safe bet any more.

“Wait...did you say we’re flying?”

“Yeah. Didn’t I mention that Nick’s a pilot?” What I hadn’t told my brother was that I’d be hiding a secret stowaway in the back of the helicopter. Oh well. I’ll worry about that later. I was sure Nick would understand once I told him the entire story.

The door burst open, and Lucas peered in. “You guys ready? There isn’t much time.”

I motioned her out of the cell and pointed to a gurney. “Hop on!” I helped Val onto the gurney, then threw a sheet over her body up to her neck, mimicking medical protocol for handling the diseased on their way to the morgue.

“You’ve got to play dead,” Lucas said. “So no blinking.”

Val blotted the sweat from her brow.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I asked her, ignoring the sudden dread in the pit of my own stomach.

Her jaw clenched. “Don’t worry. I’ll bring home the Oscar. My life depends on it.”

As I wheeled her down the long corridor past a group of soldiers, I was hit with a rush of adrenalin like I’d never felt before. Danger aside, I was having the time of my life. I’d never wanted

my parents' version of the "normal teenage life". I had been thrust into the middle of a real live—or dead, if you think about it—zombie apocalypse, the kind people had been joking about and making videogames and movies about for years. Like my brother, who had chosen the military for his own adventure, I lived for that stuff, always seeking a thrill. I craved being where the action was, and finally I was there, immersed in a risky rescue.

When we approached the guards, a chill ran across my spine. We all knew that if we didn't get past that squad, it was all over before we even really got started.

"We're putting her on ice," Lucas said without so much as a nervous quiver in his voice.

The sergeant shook his head. "It just never ends, does it?"

"Nope." Lucas looked at me. "You got this from here?"

I nodded and moved down the corridor fast, my heart thudding against my chest. Once we were around the corner, I bolted. Metal wheels screeched against the tile floor in protest of the speed I was pushing, and I hoped Val didn't fly off the thing as we took the corners. The hall turned right, then a sharp left, and then a right again. "Okay, it's safe," I said, stopping. I started to strip off my white pants. Having Nick see me in scrubs would blow the entire plan, especially if he knew I was up to no good.

She sat up abruptly. "Please tell me you have clothes on under there."

"Of course. Now c'mon!" I helped her down and pointed. "The helicopter pad's this way."

We raced through the corridor and up the stairs and finally reached the helipad, where a healthy gust of wind rushed through my hair. Val jumped into the back of the military helicopter and lay down, and I threw a U.S. Army-issued olive green wool blanket over her.

"I have a little confession to make," I whispered between breaths, just in case Nick made a sudden appearance and caught me off guard.

"You secretly wear women's clothing?"

"Geez, no!" I couldn't stifle a tiny chuckle; the girl was funny, even in the most stressful of situations, and I appreciated that.

Her gaze narrowed. "Well, that's good to know. So what is it?"



"I didn't tell Nick about any of this. He has no idea you're coming whatsoever."

She let out a huff. "Ah. So when you said nobody will suspect a thing, you really meant nobody. Geez. I don't believe this. I thought he knew a girl was coming, but he hadn't been informed about my identity."

"Nope. Please just keep quiet until we get to the city, okay?"

"Fine," she mumbled, "but you should've told him."

A minute later, Nick jumped into the helicopter and put on his headset. "Ready, bro?"

I jumped into the copilot seat and buckled up. "Yep."

"You got the list of antibiotics we need for the doc?"

"Sure thing." My big brother always played by the rules. That made him perfect for the military, of course, but it was exactly why I didn't tell him about Val. He would've never agreed to sneaking her out of the city; he did nothing against the rules—ever. He lived by the moral code 100 percent. I don't know where he inherited that from, though, because I didn't mind bending the rules when it was appropriate.

He turned over the helicopter engine, and a few minutes later we lifted off and climbed slowly into the sky over Kelleys Island. The island wasn't far from Sandusky, Ohio. That's where Cedar Point was located. I had triumphantly ridden all seventeen roller coasters in that amusement park. Well, before everything happened, but I'll never forget the adrenaline rush I felt.

Kelleys Island was the perfect place to go for refuge because we were completely surrounded by water. Zombies couldn't swim, and as a backup, there were towering walls to keep the undead from penetrating the safe haven. That helped us all sleep easier at night. We had a nice cottage that was owned by my grandma. She lived next door in a spacious bed and breakfast that she ran before the zombie outbreak.

All the Lake Erie islands had become refuges for a multitude of people, and citizens were making lives there, living almost normally, with the exception of knowing that outside those walls, the hungry dead were walking. In order for everyone to maintain such a lifestyle, the city had very strict rules in place. One of those rules stated that if a person was bitten, execution was mandatory—without exception, whether the victim was the

mayor's son or the housekeeper's daughter. The safety of the many could not be compromised for the life of one.

"We should be back before supper," Nick called out.

"Yep!" I yelled over the noise of the helicopter.

Halfway there, I heard a loud pop, something like a car backfiring. The floor and walls began to shake and vibrate. My head jerked back and then snapped forward as the helicopter plunged, cutting through the white clouds like a knife. Looking out the window, I noticed a plume of dark smoke swirling outside the copter.

"Wh-what's happening?"

Nick fumbled frantically with the controls. "Malfunction. We're going down!"

"Mal-what?" I asked with a gasp.

### Chapter 3

The helicopter dropped in altitude at a pace that felt like light speed. A sudden loud banging, like hundreds of baseball bats smacking against us, echoed beneath my feet. Gripping the arm rests tightly; I looked out the window, though I shouldn't have. The copter skidded on its belly and skipped across the treetops. The vibrations shook the floor like an earthquake. I braced for impact, knowing that even if we somehow miraculously survived the crash, we'd still have to live through the flames and/or toxic fumes that were sure to envelop us. I shook away the thought of blackened, tangled, twisting metal burning in the charred trees. My head jerked forward as Nick clipped a row of towering trees on a thirty-foot ridge. The helicopter jerked, forcing the side of my head into the metal wall. In an instant, everything was dark.

I don't know how long I lingered in that quiet darkness, surrounded by nothing but tranquility and carelessness that had become a sure death sentence in the real world. As I hovered in that dark place, unconscious of my body, the softest whiff of fumes assaulted my nostrils, slowly but steadily jolting me back to the grim reality: We crashed...in Zombie Land.

With a groan, I opened my eyes and took a deep breath, but the fumes from scorching metal burned my lungs. Nick's big

head was staring down at me, and I pushed him away and vomited into the grass. Glancing around, I noticed Nick must have gotten me out and dragged me away from the wreckage. Vines, flowers, and towering trees surrounded us. We must've crashed into a forest.

My brother squatted beside me. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice wavering.

The blazing sun beat down on my skin. Spots danced in my vision, and my head ached, especially when I rubbed the bump that had formed on the side of it where I'd clunked against the dashboard. I'd never felt so crappy in my entire life, yet I knew we had to get moving. I slowly sat up and rubbed my pounding head. "I'm fine...I think."

"Fine is perfect, especially when we're lucky to be alive." He patted my back. "I tried the radio, but it's dead."

As my mind cleared, I suddenly remembered Val. Wait...only both of us? My jaw set as I peered around, frantically searching for her. "Where's Val?" I blurted before I realized what I was saying.

Nick regarded me from under drawn brows. "Val? You must have hit your head pretty hard. We crashed in the middle of freaking nowhere. Don't you remember anything?"

His words barely registered with me. Of course he couldn't check on Val or pull her from the wreckage. My idiot self didn't even tell him she was onboard. Ignoring my brother's questioning look, I jumped to my feet and dashed for the pile of burning metal. I twisted my body through a jagged opening and climbed inside, ignoring the shark-like metal teeth tearing at my skin and clothes, then dove through the fire and smoke, searching desperately for Val. My hands dived right in, ignoring the searing pain that ran up my arms from when I'd tried to shield myself against the dashboard during the crash.

"Dean! What are you doing?" my brother yelled after me. "I told you the radio's not working. It's fried, man, just like your brain."

Ignoring him, I kept looking. The black bag of vials rested upside down on the floor; I was relieved they were plastic and not glass, so they hadn't shattered, and there was still hope for Val. Coughing and choking, I continued to stumble through the wreckage.

"I'm not gonna be the one to tell Mom and Dad that your foolish crap got you killed!" Nick shouted again. "Get out now!"

Smoke poured from everywhere, and the crackle of fire unnerved me. Even though I couldn't see a thing, instinct commanded my hands to push through the debris. About halfway through, I thought I felt something warm under my touch. Val! Crap, she's not moving. Is she even breathing? "Val! Val!" I choked out. I could hardly breathe myself from the pain and smoke, so I dragged her toward me. I scooped up her seemingly lifeless body and shuffled out as fast as I could. "Oh, Val, I promise everything's going to be okay. Don't you go dying on me."

As I felt for a pulse on her neck, Nick ran up to us. "Who is that, and how'd she get aboard my bird?"

"Oh, thank God," I said.

"What?"

"She has a strong pulse."

Nick's brows drew together, darkening his features.

"Dean, what's going on? Who is she?"

Shaking my head to signal him that it wasn't the appropriate time for a million questions, I laid her down far from the wreckage, just in case it exploded like crashes always do in the movies. "I'll explain later."

Nick grabbed my shoulder. "No! You'll explain now. Who the heck is this girl, and why's she with us?"

I swung around and shot him a venomous look. "Chill out! Her name is Val, and she needs our help."

We held each other's gaze for what seemed like forever.

Then, as if something suddenly clicked, his shoulders finally dropped. "Val, huh? Well, is she okay?" He ran a hand across her forehead. "She's burning up." Then his gaze drifted to the bandage on her arm, and he peeked under it, gasping. "She's been bitten." Nick stared at me in disbelief. "What were you thinking? Sneaking a bitten chick out of the city? This is against protocol, Dean...not to mention you're gonna get us all killed with your knight in shining armor crap!"

"Let me explain..." I hesitated, gathering my words, but he cut me off.

"I don't want to hear it, and I want no part of this. You're helping a zombie victim. What's wrong with you? You know there's no hope for her." He punched the tree as sudden realization

hit. "Wait a minute. You lied to me, didn't you? You aren't taking antibiotics to the doc. You were just using me to help you drag her out of there! Do you ever use your effing head?"

I looked away. I felt so guilty for landing us all in such a dire situation, such a mess. "No," I whispered.

"No what? No you weren't delivering antibiotics, or no you never use your thick head?"

"Both, I guess."

"I don't believe it. This was nothing more than an elaborate hoax." He ran a hand through his dense hair, his eyes throwing daggers. "Tell me one thing. How long have you even known this girl?" he asked, sounding as if he dared me to tell him an answer he already knew and was disgusted by.

"Less than a day."

His lips pressed into a grim line; he was definitely losing his cool. "I put my neck on the line for you," he shouted. "I got us the special clearance to go, and for what? So you could pull a stunt like this, putting all our lives in danger for someone you don't even know?"

"Yeah, but would you have helped me if I'd told you about Val?"

He said nothing and just continued to stare at me with rage and disbelief storming behind his eyes.

"Well, would you have helped me or not?"

He waved his hands wildly. "No! Never! Not like this. Not in a million years! But still, I have connections. I woulda tried to talk to the general and help you guys out. There is a way to go about things and we have to follow orders. You just—"

"Wait, did you say you would have talked to the general?"

I snorted, my gaze fixing on the bare trees in the distance as I conjured the guy's image. He was about as helpful as a sleeping pill and just as dampening on one's hopes and dreams. "If that's the only kind of help you can think of, I'm glad I kept her hidden. We'd be burying her as we speak."

"Better than the fate you just handed to her—and likely to us by association. I don't know her, but I bet she wouldn't want to wake up as a flesh-eating monster."

"And she won't."

"Right. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to save her! You aren't the only one capable of doing something about this zombie nightmare, just because you enlisted."

"Save her? You? Please. We'll be lucky if we can even save ourselves. If we run across a herd of zombies, we're as good as dead. We're all alone out here. We've got no communication, no weapons except my handgun, and we're gonna be lugging an injured woman around—until she decides she wants a taste of us." He shook his head. "You risked my life for a girl you barely know, you idiot."

"I'm sorry," I muttered, irritated. "Seriously. How many times do I have to apologize before you believe me? I really was just trying to do what's right, trying to help someone."

"Apologies don't mean anything if you'd do the same crap over again...and you would."

He was right, and I couldn't argue with that, so I kept quiet.

Nick paced in a circle, his brows drawn. I'd never seen him so mad...or scared. "We're in North Carolina. And our original destination is 600 miles away. I say we head back home which is 500 miles away. It's going to take us three times as long to get back because we can only go certain routes." He shook my shoulder as his voice thundered again. "Do you have any clue how dangerous it is out here? Do you? Well, I guess you never had a reason to think about it, all holed up safe and sound on the other side of those city walls on an island."

I pushed him back as hard as I could. "Death and gore...it's all people have been talking about for months, but—"

His blue eyes were intense, and I knew with one flash of them how pissed he was at me. "But nothing! You have no idea. This land is crawling with zombies that want nothing more than to eat our brains. You've been sheltered in the city since the breakout of the virus. While you're out flirting with girls, going to school, and trying to live a normal life, the other troops and I have been out here in...in hell. I've seen it up close and personal, and I can tell you it ain't pretty. In fact, it's probably worse than those stories you've been hearing."

"You're treating me like a kid," I admonished; I hated when he did that.

"Fine. Well, if you want to grow up, now's the time." He thrust his gun into my hands. "You've always begged me to be part of the action. Here's your chance. You're eighteen now, and I've protected you from all this ugliness long enough."

"I don't need your protection, Nick. I can take care of myself—and of Val if I need to."

"Spoken like a true idiot. But anyway, keep that attitude. Even if it's a load of crap you tell yourself, you're going to need a bit of that cocky nonsense to survive."

"I know it's a hard, cruel world outside the city, but I can handle it. I'm a survivor!"

"Love your attitude. I just hope you're prepared because you're going to have to fight like you've never fought before."

"Fine. You want me to take down some zombies? I'm up for that." It wasn't that I'd had much experience at such a thing, but I was sure it couldn't possibly be that difficult to defeat a mindless army of already-dead freaks who walked around stumbling over everything. I'd been taking lessons at the shooting gallery all year, and I'd pretty much amazed myself.

"You'll have plenty of chances to mow down some zombies later, trust me. Right now, though, you have to get rid of our other little problem."

"What problem?"

"You've gotta kill her. You have to kill the girl and put her out of her misery."

"What the heck are you talking about? I'm not killing anyone unless they're dead already and trying to gnaw on my leg like a drumstick."

"But leaving her to her fate is just...it's cruel."

My heart lurched. "No way."

He rolled his eyes. "You're such a liar. You didn't just meet her. How long have you been hiding your secret girlfriend from us?"

Girlfriend? She's pretty and everything, but that's just wrong. "It's not like that, man. I really did just meet her."

"Here's your chance to be a man, Dean. A real man has to make tough decisions—decisions that will save his own life and the lives of his trusted comrades. This girl—this Val—will kill you in a heartbeat, giving no thought to all your pillow talk or those cute little hearts she scribbled around your name in her diary. Leaving

your friend here to face her fate is heartless and cold. If you care about her at all, whether you just met her or have been seeing her for months, please be a man and put a bullet in her head for all our sakes.”

I shook my head violently. He would never forgive himself, just like I wouldn’t.

“I’ve had to make hard decisions myself,” Nick continued, unfazed. “For goodness sake, I even walked in on my zombie girlfriend devouring a couple of my best friends. Shooting her was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do...but it had to be done, so I pulled the trigger.”

I shot him a hard look. “Who are you? You’re so cold, so heartless—not the big brother I grew up with. Protecting the city and killing zombies has made you a merciless killer.”

“We have to face the reality of the situation. I know what she’ll become. Except for the first night it happened, you’ve never seen it outside of television reports, but I have.”

“You’ve changed, Nick. When you suited up for the Army, you became...different. You talk about her becoming a monster, but maybe you should take a good look at yourself.”

He cocked a brow. “You’re calling me a monster? Really?”

I nodded. Even though I could see the way he clenched his fists, I kept going. “Just look at you. You’re somebody else. I don’t even recognize you anymore.”

His eyes narrowed into slits, as if he might argue for a moment, and then they softened with the pain of the truth. “Well, yeah. I guess being out here all the time...well, it changes you.”

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I just wanted to get Val and get out of there before the army of the undead showed up. “Val’s coming with us, and that’s final.”

“Dean, come on. Don’t you get it? Once she dies...” He threw his hands up in the air to make his point. “Look, I’ve seen it myself. When they come back—when she comes back—they aren’t people anymore. Give me the gun, and I’ll do it myself.”

“Don’t you dare!” I shouted. I wanted to pound the idiot so hard. “Listen—”

Grabbing the gun out of my hands, he cocked it and pointed down at Val’s head. “We’re doing her a favor. Besides, she’ll try to eat us the second we fall asleep. Is that what you want,



little brother? I mean, I'm sure you would love her to nibble on your ear and all, but not literally."

Ignoring his attempt at sick humor, I jumped into the path of the gun.

"You're pathetic," he shouted. "Just move out of the way."

I flung up my arms like a madman. "No! Put down the gun! You can't kill her."

Nick shook his head. "You're emotional, not thinking straight. She's as good as dead anyway."

I hadn't gone through all of that just to watch my brother murder the girl before my very own eyes. I lunged at him, but Nick twisted and dodged me; his military training had paid off. I lunged again and shoved him hard, and he threw me full force on to the ground. Crap!

Cool, calm, and collected, my brother aimed the gun at Val's head. Obviously, it wasn't his first time, and I was sure it wouldn't be his last.

"You can't do it," I shouted. "She's..."

"What, Dean? Why is this girl so important to you?"

I couldn't believe he was being so cruel, so nasty. "She's...we can't kill her because Val is our sister!" And just like that, I'd played my trump card. Even worse, I'd broken my promise to Mom not to say one word to my brother.

He lowered the gun as confusion washed over him. "What? Our sister? Either you're lying or you hit your head harder than I thought when we crashed."

"It's the truth, I swear." I sat up carefully, but I didn't inch any closer. I didn't want him to flip out and shoot her just because he felt threatened or even more pissed. "You pull that trigger, and you'll be murdering our flesh and blood, our very own sister."

The gun trembled in his hands. "I...I don't believe you."

"I know it's a lot to swallow. I just found out this morning. Mom and Dad have been keeping the entire thing a secret. You just can't—not now that we know who she is."

Nick met my gaze. "How do you know this is true? You got any proof?"

"For starters, look at her. Who else do you know with blue eyes and brown hair in those exact shades?"

He shifted his stance. "There are a lot of blue-eyed brunettes in the world. That doesn't mean we're all related."

“You know what I’m talking about. Look at her! She looks just like us!” I shouted. “Just look! She has Mom’s nose and Dad’s chin. Take a real good look. Deep down, you can’t deny it. Just open your eyes for once and ignore the rules and protocols. Some things aren’t so black and white, and you can’t just kill your sister because it’s in the rule book.”

He stared down hard at her, as if taking in every feature. “You’re...you’re right. She’s the spitting image of us. If it’s true, why didn’t Mom and Dad tell us? Why did they keep her a secret?”

I let out a long sigh. “They gave her away when they were teenagers. She’s two years older than you.”

“Two years, huh? That makes her twenty-four.” He pushed the gun into his waistband and then ran a hand through his hair as emotion overwhelmed him. “You shoulda told me right off the bat.”

“Like I said, I just found out. Besides, I promised Mom I wouldn’t say anything. She wanted to tell you in her own way...later today.”

“So how did you find out?”

“I overheard Val talking to Mom. I couldn’t believe it.” I pulled out a vial from my black satchel; it contained the precious green serum.

“You stole for her too?”

“She’s not just any girl. She’s our sister. Should we give her some and see if it works? Doc seems to think it will do the trick.”

“It could kill her, like the last guy,” he snapped. “I don’t know what to say, what to do. I do know we’ll never make it to a city before she turns into a full-fledged monster. Wouldn’t that look great on the front of the family Christmas card? Yeah, she’ll make a lovely addition to the family reunion next year.”

“We have to do something. Like you said, we can’t just leave her to her fate.”

He crossed his arms. “You hold the possible formula in your hands, right?”

“Right.”

“So why haven’t you put it to good use already?”

“Well, Doc says it won’t work during the transformation. We can’t give it to her until she actually becomes a zombie. That’s how the formula works. The problem was, General Lofters

planned to execute her right away, as soon as he found out she'd been bitten. And you know darn well there're no exceptions."

"So what do you propose? We wait, invite her to lunch, and then hand her a cup of tea? She'll rip our heads off as soon as she turns. I've seen how these things work...and eat. They're almost unstoppable."

"She couldn't wait to meet you," I said. "You're her little brother."

"Yeah, right. You mean she couldn't wait to eat me." He shook his head. "Play the guilt card, why don't you?" Then he swiftly picked up Val and cradled her close. "It's not safe out here."

"You think I don't know that?"

"Well, what are you waiting for? I've got sister dearest, so let's go."

I nodded and swung the black bag of vials over my shoulder. "You're going to love her when you meet her."

"Maybe, as long as she doesn't get hungry."

## Chapter 4

Nick and I took turns carrying Val. My arms clasped beneath her body to hold her in place. I struggled along the woody path, intent to keep up with Nick, even though he didn't seem to want to make it easy on me. Granted, he was still pissed that I hadn't told him about our sister right away, but knowing I had saved her life was my personal redemption and justification. I released a long, settling breath and moved the thicket out of the way; still, the deeper we moved into the woods, the denser the thicket became. To make matters worse, Val's long hair almost trailed down to the ground, and I had to be mindful of it so it wouldn't get caught in anything and hurt her. It seemed to me that she should have woken up already, but as the seconds and minutes ticked by, I began to worry that she might not ever wake up again.

"Are you okay?" Nick asked hesitantly after what seemed like an eternity. I noticed his worry lines straight away as his gaze shifted from Val to me then back to Val, as though he couldn't make up his mind whether to forgive me for the sake of our sister or keep being a jerk about it. "Let me take her," he muttered, grabbing her out of my arms.

I opened my mouth to thank him, but he'd already turned his back on me, leaving me standing in the middle of nowhere while he continued his march.

For the next hour, Nick carried Val without complaint. The bulging veins in his arms and neck told me his muscles were nearly at their point of fatigue.

Unable to watch his struggle any longer, I put my arms under her. "Hey, man. It's my turn again. Take a break and let me carry her for a while."

He jutted out his elbow, and ignored me as if I was nothing more than some pesky fly.

We spotted a trail and decided to follow it. It was a brilliant stroke of luck, because we soon came to a clearing, and our pathway ended at an overgrown dirt road. Nick was hopeful that there was a city nearby, so we started to walk off to the side.

I tried not to worry about Val, but it was difficult to put her failing condition out of my mind. “I wonder when she’ll wake up,” I said.

“Don’t go getting all worked up over it. This is completely normal.” He shrugged, as though he’d seen it all before—and he had. “During transformation, she’ll have these long sleeping spells.”

I nodded and then pointed at a green metal sign. “Next town’s just a mile away. We need to get our hands on some emergency supplies.”

“Yeah, especially food and water, but also a car and gas, if we can get our hands on any.”

“Guns and ammo too,” I chimed in.

“Right! A heck of a lot of ammo!”

A smile spread across my lips as my mind began to race, searching for ways we might get out of the predicament we found ourselves in. “If we can’t find guns and ammo, there’re always chainsaws. We could check garages.”

Nick shook his head. “Nah. They’re too noisy and might attract more zombies. Besides that, chainsaws weigh around ten pounds, compared to two-pound weapons like machetes, crowbars, trench spikes, or baseball bats. Remember, we’re looking for anything that can crush or decapitate a skull in one blow. If it can’t, there’s no use lugging it around.”

I was impressed; Nick sure knew his business. “Great tips, Mr. Zombie Hunter,” I said with a laugh.

“This is serious stuff, Dean. Let your guard down once—just once—and you’re a dead man. Even worse, you might get others killed in the process. Got it?”

I nodded, even though Nick’s back was still turned on me.

We walked as fast as we could, remaining silent. My nerves were on edge, and my ears strained to pick up any unusual sound, but the only noise I could hear was the steady thump-thump of my heart, beating like a drum in my ears.

I broke the silence first. “So, we’re gonna get ourselves a cool set of wheels? I like that idea.”

“It’s not exactly a shopping spree. Going into town at all is risky. Our goal has to be to get in, get what we need, and get out—as quickly as possible. You got that?” Nick said without turning.

“Yeah, I got it.” His camouflage shirt stuck to his sweaty back. I wished he’d let me take a turn carrying Val.

We walked for another minute or so before footsteps thudded behind us. I swung around, ready to battle whoever it was. As I squinted against the glaring sun, I made out two figures in the distance, running straight toward us. My first thought was to run away, but then I came to my senses. Zombies can’t run that fast. Who could that possibly be?

“Quick, take Val!” Nick handed our sister to me and whipped out his pistol.

I could only make out long hair, so I figured we were being approached by women. “It looks like a couple of girls, running from something. Put the gun down, Nick!”

Ignoring me, Nick held his weapon steady. “No! One of them has a weapon. Don’t you know the first rule of survival out here in Zombie Land?”

“Huh? But—”

“Take no chances!”

“Don’t shoot!” a female voice shouted.

“Drop your weapon!” Nick shouted.

She dropped it on the ground and raised her hands in the air. “It’s a stun gun.”

I craned my neck to get a better glimpse as she inched closer. Fear mirrored in her wide, green eyes. Her dark hair hung over her skinny shoulders in long, disheveled clumps. From the looks of her, she’d fallen in the mud while running. A pair of sandals dangled from her hands, and her bare feet were black and dirty.

“Please don’t hurt us!” she yelled again. “We’re already being followed by zombies.”

The cute brunette with blonde streaks was a teenager about my age. In spite of being sweaty and dirty, she still looked hot in plaid shorts and a black shirt that showed off her tan midriff and navel piercing. I tried not to stare, but she was gorgeous.

Nick refused to put his gun down. “Have you been bitten or scratched in any way?”

She gasped for air. “No! I swear we haven’t.”

He slowly lowered his arm, but hesitation was clearly written on his face. “C’mon then, we need to keep moving.”

The girl sighed relieved. "Thanks." A frown appeared across her forehead as she reached down and picked up her stun gun.

Nick resumed his previous brisk pace.

The girl rushed to keep up. "I'm Jackie."

My brother kept moving but shot her a glance. "Nice to meet you. I'm Nick, and this is my brother Dean."

"Nice to meet you," I said, stepping carefully over a few moss-covered logs. If I took one wrong step, Val would fly right out of my arms.

Jackie stomped down on a large fern in her path. "It's nice to meet you too. And this is my cousin, Claire."

I turned my attention to the redhead standing behind her, wondering how I could've missed her before. The girl was in her early twenties. She wore a sundress with a low V-neck and was pretty cute herself. Though she didn't speak, the look on her pale face told me all I needed to know: She was scared to death.

Nick broke through a patch of vegetation. "I wish we coulda met under better circumstances."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Claire said, pushing aside a dangling branch.

"Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay now," I said trying to ease her nerves.

"Yeah?" she said. "That's what the last group of people told me. You know what? They're all dead now."

"Really?" my brother mocked. He hated being underestimated. "Well, maybe next time, they should consider more powerful weapons than stun guns."

As we walked, Nick turned to meet the redhead's gaze. "How many zombies were on your tail?"

"A bunch—not sure how many, but there were a lot. It sucks so much. We've been safe for months. We had the perfect hideout, a mansion just south of here. We had food, clothes, supplies, everything, but they bombarded it yesterday."

That explained why the girls weren't wearing cargo pants and combat boots like Nick and I. Those sandals wouldn't do them any good if they stepped in a puddle of blood or had to climb over a few dead corpses. They'd made the mistake of getting comfortable, something no one could afford to do in Zombie Land. The only safe place was in a sheltered city, with a military

force backing it up—or even better, an island like the one I lived on back in Ohio.

Claire frowned as she peered from me to Val, who was still lying unconscious in my arms. “Who is she?”

“We survived a helicopter crash,” I said.

“That’s horrible,” Claire said. “I’m so sorry. I’m glad you were able to get out before it exploded.”

“That was you guys?” Jackie said as she briskly walked along. “We saw the flames and smoke at the bottom of the hill after we hiked up it, and then the helicopter—yours, I guess—burst into flames. We hoped nobody was hurt.”

“That crash is nothing compared to what we’re about to face,” Nick said.

We kept walking for a few minutes, following the road I hoped would lead to somewhere. Eventually, we rounded a bend and stopped to peek at a large, contemporary, two-story glass mansion. It seemed to catch the sunrays from every angle. Who did it belong to?

“We can hide in there, right?” Claire anxiously headed in that direction.

Nick darted after her. “Wait. I need to know exactly how many of those things were after you. ‘A bunch’ doesn’t cut it. Can you give me a more specific number? Five? Fifty? If it’s a herd, hiding in that house would turn out to be a suicide mission. We’d be trapped with no way out.”

“There were about four or five of them,” Jackie called back to him.

“Cool. That’s not a problem at all. I can definitely handle four or five,” Nick said, sounding sure of himself.

“Good thing we ran into you then.” Claire smiled shyly, her eyes taking him in. Clearly, had circumstances been different, she wouldn’t have hesitated to make it clear that she liked him, but flirting days were over. In the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the very hungry undead, there was little time for exchanging phone numbers. It was more important to tell each other how to avoid a zombie bite.

If Nick did notice the girl’s rising interest in him, he certainly didn’t show it. His commanding voice barked at them, “Just in case more come, can you girls fight?”



“Fight? Who do we look like? I’m not going anywhere near those nasty things!” she shouted.

My brother let out a long sigh and then met my gaze. “Wait here. I’ll check out the house.”

“I’m coming!” I argued.

“No! I need you here to watch Val. She’s out cold, in case you didn’t notice. Do you want something to start nibbling on her leg like a piece of fried chicken?” He clapped my shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

He headed off into the house, and my stomach clenched; I didn’t like him going in there alone.

“We can’t just wait out here forever,” Claire said. “Those things are coming!”

I shot her a look. “Aren’t you wondering why that door’s not locked? You want to run into a house full of zombies that’ll eat your brains?”

I could almost see a light bulb flickering to light above her head as realization struck her. “You’re right,” she said eventually.

Jackie met my gaze. “Thanks for looking out for us.”

“Not a problem.” I craned my neck to the left and right, spinning in a circle as much as the added weight of Val would allow me; though Val was thin, she was a dead weight. My gaze focused in the distance, taking in every detail that might give away a possible pursuer, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. The sky was blue, and the birds chirped away like they didn’t have a care in the world. It was hard to believe I could be facing a zombie at any given moment. It all sounded like some bad dream—like something I’d read in my comic books as a kid.

A few minutes passed, and my brother’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “The house is clear, but there aren’t any good weapons. Let’s head into the garage.”

“Sure,” I said.

Nick nodded. “Look, I need you out here to help me fight. You up for it?”

“Sounds like a plan.” I’d always wanted to jump into the action, especially when my brother came back and told me all about his zombie-fighting adventures. Finally, I was going to get that hands-on experience I’d been longing for. My heart pounded as realization kicked in.

“Let’s get Val inside where it’s safe,” I said, shuffling into the mansion. I didn’t have much time to check the place out, but it was pretty clear that the former residents had been loaded. If the place truly had been abandoned, we’d surely find some useful supplies to take with us.

After setting Val down on a yellow sofa, Nick motioned for us to go.

I turned toward the girls as I set my black bag down beside the couch. “Please watch Val and my stuff...and lock the doors behind us!”

“Got it. And don’t worry. I got your girlfriend’s back,” Jackie said.

Nick yelled for me to hurry, so there was no time to explain who Val really was.

“Wait!” Claire said. “Do you want my stun gun?”

“What good is that going to do?” I just sprinted out the door, calling the girls to make sure they’d lock it behind me, just in case they’d already forgotten or misheard my first instructions. I didn’t know them all that well yet, so I naturally didn’t feel like I could trust them with my sister’s safety. At the moment, all I could think of was protecting her so no one would get to her in the first place.

With one hard yank, Nick opened the sliding garage door. It was as loud as a flippin’ freight train, and I only hoped it didn’t draw any attention. Once it was open, I dashed into the garage and stumbled over a few bicycles that had fallen backward against some white wicker patio furniture. I caught myself by hanging onto a monster-sized grill.

“You okay, klutz?” My brother rolled his eyes.

“I’m fine. Missed a step, that’s all.” I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and regained my balance. Tools hung neatly on hooks along a giant pegboard attached to the wall next to a large workbench. Wrenches were hanging in order of size. The owner had certainly been organized, and I felt almost bad even considering messing up his neat little display by taking a wrench, but then something better caught my attention: a sledgehammer, sitting right there on the table, begging to be used. Granted, it wasn’t the most lethal weapon, but I figured it was better than a screwdriver.

“Good choice,” Nick said, “but remember, a zombie with a broken collar bone is still a zombie. Smash the skull and kill the brain.”

“Yeah, I know. Stab, smash, penetrate, crush, or puncture the skull. It’s pretty simple if you ask me.”

Nick frowned. “Don’t you dare get cocky! And never underestimate those freaks. Do you understand? The minute you do...you’re dead.”

“A little confidence never hurt anybody, Nick. It’s worth its weight in gold in any arena.”

He glared at me. “Dean!”

I could tell my brother wasn’t keen on involving me in an episode of Man Vs. Zombie, so I tried to reassure him. “I can do this, Nick. Really, I can.”

“If I didn’t think you could, little bro, I’d have left you in there with Jackie and Claire who are very ill prepared to live in the world we’re now faced to live in.”

“Hey, your gun’s loaded, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, but we’ve gotta save our ammo. I’ll only use it if I feel it’s absolutely necessary. Plus, we don’t want to attract the zombies with noisy gunfire. We can handle a few though. No worries.”

We left the garage and walked down the long, straight driveway. I spun toward my brother. “I don’t see anything.”

Just as my brother was trying to assure me that’d we’d have the upper hand, my jaw dropped. Something growled behind me.

## Chapter 5

An unmistakable menacing growl erupted from behind me. Crap. I held my breath and turned slowly. My hand clutched the sledgehammer more tightly as I mentally prepared myself for the unavoidable.

“Don’t try to be a hero,” Nick mumbled.

Unfortunately, his words didn’t quite register in my brain as I raised my gaze at the disfigured human being before me. The gaping mouth, full of black, putrid, rotting teeth and oozing gums made me want to take a step back, but I had to prove myself—to Nick as well as to my own ego. I stood my ground and forced the bile back down my throat. Ugly blue veins stuck out from a shiny bald head. Where strong, healthy arms had once been, there remained only holes, flesh eaten away by bugs. But what scared me the most were the eyes: human, yet dead. I swallowed hard and shook my head slightly. In that moment, facing that thing, I realized that the naïve confidence I’d had before was not enough. No way was I prepared for a real-life confrontation with the undead. Yes, I’d originally been thrilled about the opportunity to kick some zombie butt, but seeing them in person again was a totally different story. For a minute, I was reminded of the Ferris wheel incident all over again. That was the very first night people had become sick and turned into zombies. I froze in my boots, but not for long.

The creature began lumbering toward us. As it moved, thick, dark blood—something like motor oil—ran down its face, dripping off its rotting chin to the dirty shirt, the result of a recent head wound. The hole in its left cheek looked fresh, and clearly its last victim had fought back with a gun.

With my heart thumping, I zigzagged left, away from the bullet-ridden zombie. I grabbed my weapon, but before I could put it to any use, Nick leapt forward and chopped into the zombie’s skull. The left eye socket made a suction sound as the eye propelled onto the ground. The corpse stopped dead and then fell backward onto the ground.

I punched the air. Yes! My brother nailed it. He absolutely knew what he was doing, and he'd had plenty of experience. After all, he'd been out there fighting those things for a year now.

Nick raced over to the downed zombie and jerked out his axe; I cringed, hoping the zombie wouldn't spring back to life like they always do in horror movies. "Get ready!" Nick yelled. "More are coming."

"I'm ready." I bolted down to the end of the driveway. As I looked over my shoulder, I saw two more zombies to my left. One was heading toward Nick, and the other had its sights on me. I needed more preparation, more weapons, and more tips from my brother, yet I knew there was no time left; the zombie wasn't about to wait for me to get over my rookie stage fright. I knew I had to fight. Nick's and Val's lives depended on me.

Dragging its right leg, the zombie inched closer and then swung its rotting arms at me. He fought like a small child. I knew I could easily take the monster on, especially since everyone knew zombies had an IQ barely above freezing, and they were slower than constipated turtles.

It was such a grotesque foe. I stared into sunken white eyes with no visible pupils. It had green-tinted skin and dirty blond hair, and the red, exposed muscles around its mouth made me want to gag—or maybe it was the foul stench of dead and rotting flesh. He wore a dirty, ripped mechanic's uniform, and his nametag read "Bob". Poor Bob, I thought. How could this...this thing have been a human? Had he been in a Halloween costume contest, he might have won for his makeup application and most interesting contacts alone, but I knew it had nothing to do with elaborate Hollywood special effects. It was all too real, and regardless of what he'd been in his life, in his living death, Bob was an enemy, and I had to take him down.

Bob hissed, flashing his black, sticky teeth at me.

I was ready to give the mummified mechanic the biggest headache of his life. The sledgehammer smashed through meat and bones like they were breakfast cereal, sending a pang of pain through my upper arm as it reverberated from the impact. I pulled away and then slammed it into the creature one more time, this time with less thought and more power. The second time did the trick, and he dropped to the ground. Realization didn't kick in straightaway, but as my breathing quickened and my eyes focused

on the bloody mess at my feet, I knew I'd have to fight off nightmares for a while.

For a whole second, I breathed out, relieved and thinking it might just be over. But barely had I had time to congratulate myself for surviving before the sound of footsteps thumped behind me, warning me of someone's arrival. I spun around quickly, focusing my gaze on the tall figure hovering over me.

"Your first zombie kill." Nick slapped my back. "You did good, man! If the girls' headcount was right, there're about two left."

Adrenalin pumped through my veins. "Well, what're we waiting for? Let's go take down those slimy suckers!" I glanced around, and my senses went on full alert.

Another goon advanced toward me. This one was missing an eye. Its decomposing leg was covered with thin, blackened and bloodied shreds of rotting flesh, and severed bone was visible through its torn, tattered jeans.

I gagged.

"You got this, bro?" Nick asked.

I held my position. "Bring it on!"

"Good. I'll take the other one—the one coming from the right. The more we can knock out with the first strike, the better."

I wiped my brow with my sleeve. "Don't worry! I got this."

A female zombie stumbled over like a drunken sailor, letting out a gurgling moan as she held out her arms, as though she were a long-lost friend aiming for a hug.

"Sorry, honey, but you're not my type," I muttered.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure you like me for my brains and not my looks." Focusing on my target, I charged, running toward the zombie at full speed before I kicked it. As it fell on the ground, I swung my sledgehammer and dealt the final blow, crushing its skull. The zombie slumped into a messy heap at my feet, but I had no time to marvel about how easy it had been. As I glanced up, I noticed another one coming and another one after that. *Crap!* Where are they all coming from? The girls had told us that only a handful of zombies were after them, but there were far more than that. Nick was busy taking down one after the other, which meant I was on my own.

Another rotting corpse headed toward me on unbalanced feet. I struck him, but then another one came right from behind. I swung around and struck him in the nose as I turned my hips into the blow. He stumbled back. I raised my sledgehammer and readied myself to take down the next zombie. Suddenly, something grabbed hold of my ankle and started to pull with a might that didn't seem possible, especially from a dead thing. I fell backward on my butt, sending my weapon flying straight out of my hands. The zombie I thought I had killed wasn't actually dead. Crap! Nick was right. Never underestimate these things. I kicked and flailed, trying to smash its face, but it would not release the death grip it had on my boot; I had forgotten that zombies were not capable of feeling—even pain.

I assumed a combat fighting stance and immediately went for the closest zombie with scraggly black hair and a missing left arm. It was shirtless and flat out nasty. I wanted to gag at the missing chunks of skin that were missing from its bulbous stomach, and the ropes of intestine that dangled, dragging behind the man with every lumbering step. I struck it hard in the nose, sending the shattered bone up into the thing's brain. The man slumped to the ground with a gurgling sound in his throat.

Another one came. I swung. The sickening sound of shattering skull seemed to reverberate throughout the air. I watched it tumble forward, and then brought my booted heel down hard on its head.

From a distance, ghouls staggered toward me in every direction. Their zombie moans made the hair on my neck prickle. "Remind me why I wanted to do this again," I muttered. My brother didn't answer. A zombie snapped at my boot like some kind of wild animal and bit me. Luckily, its teeth couldn't penetrate leather. Or so I hoped.

A shot echoed in the crisp morning air, and the zombie suddenly let go of me. Its brains seemed to explode from its head, painting the grass in a fresh coat of gore. Nick fired four consecutive shots and took down the zombies closest to me, but others kept coming.

I jumped to my feet, scanning the grass for my weapon. A glint of light shone off to the left. I scrambled over and picked up the sledgehammer I'd dropped when the zombie had attacked me.

After three more shots cut through the silence, Nick yelled, "I'm out of ammo!"

My heart thundered against my ribs. I wanted to play action hero, but reality set in: I couldn't do it on my own. We were outnumbered. "Nick!" I shouted. A zombie's head flew off its skinny neck as Nick's blade whacked through its throat. My heart almost burst through my chest as I watched a dozen zombies surround him. There was no doubt he was tough, but there was no way even he could take on so many at once.

The rotting lady in the red dress sneered and growled as she moved toward me. The left side of her face, from cheek to throat had been ripped away. I had nothing but my wits about me. Well, that and a wicked sledgehammer. The decomposing woman half staggered toward me. I took her down in one quick blow.

My fingers tightly wrapped around my weapon as one of those things growled behind me. I spun around. Black slime oozed from its mouth, and for a split second, I stared into its lifeless eyes. Moaning in a grotesque fashion, it inched closer to me, but I was ready. Before I even got a chance to swing, a loud crack sounded in the air, and the zombie collapsed in front of me.

I glanced at the house. Val stood just outside the door, a rifle tucked into her shoulder as she squeezed out one shot after another, taking down the rest of the undead army like some kind of female gunslinger. If Nick had ever doubted her being our sister, she had just proven his doubts wrong. Without hesitation, I started pounding skull after skull.

She smiled at me and then turned her attention to Nick, who looked stunned.

"Camouflage gear and combat boots?" she asked. "You're military all the way, aren't you?"

"You know it."

"I figured as much."

"Where did you find a rifle?" Nick asked.

"There's a false wall in the bedroom closet. It's loaded with guns and ammo."

"That's awesome!" I said.

Nick flashed his famous white smile. "You're as resourceful as me."

Val shrugged. "Well, what can I say? I'm the curious type."



“That was a compliment,” Nick said, slapping her shoulder slightly, “because I’m pretty resourceful myself.”

A hue of red flushed across her cheeks. “Uh...okay. In that case, thanks.”

Never much one for giving out words of praise, Nick rubbed the back of his neck, slightly embarrassed. “Uh...I didn’t have too much time to look around. You were passed out, and I was worried for everyone’s safety with all those zombies around, and—”

Val grinned. “No need for explanations. We’re all on the same team. But if I were you, I’d go upstairs and get some more ammo for your gun.” She then reached down and threw me a handgun, which I caught in one swift move.

She regarded me from under lowered brows. “You know how to use one, right?”

“Yep,” I said. “I’ve been training at the shooting gallery for some time now.”

“Good.”

Nick put his gun away. “Thanks for saving our butts back there.”

Her blue eyes twinkled. “Hey, what are long-lost sisters for?”

We both smiled.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Nicholas,” she continued.

“Please call me Nick. I-I don’t even know where to begin. I have so many questions. This entire thing has totally taken me by surprise.”

She grinned.

Nick ran up to her, hugged her tight, and spun her in a circle. “Dean told me a little, but not much.”

“We’ll catch up later, huh?” she asked.

He nodded, and then motioned around to the dead zombies on the ground. “I didn’t know I had such a tough sister.”

I laughed and joined in on the reunion.

Val held our hands as tears welled up in her eyes. “I’ve waited so long for this moment. I’ve met my biological parents, and now I’ve met both of my siblings. This is the best day of my life! I couldn’t possibly let those monsters take that away from me.”

My brother tucked his gun away. “Girl, we crashed in the middle of Zombie Land.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re together, and that’s all that counts.”

Even though it had barely been a day, I already loved her just as much as I loved Nick. I knew how important it was for us, a family, to stick together through thick and thin. I did have to wonder, however, if humanity would even survive the cruel plague of reanimated cannibals. It wouldn’t be easy, but deep down, I felt we’d somehow make it. We had too; failure was absolutely not an option.

“Hey, do you have that cure with you?” Val asked. “Now might be a good time to use it.”

She wanted to use it because she was slowly beginning to change; I could see that much in her eyes. I thought about how I could break the news and soften the blow, but it would be like trying to hit someone gently with a battle axe. “I do, but I can’t give it to you yet.”

Mistrust filled her voice. “Why not?”

I realized I’d have to tell her delicately, so she wouldn’t flip.

“You’re going to have to let the change occur first, become a zombie,” my brother chimed in. “I’m sorry, because it’s going to suck, but there’s no other choice. As much as I detest it, we’ll be there for you. When the time is right, I’ll give you the antidote.”

Val’s jaw dropped, and various emotions crossed her features, from dread to disbelief, then back to dread.

I elbowed my brother. “I was going to tell her in a nicer way than that,” I half-whispered.

“There’s no way to sugarcoat it, bro. She needs to know the truth.”

“But I...I can’t...I don’t want to turn into one of those things!” Val’s eyes brimmed with tears.

“It’s the only way,” I softly said, rubbing my hand up and down her back, which was about all I could do. As much as I wanted to help, I was helpless. I couldn’t even find the right words to soothe her, if soothing was even possible at that point.

I expected a fit or lots of crying. She did neither. She just spun around and headed toward the house, her long hair dangling behind her like a curtain.

“Wait!” I shouted, running after her. “Where’re you going?”

“I need to punch something, preferably a wall.”

I looked at Nick. “Yep, she definitely has our temper.” Of course, if I’d have been faced with the same dilemma, I’d probably have wanted to start punching holes in things too.

“C’mon,” Nick said. “Punching a wall will solve nothing. Trust me on that. I’ve only done it a million times. Some of the holes I’ve left aren’t pretty, and my knuckles weren’t either. Like I said, it accomplishes absolutely nothing.”

She stopped and turned slowly, her eyes ablaze. “Fine! Then I’m going to give those chicks you picked up a piece of my mind.”

“Geez. You should’ve just let her go hit the wall,” I mumbled.

She threw her hands up in the air. “You two left me in the hands of complete and utter idiots. Had I not woken up, we’d all be dead!”

I hated to admit it, but she was right. Even if the girls didn’t want to fight, they could’ve been our eyes and ears and let us know which way the zombies were coming from so we wouldn’t have had to worry about sneak attacks. Instead, they just hid inside the house after we risked our lives to help them find shelter.

“You’re angry at us,” Nick yelled, “not them. You’re mad at the way the cure works. I understand, because I’d be pissed, too, but you can’t take out your anger on them.”

“Who in the heck dresses fashionable in the middle of a zombie apocalypse anyway?” she said. “Look at me. I’m wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt, and some great running shoes to get me the heck out of Dodge should the need arise. Really, who are they trying to impress? You can’t turn on a freaking zombie, no matter how cute your outfit is!”

“Maybe they have a thing for Bob.”

“Bob?”

I pointed down at the dead zombie in the mechanic’s work suit. “At least that’s what his name tag says.”

She rolled her eyes, obviously not finding my joke very funny, and I really couldn’t blame her for being in a bad mood. We didn’t even know if the cure would work. If I was a nervous wreck

myself, since the thought of losing my only sister scared me to death, I knew she had to be even more on edge.

“Those little fashionistas hid in the house like a couple of scared mice,” roared Val before she slammed the door, beyond pissed.

I certainly hoped those girls had found some weapons, because it seemed my sister’s wrath might be more fatal than any brain-devouring zombie.

## Chapter 6

Nick and I hung outside for a few minutes, and I listened to his monologue as he went over our game plan. I tried to listen as closely as I could, but after a while, I couldn't help but interrupt his train of thought.

"Those zombies looked like animated corpses, like something out of a horror movie. It's just...unbelievable."

"I think you're still high from all that adrenaline. As you can see, it's not all movie magic getup. It's the real thing. We're fighting against the living dead here."

I shook my head, trying to comprehend his words.

"They're pretty easy to take down when they come at ya solo."

"Like I said, never underestimate them. All it takes is one scratch or bite. We lost Martin from just one tiny prick from one of their nasty nails."

I nodded, thinking back to the one guy everyone on our street liked, Martin. We had grown up together and gone to school together, where we'd been trained in combat, since that had become customary. I still couldn't believe he was gone. "I know," I said, eager to change the subject before my emotions got the better of me and I slumped into that depressing dump I always sank into when I thought of poor Martin. "That's why I was freaking out when a zombie bit my boot."

Nick's eyes grew wide. "Why didn't you tell me?" He knelt down and started examining my scuffed-up boots.

I pushed him away, a bit rougher than intended. "Hey, I'm fine. He didn't get through."

Nick stood. "You're pretty lucky. Their teeth can cut right through leather."

"Yeah...lucky."

His gaze pierced mine. "Don't ever let a zombie get that close to you ever again."

I returned his glare, ready to stand my ground if need be.

"It wasn't like I planned it."

"Yeah? Well, that's what Martin said too," Nick said dryly.

We had both been through so much personal loss: friends, comrades, and even Nick's girlfriend Darla, whom he was forced to shoot. But while I liked to talk about things to unburden my heart from all the fear and guilt over being alive while others were dead, Nick insisted on bottling up his pain, which consequently grew stronger by the day. "I know Martin was your friend as well," I said slowly. "You've been through a lot. I-I'm sorry I called you a monster back at the crash site. I guess I overreacted. I just couldn't believe you'd want to kill our sister."

He hesitated a moment before answering. I could see his emotions on his face, playing out like a film, right before my very eyes. He felt guilty, but at the same time he also felt it was his responsibility to take on the lion's share of work. "It's okay. I've never claimed there isn't any blood on my hands. I'm probably everything you said and more, but it's what I've had to do to stay alive and defend the city...to survive."

I cocked a brow. "We're cool then?" I asked, knowing we'd just about reached our limit of sentimental, emotional talk.

He gave me a fist bump. "Yup, little brother. Cool as ice."

As we took a quick walk around the house, I noticed two four-by-four Jeep Wranglers in the back yard. "They're perfect! I love Jeeps, man. It's the perfect go-anywhere, do-anything vehicle."

"No off-roading, Dean," Nick said. "We don't want to give the zombies an advantage over us. We stay on open, paved roads. Got it?"

I nodded.

My brother's gaze darted toward the house. "The first thing we need to do is see if anyone lives here. We're all fighting to survive out here, and we have to learn to respect each other, so no stealing. If the owner has abandoned this place or is, uh...gone, then the trucks are up for grabs."

On first glance, the house had looked abandoned to me. I felt confident that we'd soon have ourselves a set of wheels as I swung the door open. I knew the place had to be unoccupied because dust was caked on the furniture and mirrors. The fireplace wasn't stocked with wood and was ice cold to the touch. The living room was spacious and furnished in ugly yellows, antique furniture, oak floors, and cream-colored walls. A mirror hung over two large yellow sofas. I listened to Val going off on the gals and had

absolutely no doubt she was my sister; she acted exactly like Nick—and maybe a little like me too.

Claire ignored Val and kept playing a simple tune on an ebony grand piano sitting in the corner of the room.

“You’re a natural,” I said.

She closed the lid of the piano as tears welled up in her eyes. “I know now isn’t the right time to be playing. I just couldn’t help myself. That was the last song my mom and I played before we got separated.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, hoping the words would convey just how much I meant them.

She walked away, and my gaze drifted over to the spiral staircase that led up to the second-floor balcony, which stretched across the room with a glass railing. I glanced around for Jackie, who was sitting on the sofa, sipping on a can of Pepsi. My eyes roamed over her perfect body. I knew Val hated her outfit, but it sure showed off her incredible curves and long, pretty legs. I was mesmerized.

Val stared at me for a while, her mouth pressed into a thin line. For a moment, I thought she wanted to say something, but then she just shook her head, as though she found it a hopeless cause to share what was on her mind. She turned her back on me, hesitating, then poured bottled water over a towel and handed it to me. “Clean that thing off! And don’t think I didn’t notice your drooling.” She pointed down at my sledgehammer.

I wasn’t sure whether she meant I should clean it or that she thought she’d seen me drooling over it. My gaze wandered from the damp towel to the sledgehammer, and a smile crossed my lips. “I didn’t realize a sledgehammer could be so sexy,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m pretty sure you know what I meant.”

“Thanks. I know you mean well.” With a nod from her, I started to clean all the zombie guts off the hammer.

Val had calmed down some, but I could tell my sister’s theatrics weren’t over. “When did you have time to change that dress of yours?” she asked Claire, her voice sweet as honey. “While I was out there saving our butts?”

“It was bloody!” she yelled back with mock disgust.

“If all you care about is looking cute, you’ll never survive out here! How far do you think you’ll get in flimsy sandals?”

Jackie cut in, "Hey, if we'd have known zombies were about to break in and we'd end up running for our lives, trust me, we would've chosen other shoes."

Val set her bottled water down on the coffee table. "If you're going to hang with us, you darn well better get yourself a decent pair of tennis shoes...and next time, you better have my back."

"We will," Jackie said. "We'll go find some jeans and better shoes upstairs. I think I saw some close to our size."

"Why do I smell perfume?" Nick asked.

Val motioned to the girls. "These geniuses found a bottle upstairs and slathered themselves with it."

"We were trying to get the smell of blood out of our hair and clothes!" Claire whispered, the telltale hue of red covering her cheeks. "We've been through a lot, so please, can you just...?" Her voice trailed off insecurely.

I regarded her intently. The way her gaze shifted across the floor uncomfortably told me she knew she should've been out there helping us instead of cleaning up, but either she couldn't help herself or it was her way of dealing with the prospect of an untimely death. Who can blame her?

Val looked at me and shrugged. "Can you believe these girls? How are they still alive? I'll tell ya. They've been riding everyone's coattails and—"

"Val, that's enough," Nick said as he sipped on a can of warm Pepsi from the pantry. "These girls have lost people they've cared about. They're in shock and doing the best they can. Besides, they're the least of our worries right now. Let's scavenge the house for supplies."

I nodded. "Yeah, let's look for any possible weapons, canned food, bottled water, and medical supplies," I suggested, knowing Val's dressing needed to be changed as soon as possible.

"You guys are right." Val stood and walked over to the glass wall. "There're Jeeps outside. Whoever lived here might've tried to make it out alive, but they obviously didn't, which explains why the place is deserted. Let's load the Jeeps up with survival gear and get our butts on the road before the same fate befalls us."

"We need to hurry, people," Nick said. "Lingering in this fancy glass house makes us sitting ducks. The only way to stay safe is to keep moving."



Claire suddenly cleared her throat. "Why can't we all just stay here? You killed the zombies who were chasing us."

Val shot her an irritated look. "You're crazy! You might think you're safe in here, but you're not. You can do whatever you want, but we're not staying here. Come with us if you want, or stay here and play dress-up and die."

"What makes you such an expert? After what we've seen out there, you couldn't pay me to come with you, and surely not if you keep being bossy."

"Bossy? Me?" Val looked at me like she was shocked to be called such a name. "Am I bossy?"

I bit my lip. "Uh...well—"

"Well?"

"Maybe just a tad."

Val blew out a breath and turned back toward Claire.

"Trust me, the feelings are mutual. I'll drop you off in a heartbeat at the first safe place we find."

Claire tossed her long red hair over her shoulder. "I'm not hitching up with a new group. I've been there, done that. The last one couldn't protect us, and I doubt you can either. My new game plan is just to stay here." She nudged Jackie's arm. "This is a great hiding place, right?"

Before Jackie could answer, Val cut in. "Suit yourself. It's your funeral. But we're outta here, right, guys?"

Nick carried a case of bottled water. "Definitely. Staying here is like signing your own death certificate, especially with these glass walls. Besides, you girls don't even know how to defend yourselves."

"I packed up all the guns, but I left two out for Claire and Jackie," Val said, pointing to the fireplace mantel. "I also put a bunch of holsters on the table for everyone. Well, I think Nick has his own. But anyway, give Claire and Jackie one, and while you're at it, maybe you should give them some pointers."

Claire rolled her eyes. "I'm really not into violence."

"I don't care what you're into. It's all about survival now," Val said. "Cause those things will tear you apart. They'll munch on your flesh—gnawing, biting, and chewing—all while you're still alive watching."

Jackie threw a couch pillow at Val. "C'mon! That's gross!"

Val placed her hands on her hips. “No, that’s reality. You better get hip with the times, ‘cause we’re living in a post-apocalyptic world now. This isn’t some pretty world filled with colorful daffodils and butterflies. It’s do or die.”

“Does your sister think she’s Lara Croft or something?” Claire asked.

“We’re giving you some guns,” Val said, turning to face her.

She shook her head. “No!”

Val met her gaze straight on. “Yes. You have the right to defend yourself! If a zombie crosses that line, you’re gonna need an equalizer.”

Claire rolled her eyes as Val continued.

“Now, we’re gonna give you a quick lesson, Glock 101.” Val picked up a pistol and handed it to the stubborn girl. “Take it! I’m not leaving you here defenseless, Princess.”

“Well, I’m not going to let you teach me anything,” Claire hissed.

Val motioned toward Nick and me. “Fine. We’ve got two capable guys here. Pick one to coach you. Let me tell you something, Little Miss Thing, zombies don’t discriminate, and they’ll...”

I tuned her out, glanced at the sunset, and picked up a Glock 26 Gen4 from the mantel for Jackie. She squeezed past Claire, making her way out into the hall. Through the open door, I watched her enter the kitchen. It was the perfect opportunity to have a minute alone with her.

“They need to take a gun and know how to use it. Best-case scenario, they’ll smarten up and come with us. Try to talk some sense into her, Dean,” my brother said. “I’ll work on Claire.”

Claire stepped toward him. “Hey! I’m right here you know! Quit talking about me like I’m not even in the room.”

“Claire...” he began as I walked out of the living room.

I needed to convince Jackie somehow to leave with us, but if she refused, I still wanted her to have a weapon so she could take down any of those undead freaks who ventured near the house. I knew we couldn’t actually fire off bullets without attracting every zombie within miles, but I needed to teach her the basics. I found her standing near the kitchen counter, her arms pressed against the

smooth Formica, her forehead creased with fine lines from anger and worry.

Her eyes lit up the second I walked in, and her forehead smoothed, as though all her worries disappeared the moment she saw me. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

She held my gaze. “What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I asked.

“I’m not so sure your girlfriend would like that. She might kick my butt and feed it to the zombies.”

“Val’s not my girlfriend,” I said.

“Your brother’s?”

“Nope. She’s our sister.”

“I didn’t know that, Dean,” she whispered. “What do you have there?” she asked, looking down at my hands.

“If you’re going to stay here—which I still don’t think you should—you’re gonna need this.” I handed her the gun.

She bit her lip and ran a hand across the smooth chrome.

“Dean, I can’t—”

“Humor me.”

She nodded.

“Okay, first rule,” I said. “Never place your finger on the trigger unless you’re about to fire. Pretend the gun is loaded at all times.” I took out the magazine and unloaded the gun. Then I showed her how to properly hold the Glock pistol and lock her arms.

Jackie’s trembling hands reached for the gun. She wrapped her palm around the grip and secured her hold with her other hand. “It’s empty, right?”

“Yes, but it shouldn’t be. A zombie can come at any given minute. Always be prepared.”

She slammed the magazine in with shaking hands. Cocking the slide back, she successfully chambered a round. She slowly raised the gun and put her finger on the trigger. “I watched those things tear apart a sixty-five-year-old woman right before my eyes.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “She was in our group...my friend.”

I softly touched her back. “Jackie, I’m so sorry.”

“I couldn’t do anything to help her. Maybe if I’d have had a gun like this, I could’ve done something.” She inhaled and let it out slowly. “Your sister’s right. I don’t want to watch a zombie

munch on me while I'm still alive, screaming, and I don't want to watch another friend die in front of me. I'll give this gun thing a try."

"That's all I'm asking."

She gripped the gun tightly and pointed straight ahead at the fridge. "You know what?"

"What?"

"The next zombie I meet will die."

I didn't want to point out the irony of her words: Technically, they were dead meat already, but I got her point anyway. She wanted them "dead" as in unmoving, shapeless heaps. We all wanted the same thing. I knew she meant every word because the pain was evident in her voice. I couldn't imagine losing the ones I loved in such a horrible way. "I'm so sorry for your loss," I said.

"She's in a better place, and so are the others. Bless their souls." She paused for a moment and then met my gaze. "Teach me, Dean. I want to learn everything. From this moment on, I refuse to run anymore."

I came from behind and held her arms. I couldn't help noticing her perfume, which smelled so good. "Stand facing the target with your feet shoulder-width apart."

She glanced at me.

I smiled. "Now bend your knees slightly." I inched closer and said in her ear, "Extend the handgun toward the target, keeping your arms straight and locked. Got it?"

"Yeah."

I shot her a grin and continued with the lesson. "Okay. Now, with your shoulders squared, your arms form the perfect position for shooting."

"I can do this," she said with confidence.

"Hold the gun on target," I said in her ear. "If it's a zombie, aim for the brain and shoot. It's the only way to kill it. If that's not comfortable for you, I can teach you another way to hold the gun."

"Show me."

I nodded. "Okay. Stand like you're ready to hit someone."

"Like a boxer?"

"Exactly. Now, angle your support arm shoulder toward your target." My hands moved across her body to help guide her.

“Okay.” Her contours smoothed under my touch as she followed my instructions.

“Bend your knees while keeping your body weight slightly forward. Grasp the gun using opposite pressure with both hands. Keep both elbows bent, with your support elbow pointing downward.”

She spun around. “I think I can do this.”

My eyes drifted down to her flat, toned stomach. I could have sworn she caught me looking at her belly ring, but I tried to change the subject quickly. “Look, I’ve given you some really good pointers, but I’m afraid it’s still not enough to survive out here. Why don’t you come with us?”

She set her bottle down. “Why?”

“Because it’s dangerous. You know you can’t stay here.”

She let out a long breath. “Claire’s right. Getting together with another group won’t guarantee our safety. You could stay here with us.”

“There’s safety in numbers, and staying here is crazy,” I said.

“You don’t think we can make it on our own?” she asked.

“Not without concrete walls and an army.”

“Do you think we could just stay for the night? I know Claire will see things differently in the morning, and so will I. We’re just so tired after everything we’ve been through.”

Nick peeked his head in. “Absolutely not! This place isn’t safe. We need to get some supplies and load them and our butts in those Jeeps.” He grabbed my shoulder. “Get moving now!”

## Chapter 7

Val, Nick, and I quickly loaded up the two Jeeps with bottled water, a case of Pepsi, and canned food we found in the pantry. I also packed the black bag holding the precious vials. I started up both Jeeps; they ran great. Val found a few red plastic gas cans in the garage next to the lawnmower, which was great; we didn't want to stop anywhere if we didn't have to. It would be wise to get a head start, with nothing to slow us down.

We were all set to go, but my heart sank. I couldn't imagine leaving Claire and Jackie to their fates. I just hoped I could convince them to change their minds—especially Jackie, who I was really taking a liking to. Nick gave me ten more minutes to try and convince her to go with us. I found her in the humongous master bedroom on the bottom floor. What made the room really neat was that it extended from the house with three glass walls and a glass roof. “Hey,” I said, noticing she had cleaned up and changed into new clothes. They were a size too big, but they were much more practical than what she'd been wearing earlier. I was sure Val would be impressed with her blue jeans, white t-shirt, and black tennis shoes. She'd also put her hair up in a long ponytail. “We're getting ready to leave, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Don't worry. I've got the gun you gave me.” Jackie glanced out through the spacious glass wall, watching as the setting sun flooded the sky with brilliant colors. She placed her hand on the clear glass. “It's so beautiful, isn't it?”

“Yep. Something like that could even fool you into thinking the world hasn't gone to hell in a hand basket.”

She frowned and sat down on the bed. “I was trying to block all that out, if only for a minute.”

I sat next to her. “This is a cool bedroom. It's kind of like a glass cube.”

She glanced up. “Yeah. I bet it's neat to see the stars shining at night.”

I stared at her black hair with blonde streaks. It was striking, original, and beyond cute. I loved her bold look. “So, what's your story?” I asked.

“My story?”

“Yup. Everyone’s got one, right?”

“Right, but I guess right now I’m only concerned about the ending.” She sighed. “I just want to live another day. Tell me, Dean, is it really possible to survive in such a hostile, undead world?”

“Yes, and that said, I have to make one last-ditch effort to try and convince you to change your mind and come with us. We’re leaving in a few minutes.”

She continued to stare off into the sunset. “Give it your best shot.”

“Jackie, there are plenty of cities out there that are still safe, like the island in Ohio where Nick and I live. I’ve been there since the outbreak, with no problems. The zombies aren’t immortal beings. They can’t bust through brick walls or get through our military. We have machineguns, bombs, and all kinds of ways to stay safe. Supplies are flown in every day to help people survive the battle.”

She met my gaze. “If it was so great, so safe, then why’d you leave?”

“I didn’t—not on purpose anyway. Our helicopter crashed on a trip for make-believe supplies.”

She cocked a curious brow.

I continued, “I know it sounds weird, but it’s a long story. I can tell you all about it on our road trip.” I was pretty cocky and certain she’d change her mind and come with us. By the twinkle in her eye, I could tell she liked me, at least a little.

“I’m sorry you crashed.”

“It was what it was,” I said. “I can’t cry about it now. I need to stay focused and keep moving.”

“Can we ever defeat these things? I mean, do you think our lives will ever be normal again?”

I reached for her hand. “Yes, I believe we will prevail. Zombies will die off, and eventually their bodies will rot away. All we have to do is outlive the infected. Yes, there are overwhelming odds stacked against us, but we can do this. I believe with all my heart that humanity can overcome anything, as long as we don’t lose hope.”

“So you’re heading to a safe haven, one of the walled cities?”

“Yes. We can hold out in the fortresses created around the United States. Zombies will run out of food and die, and we’ll get our world back. We just need a little time.”

She nodded. “You make a good point.”

“Then come with us. I’m sure Claire will cave once she sees you’re serious about leaving.”

A thump on the window drew my attention.

Jackie jumped. “What was that?”

I turned and couldn’t believe my eyes. A zombie with rotting flesh and oozing eyeballs was hitting his head against the glass. He shot me a stone-cold, glazed-over look that said in not so many words, “I want your brains...now!” The stupid thing seemed stumped as to why he couldn’t pass through the transparent glass wall.

Speechless, Jackie pointed to the other glass walls.

I gasped. Crap. Another one stared me straight in the eyes. This one looked like a raccoon, with blackened skin around her eyes; she definitely had that I-just-got-out-of-the-grave look about her. The dead seemed to be coming out of the woodwork like cockroaches, multiplying before our very eyes. Our beautiful view of the sunset had turned into a grotesque nightmare.

I stood, but my sudden movement made them moan and groan even louder. Decaying human hands pounded on the glass walls from all three sides of the bedroom, and my heart raced. Brain-hungry walking corpses staggered around with white, sunken eyes and green, mottled skin. It was downright disturbing. I sucked in a deep gulp of air.

The glass shook, and I wondered if it would shatter. I gasped as bloody handprints streaked across the glass. Windows are notoriously easy to break, but I wondered how well a glass wall would hold up. I sure didn’t want to find out.

I backed up slowly, focusing on the zombie who was making the most fuss. Even though he had decayed hands with exposed tendons, he still kept pounding. I cringed at his blue-green veins and the open flesh wounds on his forehead, cheeks, and neck. Through a tear in his shirt, I noticed an exposed ribcage with decaying flesh hanging off of it in grotesque shreds. The right pant leg was also torn to reveal a long white femur. Even a famous horror writer couldn’t have invented anything as horrible as the very real monster I was staring at.



“Let’s go!” Jackie said, grabbing my shoulder.  
“Nick!” I yelled. “We’ve got to go...NOW!”

## Chapter 8

With the orange light of the setting sun as a backdrop, the zombie looked like a creature out of a horror movie. His decaying palms pressed against the smooth surface of the glass wall, and his open mouth dripped with spit and blood as his dead gaze focused on me, making me flinch. For a whole second, I could barely breathe, let alone form a coherent thought in my head, and then it dawned on me that we had to get the heck away from there.

I grabbed Jackie's hand and headed down the hallway, calling as loudly as my lungs would allow, "Nick! Val! There's a pack of zombies out there. We need to get going now!"

Our feet pounded the hardwood floor as we passed the hall and rounded the corner into the living room. The door stood ajar, as though no one had bothered to close it behind them. I yanked it open and stopped in my tracks when I took in the two towering guys resembling wild mountain men with their unkempt appearance, greasy hair, and long, thick beards.

"Going somewhere?" one asked.

"What the heck?" I took a step back, unsure whether they were friends or foe. They didn't look like zombies, but for all I knew, they could've been bitten and might turn on us any minute. Even if they weren't part of the undead army yet, they could have still wanted our food and weapons. "Who are you? How did you get in here?" My grip tightened around Jackie's hand as I pushed my body forward to form a shield between her and the wildlings. If they wanted her, they'd have to force their way past me first—not that I could have been much of a safeguard against a pair like that, but I hoped I could at least buy her a few seconds to get away.

The one in the red checkered shirt raised his hand and waved his rifle at Jackie and me. "You two with them?" He pointed behind him, toward my brother and Val, who were lying on the ground, their mouths pressed in a grim line that didn't leave me much hope. With Nick holding the back of his head and Val's bloody lip, I knew they'd been attacked and put up a good fight. The wildlings were clearly after our food and weapons. Whether

they'd leave us alive or not wouldn't make much difference with the zombies out there, ready to burst in any minute.

I took a deep breath, and then a step forward while pushing Jackie behind me. "Look, mister, there're zombies out back! We've got to get outta here now!"

The other wildman regarded me for a second, probably considering my words and trying to read my expression, to see if I was telling the truth. He patted Jackie and me down and took our guns.

"You don't trust me?" I spat through gritted teeth. "I wouldn't either in your situation, but if I am telling the truth—which I am—we're all dead. Go and see for yourself."

The red checkered shirt guy motioned the other forward and then aimed his gun a bit higher, right at my face. I didn't even flinch as I watched his companion walk past. The mountain man then forced me and Jackie to stand next to the others. A few seconds ticked by before his friend returned, his face a pale mask of horror. I saw his faint nod, and then the red checkered guy lowered his weapon. "We're gonna have to work together if we wanna make it out alive."

I nodded and heaved a big breath. "Give us back our weapons," I said, pointing at my brother and the girls. "We won't be of much help if we can't shoot."

The red checkered guy nodded and held out his hand. "I'm Earl, and that's my friend Tahoe, like the lake."

I ignored him as I walked past. We had to work together to get out of this mess, but I had no doubt the hillbilly twins would happily shoot our heads off and take all our food and supplies once the zombies were properly dispatched.

"I'm Nick," my brother said. "That's Dean, Val, Jackie, and Claire. Give us back our weapons...now!"

Tuning them out, I headed for the side door, pulling Jackie with me. I wanted to see if the zombies were starting to come around to the front of the house. Unfortunately, we didn't get far before a flat, metallic click warned me of danger. I turned on my heel slowly, my gaze focusing on Earl's rifle, which was now pointed at me again.

"Stop, or I'll shoot you both dead in your tracks."

My automatic response was to touch my holster, but then I remembered that Tahoe had disarmed me, so I remained frozen to

the spot. "I figured that much," I said dryly. "But I thought you said we need to work together."

"We were just trying to get a position on the zombies," Jackie said. "Do you think we'd leave our friends behind?"

My gaze became harder and colder, signaling I wasn't scared of him.

Earl narrowed his gaze. "We are working together. You help me ward off any zombie attack, and I'll spare your lives...for the time being. Sure sounds like cooperation to me."

"Right. Sounds like a great deal...for you." I snorted. "What makes you think we'll have your back the moment those zombies barge in here?"

"What makes you think they'll barge in here at all?" Tahoe said, speaking for the first time.

For some reason, the younger gruff one seemed to feel safe, as if the zombies were no threat and couldn't possibly get inside the glass house. I wasn't sure why. It wasn't a military fortress. I marveled how young he seemed. On closer inspection, I realized beneath the facial hair hid a wrinkle-free face.

He stepped closer as he stared at us. "You have yet to answer my question. What are you all doing in our house?"

Val picked up a family portrait and ran a finger across the dust. "Funny. You don't look like these happy people, and pictures like these are plastered all around the house."

Earl's mouth twitched at the corners, as though her sarcasm amused him. "They're all dead. Zombies got 'em. So we figure since they don't need the place anymore, and we were the first ones to get our hands on it, it's our house now—at least as of two days ago."

His eyes sparkled, making me wonder as to the validity of his story. Did zombies really get the poor inhabitants, or was it these two? I bit my tongue hard so I wouldn't comment and risk their wrath. After all, they were still the only ones holding weapons.

"We're not monsters," Tahoe said, reading my disgusted expression. "We didn't kill 'em. They were dead long before we arrived. Can't you tell from all the dust in this place? Nobody has been here for ages."

He had a valid point, and I hoped they weren't murderers. Just because they didn't kill the inhabitants of the house didn't mean they wouldn't kill us.

“Fine. You’ve claimed the house,” Val chimed in. “Just let us go, and we’ll be on our merry way. You can have your home sweet home all to yourselves.” Of course she forgot to mention the part about us loading up all their food and water in their vehicles.

“Sure. You’re welcome to go, as soon as the zombie threat is over,” Tahoe said. “Don’t worry. We got four strong men here. Besides, they’ll never break in.”

I was almost inclined to believe him when a loud thud echoed through the room, startling us. Urban legends about zombies touted their slow reaction time and their inability to form coherent plans, but they were just that: legends. No one knew for sure whether they still had any morsel of humanity in them. For all we knew, their brains retained some ability for reasoning and possibly for their own survival. If they did, which was pretty obvious from their attempts to get in, then we were screwed; it would only be a matter of time before they would double and triple their efforts and succeed.

“We have to go, even if it’s on foot,” Nick said with a glance toward the hall. “Trapping ourselves in this house is suicide. I don’t know about you, but we’re leaving.”

“And going where?” Claire yelled. “Zombies will rip us to shreds!”

Nick shrugged and shot her a hard look. “I don’t care. I’d rather die trying than to sit around in here doing nothing.”

“I’m sorry, Claire, but I’m with him. The faster, the better,” Jackie whispered.

For a second, I felt like hugging her. I was so proud of her for standing up for herself, even if it meant defying her cousin’s wishes.

“You don’t know anything for sure,” Claire said. “None of you do. Maybe we should hole up here until those things leave. They’ll get bored and go eventually, and we can leave in a few hours, once the coast is clear.”

Jackie shook her shoulder. “No, Claire. Waiting is a horrible idea!”

“You’re safe here,” Tahoe said. “There are a lot of them, but they can’t bust through these walls. And like Claire said, they’ll get bored after a bit and move on for easier prey. I’ve seen it a million times before.”

"I agree," Earl said. "It's best to hide out here until they leave. It's stupid to engage them, but if they break in, of course we'll fight with everything we have." Earl shot me a look. "You owe me for saving your lives."

"What?" I asked. "If you would've let us leave, we would have been long gone already."

Earl gave me a cocky grin. "Wrong, my boy. What you'd be is dead. I'm offering you protection here, and when this is all over and done, I expect to be paid for it."

"Paid? With what? We don't have any money," Claire said. "We only came with the shirts on our backs."

Earl smirked. "Who said anything about money? I just want one of you cute gals to keep me company tonight. Is that so much to ask for the price of saving your lives?"

Nick's hands balled into fists. The vein on his forehead throbbed so hard that I prayed he wouldn't do something stupid, like try to hit the guy. Fortunately, he either came to his senses on his own or the rifle pointed at his face made him reconsider.

I grabbed my brother's arm, just in case, and hissed, "Don't let him rile you up. We gotta leave with our heads still attached to our shoulders."

Claire scowled at Earl. "Our lives are on the line! How can you blackmail us like this?"

"Mmm. Feisty. And I love redheads." Earl looked her up and down, then inched closer. "I bet we could have a lot of fun, you and me."

"You're sick!" Val shouted but didn't inch closer.

I glared at Earl. The man was a disgusting sleaze ball and an absolute idiot. Zombies were literally knocking down our doors, but all he could think about was bedding down with a helpless girl. Maybe we can find a car in town, I considered. Zombies were prowling out back, but I was willing to take my chances if it meant keeping all three of the girls as far away from Grizzly Adams as we could.

Nick straightened his stance. "No deal, jerk! Move out of my way because we're leaving."

"Fine. You boys can go," Earl said.

"We boys?"

“Yep, but we’re keeping the women. You owe us for all the dead corpses I’ll have to clean up in the front yard tomorrow morning.”

Jackie gasped.

“What do you need us for, huh?” Val spat. “Let me tell you, mister, if you come anywhere near me, I’ll bite just as hard as those zombies will. You might lose something really valuable if you go waving it around at me!”

Tahoe cleared his throat, as if he was trying to stifle a laugh.

Val took a step toward him, her eyes darting in my direction, signaling something. She was trying to get their attention so we could devise a plan.

Nick must’ve realized it, too, because he nudged Claire. “You still got that stun gun?” he whispered.

She nodded, wide-eyed, and touched her pocket.

Nick bobbed his head slightly. “Good. On the count of three, stun Earl while Dean and I tackle the other guy. Then stun him too.”

“And then we run,” Jackie said.

I moistened my lips and signaled that I was ready.

Claire wrapped her fingers around the stun gun just as the zombies from the back of the house moved onto the front lawn. They were shuffling everywhere. The scratch of their cracked, yellowed nails raked against the glass. There were so many that I had no idea how we’d get past them without being attacked. We had lost our precious opportunity, thanks to Earl and Tahoe.

Nick grabbed Claire’s arm and whispered into her ear, “Wait! Hold off. The house is surrounded now. There’s no way can we just walk out the front door.” He glanced at me. “If zombies break in, we’ll need the mountain men to help us fight them off.”

I nodded, and Claire slipped her stun gun into her pocket. Our plan was ruined, and it was too late for us to make an escape. We all knew we should have run the second we saw the zombies entering the back yard, but the two sasquatches had foiled that little plan. We could’ve been in the Jeeps, long gone before the zombies had come around to the front of the house, but that chance had slipped away. Now Nick was right: We needed the mountain men conscious so they could help us battle the undead. On our own, we might not make it out alive.

“What the...” Earl said, locking the door. “We’ve never had to fight this many before.”

“I tried to tell you!” Jackie said.

Earl rubbed his chin. “I thought there might be a group of them running around, but I never would have imagined anything like this...and it’s all your fault!”

“What!?” Val screamed, furious.

“That’s right. Y’all brought them here to my doorstep! Look at all those corpses in my front yard. I bet you idiots used a gun, attracting them from everywhere!”

The banging and scratching sounds made my stomach churn. Twigs snapped under their rotting feet as they shuffled around the place, hammering against the glass in various locations with various body parts. Something began to shatter, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure whether the sound was coming from the walls or the door. I even heard muffled footsteps somewhere at the back of the house, or maybe it was the basement. They were fighting their way in, and that meant only one thing: We had to fight our way out, and the front door was out of the question.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a zombie licking and clawing at the glass in front of me. His decomposed face with black and brown muscle wrinkling over the skull stared at me as though he had already chosen his main course for the evening. I didn’t want to be trapped while those monsters fought their way in, but just walking out there and hoping for the best wouldn’t work either. I looked out the glass wall of the living room and saw zombies dotting the entire front yard. Earl’s right. I bet the gunshots we fired off earlier attracted the herd. We’ll have to be way more careful next time...if there is a next time. The dead army surrounded the entire house, like some kind of scene straight out of Night of the Living Dead. The only thing that kept us safe from them for the time being was a towering sheet of glass. I shuddered and vowed to never set foot inside a glass house again; that was one nightmare I wouldn’t soon forget. “I need a weapon!” I shouted.

Earl thrust my gun into my waiting hands, then handed Nick and Jackie their weapons.

“Hey, girl, catch! You look like you know how to use this,” Tahoe called out a moment before he tossed Val a rifle.

My sister caught the gun in midair and wore a proud smile.



My rifle was already packed in the Jeep, but I still had my handgun. My grip tightened around it, even though I doubted it'd do any good against an entire herd of zombies.

A crack echoed in the air a moment before the door splintered and the hinges burst. I froze in place as countless zombies fought with each other to get first pick.

## Chapter 9

The penetrating howling noise outside the house grew to ear-splitting levels. My finger found the trigger of my weapon as my gaze steadied on the door. Recklessly determined to sooth their constant hunger, I knew the zombies would find a way in. The fact that we were having such a near encounter with so many in such a confined space wasn't exactly confidence-boosting, but I vowed to fight until my last breath.

My gaze focused on the door a moment before it splintered open from the weight of countless zombies leaning and pushing against it. Some of them fell headfirst on the floor, gnawing and thrashing. Horrible odors of rotting flesh seeped into my nose, making me want to bend over and puke my guts out. Their unearthly moans echoed in the air, and I shivered at the thought of them tearing through my flesh, devouring me little by little.

I waved my arm, beckoning the others to follow me upstairs. "C'mon! This way!" My voice reverberated from the walls, but it didn't quite manage to drown out the zombies' hungry calls.

Without waiting for an answer from the others, I bolted up the spiral staircase, jumping two steps at a time, faster and faster. My boot glided on the smooth surface, and I tripped. *Crap!* This is not the time to panic and lose your cool or your balance, Dean! I scrambled to my feet but stumbled again, nearly losing my grip. As I hung on to the railing, I peered down. No flipping way! The door had been broken in completely, but the opening was too narrow to fit them all through. The zombies who had managed to squeeze in had gathered in front of the doorway in a messy heap, pushing and pulling and attempting to get up, while the ones coming from behind kept tripping, making any ascent impossible. I gawked at the way they had buried themselves, thankful for the tiny distraction that might just buy us a few minutes to get upstairs and find the safest room.

"Come on, boy! Move!" Earl yelled. "You're in my way. If you don't move your butt, I'll personally shove you down there to get acquainted with those things."

I didn't need to see his face to know he meant every word he said. The edge in his voice betrayed his sincerity. So, my legs rose under me as I pushed up the stairs, focusing on my feet so I wouldn't trip again.

The moment I reached the top step, Earl jammed his elbow into my stomach, making me double over, then made room for Tahoe to hurry past. "Blow the staircase up, Tahoe!" he yelled.

"Blow it up?" I asked. "With what?"

"Don't you worry about that!" Earl said.

Tahoe motioned to his friend, then they took off down the hall and disappeared through one of the doors I hadn't inspected before.

My brother raced past me, shouting over his shoulder, "Dean! Come on, man! Don't just stand there! Move it!"

"Coming!" I yelled, taking off after him. By the time I reached him, Nick was already pushing a large oak dresser toward the door, leaving scuff marks across the shiny wooden floor.

"What are you doing?" I asked, stopping in my tracks.

"Help me roll this thing down the stairs," he said.

"Why bother? I thought we were gonna lock ourselves in a room and then climb out the window." I peered at him from under raised brows. Granted, my grand plan seemed a lot more fascinating inside my head, before I spoke it out loud, but it still wasn't as bad as the expression on his face made it seem.

"Right. We're just gonna let those things slither up the stairs after us while we pick a random room, lock ourselves in, hear them bang on the door, and then jump out the window to the million zombies waiting for us below? Sorry, bro, but that's a dumb plan. We'll be even more trapped and screwed than we are now."

"I didn't think of that," I said, but he was right. Creating a blockade gave us extra time to find the perfect window to jump from. It would also help us save ammo, since we'd be out of bullets in no time. Our piddly little arsenal was no match for the number of zombies waiting to devour us.

"Come on, Dean," Nick said, unable to suppress a tiny sneer. "We don't have time for discussing it. Just trust me and do what I say." With that, he dashed past and turned his back on me, signaling the conversation was over.

We hauled the heavy dresser to the top of the landing, and then I kicked it until it tumbled down the stairs. It crashed into

some zombies on the way down, knocking them to the ground like bowling pins. When I turned around, the girls were sliding a fancy antique couch toward me. With a last heave, I pushed it down the stairs toward a zombie who was heading toward us. I let out a few choice words. Of course it wasn't the most mature thing I could have done in front of Jackie, but I couldn't help myself. The adrenaline running through my veins was making me say things I wouldn't usually say. Besides, every single triumph—no matter how tiny it was—counted when death was lurking savagely around the corner in the vacant eyes and slimy mouths of those things.

Val had dragged an enormous chest of drawers to the top of the stairs. Jackie and Claire began slipping out the drawers and throwing them down on the zombies, hitting them on their heads. Finally, the two girls gave the furniture a final shove, and it flew down, taking out a couple more of the hissing creatures. Nick threw a box spring, followed by a mattress tossed by Val. Our furniture onslaught wouldn't last forever, but we hoped it would grant us enough time to find a spot where we could safely jump from a window into a smaller crowd of zombies that we could fight off.

"Watch out!" Earl called from behind. I moved out of his way as he lit up a stick of dynamite and threw it down the stairs.

I watched the fire eat through the cord, slowly but steadily flying through the air in what seemed like slow motion. It all happened so fast, yet I felt as though a million years must have passed.

"Get down!" Earl yelled as it landed with a dull thud with uncanny precision, right in the middle of the gathered zombie herd.

I ducked and threw my body over Jackie and Claire as a loud boom echoed in my ears and smoke swirled all around me. Raising my head, I coughed and peered through the blanket of fire at the gap between the upper and the lower levels of the house. The stairs had evaporated into a huge mess of wooden splinters, interspersed with blood and gore. My stomach protested at the sight, but I didn't have time to digest the image because the next wave of zombies was already gushing in.

I peeked over the banister. There was absolutely nothing left of the stairs, so our only way back down was gone. I didn't know whether to feel relieved or pissed off that the guy didn't consult us before doing something so bold and irrevocable. What if

Nick's plan fails? What then? He blew up the freaking stairs! We're stuck up here! "Where did you get the dynamite from?" I asked, miffed.

"That's no concern of yours, boy," Earl spat.

Again I had to bite my tongue hard to keep from lashing out at him. I could only assume he must've hidden a stash somewhere and didn't feel the need to tell us about it. For all we knew, the doomsday mountain dudes probably had a stash of every kind of weapon known to mankind hidden all over the place, so I mentally prepared for more surprises to come along the way. "You should've told us," I muttered under my breath. "We had the situation under control."

"Right, like furniture would've stopped all those things!" Earl said, shooting me and Nick a glare as he bolted down the hallway with Tahoe on his heels.

"It did slow them down some," Val shouted, as if defending our honor.

"Hey, Dean," Nick called out, "now's the time to put that plan of yours to good use."

"Great. I'll go look out the windows for a possible escape route," I said.

"I was talking about myself," he said. "I need you guys to stay here and be a distraction."

"What?" I asked.

"Don't worry," Val said. "We're safe up here. They can't fly."

Nick continued, "If the zombies see food, they'll focus their efforts toward this part of the house. We need as many of them as possible here in the living room and front yard so we can sneak out the back or side window."

"I like it," I said. "Let the freaks gather up here while you find the perfect place for us to sneak out. Then we'll be gone...and they'll still think we're up here, the dummies."

"That's the plan," Nick said. "So stand here so they can see you."

Claire grabbed his arm and gave it a squeeze. "I'm coming with you. There has to be a way out of this place."

"I'll be right back," Nick said.

“Um, okay. Be careful, man!” I said, scrambling to my feet. The idea of splitting up sat in the pit of my stomach like a rock. Especially when I was the distraction...the human bait.

With a nod, he shot off down the hallway, with Claire following after him.

“They’ll be right back,” Val muttered to no one in particular.

I opened my mouth to tell her everything would be all right, but the sound of shattering glass boomed in my ears, stopping my words from coming out. I peered down at more zombies breaking through the towering glass walls and gasped.

“Oh my gosh!” yelled Jackie. “They’re busting through the walls!” Her gaze bore into mine, questioning the meaning of it all.

For once, I was at a loss for words and couldn’t give her the answer she wanted to hear. If the walls were coming down, it would be only a matter of time before the upper floor was compromised.

We fell silent for a moment. The crunch of dragging feet on broken glass as the zombies flooded into the spacious living room was all we could hear. My stomach lurched when a loud choir of the undead groaned, echoing in my ears. The giant room had filled up with moaning, groaning, and hissing, as though the zombies had multiplied. I’d never seen anything like it. I had only seen such horrific scenes in movies and videogames, but now it was happening right in front of me. I was witnessing a real-live (or dead, as the case was) zombie apocalypse with my very own eyes.

Val clapped my shoulder. “Stay calm, okay? The plan is working perfectly. They’re all coming to the front of the house. Nick will be back any minute with the perfect spot to sneak out. And then we’ll run to the Jeeps as fast as our feet can carry us.”

I nodded and forced the fear that was quickly grabbing hold of me to the back of my mind.

“You still got the keys?” she asked.

I nodded, remaining stunned and silent.

She continued bravely, “Good. We need to be ready to pound the pavement the second Nick comes back.”

I felt my pocket, just to make sure the keys were still there, but they weren’t. Much to my dismay, I suddenly remembered that I’d left them on the table. I pointed at the living room. “No flippin’ way! I left them...they’re down there!”

"I can't believe this!" She took a trembling breath as she regarded me. Her face became an impenetrable mask as her mind began to weigh the possibilities.

I breathed in sharply to calm my nerves. With the staircase gone, no zombie could climb up, but we couldn't climb down either. Unfortunately, the keys were down there. Our chances of getting out before the walls collapsed down on us were pretty slim, and I felt it was my fault for stupidly leaving the keys downstairs.

"How are we going to get down there to get them?" Jackie asked, her eyes wide, mirroring my own thoughts.

"We aren't," Val finally said, "but I can hotwire the truck."

Earl and Tahoe came from behind, making me jump.

Earl's eyes shimmered with malice as he looked at me.

"We need a big, giant distraction. How about some blood?"

"Yeah," Tahoe said. "You know how predictable the little freaks are."

"One whiff, and we've got ourselves a huge distraction,"

Earl mumbled, still looking at me, making it impossible to miss his vile and threatening insinuation. "Hmm. Blood. Where can we possibly get any of that? Any suggestions, boy?"

My heart raced. I put my hand on my holster, already determined that if I had to shoot either of the bushy-haired crazies in self-defense, I wouldn't hesitate to use a bullet.

"Do you have any more explosives?" Val asked, unfazed.

"Fresh out," Earl snapped, "but you know what? You reek of death." He suddenly reached for her.

Val let out a scream as he ripped the bandage off her arm, revealing the infected flesh. I couldn't help but stare at the darkening gash and the white bone peeking from beneath.

"I knew it!" Earl yelled. "She's nothing but zombie bait!" His eyes shined, his sneer revealing tobacco-yellowed teeth.

For a moment, I thought he might be talking about himself, because everything about him was far more grotesque and rotting than Val's wound—including his soul, if he even had one.

Val kicked him in the nuts and turned to run, but he grabbed her around the waist and forced her to stay put.

My hand instinctively moved to the gun in my holster, but someone gripped my arms from behind and yanked them hard, sending jolts of pain through my shoulders. Crap. My weapon flew out of my hands and clattered to the floor, not far away from my

feet. I peered at it and pulled toward it, but the guy was in the more advantageous position, making it impossible for me to twist out of his grip. Earl followed my line of vision and kicked the weapon under the railing. It sailed across the floor and under the banister, landing in the crowd of zombies below.

Glancing over my shoulder, I yelled, "Tahoe, let me go!"

He continued holding me in his iron grasp as he hissed, "I have my instructions. He'll kill me if I don't follow them."

"No!" I shouted. "Then at least let her go!"

"Ain't happenin', boy. You might as well just give up now before the same fate befalls you!" Earl said.

"Take me instead!" I begged.

"You're not infected. She, on the other hand, is. She's one bacteria away from being one of those nasty things!"

Jackie whipped out her gun, her eyes shifting nervously from Earl to Tahoe, then to me. She seemed hesitant about shooting another human being, and I knew we were losing the battle. Before she could even make up her mind, Earl shoved her back, and she crashed helplessly through the glass banister, almost plummeting into the void below. She clung on the second-floor railing as her legs dangled dangerously close to zombies. The way they kept reaching up made it obvious they wanted nothing more than to devour her legs as an appetizer.

My stomach clenched as their mouths started to snap open like hungry piranhas. "Val!" I flailed against Tahoe, but he only tightened his grip on me.

Earl grabbed Val and swung her over the banister, hissing, "Sorry, sweetheart, but you're gonna die soon anyway. Might as well go out like a hero and save our butts in the process."

"Don't do this!" she yelled. "Try and show some compassion. At least put a bullet through my head first so I don't have to feel them...so I won't know they're eating me."

"No!" I squirmed and desperately tried to free myself. I knew Jackie wouldn't be able to hold on much longer, and my sister desperately needed my help. I yelled for Nick down the hall, but I doubted he could hear me over the screams and chaos of the zombie frenzy.

"I can't hold on to him any longer," Tahoe shouted. His grip loosened a bit, and for a moment, I thought he might have



done so on purpose, as though he wanted me to escape and save Val, but at the same time he feared for his life.

“Well, goodbye.” In one swift motion, Earl hurled Val into the herd of zombies. Her scream chilled my blood, etching the memory into my brain forever.

In disbelief I watched as hands and arms pounced on her like a lion on a piece of raw meat. “Nick!” My own voice sounded alien in my ears, as if it couldn’t possibly be coming from me.

Finally, Tahoe let go and stepped back.

I tumbled forward, my arms reaching out to strangle the guy who had killed my sister, but Earl was faster, or maybe he had the advantage of being emotionally unattached to the whole situation. My forehead exploded in pain as he threw me against the wall so hard that I blacked out for a second. When my vision cleared, I saw the two mountain men running off. I crawled to the balcony and grabbed Jackie’s hand; I managed to pull her to safety, even though my arms were on fire.

As soon as she stepped over the balustrade, she buried her head into my chest.

“Nick!” I yelled again, almost choking on the sudden nausea in my stomach and the bile in my throat. Tears threatened to spill down my face. “Nick!” I yelled again, but no one answered. I looked for Val below, but I couldn’t see any sign of her under the hissing pile that had pounced on her. I’d never seen anything so horrible in my entire life. The images threatened my sanity, yet I couldn’t look away. I was suddenly fueled by thoughts of revenge, and I swore to myself I’d avenge my sister’s death, no matter what. Even though I had yet to make it out of there alive, I’d already contemplated the different ways I could accomplish that goal. Earl is gonna pay...and so is every freaking zombie I ever come across!

## Chapter 10

Standing on the balcony, I stared at the monsters who had killed Val. In one moment, my sister and I were there, valiantly fighting back to back, stubbornly determined on making it out of there alive, but in the next moment, she was gone, just like that. My mind spun in an endless loop of memories that didn't quite make sense to me. My heart raced, pumping blood through my body. My fingers twitched, and my skin prickled, which made the whole situation even more surreal. She was dead, and I was still alive. The world seemed more unfair than ever before. I was caught in a daze, and not the pleasant kind, until Jackie's words snapped me out of it.

"We have to find Claire and your brother," she said softly, though her voice betrayed a frantic edge.

The sudden urge to get moving didn't go unnoticed. I turned to face her. Her eyes were burning with something: Pain? Disbelief? Anger? I couldn't tell because my own pain had numbed me. My own shock and disbelief wouldn't allow me to comprehend that experiencing a comrade's death couldn't be easy on her either. "I'm—I'll stay," I whispered. "I'm not going anywhere until every single one of them is dead."

"No, Dean. You can't. We need you. Your brother needs you. Think of those who are still around, those who care about you, and the pain you'll cause if you give up now and sacrifice yourself for some impossible try at revenge." She grabbed my arm and yanked hard. "She... Val wouldn't have wanted you to do something so foolish. Your sister would want you to get yourself to safety. That was what she was fighting for."

I didn't budge. Her words registered with me somewhere, somehow in the back of my mind. She was right, of course, but I also felt as though I would be betraying Val if I ran away.

"Please," Jackie continued. "Nick has already lost one sibling. Don't make him lose both."

"Let's go!" Claire's voice called from around the corner a moment before my brother and she appeared in my line of vision.

“Dean,” my brother said with a nod, “thanks for holding it together here, man.”

I turned away, avoiding his gaze. I couldn’t bear to tell him what had happened.

“The bathroom window in the back seems like our best bet,” Nick said. “We can make a clean getaway. So c’mon, let’s go!”

My brother’s gaze sliced through me. A single worry wrinkle creased his otherwise smooth skin. I peered into his blue eyes, begging him to understand; I couldn’t dare speak the words that burned a hole in my heart.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go! This place is turning into Zombie Central.” His gaze became stubborn, and his hands clenched to his sides, as though he already sensed something was wrong but didn’t want to acknowledge it just yet.

I froze and closed my eyes to avoid his probing stare.

“What’s wrong with you?” he hissed, grabbing me hard by the shoulders.

I opened my eyes again and saw him scanning the open landing, his mind putting two and two together.

“Where’s Val?” his shout echoed in my ears. His arms yanked me around like a ragdoll, forcing me to face him.

“Those men...they...” I stammered, my voice barely snaking its way out of my constricted throat. “Earl... he, uh...Tahoe wouldn’t let go, and I couldn’t...Earl just threw Val over the balcony! He used our sister as a distraction.” I pointed a trembling finger to the pile of zombies where she’d been tossed in. The spot was covered in squirming bodies now, and on the remote chance that she was still alive, there wasn’t a thing we could do to save her.

“No!” he screamed as sudden realization set in. “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“I tried!” I shouted, shoving him as hard as I could. “Why would you think I didn’t try!?”

“Well, you should’ve tried harder!” he said, pushing me back. “For goodness sake, she was our sister, and you just let those jerks—”

“Hold on now! We both tried everything we could,” Jackie interrupted. “They took us by surprise. The older one, Evan or whatever his name is, almost killed me.”

"It's Earl," I corrected, for it was a name I would never, ever forget.

"He pushed me over the balcony," Jackie continued, "but I was able to hold on until Dean helped me back up."

"Oh my gosh!" Claire said, throwing her arms around her. "That's horrible. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she breathed out.

"Where's Val?" Nick bellowed. "Maybe we can still help her."

I shook my head. "She's dead, Nick, and even if she weren't, she'd be torn into pieces by the time we made it down there. There's nothing you—or anyone, for that matter—can do." The sudden realization that I was right hurt me more than Nick's pained expression. My jaw clenched until I thought my bones might snap.

Claire placed a hand on Nick's back, trying to steady him, but she didn't say a word.

"Don't!" Nick said, violently shrugging her off.

"I'm so, so sorry," she whispered, ignoring his command not to touch him. Even though her words were thin and sparse, I could hear the sincerity in her voice.

Nick nodded and kept his head low, and for a second I thought he was choking back tears. Then, letting out a sudden loud yell, like a war cry, he tore away from Claire and began pounding the wall with his fist, threatening revenge on every single one of those cursed things and on the two men who had done such an awful thing, throwing two helpless women over a banister.

I wanted to stop my brother, but there was no chance. Instead, I fought back the urge to join in his cursing. "I'm sorry, man." My voice trembled, and I felt a tear roll down my face. Even though Jackie wrapped her arm around me to comfort me, I could barely breathe, and the room around me seemed to grow hot.

"There was nothing we could do," Jackie said. "You can't blame anyone for this except Earl and Tahoe."

"We gotta go," Nick whispered, ignoring her. "If we don't get outta here, we'll be next. But first there's something I need to do for Val." He disappeared into one of the bedrooms and reappeared a minute later with a gas can. Leaning forward, he started pouring it down from the balcony, soaking the zombies below.

I wanted to stop him before he set the house on fire and risked our lives in the process, but his grim expression stopped me.

"Fire and explosions are fantastic ways to destroy the walking dead." Grabbing his lighter, he yelled, "Die, you undead suckers! DIE!"

"Dean!? Nick!?"

At the sound of Val's muffled scream, we froze, dead cold.

Claire grabbed Nick's hand. "STOP! Listen...that's her!"

I leaned over and saw Val crawling out from under the pack, unscathed. What? How is that possible? They didn't even touch her?

"I hit my head," she said. "Blacked out for a minute. But I'm fine." She stumbled through the moaning crowd and over to the table. There, she bravely snatched the keys for both vehicles and held them up high.

I shot Nick a confused look.

He smiled, mirroring my relief that she wasn't dead.

"Meet me out back!" she yelled up.

I nodded and pulled Nick's arm. "How is that possible? She's still alive, but how?"

His eyes widened. "It must be because she carries their scent. That wound of hers means she's turning into one. I've heard they don't eat their own kind, but..." He shook his head. "To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure."

I laughed, relieved. "Yeah, they must have thought she was one of them. Then again, I'm not sure that's a good thing."

"I can't believe it," Claire said. "If you're bitten, then you get reprieve from the zombies."

"It appears that way. And since you haven't been bitten, no reprieve for you." Nick thrust a bat into Claire's hands and motioned her forward.

She let out a shaky breath but didn't protest. The poor girl was terrified; I could tell from the way her eyes darted to and fro, and her knuckles had turned white where she touched the smooth, cold wood. "What am I supposed to do with this?" she whispered.

My brother cupped her cheek. "Well, it isn't for playing baseball, that's for sure. I know you're scared of guns, but you're gonna need a weapon of some sort. Just beat the crap out of anything that tries to bite a chunk out of you."

"I'm sorry, but I just...can't," she said eventually. "I can't hit a—"

"A what? Another person? They aren't people anymore, Claire. They're monsters, animals, waiting to eat you alive."

I felt sorry for the girl to some degree, but my patience was growing as thin as Nick's. "You know what? Just give it to me." I snatched the bat out of her hands. After all, my gun had flown over the balcony, and I was in desperate need of a weapon to protect myself. I knew I'd be okay once I got to the Jeep, because my half-zombie sister had packed plenty of weapons, but in the meantime, I had to make do with anything I could get my hands on. I thought my words might talk some sense into Claire, but she just shrugged and let me have her only weapon without protest. I didn't get the girl, but at that point, with survival on my mind, I didn't even care.

"Ready, Val?" Nick yelled.

"Yep! Let's make them pay, boys and girls!" she replied from somewhere to our right.

I craned my neck until I thought I could distinguish her brown locks from the mess of dead people around her, and I saw her standing near the edge of the house, where the glass wall and the door had been.

"C'mon!" Nick said with a wink. Once Val was safely away from the horde, Nick went to work. He pulled a lighter out of his pocket and threw it onto the gas-drenched crowd, starting a zombie roast. Smoke and fire engulfed the small undead army while Nick yelled for us to run down the hall, then motioned us into a small bathroom with a narrow window that we hoped would be just big enough for us to squeeze through.

"There's a huge tree we can shimmy down," Claire said.

I nodded. Squinting, I could see the Jeeps in the driveway, and it was a relief to see that there weren't any zombies in that general area. It appeared as if they had all headed toward the front of the house, where the glass walls had collapsed. I could only assume the noise from the explosion had attracted them and drawn them in that direction.

"Okay, everyone. No talking until we're safe," he said, sliding the window open.

Without so much as a look back, I threw the bat out the window and watched it land next to a towering bush. I climbed

out. Branch by branch, I clambered down the giant oak tree. The moment I jumped down and landed on the bare ground, I saw Val running toward me. "Val! I'm so glad you're alive," I said, burying my face in her hair as I hugged her tight. "I tried to stop him, but I—"

She nodded but didn't reply. A rush of emotions overwhelmed me, choking me. We just stood there, holding each other. In that moment, no words were needed, because I could feel how relieved she was. The other's presence was enough to convey even more than we could possibly say.

Suddenly, our Hallmark moment was interrupted by a rude gurgle echoing from the left. Instinct kicked in, and I reached for my weapon. The smell of decaying flesh assaulted my nostrils. The moonlight served as a spotlight, enhancing every black vein, rotting flesh chunk, and seeping, oozing, smelly wound the zombie had endured. I wound up my bat to hit a homerun, hoping to knock the zombie's head out of the park, but Jackie yanked the bat out of my hands. I shot her a look, but she just shook her head and replied with a grim expression of her own. I knew she was trying to make up for being hesitant about whipping out her gun to save Val. She wanted to prove to me that she was ready to fight now. I knew she had finished the thing off when a whack echoed in the air and the hissing stopped.

"You drive this one." Val pointed to the black Jeep and opened the driver door so I could jump in, then tossed me a set of keys; a second set to the red Jeep dangled from her fingers. I nodded and took the driver spot while I watched her jump into the other vehicle.

Nick grabbed Claire's hand and led her to my Jeep. I looked for Jackie, but she had jumped in with Val. I started the Jeep and threw it into gear. As I backed up, I noticed a handful of zombies to our left. My eyes scanned the area for an escape route, but that was about the only path wide enough for the Jeep to muddle through. "They're blocking our path!"

"Run those slimy numbskulls over!" Nick yelled. "They're already road kill!"

I hit the gas and sped out of the driveway, ignoring the loud thuds and crunches under my wheels. When a corpse hit the hood, I jumped in my skin; filmy white, glazed-over eyes connected

with mine. Clenching my jaw, I threw on the brakes and sent him flying off, then sped up again.

Flames engulfed the giant glass mansion and burned brightly against the night. In the flickering lights to my left, I saw a swarm of zombies eating what looked like a human being. It had to be the mountain men...or what was left of them. The beasts tore at an exposed ribcage, oozing what I took to be intestines. The car Earl and Tahoe had ridden in was still sitting in the driveway. "Look! They didn't make it," I said.

My brother followed my line of vision and shook his head. "Justice served and good riddance. What they did to Val was inhuman."

"Gosh, it's so...awful," Claire said.

I pressed the gas pedal down hard, revving the engine and making my brain hurt from the grinding sound. Blackness covered my vision for a second, and I shook my head until my vision returned. Through the blur before my eyes, I saw Val in the rearview mirror, easily following my lead. The vehicle moved at a fast speed down the narrow driveway and onto the unpaved terrain of the woods. Behind us, the glass building became nothing but a burning spot in the evening sky. We drove in silence for a while, until I could see nothing but trees and the darkening sky. Only then did I let out a long breath that it seemed I'd been holding for hours. We had made it, and we were all alive.

"I'm an idiot!" Claire said. "I can't believe I actually wanted to stay. Had you left without me and Jackie, we'd be dead." Tears streamed down her cheeks as reality set in. "I've never been on my own before. Our group—the group we were with—took care of us. They were like my family." She took a trembling breath.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Nick squeeze her hand, soothing her. "It's okay, Claire. Our world has devolved into one where people have to fight and kill each other just to live another day. The people around you sheltered you because they wanted to take care of you, and they fought to keep you alive and safe. Not all people are bad, but not all of 'em are good either," he said, pondering Earl and Tahoe's cruel fate.

"You're right." She sniffed. "We didn't have to fight before, not until today. I've never even held a gun in my life. It was surreal that you asked that of me today. I just...couldn't."



"I know, but you have to understand those people who looked after you—good as they were—didn't do you any favors by protecting you, by sheltering you too much. Now you're unprepared and ill-equipped for what's waiting out there." Nick's tone was soft, but there was a sharp edge to it, as if he was breaking bad news to someone he didn't want to hurt. I hoped Claire would listen and take his advice at face value. My brother was blunt, but his advice—hard as it was to swallow—would help her stay alive longer. "You won't stand a chance out here if you don't learn how to fight and protect yourself," Nick continued.

I listened intently, his words ringing true in my ear. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was enraged with his brutal honesty, for much of what he said applied to me as well. I suddenly understood why he'd been so angry with me for smuggling Val inside the helicopter. I, too, had been sheltered, living naïvely on Kelleys Island, having no idea that the rest of the world was crumbling around me. Sure, I'd heard stories and plenty of urban legends, but quite like Claire, it didn't seem real until I was thrown right smack dab in the middle of it. The truth was a painful thing for all of us.

Claire laid her head on my brother's shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her. I was sure he felt awkward about it and was only trying to be nice, for Claire was definitely not his type. He usually liked girls who took on the action, not the ones who ran away from it, squealing about chipping their nails or breaking their expensive heels. But then again, who knows? Maybe he needs a girly kind of girl right now to balance out all this blood and nastiness. Opposites still attract, right? Or maybe it's just a bad case of nerves. I knew whatever it was; we had no time for soap operas. We had more important fish to fry, like finding the freeway, for starters.

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Once we were finally on the highway, I felt a bit safer. Val's Jeep now led the way and we drove for a few hours in absolute silence. I would've loved to have thrown some tunes on, but I was sure all the DJs had been gobbled up by zombies.

Then, out of nowhere, I noticed my sister slowing down, and her brake lights flashed as she pulled over to the side of the road.

"What the heck?" I yelled to my brother.

He jolted awake when I stopped behind her and cut the engine.

“It’s Val. She’s pulling over.”

“Why?” Claire asked. “It’s dark outside. Stopping isn’t a good idea, right?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe she needs a potty break or has a flat or something.”

My brother jumped out of the car and dashed toward her Jeep, yelling, “Are you mad? No stopping unless I deem it safe!”

Claire and I rushed over to the other Jeep, then stopped the moment we reached Val.

She was on the side of the road by a sign, puking into the bushes.

Jackie’s hand rested on her back. She shot us an apologetic look, then went about rubbing Val’s back.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly the moment the heaving stopped.

She nodded but didn’t seem to want to move from the spot.

My brother and I scanned the area as we waited for her to finish. The long stretch of deserted highway posed no imminent threat, or so it seemed. Nick tapped his gun, signaling that we should get a move-on; I was glad for that, because I didn’t want to stick around either. The full moon reminded me of werewolves, and a chill pricked my spine. Get it together. Werewolves are fake, just something for teenage girls to giggle over, unless they prefer sparkly vampires. But zombies were real, and my sister was about to turn into one.

“Sorry, guys,” Val eventually said, standing.

“It’s okay,” Nick said. “I’m the one who should be sorry for yelling at you.”

Claire touched Val’s shoulder. “Is there anything I can do?”

She straightened and flipped her hair out of her eyes. “I’m fine, guys. Thanks for asking. Let’s just get outta here. Sorry for stopping.”

“Wait,” I said, holding a hand up to stop her. “You shouldn’t be driving in your condition.” I knew she needed rest.

Val motioned for Jackie to get back in. Once Jackie did, Val jumped in the Jeep and slammed the door in my face. Her

behavior was moody and sporadic, and it went beyond the normal female oddities. Turning the key, the engine cranked but refused to turn over.

“Why won’t this thing start?” she asked. She tried a few more times and the engine finally fired.

Nick peeked his head in the open window. “Dean’s right. You’re in no condition to drive. Also, we need to re-wrap that nasty wound of yours.”

She smiled. “I’m fine, baby brother.”

“That’s for me to decide,” he said.

“Listen, each Jeep is stocked with a first aid kit,” Val said. “I made sure of that. So don’t worry. I’ll have Jackie wrap it up as soon as possible.”

“Let me slap on a dressing from the medical kit, and then Dean’s driving while you get some sleep.” He motioned to the back seat.

“Are you worried I might hurt Jackie?” Val asked. Before Nick could answer, she continued, “Listen, the first thing I did was give Jackie a gun. If I try to bite, she can just shoot me.”

As he reached for the keys, Val threw the car in reverse.

Nick jumped back. “Val! You about ran me over.”

Tires squealed, and she sped off ahead of us. Clearly, the girl had a mind of her own, and she didn’t like being told what to do.

I tapped Nick’s shoulder. “C’mon! We gotta catch up!”

He jumped in the driver seat, looked over his shoulder to make sure Claire and I were in back, and stomped on the gas.

I let out a breath, my gaze focusing on the road ahead.

“Why’s she acting like that?”

Nick gripped the steering wheel tightly. “She’s stubborn. It runs in the family.”

My heart jumped when I saw Val exit the freeway into the next city.

“Oh my gosh!” Claire said as my brother swerved into the opposite lane. “What’s she doing? She’s driving like a maniac! She’s gonna kill my cousin!”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. We have plenty of gas, food, and water,” Nick said. “There’s no reason to venture into one of those cities. I’m gonna have to kick her infected butt when we catch up to her!”

“Not if I get to her first,” I said.

He pulled off the ramp and turned left into the city. A sharp jolt rushed through me as we ran over a deep pothole, then another. Nick didn’t slow down one bit and rushed to keep up with Val. The place seemed deserted except for a few stray zombies stumbling aimlessly down the street, groaning in unsatisfied hunger. There were no streetlights and no traffic—just eerie silence, darkness, and walking corpses.

Nick looked over his shoulder at us, “I don’t like this one bit.”

“Neither do I! Venturing into the city is beyond stupid. I really don’t want to follow her, but what choice do we have? We can’t just desert them.”

We watched as Val carelessly swerved around a corner, past an abandoned subway station.

Nick beeped the horn.

“Stop!” Claire screamed, popping her head out the window.

“Try cutting her off,” I said.

He sped up and swerved around her as my seatbelt strained against my shoulders. The headlights fell on the other Jeep, illuminating Val’s face for a brief second.

In that second, I saw the dangerous look in her eyes. I yelled for her to pull over.

She suddenly turned left and came to a halt in the empty lot of a grocery store where shopping carts were scattered all about.

“All right. She stopped,” Nick said. “Let’s go talk to her! I’m dying to see what she has to say.” Frowning, he pulled next to her and parked the Jeep.

Claire jumped out after Val. “Val!”

“Claire,” my brother yelled. “Don’t go out there without a weapon!”

“Got the stun gun,” she replied.

I didn’t believe in giving lectures, but Val needed a good talking-to, and I was going to give it to her, whether she wanted it or not. I opened the door, but my brother yanked my arm to keep me inside.

“Wait! You can’t go out there unarmed either.” He reached down and pulled a gun from a strap on his ankle. “Take this. I’ve got another one.”

Nick was right—again: Walking out in dangerous territory without a weapon would have been suicide, so I grabbed the gun. “Let’s go see what Val’s little problem is, and then we’ll get back on the road again. And she’s NOT driving again, no matter what.”

“Exactly.” Nick nodded.

“Hey, sis,” I yelled.

Like a madwoman, Val grabbed a loose brick and whipped it through the window. Glass shattered with a boom, making me lower my head to protect my face. My sister was losing it big time, and I realized Nick and I were going to have to wrangle her back because she wasn’t playing with a full deck.

“What are you doing?” Nick yelled, waving his arms in the air.

Jackie came from behind and shook my shoulder. “Your sister’s talking all crazy. She says you have a cure for her zombie bite, but she has to turn into a zombie first. She’s going mad or something!”

“We do have a possible cure,” I said, “but she’s right about having to become a zombie first.”

She nodded slowly, as if trying to process the words. “The cure...it’s in that black bag you were carrying over your shoulder when I first met you. Isn’t it?”

“Bingo. Hey, you got a weapon?” Nick asked her.

“I lost my gun when I almost went over the banister,” she said, “but Val gave me another one.”

“Good.” Nick said.

“Let’s wrangle my sister back into the Jeep,” I said.

“Crap!” Jackie yelled.

My heart leapt when Val suddenly darted inside the store, disappearing into the darkness stretching beyond.

## Chapter 11

Nighttime had descended a few hours earlier, and the streets ahead of us seemed devoid of life. A narrow slice of the moon peeked from behind thick clouds that looked almost black against the night sky. Without lampposts to show us the way, we knew anything could be lurking in the shadows, waiting to ambush us. Luckily, though, the light of the stars cast just enough light to illuminate our way. My breath misted before me as I jumped out of the car. I left the door open and hurried past overflowing trashcans, toward the entrance to the small building into which Val had disappeared a minute ago.

“Shoot anything that looks suspicious,” Nick said. “I don’t care how many bullets you waste, just stay safe. We have plenty back in the Jeep.”

Even though his back was turned on me and he couldn’t see me, I nodded and hurried after him. I didn’t know what kind of goose chase my sister was leading us on. Why she had decided to pull off the highway and lead us into a creepy, deserted ghost town at night, only to break into a grocery store, was beyond me, but for her own sake, I hoped she had some viable reason. Nick, however, wasn’t as understanding and patient as his little brother.

“C’mon, Dean. Move your butt. We haven’t got all of eternity,” Nick said, motioning me forward.

“Wait!” Claire said. “We’ll never see a thing in there.” She whirled around and headed back to the Jeep, then returned with what looked like an overstuffed purse full of flashlights, which she passed around.

Nick met her gaze. “What do you mean, ‘we’? You’re not going in there with us.”

“What? Of course I am.” As though to prove a point, she walked past him, calling over her shoulder, “It’s your sister, isn’t it? You guys might need my help.”

I raised my brows at Nick. I’d assumed Claire hated Val, but either they’d suddenly bonded over killing a few zombies, or else she really did dig Nick and was just trying to impress him. I didn’t know her all that well, but from what I had seen so far, I was

ready to bet my most precious friend and possession—the gun in my hands—on the latter.

“Just be careful. She’s been bitten!” Jackie yelled after her.

Claire stopped and turned. “I know. Nick told me everything back in the Jeep.”

Yeah, definitely the latter. She probably thinks they share something special now that Nick has confided in her. Shaking my head, I let out a long breath and took off through the parking lot. I stopped abruptly in the doorway of the market when I heard Val’s screams echoing through the air. The air smelled of damp earth and rotting garbage, but there was also something else: the scent of death.

I gritted my teeth as I looked at Nick, “Val’s going to alert every zombie from here to kingdom come if she doesn’t be quiet.” If I’d have had a roll of duct tape, or if we’d have been fortunate enough to stumble into a hardware store where they sold the stuff, I would have been highly tempted to use it. My sister’s big mouth was going to turn us all into zombie bait.

The bobbing beams of our flashlights swept back and forth as we hurried up the cereal aisle. I only knew we were in the graveyard of Rice Krispies and Golden Grahams because the sign over our heads said so; there was nothing left on the shelves but layers of dust and debris and a box ripped right down the middle of Tony the Tiger’s striped head. Then something scurried past to our right and I craned my neck and swept the flashlight over a dark head with long hair. I nudged Nick, then sped up to catch my sister. “Val, c’mon! We gotta go!”

The filthy linoleum, carpeted by an inches-thick layer of dust and grime, barely made a sound as I dashed through the darkness, then stopped. A sickly scent hit my nostrils, making me want to puke. I moved my flashlight around and illuminated the darkness as I scanned the area to spot the culprit...packages of rotting meat.

Val held up a blue box with a picture of noodles and fancy writing. She didn’t even turn as she said, “Look! It’s smashed. Rodents have been nibbling it as well, so this one’s a no-go.” She tossed the box on the floor, and it landed with a loud thud, then pulled out a giant, moldy piece of steak from its wrapper. To be honest, I wasn’t even sure what it was and I didn’t know what

possessed her to pick it up in the first place. "Is this going to be my new choice of food?" she asked.

"I sure hope not, Val," I whispered.

Ignoring me, she rolled her eyes and threw the steak away. It plopped onto the ground a few feet away and remained stuck to the ground. "It's expired! You can have it, miss!" Val yelled, her voice reverberating from the walls. "And get some clothes on. Who comes to a store dressed in a robe anyway? When you're done snacking, go home and cook your man some brains or something."

"Who's she talking to?" I whispered to Nick.

"I dunno," he said. "But it's kind of freaky. I bet she's hallucinating."

My attention remained glued to Val as she held up a can and rolled it in her hands, continuing her monologue. "And this one's dented. This store sucks! Where's the manager?"

Footsteps echoed behind me a moment before Claire and Jackie appeared and Claire's hand wrapped around my upper arm.

"What's going on?" Jackie whispered.

I shook my head, signaling that I had no clue, and turned my gaze back to Val, who was still regarding a can as though it was a famous painting hanging in an art museum.

"Are you trying to memorize the ingredients or something?" Claire asked, her voice oozing with sarcasm. "Surely you're not counting calories now, are you?"

In one swift move, Val lunged at Claire, hissing like some kind of vampire chick in a horror flick. Claire's arms flew up to protect her face, but Val was stronger. In a single motion, she tossed Claire to the ground and landed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. I had to admit, it kind of freaked me out, almost to the point that I wanted to summon the men in white coats to bring their paddy wagon and lock her up in a straightjacket. After the initial shock, I finally unglued myself from the spot and leapt forward, but Nick was quicker on the draw. He wrapped his arms around her and dragged her up in an iron grip as she kicked and screamed.

"She's trying to kill me!" Claire yelled.

I rolled my eyes. "No, I don't think so. I think she just didn't like what you said. If you knew anything about zombies, you'd know to keep your mouth shut rather than provoke their short temper."



Val's eyes bulged in her skull, and she looked like a serial killer. "You'll be the first to go, Claire! You didn't watch my back, so now I'm going to eat yours."

Nick held her tight and I was thankful for that.

Claire gasped, hiding behind me. "She's mad, freaking crazy! Get that monster away from me," she chanted over and over again. "Get her away!"

"She's not a monster," I whispered. "...yet," I wanted to add but didn't.

"My gosh! It's like she's possessed or something," Claire said.

"Okay, okay. I'm fine! Let me go," Val said quietly. She had stopped struggling and seemed reasonable again, but I didn't trust the sudden calmness.

"You sure?" Nick asked.

She nodded, her gaze sweeping over Claire, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker in her eyes. I wanted to shout at Nick to watch out when he pulled away a few inches. Like a wild beast, Val lunged forward again, her hands cutting through the air inches from my face. Claire buried her face in my shoulder, and her hands clutched the shirt at my lower back.

"What's wrong with you?" Nick said through gritted teeth, grabbing hold of Val again. "I trusted you, and you're acting like a psycho again. Calm down, Val!"

I smacked my tongue and peeled Claire off my shirt, and then I shot my brother a look. "You can't trust a zombie. Wasn't that the first lecture you ever taught me? Funny that you'd forget it now."

"I'm not a zombie," Val hissed. "I'm just a girl on a mission."

Yeah, right...the mission of eating a friend. I flashed my beam in her eyes and then gave Nick a sideways glance.

"What?" he asked.

"Her irises are dilated, her eyes bloodshot. The skin on her forehead is beginning to crack."

"The virus is kicking in," Nick said. "She doesn't mean to act like a maniac. I hate to tell you this, but it's only gonna get worse, so you'd better get used to it." He pushed Val past us. His knuckles had turned white where his fingers had sliced into her arms.

She struggled, her legs tangling with his, making it impossible to inch forward.

“Move it, Val,” he whispered, “or I swear I’ll tie you up and drag you out of here. You won’t like that little trip through the express lane. Trust me.”

“How are we going to get her back in the Jeep?” I asked.

“She’ll either cooperate, or else I’ll knock her out using pressure points.”

Val hissed and spat but didn’t argue. Slowly, she began to take one pace at a time.

When I heard a growl that wasn’t coming from my nearly zombified sister, my senses kicked in on full alert. I shined my light around until the beam fell on a pair of glowing yellow eyes that came out of the darkness. “Nick!” I yelled. “Zombie housewife at three o’clock!”

“Don’t panic!” Nick whispered. “I’ve got this.”

I squinted to get a better glimpse as I swung the beam around so I could catch any attack.

The zombie inched forward, then stopped and bent forward, allowing us a glimpse beneath her dirty white robe. I smirked and moved my gaze from her naked legs to the bulging red veins covering her face. Val’s words echoed in my ears, and I wondered if she’d been talking to that half-dressed zombie, advising it to throw on some clothes, but I had no time to ponder her strange comment. The zombie moved again. Slowly, she knelt to the ground and picked up the piece of meat Val had tossed away, then started to lick the spoiled steak in a bloodthirsty frenzy, like a starving stray dog.

Val slapped her forehead. “That’s sick! I can’t believe that’s going to be me in less than a day!”

“Put that thing out of its misery please,” I said.

Nick aimed his gun and shot the corpse in the head.

She fell straight back and landed in a large display of macaroni and cheese boxes.

“Will you shoot me too?” Val asked sweetly. “You did just shoot my sister, in a sense. I mean, we’re all part of the same happy meat-eating zombie family, right?”

“Stop talking like that!” Nick said through gritted teeth.

She grabbed my collar and shook me, her unnaturally shiny eyes piercing into mine. "What's it like to have a zombie for a sister?" she asked.

I set my jaw and forced myself to stare at her. What am I supposed to say? The truth? That it completely sucks? Whatever my brain came up with, it wouldn't be good enough, and I knew it sure wouldn't change anything. "It's not fun—no fun at all! Especially when she breaks into stores at night in the middle of Zombie Land." It was hard to see any life behind those eyes of hers. I was losing her after just so recently finding her, and that hurt me more than anything. "Try and think straight, Val! We gotta go, big sister."

"Big? So now I'm fat, huh?"

"No way!" I shook my head.

"I don't want to become a zombie," she said sadly, knocking over another display, sending several red and white cans to the floor. "Mmm, mmm, good," she mocked, looking at them. "I'm not really into brains as a delicacy," Val said.

Her thoughts were all over the place, and I realized I needed to keep her focused. "You won't be a zombie forever, Val. I've got the cure, remember?" My voice remained calm, but inside I was shaking like a leaf in the wind, hoping that what I was telling her was true.

"You do? Why didn't you just say so?" She yawned. "I'm so tired. What's your name again?"

"I'm your brother, Dean."

"And I'm your other brother, Nick. Now come on, sis. I have a nice blanket and pillow waiting for you in the Jeep," Nick coaxed softly. "Let's go."

"Okay." She leaned forward as though to hug me.

Nick grabbed her arm to put a few inches between us.

If she noticed, she didn't comment on it. She simply said, "Dean and Nick, I love you guys so much. I couldn't ask for better brothers."

I prayed to God she wouldn't bite me while my guard was down. "It's gonna be okay. I promise."

"Why are we here? In a grocery store of all places?" Val asked, as if she had just snapped back into reality. "Are you guys that hungry? Didn't we take enough food from that glass house?"

"I'm not hungry at all," I said, pushing her forward as gently as I could. Luckily, she began to move.

"Then why are we here?" she asked.

"Well, you hightailed it off the freeway to take us on some kind of midnight tour of this place," I said. "I figured maybe you were looking for a fast-food drive-thru."

"I'm losing my mind. You better not let me drive again. I'm so sorry, guys. I-I just don't know what's happening to me." She squeezed my hand and then let it go, as though she didn't trust herself any more than I trusted her. In the very next second, she yelled, "Get away from me! Who are you? I'm not going anywhere with you!"

In an instant, Claire pressed her stun gun on Val's arm, sending my sister crumbling to the ground on jellied legs. "Sorry for zapping your sister and all, but I think we need to get outta here," Claire said.

"It's okay. She was out of control." I scooped her up and realized she was burning up.

Nick shined the light down. "She's out cold. Let's get her back into the Jeep."

We barely moved a few steps before zombie groans came from our right.

Jackie gripped my hand. "We've got company, and I don't think they're here for this week's sales." In spite of her attempt at infusing humor, I could feel her rigidity.

"This isn't good?" Claire said.

"Don't worry," Jackie said. "Val gave me a gun, so we'll be okay."

"I hope you're right," Claire said. She peeked around an aisle, then gasped.

I followed her line of vision, and my own breath caught in my throat. "There're so many of them. That gun of yours better be a dead aimer...and I mean that literally."

We moved forward at a snail's pace, careful not to draw any unwanted attention. About twenty zombies stumbled around aimlessly, knocking over boxes and cans as they rummaged through the stock, looking for any kind of raw meat.

We were almost halfway down the aisle when a zombie's gaze fell upon me. I forced myself to remain calm, even though my whole body screamed to run. "Nick!" I nudged my brother harder

than intended. "We're outnumbered. How are we ever gonna get out of here?"

He grabbed my arm and pulled me down the aisle where we hid behind a giant display.

"We need a distraction," Jackie said.

Nick glanced around, as if pondering. "Flour," he finally said. "And it's not for baking a cake."

"Brilliant idea. We can cover them in the stuff," Claire said.

"Perfect distraction," I said. "I saw flour too."

"Where?" Claire said.

Without giving her an answer, I darted a few aisles over, flashing my light on the overhanging signs until I found the right aisle. I turned left and started frantically looking until I found it. Just as I snagged a package, a zombie's hand burst through the shelf opening from the other side, grabbing my arm and startling me. My gun clattered to the floor, next to a cellophane bag of broken plastic forks.

Through the shining beam of my flashlight, I looked through the gap, and I saw the zombie's white, lifeless, hungry eyes. My heart lurched. I knew if the thing broke my skin, I'd be in as much trouble as Val. I tried to wiggle my hand free, but it had amazing strength and just tightened its grip, pulling while rattling the shelf. I feared it might draw the attention of the other undead late-night shoppers, but my main concern was freeing my arm without sustaining a wound. I prayed it wouldn't scratch or bite me with its jagged teeth, because I knew that would be more fatal than any saliva dropping on my skin. With my free hand, I tried to hit it with my flashlight over and over again, until my arm hurt, but still the thing wouldn't let go.

Footsteps rushed behind me, and my heart raced. A zombie? How am I supposed to fight while this thing's got a hold of me? I glanced over my shoulder and saw it wasn't a zombie. It was only Claire. She was hurrying over to me, holding her stun gun. I bit my lip hard as she stunned the corpse's arm. When it released its cold grasp, I yanked my arm free. "Thank you, Claire! I so owe you."

"Did it get you?" she whispered.

I ran my hands over my arm, fearing that I might find myself in the same predicament as Val. "No blood," I said, letting

out a huge sigh of relief. When I suddenly heard footsteps, my gaze jerked up.

"It's okay," Claire said. "It's only the others."

Nick carried Val securely in his arms. "Grab as many bags as you can!"

We all went to work and started grabbing bags of flour. I was pretty sure Nick hadn't seen my little 'shelf battle' with the zombie and I wasn't about to say anything at the moment. There was no time for lectures. Carrying the sacks, we sped down the aisle.

"Our goal is to confuse them, to distract them!" Nick whispered, setting down Val.

We clambered to the top of the shelves and opened the bags. When we threw them, flour spewed everywhere. I coughed from the blanket of white sifting through the air, but our plan seemed to work: The zombies hissed and started to stumble around like big, clumsy idiots, and it looked as if they were completely disoriented from the flour fog we'd created.

"Run now!" yelled Nick, jumping down and scooping up Val.

Nick and Claire darted off ahead of Jackie and me. We were right behind them when an avalanche of cans and boxes tumbled over my head. The shelves had collapsed right down on us, probably from the weight of so many zombies filling the store. I gripped Jackie's hand tightly, peering through the smog of flour. It appeared as if Nick, Val, and Claire had made it out okay, but I hadn't. Murphy's Law. Go figure. I glanced helplessly at all the zombies flooding in through the doorway.

"We'll have to find a different way out," Jackie whispered.

I glanced at the zombies flooding in through the doorway and realized we definitely couldn't use the main entrance. From what I had seen so far, the only other way out was the back, where the zombies were gathered. *Crap!* We're so screwed.

## Chapter 12

From outside, the grocery store had seemed deserted, even peaceful, but there was nothing peaceful about the place.

Unfortunately, we had to discover that tiny detail after following Val inside, and now we were trapped. The countless growls and moans cutting through the night made my skin tingle, and my brain was working overtime as I tried to figure out a way to make it out alive. Nick, Val, and Claire had made it out of the store, but Jackie and I were still trapped inside, and it didn't look like we were going to be able to come up with an exit strategy before the zombies noticed our presence. One had already spotted me, and with more flooding in through the front by the minute, the place would grow crowded soon. My heart was already drumming in my ears, and I was sure that if I could hear its terrified thump-thump so loud and clear, the zombies would hear it too. It was only a matter of time.

I bit my lip as I glanced around the darkness, then pointed to a high window way over to the right.

Jackie nodded in silent agreement, then took off in the right direction.

Our shoes barely made a sound on the tile floor as we zigzagged through a few aisles and finally made it to the horizontal window, then stopped to peer around. Long shelves filled with cans jutted out of the wall.

Giving Jackie's hand a last squeeze, I stepped on one of the rickety bottom shelves and pulled myself up to the next horizontal surface. "C'mon!" I whispered. It was difficult to shimmy up it without knocking off any of the merchandise with my feet, but we couldn't risk making any noise. The last thing I wanted to do was give away my location to the army of the undead. I placed a foot on the hard surface and held on to the metal rod, then heaved myself up. My clothes made a chafing sound that wouldn't have been noticeable under normal circumstances, but nothing about our circumstances was normal. I held my breath and peered around me, trying to determine if we'd been spotted. The zombies went about their business, fighting and hissing over a slice of foul-smelling meat. Letting out my breath, I tested the shelf with

my leg. When I realized it was strong enough to support me, I moved up to the next level, then stopped again when the shelf trembled. A few cans knocked against each other; two or three rolled to the side, but didn't drop to the ground. Thank God! I knew if I could keep it that way, we might just stand a chance. The last thing I wanted to die over was a can of black-eyed peas.

Using the shelf as a ladder to reach the top, I climbed up slowly but steadily, taking one step at a time. I was almost up when one of the cans clattered to the ground, the sound reverberating from the walls. Crap! Suddenly, a few zombie heads snapped in our direction, causing my breath to catch in my throat. I prayed their interest wouldn't be piqued but, as usual, luck wasn't on my side. Hurrying as fast as I could, my legs on fire, I dashed up, then reached down to help Jackie. I wrapped my hand around her thin arm to pull her up, and once she reached the top, we glanced down. Because of my fumbling cans fiasco, zombies had spotted us and headed in our direction.

Jackie unlocked the window. We pushed and pulled as hard as we could, our arms straining as we forced the latch, but it was painted shut and refused to budge. I reached for my gun but it wasn't there and I knew it must've fallen out when the shelves collapsed on us.

"Give it another push!" I yelled. "On three!" I began to count, and then hurled my whole weight forward, to no avail. My heart began to race again. I got on my knees and reached down for anything we could use to bust the window or knock the latch off. My hands wrapped around a can of spaghetti sauce, the mushroom variety. It was a bit small, but the edges were sharp enough to do the trick. "Cover your face!" I said to Jackie.

"No need," she said, sliding out her gun from her holster. Pulling the trigger, the window shattered with a boom, glass spraying outside onto the gravel below. The shelves started to wobble as zombies began to rock them from below, and Jackie fell back with a loud yelp.

I quickly grabbed her around the waist to steady her, while holding on to the railing with my other arm. "Wrap your arm around my neck," I shouted through the moaning noise below. When Jackie reached up, I scooped her into my arms and held her tightly against me, then kicked out the rest of the window while Jackie kicked the shelf over. Her body was still pressed against me



as we teetered on the edge of the windowsill, dangerously close to the floor below and the hands reaching up to grab us and tear us into tasty, bloody morsels. With a loud thud, the shelf crashed on top of the zombies.

I peered out into the night, exasperated. There were no trees to shimmy down, no ladder, no rope, and nothing to aid our descent. Only after leaning out did I notice that directly underneath us, there was a tall dumpster with flat, open doors on the top and metal sliding doors on the side. "We've gotta jump," I said.

Without hesitation, Jackie climbed out and took the plunge.

I followed right after and fell into a giant pile of black bags. I could hear the plastic crinkling beneath me a moment before the reek of rotten eggs hit my nostrils and made me gag. Pushing up, I struggled to grip something hard without spreading the garbage and smell all over me. When I finally managed to sit up, I realized the only thing that wasn't covered in trash were parts of my face. "Are you okay?" I whispered, looking around for Jackie, who'd disappeared into the abyss of garbage.

She popped up and peered over a few bags. "Yeah, I'm fine. You?"

I nodded, even though I couldn't tell whether she could see anything in the pitch black.

"See anything?" she continued.

The moon cast a glow over city buildings, and graffiti-covered walls stretching into the distance. To the left of a broken lamp post, I noticed a long alley strewn with garbage. My gaze scanned the area for any suspicious movement, but everything remained silent. "The coast is clear," I whispered to Jackie.

The loud rustling of plastic bags next to Jackie startled me. Then, a green, rotting hand burst from the boxes and tried to clench the air. My heart lurched. I felt around the trash looking for anything I could get my hands on. All I could find were empty boxes that wouldn't even smash a fly, let alone fight off a zombie.

The oversized container shook slightly on its wheels as the zombie fought its way through the trash and sprung toward Jackie, snapping its jaws. She whipped out her gun and shot it straight in the forehead. Dark liquid squirted everywhere, and the zombie fell sideways. Jackie scrambled up.

I was right behind her, so I helped her climb over the edge of the dumpster, and then followed. "Which way should we go?" I whispered as I scanned my surroundings.

"Let's circle around. Maybe we'll find Nick and Claire...and your sister."

Before I could even answer, I heard a moan and spun around. I gasped. More zombies had spotted us and shuffled in our direction. Jackie aimed her gun, but we both realized there were too many and we wouldn't stand a chance. With my heart pounding, I gripped her hand, and we turned around. "C'mon!" We took off down the alley, and I spied the perfect getaway vehicle, an abandoned motorcycle. Nick had taught me how to ride his motorcycle ages ago. I was a pro and could handle this with no problem. "Think it runs?" I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the zombies weren't gaining on us. Luckily for us, they were slower than turtles, and they were still a good distance away, but I wanted to get out of there before they caught up.

"It won't even start without keys," Jackie said, searching for them in the darkness.

It would have been far too easy for them to have been left in the ignition, I supposed. I glanced down and noticed a leather coat lying on the sidewalk in a bloody heap. I was about to open my mouth to say something about it, but before I could, she had followed my line of vision and was poking her foot into the heap. Bending down, she felt the pockets and pulled out a set of dangling keys. I prayed one of them would start the bike. I hopped on, she hopped on behind me, and I slid the most appropriate-looking key in the ignition. There was a click, but the motorcycle wouldn't start. Beads of sweat rolled down my face.

"Try again!" yelled Jackie. "They're getting closer."

"I am!" I said, wondering why the thing wouldn't cooperate. With a terrified glance over my shoulder, I tried one last time. The engine spluttered for a moment, but then it finally started! We sped down the alley, my heart racing. I had always dreamt of riding a magnificent Harley with a beautiful girl, the blasting gusts of wind whipping through our hair. Of course, I'd pictured it more on a highway, not in a back-alley labyrinth, in the middle of the night, with zombies hot on our tailpipes.

We took a few twists and turns, but I really wasn't sure which way to go. I slowed and turned the motorcycle down another alleyway, which ultimately led us to a beach.

"Turn around," Jackie said.

Just as she said it, I heard hissing and moaning wafting through the night air and glanced over my shoulder to see a new group of undead coming out from behind deserted buildings and heading toward us. "Um, scratch that!" I said. "There's no way we're going back."

## Chapter 13

“The sand! It’ll slow them down big time,” I said, turning left onto the beach and hitting the gas. I scanned my surroundings. To the left, tall trees stretched into the sky, their crowns swallowed up by darkness. Behind us, a white sign glowed in the darkness, pointing out that it was a private beach and any intruders would be prosecuted. We didn’t know what we might stumble upon in either direction, and I wasn’t sure which way to take. While I was deliberating, my wheels suddenly squealed, throwing up sand everywhere.

“What’s going on?” Jackie asked behind me. Her frantic tone and the way her hands clutched my waist told me she was slowly getting worried.

“Hold on,” I said calmly, even though my hands were shaking. There wasn’t enough time to dig the tires out. If we were stuck, we’d have to make it out of there on foot. We had no flashlights and, worse, no idea what was lurking around the next corner. Shuffling through the sand, groups of zombies slowly came from every direction, drawn to us like moths to a flame. I assumed they were attracted to the roar of the motorcycle. I met Jackie’s terrified gaze. “If we can get free, we can zigzag around them.” It was a crazy idea, but it wasn’t impossible. They were still at least a hundred feet away, but one particular zombie seemed to move faster than the rest; I wondered if he’d been just recently turned. I kept the zombie MVP in my line of vision.

Jackie pulled out her gun. “I’m going to keep these freaks from getting too close. You just work on getting us outta here.”

“Remember, aim for their heads.”

“I know,” she said flatly.

The motorcycle rattled as I revved it up, the tires digging deep into the sinking sand. Time was running out, and I contemplated running on foot if we didn’t get the Harley out within the next minute or so.

“Hey!” she said. “Try not to spin the tires. Digging us halfway to Australia isn’t going to do us any good.” She squeezed the trigger and missed.

“Concentrate!” I said.

“I am!” she said. She fired again, this time hitting the zombie in the chest. “It’s still coming!”

“They will unless you hit them in the head!” I yelled. With the zombie inching forward, I needed to get the motorcycle tire out of the sand, but I couldn’t focus on helping Jackie and digging our way out all at once.

“Got it!” She slid off the bike. She walked right up to the zombie, until she was only a few feet away, then aimed and shot him right in the forehead, sending him to the ground, where he flailed around for a moment like a dying fish out of water.

“Are you crazy? Get back on the bike!” I yelled.

“I’m not going down without giving us a fighting chance.” She aimed at the approaching crowd, and three more fell. Jackie was finally realizing that fighting had become a necessity for life, but she was failing to realize that two people couldn’t take on an entire zombie herd by themselves.

“You need to quit playing hero and get your butt back on this bike!”

Reaching down, she grabbed some loose branches from the beach. “I have an idea.”

“I think your gun’s a much better choice,” I said.

“Try to lift the motorcycle when I count to three,” she said.

I heaved as hard as I could, but with the sand shifting everywhere, I only managed about two or three inches.

“Hold it up,” Jackie said, kneeling down.

I clenched my teeth and held the weight of the machine as I watched her squeeze the branches under the front tires, then move to the back. I held my breath as I dropped the front tire, then lifted up the back so she could stabilize the branches beneath it.

“The branches will provide traction, or at least I hope so,” she said.

It was a brilliant idea; I had to give her that. I rocked the motorcycle back and forth, spewing a cloud of sand in the air. Some of the smaller twigs snapped beneath it, making me doubt it

would hold. I knew we had to hurry. I could just picture that undead army pulling us off the motorcycle and biting into our flesh, and I shuddered at the thought. "Jump on," I said to Jackie before starting the engine. I could feel the twigs giving way beneath the tires, so I hit the gas. With one last squeal, the tires were free. I turned in the direction with the least amount of zombies and was able to easily pass by them, my heart racing even faster than the bike.

Speeding up, I followed the beach strip, my thighs clutching to it to keep it steady. I turned right. There has to be an opening or exit somewhere. If we could only find it... "Look for a gate or something," I yelled to Jackie, my gaze still fixed on the ground. As I turned the bend, I saw that the south side of the beach was also swarming with zombies. To make matters worse, I was sure our loud motorcycle had just rung the dinner bell.

"There're too many of them!" Jackie said. "We'll never get through."

She was right, for I saw no way to break through them without becoming their midnight snack.

Jackie started shooting, and two dropped in our path.

I abruptly turned the bike and zigzagged past a few stragglers. I revved up the motorcycle and sped toward a nearby pier.

Jackie wrapped her arms tight around my waist. "What're we doing?"

"Can you swim?"

"Yeah, sure. I take it we're going for a dip?"

"Yep, hold on." Adjusting my speed, I raced down the pier. The engine revved and the tires squealed as the motorcycle drove into the lake with a giant splash and began sinking, pulling us beneath the surface.

Cold water gushed into my mouth and soaked my clothes. Somewhere in the back of my swirling mind, I realized I could no longer feel Jackie's hands around my waist. With deliberate, long pushes of my legs and arms, I broke the surface and spewed out water, my whole body screaming for oxygen. I took giant gulps of air and searched for Jackie. "Jackie? Jackie! Where are you?" I asked between breaths.

A few moments passed, but the dark surface of the water remained undisturbed. I scanned the area around me frantically,

fearing the worst. Suddenly, a spluttering noise echoed from behind me. I turned sharply to Jackie, throwing her arms around me.

“You’re okay!” She laughed.

I melted into her embrace. “Never been better. I shook my head to push the scary images to the back of my mind. If anything had happened to her, I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself.

She motioned toward the shore. “You don’t think they can swim, do you?”

“No way! I live on an island. Trust me, those things can’t swim, and they know it.” My gaze darted over to the shore. Under the bright moonlight, zombies were pacing up and down it, moaning and groaning, just waiting to tear us apart. Lots of them had also followed us up the pier. It gave me the creeps, but I knew they wouldn’t come into the lake.

She squeezed my arm. “I bet they’d love it if we were stupid enough to swim back.”

“Yeah, but we’re not that stupid.”

“Let’s swim to the other side and get our butts out of here,” Jackie said.

I had no idea how big or deep the lake was, but I didn’t even want to think about it. With no other choice, I had to remain positive, so I glided forward with long strokes.

After a few minutes of swimming, Jackie stopped. I halted next to her and followed her line of vision, down the water surface to the darkness stretching in the distance. “You see that?” she whispered, pointing at what looked like a shore.

“What?”

She started forward, then swung back. “There’s somebody over there.”

I was sure it was just more zombies, so we’d have to keep swimming until we found a safe way out. I could see the opposite shore not too far away. Squinting to get a better look, I made out figures in the distance. A second later, a strong breeze carried their shouts to us. My lips curled into a big smile when I realized Nick and Claire were pacing along the shore, waving their hands wildly. “I can always count on my brother!” I pounded the water with my fists, splashing it in all directions.

Jackie smiled. “We’re saved!”

I met her gaze when she gripped my shirt tight and pulled me close, wrapping her legs tightly around me. Catching me off guard, she captured my lips in a hot, hungry kiss. I swirled my tongue over hers. My heart pounded as adrenaline surged. I had never kissed such a hot girl before—or many girls, for that matter—and it was the most amazing feeling in the entire world.

She broke the kiss and said with a coy smile, “C’mon. Your brother’s waiting.”

I smiled. “Yeah, let’s go.” With powerful strokes, I cut through the water and swam toward shore.

“Hey, we saw headlights, and then a bike drive off into the lake!” Claire called as soon as we were within earshot, only a few feet away. “When we saw it, we raced our Jeeps over here to the other side, hoping it might be you.”

“Yeah, with all that screaming to get your attention, I thought we’d attract zombies,” Nick said.

I scanned the beach for any shadows, but saw none. It looked safe for the moment, and I was happy when my feet finally touched the ground beneath me. As I waded through the waist-high water, pebbles and sand shifted under my feet. I climbed out, shivering in the cold breeze running over my body. “How’s Val?” I asked my brother.

“Sleeping,” he answered. There was something in his voice though, some kind of hesitation, as though he was keeping something to himself, but I didn’t press the issue.

Happy to have made it out, I let out a sigh of relief and squeezed Jackie’s hand, and then my gaze fell on the gun in Claire’s hand. “You pack heat now?” I asked.

She noticed my staring and held it up. “Your brother showed me some tips at the house, so I thought this might be the perfect time to put them to good use.”

“Yeah, well, Nick can talk anyone into anything,” I said.

“C’mon,” Nick said. “You know a stun gun wouldn’t cut it out here.”

“I thought that too,” I said, “but then Claire saved my butt back in the store.”

“What?” Nick gasped.

“One of those zombies grabbed me through the shelves and I lost my gun. If Claire hadn’t come and stunned the freak, I’m



sure the thing would've bitten me." I threw Claire a thankful look. "Thanks, Claire."

"Not a problem." Claire slipped her gun into a holster around her waist, then threw an old blanket around me and Jackie. The wool felt so warm against my freezing skin; I couldn't stop shivering.

Nick hugged me. "I'm so glad you two are safe. You scared me to death!"

"Sorry, man."

"That was crazy!" Nick said. "Don't you dare ever pull a stunt like that again. The bike could've dragged you underwater and drowned you."

Jackie laughed. "A stunt? As if we planned it."

I nudged her, smiling. "Yeah, I knew he'd be totally freaked."

"Why wouldn't he be?" Claire asked, as if standing up for his honor. "The last thing we saw was you guys heading off to the lake on a motorcycle with a herd on your butts." She let out a trembling breath. "We tried to distract the zombies by beeping the horn."

"And then Claire's Jeep wouldn't start at first...about giving me a heart attack," Nick said.

"I really think we should be on a lookout for a new vehicle," Claire said.

"Yeah," Nick agreed. "Anyway, Claire laid on the horn like you wouldn't believe!"

Claire nodded. "Some of them turned, but most of them had their eyes set on you."

I found it funny that Claire had tried so hard to deter the undead army. The girl I'd met only hours earlier wouldn't have dreamt of attracting their attention when she could have just run away. It was quite a change, quite an accomplishment. I was sure she didn't do it entirely for me though. It was for Jackie, her cousin. When someone's loved ones or friends are in trouble, they'll go to astonishing lengths to save them, no matter how scary it is. I learned this firsthand with Val.

"We got separated when the zombies knocked the shelves over," Jackie said. "We made an escape out a window."

“Yeah, we were totally freaked out when we lost you guys.” Claire wrapped her arms around both of us. “I’m so glad you’re safe now.”

“Thanks for finding us,” whispered Jackie, hugging her tight.

“You think I’d let my BFF and cousin get eaten by zombies?”

Jackie chuckled. “Not in this lifetime.”

We all laughed.

Nick insisted I ride with him because he wanted to discuss game plans and routes, so Claire and Jackie drove one Jeep while Nick, Val, and I took the other. We took off, heading for the highway. Val was sprawled out across the back seat, Nick drove, and I rode in the passenger seat.

“You really think Val’s okay?” I asked. “She looks so pale.”

“She’s fine, but I’ll tell you one thing. If our crazy sister pulls another stunt like she did back there, I’m gonna...” He didn’t finish the thought.

She had definitely put us in a dangerous situation, and I hoped she would stay passed out for a while because I had no idea how to handle her. “When’s she going to turn so we can see if the cure works?”

“Soon—very soon.”

A thumping sound startled me. Turning sharply, I signaled Nick to keep quiet as I listened for any more strange noises. A second later, the thumping started again, stronger than before. My head snapped in Val’s direction, even though I knew she was out cold. With my heart racing in my chest, I whipped out my gun and motioned for Nick to pull over as I prepared for yet another surprise coming from the storage compartment of our Jeep.

## Chapter 14

We'd been on the highway for at least half an hour, listening to the rhythmic sound of our tires on the asphalt, when a strange noise made me look up. I held my breath and listened. For a whole second, nothing stirred, but then a thudding sound reverberated from inside the Jeep, the strange thudding and thumping we'd heard before. "What the heck?" I mumbled, motioning Nick to pull over and cut the engine. "I think something is in here with us."

"I hear it too. Stay calm," Nick said. "Let's not confront anything until we're all safely out of the Jeep. That'll give us a huge advantage."

The moment the Jeep ground to a halt, I grabbed Val and jumped out, setting her softly on the grass. If something was in that Jeep with us, I didn't want her to get hurt, especially while she was out cold and couldn't defend herself. I dashed for the back of the vehicle, with my weapon drawn.

Nick reached me in two long strides and placed his large body on the other side of the rear hatch.

Signaling him to keep quiet, I pointed my gun at the storage compartment located behind the second set of seats, and mentally prepared myself to shoot the miserable stowaway between its dead white eyes. I had no idea how a zombie could've gotten in there, but I was going to make it pay. With my eyes glued to the rear hatch, I inched closer and reached to open it.

Suddenly tires screeched on the asphalt behind us, and the doors opened and slammed shut.

"Get back inside!" Nick yelled. "There's nothing to see."

"What's going on?" Jackie asked, ignoring him. "You just stopped in the middle of nowhere."

"Is it Val?" Claire asked, appearing beside me.

I pushed her a step back and peered at Nick's face, which resembled a mask of irritation. "We all have to be quiet," I whispered, "or you might just wake up the monster—and I'm not talking about the zombie in the storage compartment of the Jeep."

As though in answer, a thud echoed from inside, followed by a louder one.

Claire jumped back, startled. "What the heck? A zombie? How did it get in there?"

"Probably while Val was on her little moonlight shopping spree." I shrugged. "As to why it would have wanted to crawl in there, don't ask me. I guess they're not claustrophobic or prone to motion sickness."

"Okay, we're opening," Nick said, pointing at Jackie. "Can you stand guard?"

She nodded, pulling out her gun.

"Okay." Nick sighed heavily, then unlocked the rear hatch and slowly opened the compartment door.

I drew a sharp breath and held it, bracing myself for the worst.

Something stirred inside, as though whatever was in there had sat up groggily and tried to maneuver themselves out. Then a voice echoed from within.

I blinked several times before a face came to mind to match the voice.

"Please don't shoot, Nick! Don't shoot, man!" Tahoe pleaded, appearing in my line of vision. His face was covered in darkness, but I would have recognized his hands anywhere, for they were the hands that had almost cost Val her life.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Nick stepping closer, his jaw clenched in anger. "Nice touch remembering my name, Lake Tahoe, but do you think that's gonna actually save your sorry butt? The tables have turned for you, buddy. Now I'm in charge."

I shined the flashlight in Tahoe's eyes, unable to believe the guy's luck. He'd ventured out into the night, and when we'd watched his friend being eaten alive, we'd all mistakenly assumed Tahoe had been a side dish. I couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone standing in front of us. Either he had to be the luckiest moron in the whole wide world, or else he'd been bitten, so the venom had kept his future kind at bay. I knew which option was more likely. Taking a step back, I pushed Claire behind me, just in case, and focused my attention back on Tahoe. His hands and clothes were bloody, but whether the brown and red stains were from his blood or someone else's, I couldn't tell. If he had been attacked and infected by zombies, I knew Nick wouldn't hesitate to

shoot him; at least that would have given Nick the perfect excuse to put a bullet in his head, a fitting death sentence for his attempted murder of our sister.

“You’re the scum of the Earth. You know that, right?”

Nick pointed his gun directly at the scraggly man’s head. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t pull this trigger.”

Tahoe held up his hands, his eyes wide with fear. “Please don’t shoot! It was all Earl! I let Dean go so he could help her. Just ask him. I let go!” He pointed at me, his gaze begging me to tell my brother my part of the story.

I’m not gonna play along with his little games.

My brother glanced over at me as if to acknowledge his claims.

“What?” I asked Tahoe. “You want me to remember?”

Hmm. Well, I’m afraid that might not work right now since I have a little concussion leftover from trying to save my sister from you and your sleaze-ball friend.”

Tahoe paled, and a sheen of sweat covered his forehead. His hands clenched and unclenched, and his gaze fixed on the gun in my brother’s hand.

“Is that so?” Nick said, grinning.

I inclined my head and tried to keep hard from laughing at Tahoe’s shocked expression. “Yeah. Look, Nick, you might hafta draw your own conclusion here since I ain’t gonna be of much help.”

Tahoe swallowed audibly.

I couldn’t help but feel justice had been served by terrifying him, if only a tiny bit. “Okay. He did let me go, technically,” I said eventually. “Thing is, I still couldn’t reach Val in time, and if it weren’t for him and his half-wit friend, she wouldn’t have gone through the horror she experienced.”

Nick nodded. “Right. An accessory. I think any judge and jury would condemn a man who tried to assist in the murder of an innocent woman.” He pointed the gun into Tahoe’s forehead.

“Hey! You’re not the judge and executioner,” Jackie said, grabbing Nick’s arm.

Even though I’d sworn it when Val had supposedly died, I didn’t believe in cold-blooded murder. Those vengeful thoughts had been nothing more than the result of my emotions spilling over when I thought my sister had been murdered. “Just let him

go,” I said with a heavy sigh. “He’s not worth a wasted bullet. Besides, we need to get back on the road.”

“Get out of the trunk, Tahoe!” Nick said through gritted teeth. “Make one wrong move, and I’ll shoot you dead in your tracks.”

Tahoe slowly climbed out. “I’ll just be on my way. Thank you.”

“Everybody get back to your vehicles,” Nick said, motioning Claire and Jackie back to their Jeep.

“Nick...” I said, hesitating. Knowing my brother, I doubted he’d just let Tahoe be on his merry way, but Nick was hard to read. He’d always been like that, but he was no killer. Or is he? “Nick?” My hand wandered to grab his arm, but he shrugged it off.

Jackie picked up on his vibes too. “You can’t kill him, Nick. We’re not murderers!”

Tahoe coughed and fell to the ground. He’d lost a lot of blood and was pretty weak.

“Nick,” Claire said, “you’re not a killer. You know that.”

He regarded her coolly. “How would you know? You’ve known me for all of five minutes.”

She pressed her fist against her chest, right above where her heart was beating. “I can feel it.” Her voice quivered with emotion. “Let’s help him get better, and then you can kick him out.”

Laughing, Nick shook his head. “Why shouldn’t we just leave him here? He’d make a nice little buffet for any zombies who happen to come along.”

“You can’t just leave him out here to die,” she said, her gaze imploring him to listen, “and you can’t kill him either.”

We were trying our best, but in the end, we knew it was Nick’s decision to make. We hoped he would do the right thing. But do I really know him? I wondered. What I’d seen of him during our brief stint in Zombie Land had changed my perception of him. He was tougher and colder than I ever imagined he could be.

“They won’t touch him if they recognize their kind,” Nick said, regarding Tahoe.

“They didn’t bite me,” Tahoe insisted. “Really, they didn’t!”

Nick's eyes narrowed. "But wouldn't that be sweet justice?"

"I'm with you on that one," Jackie said. "He had no qualms about helping to throw an innocent woman over the railing as a distraction to save his own butt."

"I would never hurt anybody!" Tahoe said, shaking his head vehemently. "It was all Earl! I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for your loss. If I didn't help him and do what he said, he would have killed me too!"

"Not a loss," Claire whispered. "The girl lived."

He gasped. "What? How? I-I mean that's wonderful, but how? Where is she? I'd like to personally apologize."

"Let's bandage him up," Jackie said. "Give him some food and water and a weapon. Whatever happens after that is his problem."

"You want to waste our precious supplies on this loser?" Nick asked.

Jackie stepped toward him, her eyes sparkling with determination. "Yes. I don't want to have his demise on our conscience. That's the only thing that makes us any more human than those things out there, isn't it?"

Nick waved his gun in the air. "This jerk almost cost my sister her life!"

"Listen, Nick..."

"No, Claire! If he and his friend hadn't stopped us, we could've made it out in the nick of time, before the herd came around to the front of the house."

Claire shook her head vehemently. "That's not entirely true, and you know it. I slowed you down in the first place. If you hadn't stayed there long enough to convince us to come with you, you would've been long gone."

"That's different."

A dangerous glint appeared in her eyes. "Why?"

Nick ran a hand through his hair as he contemplated her answer. "Because you didn't try to kill my sister," he said after a moment.

Claire's shoulders slumped. She was losing the argument, right or wrong, and she knew it. Whether we wanted it or not, Nick would make the final decision.

“Claire, Jackie, you can’t just leave me here,” Tahoe pleaded. “Zombies will shred me to pieces. Earl’s a psychopath and told me he’d kill me countless times. I believed him after I saw the things he’s done in the past. But he was my uncle and I couldn’t leave him.”

“Oh, you’re good,” Nick said. “Go on, storyteller. Humor us.”

“No, really! It’s all true. My father’s the chief of police and I was going to tell him all about Earl.”

“Right,” I said.

“I swear I’m telling you the truth. Earl and I left the city we resided in to go pick up family members stranded in another state. We got sidetracked trying to lose a herd. I planned on getting back home, zombie apocalypse or not.”

He was good at making up stories, but none of us believed Tahoe for a second.

“Do you really have the heart to kill a cop’s son?” he said. “Not to mention, I have a wife and twin girls. Please think of them before you do anything to me.”

“If I was you,” Nick said, “I might’ve tried telling the story with one kid. It’s way more believable than twins.”

“Please think of my girls,” Tahoe added. “They have beautiful blonde hair like their mama. If you met my babies, you’d instantly fall in love with them.”

I raised my brows at him when he tried to play the sympathy card. I was sure no one in our group could possibly fall for such a tall tale, yet I could tell Jackie was softening: Her frown and the angry crease in her forehead disappeared, and her hands clutched into fists at her side as she turned to regard Nick. “We need to get going,” I said. “Having an argument out here is bound to draw attention—and not the positive kind.”

Nick nodded and took another step toward Tahoe, but Claire jumped in front of him as if to block Nick from shooting him. “He has nobody to look out for him!” she said. “You know what would’ve happened if no one had helped me in my time of need? I’d be dead.”

Nick let out a long breath. “Fine. Get the medical kit, Dean.”

I sighed. Is he seriously caving just because of a pretty face? Then again, I didn’t care. I just wanted to do whatever we



were doing so we could get the heck outta there. When I grabbed the first aid kit, Claire snatched it out of my hand and began tending to Tahoe's wounds.

"Hurry up. We don't have time for this," Nick said. "Every minute we stick around here just makes a bigger target on our backs."

"Then help us get him into the Jeep so we can leave," Claire snapped.

"No," I said. "Nick's right. Tahoe can't come with us. He's a liar and nothing but trouble. Tend to his wounds like you wanted, and we'll give him a little food and water and some kind of weapon to defend himself, but that's all we're going to do for him."

"Check him for any scratches or bites," Jackie said.

Tahoe wiped a sleeve across his eyes. "I wasn't bitten. Earl stabbed me. The zombies were on my butt, and I saw the rear hatch wide open from where you were packing supplies. I threw out the stuff in my way and I squeezed into the compartment, then shut the door. If I would've climbed into the back seat, they would've seen me. My idea worked. The dummies had no idea where I went."

"And how did you plan on getting out?" I asked.

"I didn't think that far ahead. I just wanted to get away from them."

"Wow," Nick said in a sarcastic tone. "You're pretty smart for a cop's son."

"All I knew was that I couldn't outrun them," Tahoe said. "I was bleeding, and I didn't have the energy to hotwire the Jeep. I was about to pass out. I knew if I fainted in the Jeep, the zombies would've broken in and eaten me. I thought it would be safer to try and hide in the storage compartment, and I must have passed out and not woken up till now."

"He's coming with me," Claire said, determined. "Cut out the tough guy act and try to show a little compassion, because there's nothing you can do about it." As though to prove their point, Claire and Jackie helped Tahoe up.

When he hobbled over and climbed inside their Jeep, I knew there was no changing their minds; we were stuck with him.

Nick's eyes blazed as he pulled Claire aside. "Have you lost your freaking mind?" I could tell that he was a bit miffed at her outright defiance, but the girl had a mind of her own.

“What if he hurts you?” I said.

“Just look at him.” Jackie pointed at Tahoe, now slumped over the back seat. “He’s a conman, not a murderer. We can handle him. I really don’t think he’ll hurt us. He’s barely in any condition to breathe, let alone anything else.”

“True,” I said, “but what if he dies? It takes up to five days to turn into a zombie from a bite or scratch, but if one dies, it’s immediate. You need to know that.” I didn’t even want to think about what might happen to the girls if he turned and attacked them.

Jackie’s eyes grew wide. “He won’t. I grabbed the medical kit, some antibiotics, and pain pills. But just to be safe, I’ll let Claire drive. I’ll watch him closely. If he dies, I’ll shoot him straight in the head.”

I pulled her close. “No! This is a bad idea, Jackie—a really, really bad idea.”

“I just can’t stand by and leave somebody in this condition in such a horrible, lonely, scary place. Please try to understand.” She kissed my cheek and hopped in the passenger side.

“It’d make me feel safer if you at least tied him up,” I said.

“We can handle it.” Claire turned the key and started the ignition. “We’ll be right behind.”

“Change of plans,” I said, peering in through the open window. “Tahoe’s coming with us in our Jeep whether Nick likes it or not. That way I know you two will be safe.”

Jackie shook her head vehemently. “Nope! Not happenin’. Nick will use any little excuse to kill him and you know it.”

“Then we move onto Plan B,” I said.

“What’s that?” Claire asked.

“Hey, Nick,” I yelled. “I’m riding with the girls.”

“Okay, that’s fine. See if Claire wants to ride with me?”

“Yeah, I want to ride with him,” Claire said, opening the door, when Jackie grabbed her arm.

“No you don’t,” Jackie said. “They’re insisting a guy needs to be in each Jeep. We’re strong, independent women. We can handle a Jeep just as well as they can.” She looked up at me. “I killed that zombie with a bat because I was trying to make a point. From this moment on, I can take care of myself. And I don’t need a guy to protect me ever again.”

"I'm just trying to keep you safe from a psychopath," I said. "So here's Plan C. You know I won't kill Tahoe, so he and I will ride in my Jeep and Nick can ride with you two."

"I like it," Claire said.

"I don't," Jackie said. "Again, he feels like a man has to be with us so we're safe. Go back to your Jeep, Dean, and please trust me that I can handle this."

A moan echoed from the trees as a zombie stumbled out of the vegetation toward us.

"Get in the Jeep, Dean. Now!" Nick said. He then shot the zombie with perfect aim. "We don't have time to stand out here arguing. Listen, they're big girls. They can make their own decisions."

I ran back to my Jeep and jumped in, slamming the door. "They're trying to be all independent now," I said.

"Not again," Nick said, peering out the window. "Their Jeep just stalled."

We definitely needed to find them better transportation. I let out a sigh of relief as the Jeep suddenly turned over.

Biting my lip hard, I struggled with the decision of leaving the girls with a possible zombie.

"At least we know Val's safe with us," Nick said, shooting her a glance over his shoulder. "We need to stick with the mission and save Val. It's easy to get sidetracked, but we have to stay focused for her sake." I opened my mouth to argue my point, but my brother raised a hand to stop me and continued, "Today has been a horrible nightmare, and I'm dead tired. Let's just go and leave it at that."

The crease on his forehead deepened, and worry wrinkles had emerged around his eyes. He was tired, and I didn't want to add to his problems, so I pressed my lips shut and made myself comfortable in my seat. I wasn't happy about the girls letting Tahoe ride with them, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

## Chapter 15

The highway was one long strip stretching out into the night, illuminated only by our headlights and the rising moon above. Sitting in the passenger seat, with my head pressed against the cold, smooth window, I stared at the road ahead, my mind scattered in a million directions. I knew I should try to get some sleep, in case I had to relieve Nick from driving, but for some reason, any shred of fatigue seemed to have eluded me. Every now and then, my gaze moved to the rearview mirror to check on Claire and Jackie, following in the second Jeep with Tahoe for a passenger. With nothing stirring, silence engulfed us, just three siblings. Siblings. Brothers and sister. It sounded strange to me. Up until recently, it had been just Nick and me. Never in a million years would I have guessed that might change, but then Val came along, and just like that, we had a sister. I still couldn't quite wrap my head around it.

My brother suddenly rolled down the window, jolting me out of my thoughts. "I can't stand the stink in here. We need to get a clean dressing on Val's wound before it turns completely nasty."

"We don't have to stop out here. I'll do it while you're driving," I said, crawling into the back seat. I dug around for the medical kit we'd snagged from the glass house. Inside it, I found all the necessary sterile bandages, antiseptic, and tape.

Suddenly, our sister awoke and sat up.

I stopped, unsure how she'd react to me looking at her wound.

"You're changing my bandage?" she asked groggily.

"Because Jackie gave me a new one while I was driving."

"Yeah? Well, we need to put a fresh one on again," I said, clearing my throat. "It's, uh...it looks like it's seeped through."

"Just be sure to wear gloves," she said, pointing to the medical kit. "We don't want to take any chances of you getting infected."

"Yeah," I said quietly. In silence, I grabbed a pair of latex gloves, tore the packaging open, and pulled them on with a snap, just like a surgeon.

“Ready?” she said, pulling her sleeve up. When I nodded, she switched on the flashlight and held it up, instructing me step by step on how to cleanse and change the bandage like she’d done seemingly a million times before.

As I worked, the scent of foul flesh intensified. Taking in shallow breaths, I followed Val’s instructions to a T, then threw some tape on it and smiled. Back when we first met, she’d hinted at having some basic medical knowledge, but I’d never had the chance to ask about that. I sensed it was now a good time to learn more about her. “What did you used to do—you know, before all of this?”

“I was a cop,” she said, looking at me with an amused expression, as if anticipating my reaction.

It wasn’t what I expected her to say, but it did make perfect sense. “I should’ve known by the way you handle a gun,” I said. “So where did you get your medical knowledge from?”

“I was engaged to a doctor,” she whispered. “His name was Travis. I used to help him change bandages at the clinic. Infected people swarmed that place. His staff was swamped when the outbreak happened, so he had no choice but to let me assist him, even though he didn’t want to and we argued for hours whenever the chance presented itself.”

Nick glanced over his shoulder. “Our hospitals, doctor offices, and clinics in South Carolina were also teeming with people who wanted help and demanded to know what was going on.”

“Yeah, I imagine every medical facility across the world was jam-packed just like ours. So, whether Travis wanted it or not, I helped out at the clinic when my shifts were over.”

“That’s dedication,” Nick said.

“Yeah, well, we didn’t know what was going on at the time. Travis was so sure he could help them, and I was naïve enough to believe him.”

She seemed sad to talk about him, and I wondered what had happened between them. Did things go sour and not work out, or was he killed when the zombie thing went down? I didn’t have the nerve to ask, but she must’ve sensed my interest, because it didn’t take long to get my answer.

She pressed her lips into a grim line. “He’s dead. He never shoulda been at the clinic with all those infected people. I still can’t believe we were treating zombie victims like real people. They

wanted nothing more than to rip our heads off. How could we have been so stupid?"

"You couldn't have known," I said softly, "but what you were trying to do was admirable."

"If only we had known what we were really dealing with, maybe things would have turned out differently. If only I could go back in time and save him."

"I'm so sorry, Val." Even though nothing I could say or do would ease my sister's pain, I leaned in and rubbed her back gently in the hopes that she might draw some relief from it.

Her voice quivered. "They're all dead—all my family in Philadelphia and most of the people I've ever known. I thought I'd lost my entire family until I met you. Now, you guys are all I have left. I thought I couldn't lose more until zombies broke into my home and killed my dogs. That was the moment when I knew I couldn't stay in Philadelphia. I had to get the heck outta there, or else I would've been next."

"Pennsylvania?" I asked.

"Yep. Born and raised." She nodded and smiled, her gaze turning distant. "When I found adoption papers by accident, I was shocked. I demanded answers, and my adoptive parents finally told me about my past and about you. A few weeks later, they died. I spent months traveling around, trying to find you, slaying I don't know how many zombies in my path." She reached in her pocket and pulled out a crumpled Christmas card, then handed it to me.

With trembling fingers, I reached for it and recognized it immediately. "Nick, this picture is of us, last year at Christmas," I said, passing it to my brother.

He glanced at it briefly, his gaze barely brushing it. "The Christmas card with those goofy Santa hats Mom made us wear? Come on! That was so freaking embarrassing."

"Yeah." I studied our bright smiles and glowing faces. We were so happy. I shook my head and swallowed the lump in my throat. "How did you get this?"

Slowly, the words tumbled out of her mouth. "Your...er, our mom sent it to me."

I gasped, shocked beyond belief. "When did she find you?"

She reached for the Christmas card. Her eyes glazed over, as though she'd lost herself in memories. "We'd been talking for

only a few weeks, barely able to share much about our lives, when the epidemic destroyed everything, from the police force to the postal service and radio stations, and we lost touch. At first, the phone lines went dead. When the letters stopped arriving, I feared the worst.”

“Mother talked to you? I don’t believe it,” Nick whispered, in just as much shock as I was.

“That picture kept me going on my long journey from Philadelphia to that island in Ohio,” Val said, her hand still clutching the photo. With shaky fingers, she brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes and continued, “After I got in touch with our mom, she begged me to relocate with you in South Carolina. That was right before the whole zombie thing happened and you left South Carolina to come to the island to join Grandma.”

I nodded, thinking back and remembering how hard it was to leave our old lives behind.

“She said she wanted us to meet and start from scratch, so I went through this zombie-infested landscape in order to be with my new family.”

“I’m so glad you did, Val,” I said. “Meeting you is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ve always wanted a sister.”

She grinned. “And I’ve always dreamt of having some little brothers.”

“Have you met Grandma?” Nick asked casually.

“Yes,” Val said. “As a matter of fact, she was the one who called me when we realized the virus was a full-blown zombie dilemma that might just wipe out the world. She told me to get my butt out of Pennsylvania and move to the island, but we stayed behind because we thought we could change something. We were wrong. We should have listened to Grandma.”

“I can’t believe you met Grams,” I said, my jaw dropping. My grandma was the most understanding, caring, forgiving person in the world. It made sense that she would have met Val right away, but I couldn’t understand how she managed to keep it a secret. My grams and I were so tight, and I thought she always told me every secret she knew.

“Yeah, she’s sweet. She texted me every day before all communication went down.”

I smiled, proud of myself. "I taught her how to text." I'd even taught her how to email, and I got a message from her every day when I lived back in South Carolina.

"I know. She told me all about your mad skills."

It seemed as if everyone had already known about Val except Nick and me. I wondered why it had been kept a secret from us. Mom had told me they'd planned on sitting down later that day with the entire family and explaining everything, but it still didn't make much sense why we'd been left out of the loop. My thoughts raced. So Val didn't just pop up on the doorstep to give us all a heart attack. She was invited. I could completely imagine Grams begging Val to be with us in our safe haven. Heck, I'm surprised she didn't try to go out and find Val herself, guns blazing. Upon our arrival on the island, I noticed Grandma being more absentminded than ever. I suspected something was bothering her, but every time I'd tried to ask her about it, she'd just clammed up and brushed me off, calling me paranoid. One evening, however, she'd disclosed that she was worried about a girl in Pennsylvania. Her words had made no sense at the time, but now a light bulb went off in my head. Now, it all made sense.

"Our grandma is amazing," she continued. "She showed me a picture of Mom and me in the delivery room. By the look on our mother's face, I know she didn't want to give me up. Dad looked happy too."

"They should've never given you up," I said.

Val smiled bitterly, and for a moment, I thought she was going to agree with me, but then she said, "That's not true, Dean. You know they couldn't have taken care of me. I mean, they were only fifteen years old, just kids themselves. Besides that, Grandma seemed to be losing a battle with cancer, and Grandpa had just died in a car accident. So much was happening that raising a kid was out of the question. Keeping me just...it just wasn't possible."

"Did you ever flat out ask her why she did it?" Nick asked.

"Yes." Val hesitated a bit, considering her words. "She said it was because she loved me so much that she wanted me to have more than what she could give me. She also told me that not a day went by when she and Dad didn't think about me."

"They should've never given you up," I repeated, anger edging my voice. I swallowed hard and stared out the window as I tried to process everything.



She brushed the hair behind her ear and sighed. "Mom and Dad's decision to choose adoption for me must've been a difficult one. Dad said it left them with a sense of deep loss and that they were haunted by it."

Nick kept quiet during most of our conversation. Several times, I noticed him shooting interested looks into the rearview mirror, his tired, bloodshot eyes shining in the darkness. He kept driving at a fast and steady pace, but the way his hand clutched the steering wheel rather than casually lingering on it as usual told me he was taking in every word being said.

Val touched my hand, sensing my sadness. "Hey, it's okay. They gave me to a really great family because they loved me and wanted the best for me. I have no regrets. I had an awesome and fantastic life. My adoptive parents truly loved me with all their heart."

I didn't even know what to say. Maybe I was in complete and total shock that my mom had hidden something so big from us when we were such a close-knit family. I was happy that Val had enjoyed a great life.

Her voice quivered. "I was almost there. My group got attacked in Sandusky."

"You've been through so much," Nick said. "We're here for you."

"Thank you, Nick," she said. "When I lost everyone, Grandma's words rang in my ear. 'Get your butt to the island. You'll be safe. I promise.' So, I decided to come and find you, to meet all of you in person."

I put my arm around her and pulled her close. "I'm so sorry for your loss, sis. I can't even begin to imagine what kind of pain you're in and all of the horrible things you've seen and experienced, but you've got family here. We're not going to ever let you go."

"Well, I wish I wouldn't have gotten bitten on the way, but that was probably fate." She let out a long sigh.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Travis and I thought we could find a cure, so we kept close to the infected, treating them, searching for ways to make them feel better. If this cure works, that means our prayers were heard, and our mission is complete. I can finally focus on helping the infected to get cured."

"See?" I asked. "You are destined for something great, and you'll be famous, because you'll be the first one to survive a bite!"

"Yeah, I can see it in the papers now. 'Guinea Pig Zombie Cop Girl Lives to Tell the Tale.'" She smiled faintly, then yawned. "Gosh, I'm so tired," she said, leaning her head against my shoulder.

"You should rest," Nick said. "We still have a long journey ahead of us, and you should get as much sleep as you can."

Val closed her eyes, as if drifting off to sleep.

I closed mine too, but I knew that my racing mind wasn't going to let me doze off anytime soon. Apart from the tiny detour through the grocery store, we drove without a break for most of the night. When morning came, we made good time until we ran into a major roadblock...a helicopter had crashed into the ground upside down on a major road. This meant we had to take a different route. We had gotten lost and spent the entire day trying to get back on track.

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After hours of driving, we finally took a break and parked in the middle of a wide and very shallow river. It was Nick's brilliant idea and I loved it. The rushing water was shallow enough to keep us from getting our vehicles stuck, but would wash away any zombie who dared to come brave the strong current. Nick and Val were getting to know each other over lunch on the hood of the Jeep. Val scooted to the edge, her bare feet swaying in the air over the trickling water. Nick never had alone time with Val so I headed over to the other Jeep.

My boots sloshed through the water as I waded through. The sky was a neat shade of blue and a cool breeze blew through my hair. Tahoe was passed out and sprawled across the backseat. Claire sat on a huge boulder nearby and seemed to be in deep thought while Jackie sat on the hood of her red Jeep sipping a bottled water. I loved how the afternoon sun brought out the blonde highlights in her dark hair. A frown creased her forehead and I knew something was on her mind.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, jumping up next to her on the hood.

"Yeah, I was just thinking, that's all."

"About what?"

"I should've never hesitated," she said, setting the bottle down next to her.

"Hesitated?"

"I can't stop thinking about the glass house. The second Earl took Val, I should've whipped out my gun and shot him in the arm or leg."

I reached for her hand. "Jackie, you can't blame yourself. You were just handed a gun. And you never held one a day in your life. How could you expect to be some kind of Lara Croft and kick the bad guys butts? Trust me, that will come in time. 'Cause you have mad skills."

She playfully slugged me. "Not yet, but I will. You can count on it."

"Jackie, you do have skills. You were spectacular when you sprang into action to save our butts. I mean, you didn't hesitate to shoot out that window back at the grocery store, hit the zombie with the baseball bat, walk straight up to that zombie on the beach and shoot him, and the way you took down that zombie in the dumpster was impressive."

"It's a start. But I need more practice with shooting. I sucked back at the beach."

"It was dark and you have absolutely no shooting experience, but it'll come in time. I sucked when I first started, but I've been practicing for a year now. By this time next year, you'll be slinging down zombies like second nature."

"When I watched Val get thrown into that pit of zombies..." Her voice trailed off.

I cupped her cheek. "It's okay."

She blinked away a tear. "When that happened, I swear something inside of me snapped. I thought my actions just killed this poor girl. I was devastated."

"But Val's okay," I said. "Everything turned out fine. Dwelling on that horrible memory is just going to eat you up alive."

"When I thought she died, it was one of the worst moments of my life. I felt like I was struck by lightning. I knew from that second on, I could never be scared of defending myself or my friends. All of this anger boiled up inside of me, and I swore I was going to take down the next zombie I met."

"Uh-huh. So that's why you grabbed the bat out of my hands and pounded that zombie."

"I took out all my frustration and pent-up anger in a few powerful hits. I refused to fear them anymore. Believe it or not, it was a major turning point in my life. I was going to fight to survive. And I would never hesitate shooting anything or anyone that threatens me or my friends lives ever again."

"We'll fight together," I said.

Her fingers entwined into my hair and pulled me closer, her green eyes shining bright. I kissed her on the lips...slow, gentle, and romantic. Everything felt perfect.

"That was nice," she said. "I'm so glad I met you. Thank you for not wanting to leave me back at that glass house. I know it could've been so easy to just drive away without ever looking back."

"No, it wouldn't have been easy. Not easy at all."

"Really?"

"I was hoping not to leave without you," I said.

She smiled.

"And I'm so thankful you didn't freak out about Val's bite. You were so cool about it. I mean, you even rode with Val in the same Jeep."

"I knew she was still a day or two from turning so I wasn't worried. But I didn't expect her to stop at the local grocery store."

"Even still, you stood by her. That means so much to me."

"I felt like I owed Val. So when she ran off into that grocery store, I didn't hesitate going in after her. Even though I know she'd never admit to it, she needed my help."

"She's so much like Nick," I said. "We just met Val for the first time yesterday."

"That's what Claire told me. Nick told her everything. I think it's an amazing story."

"Let's just hope it has a happy ending."

She brushed a stray hair out of my eyes. "It will."

I wanted to believe her more than anything.

"Hey, I also wanted to apologize to you about what happened when we met. I can't believe I hid in the house with Claire. We should've been at your side fighting."

"Seeing those zombies for the first time all by yourselves had to be terrifying. I hadn't seen a zombie since the outbreak a year ago. And when I saw them again, I was..."

"Shaking?"

I laughed. "Let's just say my heart was racing a million miles a minute. We've got a lot in common. I was sheltered over the last year too. And then—bing, bang, boom!—we're both thrown into Zombie Land at the exact same time."

"Two newbies just trying to survive another day, huh?" she said.

"Yeah. Why didn't somebody give us a zombie survival handbook?"

She laughed. I loved her laugh. We talked some more. Jackie was so easy to talk to and we had so much in common. After a few minutes, I went back to hang out with Val and Nick. Jackie and Claire gave us siblings some space. I think they both knew that we needed to get to know each other by spending time together.

A growl made me glance up. A zombie with those horrible white eyes broke out of the thick vegetation. The thing that really caught my attention was the axe sticking out of its head. I whipped out my gun, my heart racing.

"There's only one," Nick said, scanning the vegetation around us.

"I can take on one blindfolded," Val said.

I motioned to Val and Nick. "Don't worry, I got this."

"I thought you lost your gun back at that grocery store," Nick said.

"I did. But Val got me another one." I shot her a thankful look and she smiled.

Val cringed as she stared down the zombie. "Wow, if that dude could feel pain...ouch. I bet he'd have a pounding headache the size of Texas."

Just as the zombie stumbled to the water's edge, it lost its balance and was swept away downstream.

"Good riddance!" Nick yelled.

"We better get a move on before more come," I said.

"Dean's right," Val said. "I planned on stopping for lunch, but not becoming it."

Nick motioned over to the girls that we were leaving because it wasn't safe anymore.

And once again, we were all back on the road.

## Chapter 16

I'd driven for hours giving Nick some time to sleep, but then he woke up and we switched. I stared out at the stars in the night sky. This would be my second night out here in Zombie Land. I don't know when tiredness overwhelmed me, but at some point, my eyelids became so heavy I could no longer fight off sleep. It seemed like I'd only managed to doze off for seconds, minutes at the most, when the horn blew, jolting me. I sat up groggily and looked around, disoriented. "Wh-what's going on?" I asked Nick. "Is Val okay?" My voice sounded hoarse and slurry, so much so that it took me a second to recognize it as my own.

"She's sweating up a storm, but she's out cold," Nick said, cool and calm as ever. "Look up ahead."

I rubbed my eyes to get rid of the foggy sensation and peered out the windshield as Nick hit the brakes slowly. The Jeep came to a halt a few feet away from our obstacle. The headlights shone on a figure in the middle of the road. I couldn't make out his features because a dark hood hung over his face. "Is it a zombie? Run it over, Nick!"

Nick shook his head. "No, it's not a zombie."

I didn't reply because he was right, as usual. I squinted to get a closer look, and as my sight adjusted, I could make out more details.

He was at least six foot, maybe six-two, with a strong physique that boasted of regular physical activity. His feet stood apart, turned toward us, and his hands hung by his side, hidden beneath his coat. Something shimmered at his waist, and it appeared to be some kind of belt buckle. When I inclined my head to get a better look, I realized it was a weapon, pushed halfway up to his shoulder. The guy's hand moved ever so slowly up to the gun, and his fingers hovered there, maybe to signal us he wasn't afraid, but he didn't retrieve it.

"I think he's dangerous," I whispered to no one in particular.

If Nick heard me, he didn't reply. There was, after all, nothing to say. No one could argue that point.

“What is that shadow on the right side of the road?” I said, pointing ahead.

Nick leaned into me and followed my line of vision, to the place where the headlight didn’t reach. “I don’t know.”

Keeping the guy in focus, I peered from him to what looked like a black, shapeless pile cast in darkness. It looked like someone had gathered a mound of firewood, but some of the timber seemed larger than the rest, like whole tree branches instead of twigs. What would anyone need all that for? If he’s trying to barricade the street, why is it all piled over there? I was inclined to believe it was nothing but a pile of wood, until a strong breeze blew against our windows, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of dead flesh, even stronger and more noxious than the one coming from Val’s wound. The latter was probably the reason why we hadn’t noticed the stench before.

“Looks like the guy’s killed a zombie or two,” Nick said, mirroring my thoughts.

“I hope he’s not infected. If he’s healthy, he might need help,” I said hesitantly, almost expecting Nick to ask why I was being so stupid. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying we should offer him a ride or anything, but—”

Nick slipped out his gun. “Okay. I want to help him if we can, since the guy looks like some kind of master zombie slayer, but we have to be careful. Even if he’s not infected, he’s armed, and he might try to steal the Jeep. Times like these will turn otherwise good people into all sorts of things, zombies and thieves included.”

“Well, just a thought, but it looks to me like he’s pretty good with whatever weapon he’s slinging. There are more than a couple dead zombies on that heap,” I offered.

Nick put the Jeep in park, flung the door open, and jumped out, then stopped in his tracks. “What the...?”

I peered from him to the figure, who was still standing in the middle of the road.

“Dean, you aren’t gonna believe this,” Nick said, laughing.

I frowned and jumped out of the car, my hand wandering to the weapon attached to my waist. Out of the car with the headlights no longer reflected by the windshield, I could make out more details.

The guy tossed back his hood and headed straight for us. His military short hair and Army fatigues caught my attention before my brain registered his facial features.

My mouth gaped in sudden recognition. It can't be! "Lucas? How did you—"

"Dean!" He came over and slapped my shoulder, laughing.

I noticed spots of blood and gore on his coat, but I didn't pull back.

"You know Rambo?" Claire asked, approaching us from the left.

"Hey, ladies," Nick said. "Next time, wait for me to deem the situation safe before you leave your vehicle. What if this guy was some kind of serial killer or something?"

"And that's supposed to scare me?" Jackie asked. "For all I know, I could be riding with one."

Lucas raised a brow.

"They picked up a straggler we had a run-in with," I explained.

"Let's not open up that can of worms right now," Claire chimed in. "I'm not up for another fight. So, Nick..." She turned and gawked at my brother, wearing the most obvious I-have-a-crush-on-you smile I'd ever seen. "Now, do you know him?"

"This is my best friend Lucas. We go back a long way."

"Hey, gals. What's up?" Lucas smiled and gave me a fist-bump, then turned to Nick. "I've been looking for you, man! When you didn't come back to the city, we were all worried. I came with a team, but we all got separated in the woods when a group of zombies ambushed us."

"I'm sorry to hear that. We meant to get in touch, but we had no phone out here in the middle of nowhere," Nick said quietly. "I'm just glad you made it. Can't believe you even found us! How's that possible?"

"I tracked you. Bet you didn't know the bag of vials Dean took were tagged."

I tried to make sense of his words. "Whoa! What? Wait a sec! What tracking device? You never told me about that." I didn't know whether to be pissed or hug the guy. Having Big Brother on my heels felt kind of intrusive, but at the same time, it was nice knowing that someone had known our whereabouts all along.



Ignoring my question, he eyed the girls cautiously, as though to warn us that he didn't want to divulge that information in front of civilians. "I'll explain everything, but how about some introductions first?"

I motioned toward Nick. "Well, you know my brother."

Lucas playfully slugged him. "Nick? That's your name? I've always called you The One-Man Army, dude. You've got more zombie kills than all of us put together. It's good to put a name to that face."

"Stop messing around." Nick rolled his eyes. "I'm still pissed at you. I can't believe you helped my brother break Val out without telling me."

"Come on, man! You woulda done the same in my situation. When Dean came to me, I understood his point straightaway. The girl didn't deserve the death she was going to get," Lucas said. "I felt compelled to help her just as much as Dean did. When we see something going on that just isn't right, we gotta step in and try to do something to fix it."

"Had you told me the truth, I would've helped you," Nick said.

Lucas sighed. "With those high morals of yours, always sticking to the rules and the code? I highly doubt that."

Lucas was right. Nick would've come up with some stupid legal way that wouldn't have worked in a million years. My brother always played by the rules, no matter what. It was his strength in many cases, but it also drove me nuts at times. Eager to change the subject and ease the tension, I continued with the introductions. "Lucas, this is Jackie and Claire," I said. "We met them along the way."

Lucas held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, beautiful ladies."

They smiled and shook his hand.

"And where's this drifter you picked up?"

"Tahoe's sleeping right now," Claire said. "He's recovering from a knife wound."

Lucas cocked a brow. "A knife wound? Who stabbed him?"

"He had a fight with his psychopath buddy. The dude's doing just fine. It looks like it's just a flesh wound."

"You'll have to introduce me," Lucas said. "I'm a good judge of character."

"Don't get too attached," Nick muttered. "We're dropping the idiot off as soon as he's better."

I still couldn't believe Lucas was there, yet there was something else I couldn't wrap my head around either. "Okay, let's get back to the topic at hand here. Don't keep me in suspense. How did I get tagged like a wild animal?"

Before he could answer, a zombie ventured out of the woods, moaning.

Lucas pointed his gun and nonchalantly shot it in the head. "It's not safe out here. Let's get moving, and I'll fill you in on everything. Mind if I drive? We had to leave the cars behind, and I've kind of been hoofing it everywhere. I miss driving."

Nick clapped his shoulder. "You're still the same old Lucas. It's great to see you, man. Even still, the answer is no. I'm driving."

He nodded. "Fine." He then turned his gaze to me. "I didn't know it at the time, but every bag of vials had a tracking device installed."

"I should've known," I said.

Lucas opened the door and peered onto the back seat, where Val lay sprawled, still sleeping, her hair spread around her like a soft blanket. She looked so serene that it was hard to believe she was about to turn into one of those monsters, but there was no denying the inevitable.

"How's your sister doing?" Lucas asked.

"Good as can be expected," I said.

"I can't believe you knew about Val being my sister before I did," Nick said.

"Dean tells me everything. Why do you think I put my neck on the line like that to help her escape? She's family, and I knew I had to help. I just hope the cure works. It hasn't been tested enough, and no one knows what it's capable of." Lucas threw his backpack over the back seat. He scooted Val over and sat down.

"It'll work," I said in a stern voice. It just has to.

"Not again," Nick said, glancing out the window.

"What?" I asked.

"The girls are having a hard time starting the Jeep again."

“We need to hotwire them a better car,” I said. “Let’s keep an eye out for one.”

“Definitely,” Nick said.

“Okay, looks like they got it started,” Lucas said.

Nick pulled out onto the empty road.

Lucas then pulled a thin black computer out of the satchel dangling over his shoulder. It looked like an iPod or something. He turned it on, and it beeped loudly. “See? The bag with the vials is in here.”

“Of course it is,” I snapped. “I don’t get it. There’s an entire lab filled with those vials. Why do they care about one missing bag of them?” I asked. When he looked away, I knew something was horribly wrong. Am I in big time trouble? I bet they saw me on the security cameras! Lucas would never rat me out. “Did they send your team here to arrest me? And why would they risk their lives just to bring me in?”

“Just the opposite, buddy,” Lucas said, avoiding my gaze.

I blinked. “The opposite?”

“Yeah. You’re being hailed as a hero for stealing them out of the city.”

“Why?” I asked. “What are you not telling me?”

“There’s something else.” A shadow crossed his features.

I tried to make sense of his words. Why would I be a hero for sneaking out a bag of vials? “What’s going on, Lucas? Just spit it out.”

He bit his lip and then finally spoke. “There’s no easy way to say it, but the city’s been overrun by zombies.”

A shudder shot down my body. “How’s that even possible? It’s an island, with walls, and those undead freaks don’t go in the water!”

“They didn’t actually break in. It was the virus itself. Somehow, it accidentally got inside, and many people became sick and started attacking everyone.”

“I-I don’t believe it,” Nick said, shocked.

“Too many people were bitten, and an overzealous general even bombed parts of Kelleys Island. The lab is completely demolished.”

“No!” I shouted. “How could they do that?”

He swallowed hard. “The formula’s gone. All that’s left are those vials you stole.”

“No! Quit joking,” I said.

Lucas nodded gravely. “It’s absolutely true, pal. I’m sorry, but you have the only remaining vials.”

I froze, numb. Parts of me wanted to believe him, but it all sounded so far-fetched that I just couldn’t. We’d been safe for months on the island, but now all was lost. Our safe haven had been compromised, infected, blown to bits. I sucked in a trembling breath as my mind contemplated his words over and over again.

“No! I can’t believe this,” Nick said, his harsh tone jerking me out of my trance.

“I was on zombie patrol inland, battling a herd in a tank, shooting as many of those smelly, decaying freaks as I could. I missed the whole thing so there was no way I was exposed to the virus.”

My heart lurched as horrible images and thoughts and worries flooded through me. “What about Mom and Dad? Grams? Dr. Hamming? My friends and family?”

“Lots of people escaped to South Bass Island. I think your grams and your parents were with them, but Dr. Hamming is dead. As of now, Dean, you hold the only cure in your hands.”

“I don’t believe this,” Nick said, slowly letting out a breath. “It’s impossible.”

“I assure you it is entirely possible and entirely true, crappy as it is. You’re our only hope, Dean. General Rika didn’t send my team to capture you, but to bring you back to safety, along with those precious vials.”

“Is the island totally destroyed?” I asked, fearing his answer.

Lucas hesitated. “All the zombies have been killed. We’re rebuilding the parts of Kelleys Island that were bombed. The south side, where you live, was untouched, so I’m sure your family’s safe, but they don’t know how long the restoration will take.”

“I hope they weren’t infected,” I said quietly.

“Like I said, a lot of people escaped to the other islands around Lake Erie. The important thing is that we managed to avoid an epidemic.”

“But you don’t know specific names,” I said. It wasn’t Lucas’s fault, and I knew I shouldn’t be taking my anger and helplessness out on him, but I couldn’t help it. Not having answers

frustrated me big time. In a brief moment of anger, I punched the window until my knuckles ached.

“It’s a big mess over there,” Lucas said. “Everything’s in total chaos, but I plan on going back and helping the island get back on its feet. We just have to be more careful about letting anyone new onto the island. Stricter guidelines have been put in place.”

“How much stricter could they get?” I’d already felt like I was living in a prison.

“Every resident has to carry an electronic ID badge. If you leave the island and come back, you have to be put in isolation for one week for observation.”

As much as it infuriated me, I was willing to do whatever it took to be safe. Nick and I questioned Lucas for the next hour, but that interrogation didn’t change anything. For all I knew, my parents and my grandma were dead—or worse, undead. I wanted to scream from the emotional torment ripping through me like a knife. No! They aren’t dead! They aren’t infected! Not my family! I didn’t believe that for a minute, and neither did Nick. I had to quit thinking about everything, because my mind was turning to mush.

We took turns driving through the night so everyone had their turn for a catnap. When it was my turn to ride in the back, as much as I tried not to think about things, thoughts of my parents wandered into my head. I wondered if they were okay and when we’d be reunited. I thought about them giving Val up for adoption. I wasn’t even sure why that popped into my head, but it did. I still couldn’t believe I had a sister, and even though my parents had had their teenage reasons for giving her up, I was still bitter about missing out on all those years I could have had with her. I hadn’t had the chance to grow up with a big sister. Maybe part of me wanted to make up for it by protecting her and saving her life, now more than ever. Knowing my parents, even if they had only been teenagers at the time, they wouldn’t have given Val to just anyone. I knew my grandma would have made sure Val had a loving, caring, safe, happy home. I only wished I would have known about her. Why did she have to be a big secret? Was that really fair, keeping our sibling away from us like that? But there was no use dwelling on things I couldn’t change. I had to keep my mind focused on getting to the next city. Nick, Val, and I had become fighters, and somehow, I knew we’d get through it together.

Beams of sunshine shone through the trees, and mist billowed and swirled all around us. Morning had come so fast! Val was sleeping quietly in the back seat next to me, and I was thankful for the chance to focus on my thoughts and form a plan. There was no way I could have dealt with any of her crazy antics at that moment.

Lucas shook his head, jamming to songs on his iPod, and Nick drove us down the highway, past deserted towns.

“Great! Another obstacle,” Nick suddenly said, breaking the silence.

Black skid marks caught my attention as I peered through the windshield. Further down the road, cars and trucks had crashed and were now abandoned on the little stretch of road. What the heck happened here? I wondered.

## Chapter 17

The sun shone brightly in the early morning. Through the windshield, we peered at the scene before our eyes. Even though months must've passed, the car accident looked like a picture frozen in time with countless vehicles piled up on top of one another, stretching out as far as my eyes could see. Scraps of metal were strewn all along the road.

I swallowed hard and pointed at the mess, even though Nick had already gotten a good look at it. "Whoa! Look at that. I've never seen such a big collision before."

"There's broken glass everywhere," Nick replied with a frown.

I could sense the implication in his words: That glass could have led to a flat tire or two, and we had no time for obstacles.

"We can swerve around some of the cars to get past," Lucas said, hesitating.

I stared at a crumpled blue car that was resting upside down. The thing that scared me the most was that I didn't see one dead person, and I knew there weren't exactly any clean-up crews or EMTs around—at least not human ones. I didn't even want to think about where the bodies had gone.

"What's going on?" Val asked from the back seat.

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders to pull her close and pointed ahead of us, explaining the situation.

Val's jaw dropped open. Her hands wrapped around my arm, either to support herself from the shock or to keep me in place. Either way, she was distressed.

"We'll be okay," I said.

Nick swerved around a red sports car and slammed the brakes, tossing us forward.

I pushed my hand against the driver seat to steady myself and Val, only then noticing the beads of sweat rolling down her face. In the soft glow of the sun, her skin pallor reflected the light. Her grip was more flaccid than before, as though she was losing strength, which she probably was. My heart went out to her.

"Could you hit those brakes with a little less vigor?" I asked my brother.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It looks like the girls blew a tire. We better go help them."

I craned my neck to see what he was talking about. "Pull up closer," I said.

Nick shook his head. "I'm not parking on all that grass. You want us to be the next ones to get a flat tire? No way. We're not moving from this spot. Once we get the girls moving, it'll free me to swerve around in the grass."

"Makes sense," Lucas said.

"Stay here," I whispered to Val, who nodded, wide-eyed. "If you hear or see anything, don't move. Don't get out of the car or do anything stupid. You hear me?"

She nodded again.

I wasn't convinced that she'd listen, but taking her word at face value was about all I could do.

"Hey, Nick," she called. "Can't we just have them ride with us? We can all fit in here I'm sure."

"And lose a perfectly good vehicle loaded with supplies just because they have a flat tire?" he retorted.

"He's right," Lucas agreed. "We can change it in less than fifteen minutes. It's no biggy and not worth losing a Jeep."

Nick opened the car door to step out, but I tugged at his arm and nodded my chin toward Val. "I still think we should park a little closer to the girls."

He narrowed his gaze the way he always did when he was irritated. "Why?"

"Because she's not doing so well, and I'd like to keep an eye on her," I whispered so Val wouldn't hear me.

"Park here," Val said. "I can change that tire in a hurry."

"Remember what we talked about? Nick and I got this." I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

She wasn't doing well at all. The girls' Jeep was at least fifty feet, maybe a hundred, down the road. Nick wasn't doing us any favors by stopping so far from where we were heading.

Val shook her head and tried to squeeze past me.

I grabbed her around her waist to hold her in place. "Where do you think you're going?" I hissed.



“Look at that accident.” She struggled in my grip, but her attempts were feeble. “You’ll need backup. I’ll call this in.”

Nick shot me a look that warned me our big sis was drifting back into La La Land, and I couldn’t have agreed more. “Val, you’re not at work,” Nick said.

She flopped back down. “I’m so confused. I can’t even tell what’s real anymore.”

“Go back to sleep,” I said, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “I’ll take care of things until you’re better.”

She nodded, her eyes shining unnaturally again. “I’m so sorry. You must think I’m a horrible partner. Just don’t take my gun and badge, okay?”

It was so sad to see her like that, and I felt like shouting and kicking at something. Instead, I just bit down hard on the inside of my cheek until I thought I drew blood. “Just promise you’ll get some rest.”

She peered over my shoulder, her gaze clearing a little. “I’ll try. Hey, am I imagining things or is this the dude who arrested me and threw me in that hole back on the island?”

Lucas’s fingers reached up, as though to touch her cheek. When I shot him a venomous look, he pulled back. He smiled, but his eyes never left her as he spoke, “Yeah, that’d be me, the one and only. But don’t worry. I’m on your team now.”

Val met my gaze. “Slap the bracelets on that perp!”

“This is Lucas,” I said patiently. “He’s a friend, not a perp. He’s one of the few friends we’ve got left.”

She grabbed the collar of Lucas’s shirt. “My mistake. But, hey, will you do me a quick favor?”

He smiled. “Sure. Just name it.”

“Tell Claire she’s safe.” She leaned back into the back seat.

I could see she was overwhelmed with tiredness by the way her brows drew together with a tiny crease forming in between.

Lucas cocked a brow at me. “What’s she talking about?”

“I’ve taken her off my hit list,” Val said simply.

“That’s good.” Lucas nodded.

She licked her lips, as though she was thirsty. I raised a water bottle to her mouth, but she shrugged it off. “Yeah, it’s good. For her. This might be one fight she couldn’t win.”

“Why’s that?” Lucas asked, as if humoring her.

“Because once I change into a zombie, I’ll probably end up bored and determined and particularly hungry. Combine that with the fact that I won’t be very choosy as to what or who I eat and how I get my next meal, and you’ll have a deadly combination.”

A dark shadow crossed Lucas’s features for a second, but it disappeared quickly, and his easygoing smile was back in place. “You’ll be the first pretty zombie,” he whispered. “I think that makes up for the deadly part.”

With her confused gaze focused on him, she leaned back into the seat and wrapped her arms around her waist. Her lips moved still, but no words came out.

Lucas inched closer, until his fingers almost touched her cheek. He shot me a questioning look. When I nodded, giving him permission, he brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face and leaned in to whisper something in her ear.

I strained to listen, but I couldn’t make out his words.

Val’s fingers clutched his forearm, and her head bobbed once, then again.

Lucas reached into his backpack and pulled out a mini black bag. Unzipping it, he pulled out a syringe and a vial full of blue liquid.

“What’re you doing?” I yelled at him, already picturing the worst. Whatever he’d said to her, I could only hope he hadn’t asked her for consent to kill her, or he would have been the next to go.

“She needs it,” Lucas said.

Nick pushed me aside, taking charge of the situation, probably fearing what I might do if Lucas didn’t explain himself immediately. “You can’t just whip out a needle and not explain to Dean what it is.”

“It’s Tyrima,” Lucas said, as though I was supposed to know what he was talking about.

“What the heck is that?” I asked.

“It’ll take a few hours to work, but once it kicks in, she’ll feel better. I’d rather give her the last vial than see her suffer.” He met Nick’s gaze. “You cool with that?”

“Yeah, do it,” my brother said.

“Nick!” I shot him a glare. “I hope it doesn’t slow down the process because we need her to change into a zombie as soon as possible so we can give her the cure.”

Lucas fumbled with the equipment while my brother steadied Val, who assured me, "It won't slow down the zombie transformation one bit, but it'll help her keep her mind until the very end. It'll just take a little while to kick in."

"It's safe," my brother reassured me. "We've used it on the front lines to get important information from people going loony from zombie bites or scratches."

Nick obviously knew what he was talking about, and I trusted him. Val was my sister and I hated to see her suffer going through this zombie transition. I slowly nodded my consent, albeit not quite convinced. "Okay, but if something goes wrong, I'll hold you responsible for it."

"I would expect nothing less," Lucas said, turning to Val. His voice became softer, more soothing. "Hey, like promised, this is going to help you, but you need to trust me. It's going to keep you from losing your mind. Nick told me about the grocery store incident."

Val's voice came so low that I had to crane my neck to hear her. "I don't want to put the others in danger. If you can help me keep my mind a little longer, please do whatever it takes."

Lucas nodded and gripped the syringe tightly.

The serum caught the light and shimmered blue. Val's gaze fell on it, and her face paled like a ghost. For a moment, I thought she might be sick, but instead of showing fear, she broke Nick's grip and jumped out of the Jeep, yelling, "You touch me with that thing and you're a dead man."

"Val, we're trying to help you," I said.

"I'm going to bite Lucas," she said. "He'd better watch out because I'm pretty hungry."

"No you're not!" I said.

"I repeat, suspect is armed and dangerous," Val said. "All Philly PD units be advised; suspect is armed and dangerous! I need backup immediately."

Nick gripped her arms from behind. "Quick! Do it!"

She let out a long growl a moment before Lucas pierced her skin, injecting her with the serum as she thrashed about, calling him every name in the book. I knew it was a temporary fix, but we had to do what we could to keep Val sane and calm. She was starting to get weird again with all that growling and hissing, just

like back at the grocery store. It was for her own good, and I knew if she could think straight, she would've agreed with me.

Val's eyes fluttered shut as she slumped back into Nick's arms.

"Okay, she's out cold," Lucas said. "I didn't know a girl could even talk like that. Where did she learn that kind of language?"

"She was a police officer back in Philly. Couldn't you tell from the cop lingo?"

"I seriously thought she just watched too many cop shows on TV." Lucas grinned. "If she had her gun, I bet she'd have shot me dead."

"Lucky for you, Nick disarmed her earlier," I said.

"Did you see the hate in her eyes?" Lucas asked.

"C'mon, man. She can't help it. She's not herself. She's just mad that you dragged her out of our parents' house and threw her in jail, and now you just injected her with something."

"Yeah, I put her in jail, but I was just following orders!" he said. "And did she forget I helped you get her out? Without me, you wouldn't have gotten anywhere! She'd be dead right now."

Reloading my gun, I smiled. "Yeah, we'll remind her about that later, but right now, she's kind of grumpy."

Nick rested his rifle on his shoulder. "Yeah, really grumpy."

"Zombifying will do that to a girl." I slipped my weapon into my holster.

I looked up at the towering pines along the road. The jungle-like ground was covered in a blanket of green ferns and colorful wildflowers. "You guys keep watch, and I'll change the tire," I said. A gust of cool morning air brushed through my hair. For a quick second, I considered getting a jacket, but I just wanted to get the heck outta here.

Lucas nodded and took off after Nick. I watched them with my weapon aimed, making sure I had their backs. Glass and metal crushed beneath their feet, the sound reverberating in the early morning.

Half the distance in, my brother turned and waited until I had caught up with him, then grabbed my arm. "Just a sec."

"What?" I asked, following his line of vision as he scanned the area. As I gazed around myself, it made me think I was living in

a dead world of chaos and twisted metal. I wondered what had happened to the drivers and their companions. Are they dead? Turned into lost souls who never asked for that kind of sorry existence? Souls who were never given a choice, just handed a monstrous fate? I stared at an empty baby seat still strapped in the car and tried not to think about what had happened. There was no dried blood, so I hoped that meant the people were able to get away in time. It sure was a different world out there; my brother was right about that. Back home, I'd had no idea how bad it was. Now I was getting a taste of it firsthand. I wondered if the people out there even knew about the safe cities around the U.S. Maybe the government should have a rescue mission to help those who are still stuck out here in this disease-ridden place.

"All's clear." My brother motioned for me to continue, and we reached the Jeep in no time.

Sure enough, the rear passenger-side tire was flat as a black rubber pancake. I grabbed a jack out of the trunk while Nick fetched the spare. The girls stood at the rear of the car and kept watch. They both offered to help, but I assured them we had it under control. I placed the jack under the side of the Jeep and hooked the crank to it, then started cranking it up.

"It's so freaky out here," Nick said. "What a place to break down. I don't like it. There's no visibility."

"Me neither." Thick fog swirled around everywhere, putting my overactive imagination into play.

"Don't worry," Lucas said. "I'm keeping a close eye out. Kind of reminds me of a Stephen King novel though. Remember the one where a thick mist descends from the mountains to cloak the land in fog?"

Nick chuckled. "Yeah. I saw that movie, and now's not the time for a recap. Creatures lurking in the mist? They're real, and they're called zombies. You can't scare me with that Stephen King crap. I've seen worse than that movie in real life."

"You're not kidding," Lucas said, nudging me. "Hey, we aren't scaring you, are we?"

Their chitchat wasn't exactly settling my nerves, but I wasn't going to admit it. I set my jaw and rolled the bad tire out of the way, muttering, "Just keep a lookout, okay?"

“Sure,” he said. Just as I glanced up at him, Lucas suddenly threw his head back and pointed his gun into the trees. “There’s something up there. See it, Nick?”

Nick stepped closer and peered into the overgrown vegetation. “Yeah, I think I see it, but I’m not sure what it is.”

I tilted my head to look at a black patch of shadow in the trees. I had no idea what it was, and frankly, I wasn’t keen on finding out. The mist and eerie silence added to the scary atmosphere and made us feel like we were on pins and needles. “We better hightail it outta here,” I whispered. “If whatever that is gets a good glimpse of us, it might decide it wants to join our little crew—for dinner.”

“It’s probably nothing,” my brother said, “but let’s hurry up, just in case.”

I didn’t like the “just in case” part. Rubbing a hand over my face, I let out a breath to calm my nerves, then focused back on the tire.

“Hey, I got a good look,” Nick said. “It’s only a deer foraging for food so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Good,” I said, relieved.

The Jeep door slammed behind us.

Groaning inwardly, I looked up at Val dashing down the street toward us.

“What are you doing here?” Nick growled.

Ignoring him, she wiped her forehead with her sleeve. “I can smell it.” Her nostrils flared as she sniffed the breeze that washed over us, as though to prove her point.

“Get back in the car, Val,” my brother said. “We got this.”

“The smell’s getting stronger by the minute,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Lucas said. “What smell?”

She spun in a slow circle, sniffing the air like a dog.

“Death, terror, affliction, torment, horror—”

“Way to use a thesaurus, Val, but you’re tinkering a little in the dark side there,” Lucas said.

She met his gaze as the sunlight reflected in her eyes, giving her an eerie glow. “One of humanity’s greatest fears is the terror of death. You better flee while you can, because the living dead are on their way!”

Lucas nudged me. "She always so dramatic?" His tone was nonchalant, but I could tell her words were getting to him from the way his gaze scanned the area around us.

I shrugged. "How much longer before that shot starts working?"

"Maybe a few hours."

I nodded. "Good. The faster, the better."

Val walked a few steps closer to the forest. "There's more than one."

"Your sister's kind of freaking me out," Claire said, pacing around the Jeep as her gaze scanned the trees around us.

"She's hallucinating," Nick said.

"I'm keeping a close eye out," Jackie said. "Just in case she isn't."

Val spun around. Spots of decaying flesh mottled her once perfect skin. Thin flaps of greenish skin peeled from her face. Her bloodshot eyes met mine. "They're coming," she hissed.

I swear she looked like she was possessed. I tried to ignore her and tighten another lug nut.

Lucas patted me on the shoulder. "Focus, okay? She's hallucinating. Nothing's coming."

"Lucas is right," Nick said. "It's all in her head."

"I'm going to call this in," Val said. "We'll need backup and medics on the scene as soon as possible. How could anyone have survived such a horrible pileup? Have you checked for survivors?"

"Let's get her back in the Jeep," Nick said.

She shot him a look. "Bite me."

"Please, Val. You need rest," Nick said gently.

"No! And why are you looking at me like that? It's my face, isn't it? It is! I can't help the botched-up chemical peel."

Nick gently grabbed her arm. "Come on. Let's get you a bottle of water from the Jeep."

She yanked her arm away. "Listen, Sergeant, just because you took my badge and gun, that doesn't mean I can't fight as a civilian. They're coming! Don't you smell them? I do!"

Nick ran a hand through his hair, seemingly frustrated.

"Play by her rules," I whispered. "It might help."

He moistened his lips and nodded, then turned back to her. "As your commanding officer, I order you to get back in the

patrol car so we can drive back to the station. I'll expect a full report."

"You're a dirty cop, and I'm going to prove it. I saw you taking a bribe from a major drug dealer, and then you had me raid that house, where a million bullets happened to come my way. In case you haven't learned by now, I'm hard to kill." Her voice thundered. "I'll spend the rest of my life taking you down. You're going to regret the day you messed with me."

Jackie and Claire suddenly yelled for us to get back in the Jeep. Out of nowhere, six or so zombies moaned and broke through the thick blanket of fog. Val's nose told no lies.

"We can handle a few zombies, right?" Nick asked casually as he aimed to make his famous lethal headshot.

"Oh yeah. No problem. Dean, you done?" Lucas asked calmly over his shoulder.

"Almost!"

"Just hurry!" Claire said.

Gunshots echoed as they all fired away.

My hands trembled. Get it together. Concentrate! I tightened another lug nut.

"It's not just a few. More are coming!" Lucas shouted.

"Dean, that looks good enough to me. Let's roll!"

I scrambled to my feet. A zombie in a torn suit walked toward me, his head leaning to one side. He had a metal rod protruding from his head, and bite marks ran across his green arms and neck. Behind him and out of the fog, more zombies stumbled toward us.

Val jumped straight into their path, with no weapon. "I'm going to arrest every single one of these sorry thugs. You have the right to remain silent..." The girl had guts. She started taking one down with her bare hands, using impressive karate chops and lethal roundhouse kicks like in those old Kung Fu movies. She sent the zombie rolling across the asphalt. If I hadn't been so utterly terrified, I'd have been cheering her on.

Nick grabbed me by the upper arm. "Let's go! Who has the keys?"

"Me." Claire jammed her hands down her pockets and whipped them out. Jumping into the front seat, she tried to start the Jeep, but it just clicked when she turned the key. "It won't start!"



“What?” Jackie asked in a frantic tone. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No!”

“Let me try then.” Jackie pushed her aside and turned the key.

The engine spluttered but didn’t start. It wasn’t good, because I knew we’d never make it to the other Jeep without being mauled to death.

Nick covered Lucas while he popped open the hood to see what the problem was.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with it,” Lucas yelled over the gunfire.

“Have you checked the belt?” I yelled back, firing away, hoping to stall the zombies until Lucas could fix the Jeep.

“Negative.”

I frowned as I tried to focus on doing two things at the same time. I knew a bit about cars—not quite as much as Lucas, but enough to possibly be helpful. I thought if I could take a peek under the hood, maybe we could figure it out together and get the thing up and running again.

Jackie stood close by, with a determined look on her face. She wasn’t the best marksman yet, but she was going to stand next to me and help me fight. I admired that. If there had only been two or three zombies, I would’ve let her have a go at it, but this wasn’t the movies. There was no way she could take down all those zombies after one fighting lesson. “Get back inside the truck!” I yelled.

“I’m not leaving you.” She aimed and fired, letting out a round of shots, but she only managed to hit a zombie in a blue, sparkly party dress.

It threw its head to the side and let out an angry roar but didn’t drop to the ground. The thing kept coming at her, this time with more vengeance than before.

## Chapter 18

Stopping near the car pileup had been a bad idea. I'd known it all along, yet we had to help the girls change their tire. If only we'd just picked them up, squeezed them inside our Jeep, and driven away before we managed to raise half the undead population in the area. But Nick and Lucas didn't want to lose a good vehicle loaded with precious supplies over a simple flat tire.

Swallowing hard, I peered around me. The sun was breaking free from behind the clouds, but the fog made it difficult to see into the trees. Lucas continued to try to fix the Jeep and the rest of us gathered in a circle, pressing our shoulders and arms together so we could watch all angles as the undead neared us, their calls breaking the silence of the morning. From the corner of my eye, I noticed a zombie in a fancy sequined dress, heading straight for the girls. Jackie and Claire began to shoot, but their bullets did nothing to slow down the corpse.

"Headshot!" Nick yelled.

"I'm trying," Jackie said, frustrated.

But we had no time for trying. I took aim at the party girl zombie, measuring her raised arms and swaying body as she hobbled toward us. My gaze moved to her undead white eyes, and I pulled the trigger, nailing her right between them. Dark blood squirted in a wide arc, landing not far away from us. As I watched the zombie drop to the ground in a crumbling, bloody heap, adrenaline rushed through me.

Jackie grabbed my arm. "Dean! Your sister! Look!"

Val gripped a zombie's hands behind his back and was telling the thing he had the right to remain silent. She hauled him over to the Jeep and opened the door.

"Val!" Claire yelled. "That's not a police car. You wanna kill Tahoe?"

It wasn't that I particularly cared for the guy, but I couldn't just let her kill him. For one, we needed all the backup we could get. Also, there was the tiny inconvenience of him turning into a zombie if he was bitten; one more zombie might have been just one too many. I rushed over and shot the zombie in the head. He

dropped down, crashing at Val's feet, and I poked him in the ribs just to make sure.

Val yelled in my ear, startling me. "How dare you? Where's your code of honor? You can't take justice into your own hands like that."

I couldn't believe she was taking her job so seriously, even in the throes of delirium. I wanted to scream; my only sister was turning into a monster right before my eyes.

Claire let off several rounds, but she did not hit any zombies. We needed all the help we could get, but she was really just wasting ammunition, so I motioned her back into the vehicle.

"Try and start it!" I said.

She opened the door, jumped in, and pulled Jackie in with her.

Rolling down the window, Claire asked, "Hey! Can't you just hotwire this thing?"

"Hot wiring just starts the car without a key," I said. "You can't hot wire a vehicle that isn't working." I then turned my attention to Lucas. "Well? Anything?" I asked, shooting him a questioning look over my shoulder.

"Claire, turn the key," Lucas said, ignoring my question.

I assumed he was either too busy and didn't hear me or that he had bad news and didn't want to tell me; I would have wagered on the latter. "Nick, cover me," I said. "I'm gonna have a look under the hood."

"Lucas's got it under control," Nick said. "Besides, I can't cover you both." His tone betrayed his tension.

I took a few steps to my right, arguing with myself about whether or not Nick could handle it. Suddenly, I saw a figure passed out on the grass, her long brown hair spread around her in disarray. Sudden recognition hit: It was Val. Zombies were stepping over her, some of them tripping, their feet burying into her flesh and kicking her limbs. They'd obviously accepted her into their clan. If Nick or I had been over there, they certainly wouldn't have ignored us and kept on walking. Those zombies would have ripped our throats out without hesitation. Even though I'd seen them bonding and recognizing their own before, it still creeped me out.

I had to help her, no matter what, so I aimed and fired until I had a clear path to reach Val. My feet moved quickly,

minding the broken glass and dead zombies, until I was a step away. Kneeling down, I gently scooped her up in my arms and slung her over my shoulder, then sprinted back to the Jeep. Val's eyes turned in their orbits as I laid her in the back seat and slammed the door shut, making sure to lock it to prevent her from venturing out again.

The Jeep sputtered and started, but then it stalled, refusing to turn over.

Lucas frantically let out a few choice words.

More zombies broke out of the woods, as if they were multiplying by the minute. My heart began to race, pounding adrenaline quickly through my veins. We have to get out of here right now! I knew, but I began to lose hope as Claire turned the key again and again, to no avail. Just when I thought the car was beyond saving, though, the engine started.

Lucas let out a loud, "Woo-hoo! Got it!"

"Get your butts in here NOW!" Jackie said, rolling down the window.

Lucas slammed down the hood. "Listen to Jackie. Get in there and lock the door."

"You too!" I said, not about to leave him or my brother out there to die like some kind of martyrs. Even if the tire wasn't finished, we could still drive away. Even if we weren't able to drive as fast, we'd still move faster than the clumsy zombies could on their decaying feet. None of the corpses would be joining the Olympic track team anytime soon, that was for sure.

"I'm coming!" Lucas said.

I shot another zombie right in the forehead, then gave him a hard kick in the gut. He fell straight back, sailing down to the ground, his badly shredded arms flailing. I slipped inside the truck, but I refused to lock the doors until I knew Nick and Lucas were safe inside.

"Hurry!" Jackie shouted.

Claire screamed out the window, "Nick! Lucas! Get in here! I'm leaving, with or without you two." She laid on the horn to prove her point, but I knew it was just a bluff; she wouldn't ever leave them behind.

After a few more shots, they jumped into the Jeep, tumbling over sleeping Val, an unconsciousness Tahoe, and me in

the back seat. Once they were all inside, I frantically locked the door.

“Drive!” Nick yelled.

Lucas rolled down the window and started firing. “Yeah! Run the bony freaks over!”

Claire shifted gears, and we were about to take off, fixed flat or not. She peeled out, but we didn’t get very far with all the zombies pounding on the glass and rocking the Jeep. Before we knew it, we found ourselves helplessly sandwiched next to a semi.

Claire kept gunning it, squealing the tires, but the Jeep wouldn’t move an inch. “It won’t budge!” she wailed. The engine roared, but we remained wedged, even after Claire jammed her foot on the gas over and over again.

“You’re destroying the pedals,” Lucas said calmly.

“I don’t care!” she yelled at him. “They’re not working anyway.”

“Claire, you need to listen to Lucas,” I said. “We need this Jeep to get away from here.”

She nodded, and her expression softened a little, as though his words made sense to her.

A zombie with black hair and bald patches of bloody scalp crawled onto the windshield and began slapping at the glass.

My heart raced. I gripped Jackie’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, though I wasn’t sure whether it was meant to calm her or myself. I didn’t want to go out like that, surrounded by zombies who couldn’t wait to get their paws and their nasty rotting teeth on us. Then, an idea struck me. “Nick! We can climb out through the sunroof onto to that semi next to us.”

“It might work!” Nick tucked a gun in the waistband of his jeans and slung the rifle back over his shoulder.

“What about Tahoe?” Claire asked. “We can’t just leave him.”

I glanced down at Val, lying on top of him. “Val’s smell will repel the zombies. As long as he stays under her, he’ll be safe. Even if he turns, they won’t attack each other.”

Jackie sucked in a deep breath, and I gripped her hand tight. “You can do this.”

She nodded, and Nick slid the electronic sunroof open and climbed out. He reached down to help Jackie and Claire, and I was right behind them.

Claire stumbled, almost losing her balance, but she clung tightly to Nick.

"Don't look down at them," I said. "Concentrate on getting to the roof of the semi."

Nick wrapped his arm around her waist, trying to steady her.

I balanced on the roof of the Jeep waiting for the girls, Nick, and Lucas to get on top of the truck. As I did, a blue-veined, beyond-creepy hand grabbed my foot, trying to force me to lose my balance. I thrust my boot into the zombie's face, sending him flying back into the crowd. "Hurry up, you guys!"

More zombies grabbed for me, and I lunged to temporary safety on top of the eighteen-wheeler. I wanted to jump and run off into the woods to try to lose the suckers, then circle around and get back to the Jeep Val was in. Val was safe for the time being, but I knew if we didn't get her out of there, we might miss the turning and our chance to administer the antidote when the time came. The problem was, the semi was completely surrounded, so that little plan of mine wasn't going to work.

Chills swept through me. I glanced down at the zombies crowding us. Swarms of hands were reaching up to grab us, and countless others pounded the steel walls of the truck, causing an unnerving clatter. Groans, gurgling, and moans came from everywhere, making the hair on my neck rise. It was worse than being trapped inside the glass house. At least there, we'd been safe on the balcony after the stairs were blown to shreds, but in this situation, there was no safety net. I felt like I had done nothing but fight to survive since we'd crashed in the middle of what my brother called *Zombie Land*. I had been naïve to the dangers all around me, and I felt like an idiot—a terrified idiot.

Next, the hungry zombies began to rock the truck. Claire and Jackie let out long screams, and I couldn't blame them. We had no idea how to get out of that predicament. Desperate for some kind of escape, I swept my gaze over the area one last time. When I did, I saw it: a hornet's nest, hanging just above us. I picked up a loose branch and poked at it, trying to find the entry hole.

"What's that gonna do?" Lucas asked. He aimed his gun and began shooting at the zombies who were rocking the truck.

"There's a method to my madness!" I hope. I used the stick as a baseball bat and swatted the nest as hard as I could, right

into the group of zombies. Granted, they wouldn't feel the pain of the stings, but I hoped it might be enough of a distraction to allow us the time we needed to get away.

A mass of angry hornets immediately swarmed the zombies, and the undead began to swat them away. It didn't cause the zombies to retreat, but it did distract them from rocking the semi-truck. We huddled close together.

I looked at the others. "At least I gave it a try. Anyone have a Plan B?"

"We could try and make a run for Nick and Dean's Jeep," Lucas said.

"No way!" Claire hissed. "If they so much as grab our sleeves, we'll be dead in no time."

"I agree. It's way too risky," Nick said. "We can't possibly take a chance like that. If we could only divert them to the back of the semi, I could move toward the front and see if I can slip into the driver seat and try to hotwire this thing."

With a serious look, Lucas gave him a fist bump. "I like it, but if you get it running, just don't go too fast. We'll all fly right off the top."

"Maybe the keys were left in the ignition," Jackie said, hopefully.

"It could be out of gas, especially if the driver left it on when he was dragged out." Tuning out, hundreds of thoughts raced through my head, until I came up with a better plan. I swatted at a few stray hornets that were headed our way, and I screamed my lungs out for Val. Everyone caught on quickly and started yelling for her too.

I thought maybe she could bring the other Jeep around, the one Nick and I had driven, and open the sunroof so we could all slip in. It sounded like a great plan to me. I saw Val walking toward us to the back of the semi through the sea of zombies. They didn't pay her one bit of attention, and her appearance—greenish skin and long, stringy hair—was allowing her to blend in with them.

"Get my Jeep!" I yelled to her.

Squinting, she pointed a gun at the gas tank. She obviously had her own plans, but I didn't like them one little bit. I was sure she wasn't thinking straight. Did that shot Lucas gave her even work? She's still deranged!

“What in the world is your sister doing?” Lucas yelled.

She peered up at him, droplets of sweat pouring down her face. “I’m going to fry these suckers.”

“Yeah, and us too!” Jackie shouted down.

My brother shot Val a glare. “Don’t you dare!”

I waved my hands up and down, trying to get her attention. “No, Val!”

Ignoring us, she shot a hole in the gas tank, and a river of fuel began to trickle down into the dirt. She pulled a pink lighter out of her pocket and was preparing to throw it to spark the flame when Tahoe appeared behind her.

He grabbed the lighter out of her hand. “Don’t throw it until they’re clear!” He motioned for us to jump as he shot the zombies blocking our path.

Val elbowed him in the ribs and grabbed the lighter, throwing it into the trickling gas on the ground.

“Holy crap!” I shouted.

“GO!” Lucas gave me a hard shove that made me stumble forward. “It’s gonna blow!”



## Chapter 19

I couldn't believe Val had shot the gas tank and thrown a lighter into the trickling gas. What was she thinking? The semi's gonna blow up any minute!

As we jumped off the truck, Nick, Lucas, and Val started shooting at the zombies to clear a path for me and the girls. Everything moved so fast that it seemed to be a blur before my eyes: bodies dropping to the ground in front of us, us jumping over them to get to safety (whatever safety we could find in such a situation), and our voices slicing through the morning as we called instructions to each other. Glancing over my shoulder, I was thankful to see the others right behind me. It was about all I could hope for, but the moment of weakness left me unprepared for the attack.

A zombie's jaws snapped just inches from my neck when a bullet hit him in the head, sending him crashing to the ground. Almost choking on my breath, I shot Tahoe a thankful look and forced myself back into the moment, a hundred thoughts racing through my mind. I didn't necessarily like the guy, but I had to admit that Tahoe was covering us like a champ, mowing down anything that got too close to us. Had he not been there, that thing would have taken a sizeable chunk out of my throat, and I would have become one of them. Tahoe quite literally saved my neck.

"Get away from the truck!" Nick yelled a moment before a loud thud echoed through the air.

The roaring blast sent me tumbling through the air. I landed on my stomach as hot air rushed into my lungs. Everything throbbed, but at least my brain seemed okay. Or is it?

Groaning, I lifted my head off the ground and turned to peer at the exploded truck—or what was left of it. The stench of burning zombie bodies made me gag. Instead of the truck, I saw snapping jaws and flailing bodies in the flames, their flesh burning from their bones as they held on to the hot metal. The Jeep the girls had been driving was covered in leaping flames that seared everything in their wake. If Nick hadn't been so paranoid about running over glass, we would have had to fight our way out of

there on foot. Finally, I was thankful Nick had refused to budge on that, even though we gave him a bunch of gruff for it.

“You guys okay?” I called out to the others.

“Everyone’s here!” Tahoe yelled back.

I scrambled up, and we all hopped into my Jeep. Just as I slammed the door shut, a burning zombie pounded on the glass. I had never locked a door so fast in my life. When the zombie slammed its pasty, ugly skin against the glass, I shuddered. “Let’s go!” I shouted to Lucas, who now sat in the driver seat.

Lucas backed up, turned around, and hit the gas pedal so hard that the Jeep jerked forward.

As we sped off down the road, I glanced out the back window at the shocking scene stretching behind us. Billowing, thick smoke twisted into the air, interspersed with burning bodies. Their pained moans gathered to a crescendo that was only nearly drowned out by the Jeep engine.

Closing my eyes, I leaned back and let my nerves get the better of me. As we moved away from the burning heap, my hands began to shake from the aftershock. I couldn’t believe we’d survived—again. It had been a tough one, and there had been times when I wouldn’t have bet on us living to tell about it, but we had.

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At one point, the highway became an impenetrable maze of tangled vehicles. I would’ve insisted on driving through, but as usual, Nick made the better decision, and Lucas followed it through. We backtracked through the woods, and I swear we lost hours because of it, but no one complained. Everyone was still in shock, realizing how close we’d all come to losing our lives.

Val stayed out cold for hours, so I assumed she’d used up all of her energy. How the girls and Tahoe could sleep while we rode over one bumpy road after another was beyond me, especially with Lucas’s music playing on his iPod in the background.

My brother met my gaze. “You’re so lucky I didn’t park close to the girls like you suggested. If we had, this Jeep would’ve been toast.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “You’re awesome...and always right. You want a medal?”

“No, but some respect would be nice.”

I smiled. "You know I respect your decisions. Heck, I'd probably be dead if it weren't for you."

"I'll watch your back," he said, "even if you're a royal pain in my butt sometimes."

I chuckled and closed my eyes again. It wasn't long before I drifted off, and by the time I woke up, the windows were rolled down, and the sunroof was wide open. The sun cast a warm sensation on my face, while a cool breeze whipped through my hair. I opened the glove compartment and fumbled around, then pulled out a nice pair of men's sunglasses and slipped them on.

"Oh yeah," Nick said, shooting me a sideways glance. "Now you look cool."

I noticed he and Lucas must've switched seats at some point, and I wondered how long I had been out cold, unaware of anything around me. I chuckled. "They give me character."

"They make you look older," Nick said.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Well, my life has been turned upside down. I guess I do feel more mature. I can't believe the crap we've been through. It's mind-blowing, you know?"

"I feel ya, little brother." Nick let out a long breath, giving me the impression that he had something else on his mind.

"What's wrong?" I finally asked.

He refused to look at me, keeping his gaze focused on the road. "I'm sorry I yelled at you when we first crashed, and I'm even sorrier I even suggested that you should kill Val. That had to be tough, knowing she was our sister."

"It was horrible," I agreed, "but I should've just told you the truth. If I had, it would've never even crossed your mind, I'm sure."

He grimaced, his gaze still focused on the road. "It probably would have, but I might've given her another day to live. Letting my sister turn into one of those things...well, I just couldn't let it happen. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge you have a possible cure."

I considered his words carefully. Would he really kill his own flesh and blood if I didn't have the vials in my possession? I reasoned that Nick must have thought he was saving her from a

fate worse than death, and perhaps he was right. I knew I would have rather been shot dead than become one of those things.

"I don't blame you for anything," Nick said. "Yes, you broke some rules and went outside of protocol, but you saved Val's life, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

"Gee, thanks," I said.

His lips pressed into a grim line, but I could tell something else was bothering him.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head and ran a hand through his disheveled hair, speaking out what I had been trying to push out of my mind ever since boarding that helicopter. "What if the cure doesn't work, Dean?"

I clenched my fists, hoping against all odds that it would work. "It will," I said with less conviction than I wanted.

"But what if it doesn't? I don't think I can bear having a sister one day and having to put her down humanely the next day. It's just not fair—not freaking fair at all! I never even got a chance to really know her."

"I dunno," I said. "All I know is that we'll get through this." I tried to keep my voice from quivering.

He nodded in agreement and didn't say another word. He'd never shown me his emotional side before, and I could tell how hard it was on him. I decided not to pry any further; I left him alone and didn't talk about it any further. Besides, I knew if we continued discussing such touchy subjects and sentimental things, a tear might slip down my cheek, and I wasn't about to let him witness that.

We drove for another hour before something caught my eye. The Jeep drove past a zombie, hunched over a dead deer on the side of the road. I didn't have much time to grasp details, but in the brief second our eyes connected, a chill ran through me. I knew I would never get used to their cold, dead eyes. A few years back, my buddies and I had enjoyed a good laugh and chatted about how the world was going to end. We'd even joked about a zombie apocalypse, but we didn't think that would really happen, not in a million years. I'd come to realize as of late that life does throw curveballs we never quite expect. The girls slept. Lucas and Nick glanced at the venison-devouring zombie for a second, but then their attention drifted off like it didn't even faze them. There's

something seriously wrong with this world when we can drive by a zombie feasting on a deer on the side of the road and accept it as normal. Yeah, this is seriously messed up!

The world seemed to be crumbling all around us, and the undead army seemed to be growing in numbers daily. Sooner or later, though, they would have to run out of healthy people to infect. My hopes were that we could take the remaining healthy people out of the equation. I wanted to get them into safe cities, even build more cities if we had to. I didn't understand why the authorities weren't trying to do just that. It seemed simple to me. I figured the leaders needed to focus on solving major problems first and then deal with after-effects. Getting help to everyone in Zombie Land had to be hard, if not impossible.

The living dead would eventually die, and survivors could rebuild, but in the meantime, the healthy people out there needed help. They were always on the run or hiding out. I quickly learned that it was an everyday battle to survive, with death lurking around the corner. Life was rough and totally sucked out there, but there was little I could do about it. Whether I wanted to or not, I'd have to deal with it, and I could never give up on thinking humanity might stand a chance after all. Whatever happened, I knew I'd never get accustomed to the things we witnessed out there. My head ached. Thinking about the last days' events, Mom and Dad, and trying to save Val was driving me insane. I needed sleep—some peace, if only for an hour—but sleep felt as though it wouldn't come for a long time. Trying to block the image of the half-eaten deer out of my head, I eventually drifted off to the girls' shallow breathing. It felt as though I had only closed my eyes for a few minutes when someone shook my shoulder hard, jerking me out of my slumber. What?" I groggily opened my eyes to Nick towering over me. "Where are we?"

"Look up, sleepy head," Nick said, pointing up to an air traffic control tower. "It's an airport. I think this would be the best place to stay the night and get some rest."

Without another word, I followed him out. It was late afternoon and we'd been driving all day. My whole body felt cramped. I squeezed out and stretched my legs, thankful to get out of the truck. I glimpsed at our surroundings. To the right, there was nothing but woodlands. To the left was a tall, gray building. In front of us, there was a ramp that probably served as a runway.

Apart from the usual sounds, such as chirping birds and a soft wind rustling the leaves, the area seemed completely deserted. And I couldn't believe this would be my third night out here in the middle of Zombie Land.

No planes were out, but a giant steel hangar lined the north side of the field. For some reason, the hangar doors were slid open, as if somebody was in a quick hurry to leave. I craned my neck until I could see right in. Everything was empty.

Nick was right: The control tower was the perfect place to spend the night, and I felt like we would be safe. "We can see a zombie coming from anywhere."

Lucas playfully slugged me in the arm. "Yeah, but the best part is that we can talk and be as loud as we want."

I gave him a fist-bump. "Yeah!"

"I like it!" Jackie said, grabbing a box of food from the trunk. "I can whip up some dinner with this stuff. How about cold chicken noodle soup with crackers, baked beans, and Spam?"

"Mmm. A meal fit for a king." Claire laughed as she grabbed some candles and other supplies.

I got a crowbar out of the trunk and wedged the lock until it finally snapped. I agreed to stay downstairs with the girls while Nick and Lucas checked things out. We left Tahoe sleeping in the back seat; we weren't about to carry his sorry butt up all those stairs. But then a thought struck me: Wait a minute...he did save my life back there. Maybe I should cut him a break and not ride him so hard. I decided if he didn't come up by dark, I would go out and get him. I owed him that much.

"Your brother is so brave," Claire said, wearing a big smile. "He's not afraid of anything. When I'm with him, I just feel so safe."

I smiled and decided to put her on the spot. "You have a thing for Nick, don't you?"

Her cheeks grew red. "Yeah, he's really sweet."

Jackie grabbed my arm and smiled. "So is Dean here."

I flung my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, my heart racing. "Is that all I am to you? Sweet?" We'd shared a rather passionate kiss, and now I was standing there with my arm around her, so I was pretty sure there was more to it than "sweet".

"Is there something wrong with sweet, mister?" she chimed, meeting my gaze.

“No, but I’d rather be sexy and irresistible.”

She batted her eyelashes like a puppy dog. “Should I rephrase?”

“Oh brother,” Claire said.

“Yes, please do.” I shot her a playful look.

She wrapped her arms around me and stared into my eyes.

“Dean, uh, what’s your last name?”

“Walters,” I said.

“Dean Walters, you are sexy and irresistible and sweet, and I like you. I also trust you, and I consider myself lucky to have met you.”

“That’s more like it.” I softly kissed her lips. “But I could say those same things and more about you.” My lips brushed hers again. When she leaned into me, I put some distance between us.

“No, let me tell you what I think about you.” My voice grew slightly husky. “You’re gorgeous and clever, brave and adorable.”

Her face lit up, and her lips curved into the most beautiful smile I had ever seen.

“Get a room, you two!” Lucas said.

Jackie turned around and playfully punched him. “Shut up!”

He chuckled. “Just because we’re in the middle of a zombie apocalypse doesn’t mean you can’t get arrested for public displays of affection.”

We all laughed, and the mood seemed lighter.

“So I take it everything’s safe up there?” Claire asked.

“All clear,” Nick said.

We went out to the Jeep to get Val. I scooped her up from the back seat. She was still out cold, but she looked a lot paler, and she was sweating profusely.

Claire and Jackie glanced over. “Is she okay?” Jackie asked.

“It’s all part of the process of becoming a zombie,” I said.

Nick nodded. “We’ll prepare her bed upstairs.”

Claire didn’t waste a minute. She was right by his side, holding some pillows and blankets and a box of supplies to be carried up.

“Here, Claire, let me help,” Nick said, taking the box before he turned and looked at me. “You got the vials in case sis changes?”

I nodded. "Yep." Carrying Val, I climbed up what felt like a million flights of stairs, but eventually, we reached the open space overlooking the airstrip below, and I could finally lay her down.

Claire hurried to cover her with a blue blanket.

Val opened her eyes briefly and said. "Hey, do you know what a lobster feels like when it's boiled?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

"I do."

I could tell she was roasting, so I took off the blanket and chuckled at her attempt at sarcasm, something she'd obviously inherited from our mother. "There. I hope that's better. Just get some rest, sis."

She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

The view from the top of the control tower was amazing. I could see from every direction. I picked up a pair of binoculars from a desk and realized I could see as far as the woods stretching in the distance. Nothing would get past us.

"We're taking those," Lucas said, pulling me aside.

"I'm sure nobody cares at this point."

He opened my black bag and inspected the vials.

"Everything looks good here."

"Of course. I've been guarding them with my life."

"Keep up the good work. You're doing great."

I nodded. "Well, there's a lot on my shoulders, I'll tell you that."

"Yeah, I know. It's to be expected since we're the world's only hope for survival."

"No pressure or anything."

His expression darkened. "Seriously, Dean, you're doing a fantastic job. You really are a hero."

"I wonder if they'll even work. You really think we've got the cure?"

"If not, it's the closest thing we do have. We've got to get those vials to the scientists in Washington. This is the most important mission of our lives."

I bit my lip hard. "I know."

His eyes glimmered with hope. "We're gonna be able to help so many people. We can't think of this as the end of the world. We need to think of it as the beginning of a new life...for everyone."



"I hope it's the miracle we've all been praying for," I agreed.

He zipped up the bag. "Well, there's only one way to tell. We need to test it on your sister."

"That's the plan," I said.

"For her sake, as well as the sake of all humanity, I sure hope it works like we want it to."

"Doc ensured me this is the final formula, and I believe he was telling me the truth."

Lucas nodded gravely. "Yeah, me too."

Jackie's laugh drifted over, and we both smiled. She was joking around with Claire and Nick. When I met her gaze, she smiled; she had the cutest smile, teeth gleaming white like a Hollywood movie star.

"Hey," Lucas whispered, "Jackie's really cute."

"Yeah, she's hot, smart, funny, and super sweet. I like everything about her."

"She seems perfect for you. I guess time will only tell."

I shook my head. "Yeah, she looks a lot like, uh..."

"Who?" he asked.

"A lot like my next girlfriend." Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. After all, we hardly knew each other, but I was smitten. I wasn't going to rush anything, especially with everything we were going through. We'd just take it nice and slow. Besides, my main focus right now was saving Val and getting home.

"She's all yours," Lucas said. "Besides, I like your sister. She's pretty when she isn't threatening to eat me."

"I could tell you like Val," I said.

"The second I laid eyes on her back on the island, I was totally blown away. It sucked that I had to arrest her. I really hated that. Would it bother you if I asked her out sometime when this is all said and done?"

"It's fine with me if you wanna go after my sister. You're the most honorable guy I know." I playfully slugged him. "Just don't go pulling pranks on her the way you do to the guys back on the island."

"She might like a guy with a sense of humor."

I laughed. "Yeah, or she might punch you in the face."

## Chapter 20

The airport control tower was the best possible place for us to rest and stay the night. The highest story boasted fantastic visibility, allowing us to see any approaching zombie from a mile away. We weren't worried about single zombies though. Our main priority was not to draw any attention; we had to avoid a herd. Scanning the area below the tower, I realized that even if a whole bunch of them tried to corner us, there'd be enough time to jump in the Jeep and race down the airstrip that led to the main road.

"What are you thinking?" Jackie whispered from behind me.

I smiled but didn't turn to face her. "Nothing Earth-shattering. I just realized we can get from the airstrip to the main road by taking a few different directions."

She rubbed my back gently. "Always plotting ahead, aren't you?"

I inclined my head, not sure where she was headed. "Sometimes."

She laughed. "Relax. It's a compliment. I wish I was more of a planner rather than jumping in headfirst without thinking of consequences. I might've saved myself a bit of trouble in my life."

"And I wish I was more carefree," I said, finally turning. My gaze fell on her lips first, then trailed up to her beautiful eyes. "My paranoia's something I learned from Nick. Did you know he's already plotted our escape plan in case we have to evacuate?"

She cocked a brow. "Impressive. I haven't even planned my dinner yet."

I laughed and pulled her against my chest, marveling at how good she smelled. "That's something I like about you." My heart picked up in speed at the realization. I liked a lot of things about her—a whole lot of them.

We settled in, and Claire laid out a red and white blanket on the floor. Jackie dished out cold chicken noodle soup, baked beans, and Spam, just like she promised, on paper plates. I lit some

thick white candles and put them in the center. Girls usually dig candles, and I had a strong hunch Jackie would like them too.

“Our first romantic dinner,” she said.

I grinned while everyone sang, “Awww!” trying to make light of a tough situation. I laughed as I drank a warm, flat Pepsi. I was so hungry and thirsty that I didn’t even care. I could have eaten a whole other can of baked beans, and I didn’t even like them.

The stairs creaked as someone walked up them. We all exchanged shocked glances.

Jackie ran to the window and glanced out. “I don’t see any zombies around and it looks like Tahoe isn’t in the backseat anymore.”

My heart raced as I rushed to the door. “Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

“Lake Tahoe?” I asked. I was so thankful it was a human’s voice and not a zombie’s moan and heavy breathing. At this point, I just needed a little breather from all that kind of crap. I’d only been out here for three days and seen enough to last me a lifetime. Of course, after a good night’s sleep, I’d probably be ready for more adrenaline rushes tomorrow.

“Funny. Just let me in. My side’s killing me.”

Hesitating, I opened the door. Even though he had saved my life, I was still ticked at him for almost killing Val. How can someone forget something like that? I knew I needed to forgive him. And I would...in time.

Jackie offered him a plate of food and a beer. He sat next to us like he was part of our gang, as though all was forgiven and forgotten. Personally, I couldn’t wait to be rid of the mountain man once and for all, and Nick’s expression told me he thought the same.

Keeping to himself, my brother downed a beer, then another, as though alcohol could help him forget his worries. The city we’d lived in for the last year had been destroyed. We didn’t even know if our family had survived. He didn’t usually drink, so I could only assume it was all quite devastating for him. As much as I understood him, I didn’t like him drinking while continuing to play tough. We needed to be on alert, but after everything we’d been through, a beer was nothing. Heck, we all decided to have one. Nick didn’t even speak for the first hour we were there. He just drank while Lucas kept guard using the binoculars we found.

Finally, he said, "I've been thinking. I know my parents had to make it out safe, and I'm not even going to waste another minute worrying about it."

I nodded. "I agree. Mom and Dad had all kinds of escape plans and drills. We'll find them, no doubt about it." I lifted up my can and smiled. "To survival and new friends."

Jackie's brown eyes twinkled, and we all clanked cans.

"I'll toast to that," Tahoe said.

Val even opened her eyes. "How can anyone toast in this day and age? I've lost so much and so many people I cared about." The pain was evident in her whisper.

"She makes an excellent point," Lucas said. We all nodded as he continued, "Death lurks around every corner, making every breath a choice. We fight to live another second, another minute, another day. All of us come from different backgrounds and walks of life, but we all have one thing in common." His lips pressed into grim lines. "We've all experienced the loss of a loved one. Let's stop making toasts and just live to see another day."

There was a moment of silence as we all contemplated his words. Somehow, he hit home with every single one of us. I wrapped an arm around Jackie to draw her close, and she snuggled into my shoulder.

"I can't argue with that," Nick said, "not after losing countless friends and even my childhood girlfriend."

"I've lost friends too," I managed to choke out.

Nick lifted his chin. "This one goes out to Sam Moalny, who was killed last month in the line of duty. He was a great patriot, humanitarian, and loyal friend. And this also goes out to all those who have died in vain to this wicked epidemic that has taken place all over our world. Our loved ones are gone but never forgotten. This thought goes out to them. May you rest in peace."

"Thanks, Lucas," Val said quietly.

He smiled. "I didn't do anything."

"You understood what I meant." She leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes again. For a moment, silence ensued, and I believed she had drifted off to sleep, but then she opened her eyes again and smiled. "Hey, if I said anything crazy to you, just forget it, okay? I wasn't thinking straight. Also, I think I might've attacked you. It's all fuzzy. I'm trying to put the pieces together."

"Then you're not going to eat me?" Lucas asked.

Her face blushed. "No way. Did I really say that?"

He smiled.

I chuckled. "That...and a little more."

"Yes, with a very descriptive cursing vocabulary," Claire added.

"I'm sorry, Lucas," Val said. "I talk like that in front of the guys on the police force to blend in, ya know?"

"Don't worry about it," Lucas said.

"That shot took a while to work, but it finally kicked in. I can't thank you enough. Nick filled me in about how I fought you over it. I'm sorry I was such a bear. Also, thanks for breaking me out of that medical prison."

He threw his arms up in the air. "Well, it's about time you gave me some credit for that great escape."

"You did a fantastic job of planning it." She shot him a tiny grin. "You'd be kind of cute if Uncle Sam would let you grow your hair out."

"What? You don't like the buzzed look? What do you expect? Are you looking for some brooding sap or some Fabio from the cover of one of those romance novels?" He made a fist and the huge muscles bulged in his arm. "I'm a born and bred soldier, and this is a soldier's hairdo."

She grinned. "If you're ever interested in going out with me, you'll have to grow out your hair."

He grinned back. "Are those your final terms?"

"Yep."

"Then it's settled. I'll grow out my hair for one date with you."

She smiled. "Deal. Hopefully, by the time that happens, I'll be back to normal too." She walked back to her bed. "I'm going to rest over here for a bit." She pulled the cover up to her chest and closed her eyes.

"Get some rest," Lucas said, carrying over a second pillow and propping it under her head.

Tahoe approached. "Hey, Lucas, I need a minute with Val, okay?"

Lucas cocked a brow.

"It's okay," Val said. "I want to hear what he has to say."

Tahoe apologized for Earl and even his own involvement. His words were mumbled, but whatever he said, it seemed to make Val smile. I regarded her from the corner of my eye, unable to believe what I was witnessing. A few times she just nodded, and then she raised her arm to touch his shoulder, as though all was forgiven and forgotten. He said something under his breath, making her giggle and then laugh, reminding me of the old Val I'd met not long ago. He irritated me, but I let him chitchat with my sister because he seemed harmless. I knew Val could handle him, but I couldn't help inching closer to tune in.

Val was telling him about the cure and that there was hope for her life. He squeezed her hand and gave her words of encouragement. Even though she seemed tired, her mind was clear, and it had been hours since she last growled, hissed, or said any off-the-wall things. I was happy the shot had worked after all. If it hadn't, she would have been taking down Lucas or Claire and trying to bite their necks at that very moment; or else she would have been trying to arrest me, thinking she was a cop hot on a case. I chuckled to myself at the thought.

"Hey, Lake Tahoe," my brother said, "I'm watching you."

"Love the nickname," he said. "I guess I'm stuck with it, right?"

Lucas and Nick started telling us Army stories about their narrow escapes with death and zombies. Tahoe even joined, sitting at Val's side as he told some stories of his own. I used to think my brother was an exaggerator, but after all I'd seen, I knew the stories were true. I wondered if the guys back home would believe me when I told them about the glass house or the multitude of zombies that surrounded the semi-truck we stood on top of. Those were the crazy kind of stories Nick used to come back and tell us, and we'd always thought he was full of it. Of course, I had never said that to his face.

Nick squashed the beer can he was drinking from and threw it across the room, making the basket. "Yes!"

"Woo-hoo!" Claire squealed. "He shoots; he scores, and beats the buzzer at the last second to win the game."

"He's so getting a championship ring," Jackie said.

Nick laughed, then grabbed another beer and took a swig. "So, Claire, what's your story?"

Jackie almost spat her drink out in a fit of laughter. “Dean used that line on me earlier, back at the house. Is that some kind of brother pick-up line?”

We all laughed, and I elbowed her playfully.

“I just want to know more about you, Claire,” Nick said. “I don’t know a darn thing except that you’re twenty-one, smokin’ hot, and gorgeous.”

“That’s the corniest thing I’ve ever heard,” Lucas said.

I laughed. “It is, isn’t it? But he gets so daring once he’s had a couple of beers.”

Jackie chuckled. “Yeah. He’s not beating around the bush now, is he?”

Nick stumbled over and wrapped his arm around Claire as he slumped down next to her. “I like the direct approach.”

“If he gets on your nerves, Claire, just let me know,” Lucas said. “I can throw his butt on the other side of the room.”

“I’m fine, Lucas.” Claire grinned and turned her attention to my brother. “I’m from New York City. Jackie and I aren’t only cousins, but also roommates.”

“Cool,” I said. “Nick and I are originally from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. When all this happened, we got relocated.”

“Did you like it there?” Jackie asked, chiming in.

I nodded. “I miss the ocean big time. My buddies and I used to surf all the time. We had fun, but we also had goals in life.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed it gently. “I really wanted to be a broadcast sports reporter. I wish we could all go there. I’d love to show you the beach and how to ride a wave.”

“Oooh, I would love that,” Jackie said. “By the way, sports journalism is a cool career choice.”

I pointed at her. “Thanks, but back to you.”

“We used to attend Parsons before the zombie thing went down,” Claire said.

I cocked a brow. “Never heard of it.”

“Fashion school,” Jackie elaborated, brushing a strand of hair back. “It’s not what you think. It’s more than pattern-making and sewing courses. I was taking classes in fashion photography and journalism.”

“Yeah,” Claire said. “It’s one of the oldest institutions of its kind offering undergraduate and graduate degrees. We were taught valuable industry knowledge while designing innovative

clothing and products. Parsons is credited with launching the careers of various fashion legends like Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, and Tom Ford, and so many more.”

Jackie seemed quite enthusiastic about it, and I wished I knew more about her career choice, but given that I’d grown up among boys with absolutely no fashion sense, I was glad to even know what fashion school was.

Nick grinned, probably getting as little out of it as I was. “Well, that explains the cute outfits.”

Claire nudged him and batted those long eyelashes of hers. She really liked my big brother, and she wasn’t embarrassed to flirt with him.

I met Jackie’s gaze. “I think you’d make a wonderful fashion photographer.”

My heart began to race as Jackie flashed her bright smile. “Thank you,” she said. “I started taking pictures at ten. I thought about the great adventures I could have taking beautiful pictures all over the world. But as a teenager, I began to love fashion, so I thought I’d just combine my two great loves.”

“You gotta do what you love,” I said. “Did you work as well?”

Claire cut in. “Yeah. Jackie and I worked as wedding gown models in some of those wedding shows. We got to wear beautiful gowns and have our hair all pinned up in some elaborate up-dos.”

Nick reached for her hand. “I bet you made the most beautiful bride.”

“Thank you, Nick,” she said. “We weren’t allowed to move one muscle or even blink.”

Jackie chuckled. “Yeah, and Claire kept giving me this silly look, and we’d end up busting out in laughter. She always got me in trouble.”

I shot Lucas an amused look.

“What were you doing when all of this happened?” Lucas asked.

Jackie looked off, as if remembering a horrible event in her life. “We were actually on a photo shoot as wedding models for a fashion magazine in Hershey, Pennsylvania when the virus broke out.”

“Why would you leave New York City to go to Pennsylvania?” Nick asked.



“The title of the article was ‘Chocolate, Wine, and Weddings,’” Jackie said, “so they chose to do it in the chocolate capital of the world. Everything turned to chaos. We couldn’t get back to New York City. There was gunfire everywhere. People started killing and eating their friends and neighbors, and there Claire and I were in these fluffy wedding dresses.”

“We hid out in the basement of a pet store,” Claire said. “The poor animals were going nuts. The glass door was shattered, so we let them go so they’d have a fighting chance. Leaving them locked up in those cages would have been a death sentence for sure. I watched the parrots squawk and fly off into the sky, and I envied them.”

“I remember where I was too,” I said. “I was stuck at the top of a Ferris wheel with a date. Innocent people were being killed below, and I couldn’t do anything to help them.”

“That’s awful,” Jackie said.

“It was like something out of some B-grade horror movie, and I thought maybe I was dreaming. Hours later, Nick and my dad let me down. My date ran in the other direction and I haven’t seen her since. Nick then flew our parents and me to Kelleys Island where my grandma lived.”

“So you’re a pilot?” Claire cut in, her gaze meeting Nick’s. “I dig pilots.”

A soft hue of red covered his cheeks, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure if it was from the alcohol in his blood or the compliment from a pretty girl.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, my grandma owned a bed and breakfast and a small cottage. About 200 residents lived there before the outbreak.”

“My best friend from school went to Kelleys Island two years ago,” Jackie said. “She went fishing, sea kayaking, and hiking. And even took a trip to that amusement park, Cedar Point in Sandusky. I remember all the pictures she showed me. It looked like a lot of fun. Kelleys Island is a tourist attraction, right?”

I snorted. “It used to be. It was the perfect place to hole up, considering we were completely surrounded by water. It’s a great island and we love it. I just wish Nick was around more.”

“And where’d you take off to, Nick?” Claire asked.

“I was home on leave from the Army, but when this zombie thing happened, I chose to fight over here in Ohio,” Nick

said. "With everything happening, the Army was cool with it. I wanted to give back, to save the people who weren't dead yet."

"Me too," Lucas said. "I had lots of connections so I got stationed at Kelleys Island too. Nick and Dean's family...well, they're like the family I never had."

Claire gripped Nick's hand. "That's very honorable to serve your country."

He leaned in and whispered something in her ear that made her laugh.

Jackie squeezed my hand and I smiled. We talked about everything, and I learned so much about her. She'd been born and raised in New York City, and family and friends meant everything to her. She also loved burgers with all the fixings, and she demanded gobs of mustard, just like me. She used to jog Central Park every morning at six a.m. with her brothers, and she loved cats. She'd always wanted a dog, but her landlord wouldn't allow it. She wore pajamas and pink slippers every night—or at least she had before the zombies took over.

"I've got one question," said Val, looking at Jackie and Claire.

"Vall" I said.

"You're awake," Jackie said. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a zombie is eating my intestines." She cringed.

"Well, you asked. Anyway, here's my question."

"Yes?" Claire said.

"This zombie thing has been happening for a year now. Why were you dressed so fashionable when we met?"

"We ran until our group found an abandoned mansion," Jackie said. "We got comfortable and didn't see more than a handful of zombies for over eight months."

"There were giant closets filled with the most gorgeous designer clothes," Jackie said, "so we started relaxing and letting our guard down. We dressed up every day and did our hair and makeup. All the girls in our group did. We were led into a false sense of security. I know now that it was a big mistake. We should've been training to fight, but the men treated us women like china dolls. They took care of us, and I guess we let them."

"At three o'clock one afternoon, a window shattered," Claire said. "I'll never forget it to this day."

Jackie sipped her beer. "That was the end of our group...and our time together. A herd broke in and killed everyone else." Her voice wavered. "We barely escaped."

I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close. It had to be awful. I couldn't even begin to imagine what that night must have been like for them, mourning the loss of their protectors and running for their lives with no supplies or weapons.

"I'm sorry," Val said, looking out the window.

"Isn't the sunset gorgeous?" Jackie asked, changing the subject.

"Yes. And I want to watch it one last time before I...before I die," she said between breaths.

"How can I deny my wonderful sister her last wish?" I rushed over to help her up. "Technically though, you're not really dying, Val." I scooped her up in my arms and brought her next to Nick. We all sat together and watched the sun sink into the horizon.

"That was beautiful," she said and looked up at me, then at Nick. "Hey, guys, what if the cure doesn't work?"

I gripped her hand tightly. "Don't even think about it."

A tear ran down her face. "I don't want to die, Dean. I want to live to see another sunset."

"Shh." I wiped her tear away and pulled her into my arms. "You're my sister, and Nick and I are going to do everything in our power to save you."

"You've got to trust us," Nick said.

She smiled, but I could see the hopelessness in her eyes. "I'm not giving up yet."

Nick touched her hand. "That's my girl."

"Just promise me one thing," she said.

"Anything," I said, meaning it.

"If the cure doesn't work, I want you or Nick to...one of you have to put the bullet in my head—nobody else!"

Tears welled in my eyes as I met Nick's gaze; he was choking up too. I tried to compose myself because I didn't want to cry in front of everyone. "I...we promise." It was the hardest promise I'd ever had to make to anyone, and I hoped it wasn't one I'd have to keep.

She sniffled. "Thank you."

I squeezed her hand. I prayed against all odds that the cure would work, but if it didn't, I knew I'd have to keep my promise, no matter how much it hurt.

Val let out a sigh. "I wish we could've been a real family, that we could have grown up together."

"Well, we're a real family now," I said, "and that's what counts."

"Tell me about Mom and Dad," she whispered.

I laughed. "You remind me a lot of Dad, with that temper of yours. I think that's a family trait."

Nick chuckled. "I'm the worst. I punch walls when I get pissed off."

"My adoptive parents were as sweet as can be. I knew I didn't get my temper from them."

"You're funny and sarcastic like Mom, but tough like Dad," Nick said.

"And you're a fighter, just like Mom," I said. "When she had cancer, she never gave up. She beat it years later."

"Mom almost died?" she said.

Slowly, the word came out. "Yes."

A tiny gasp escaped her throat. "Why didn't she tell me about it?"

I sucked in a deep breath as I considered my words. "Even though the ordeal was over and done with, maybe she didn't want to worry you." I shrugged. "I honestly don't know."

"I'm glad she made it," Val said softly.

"Me too." I nodded. "Imagine if she didn't. Then I might never have met you, and she would've died without having a chance to meet her only daughter." I met her gaze. "During chemo, she said she only had one regret about life. She wanted to meet Valarie again. Yeah, she called you by your formal name. I thought she was talking about an old high school friend."

"But it was me." She let out a sob. "I never cry like this. It's the virus. It's doing crazy stuff to my emotions."

Lucas put an arm around her, and she playfully slugged him.

"Hey! I'm willing to let that one slide," he said, "but I'm warning you, if you try to bite me, our little friendship is all over."

Val smiled. "You don't look like the type of guy that dates zombie chicks."

He shot her a gleaming grin. "I'd date a zombie, as long as she didn't treat me like a piece of meat, though I'm not at all opposed to a little nibbling."

"C'mon," she said. "Be serious. You know I want your braaaaaains."

"You know what else I like," Lucas said. "Zombies aren't quitters. I mean, if they want you, they'll keep coming after you...and I love being chased!"

"That's a no-brainer."

We laughed some more as we continued to tell jokes and stories. For just a little while, we let go and allowed ourselves some fun; we knew that soon enough, we'd be back to fighting for our lives. Settling into our beds hours later, when the sun had long set and countless stars dotted the skyline, we decided to take turns standing guard to make sure no zombies crossed the perimeter and to watch out for Val changing while the others slept.

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Morning had finally come. The sun beamed in, and we all immediately got to packing the little bit of supplies we had.

"Okay, I'm starting here. You guys split up. Check every corner and crevice so we don't leave anything behind," I said, glancing around one last time.

"Where's Lake Tahoe?" my brother asked.

I peered at him, surprised. "He's not with you?"

"I thought he was with you." He shrugged. "He's gotta be around somewhere. Let's just pack up the Jeep. He'll turn up."

Ignoring the sudden uneasiness in the pit of my stomach, I grabbed a box and some blankets and looked out the window. My heart lurched. "Nick! Lucas! The Jeep's gone," I yelled, my voice reverberating from the walls.

Val's eyes darted about, not really focusing on anything. The way Nick regarded me told me he knew before I even opened my mouth.

"He must've left during his short shift of staying awake and guarding. We're so screwed," I said. My heart lurched in my chest as I checked our belongings, or lack thereof.

I swear Val's face turned another shade of red as she wailed, "He took our food, water, guns, freakin' everything!"

“He didn’t take the stuff we dragged up here,” Jackie said, swinging a backpack over her shoulder. “We’ve still got some food and water and some guns.”

Nick grabbed my arm and pulled me aside, whispering so the girls wouldn’t hear him. “Where’s the serum?”

I scanned the naked floor, willing my eyes to see something that wasn’t there. “I-I don’t know. The bag’s gone!” I managed eventually. “I thought you or Lucas had it.”

“We’ll find another vehicle,” Lucas said, “and catch up with him. I still have the tracking device.”

“You’re right.” My heart raced, thumping in my ears like a drum. “We can’t stay here.”

“We’ll have to leave on foot,” Nick said, “and I mean right NOW!”

A chill washed over me. We were right back where we’d started: running for our lives and in dire need of transportation. And now, we didn’t even have the cure in our hands. Val’s life depended on those vials, and without them, my sister was doomed, dead and gone forever.

“What are we waiting for?” Val asked.

“Let’s get outta here...and find those vials,” Nick said.

I couldn’t have agreed more.

## The End of Installment One

To be continued in the next book,  
The Zombie Chronicles: Book 2 (See pic on next page)

I’d love to hear from you! Please leave any thoughts or feedback on my fan page. Thank you so much. Can’t wait to hear from you!

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Book Two



Amazon Link for book 2: [http://www.amazon.com/The-Zombie-Chronicles-Apocalypse-ebook/dp/B009L5B8LK/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1362694217&sr=1-1&keywords=zombie+chronicles+2%20](http://www.amazon.com/The-Zombie-Chronicles-Apocalypse-ebook/dp/B009L5B8LK/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1362694217&sr=1-1&keywords=zombie+chronicles+2%20)

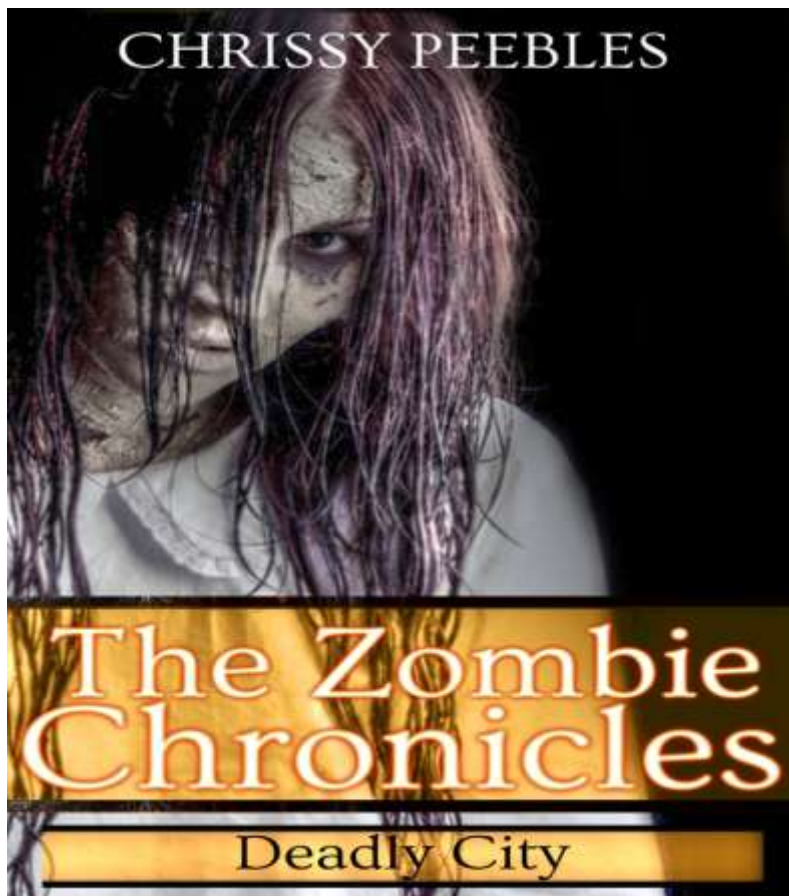
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Book 2 is also available at Sony, Diesel, and iTunes.

### Book Three





Book Four

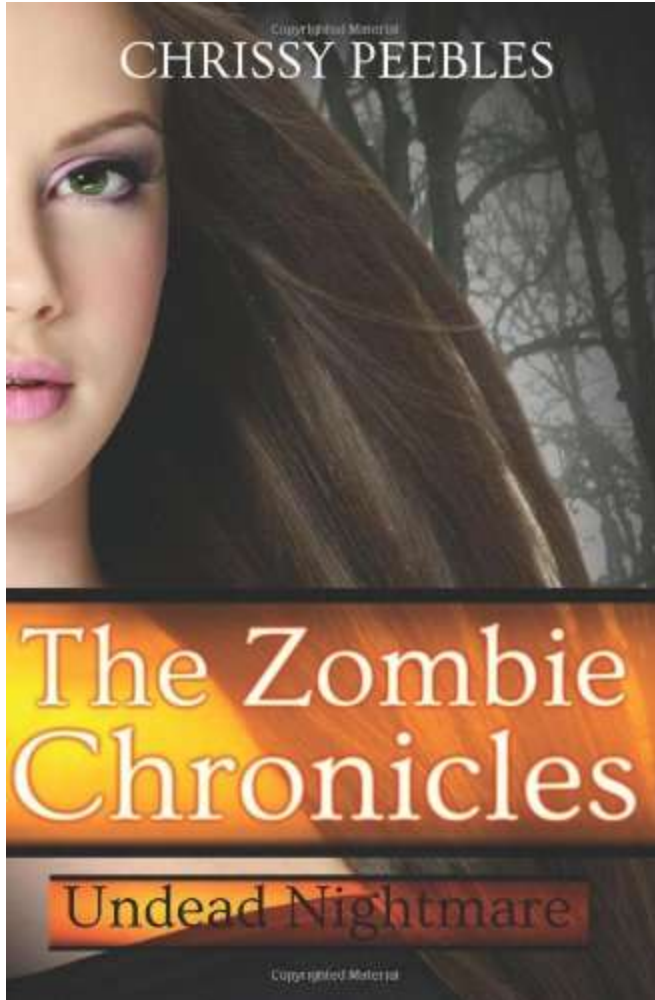
CHRISSY PEEBLES



# The Zombie Chronicles

Poisonous Serum

**Book Five**



**The Zombie Chronicles**  
**Apocalypse Infection Unleashed Series**  
**by**  
**Chrissy Peebles**

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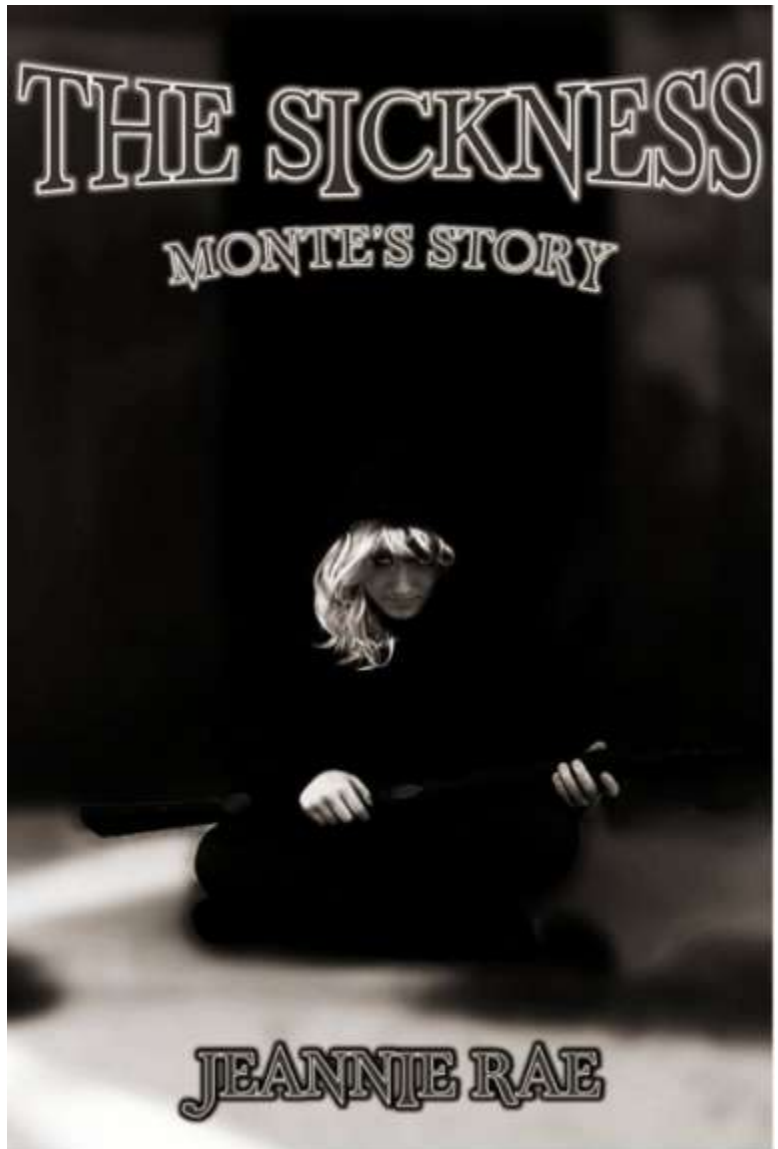
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*Jeannie Rae*



## ***The Sickness: Monte's Story***

**By Jeannie Rae**

### **AWAKENING**

Sluggishly opening my eyes, I can feel the light and warmth of the sun peeking through the slight opening in my drapes. The window in my minuscule room faces the rising summer sun, if I'm not up by eight, that ball of fire cooks me until I get up. My skin is tacky with sweat, already. There's nothing I hate more than being penny-saver poor and living on the south side of town. It's not safe to leave my window open at night—or even at day for that matter. A swamp cooler hangs out of our living room window—the only source cool air in this place, which Dad refuses to turn on until dusk and only for an hour on days when it's hot as hell.

My name is Monte. I'm sixteen and on the all-girls softball team at Druid High School, in the small coastal town of Port Steward and work part-time at the Taco Shell Taqueria around the corner. All that keeps me going in this miserable existence is playing ball and the thought of getting out of this rotten place.

Rising from my second-hand mattress on the floor, I'm fully clothed in yesterday's outfit. After a quick change into a pair of blue jeans and a faded blue tee, I stumble my way to the door. Jerking the hair tie from my wrist, I yank up my knotted, blonde hair into a side pony tail. I steal a glance over my shoulder at my room, it's a sty—but who cares. It's not like there's anything remarkable about this second-rate place, so why should my room be any different?

As I shuffle down the hall, the house feels humid and sticky as usual, with almost a wet smell of nicotine. Mom and Dad both smoke enough cigarettes in a day, to penetrate a hole in the ozone layer. They do most of their smoking inside, which leaves behind a smoke so concentrated that it's nearly a solid. The house is quieter than normal for a Saturday morning. Ordinarily, Mom is in the kitchen fixing breakfast, while Dad is reading the newspaper.

And my ten-year-old brother—Sammy, is usually causing trouble, with Dad always hollering at him. Hollering, that's Dad's word. Maybe Sammy's already outside playing. I tiptoe through our empty living room eyeing the primordial, mismatching couch and recliner. There's no carpeting in this old shack—only ancient wood flooring that may have been used from the same lumber that made George Washington's teeth. A couple of holes in the rotting, wood floor are located in the bathroom and kitchen—no step zones—as Dad calls them. Moving into the kitchen, I see that our small, discolored table and plastic chairs are empty, as is the rest of the tiny space.

Where is everyone?

After searching the rest of the house and finding it void of all but me, I wonder, do I want to find them? Or should I just take in a moment of peace? Against my better judgment, I head out the back door off the kitchen. The sun hasn't found its way to the backyard yet, as the house shades most of the patio at this early hour. A gust of cool air hits me when I open the back door, it must be at least fifteen degrees cooler out here, than it is in the house. As I soundlessly step out onto the porch, I see Sammy first, sitting on the ground with his back to me. My kid brother is hunching over like an old man, and his head is hanging low, snaking back and forth. He's tracing his hands in a circle on the sidewalk in a blob of goo. It looks like motor oil or something. Dad's going to kill him for this one.

My eyes widen as I notice my mother near the shed. Her shoulders are slumping forward and she's shuffling through the garden, toppling over her marigolds and daisies. She's still in her nightgown and slippers. And the front of her gown is caked in dark-colored gunk. It looks similar to the stuff Sammy is playing in.

I sigh, shaking my head. Dad must have tuned her up again. Damn! I didn't even wake up. I want to say something across the yard to her as she dirties the cotton on her slippers, while trudging through the dirt, but what would I say? This whole production plays out at my house at least three times a week for as far back as I can remember.

I hate him so much. His reign of terror over our family has gone on long enough. I'm so tired of taking his crap, and watching his drunk-ass smack everybody around. I wish he would fall off the planet. I hate this whole place—I want to get my license and a

cheap car and put this place in my rearview mirror and never look back.

I keep my silence, waiting for either my mom or my brother to notice me, before I take a seat on the back porch steps. I watch Sammy play in his greasy mess and my mom roam around trampling her garden—in her nightgown—like a psyche ward patient. Her eyes are fixed downward, as her head bobs back and forth. She must be running the whole fight back through her mind. It's moments like this that I lose patience with her. Why couldn't she have walked away from my creep dad a long time ago, at least for the sake of Sammy and me? But then, I remember where my frustration should be placed.

I'm waiting for that bastard that goes by the name of Dad. I can't believe that I didn't hear him beating on her again. Where is he anyway?

As though my thought had been heard, my dad comes stumbling out of the darkness shaded from within the shed. Drunk already? It's like eight in the morning. He stumbles his way out of the shed and takes a face-plant right on the sidewalk. My brother gets up and wobbles his way over on unsteady legs, almost looking like he's sloshed too. Mom stumbles toward the shed as well. As Dad gets back to his feet, blood is pouring from his mouth as he spits out a broken tooth. Disgusting, but deserved. The blood all over his face and chin is dark, almost black looking. The fluid dribbles down his throat and drips off his chin onto his dingy, sleeveless shirt. I watch as Sammy and Mom bypass Dad. Both going into the shed, as if they hadn't even noticed the drunken king of the house just knocked out a tooth. As Dad slowly raises his eyes, I notice that he looks terrible. Not even regular drunken stupor terrible, but like—seriously ill. Like—knocking on death's door—ill. Maybe that's wishful thinking.

His blackened eyes fall upon me like an inescapable fishing net. I'm nearly paralyzed with fear as the look on his face could be described as nothing less than murderous. Breaking into an inhumanly quick run, he sprints straight for me.

I jump up from the porch step and race into the house, flinging the spring-loaded door open and dashing through the kitchen and down the hall. I'm nearly to my parent's bedroom, when I hear the back door slam shut. I burst into my parents room like I'm running for my life, and to be honest, I probably am.

Brushing past their double bed, I race into the closet and pull down the old, black shoe box that holds Dad's revolver.

With terror in my heart, my trembling hands drop the box. The bullets fall all over the closet floor, inside shoes, in the laundry pile—all over. I find two bullets and with a shaky hand, load the chamber. My entire body tremors as if an earthquake had been triggered in my body alone. I know I have to make my shots count. If I don't kill him, he will definitely kill me for trying, and he won't need a gun to do it. I back myself deeper into closet with the gun pointed at the doorway.

### THE SHOWDOWN

Waiting for the showdown with my Dad, feels like an eternity. My heart is pounding so hard that it could burst right here, while hiding in his sweltering, musty closet. I feel sweat trickling down my temples and brow—my parents' room is like a sauna. The only sounds I hear are from my hammering heart and shallow breathing. On a shaky foot, I step forward, inching my way to the closet doorway. I squeeze the revolver tighter in my hands and poke my head gradually out of the doorframe, but he is not in the bedroom.

Tactfully stepping out of the closet, I sneak my way to the bedroom door. It's closed, but not locked. I must have flung it shut when I raced in here. Listening at the door, I hear nothing. Maybe he's still outside?

I slide to the wall beside the door and lean up against it, letting my arms relax at my side. My brain is on overload, trying to figure out this situation. Without yelling at me or anything, he just came after me—like he'd been waiting for me to come into the backyard. And he looks so sick. I've never seen anyone alive, who looked so...dead.

I notice the window near the bed that leads to the backyard. Making my way over, I pull back the curtain and see Mom and Sammy on the back steps. They are trying to get into the house, but neither of them have their hands anywhere near the door knob. Clawing and biting at the door, their faces are encrusted with the oily mess that Sammy was playing with on the ground. As my eyes drift downward at their clothes, the oily sludge is

all over them and changes color from a dark, tarlike hue to a reddish one.



Oh god...it's blood!

My eyes move to the pool of gunk Sammy had been rubbing his hands in. As the emerging sun over the neighbor's roof reflects on the sidewalk, the fluid has a red tint to it. It is blood.

What's wrong with all of them? Why do they have blood all over their faces and clothes?

"What the hell is going on?" I say aloud.

Thundering knocks and punts coming from outside the bedroom door fill my heart with fear. I flinch so hard, I feel my knees weaken. The frightful sounds rock the door back and forth with such force that it looks as if the door is made of liquid. I can hear the cheap wood giving way with each powerful whack to it. My dad's hands and head bust through the hollow-cored door.

I sidestep away from the window, falling over the bed. Dad charges through the half broken door toward me with fury and a speed like I've never seen. I spring from the bed and fire the first shot. The bullet takes flight from the barrel and strikes him in the left shoulder. He barely reacts, only a slight jolt in the shoulder area, then he stumbles over the bed.

His mouth hangs open, caked in his darkened blood. A black tongue and decayed-looking teeth fill his mouth. His skin is paler than usual and black veins web his face and arms. The whites of his eyes are filled with black nothingness. I do not know this creature standing before me, wearing my dad's body.

I move around the foot of the bed trying to get a good target on his chest but he's moving too fast. My dad charges toward me, and in that moment, I find my shot. With a steady breath, I aim and pull the trigger. The bullet smashes into the left side of his chest, but it has little effect on this monster. He tackles me to the ground. His teeth look and stink as if they are rotting chicken as he repeatedly snaps his gnarly mouth near my face. I try to push him off me, and that's when he sinks his nasty teeth into my wrist, right down to the bone.

## DISCOVERY

The searing pain from the bite on my wrist, caused by my dad's disgusting teeth, is far worse than any other pain he has inflicted upon me over the years. What's worse—is that his mouth still is latched onto my wrist like a leech to flesh. He holds my wrist

in his mouth, digging his repulsive teeth deeper into my skin and tissue.

“Get off!” I scream, extending my free hand for the gun that I dropped when he tackled me.

Dad is straddling my torso, snarling as blood drools from his lips onto my shirt. The gun is just out of my reach. Stretching my arm as far as I can, my fingertips stroke the cold, metal tip of the revolver. He yanks his head back, and I can feel my flesh on my wrist beginning to tear. I clutch the barrel of the gun and whack the handle at his face. Smacking at his nose and eyes as hard as I can, I feel like my life is at stake. He finally releases his bite, seeming slightly distracted by the blows to his face.

I seize the opportunity to buck him off me and scramble to my feet. Racing into my room, with him following right behind, I run inside and around my bed. I knock down my radio, laundry pile and art supplies in his path, and then rush back toward the door. His legs get tangled in the radio chord and he is tripped up by about five soda cans and other crap all over my floor. He tumbles hard to the ground. Sprinting out of the room, I shut the door and back away from it. I hold my breath and listen, but he’s not trying get out. Muffled noises resonate from within my room, but it doesn’t sound like Dad is anywhere near the door.

I look down at my injured wrist. It burns with a painful fiery sensation like I’ve never felt before. I feel like he bit my wrist and poured hot lava into my bloodstream. The stinging pain throbs at the site of the injury, and climbs up my arm, past my elbow.

I tiptoe back into my parents’ room and look out the water-stained window again. Mom and Sammy are still gnawing at the door like vengeful puppies left in the yard alone. I don’t understand why they don’t grab the doorknob and open it. It’s like they forgot how to open the door. Their skin is pale with black veins all over, like Dad’s. And why do they all have black-colored eyes?

While I try to grasp what could be wrong with them all, I can’t believe that Dad took two bullets and didn’t even feel it. Finally, after all this time, I drew up the courage to put a bullet—make that two—into the king of mean and it didn’t even slow him down. I can hear Dad starting to growl and pound on the walls in my room. I should be as quiet as I can. Don’t want to catch his attention again.

While looking out the window, I notice something on Sammy's neck. Right in the front of his throat, is a gash. A gaping hole in his neck, as if a chunk of his neck is gone. It's hard to see it clearly amidst the blood coated on his throat. I scan my mom, but her neck is intact, and so are her arms. I notice her left slipper is doused in blood, while the right one is only dirty. I watch as she shuffles near the door. Bending down, she brings her face near the doorknob and her nightgown lifts just enough for me to see, what looks like, a bite mark on her ankle.

It hits me in the face like a backhand from Dad. They all have some gross sickness. Mom and Sammy both have bites. I don't know if Dad has one, but he bit me. He has slapped me, thrown stuff at me, and whipped me with the belt, but he's never tried to bite me before. And normally, he's yelling at me, teaching me, what I did wrong—when he's kicking the crap out of me. But this time, when he came after me, he didn't say a word. It has to be a sickness that has changed them into blood-thirsty monsters.

The sickness is what's wrong with them. And now, I'm pretty sure, I'm going to get sick too. Looking down at my wrist, I can't help but cry. This whole situation sucks—big time. And even though my family isn't exactly the Brady's, they're still my family. What am I supposed to do now?

### STONE-HEARTED

With heat drifting from every pore on my skin, I feel as though fire is coursing through my veins. The venom is making its way from the wound into my bloodstream, saturating the muscle and flooding my arteries, as though it's a snakebite. Looking at the nasty wound, it's a bite, but not from a snake. I wish. The bite on my outer wrist has been made by something much more sinister than a snake—by someone who was supposed take care of me, my dear, ole-dad. Even so, it has been a long time since I've been Daddy's little girl.

Having deep grooves in the exposed tissue, the teeth marks are set deep beneath the surface of my skin. The flesh surrounding the gash is tomato red, feeling hot to the touch. The broken skin appears as if it is charring before my eyes.

I pull back the drapes in the living room window to peek out at the front yard. The chaotic scene of people scrambling in

yards and in the street is disappointing, but not surprising. After discovering that my entire family had the sickness, I'd only hoped that it wasn't part of a bigger problem.

The pounding is becoming nearly unbearable. After fiendishly fighting off my dad, I had managed to lock him in my bedroom. He was quiet at first, but I think he can hear me walking on this old, creaky, wood flooring.

Thrashing and pounding on the walls, he growls and bays as though he is calling for help in his new tongue.

I head into the laundry room, off the kitchen and snatch a dirty rag off the top of the laundry basket, near the dryer. I wrap it around my wrist securing it with the tightest knot I can tie—using my good hand and teeth. The grime on the dirty rag is no bother to me at this point. A sickness much more powerful than whatever bacteria or filth is on the rag—is already ravaging my body. Pulling a folded, black hoodie from atop the dryer, I slide it over my head, concealing the wounded wrist beneath, and then I head back into the living room.

I tap the disintegrating floor planks with my foot until I find the one that sounds hollow. Moving the rusty coffee table and lifting the board, I kneel down and pull out my dad's shotgun and its coiled strap. One of three guns, he has, not-so-well hidden in the house. And there's no way I'm going back down the hall for the revolver. I load the weapon. Standing up, I steal one last glance back toward my bedroom, eyeing the name placard hanging from the door--Monte. Sammy got a hold of it a few years back and scribbled it black with permanent marker. I had tossed it out, but then fished it from the trash bin and repainted it. Now, nothing is left for me in this house. I take one last look around, before walking out the front door.

Pausing momentarily on my front porch, the view out here is like a riot scene from the news. About twenty people with the sickness are in the road, on neighboring lawns and chasing after speeding cars.

I don't recognize most of these people from the neighborhood, but Emma Sampson, Mr. Hilt, even the paperboy, Javier—all have the sickness. The sick ones all have the same posturing, pale skin and dark veins. Some are shuffling along slowly, while others bolt after their victims. They're monsters like

my dad, chasing down men, ladies and little kids and attacking them like starving beasts.

Emma has caught up with Manuel Rodriguez—a boy she’s had a crush on for the last six months—and has tackled him to the ground. He’s fighting her back, kicking and socking her with the bottom of his fist. She seems as though she feels no pain and whips her head down at his arm. Manuel is wailing in pain as Emma rips a mouthful of his flesh with her teeth. She is soon joined by some unfamiliar faces, all making a meal out of poor Manuel.

Mr. Hilt is in his sixties and has lived in this neighborhood since before I was born. He and two others crouch over a little boy, no older than Sammy. They are attacking the kid, burying their faces in his chest and stomach like raging animals. The kid is screaming and smacking Mr. Hilt in the head. They are eating him alive.

And Javier, still has his newspaper bag on his shoulders, while chasing down an old man. As he catches up to the white-haired man, newspapers are bouncing out of the front and back of his bag, before he and the senior take a tumble to the ground.

I wick a tear from my cheek and look away. It’s unbelievable that my street has gone to crap so fast, that all these people could have the sickness. I don’t understand what happened to make all these people sick. What kind of sickness could be making these people kill each other and then...eat each other? The gory scenes are too gruesome for me to let them sink in. I feel as though I need to be stone-hearted right now.

Stone-hearted, is how I make myself feel when Dad’s is on a rampage. I just shut down every bit of emotion, make myself feel nothing, like my heart is made of stone. I won’t let myself feel sadness or pain—I tell myself that I just have to survive. And that is what I need to do right now. I can’t do anything here—for any of these people—without having all of the sick ones coming after me. Right now, I have to survive. I have to be stone-hearted.

“I’m outta here,” I say out loud to nobody.

#### MS. ANDREWS

I sneak off my porch to the side walkway of the house. Clipping the strap on the shotgun, I sling it over my shoulder. My

bitten wrist stings so bad that I want to scream out in pain, but I don't want to risk the sick ones noticing my presence. The air is hot and thin outside. So much for Fall. Technically, the start of autumn is two weeks away, but it doesn't feel like this heat will be leaving anytime soon. I can hear my dad still pounding on the walls in my room. He sounds like a trapped animal, grunting and growling.

I yank my little brother's dirt bike from its resting spot, against the house. A rebel teardrop skids down my cheek, as I hop on. Flicking on the start button, I thrust my foot down on the kick start pedal. It whines but doesn't start. I try again, thinking to myself, that Dad was supposed to fix this stupid bike for Sammy, like ages ago. Three more tries and still no life in the bike, although my middle-aged neighbor has now taken notice of me.

Ms. Andrews, as I know her, is a thick, stubby woman, who loves to bake goodies and give them away to the neighbors—and obviously keep a few for herself. But today, Ms. Andrews has no goodies in hand and no intention of giving anything away except for her disgusting sickness. Nearly everyone I've seen in the last half hour is sick with whatever's going around. As Ms. Andrews topples over the white picket fence—separating our yards, her face looks like all the others I've seen so far. The whites of her eyes are as black as her tongue. Her once creamy looking complexion is pale and dry, with her black veins road-mapping her vile skin. I pull the shotgun off my shoulder and aim it at the woman. With no fear of the gun, Ms. Andrews staggers forward.

My panicked breathing becomes shallow as I pump the gun. My sixteen year old hands tremble as the woman approaches, shambling toward me. I drop the dirt bike and step away from it. With all that I have, I try to muster the courage to pull the trigger. Knowing that Ms. Andrews is no longer the sweet lady next door, and knowing that I will be killed by this woman if I don't pull the trigger, I simply can't bring myself to do it.

This is different, not like with Dad. I daydreamt for years about ridding myself of him. But Ms. Andrews has always been kind to my brother and me. Even with her sickness, I just can't hurt this lady.

Stepping backward as Ms. Andrews shuffles forward, my heel hits a lip on the walkway. I try to catch myself, but it's too late. My body tenses up as I fall, my elbow hitting the ground first.

Then my tailbone slams onto the hard concrete, followed by my head and an echoing gunshot.

I grope myself, anxiously feeling for any wounds. A tiny wave of relief washes over me, as I feel none, but it soon gives way to the pain in my head. My skull feels like it cracked open from that fall. I lift my head, rubbing the spot that hit the pavement. I don't feel any blood or tears on my scalp.

My eyes drift to Ms. Andrews. Her body is flat on the ground, motionless. I look down at the shotgun and then once more to Ms. Andrews. The thought of her biting me to death wasn't enough to get me to pull the trigger, but the thought of falling three feet was?

I half expect my neighbor to get back up, as I slowly rise to my feet. Swinging the shogun over my shoulder, I let my eyes wander toward Ms. Andrews' head. The shot hit her in the face, and now, she is nearly unrecognizable. Her head is a mound of blood, exposed flesh and bone. My stomach rolls, as guilt burns up my throat. Turning away, I puke on the ground beside her. I wipe my mouth with the sleeve of my hoodie, while my nose and throat burn in agony.

My bitten wrist—and the whole arm, actually—feels like it's on fire. I killed a sweet, old lady. My family, friends and neighbors have turned into cannibals. I don't know if I should lie down and give up or try to go somewhere. But where? Of all the ones with the sickness I've seen so far—none of them have said a word. There must be something wrong with their brains. That would explain why Mom and Sammy couldn't get into the house from the back door, and why Dad was so easily trapped in my room. Easily, I look down at my wrist, not that easily.

It doesn't matter where I go. I have to survive. To survive, I have to leave. I can figure out where to go later. Anywhere but this house. I've spent too much time being unhappy at this house and I'd rather saw off my own arm with a butter knife, than to spend my last moments on earth here.

Picking up the dirt bike again, I thrust my foot on the petal, using it as an outlet for my frustration and panic. It doesn't start. Grumbles and roars echo through the side yard from the sickened ones nearby. I know it's because of the sound, the sound of the gunfire. That shot was probably heard for blocks.

While I know that it won't be long before I become one of them, I'm not ready to give up. This sickness is going to take me kicking and screaming. I won't make it easy.

I thrust my foot once more on the dirt bike with rebellious force. It whines to life at last. Opening the throttle, I whiz past Ms. Andrew's lifeless corpse and around the side of the house. I spot a group, of nearly fifteen on my front lawn, as quickly as they see me. I swerve out, around the gathering crowd. The eerie sound of fingernails scraping the bike's rear fender sends a rush up my spine, as I narrowly escape the group's clutches. It's a few seconds, before I look back. Now, the group is a fair distance behind me. But that doesn't stop them from sprinting and shuffling after my exhaust fumes.

### SAFE HOME

As I make my way through the next few blocks, I realize that the sickness is not exclusive to my street. On the next block, the Taco Shell Taqueria and three nearby houses are flaming infernos. Abandoned and wrecked cars and trucks are all around me for the next two blocks. Bodies pepper the pavement, some staying still, while others are stirring back to consciousness. There is so much blood on nearly everything. It looks as if blood has rained from the sky.

Riding through the neighborhood, the dirt bike putters along. I pass a road that has a little less activity. There are only a few of the sick people roaming about. To my surprise, the next block up has even fewer people. I feel lightly dusted with relief, but still have my guard up.

I'm still in the crappy part of town, but I can't have it all. I cross the next intersection and see a man, two streets down. He's chugging a forty from the Quick Time Liquor store.

My dad drinks those all the time, and it's the only liquor store for seven blocks. That chunky guy guzzling the forty didn't go that far to get his morning drink on. With the exception of the beer, he looks a little like my Mom's half-brother, Uncle Victor. I hope he is as kind as my uncle, but I've never met anyone kind who drank beer so early in the morning. Approaching the man, I slow down. He is not the ideal person to talk to, but at least he isn't like all the cannibals I've seen so far.



"Hey Mister, do you know what's going on?" I ask, slowing to a stop.

"Hi—hi baby. You pretty," he says, a smile broadening across his shiny, red face.

Oh great, he's some midlife perv. With how this day's been going, how can this be a surprise? I should have known better than to stop from when I first saw that forty.

"Never mind," I say with a sigh.

"No, no, don't go. My name Edgar. It's okay, really," he says with one of the thickest accents I've heard in a while. He takes a step back, raising his empty hand and forty in submission.

I should go. This guy is going to be nothing but trouble for me. I know it.

"Hi Edgar. Have you seen any of the sick people?" I ask despite my reservations.

"Oh yes, people really sick. Eating other people! Not safe out here. You give me a ride home?" he says coming closer.

"No, I can't," I say shaking my head.

"Yes, you come to my home. Safe in my home," he says grabbing the dirt bike's handlebars.

My heart is thumping so hard that I'm nearly frozen in place. I don't know what to do. I grab his hand and try to peel it off the handlebars, but his grip is too tight. Furrowing my brow and gritting my teeth, I try once again. His hand seems like it's cemented to the metal as his smile gets bigger and bigger.

Is this really happening? After everything that happened to my family. After watching my neighbors devour one another like savage lunatics. This creep-a-zoid is seriously going to make me go to his safe home. With all that I've seen today, who knows what demented plans he has in store for me. Even if I could somehow call the cops on him, no one would come. Edgar probably knows that already. I feel my heart racing into overdrive and my mouth feels parched from my rapid breathing. This is like, the worst day of my life. Way worse than that time Dad mopped the floor with my face after he caught me trying to run away. When this guy is done with me, I'll probably be buzzard food. I need to find someone who can help me, someone who's a good person, not a total weirdo.

"Let go," I yell slapping his hand.

"No, you be safe in my home pretty girl," he says again.

I hear familiar roars that could only belong to the sick. Two men with the sickness come stumbling out of a backyard from the house across the street. They must have heard me yelling at Edgar. Growling and flashing their rotting teeth, their eyes meet mine. Both men sprint from the side gate on the house, never taking their evil stares off of me.

This is not happening. There's no way that I'm going to let this creep take me to his safe home. And I won't let these maniacs darting toward us, take me out, either. I reach for the shotgun on my back and slam the butt of the gun onto Edgar's hand. He recoils, letting out a painful squeal, and dropping the forty. The beer bottle shatters upon impact with the asphalt. I roll on the throttle and peel out—away from that creep.

"Wait! Please help!" Edgar calls out.

I take one last look back, and see the two men chasing Edgar. I turn my head forward, looking out ahead, and feeling torn. I don't want that jerk to be killed by the sickened ones, but who knows what that he would have done to me in his safe home. With a heavy heart, I continue up the road, without looking back again.

## DOWNTOWN

After ditching the bad part of town, the buildings around here would be truly spectacular, if not for all the people with the sickness racing around. The area is thick with people in this downtown neighborhood. However, I'm seeing fewer and fewer normal ones at every turn. Those that I do see—are running from the ones with the sickness. Broken-down cars and property litter the road. Opened laptop cases with pages of typed documents are carried in the breeze. Purses and duffle bags have been left behind by those who likely ran for their lives. Passing a police car, I see nobody inside. The driver side door is open, but I see no sign of the cop that it belongs to. I press on, traveling the obstacle filled streets. The further I go the more my heart feels pained at the horror by the entirety of it all.

As I pass an empty-looking ambulance with its back doors open, a normal man comes out from behind it. Seeing a regular person feels so incredibly relieving. My relief feels short-lived as the look on his face turns to a vengeful one and he begins running toward me. I speed up—only because I feel scared.

“Give me that bike,” the man yells.

He runs full speed toward the bike, his hands outstretched with a frightening look on his face. He isn’t sick, but looks unbelievably desperate. Increasing my speed even more, I leave that crazy guy in my tracks.

I swerve and weave between traffic trying to make my way to the city’s edge. Wondering where all the police are, I find myself questioning if they are all dead. And if the sickness is everywhere, where am I going to go?

“Please! Don’t take my car!” A woman in a white lab coat squeals at a man who peeled out in a small, compact car. On the side of the car door is a triangle symbol and the name, Strickland Laboratories.

I slow near the woman. She is carrying a large, black backpack with the same triangle symbol on it. Her chin-length golden hair framed her soft features, making her look almost like an angel.

“Do you need help?” I ask pulling to a stop near the woman.

“Yes, he stole my car. I have something really important that needs to be delivered right away,” she says breathlessly.

“What is it?” I ask. I don’t want to offer her a ride if it’s a bomb or something.

“I’m a laboratory technician from The Strickland Lab. The scientist that I work for...died yesterday. He was working on something very important. I was supposed to drop off the medicine in my pack yesterday. It could help a lot of people.” she pauses shaking her head. “I really messed up.”

“I’ll get you where you need to go. Don’t worry,” I say.

I think that helping this lady might change my luck. What else am I going to do? Besides, I’d rather my last act on earth—before the sickness kills me—be a kind one. Getting this lady where ever she needs to go, to help people with her medicine would be a good—last thing to do. When I die, I’d rather my last memory not be the one of me killing Ms. Andrews.

“You don’t understand, this is all my fault,” she says looking me straight in the eyes.

“What is all your fault?” I ask, not sure what she’s talking about. She can’t be talking about all this chaos in Port Steward.

“Never mind,” she says pulling on the backpack and sliding onto the back of the bike. “I need to get this to Angora Laboratories. It’s the big building, near the edge of town. I really appreciate the lift. I’m Haley, by the way.”

“Hang on Haley. I’m Monte.”

I roll on the throttle and maneuver the bike through the downtown area, toward the great laboratory. We travel several blocks with the streets looking very much the same—like everyone raced out of town without a second look.

The towering building looks to be about a mile or so away, when my arms begin to feel as if they aren’t working at full capacity. Every part of my body aches in agony. I know it’s the sickness. I feel as though I’m on the verge of passing out, when I decide to pull over in a clearing.

“What’s going on? We’re not far,” Haley says.

“You have to go alone,” I strain, getting off the bike. “I’m bit.”

I yank the shotgun off my shoulder and drop it on the ground, as I stumble over to the curb. Taking a seat on the sidewalk, I lay back on the concrete, ready to surrender to my fate.

Haley shuts off the bike and comes over, “Where were you bitten and when?”

“Like an hour ago,” I pull up my sleeve, revealing the wound.

Haley reaches in her backpack and pulls on a pair of latex gloves. They smell like grapes. Untying the rag from my wrist, Haley looks at it carefully. She reaches into the backpack and pulls out a small metal case about the size of a telephone receiver. Opening the container she pulls out a syringe filled with an orange substance. I want to protest, and ask about the shot, but then I think--why? I can feel that I’m not far from death. Maybe this woman is just going to make it as peaceful as possible, why should I protest her taking my pain from me. My entire body hurts so much. The pain is everywhere for me, like my whole body is filled with poison.

Haley pierces my flesh inside the wound with the needle and injects the fluid. I’m surprised to find that I can’t even feel the shot.

“They’re coming,” Haley says breathlessly. “Get up. Let’s go.”

“I can’t,” I say, feeling weaker than ever. There is no way I can drive that dirt bike again.

“Get up!” Haley yells grabbing my hands and dragging me across the pavement toward a white SUV. “At least get in here, so they won’t get you!”

I use the last ounces of energy and life force I have to stand and climb into the backseat of the empty SUV and hide behind the tinted windows.

I look out the back window as my eyelids become heavier and heavier. Haley mounts the bike with her backpack on, and tries to start the bike, but has no luck. She tries kick starting the bike twice more, before she is overrun by a group of four with the sickness. As Haley disappears beneath the sickened ones, I find that my time has come and can remain awake no longer.

### WAKE UP

My eyes lethargically creep open—it’s tough breathe. I am so hot. The blistering temperature leaves me feeling breathless, as if the oxygen has been sucked out of the world. I tug at my clothes and see I have on a lightweight hoodie and jeans. I’m trying to focus and remember how I got here.

Examining my surroundings, I recognize that I’m in a car—no an SUV. An expensive SUV. Where am I? Leather seats, electric windows, GPS system, this SUV is awesome, but stifling. I sit up, a little too quickly as a brief surge of dizziness sweeps over me. Looking out the windows, I’m thrust back into reality. Dozens of sick people shuffle along the street and sidewalks. They are everywhere. Some of them are roaming around, while others run after what few normal people remain in the street.

Cars are backed up in a tight gridlock and garbage blankets the ground. I look out the back window, remembering Haley. I don’t see her, but I see her backpack on the ground a few feet from the dirt bike. I try to fight back the tears, but it’s a futile effort, as my bottom lip quivers uncontrollably.

I tried to do something righteous, before the sickness got the best of me, but it was a waste. It’s like I’m cursed. Haley was the only civilized person that I’ve met today. She was going to help people. She helped me. And she died for it.

I look down at my wrist and pull back my sleeve. The fiery pain is gone, leaving my wrist and arm feeling nearly painless. Maybe Haley gave me a pain killer. I feel surprised when I peek at the bite. It's scabbed over and the redness surrounding the wound has all but gone away. Come to think of it, my whole body feels...better. I have that sensation, like I've had a fever that has just been broken, like I'm waking from a cloud of confusion and soreness.

Maybe it was one of those anti...what are those medicines that fight an infection called again? Either way, I'm feeling so much healthier. In checking out the SUV, I find it picked over, and there aren't any keys in the ignition. Climbing into the back, I sit on a knee and eye the dirt bike through the back window. I wonder if I should chance it. There are so many with the sickness out there, that I won't have time to keep trying to kick start it if it gives me trouble.

Suddenly a bloody hand slaps against the back window, I flinch backward, drawing in a sharp gasp. The hand slowly slides down the window, leaving behind a bloody reminder of its presence. As I cautiously lean forward, I look downward for the body that owns the hand. A pale, chapped face pops up to eye level with me. It's Haley. Her once sun kissed skin is now drained of all color, her veins have all rose to the surface of her skin and look extraordinarily dark, and the whites of her eyes are now black—just like all the others. She curls back her lips in a snarl, revealing blackened gums as she presses her face to the back window. Backing away from the window, I climb back over the seat and duck down. As fear pulses through me, the only thing I can think to do, is hide and hope that she didn't see me through the tinted back window.

### IN HIDING

From my hiding place, on the backseat floorboard of the SUV, I can hear Haley roaring. She emits a merciless sounding call, beckoning the other sickened in the area. I gently poke my head up, looking in her direction. As though she can see me through the tinted window, Haley slams her fist into the glass. She strikes it again.

My body remains motionless as I watch her repeatedly pound the glass. About seven or eight others have now joined Haley, surrounding the back end of the vehicle. The lady I met is gone and this...creature, in her place, is a monster. She tilts her head back snarling and wailing, while raining down a barrage of hammer-fists to the glass.

The strength of this relatively small woman is impossible. After another powerful blow, the glass begins to crackle. She proceeds with more blows as the glass collapses inward. Small chunks, the size of half-dollars fall onto the back carpeting of the SUV. About a half dozen more people with the sickness are making their way over to Haley, as if she's discovered hidden treasure. The group of almost fifteen now, begins thrusting their fists at the rear, side windows and clawing at the broken out crater caused by Haley. A basketball sized hole has now been formed in the back window. Haley whips her head in the opening and starts to climb in. The others gather tightly around her at the rear of the vehicle pulling at the fractured glass.

I am so thankful for these tinted windows. I don't think that the rest of the crowd can see me through the glass. It seems like they are following Haley's lead, gathering toward the back of the vehicle.

Haley snakes in head first. Then her hands and arms slide through the opening. The hole in the glass is not quite large enough for her arms to fit through, but she forces them, causing the window shards to rip open the skin on her upper arms. Her dark blood explodes out of her torn flesh and streams from the splintered, broken window. It flows down her arms onto the floor of the SUV, like a faucet of blood.

Realizing that I have to move—to do something if I want to survive this, I climb over the center console into the front seat. Right now, I really regret ending my friendship with Denny Crocket last year. I could have picked up some of his bad habits and learned how to hot wire this SUV. But he did get busted by the cops—so never mind. The dirt bike is my only option. I have to try to get to it. I'm scared though. That's how they got Haley and there is no way I can out run them if the bike won't start. I could try for the shotgun I dropped in the street, but from here, I can't see it. Plus, there aren't enough shells in it to taken down all these people with the sickness. Yup, the bike is the only way.

I quietly open the driver door and inch it open, while keeping my eyes on the ever growing crater in the window. I leap from the seat, sprinting around the front of the vehicle and darting toward the dirt bike. I steal a glimpse back at the SUV.

Those morons are still trying to get in through the window. Lifting the bike, I crank the kick starter, channeling all my fear into my foot's thrust. It started! As I roll on the throttle, a woman with the sickness runs full speed toward me. I feel the woman's fingernails tug on my hoodie. Her grasp is loose and slips off the fabric as the bike whisks me away.

I weave through broken down and stalled traffic, noticing that nearly every soul within eyeshot has the sickness. Am I the only one left? For how far—just in my town or state—or the whole world? Purses and backpacks are discarded in the street, even a diaper bag sits alone, left behind in the gutter as receipts and papers drift in the warm summer breeze. The people with the sickness move about the streets cluttered with empty cars like cockroaches raiding a kitchen cabinet.

I can see the highway that leads out of town from here, but it looks like it's blocked with concrete road barriers—like the ones used for highway roadwork. The only way in or out of town by land is on the highway. This coastal town is shaped like a witch's boot and up toward the top of the boot, is a bottleneck that is scarcely wide enough for the highway, with the ocean on either side. I know I can get to the roadblock on this dirt bike, but why aren't there lines of people trying to leave? As I get closer, I can see that there are people moving around behind the road block. Oh thank God, real—regular people!

I'm almost there, three blocks to go. I speed up and hear a long beep from a loud speaker.

"Turn around and return to your home," the voice commands.

That's not going to happen. Only one block to go. With a steady speed, I head toward roadblock. It only takes seconds for me to reach the barricade and slide the dirt bike to a stop.

I see about ten men behind roadblock that are dressed in camo, must be some branch of the Armed Forces. As I look to these men, they all have their weapons lifted and aimed at me.

## HANDS UP



The military forces have their weapons drawn at me. I'm not sure if they'll give me a chance or shoot me dead right here. Out of the corner of my eye, I see bodies piled up into a mound, fifty yards down the street. I only hope those bodies had the sickness when they were alive and were not normal people trying to leave.

Whatever it was that Haley gave me, it cured me. I don't have the sickness. Maybe that's how she was going to help lots of people—with the cure for the sickness. She gave me the medicine in time to stop it. But I think it will be better not to mention that to these guys, they may not believe me. I can hardly believe it myself.

"Can you help me, please?" I call out, laying the dirt bike down and raising my hands into the air.

The men look back and forth between one another, exchanging looks and head nods.

"Have you been bitten?" One asks.

"No," I lie. "Is that how the sickness works?"

"The sickness? It's an outbreak of disease and yes that's how it's spread," he responds in a short, authoritative tone.

"What happened, I mean, how did it start?"

"Nobody knows yet. Personally, I think it's a terrorist attack. Not sure if it's foreign or domestic though. But mark my words, it's an attack. How old are you?" He asks, furrowing his brow.

"Sixteen."

"Huh, everyone else you got is dead, right?" He says with a twinge of sympathy.

I nod my head, as a sharp pain in my gut makes me feel as though I've been stabbed. I don't know if it was the pinch of humanity that I saw on the soldier's face or if it was all hitting home for me—that I have nobody. I feel the tears welling up in my eyes, as I realize that I have the freedom that I've been wanting for so long. But my newfound freedom came at a terrible price. Not only will I never see my dirt-bag dad again, but my mom and kid brother too. And it's not like I won't see them because I moved away, leaving a chance to reunite with them someday—no—they are just gone.

"Come on in Hun, but you have to go through decontamination first."

I walk past the barricade, leaving the dirt bike behind as I fear what may come next. Decontamination sounds like they will definitely discover the bite on my wrist and my body would soon join the pile of discarded carcasses on the roadside. My heart hammers, as my mind tries to quickly figure out what to do or say next. A female guard with short blonde hair approaches with a gruff expression.

“Come with me miss,” she says in a monotone voice.

A few yards from the barricade, we approach a thick, plastic tent—like structure with what looks like a carwash sprayer on the side. The woman picks up the sprayer and kicks over a clear, plastic tub to me.

“You are going to need to disrobe. Put all of your clothes—shoes and all in the tub.”

This is it. She will discover that I’ve been bitten and I will be executed right here, naked and in this plastic tent, virtually all alone.

## DISPLACED

After the coldest shower of my life, I’m standing in a line where meals are being served from brown-paper sacks. A temporary spot, on the side of the highway is set up by the Red Cross. A line of eight, red and white canopies are situated for refugees to clean up and eat. There is a little grass beside the asphalt, before the ground cliffs off to the ocean on either side of the highway.

I had been so scared to take off my sweater before the shower—that I nearly turned back toward the barricade. The female guard at the decontamination area took a peek at my wrist and had hastily asked me about it.

I had lied again, telling her that I fell off my dirt bike, but she kept shouting out commands like, “turn around” and “wash with soap,” that I soon realized, she didn’t care. After all, it’s all scabbed up now, no redness. It looks like it happened days ago. I wish Haley could have made it, whatever that medicine was...it worked. The female guard had slapped a wristband on me, that included my name and the date and time I went through decontamination. Then she sprayed my clothes with an earwax smelling spray and gave them back to me to get

dressed.

I take a seat on the ground, eating a ham and plastic cheese sandwich from within the sack lunch provided at the food canopy. I don't care that it tastes like crap. I am so hungry that it feels my stomach might begin devouring my organs on its own. I'm all alone on the grass beneath another canopy. I notice that most of the people aren't bothering to stick around. They're loading onto school busses parked on the highway. I think that I should probably get a move on too. Where am I going to go? I don't have family nearby. Closest relative I have is two states over and is an aunt whose face I couldn't spot if she sat down next to me.

My mom and dad have a friend not too far from here that stayed at our house for about six months, two years ago. He works as a porter at the diner my mom where my mom works—well...worked. He might take me in for a little while and help me contact Aunt Charlotte. It's a long shot, but what else can I do? My mom hasn't talked to her side of the family in years. They had a falling out—as Mom called it. Probably over my dad. All I can remember about Aunt Charlotte is that she used to give me candy every time I saw her, which was only maybe four or five times that come to mind. I had to be six or seven the last time I saw her.

"Excuse me, Miss," An old woman offers a warm smile. "Are you displaced?"

"Um, I don't think so. I'm fine," I say rolling my shoulders. "Everything is in the right place."

Why would she think my shoulder is out of place? I saw that in a movie one time when a guy could displace his shoulder, and then slam it into a wall to get it back into place.

"I don't mean dislocated, sweetheart. I mean, are you separated from your family?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well sweetheart, the bus is right over there, when you are ready. It will take you to a place better equipped to find a relative or a social worker. I'll see you there," she says with a nod and walks toward a school bus with a gathering crowd of about ten people.

I toss my paper sack in the trash can, after devouring every last crumb. As I think about whether or not to get on that bus, the woman told me about, I hear a commotion from behind me. The Army—or whatever military branch they are—stands with their

guns raised. They're all yelling at the same time, making it hard to understand any of them.

I move closer to the decontamination tent to see who or what they are yelling at, and see a whole group of maybe fifteen people running full speed toward the barricade. They are screaming for help, as a group having twice as many chases them. The group behind them has the sickness.

The guards at the concrete rails look on the verge of panic. One of them reaches for the bullhorn.

"Return to you homes. Don't come any closer or you will be shot!" He yells.

Ignoring the warning, the normal people out front continue running straight for the rails, with the maniacs on their heels.

I cup my hand over my mouth, in disbelief of what's happening. The Army has to help them— they have to let these people in. The man with the bullhorn warns the oncoming group once more, this time his voice is harsh and furious.

"Turn back now! Do not come any closer or you will be shot!"

"Those people have no choice, if they don't come this way, the ones with the sickness will get them. You have to help them!" I yell at the soldier shouting commands.

The man lowers the bullhorn, and looks at the men beside him and lets out a heavy sigh. He turns back to me and gives me an icy glare, but says nothing before returning his stare out on the approaching crowd.

A soldier turns to the one with the bullhorn and says, "Sir if we wait for the civilians to reach the blockade, we won't be able to stop the horde. There are too many and the civilians are blocking our shots."

"Fire," he commands, setting the bullhorn on the concrete rail.

I feel a jolt of shock rock my body. Did he really say that? To shoot at all those people?

My eardrums are flooded by the repeating sound of gunshots tearing through the summertime morning. In only a matter of seconds, all of the people who had been approaching—are dead. The ones with the sickness and the ones who needed help lie motionless on the asphalt. Their bodies litter the street only

twenty feet from the edge of the barricade. That could have been me. I sink to my knees, stunned —almost feeling temporarily removed from my body.

“That’s it boys. We’re not bringing in any more civilians through decontamination. This is a full quarantine—nobody in or out. Those who do not yield our warning will be shot. Understood? Now let’s get these bodies to the pile,” he says.

“Yes, sir,” the men on the front line shout.

I rise to my feet in total disbelief. They can make that call on their own—to not let anyone else out of the city? What if they don’t have the sickness? I’m thinking that bus ride out of here is sounding more appealing by the minute.

### THE SCHOOL BUS

There is no way that I am going to stay in this make-shift camp any longer than I have to. Soldiers slaughtering innocent people instead of helping—I want as far away from these guys as I can get.

The soldier that held the bullhorn looks to me with fire in his eyes. Leaving his post, behind the barricade, he begins striding confidently toward me. I’m feeling miniscule, like I am an ant among a giant. The soldier is taller than me by at least a foot, making him about six-two. His body is roughly three times my size and the creases around his eyes and mouth tell me that he’s super-old, probably in his fifties.

“Colonel Kennedy Channing. What is your name miss?” He asks.

“Monte,”

“I remember letting you in. Dirt bike. On your own,” He says.

“Yes,” I whisper, uneasy about what he may say to me.

“Listen, I don’t expect you to understand, but what happened here...” The Colonel looks away. Returning his eyes to mine, he continues, “The event you witnessed here is as bad as it gets. It is a memory that I cannot take from you, although I certainly wish I could. While I owe you no explanation, I would like leave you with a thought. The innocent people that were coming toward us were all over the road, leaving no clear shots for my men to fire at the horde behind them. Had we waited until the civilians

were closer, there is no guarantee that my men could have stopped the horde and they could have escaped the town's boundaries. That would have put you and everyone in this camp at risk, not to mention the towns beyond," He says with empathy in his voice.

I nod my head at him and watch him turn on a heel and go back toward the barricade. Taking in his words, I am finding myself both understanding his viewpoint, but also resenting him for the deaths of the regular people. I don't know what he could have done differently, or even, if it was possible to save those people. I do know that those soldiers saved all of us at the camp by using their guns, but all those people are still dead, sick or not.

Turning toward the school bus, I take my time shuffling over. I'm trying to decide whether or not to still be angry about the massacre or put it behind me—along with all that has happened today. The bus's engine is roaring and ready to go. As I make my way up the steps, I see the sweet woman who told me about the bus. She is standing beside the first seat, behind the driver, welcoming on new passengers. She reminds me a little of a hostess at a fancy restaurant. Her warm smile is welcomed, but then, she unexpectedly pulls me into an embrace. I awkwardly hug her back. The feeling is so bizarre, but I understand that she is attempting to be comforting.

My family had never really been the hugging type. I could probably count on one hand the number of times I've had a hug, with this woman's embrace included.

"You take a seat anywhere pumpkin. It will all be alright," she says.

I take notice of a soldier sitting across from the woman. He is dressed in camo, with a blonde buzz cut and looks like he's only a handful of years older than me. As I walk past him, he looks up from a clipboard and gives me a frosty stare with his glowing blue eyes.

The bus is nearly full, as I walk down the aisle looking for a seat. Chatter fills the bus. Everyone is explaining their stories of how they made it out or what happened to their loved ones. A few of the riders are sobbing and wiping tears from their faces. Even with most of the windows open, the pungent smell of body odor pollutes the bus. Halfway down the aisle, I see that nearly all the

seats are taken. I might have to stand. How long is this ride anyway? This day can't get any better.

"Monte, is that you?" a delicate voice sounds.

I look all around, but can't find anyone familiar. Then a waving hand from the back catches my eye. I hurry toward the wagging hand, eager to find the owner. After squeezing by a gabby guy in the aisle, chatting up a cute girl, I see that the hand belongs to—Annabelle Sanchez. Oh God.

Annabelle Sanchez is the snobbiest girl at my high school, hands down—there is no competition. She comes from a family with money, and has on many occasions been shamefully wicked to me and my friends. Of all the people to find me on the bus, Annabelle is the last one I want to see.

"Monte, come sit over here," she says with an unusually friendly smile on her face.

If she is trying to play some embarrassing trick on me, I swear, I'm going to kick her ass. I'm not going to take her crap—not today, not after what I've been through.

I take the seat beside Annabelle and offer nothing more than a nod at first. I look around, but don't see her usual clan of tormentors anywhere around us.

"I'm so glad to see a familiar face," Annabelle says. "Since this morning, I haven't seen anyone I knew, until now."

"Me neither," I mumble.

"I don't know what happened to my family. They have a disease or something," Annabelle says with tears in her eyes.

"Mine too."

Maybe Annabelle and I are not that different from one another. Take away her fancy clothes and fake friends; reduce her to the same situation as me and she's not that different. She called out to me on the bus, not because we're friends, or because she wanted to play some embarrassing joke on me, because I'm the only thing familiar to her in this mess. And she is the only thing familiar to me. Honestly, I am glad she called me over, being all alone sucks. Even if we aren't friends and can hardly stand the sight of one another, being with someone, at least a little familiar, feels better than being all alone, especially with all this craziness that's going on.

## FEAR

I'm mostly quiet, sitting next to Annabelle, as the bus makes its way onto the highway. Annabelle is doing most of the talking, telling me about what happened in her house this morning, like we are old friends. I still have my guard up, I've gone through too much taunting at her hands to completely open up to her. From the sound of it, it seems like her morning had been quite similar to mine. We are a few miles outside of our hometown of Port Steward, in Bayberry Hollow—the next town up, when I overhear a man talking about his experience.

"I read on the internet, before I lost cell service, that they're saying it's a terrorist attack," the guy began. "Some kind of bio-chemical weapon and that it can go airborne at any time. Our town has gone to shit, if it's not the ones with the disease, than it's the rioters that are looting and destroying The Port. We won't be coming back, the whole town will be shut down for months or even years and you know what else—" he pauses looking up the aisle.

A very old lady, about four rows ahead, began coughing—more like hacking, loud and uncontrollably. Those around her spread out all over the bus trying to get as far away from the coughing woman as possible.

"Pull over this lady is sick," a guy not much older than me yells to the driver.

Soon others shout for the driver to pull over as well. It doesn't take long before he surrenders to their requests and pulls the bus to the side of the road, just outside of the downtown area. The soldier from the front of the bus makes his way to the woman—who has now stopped coughing—and escorts her off the bus.

Annabelle and I look out the half open window on our side and see the soldier walk the woman a few feet away from the bus. He yells at her to show him where her bite is and to tell him when it happened. The woman maintains that she has no bites, but suffers from emphysema. He doesn't look like he believes her as he yanks up her peach, satin sleeves and tugs at her blouse before lifting her polyester skirt. The elderly woman looks to be in her seventies or so. She is so offended by the soldier's behavior that she screams and slaps him with a soft hand. He grabs her arm and cruelly yanks her behind a section of overgrown bushes. A few seconds later, a lone gunshot rings out.



I shudder at the sound and look at Annabelle with terrified eyes. That soldier killed that poor woman. She probably wasn't even bitten. We look back out waiting for the soldier to return, but it feels like it's taking forever. He finally emerges, alone. Wild-eyed and out of breath, he boards the bus and takes his seat.

I've seen that wild look that is on his face before—but on my dad. It's the look of a madman. This guy is a lunatic. He's not like the other soldiers or like the Colonel, no, he's like five seconds from a psychotic break down.

"Was she bitten?" The driver asks, closing the door.

"No, I checked her whole body, no bites. But she was going to turn, I could tell. She had the disease. Yeah, I'm sure of it. She must have got it some other way. Let's move out," the soldier replies.

"Are you sure she really had it? I mean, if there wasn't a bite, then how can you know for sure?" The driver mentions casually as he pulls away from the curb.

"I'm sure," the soldier says in a stern tone, leaning back in his seat.

As we pull down the road, I crane my neck, leaning over Annabelle, staring at the overgrowth. Before it's out of sight, I catch sight of the elderly woman lying on her stomach. Her clothes have been taken off and tossed onto her back.

Closing my eyes, I feel like my own sanity hanging on by a frayed shoelace. When that paranoid jerk checked her body, he took off all her clothes. And when he couldn't find a bite, he tossed them on her back and left her naked body to rot behind overgrown weeds. I am in hell. I would happily take a beat-down from my dad any day—over the crap that's been happening today. When we get to the shelter, with or without Annabelle, I'm not staying for long.

## THE SHELTER

The ride to Moss County on the overcrowded, smelly bus was a bumpy one, but uneventful for the remainder of the trip. When we finally pull to a stop at the new shelter, I'm in a daze—thinking about what Lieutenant Lunatic did to that poor old lady. Annabelle nudges my shoulder to get my attention. The seats behind us are already empty as everyone pushes and shoves in the aisle. Annabelle and I are the last to leave the stinky bus. I'm hot

and sticky, and sleepy too, as we step onto the curb. Before us is a humungous building, larger than any I've ever seen. It looks like an arena for basketball games or concerts. I notice that the street in both directions is empty. There aren't any cars driving around, or parked on the street. No people are walking around or riding bicycles. It seems really strange to me.

There are more soldiers out in front, checking our decontamination bracelets and pinning index cards to everyone's chest. As we approach, a female soldier makes eye contact and offers a grin.

"Bracelet," she says with softness to her voice.

I hold out my wrist and she examines the bracelet, scribbling onto an index card.

"Can you state your full name and age," she asks.

"Monte Barrett, sixteen."

The conversation goes back and forth as she makes notes on a clipboard. I tell her my address and the names of my parents and brother. I leave out the part about what happened to them. I don't know why I did that, but I have a bad feeling about telling her that I'm all alone in the world. The lady soldier gently pins the card to my shirt and points out the area where my bunk is located. She explains that the index card—that must to remain pinned to my shirt—includes my name, home address, and bunk number which doubles as a meal number during serving time.

Annabelle is next and she gives up her information too, but she tells them everything about how her whole family having the disease and that she narrowly escaped with her life. It was all very dramatic in my opinion. After all, I don't think that these soldiers really care. It seems more like they want us to move along, so that they can quickly get everyone inside.

In looking around the expansive space inside the building, I can see cots in rows filling nearly the entire space. On the other side of the building I can see a cafeteria area and a line snaking a quarter of the way around the inside of the building. I'm not hungry, but I feel exhausted. Annabelle heads off to join the line and get some food, while I try to make sense of the numbering system of the cots.

I take careful notice of the exits, there are six in all. They are all closed and have a soldier stationed before each set of double doors. Are they keeping everyone inside? I begin to wonder

whether or not we are allowed to leave. I don't want to stay here long, but I feel so tired that finding my bunk is my first priority. I need to take a nap, at least for half hour or so, and then I'll find a way out of this place.

When I finally reach my bunk, I'm exhausted. I fall into the lumpy cot with hardly any energy to spare. I feel uncomfortably hot and slightly weak. I think it's because I am so tired. I want to take off my hoodie, but I'm a little self-conscious about my wrist—which is itching like crazy. I don't want Annabelle asking about it, or anyone else for that matter. Thumbing the wrist band as I laid on the bunk, I drift off into a deep sleep.

### DESERTED

I wake up with a chill creeping down my spine. Sitting up, in my cot, I don't see Annabelle on hers. In fact, there's no one around. My eyes drift to the cafeteria area, empty. The rows of cots are deserted as well. Not another soul is within eyeshot. The startling silence and abandoned arena can't be a good thing. Why didn't anyone wake me and where did they go?

I make my way to the door we used when we arrived. I pass dozens of empty cots, purses and backpacks left behind, half empty soda bottles and even a few pair of shoes on my way to the exit. Opening the door, I'm surprised by the brightness outside. As my eyes begin to adjust, outside the arena is as vacant as the inside. The bus is gone as are all the cars and people. It's as if everyone left in a hurry, leaving behind their belongings. No one noticed that I was left behind?

I feel like I'm in a newly built city that no one has been admitted entrance to. Or maybe, instead of newly built, it's more like—ready for destruction.

I jog down the street, my mind making its best attempt to rationalize what I'm seeing. The city is empty—void of all people and traffic. It feels like in no time, I come upon Coastal Acres Forest. It lines the highway for miles. I can't believe how close we are to the highway. Maybe my mind is racing too fast as I jog, that I don't even realize how far I've gone.

As I enter the forest, I can't hear anything. No birds or wildlife, no insects, no cars on the highway and not even the ocean on the other side. No way is this happening—where is everything?

The forest is probably the last place I should be, but I feel like I need to keep going. I need to find Annabelle or someone—anyone. I was all alone this morning when I first discovered the sickness. And I was alone when I ran into Edgar and lost Haley. I can't do this alone anymore. I've wanted to be on my own for years, while living in my house of misery. But now, the thought of being alone, is almost as terrifying as the thought of being eaten alive by the ones with the sickness.

I feel like I've been wandering through the forest for an eternity before I finally hear something. The sound is low and far away, but for some reason, I begin running toward the noise. It means there's something near. I race through trees, jumping over fallen logs and dashing around large bushes. I come fast around a boulder and find myself face to face with Lieutenant Lunatic. He is aiming a handgun at my head.

All of the oxygen has left my body; I feel like I could collapse right here. I slowly step back as he cocks the pistol while stalking my movements. I duck back behind the boulder and turn to run—only to see a small group of people with the sickness right before me. I run as fast as I can through the forest, but the group is not far behind. They are growling and howling as their speed carries them closer and closer to me. It's not long before I can feel their outstretched fingers pawing at my back. I feel like I'll never outrun them, but somehow I manage to stay barely out of their grasp. Coming upon the highway, I can see cars are passing by. Thank God! If only, I can make it to the road. I run as hard as my legs will carry me, but my speed stays constant, slightly out of the group's clutches.

I burst out from the trees, and sprint out onto the highway. A car is coming, a white, compact car. Only, the car doesn't brake or even swerve. It's coming straight for me, while the group approaches from the side. I stop in the road. My fate is sealed. I am not going to survive this day. I steal one last glance at the group and see that Annabelle is out front. She is as sick as the strange faces behind her. She flashes her teeth at me.

"Monte," she says softly.

In my peripheral vision I see the white car approaching. Everything seems to slow down.

"Monte!" Annabelle's voice is louder now.

She reaches for my shoulders, but I don't have it in me to fight any longer. Opening her mouth, she shouts, "Monte, wake up!"

My eyes fly open like I'm waking from a demonic possession. I spring up from my cot into a sitting position and look wide-eyed at Annabelle.

"Are you okay? You were dreaming—loudly," she says.

I look around the people-filled arena. Everything is how it was when I drifted off to sleep. Whoa, that was a crappy dream.

### BLUE FALLS

Lying in my bunk, I'm trying to decide when to leave and where to go. After Annabelle woke me from that rotten dream, she was called over by one of the soldiers to discuss what family members can be contacted. When she gets back, I need to tell her that we're leaving. This place with all the soldiers standing guard is getting creepier by the minute. Everyone that was on the bus is here along with a few bus loads more. No one has left. We already went through decontamination when we left our town, why aren't people leaving? At least some of them must know people nearby or would rather stay in a motel or something.

"Monte, are you awake?" Annabelle shouts from five bunks over, as she races for me.

"Yeah," I say, sitting up.

"They are taking me to Blue Falls. They said since my family didn't make it, they are taking me up to a shelter for orphaned kids—where they can contact my relatives and get me to them. Isn't that great? You're probably coming too," Annabelle says.

"Why are they taking you somewhere else? Blue Falls is hours away," I say.

There go my plans to have Annabelle escape this prison-like shelter with me. I don't want to be alone, but she's leaving anyway. My whole life I've only been able to count on myself—why would I try to fool myself into thinking that I can count on someone else?

“They said that there are social workers that can get me to my grandparent’s house,” Annabelle says, frowning at my lack of enthusiasm.

“Well, that’ll be good for you... to get to your grandparent’s place. Really, it’s good news. But I won’t be going to Blue Falls. I didn’t tell them about my parents—”

“I know, why did you do that? But it’s okay, because I told them. So yes, you’re coming,” Annabelle’s smile is huge.

I swear I want to punch her right in the face. Why would she tell those soldiers that? Another bus ride with Lieutenant Lunatic and I’ll want to bite myself. And this ride is hours long.

“Annabelle,” I begin, before stopping short. Combat boots are noticeably approaching in my peripheral vision.

“Monte Barrett?” A familiar voice asks.

I nod, looking up at the soldier. It’s Lieutenant Lunatic. It’s like this guy is our personal escort. I want to be as far away from this creep as I possibly can, yet it seems like he’s everywhere.

“We have received information that your family may have not made it out of your home town, is this correct?”

Looking at the intimidating soldier, I don’t want to get caught in a lie. I really have to watch what I say to this nut—I don’t want to end up like the old lady on the bus. I want to head out the back door and find my own way, but I have a feeling that these people aren’t going to let me go on my own.

“Yeah, they had the sickness,” I say with reluctance.

I can’t believe that Annabelle narked me out. What happened to my family is my business—not hers to go around telling everyone.

“Sorry to hear that young lady. We are going to put you on the bus to Blue Falls. It’s where all of the orphaned minors are headed for social work help.”

“I don’t want to go to Blue Falls. I’d rather just leave if that’s okay. A family friend works not too far from here, I’d rather head to his place and go from there.” I say

“Unfortunately, we cannot let you leave. A social worker in Blue Falls will get it all straightened out and if your friend of the family’s place is where you should go, then they’ll send you there,” he says with a grin. “Bus leaves in ten minutes.”

After he leaves, I glare at Annabelle, who seems totally oblivious to not only me, but to everything going on. I feel like my

whole world is caving in, after all that is happening and it seems like just another adventure to her. Miss high horse over here has probably never been around shady people before. She has no instincts at all. My Uncle Samuel was in the Navy for a long time and I've met some of his buddies who served with him. They were real upstanding guys. But the soldiers here are different. I can't put my finger on it, but it's like they're acting like we're cattle. Move here, do this, take that. There is something really off about these soldiers and this place.

"Save me a seat, I have to go to the restroom. I'll meet you on the bus," I say, offering a fake smile to Annabelle.

"Alrighty," Annabelle says heading toward the exit at the front of the arena.

As I enter the ladies room, there are already a handful of women inside. Looking around, there aren't any windows for me to escape. As disappointment fills my gut, I head to an empty stall and overhear the women's conversation unfolding.

"I know, right. I can't believe it either—it's ridiculous."

"Danny went to talk to one of the guard soldiers, and they won't let anyone leave. They said that further testing is needed before we can be released. But I've noticed that they have evacuated this part of the city for blocks and are pulling out a lot of the soldiers. There are only a few left here."

"Then where is that one bus going? I saw a bunch of kids loading into it."

"I don't know for sure, but I heard, that they are all orphans with no place to go and no one to claim them. Just to be safe, they could get rid of those kids—ya know what I mean—to make sure that none of 'em are sick—and no one would even miss them. People would think that they died in The Port."

I bolt for the restroom door. I am not sticking around to see if these women are right. They could be planning on getting rid of us all—to be safe. Even the adults in this arena could be danger. They might have changed their minds or received new orders telling them not to release anyone. If they evacuated the area, like the woman said, than big trouble is probably headed our way. I can't get on that bus and there is no way that I'll be able to get Annabelle off of it. It looks like I'm on my own again. I don't want to stay here another second.

I see a door across the way and head for it. The nearest guard is talking to a family a few feet away, with his back to the exit. I'm getting out of here. As I approach the door frame, I look around. There are fewer soldiers than before, and that guard is still speaking to the family. I press the door open gently and walk through opening to the outside. I'm free. I'm so sorry Annabelle. I wish that there was something that I could do to get her off that bus. Wiping a tear from my cheek, I tell myself to be stone-hearted. I have to survive. But it doesn't work—I can't stop the tears from falling. With all my heart I hope that those women were wrong, and I hope that I am wrong—for Annabelle. I run down the side of the building and cut behind it.

### FREEDOM

I'm outside of the arena. I'm free. Scratching my wrist as I jog along the backside of the building—my scab feels like it's been sprinkled with itching powder. It itches so much that it kinda hurts.

I'm not sure where I'm going—anywhere but here. I don't care if I have to sleep under a bridge tonight. At least my fate is in my own hands now. Thank God I made it out of that place. The air out here feels fresher, more-wide open. I finally feel like I can breathe—but I also feel tethered to Annabelle. My heart twists telling me that I am doing the wrong thing by leaving her behind. But what could I do? If I go back to that bus, they'll make me get on it. Even if I could get Annabelle's attention somehow—she wouldn't get off the bus. She's psyched about going to Blue Falls and getting reunited with her grandparents. She'll never get off that bus, if I tell her I have a hunch that things aren't what they seem.

Looking behind me, I see that no one has come after me. A sharp pain surges from my scabbed wrist and shoots all the way up my arm. I keep jogging. I can't do this, I can't leave without Annabelle. She needs me and I need her—I have to go back for her. With my eyes on my wrist, I reach for the sleeve but my momentum suddenly stops. It feels like I have run into a wall. Stumbling backward I look at obstacle and see the very soldier from the bus ride here, the one that told me about the bus to Blue Falls. Lieutenant Lunatic. I open my mouth to speak, but he already has me at the elbow escorting me back around the building.

"I was just—" I whisper breathlessly.



“Trying to find the bus?” He says. “That’s alright, I’m sure you got turned around. Here, let me take you there—personally,” his voice sounds more like a growl.

I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing. His tight grip on my elbow conveys the message that he knew what I was attempting. How did he know I made it out? He must have seen me leave and sprinted out one of the other exits to cut me off.

The buildings and businesses surrounding the arena do look empty. It’s Saturday, these places should be abuzz with shoppers. Aside from the vacant streets, all of the businesses look closed. As Lieutenant Lunatic leads me toward the bus, I notice that there are no cars. None parked on the street, nor driving around—even the parking structure across from the parked bus, is empty.

My mind goes back to the conversation I’d overheard in the ladies room. Those women were right, it’s like the whole area has been evacuated or something. Why would they clear out this area? We all went through decontamination and are okay.

My wrist itches again and my whole arm aches. I can’t understand why it’s bothering me, but then again, I haven’t been able to look at it. The shooting pain that began behind the building subsided right after I had my run in with Lieutenant Lunatic, but I still feel discomfort in it. I can’t look at my arm or show any favor to my injury—while he is here—or it will be the end of me.

There’s only one bus ahead, it’s a tour bus. Like the one I’d taken on my eighth grade trip to Funland, three hours away. Definitely a step up from the school bus we used to get here, this one will have a bathroom in the back and reclining seats with confetti upholstery. I haven’t even boarded it yet, but I already know.

“What happened to the school bus?” I ask softly.

“The school busses are for local transport,” he says officially. “It’s a long ride to Blue Falls—this bus will get us there with no stops.”

As Lieutenant Lunatic and I approach the bus, he escorts me up the steps and forces me to sit in the first seat behind the driver.

“Monte,” Annabelle calls out from the rear of the bus.

“I’m gonna go sit with my friend,” I say, rising from my seat.

He shoves me back by my shoulder into my seat, without a word. Waving at Annabelle to come forward, he reviews a clipboard that hangs behind the driver's seat.

"Hey—" I say, rubbing my shoulder. He can't push me like that or make me sit here. There has to be someone I can report this psycho to.

"Listen, you are not going to be a problem on this bus," he kneels down and whispers to me. "Do you understand? I remember you. We were on the same bus over here. If you become a problem, I'll take you out behind a bush. Got it?"

He stands back up and looks at his clip board once more. Did he just threaten to kill me if I didn't behave? He can't do that. But he already did—to the old lady. No one even asked questions except the driver, who really didn't push the issue. This guy could probably kill us all and not even get in trouble for it. He could tell the cops or his boss that we all had the sickness. I'm starting to understand that my rebellious streak might work against me in this situation.

"Right there," he says to Annabelle as she approaches, pointing the empty seat behind me.

Annabelle quietly takes her seat, looking at me with enormous eyes.

"Sir," I say wanting to vomit, but to get what I want—I guess I got to kiss a little tail. "May I sit next to her?"

He looks up from his clipboard with a smirk. He sees right through my phoniness. "If there's any trouble from you—"

"There won't be," I say moving quickly to the seat behind.

I am still behind Lieutenant Lunatic, but at least I'm not sitting next to him.

"Where were you?" Annabelle whispers.

"Long line at the restroom. I'm here now," I say.

The soldier tosses the clipboard onto the seat and smacks the driver on the shoulder, then takes his seat, in front of us.

"Next stop, Blue Falls," the driver announces, starting the bus. "Settle in kiddies, we should be there in about two and a half hours."

We are about twenty minutes into the bus ride to Blue Falls, and my wrist is killing me. It feels even worse than it did after the bite. I know that Annabelle can sense my discomfort—she keeps asking me if I'm okay. I can't look at it with her right here

and Lieutenant Lunatic right in front of us. The last time she asked, he turned around and gave me a death stare. I lied to them both telling them that I sometimes get a little car sick. They seem to have bought it. I don't know how much longer I can keep it up though.

"Hey, I'm going to use the restroom, okay," I tell Annabelle.

She gives me a weak smile and a nod as I get up. I head to the back and see that there are about twenty other kids of all ages in the seats on my way to the restroom. There are a few toddlers, and some of the older kids are seated alone, while others are sitting close together. Many of them are chatting quietly with each other and a few are even playing the alphabet road sign game.

That game made me think of my little brother Sammy—we used to play that game all the time. Sometimes we'd go down to Andre Street and play it watching the license plates of all the cars passing by. I really miss that little pain in my butt. I can't believe that he got the sickness and my parents too. It's not like I had a lot—but everything in my whole life except me—is only a memory now.

I would have never imagined when I woke up this morning that this is where I end up right now. I'm still not sure about this whole bus to Blue Falls, but I don't have any options right now but to stick it out and hope that I'm wrong.

### THE SICKNESS

I duck into the tiny restroom. After locking the door behind me, I roll up my sleeve. My wrist is infected again. The scab is soaked in the fluids leaking from the wound. A ring of redness surrounding the wound stretches up my arm. It looks grotesque and the smell is disgusting. I touch the scab with my index finger and slightly press down. Greenish puss oozes out of it the on the other side of the soft scab. I begin to choke, coughing and gagging at the same time.

I shove my arm—up to the elbow—in the tiny sink and turn on the cold water and let it flow over the wound. The water stings a little at first, but then starts to feel soothing on my arm. I stand there for what feels like the longest time, savoring the relief that the water is giving me.

Whatever Haley gave me, helped for a while, but it looks like nothing can beat the sickness. I think about telling someone, but I push that thought out of my head. Lieutenant Lunatic runs this bus like we're all prisoners. He'll kill me for the safety of the others and he'll like it—because he is a psycho. No, I can't think that way. This is just a little setback—I'll be fine. Now that I'm washing my wrist, it will get better again. It has to.

I worry that I'm taking too long and Lieutenant Lunatic will come bursting in like a SWAT team, so reluctantly, I turn off the water. As soon as the water stops, my wound begins to burn again. Although it looks a little better now that the scab is totally water logged. Gently, I pat my arm dry and pull my sleeve down, covering the bite. I feel so awful, as if all of my energy is being sucked right out of me. I need to lie down and try to sleep.

Making my way back toward my seat, I can already feel perspiration emerging from my flesh. I can't tell anyone about my arm or Lieutenant Lunatic will take me out behind a bush and put a bullet in my skull. I squeeze past Annabelle and take a seat by the window.

“Oh boy, you're really feeling carsick aren't you?”

Annabelle says with a frown.

“I'm okay. I think I'm just really tired. You know, today's been...crazy. I think I'll take a little nap,” I say pulling the hood of my sweatshirt over my head.

“Yeah, get some rest Monte and you'll feel better. I'll wake you when we get to Blue Falls,” she says.

Who knew that Annabelle Sanchez could be so sweet? I guess you normally needed to be in her inner circle to see that side of her. Now, due to lack of other people, she is actually worried about me. I feel so exhausted. Maybe I'll feel better when I wake up. I can beat this. I close my eyes and lean up against the window and feel myself drifting off.

I don't feel like I've slept long, when I'm jostled awake by an explosive sound. I feel different. I see Lieutenant Lunatic standing before me with a crazed look in his eyes. As my eyes adjust to the bright light beaming in from the windows, I see that he just shot the bus driver.

Before I have time to react, Annabelle pulls me down to the floorboard below our seats. Looking out the window on the

other side of the bus, I can see that the bus is pulled over. It looks like trees outside—we're on the interstate.

Lieutenant Lunatic turns to the other side of the aisle and two more gunshots blast. What's he doing? I look at Annabelle with wild eyes. She only shakes her head as tears fall from her cheeks onto the floorboard. Two more shots ring out. He's killing kids. Has he lost his mind?

Lieutenant Lunatic makes his way down the aisle of the bus blasting kids away. I don't know what to do. Someone has to stop him, but we're all kids and he has a gun.

"You can't do this to us—we're not sick!" A boy in the back shouts out, and then another gunshot sounds. I can hear the kids crying out, screaming and begging for their lives from the seats as he makes his way down the aisle.

"There is no way to tell if any of you are infected. No guarantee that you won't spread this disease to the general population. I can't take that risk," Lieutenant Lunatic says fanatically, firing another shot.

Even with all that is happening, I feel unbelievably tired, as though I could drop dead from exhaustion alone. A fiery pain surging up my arm to my shoulder sends shock waves through my body. Gripping my shoulder as if it's on fire, I pull down the collar of my hoodie checking for any markings. But now the pain begins to subside, almost retreating down my arm. What's happening to me? Annabelle says something to me but I can't recognize the words she's using. Her sounds are all messed up, distorted. I hear more blasts from the gun, but they sound more like an echo now. Annabelle grabs me, but I can't even get her face into focus. I see her back away, and what only looks like a shadow of her is going for the bus exit. It looks like she is pounding on the glass, the door must be locked. I crawl one, maybe two steps, when I feel a new sensation trembling through my body. I have the sickness—I'm going to be a monster soon. I can feel it. I need to get out of here before I hurt someone. Then the shooting pain returns. This time, every muscle in my body feels like they've tensed up in pain, as the agony seems to pulse through my entire body. I feel weak, impossible weak. I want to call out to Annabelle to get out, but the pain is severe, as if the pain is pinching off my vocal chords. Then, as everything starts to go black, I see Annabelle's shadowy figure

pull the lever, opening the door and leaping from the bus. They everything goes black.

I haven't quite woken up yet, but somehow I feel conscious. My eyes are still closed and the pain has left me entirely. I can't open my eyes! I can hear sounds, like muffled voices—but I can't understand what they're saying. It seems as if the voices are fading away. I might be going into a deeper sleep. A...deep...sleep.

My eyes burst open like an opening umbrella. Bright light floods my eyeballs causing me irritation, but not pain. I sit up slowly, confused and disoriented. As I rise to my feet, light is all around me, except for the occasional shadow fluttering past. There is a smell. I inhale deeply. A wonderful aroma. It smells like the most delicious thing I will ever taste. I am so hungry. Following my nose, something ahead comes into focus. It is the source of the delightful aroma. I look on in disgust for only a moment, but the hunger inside is triumphing in the battle of my fading subconscious. Lieutenant Lunatic is standing before me. The nourishing scent of his flesh is too much temptation. I leap toward him as we fall to the ground between the seats. My teeth sink deep into his throat tissue, as I taste the tangy blood flow across my tongue. I swallow a piece of vitamin-rich flesh, before diving in for another bite. As I slurp and chew on my meal, I can feel the last remaining nonessential brain functions shutting down. Now, I just have one thing left...on...my...mind. The hunger.

### STILL HUNGRY?

Do you have a hunger to know more? Check out *Endemic: Rise of the Plague* to find out how Monte's town became a menacing place destroyed by a plague that spread at a breakneck pace. How did it really all begin? By accident? Or were there more sinister motivations behind the origin of the plague?

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## *Suzanne Robb*

### *Dentists, Autopsies, and Nutritionists Oh My!*

Ted Brock news anchor, gave a brilliant white smile as he stared into the camera. He had dark hair, a fake tan, and his left ear had a bandage. Heidi Dinkins sat to the left side, his co-host. Blonde, beautiful, with a real tan, and busty.

“Good evening and welcome too this Friday the twelfth edition of KSPAZ news. Originally we were going to be talking about the Zombie War, but I decided I really didn’t want to, so I have come up with something far better.”

Heidi cleared her throat. “Excuse me Ted, no one told me about a change of program. I have all my segments set up for the war coverage.” Ted just smiled.

“As I was saying, tonight we will not be recapping the highlights of the Zombie War as previously advertised. I mean really, what can be said about a war that lasted three days and fourteen hours? Then again when your enemy has no ability to pick up or use weapons, organize a defence, and has the attention span of an ADD kid on crack, the fact we won really comes as no surprise.” Ted chuckled at his joke. Heidi did not.

“That’s right, Ted. This war was not a challenge to our armed forces, but the mystery remains as to how the Zombie virus was released in the first place, thus making it a topic of significant interest.”

“Yes, Heidi, I am sure people are dying to hear what you think, but as I was saying, tonight is going to be different. The end of the Zombie War led us into completely new territory. Millions of Zombies were captured. None of them were willing to talk, no matter how badly they were tortured. This stymied our military for some time.”



“Actually Ted, the military knew they were unable to speak. They discovered very early on Zombies have no speech capacity.” Heidi smiled at the camera, holding tight to the papers in front of her.

“Again, Heidi, you can put that in your bit for another time. Right now is my story. I would like the viewers to look at some fairly graphic re-enactments I have created. If you have children in the room, please cover their innocent eyes.”

Ted reached under his desk and brought out some two by two foot poster boards. On them Zombie stick pictures were drawn being tortured by military stick figures. He sighed as if saddened by the creepy pictures and turned back to the camera.

“I apologize for the quality of these pieces, but our art department told me at the last minute they were too busy for my request, so I had to whip these up over the weekend. You can see the brutality was quite severe. The military denies it to this day, but what else can possibly explain the horrible condition many of these Zombies were found in? Some of them looked as if they had just been dug out of the grave for God’s sake. To make matters worse, it was discovered Zombies could not even talk.”

Ted stopped and pinched his nose. He tried to see if he could squeeze out a few tears for the added dramatic effect. This story might be his best shot to get the hell out of this town and hit the big time. He shook his head and sighed, annoyed no tears would come.

“Sorry, folks, I just get a little emotional when I think of all the damage done to these poor creatures.”

Heidi coughed. “I wouldn’t actually call them poor creatures as they did eat thousands of people and terrorized the general populace for some time.” The camera panned to Heidi.

Ted held a fake smile on his face. What the hell had gotten into Heidi tonight, she just would not keep her trap shut. What the hell was that about? She was just there so the network had a set of breasts on the payroll. He didn’t care about her degree from Stanford, probably made the place up.

She always pitched stories about the Zombie Virus, pieces on the Zombie aftermath, or who to hold accountable for the outbreak. Like people were really interested in that. He knew what the people wanted, and tonight he planned on giving it to them.

“Heidi, while that is another interesting perspective, it is not what tonight’s show is about. Tonight we are going to discuss the effects of the LDR movement. The Living Dead Reintegration is a daring, may I say even brave, endeavour being met with resistance at every turn. All this organization is trying to do is find a place for Zombies within our society.” Heidi yelled as she threw the papers in front of her.

“The LDR movement? Are you insane? The controversy surrounding LDR is horrific, rumours of live autopsies, germ warfare, accidental infections, and not to mention the number of people getting infected and or killed during the reintegration process.”

Ted ground his teeth so hard he actually felt a filling crack. What the hell had gotten into Heidi this week?

The only explanation, she had slept with the network head Jimmy Gillon. He probably told her she could speak. Fantastic, now he had to contend with a talking bimbo. Thank God he had the foresight to draw things out for her, he felt pictures made things easier to understand. Heidi already got more fan mail than he did, there was no way she would speak more.

“Heidi, obviously your sources are not as up to date as mine. I have data not only showing promise for LDR, but can ensure safe reintegration of the living dead back into our society.”

Ted reached under the desk again and brought out another poster board. This one had a Zombie stick figure helping another stick figure across the road. In another a Zombie stick figure gave candy to a much shorter stick figure.

“As you can see, Zombies can be contributing members of society. This is what tonight’s show will be about. I’m going to detail the process of how Zombies are reintegrated into society.”

Ted stood and walked over to a screen. He proudly pointed to it as the image of a Zombie in a suit appeared.

“The proof is in the pudding, my friends. Tonight you will watch the amazing footage I caught with the help of my camera man as we went to LDR headquarters and recorded the reintegration process step by step. Afterwards, if you’re not as convinced as I am that these Zombies are on the path of goodness, then nothing will sway you.”

The lights went down in the studio and on the big screen Ted could be seen holding a stack of papers in front of the LDR building. He talked, but no sound came out.

“Goddammit, where is the mic? You always hide it on me to make me look like an ass. Wait, there it is. Okay turn it on in a few minutes.”

Ted straightened his clothes, he wanted eyes on him and his impeccable sense of style. He tested his breath, then slicked back his hair to make sure everything was in place. Lastly, he picked his nose to make sure no boogers were visible. Last year, he had one hanging there for his entire interview with the CPA (Captain of the Poultry Association). People still handed him Kleenex boxes and laughed as they walked away.

“Hello, I’m Ted Brock, and tonight you will get an exclusive look at the arduous process a Zombie must go through in order to be accepted back into society. Then we will take a look at the various jobs they can do to help us. Follow me on this journey, my friends.”

The camera man followed Ted into the building. The interior had an eerie ambiance, and used to be a psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane. Someone had chipped off some of the letters leaving only “IT ALL INSANE.” The personnel walking around were all armed with guns, batons, and wore thick padding around their necks, arms, and legs.

John Simmons, the cameraman, spoke in a low voice. “Psst, Ted...don’t you think we should have some weapons, or gear?”

“Of course not, John. This is a perfectly safe place. Let’s go.”

“Ted, maybe you can deal with the smell of rotting corpses emanating from every corner. Maybe the fact everyone here is in protective gear from head to toe doesn’t make you the least bit suspicious. However it is making my ass twitch.” John kept switching from one foot to the other.

“John, calm down, they won’t let anything happen to us, I’m Ted Brock after all.”

Ted did in fact have a gun in his breast pocket in case something happened. He also knew he would have a head start over John because of the weight of the camera.

The two walked down the hallway, John filming everything. There were blood smears and splatterings everywhere. Moaning and groaning could be heard echoing through the hallways. They came to a door with Phase One written on it in with a Sharpie.

“Hello, gentlemen, welcome to Phase One of the LDR program. In a second, the doors will open and all you have to do is head inside to begin your tour.”

The voice came through an old intercom system. As the door opened the two men made their way inside. Ted wondered how fast John could run with the camera, he assumed not very.

John slowly went through the doorway, filming the whole time. The floor was covered in some sort of thick ooze, and the walls had a disturbing amount of blood on them and upon closer inspection many teeth as well.

A man in a stained lab coat came at them. Ted let out a small scream.

“Hello, there. You two must be from the news station. We heard you were going to come down here and give some positive attention to our little organization. I’m doctor Herron, the dentist in charge of Phase One.”

Doctor Herron stood there with some sort of permanent grin on his face. He held onto a tank of some sort, either because he enjoyed the way it felt, or he needed the support. The smile still in place he reached out to shake the hands of the two men. However the brownish fluid on the gloves he wore prevented them from cooperating.

Ted looked at the blood stains covering the doctor’s coat, then down to the sticky floor. He had no idea the things this room had witnessed, but he knew it was a bad sign the dentist wore more protective gear than a virgin on prom night.

“Hello, doctor Herron, it’s nice to meet you. I’m a huge fan of your work. Can you tell me exactly what it is you do?”

Doctor Herron gave an odd smile at the comment, but didn’t say anything.

“Of course, well as I said I’m the dentist in charge of Phase One. When the Zombies first arrive, they are at their most dangerous. As you know a bite from one of them results in immediate infection. To prevent this from happening they are brought to my office, and neutered by me.” The dentist chuckled

at his joke. Ted did not change his facial expression. John moved his legs uneasily.

“Very interesting, doctor Herron, and why would a dentist want to neuter a Zombie? Are you trying to tell me they can make baby Zombies?”

Another odd look from doctor Herron was sent Ted’s way.

“Umm no, what I meant is, I remove all their teeth mister Brock. After which they can no longer bite anyone, and are essentially neutered.” Ted fidgeted with his mic, avoiding thinking about the sticky floors.

“Right of course, I just wanted you to explain for our audience.” Doctor Herron tilted his head to the side and smiled.

“Then let’s get started with a demonstration. This is your lucky day. We just got in a shipment of fresh Zombies so you can witness the work we do here to help make Zombies safer, and easier to reintegrate back into society.”

Ted and John watched as doctor Herron grabbed the laughing gas, placed the mask on himself inhaling deeply.

“Right then, let’s start yanking some teeth, guys.”

Ted looked terrified, and John got as close to the door as possible. Doctor Herron looked totally at ease as he pressed a button.

“Bring it in.” He removed his finger from the button and smiled at the two men.

Ted went rigid and casually put his hand inside his coat jacket so he could hold onto the gun.

A door in the back of the room creaked open and a Zombie appeared with three men covered in protective gear. A thick collar hung around the Zombie’s neck which helped the men keep control over it with via a rabies stick. There were rusty shackles on its wrists and ankles which also aided in controlling it. Ted watched in horror as the Zombie entered, and the two now shared a room.

Ted began to turn green, the smell of the place getting worse. He had to fight back the rising bile, it became overwhelming.

Ted watched John get a close up with the camera, showing flesh hanging loosely, and in some places falling off of the Zombie.

Ted swallowed the gorge rising in his throat. Then the Zombie let out a gut wrenching noise and liquid poured out of its mouth. Ted watched as John spit something onto the wall behind him. Ted knew he was not the first one based on the collection. Ted casually turned and threw up in what he hoped was a trash can. John made sure to get it all on tape.

“Thanks. Just secure it in the chair, please.”

The camera recorded as three men maneuvered the Zombie into the dentist’s chair, then secured its arms and legs. The collar around the neck locked into place, as well as a strap he wrapped across its forehead.

Doctor Herron pulled over a mobile tray full of dirty tools and grabbed a metal device with crusty gore all over it.

“See, we try to be as humane as possible. These pliers are some of the best, with a great grip. I can yank a tooth in less than three seconds.” Ted smiled uncomfortably at the mad dentist.

Doctor Herron pulled on the forehead strap restraining the Zombie’s head. The force of the motion, causing its mouth to open. Doctor Herron then shoved a wedge inside to prevent it from closing.

The doctor went to work immediately. The only sounds heard within the room were the exertions of doctor Herron, the groans of the Zombie, and the occasional clink of a tooth being tossed in the general direction of a metallic bowl. Ted winced in sympathy.

“Excuse me, doctor Herron, are you sure it isn’t painful?”

“Nah, they don’t feel any pain, so it would be a waste to use any sort of pain killer on them. Oh, and in case you were wondering, they really can’t get any sicker than they are so there’s no need to worry about clean tools.” The doctor smiled, and Ted equated it to a serial killer.

Ted watched as the doctor knelt on the lap of the Zombie to get into a better position to yank out a particularly stubborn tooth. When he finally got it, he admired it for several seconds before tossing it towards the bowl. He missed, and Ted saw the tooth and a portion of gum line.

Ted wondered what doctor Herron did before he got this job, dentist enforcer for the mob? He thought there might be a story there.

Twenty-eight long minutes later, the Zombie sat neutered. Ted removed his hand from his breast pocket, breathing for the first time since the dentist started. Finally, he felt safe.

The doctor, sweating and covered in blood, smiled at Ted. Several teeth were scattered across the floor, along with bits and pieces of tissue.

“So, as you see, it’s a rather easy process, and neutralizes their ability to bite and infect people. Now we send it to Phase Two. You can follow the men through the door. I have several dozen Zombie’s waiting out back.”

Ted placed his hand back in his breast pocket. The information about dozens of Zombie’s waiting to be neutered scaring the hell out of him. His bladder felt funny, and the fact there was a Phase Two made him want to run away.

Ted motioned John to go ahead of him, following the two men prodding the Zombie along. The hallway floor slick with dark blood and other liquids Ted didn’t want to think about. Moments later they arrived at a door with the number two written on it.

The two men knocked, when an opening appeared they shoved the Zombie inside. They led it to a metal table forcing it to lie down. Once prone, shackles kept its wrists, ankles, and head in place. Ted noticed it was an autopsy table and began to feel a bit nauseous.

“Come on in you two. Don’t be shy. This is an educational program as well as a rehabilitative one. I’m doctor Ken Mengles.”

Ted shoved John into the room then followed a few feet behind. They both looked up to see dozens of eager young faces in an observation window above. Bright lights lined the ceiling. The same sticky substance from the dentist’s office could be found here. The walls were relatively clean, but the tray of tools next to the table were rusty and old.

“I know this can look shocking at first. The look on your face speaks volumes. All I can do is assure you everything will be fine. Just relax and you’ll see all the good work we do here.” Ted cleared his throat.

“Doctor Mengles, exactly what is Phase Two?”

“Phase Two, is technically, an autopsy.” Ted tried not to look appalled.

“But isn’t it still alive, how can you do this? Autopsies on Zombies might be considered cruel and unusual by some people, not me at all, but maybe others.” Ted looked towards the observation room and smiled.

“A common misconception held by many, which we try and change with our work here. Come over and take a listen.” The doctor held out a stethoscope to Ted.

Ted didn’t want to take a listen. He wanted to leave this place. Then again he wanted a better job, so he slowly made his way over to the doctor. The Zombie twitched and fought against its bonds, but seemed to be secure. Ted put his ear as close as he dare to the stethoscope and listened.

“I’m sorry, doctor, it’s broken. I don’t hear anything.” The doctor laughed as did the people in the observation room.

“I’m sorry, mister Brock, I don’t mean to laugh. It isn’t broken. Zombies are categorized as the living dead. This means technically they’re dead, they have no heartbeat, no need to breathe, and as far as we can tell have no real thought process other than to find food.” Ted moved away positioning himself between John and the Zombie.

“So, why do you need to do an autopsy then?” Ted decided then and there he deserved some sort of award for doing this damn story.

“Well, you have to understand just because a Zombie is dead, and had its teeth removed doesn’t mean it can’t infect you.”

Ted took three more steps back and watched John reach into his pocket. Ted thought John had finally cracked ready to blow them all away. He lifted his hands to protect his face, but when he saw a bottle of anti-bacterial lotion in John’s hand he cleared his throat and looked at the doctor.

“Really, doctor, that’s fascinating. So how exactly can we still get infected?”

“Zombies are giant petrie dishes for all sorts of bacteria, not to mention the liquids in their system still carry the Zombie virus. We autopsy them to determine what health risks they pose, and whether or not they should be reintegrated based on that risk. For example, if we get a Zombie carrying the plague we can’t very well let it back into society.”

“Of course not. Do a lot of them tend to carry the plague?” Ted plastered a fake smile on his face all the while



wondering how one caught the plague. He debated holding his breath for the duration of his time here.

“Not many, but enough. But there are many benefits to doing autopsies on Zombies. Firstly, we can teach medical students how to perform them, and what kind of surprises to expect. Secondly, we try to correct a lot of the damage inflicted on these poor creatures. The more holes we patch up, the less likely they are to leak.”

Ted watched the doctor begin the autopsy on the Zombie. He cut down the center of its chest and pulled out various internal organs. The doctor pulled out the heart and held it up so the students in the observation room could see.

“Take a look at this, it is important to note the atrophied heart muscle. This is one of the first things you need to look at in any autopsy. This heart tells us that in human life this Zombie was rather lazy, and didn’t take cardio seriously. Most likely why he got caught.” The doctor laughed as did the students. Ted did not.

The doctor placed the heart back inside the chest cavity using staples, sutures, and super glue to help keep it in place. Then he poked around and pulled out the liver. Ted tried very hard to keep his bagel down.

“Okay, have a look at this, see how engorged it is? Another important organ to examine when doing an autopsy. This tells us that in his human life the Zombie most likely suffered from cirrhosis, probably an alcoholic.”

The doctor once again used sutures, staples, and ample amounts of super glue to keep the organ in place. Ted shut his eyes every time he heard the staple click.

“Doctor, isn’t it important to make sure the organs are attached correctly so that they work?”

“Mister Brock, Zombies are dead. They don’t function, if I put an organ back in, or decide to keep it for my personal collection it’s irrelevant, the Zombie will still move around.”

“Right of course, continue.” Ted stood rigid as he watched the doctor autopsy the Zombie.

Everything seemed to be there as far as Ted knew, but he based his anatomy knowledge on the game *Operation*. The more the doctor cut into the Zombie the worse the smell got, and the more putrid liquids oozed out. Ted knew his breakfast would eventually reappear.

“Oh this is interesting, get a close up if you can.” John reluctantly moved in.

“Seems the original cause of death was not the Zombie virus. See all these little growths? This guy had very advanced cancer. He must have risen after he died. Class please make a note to find the primary cause of death if possible.”

Ted breathed through his mouth to try and avoid the putrid odour coming from the Zombie. He watched in horror as the doctor took a bone saw and cut the top of the skull off to examine the brain. The doctor then placed a small metal chip in the brain. The chip, about a quarter inch in size and thinner than a paperclip, had a small green light.

After the doctor placed the chip where he wanted it, he popped the skull cap back on, turning it left and right until in its proper position. Then he grabbed a tube of plumbing epoxy and lathered it onto the cut marks, after which he stapled it in place.

“Excuse me, doctor Mengles what did you just do?”

Ted had not seen anything this gruesome during the war. His therapy bill was going to sky rocket.

“That, mister Brock, is an explosive tracking device. When we reintegrate the Zombies back into society we want to be able to keep tabs on them. Make sure they don’t go places they shouldn’t. If they do we press a button and the small bit of explosive is enough to kill them, but not a risk to humans.”

“What kind of places are you protecting?” Ted wanted to take out a notebook and write some of this down, he felt like his life depended on it.

“Schools, hospitals, restaurants, places of where contamination is a risk. It’s protocol, nothing to worry about.”

Ted looked over at John when he noticed the camera light wavering. The doctor was performing a check on retinal attachment by removing the eyes. John looked pale, and Ted hoped he didn’t pass out, he couldn’t carry the damn camera and be the star. Looking back at the eyes being removed, he felt his knees get weak.

Ted turned his head and threw up on John’s feet when the doctor removed several feet of the intestinal tract and emptied it onto a table. Several things fell out including fingers, toes, several eyes, brain matter, and partially chewed up rodents.

“Last lesson of the day, Zombies will eat anything.”

The doctor finished by sewing the Y incision shut, filling it with more plumbing epoxy, and then stapling it for good measure. The doctor also filled the pre-existing holes with something from a tub. The Zombie seemed to be totally unaware of what had been done to it.

Ted regained his composure and looked into the tub, he wanted to stick his finger in it but resisted the urge.

“Excuse me doctor, what are you using to patch up the Zombie?”

The doctor grabbed the tub. “This is a special blend I created. It’s a mix of dry wall spackle, super glue, and plumbing epoxy. It is the best sealant so far, though it needs touching up every few months.”

“Great thanks for explaining.” Ted plastered the fake smile on his face.

“Well that’s all for here, you can move on to Phase Three. Class, see you tomorrow for virus cultivation and brain slicing.”

Ted watched as men came in and got the Zombie back on its feet. The Zombie shuffled ahead of them, exiting through a back door. Ted pushed John ahead of him, and they went down another gore infested hallway. The floor less sticky, but the scent significantly worse.

Ted started to worry. He didn’t want to know what could possibly smell worse than a dissected Zombie. They got to a large door with no markings, just a latch and a small window. A bloody hand print smeared across it. Ted noted it the freshness of it. The men opened the door and were greeted by a stern looking woman in glasses.

“Bring it in.” The men took in the Zombie, and secured it to a chair in the middle of the room.

As soon as they were done they quickly exited the room through a back door. John went in next, followed by Ted. Ted reached a hand out to introduce himself, but pulled it back when he saw her gloves.

Ted tried to use his winning smile on the woman. She stood about five foot seven, gorgeous, and unnaturally skinny. She maintained the scowl on her face, and her jerky movements indicated her discomfort with the intrusion.

The large and dirty room looked like it might have been a cafeteria at one point. Coolers with lids half on were strewn all about. Each one labeled with a different animal name.

Then Ted spotted the table, several different coloured piles of rancid meat on it. The stench enough to make Ted vomit immediately.

“Breathe through your mouth. It won’t help much, but there’s less chance you’ll choke on your own barf.” The woman smiled briefly, then put the scowl back in place.

Ted and John transformed into mouth breathers in half a second, immediately realizing she had told them truth, and it didn’t make a difference. They both spent a few moments dry heaving in the corner.

“I’m doctor Rexic, call me Anna. I’m the nutritionist in charge of Phase Three.”

“A nutritionist? How is that really necessary? I thought Zombies ate people.”

Ted immediately regretted the breath he had to take in order to speak. He made a mental note to stop asking questions.

“Well, yes, but a Zombie will eat anything when it’s hungry enough. What I to do here is make sure their nutritional needs are met so when they are reintegrated back into society, they won’t eat people.” She let out an uneasy laugh. Ted and John just stared at her.

Anna stood by the table of various meats in different stages of decomposition. Flies hovered, and maggots wiggled.

Ted watched as John moved in with the camera to get a shot of the buffet from hell. Ted stayed put.

“You see, even Zombies have preferences. For example, the one I had in here before liked dead rats, but wouldn’t touch dead mice. My job is to find out what a particular Zombie likes and train them to eat it.”

Anna inspected the selection and grabbed a handful of something foul. She held out her hand approaching the Zombie as one would a feral dog they were trying to befriend. When she stood about two feet in front of it, she tossed the food into its open mouth. The Zombie seemed to like it and open its maw for more. Anna repeated this with four other samples.

Ted watched as the Zombie asked for more, by leaning forward and moaning, for the first and third piles of meat the Anna

had given to it, though samples two and four were rejected outright. Ted watched Anna make notes on her clipboard then make a small tag which she pinned to the collar of the Zombie's jumpsuit.

Ted felt like he had created a documentary from hell. Anna was like some sort of demented mama bird to these things. The whole process horrific and he would bet his paycheck she got off on this somehow. No normal woman would think of this as a good idea, nor a positive way to spend one's time.

"Well, this one prefers rancid road kill of the armadillo variety, and raccoon. Now we train him to only eat those particular foods, thus making him safe to people. As an added benefit, it will also help keep our streets clean."

Anna attempted a smile, and Ted wished she would go back to scowling at him.

"So what you're saying is a Zombie can be trained not to eat people? Wow, what does your husband think of your work?" Ted mentally patted himself on the shoulder for being smooth.

"Yes, this would make Zombies safe. As for my husband, he's supportive of my work. He's the reason I do this, he fell victim to the virus during the war, but I refuse to give up on him."

Ted tried to act nonchalant with this new information. John visibly shivered and took a step back from Anna. Ted looked over the woman one more time. Why were all the good ones taken?

Just then the Zombie tried to get loose from its restraints. Anna remained calm, but Ted was pretty sure he just shit his pants. Even neutered, these things were scary as hell.

Blood spurt out of the sockets in its mouth and yellowish puss oozed out of the suture marks the autopsy doctor had left. Ted reached the end of his rope. What was wrong with this Zombie? Did Ted find a defective one to follow, or were the psychos working here making it up as they went? His union would be hearing from him as soon as he got home. Was there a Phase Four? How much more of this would he have to endure? Would she ask him to sample to food? Did she eat with her husband?

"Now I know you are anxious to get to Phase Four, our final phase and see how all this hard work pays off. You won't follow this particular Zombie any longer because he needs to be trained with road kill treats, but you'll see the end product, and why our work here is so important."

Anna motioned to an exit in the back and Ted took three long strides to reach it, John on his tail. He opened the door to a cleaner hallway and noticed a significant improvement in the air quality. As they left the room, they could hear Anna cooing to the Zombie about being a good boy eating all his armadillo.

They could only go in one direction, so both men walked down the hall side by side. Ted with his hand on the gun.

“Ted, what do you think Phase Four is?”

Ted cleared his throat. “I have no idea, but I don’t think it can be much worse than what we’ve seen.”

Ted kept pace with John, slow. Ted expected something to jump out every time he took a step.

“Why do you think they didn’t send us with a guard this time?”

Ted noticed John kept looking over his shoulder.

“John I have no idea, most likely because we’re totally safe here. Now quit whatever it is you’re doing, it’s making me nuts.”

“Right, be calm in a building full of Zombies.”

They arrived at the end of the hall and stood in front of yet another door. This one free of blood, and the number four written across it. Ted knocked and took six steps back. No way he would just open it to see what lurked inside.

A moment later the door opened and they were staring into the face of a Zombie. Ted screamed pulled his gun a bit causing it to point upwards. Then a rush of adrenaline made him apply just enough pressure to the trigger. He shot a hole through his favourite suit and blew off his left earlobe. John wet his pants and threw the camera at the Zombie.

“Whoa, guys. Relax. He’s harmless.” An older gentleman stood there in a three piece suit.

Ted held his ear tears running down his face. John stood awkwardly in an attempt to cover his groin.

“What the hell is this place? Are you all insane? Is it part of the job description, my viewers might ask.”

The man in the suit picked up John’s camera handing it back to him.

“I’m sorry, we thought it would be a nice surprise if you got to witness the amount of progress when you got here.”

Ted cradled his ear.

“A warning would have been appreciated.” Ted tried not to sound whiny.

“My apologies, I’m Terry Hutchings and this is the Phase Four. We thought if you saw trained Zombies doing simple tasks, such as answering a door, you would understand the value of the work we do here.”

At that moment Ted noticed the Zombie wore a clean shirt and pair of jeans, had no teeth, and seemed indifferent to their presence. The Zombie backed into the room, and John hesitantly entered. Ted noticed John walking like he had shit his pants. He smiled internally.

“Mister Brock is that blood? I thought I heard a gunshot but wasn’t certain. It happens so often.” Terry chuckled, but Ted and John just stared at him.

“I feel safe. I’m a news anchor you know. We do this kind of thing all the time. I don’t have a gun. I cut my ear on something in the hallway.”

“Okay mister Brock, we need to see to your ear and hide the blood. These Zombies have been on the wagon for weeks now and don’t need to be tempted at this crucial time in their rehabilitation.”

As they sped through the large auditorium like room, they noticed several Zombies opening panels with knobs over and over again, washing dishes, throwing newspapers papers, washing cars, and bagging groceries. Ted found it very very creepy. When the Zombies stopped and looked at him in a hungry manner, he moved quicker.

They exited the room and went into Terry’s office. They watched as he locked it. There were twenty-three dead bolts, five chains, and a bar he jammed into place. Ted raised an eyebrow at this but said nothing. John zoomed in on it.

Terry handed Ted some wet paper towels and motioned him to a sink in the corner. As Ted bent his head he tried to regain some of his professionalism and conduct the interview.

“So, mister Hutchings, what exactly do you see in the future for these Zombies once they are reintegrated?”

“We see all sorts of great things for them. The ones like you just saw that can be trained can help with small jobs here and there. Of course they would be prohibited from working with kids, and the food industry.”

“Why is that?”

Ted rinsed his ear one last time and then held some paper towels to it as he stood.

“It’s a safety precaution to keep them away from kids. All sorts of things can happen. As for the food industry, well it is a matter of hygiene. Zombies are decaying, and no amount of chemical intervention will stop the process. The last thing you want is to order a salad and find a finger or an eye in it. The repercussions would be catastrophic for what we’re trying to do here.”

“Right, of course, makes sense. All this looks fantastic, but what about the ones you can’t reintegrate, or fall off the wagon?” Ted positioned himself between Terry’s desk and the other door.

“We’re working very hard to ensure that doesn’t happen. I’m positive within the year we’ll be able to safely reintegrate all of the living dead back into society.”

“Really? All of them? Weren’t there millions? `Seems like an awful lot.”

“It is, but if they are safe and pose no threat, then where is the problem?”

“Why don’t you two take a seat and we can discuss the work we are doing here.”

Ted’s ear throbbed, and his pants were full of shit, so taking a seat, not something he wanted to do. In fact when he got home he planned on bathing in antiseptic.

“Mister Hutchings, we can see the good work you’re doing here. I promise to air what we taped today so the whole world will see how hard you’re working to make Zombies safe so they pose no threat when reintegrated into society.”

“Are you sure mister Brock? I thought there would at least be an interview?”

“It isn’t necessary, we have enough footage. Great meeting you, and the work you’re doing here is fantastic. I wish you the best of luck. We’ll just be on our way.”

John was out the door and halfway to the car by the time Ted felt mister Hutchings grab him.

“Mister Brock, we had a deal. We paid you a lot of money to get some good press.” Ted shifted uncomfortably.



"I promise you'll get good press off of this. I want a promotion and the bleeding heart liberals love this kind of stuff. I however, am not a liberal and think this place is a carnival of horrors."

"I don't care what you think it is as long as you sell it as a rehabilitation center doing good work. Are we clear? Wouldn't want anything happening to you would we?" Ted made an audible gulping noise.

"You don't scare me." The quiver of his voice made his statement unconvincing.

"I may not, but I know my Zombies do."

"Why do you want them reintegrated back into society so badly anyways?" Hutchings grabbed Ted tighter and held him close as he spoke into his ear.

"That really is no concern of yours, although I would recommend you learn how to properly fire your gun. Now you go and put on a good show. Oh, and for the love of God, change your shorts. You smell worse than one of them."

Ted ran out of the room as fast as possible. He headed for the news van and barely made it inside before John started to drive away. Ted cleared his throat.

"I need to stop at home and change." John looked out the window.

"Me too, roll down your window." Ted rolled down his window, but looked at John.

"You should also have the van cleaned before we take it back in."

Ted was uncomfortable with the silence. He felt as if he should say something.

"Well, interesting experience, should get some good ratings with the footage."

"I hate you."

"Okay then, at least there's no way Heidi is going to scoop me on this story. This is going to make me a star, and she can go back to lap dancing for the producers."

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In the studio, Ted frantically made the cut motion with his hand across his throat.

“God damn it, John, stop the tape.” John finally relented, but by the look on Heidi’s face Ted could tell she was ticked off at him.

“I’m sorry you all had to hear and see that. It was highly unprofessional of John to do that. The stress made me do and say things I normally would not. As the tape you saw indicated, we were in a scary place for the uninformed.”

Heidi cleared her throat and straightened in her chair with a plastered smile on her face. Ted approached the anchor desk as if he expecting as blow of some kind. He avoided eye contact with her at all cost, and tried to make as little movement as possible.

“So, Ted, you would consider yourself one of the informed now? A trip to a rehabilitation clinic under investigation for cruel and unusual punishment, and all of a sudden you’re mister Informed.” Heidi was getting visibly agitated, turning to look at Ted.

“Heidi, you saw the great works they’re doing there. It’s just going to be a matter of time until they’re able to reintegrate the Zombies back into normal lives. It will be like nothing ever happened.” Ted shuffled some papers in front of him.

“Like nothing ever happened. Have you lost your mind? The Zombie War just finished and you think that things will return to normal? Wow, a Zombie can answer a door, deliver a paper, and wash a car. Did you know they can also eat dogs, cats, kids, and adults? Did you know they can infect millions of people with fluid contact, and that there is no cure?” Heidi pointed a finger at Ted as she yelled.

“Heidi, I have no idea what you are talking about, but I think you need to take a step back and re-watch my documentary. You missed the entire point of what they’re trying to do.” Ted looked up at the camera and smiled. Why wouldn’t she just be quiet already?

“Are they paying you? Have they bought you off for some good press?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. In fact I have no idea why you’re talking so much. I’m the senior anchor here, back to me.” Ted smiled again, trying to regain control of the situation.

“You arrogant son of a bi-”

“As I was saying, this documentary clearly points out the direction Zombie rehabilitation is going. They will no longer pose a threat as they are neutered. They will also be on a strict diet of whatever dead things they prefer. Lastly, they will go through a tough rooting out process to make sure that they can perform the tasks we ask of them. Personally, I think this is a giant step for mankind, or Zombiekind as it may be.”

Heidi sighed. “Good God will someone shut him up.” She slammed her fists on the desk.

Standing up to her full six foot height Heidi cut an imposing figure. She grabbed her earpiece and threw it on the desk. Turning a fiery gaze towards Ted, she waited until he made eye contact.

“I have worked with you far too long, and taken your shit even longer. I have multiple degrees in journalism, broadcasting, and media. I am a better news anchor than you could ever dream to be, and I have never in my life given a lap dance. You can take this anchor position and shove it.” Heidi stormed off the stage leaving Ted alone at the desk.

“Oh and Ted, one more thing. Since you love Zombies so much, I had the entire crew here replaced with them for the night. They can help you with the rest of the newscast.”

Ted felt the fingers of panic running up and down his spine. What the hell was Heidi up to? She had to be after his job. Did she really think that he would fall for this? People loved him, he was Ted Brock after all.

Ted sat at his desk and heard shuffling off to his left. He let out a small scream when a well-dressed female Zombie took the seat next to him. The Zombie had a totally vacant expression as it stared straight ahead.

Ted had no idea what to do, thinking didn't come easy to him. The rest of the show was Heidi's job. She did the local, regional, weather chat, and global issues. Of course none of that was important. What really mattered, what brought in the viewers, was what he did, the introduction, people paid attention to Ted Brock.

Ted shifted in his seat and looked for John. Perhaps he could help him out of this predicament. Ted looked all over and his heart fell as he realized there was no one else there, no one

living at least. Then he heard an eerily familiar noise. He looked around. What made that noise?

Then a soft scraping sound. He looked to his left and saw the creepy Heidi replacement still there. Perhaps the studio had hired one to be a janitor, or replace John. He didn't really want to work with one, but he couldn't be picky.

Then the lights went off. He saw the red light on the camera, it was recording. A familiar smell swept through the room as he felt himself sprayed with something. He tried to place it. Then it dawned on him, armadillo. A brief shadow crossed the red light, and Ted knew he had a problem.

Ted didn't want to die, not like this. Zombies eating him, gnawing on his organs, sharing bits of his brain. The panic had grown into full blown terror. He stood up to run, escape the studio, but tripped.

As soon as he hit the ground, he felt something grab his leg, seconds later he felt teeth sink into him.

"Someone please help me. I'm Ted Brock!"

Ted felt something on his back. He automatically turned to look even though he couldn't see. Something held his head and reached inside his mouth ripping out his tongue. He squirmed for a few minutes trying to scream then stopped.

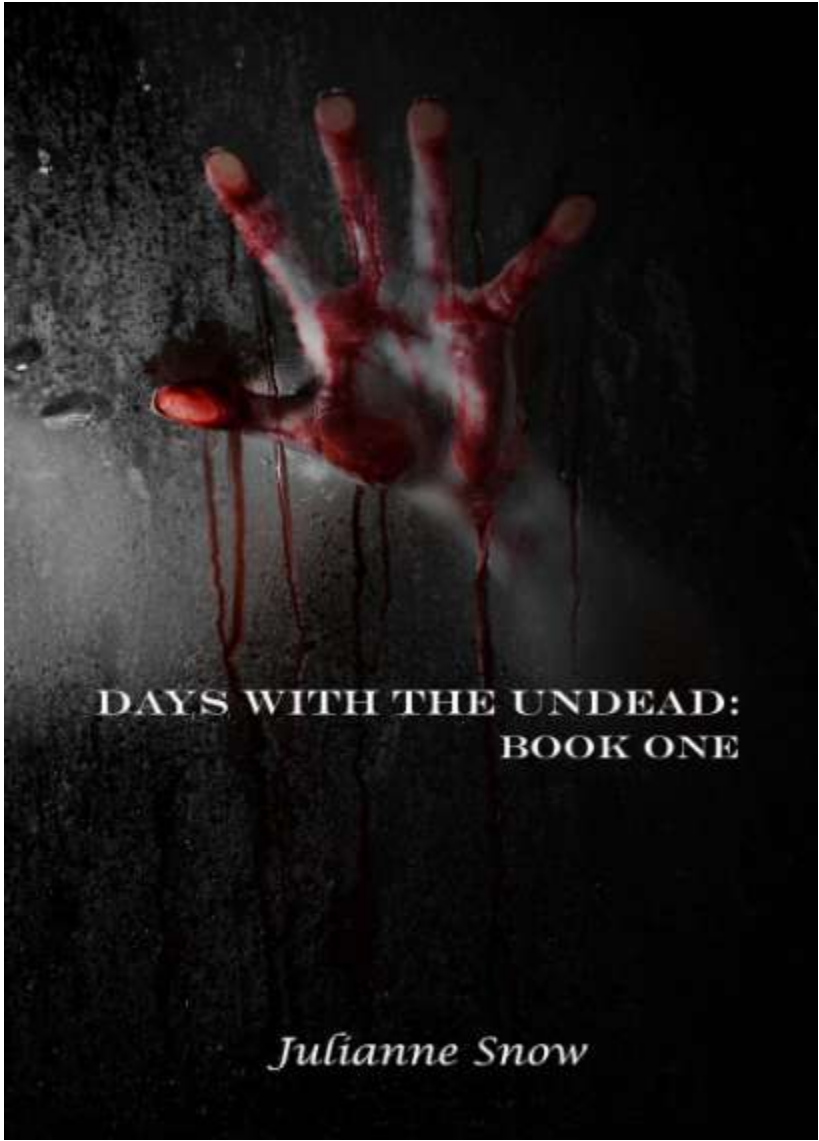
Ted Brock, officially off the air.

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*Julianne Snow*



**\*\*\* Excerpt from *Days with the Undead: Book One*  
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**Day 3...**

It was a close call today. We've been travelling west, trying to get in front of and then outrun the Undead for almost two days now. Trying to stay off the roads but keeping close enough to use them if the need arose was getting more and more difficult. And then the inevitable happened.

We came across a horde of the Undead just mulling – well, not even mulling - just standing in a clearing early this morning. As far from them as we were and as silent as we were being, something or someone in our group caught their global attention and the collective of milky white eyes that turned in our direction was positively bone-chilling.

As we stared dumbstruck in horror, drawn to the sight as one becomes to a horrific accident, we soon realized that we would need to move. Our frozen tableau continued though, even as the ballerina-like synchronicity of decomposing limbs turned and started to move in our direction. Our ridged limbs not comprehending the commands to take flight from our terrified minds.

I don't remember quite when we started to run or what broke the reverie we were all experiencing. I just know that we ran and were thankful that we had a path to travel. The Undead are unconcerned with such things, and the thick foliage and uneven ground would help to slow them down.

Our escape was narrow but our lesson important – never stop to stare.

The truly scary thing about the Undead - besides of course the fact that they are what they are - is their unwavering ability to pursue you. They don't get tired, they don't stop to rest and the only thing that stops them is a swift second death.

The trouble with trying to put them all down is that fairly soon you can end up being overrun by their masses, or too tired to fight the ones in front of you. All you can do is keep moving and hope that something catches their attention to divert their ravenous intentions.

To be perfectly honest we had assumed that we had left most of the Undead behind us in Toronto and the surrounding Greater Toronto Area. In the past few days however it's become increasingly apparent that anyone fleeing the city and suburbs has spread things farther afield than we had dared to anticipate.

Stupid, I know; in any situation one should always prepare for the worst possible outcome, it has the tendency to keep you alive. Planning for the worst or in fact planning for any contingency has a way of keeping you on your toes.

Unfortunately we were all still a little shell-shocked; shocked that the world appeared to be disintegrating behind us. While we had tried our best to prepare for this possible yet improbable eventuality, it was still something that none of us had actually thought would happen. The events of the past one and a half days have left us all a little frazzled, lost, and feeling alone even though we are together in the physical sense.

Putting some distance between us and the horde from the field felt good. In an instant that feeling was robbed from us as we came to the crest of a steep ridge. We were now face to decomposing face with a group of our Undead pursuers. The surprise elicited a shocked, scared little cry from Barbara, one of our group, but it was quickly squashed as we reacted. And there wasn't much time to do anything but react; our primal, instinctual selves took over.

The sound of the first shot ricocheted off the surrounding foliage in the relative silence of the early morning. Before my eyes the pimpled face of what was once an adolescent boy exploded, shards of bone along with infected brain tissue flying out like they were searching for their next victim even in death. I quickly turned my face, hoping to shield it from the spray of grey matter and connective tissues. Thank heavens I was just out of splatter range as the Undead kept coming at us in what felt like increasing numbers.

In all truthfulness there were only twenty-five to thirty of them and they were spaced out and slow-moving. Unwittingly, they had made themselves easy targets; having to come up the opposite side of the ridge made our task of their death relatively uncomplicated.

We each had our own firearms along with other back-up weapons in the event a gun jammed on us. It was moments like

those that I appreciated the fact that my husband had been so meticulous when teaching me to shoot. I could hit both stationary and moving targets at a number of distances. That knowledge made me feel somewhat safe and comfortable in what I had to do. I don't know how each the others felt in that moment but I could read the resilience in their faces.

Given our knowledge and perseverance, we made it through that encounter and plan to make it though many more to come. Survival is what we have chosen and we are all geared to success.

You have to be.

This is a fight to the death and none of us want to think of the consequences of what death will mean for us. I know that each and every one of us would rather die than become one of them. Of that I'm one hundred percent certain.

It only took us a few minutes to quickly dispatch all of the Undead coming up the hill at us. They came at us in all shapes and sizes. Most of them were still fully intact and had barely started to decompose. It's only been three days since this all started and what I would have expected to see as a pathologist was normal; some bloating and a little skin slippage, even some discoloration of the skin. Their faces were all slack and carried the expression of vacancy.

It made it easier to kill them if you happened to look at their faces. You knew that there was nothing left of the human soul that once thrived inside the shell.

I tried not to make eye contact with any of them. It was unnerving to catch a glimpse of the dead eyes. Eyes that had likely once held such promise. Now they were just limpid milky pools of emptiness. Stare too long and you can get lost.

It happened to Ben the other day as we were just leaving Toronto. He happened to stare a moment too long and ended up mesmerized by the sheer austerity of those eyes. That moment we had to rescue him as the Undead toddler got closer than any of us would have liked. It was another lesson that we needed to learn. Staring is bad in any form when it comes to the Undead. Unless of course you happen to be behind a barrier that's impossible for the breach. After all, observation is key; you need to observe in order to understand.



But nothing in the movies we watched could ever have prepared us for what we were now facing. Sure, it was always entertaining to watch the way that Hollywood varied the classic archetype of the “Zombie” but to witness something so fundamentally against nature actually moving toward you; that’s another story altogether.

Your fear and panic can take root in your disbelief. You can either choose to believe and move or you will succumb to it.

It’s a sad thing, coming face to face with the Undead. While we realize that they are just monsters now, they were once people. People like you and me. People that have loved and lost. No one is immune to what is happening. Your money couldn’t save you. The only thing that kept you alive these days was a plan and the will to put it into action. Once you started moving, you can’t just stop. If you do, the Undead catch up.

From our vantage point, we could see that the Undead from the field had gained a little ground on us. The way that we had previously come also had a few stragglers shuffling in our general direction. We decided our only option was to divert our journey along the ridge and hope that we didn’t meet any other unwanted travelers along the way. Ben, our map expert let us know that in a few kilometers another trail heading in the right direction would present itself.

The trouble with staying out of any major urban area - or even minor ones for that matter - is that you end up travelling in less than optimal conditions. We would have loved to get into a car and travel farther and faster but the roads were already treacherous.

With the sheer number of people fleeing from Toronto and the surrounding cities and towns, the roads in some areas were clogged with accidents, cars with empty gas tanks and the Undead that follow the exodus.

It frightens me to think of the number of people who left the town harboring family members or friends that had been infected in recent attacks. One would think that they would have gained some knowledge from the Hollywood blockbusters. But no... It’s like the panic that they felt in needing to put distance between themselves and the situation prevented their brains from assessing sound logic.

Now as a result, the Undead have more of a chance to gain a foothold on our civilization, our humanity. Anyone watching the

news can see that Toronto is quickly becoming the antithesis of a tourism hot spot. And the closer you happen to be to Toronto, the more risk you can expect to encounter.

If one could look at a map of Southern Ontario and see the vectors of transmission illustrated, it would look like a bomb had gone off. The damage, in this case the infection, was spreading outward at an alarming rate. The northern shore of Lake Ontario, with all of its urban sprawl, would have become a sea of red. All we want to do is stay as far in front of that sea as possible.

We have been fairly lucky so far by staying off the roads but inevitably we seem to manage to pick up followers when we can't avoid them altogether. While we are careful as anyone can possibly be, you cannot avoid the Undead completely.

We were fortunate enough to spot an isolated and abandoned cabin in the woods to spend tonight in. It's small, but that made it all the more attractive to us. I assume it's a hunting lodge of some sort, being that it's so far from any major access road. Its construction is simple; made of solid brick with two heavy doors and four double paned windows. A lot of egress points if needed and not too many points of weakness to safeguard.

It was a dangerous move to stop for the night especially when we know that there are members of the Undead army shambling in our general direction. It was a direction that we had guided them into taking as well; they had the understanding that there were uninfected people somewhere in front of them.

I may be giving them a little more understanding than they actually have but it's the simplest way to describe it. But we had to stop; all of us were exhausted from our flight out of the city and all of the encounters with the Undead that we had endured. Combat takes a lot out of you; both physically and psychologically. We needed a few moments to stop and recharge. If we didn't we might make a mistake that we would never get the chance to correct.

I guess at some point I should let you all know who we are. We're just a small group of five that came together a few years ago. At one point we had more members but the passage of time has pared us down a bit; time and current events, to be more honest.

We tend to think of ourselves as like-minded individuals - yet having typed that I can't help but smile. If you knew us outside

of these moments you might wonder how in the world we ever came together...

Of course there are some similarities and connections between us. Bob and Max served together in Afghanistan as part of the Canadian military, Ben and I both have medical degrees and Barbara and Bob know each from University. That's pretty much where it ends though.

Ben is a doctor in the Emergency Room of St. Michael's Hospital where all of this started and I work as a pathologist for the Center for Forensic Sciences.

Even-though Bob and Max served together they each had different roles. Max was trained as a sniper so he did a lot of work that is classified and can't really be discussed. Bob, on the other hand became an Intelligence Officer after basic training, mainly because of the education and the penchant for languages that he has. His work is most definitely classified but sometimes he talks about things in bits and pieces from the need to get them out.

Barbara is an Environment Scientist and she works at an Outdoor Education Centre for school children to the northeast of Toronto.

So how did we all come to meet you might wonder? Well, Bob and Max already knew each other; that part is fairly simple to infer. Max's wife, Miranda is - well was - my husband's sister. Barbara and Bob used to date in university but managed to stay in touch after they split (they say amicably, but there's still tension so I think there are unresolved issues). Ben treated Steve, my husband, when he came into the Emergency Room about three years ago after getting shot in the line of duty. Oh, I may have forgotten to mention that my husband was an officer with the Toronto Police Service.

Through the wonder of absent conversations in an otherwise ordinary world, we discovered that we shared something fairly special in common; a love for Zombie media and the willingness and desire to "prepare" ourselves just in case.

I think we all felt a little silly at the time; I'm sure none of us actually believed that we would come to experience a veritable hell on earth. But our discussions and time spent training has gotten us this far so we have to believe that we're better off somehow.

We can all handle different kinds of firearms; Max and Bob having more experience and better aim. Barbara has schooled us all in edible plants and the types of materials that can be found in the woods with which to make the most durable melee weapons if our ammo runs dry before we can stock up. It's amazing, actually, the types of woods that are hard enough to actually skewer someone in a pinch! Ben, a child of the foster care system, grew up trying to find ways to escape his life and as a result, he has collected a wealth of maps; maps you probably didn't even know existed. Heck, I didn't know they existed but they are a godsend to us now.

As for me - I'm a mechanical and technological junkie. I've spent years learning how things work and I can thank my brothers for that. Those skills may be the difference between life and death for us out here. So that's us in a nutshell, just a group of people trying to stay alive.

Tonight we've decided not to light a fire or use any of our camping lights. We don't understand everything about the Undead at this point and we are all tired enough not to want to draw any unwanted attention. The only light we have is from my laptop screen but that's turned as low as I can get it and still see what I am typing to you.

Our hope is that we will be safe tonight and many more nights to come. Some of you out there - those untouched by the reality that we are living first hand - might think this is a joke, a prank or some sick and twisted hoax. I can certainly attest that it is not. What's happening is real and this is our record of it. I do hope that my frantic typing isn't garbled and that I don't repeat myself too often. PLEASE forgive me if I do. My intent is only to give the world a glimpse into our survival until the very last possible moment.

I hope this communication finds you in a safe place where the Undead have yet to proliferate. Pray for Us. Pray for life. Just pray... Please.

## Day 4...

For those of you out there that have no idea what is going on or those dealing with minimal information, I'm going to fill you in with what we know so far. Ben managed to survive being at the epicenter when Patient Zero transformed from being medically dead to Undead. Forgive me if the language I use is technical or scientific; being a pathologist, it's how my brain is programmed to work and right now it's on autopilot.

Four days ago my world - our world - went to hell and I don't think it's coming back. From what I've been able to gather from Ben, Brooks VanReit, whom I will refer to as Patient Zero from this point, came into the Emergency Room of St. Michael's Hospital with practically non-existent vital signs. The staff assigned to treat him tried to resuscitate him but their efforts failed. Sometime between 7:30AM and 7:45AM, he was pronounced dead and as quickly as he died, he came back to life. From what I understand, the doctors and nurses first thought they were witnessing a miracle. They immediately found out how wrong they were.

Ben had tucked himself away in the nearby nurse's station while completing a few charts before going home and he said he had a fairly good view of what transpired. His description of the carnage left in the wake of the reawakening is brutal.

As a doctor, you get used to the sight of blood but even Ben tried to impress upon us the sheer volumes that covered the Emergency Room that day. It was all over the floors making any means of escape difficult if you were in the direct vicinity of the attacks. Arterial spray marked the walls in long sweeping arcs of crimson.

It didn't take long for the nurses and doctors who had been working on Patient Zero and thus been attacked in the chaos that erupted to reawaken and start to attack other people. It was like a wave; attack, death and then reawakening. The more that were attacked, the more that came back.

In one of the busiest Emergency Rooms in Toronto, it was absolute pandemonium. With blood everywhere and many of his colleagues succumbing to death and then entering a second life of sorts, Ben knew it was only going worse.

He said the worst moment he witnessed was an attack on an elderly invalid woman left in the hallway on a gurney. She had nowhere to go when it all started and the fear present on her face and in her frail body made Ben wish he could go to her rescue. Since she wasn't mobile Ben said that it seemed to take them a little longer to find her.

There was a moment that he thought he could have gotten to her but he hesitated. With the moment lost, all he could do was watch from his vantage point as they homed in her fragile frame.

As he retold how they tore her apart, leaving only the bloody mass of a skeleton behind, his eyes welled with tears and his voice caught in his throat. Ben thought that maybe she would escape the same fate as the others given the fact that her small body was very literally shredded.

He was stunned, however, when the bloody pulp of a skeleton started to move. It tried to get up but in its less than whole state, it couldn't quite manage and instead fell to the floor with an audible wet slap. It started to move across the floor powered by what Ben described as sheer will and determination.

It had aimed itself in the direction of a small boy that had taken refuge under the bank of chairs along the wall of the waiting room. Ben could see the whole thing play out from where he was and it just made his heart ache when she caught up to him. The young boy was frozen in place like a deer in headlights. She kept slowly but determinedly slithering across the floor toward him and with each inch it gained, the boy's face grew more scared yet vacant at the same time. Ben described it as such; like there was recognition in the young boy that he would die and instead of fighting, his mind gave over into acceptance.

Realizing that most people were beyond help, he knew he had to leave. What good was he dead - or worse? His best bet was to escape the hospital and prepare to leave the city as soon as possible.

He said getting out was difficult by that point but that he was lucky enough to find a way. Before leaving though he did manage to call 911 and notify them of the situation. He's not entirely sure that the operator took him completely seriously, who would have when the caller is stating emphatically that the dead are coming back to life? In the end, we know that the police responded and became fast believers.

I was a few blocks away working at the CFS (Centre for Forensic Sciences) and I was just beginning to hear the grumblings of some sort of strange occurrence at the hospital. Steve, my husband and thirteen year veteran of the Toronto Police Service called to let me know that some sort of riot (as it had been reported at first) had erupted at St. Mike's and to stay inside until further notice.

Realizing that something serious was going down, I called Ben. I knew he worked at St. Mike's and any information I could obtain from him to pass along to Steve, the better in my books. When I didn't get a hold of him, I hoped for the best, thinking he was probably just busy treating anyone hurt in the riot. I didn't want to think that anything terribly serious had happened to Ben; no one wants to lose a friend, especially under violent circumstances.

At around midday - they started bringing the bodies to us.

But - they weren't really even bodies. I mean they were clinically dead - certainly, but not acting like it. It was readily apparent from the faces and demeanor of the officers bringing in the highly restrained individuals that they just needed to get as many of them off the streets as possible.

The official consensus was that it was an absolute mess out there and even though they had been authorized to use lethal force, it was a battle that they weren't winning. No one in the lab wanted to touch them but my clinical curiosity got the better of me. What I was looking at seemed so utterly impossible; corpses of all races, ages, and gender were in front of me acting as if they were having a psychotic break of some kind.

The blood on them was horrific - and I'm used to blood. Some were missing limbs or parts of limbs where they had been ripped or chewed off. One woman, and the only way I could tell that was from the tattered and bloody clothing she still had hanging from her body, was missing her face. I literally mean the skin and underlying tissue was gone; gnawed off.

You could still see the teeth marks along her hairline. All that was left was the crimson stained surface of bone.

It was at that point that I realized I had to leave. It was hard to believe then and is still just as hard to believe now; the Undead were fighting to assimilate the living in a battle that I wasn't sure we could win.

Not after seeing the after-effects firsthand.

One might ask when the first person realized that the “rioters” were really and truly the “Undead”. I’m not sure myself but it must have been fairly quickly that morning or else why would they have brought them to me? I know all of it seems so strange, so unbelievable that the police were even able to restrain any of them. Yet the state of the bodies that I saw that day could make even the most skeptical believe in life after death. Okay, maybe that’s not an entirely accurate statement since they aren’t technically alive, but it’s the closest explanation I’ve got.

In my heart I would love to believe that the situation in Toronto and the surrounding areas will be brought under control. However, I’m not going to stick around in the thick of it waiting complacently to see if that’s the case. I’m a realist and right now I’m choosing to fight for survival.

I don’t know how long any of the technological infrastructures will remain intact or if anybody out there is even able to read this. All I know is that I will keep posting as long as I am able to. I think people in the world need to know what is going on.

We’re afraid that even if the situation is brought under control that the amount of information (read: truth) that will accurately surface and be reported may be slim to none. For the sake of everyone left alive in the world, we need to collectively band together in order to keep our humanity alive.

After our night in the cabin in the woods we’re starting to encounter more people travelling out of the urban sprawl and the smaller towns in Southwestern Ontario. There are some that want to join up with us but we’ve already decided as a group that we would try to stay small. Stay mobile. Besides we figured it would be easier to survive knowing the particular strengths of each of the persons in our group.

So far we’ve been moving mainly on foot because the roads have been partially gridlocked with cars making them the ideal feeding grounds for the Undead.

It’s sickening really; you can sometimes hear the honking from trapped vehicles. Their horns like the Siren’s call just leading more of the Undead to them...



The day has been pretty uneventful by comparison to recent events. We managed to make good time and put a little more distance between us and them. We did encounter the odd walking corpse but thankfully the Undead have been less prevalent today than yesterday.

While on the move, you learn a few things; certain things become a sixth sense that you never realized that you had. There were certain areas that we instinctively avoided; areas that none of us felt we should enter. It was the subtle clues that we took to heart the most.

While your conscious mind is working on making sure that you are indeed placing one foot in front of the other in a safe and routine manner, your subconscious mind is working at keeping you alive. It's making millions of life and death decisions for you and you just let it.

Trust it.

It's the thing that is telling you right now to get up and get moving. Not to wait for someone to rescue you. The more of us that get out of their way, the less of us that will potentially meet horrible deaths. None of us want to become one of them. That's a fate worse than death.

We felt a little safer sleeping outside tonight as there's a full moon out to help illuminate the woods around us. Obviously it's not the best of circumstances but we need the sleep when we can get it.

It helps of course that we've strung an alarm system of sorts around the perimeter of the camp. Just some rope and a few bells can work wonders if you set them up properly. If anything it will at least give us some time to get our weapons ready if the perimeter is breached.

While we're in the thick of this, I'm not sure how often I will have the chance to update you. Last night, I found the act of recording our journey extremely cathartic and a means of processing the day we had endured. It's also given me a purpose.

I know that I'll be able to continue posting as long as I have access through my mobile internet or some unsecured Wi-Fi signal to leech off of. I'm just a little worried that at some point there will be no one to read these posts. Regardless, they will be immortalized on the World Wide Web for future generations to read.

If there are any future generations...

God, I have to stop thinking like this! I just hope that my words sound an alarm deep in your soul that you'll hear and subsequently heed.

It is a little early to start being pessimistic but after everything I've seen in the past few days and the fact that I'm running for my life, I have to wonder if we, as a global whole, can bounce back. I don't pretend to know what happened to Brooks VanReit before any of this. Did he pick up a bacterial contagion, a virus, or touch some piece of fallen space junk? No one knows. All I know is that he appears to be at the center of all of this and that whatever he had, viral, bacterial or alien; at least it's not airborne. Yet.

Think about it; our bodies are marvels at mutating things. Think of all we know about cancer; think of all we have to learn about it still. Why do the cells in one person decide to mutate but others do not? Why does one person have to experience the devastation of cancer but not others?

It's like the lottery, some win but most don't. That may sound a little callous comparing getting cancer to winning the lottery but it's the best analogy I can come up with at the moment.

Even though I'm digressing from the matter at hand, I guess what I'm trying to say is that we really don't have any idea what we're dealing with. It could have been one thing to start but now it could be something different; something mutated.

The questions that I have are endless but the answers are insufficient and scarce. What it boils down to is the desire, the need to find someone or something to blame.

A faceless, nameless entity is chasing us, using the Undead as its host. It's eating us alive and we are helpless it would seem to stop it. It's multiplying faster than we can kill it and to be honest, we don't even have the means to eradicate it.

A terrifying aspect to all of this is that during our escape we have not witnessed any concentrated effort to contain the epidemic thus far. The Toronto Police made a gallant effort but in the end they failed and most of the officers joined the ranks of the growing Undead army.

Even though we've been trying to travel off the radar, it's apparent from our encounters with the Undead and the lack of

military or police presence anywhere that nothing has been organized.

I keep scouring the web looking for any signs but it seems like there has been a blackout on the whole thing. Viral videos from Toronto on YouTube have disappeared, and there are no recent news reports. It's almost like the net has been sanitized but I don't understand to what end that serves. My sincere hope is that our government is not trying to cover this up. People out there need to know what's going on, if only for the sole purpose to protect themselves.

Holy shit! The perimeter alarm just went off. Hopefully we live to see another day. Pray, NOW!

## Day 5...

The perimeter alarm was triggered by a singular Undead last night. Max thinks it might have been tracking slowly behind us all day as the Undead sometimes do waiting for the living to stop for a reprieve before inconveniently catching up. Its unexpected arrival was met with a swift and final second death but the fear of more of the Undead, especially in the semi-darkness, put every last nerve on edge.

No one got any rest last night which probably contributed to the accident that occurred today. Not that you can call it an accident. Accidents in this new world are anomalies. All we have now are certainties – if we do not take heed, we will not survive. It's just that simple.

We had decided as a group to scope out a somewhat larger urban area closer to the border separating Canada from the United States that had not reported any incidences of the Undead as of yet. We were short of certain necessary supplies that we would need to purchase and knew that at some point we had to restock. Our hope was that we could resupply and then get into the United States without too much incident. Under the current circumstances, the sooner, the better.

After observing the city for about an hour, we were amazed to see that things looked calm and orderly; like nothing apocalyptic was happening only kilometers away. There were no Undead in sight which was promising, and no one appeared to be in any kind of panicked state.

The infection did not look like it had spread this far southwest yet and we could probably get in and get through the city without much of a problem. I have to say that it was a little weird. We had not really managed to travel all that far and the reports on the news must have gotten the people into some kind of an agitated state.

I cannot simply believe that all of the news reports and the like hadn't affected these people. There was no way that I was prepared to believe the Canadian adage of "don't ask, don't tell" was so deeply entrenched in this town.

They had to know what was going on.

Regardless, the absence of the Undead meant that we were going to go into town and exploit their resources before they even realized they needed them. Get in, get out. Easy as pie right? We will never make such an assumption again.

As we walked into town we saw that our first and only stop was right on the relative outskirts. One of those big box-stores where you can buy everything from toilet paper to electronics to ammunition. We stocked up with what we needed and I'm sure that we must have looked somewhat crazy to the people working in the store.

We had decided to split up and leave most of our gear outside with the dirtiest of us. Anyone that had blood on their clothing was out of the question. We were going into this store to purchase ammunition, so making it look like we were stocking up for our next homicidal rampage wasn't going to help us get any service. The fewer questions we had to answer, the better.

We knew that we had to keep everything light and portable; each of us were already carrying a small pack of supplies and adding ammunition, though needed, would only weigh each of us down more.

There was a point where putting more on our back became counterproductive. The heavier our packs were, the slower we could walk. It would also affect our ability to fight off the Undead if we happened to come across more of them in our travels.

Most of the time, we didn't have that moment to shed our packs so it was all about being able to engage in combat if needed with the pack on your back. It was a fine line to dance but each of us had practiced a little. Not a huge lot, mind you; it would have looked awfully weird for us to have taken so much stuff on a hiking trip, not to mention carrying our firearms with us.

You have to remember that while we were subtly preparing before all of this, the last thing we wanted to do was draw attention to ourselves. Too many curious eyes can lead to many more curious questions.

My husband Steve was a member of law enforcement and in a way I was as well, but to have to answer unwanted questions wasn't something that any of us wanted. Not for fear of being ridiculed or laughed at. Those thoughts were actually far from our minds. It was the fact that the political and law enforcement

climates had changed so much since 9/11. We didn't want to be labeled as home-grown terrorists when what we were doing had absolutely no connection. Besides, it wouldn't have served a purpose for us to have been detained, trying to explain it all away. Even I can see how crazy and potentially dangerous we could have appeared to be.

In the store, we still got strange looks. Three very dirty and disheveled people wanting to purchase ammunition wasn't something that they were used to seeing on a daily basis. But no one asked us any questions, so we didn't have to lie.

Once we left the store with our meager but important purchases, we were still surprised by how calm the town was. It was so different from the panic that we had been experiencing for the past few days. Maybe the advance of the Undead had been stopped. Anything was, after all, completely possible.

We should have just backtracked out of town the way that we had come. Instead we decided to take local transit and cut straight through town. The idea was supposed to save us time, supposed to give us a break.

We got on the bus, and everything looked fine. People seemed happy if not a bit wary of the five of us with our guns, gear and gore-pocked clothes.

Then I heard the scream of pure fear.

It was a sound that I had heard before. I had even screamed a scream like that myself only a few days ago. It was the kind of scream that imprints on your soul and chills the marrow flowing through your bones. You hear a scream like that and there is no coming back. You know something is terrifyingly wrong and a part of your mind wants to ignore it; what you can't see can't hurt you. But then your subconscious comes to your rescue and you're able to think about your next steps.

It happened in a heartbeat. One minute he was alive, although he had looked a little under the weather at first glance; the next, he was Undead.

He had been sitting by himself toward the back of the bus, sort of slumped over himself in the seat. There was a bandage on his forearm but to be honest, I didn't think too much of that; not everyone sporting a bandage is infected.

Barbara was the first of us to react, mainly because she was the closest to the disturbance occurring toward the rear of the bus.

Knowing that firing a gun in such close quarters and with the number of people now trying to get as far away from the newly but ravenous Undead was dangerous and careless, she drew a short spear she had fashioned from a fallen maple branch.

She lunged at the thing that was once a middle-aged man as the bus took an inopportune moment to hit a pothole nestled in the road. The bus floor lurched and threw Barbara off-balance, allowing newly dead hands to clasp tightly onto her shoulders.

Before any of us had a chance to react those Undead arms were pulling Barbara ever closer.

Closer to the open mouth of certain death.

Its lips settled into the crook of her neck like those of a lover initiating an intimate interlude. Its teeth could be heard biting into her flesh in the comparative silence of that moment. The head jerked back and a surge of crimson burst forth.

Barbara screamed; in panic, in terror, in realization of what she would likely become. Her face turned to us, disbelief fairly evident but the control was still there. She was prepared to do whatever she could to save many more

The hole in Barbara's neck looked massive, a chasm of crimson on an alabaster background. While you could see the panic in her eyes and hear the panic from the other riders, she kept its attention focused solely on her. In an attempt to what I can only assume was to save her own life, she tried to get her hands up to help staunch the blood but it had too great of a hold on her. Giving up, she clung to the Undead man as it turned its attention to the rest of the riders.

The bus driver pulled over to the curb, opening the doors as he did. Everyone with the ability to exit did so, leaving their belongings behind in their haste. A few people were trapped in the back of the bus, unable for various reasons to pass by the carnage unfolding before them. Everything but their eyes was frozen in horror.

In the space of a moment, the Undead dropped Barbara. She had lost a lot of blood, that fact was apparent from the map of it on her clothing, conquering new ground each second in its quest for freedom.

The shock in her countenance was plain to see. Shock from the attack as well as shock from blood loss. She wasn't dead yet but soon she would be. There was no way Ben would have

been able to repair the damage done to her neck. No way that we could have undone the damage that bite had done to her blood as well.

There was no saving Barbara; we knew and so did she.

The Undead turned and came at us, its speed still slightly quicker than most of its kind mainly from the fact that it still had some oxygen in its blood to help feed the dying muscles.

Bob's rage in that moment was palpable. Barbara lay dying and now it was coming for more of us. He pulled out his hunting knife and with a swift and powerful arc he sliced through its neck almost completely. His aim was kissed by pure chance, or maybe it was a little skill.

Its head hung on for the briefest of moments only by the strength of a few tendons but as the body went limp the last remaining vestiges tore free. The severed head, still claspings the morsel of Barbara's flesh in its teeth, tumbled toward the rear of the bus, startling a response from the frozen passengers. It was as if that was the signal for them to leave and quickly, they fled from the carnage in their wake.

Our attention immediately turned to Barbara. She had slid down the support pole bolted in the middle of the bus and was now slumped forward. Her face was so pale in comparison to the pool of blood growing around her. She was bleeding out; the Undead had punctured her carotid artery in its haste to taste her flesh.

We knew that it wouldn't be long before she was dead. And now her blood, her body was infected. One of our biggest fears had befallen us. We would again be charged with killing someone who we cared about. We knew it and Barbara knew it. She quickly told us that she was sorry and then ordered everyone but Bob to leave. She had clearly chosen him to put an end to what she was going to become.

She had nominated him to extend to her the final dignity that every living thing deserves. Death.

We knew the moment of her death. It was marked by the cry of soul shattering grief that exited the bus. The single shot of Bob's firearm ended her reawakening.

Upon exiting the bus Bob looked at no one, only turning to head back out of town. We gathered our supplies and silently fell in behind him. Bystanders tried to engage us, screaming in their



demand to know what was going on. We had no answers, only warnings.

Get out. They're coming.

None of us spoke for quite some time, all of us lost in our thoughts of Barbara. The first to break the silence was Bob. All he said was this: She didn't deserve that. And he began to tell us more about Barbara. Things that we hadn't known until that moment.

Barbara had grown up really poor. Her family had next to nothing and lived from paycheck to paycheck. Her father barely had work most of the time. Nothing was ever full-time but he was willing to work almost around the clock to make sure that Barbara and her sisters had food to eat and a roof to cover their heads at night.

In school, she was never popular. She had a few friends but they were constantly playing at being mean little girls so she separated herself from them as much as possible without becoming a complete loner. Being a loner would have served her just fine, however. She knew that she wanted to get out of the small northern town and she was willing to study harder than everyone else to get there; and get there she did. Full scholarship to the University of Toronto.

Life in the big city was quite a shock to Barbara. She was a shy country girl from up north. Her town didn't have the multicultural aspect that makes up so much of Canada now. She was lost and alone, but quickly made friends with the boy that lived across the hall from her; Bob. Soon they would start dating and become inseparable. They would study together, even though they were in different programs and around the campus, they became known as the power couple; both of them winning awards in their respective fields of study.

They were perfectly matched. The both had a quick and intense intelligence and they made the cutest couple (or so everyone told them).

Then, in third year, Barbara got pregnant. And it was the pregnancy that tore them apart. Bob was in favor of keeping the baby and Barbara against it. Not because she didn't want children but because she knew that having the baby could have put a hold on her dreams of achievement. It was a slightly selfish reason, but she wanted to have it all before she brought a child into the world.

Slowly but surely, though, Bob was beginning to bring her around to the idea of being a family together. But it wasn't in the cards for them. The unthinkable happened and Barbara lost the baby.

Bob's anger in that moment turned itself completely in her direction. He blamed her. As a result, they broke up and didn't talk for quite some time. It was only in the year before Bob left for Afghanistan that he sought Barbara out to apologize to her. They quickly fell into their friendship again, but it didn't amount to more than that despite Bob's attempts to rekindle them. He had hurt Barbara so badly, that she couldn't even think about allowing him that kind of access into her life again. So they remained friends while they both secretly desired more.

With Barbara gone, Bob seemed a little less whole. We've all experienced loss, some of us quite a bit in the past few days. All we could do was support him in his grief as he had supported us in ours. The truth is that no one deserves to become one of them.

Please do everything you can to avoid that fate. Those are my only words of advice for tonight.

## The Treehouse

It walked with a sickening limp. The accompanying noise was akin to the grinding of teeth, only louder. Much louder. It was a sound that reverberated inside your head, warning you of its imminent appearance.

A voice snaked out of the darkness at me. "It's comin' this way!"

It was Billy. Stupid Billy.

"Shhhh! It's gonna hear you!"

The response was barely above a whisper. Too quiet for poor Billy to hear and likely too intelligent for him to understand.

The grinding noise seemed to get closer. Out of the corner of my eye I could see it. Everything about it was frightening. The slack, waxen face. The left eye drooping out of the socket and laying half eaten on the discoloured flesh of its cheek. The gore pocked clothing relaying the message that it had eaten - recently. The worst sight was its left leg; the skin had been flayed off of most of the lower half and one of the bones was broken. The sound that we were hearing was the scraping of the ends together as it limped awkwardly in our direction.

We didn't have the best hiding spot but sometimes you have to make do with what is around when you're on the move. Technically we were just on the opposite side of a large planked fence, but the fence was broken. It looked like a herd of elephants came through a section just a few feet down from us, but we knew what really happened.

We saw it all go down. About 3 days ago, a group of survivors were fleeing an onslaught of Zombies on the road. With the corpses so thick in front of them, they changed directions and drove straight through the fence.

In any other situation, the action would have been cool to watch but the fence was the only thing keeping the Zombies out of the yard and away from the tree that supported our sanctuary.

As we watched from our vantage point, high above the verdant ground, we saw the truck come through one length only to lose the speed needed to go completely through the length on the opposite side. Instead, it got hung up on the broken fence beneath it and stopped short.

The driver panicked and in their haste to free the floundering truck, managed only to hopelessly tangle it among the hewn boards.

Panic is a funny thing; it can give you superhero capabilities or it can paralyze you. Like a sick game of Russian roulette, it chose paralysis this time.

We listened in horror as the Zombies flooded the backyard and surrounded the car, our minds making movies of what was occurring below us. Each whisper soft sound of their decaying limbs brushing the shiny blue exterior of the truck. The dull pounding of their grimy hands on the glass, almost rhythmic in its intensity. The sharp cracking of the glass as it spider-webbed out from the point of impact. Screams assaulted our ears as the Zombies pulled the occupants through their access point. Not daring to look down lest we give away our position, we were forced to watch the translation of those sounds behind clamped eyelids.

It didn't take long but the memories of what we heard reverberate in our minds even now. Everything that we've seen and heard have melded together to produce the most horrific montages that play across the black expanse each time we close our eyes.

We knew we had to leave our makeshift home. With the hole in the fence, the backyard became a draw for them. We've waited until this moment to climb carefully down the lowered rope ladder, hoping not to attract attention to ourselves. I was the last to descend, cautiously feeling for each woven rung as I watched the scarred and lonely landscape around me, hoping I wouldn't attract any attention.

Over my left shoulder I saw it. The solitary corpse had spotted me and was now limping in our general direction. It was slow but it moved with purpose. Our only hope was to confuse it by waiting until it was in the enclosed backyard before sneaking out behind it.

Fate wanted to play a different game with us today. Not only had it stacked the deck against us with Zombies, it had also given us Billy.

Stupid Billy.

As the broken leg of the Zombie came into view around the smashed edge of the planked span of fence, Billy screamed. High pitched and girly.

He froze, his mouth forming a perfect, round hole as the scream choked in his throat. A face appeared around the damaged edge, almost comical in its surprise and hunger. Its eye locked on Billy, the milky cornea searching for something; recognition perhaps.

With another scream, matched by a strident noise of victory from the Zombie, the dance of death resumed.

The rest of us took the moment of inattention to scale back up the rope ladder, knowing that at some point, we would need to escape. The time will come; we just need to be patient.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Julianne Snow's Bio:



It was while watching Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* at the tender age of 6 which solidified Julianne's respect for the Undead. Since that day, she has been preparing herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own.

*Days with the Undead: Book One* is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. Along with many zombie shorts published on her blog, she has a story in *Women of the Living Dead* as well as two zombie pieces; a standalone short and a collection releasing the summer of 2013. Julianne's second novel in her *Days with the Undead* series will also be released in 2013. Stay tuned!

### Social Media Links:

Twitter: [@CdnZmbiRytr](#)

Facebook: [Julianne Snow](#)

FB Fan Page: [Days with the Undead](#)  
Pinterest: <http://pinterest.com/cdnzmbirytr/>  
Google+:  
<https://plus.google.com/u/0/110149434437717424445/posts>  
Goodreads: [Julianne Snow](#)  
Amazon Author Page: [Julianne Snow](#)  
Blogs: [Days with the Undead](#) & [The FlipSide of Julianne](#)  
& [The Randomness of Julianne](#)

### ***Days with the Undead: Book One***

#### Synopsis:

It's a journal of survival.

Five people set out to escape the Undead who have risen too close to home. Join the emotional and physical struggle as they began on the third day after the awakening of Brooks VanReit, as they are recorded from the point of view of Julie, a former pathologist and part-time survivalist.

Each entry is geared toward helping those who want to help themselves and maybe give a few that don't a swift kick in the ass. Join our group of survivors on their journey through these Days with the Undead.

#### Links for Purchase:

Amazon: [US](#), [Canada](#), [UK](#), [Germany](#), [France](#), [Spain](#), [Italy](#),  
[Japan](#), [Brazil](#)

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## Rebecca Snow

### *A Mile in His Shoes*

Del Weldon looked down into the hold and counted the bodies swaying in the flashlight beam. Twenty pairs of gray-green arms strained toward the light. Reaching to the floor, he grabbed the cold metal handle and pulled. A wheel shrieked as the steel trapdoor rolled on its runners. He shut the squad back into darkness. Removing a pen and a small black notebook from a breast pocket, he scribbled the tally and made a note to grease the caster. The smallest noise upset the squad sequestered beneath the uninsulated floor. They called for quiet as Del unhooked a leather harness from a storage locker and snapped it onto a loop dangling from the ceiling. Tomorrow, the count might be up to twenty-one. Or perhaps, it would still be twenty.

Stepping to the wall, he grabbed a crank and spun it clockwise. Empty straps lowered to the floor. Winding in the opposite direction, the loose yoke rose to its former position hovering in midair. The chain holding it swung without a jingle. Del made another notation in his book before taking a final glance around the room. Aside from his desk and the closed metal panel, the floor was clear. The monotony of the block wall was broken by a single sheet of safety rules and the locker. The few fixtures gleamed. Dust bunnies had been swept down onto the squad's cell. He would bring the oil for the squeaky wheel in the morning. Switching off the lights, he left the room and closed the door.

"Evening, Tony," Del said. He flashed an identification card at the guard behind the shatterproof glass. "Quiet night?"

"Usually is before we lose one," Tony said as he pressed a button.

The lock clanked as it released. Del nodded then entered the corridor beyond. Behind him, the gate swished closed. Before



him lay a hallway filled with doors leading to eight-foot by eight-foot rooms. A fluorescent light flickered at the end. Del made another notation in his book and walked halfway down the passage. Rubber soled shoes squished on the waxed floor tiles. He turned left to face a door marked with the number 313 in a thick layer of shiny black paint. Striding toward the small, eye level window, Del stared into the chamber. All the rooms were almost identical, the occupant being the sole difference. A lumpy cot stood on the left, a small receptacle for human waste on the right. In this particular compartment, a man in an orange jumpsuit reclined with an arm over his face. Lights out wasn't for another four hours, so darkness had to be manufactured. Del rapped a knuckle on the tiny glass pane. The man craned his neck without dropping his arm.

"What now?" the man asked and lowered his head back to the mattress.

"Mister James, I need your meal request," Del said, reaching for his small notebook.

"I'm not hungry," the man said. "And what does it matter? I'll be dead before it digests."

"It's protocol." Del waited, pen poised above the unspoiled sheet of paper.

"Screw protocol. I'm not hungry."

A large, silver-toned clock ticked on the wall as the second hand measured lost moments. Del shifted his weight to his left foot. The light at the end of the hall brightened before flickering again.

"If you don't tell me what you want, I'll be forced to guess." Del tapped the glass again. "I don't think you want the last food you see to be my wife's faux meatloaf."

The man groaned and rolled toward the wall.

"Might I suggest a breakfast food?" Del asked.

The man sat up.

"Don't bring me anything. I don't want a last cigarette, I don't want last rights, and I don't want a last meal. I don't want anything but to be let of this cage. But no, that's out of the question because I was the only one they could blame."

"Excuse me, sir," Del said in a voice he used to calm his wife's nightmares. "You had your day in court, and you were

sentenced. There's nothing I can do for you other than bring you your last meal."

"Day in court, my ass." The man stepped to the little window and slammed his fists on either side of it. "It was a bunch of clowns at a circus." Spittle flew from his mouth and dotted the glass.

"Would you like me to summon your lawyer?" Del asked, retreating from the man's rage.

Mr. James spun on his heel and threw his arms in the air before dropping onto the cot.

"No, she was useless." He let out a sigh. "And can you at least call me Patrick? Not even a day left, and I'd like to remember I had a name."

Del glanced toward the guard station before looking back into the tiny cell.

"Certainly, Patrick. Now, will you please tell me what you want for breakfast?"

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Del planned to leave as soon as he'd left the meal request with the facility chef, but found himself walking back to the office instead. Patrick's words tugged at his mind. The key turned the tumblers. He let himself into the extermination room and cushioned the door against his hand to shut it. Tiptoeing across the floor to keep the squad undisturbed, he flipped through a stack of files resting in a wire basket on the desk. Del dragged the one marked "Patrick James" open on top of the blotter. The pock-marked, wooden chair wobbled as he lowered himself into it.

The procured pages described Patrick James as having been a decorated soldier during the original outbreak. His bravery and quick thinking had saved scores of men and women from becoming shamblers themselves. What was left of Kingston had been renamed the Jamestown Sector in his honor. But as with some valorous heroes, the information portrayed his family life as having been anything but glorious. According to his file, he had killed his wife and three daughters after taking them prisoner and barricading himself inside their home. Del was surprised that the media hadn't swarmed the scene. Reading the file was the first he had heard of the story.

Closing the folder, Del pushed himself back from his desk. Chair legs scraped across the flecked industrial tiles. He could hear

the moans through the trapdoor. He sighed knowing the squad wouldn't relax for hours, but he had to get home. Locking the door, he set off toward the transit station.

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"Don't they always say they're innocent?" Del's wife asked. She lifted a wooden spoon to her lips and blew on the end to cool its contents before sipping the sauce. "Perfect. Dinner will be ready in about five minutes."

She turned off the stove and removed the pan from the element.

"Yeah, they all say they didn't do anything wrong." Del smiled. "It's always not what it seemed, or they were framed. The best one I've heard was some guy said his dog made him kill his neighbors. That guy would have been committed before the outbreak. Now, he's making himself useful."

Del laughed as he set the chipped plates in the hand-me-down table he and Jenny had received as a wedding gift. Mismatched flatware rested on stained napkins. Two plastic cups finished off their place settings.

"But he seemed different. I can't put my finger on why, but I don't think this James guy should be in there."

"Can you do anything for the man?" Jenny asked. She pulled another pan from the heat and brought it to the table.

"Not really. At least nothing that I can think of that's legal." Del held his plate out, and his wife spooned on dripping strands of pasta. "Anyway, his file said he killed his wife and kids."

Jenny lowered the pan midway to the table and threw an incredulous stare at her husband.

"Then why do you want to help him?"

Del shook his head and smoothed a napkin onto his lap.

"I don't know. Maybe it's because he saved more people than he was supposed to have killed."

Jenny returned the pan to the stove and reached for the sauce. Pouring it onto Del's pasta, she slid her gaze sideways and looked at him.

"But he killed his own children," she said. "That can't be forgiven."

Easing herself into her chair, she shook open a napkin and placed it over her swollen stomach. She was due to give birth to their first child in a month. Del hoped it was a girl.

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Feeling the vibration in the button under his finger, Del heard a buzzer sound behind the wall. A seamed partition slid aside, and a tray appeared in front of him.

"All set, Mr. Weldon?" a woman wearing a white hair net and latex gloves asked. Wisps of gray curls peeked around her face.

"Yes, Lucy. Ready as always." Del took the tray and stepped back into the hallway.

"You go get those bad guys." Lucy smiled, shaking a fist in the air before disappearing behind the panel.

"Yeah, I guess," Del mumbled.

He took a deep breath and sighed. Even though he'd taken the prisoner's breakfast order, Del hadn't been prepared for the scent of bacon. He wasn't sure when he'd last had a meal that tempted him like this one. His wife cooked like a skilled chef, but there was only so much she could do with canned beets and endless boxes of pasta.

Del tapped the door to 313 with the edge of the tray. Tinny clangs echoed in the hall. Patrick James stood up, stretched, and took two steps toward the door. Holding the tray with his left arm, Del unlocked a small door the size of a large mail slot and opened it. He removed the metal lid covering the meal and slid the tray through the hole into the prisoner's waiting hands.

"Would you like anything else?" Del asked. "Is there anyone you'd like to talk to, any last requests?"

Patrick drew his eyebrows together and stared at Del through the small window.

"I missed the sunrise, didn't I?"

Del nodded.

"Well, is there any chance I can see the sky one last time?" Patrick asked, tilting his head.

"You didn't let your wife and kids see the sky," Del said.

Patrick slammed the tray onto the cot. Del saw the bacon bounce into the air. The prisoner turned and stalked back to the small window.

"Is that what the records say?" Patrick's blue eyes glared through the glass. "They say I killed my family?"

Del nodded. Patrick threw back his head and grunted before turning his back to the door. Del stared through the window and waited. He thought Patrick looked like a caged lion at

the zoo. No one was certain what happened to the animals, but the zoos had been empty ever since. Patrick leaned his head against the cinder block wall at the back of his cell. Del thought he heard the man talking.

“Excuse me?” Del asked.

Patrick spoke again.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

Patrick turned.

“I said,” Patrick shouted. “Then, I might as well be dead.”

Del tilted his arm and glanced at his watch. The hands pointed to 8:30AM. Patrick’s extermination was scheduled for 11AM.

“It won’t be long now,” Del said under his breath.

Patrick shuffled back to the cot and flopped down next to his breakfast.

“Any chance I can see the sky?”

The law said prisoners sentenced to extermination were allowed a last meal, last rights, and a last request. Patrick had refused his last rights, almost refused his last meal, and his last request wasn’t against any law as far as Del knew.

“Let me see what I can do,” Del said before relocking the slot. He smacked a palm against the door and trotted back to the guard station.

“I need roof access,” Del said to the uniformed man behind the window. He didn’t recognize the guard but noticed his name badge said “Thompson.”

The man pressed some buttons on a keypad. A metal panel folded out from below the window revealing a set of keys. Del pocketed them.

“I’ll also need a set of restraints.”

The guard raised his eyebrows and peered at Del.

“I hope those items aren’t going to be used together,” the guard said.

“Officer Thompson, I am required to grant the last wishes of our detainees. The man in three-thirteen is scheduled for extermination in two and a half hours. He has requested to see the sky.”

The guard lowered his eyebrows and nodded before leaning back in his chair and reaching into a cabinet. Turning back to the window, he smiled.

“Here you go.” The man put restraints into a container and slid them through the opening. “I thought you were going to throw somebody off the roof. You’ll need to sign for those.”

Del scribbled his signature on the next empty line of the sign out sheet and returned to cell 313. Patrick sat on his cot leaning his head back on the wall. His arms rested on his knees. Half of the bacon remained on the plate. Del unlocked the slot.

“Hands through,” he said.

Patrick stood and moved toward the door. His hands slid into view. Del placed the restraints around Patrick’s wrists and pulled the buckles.

“Please return to your cot,” Del said. He unlocked the deadbolt and removed the padlock from the door.

Stepping inside the cell, Del secured Patrick’s ankles with the second set of restraints and pulled him to his feet.

“Can you walk?” Del asked.

Patrick shuffled forward a few steps.

“Good enough,” Patrick said. Using his bound hands, he motioned to his breakfast plate. “Want some bacon for the road?”

Del eyed the delicacy as he strapped a collar around Patrick’s neck. A leash trailed halfway down the man’s back.

“No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself, but it was pretty good.”

Del picked up the end of the lead as Patrick shuffled into the hall. The two men made their way down the corridor through three sets of guards and doors onto an elevator. When the metal doors slid closed, Patrick leaned against the back wall and took a deep breath.

“Do you want to know what really happened?” Patrick asked.

“To what?” Del pressed the button that would take them to the roof.

“The real story that wasn’t in my records. What happened to my family on the last day of their so called lives.”

Del shrugged as the elevator rose.

“I used to be a soldier, a good soldier. Did they mention that?”

Del nodded.

“I had three girls. Maggie, Taylor, and Jill. They all favored their mother, my wife. She was the love of my life until

she met someone else while I was off saving the world.” Patrick scratched his nose on his shoulder and strained to get more comfortable in his restraints. “She decided she wanted to leave me, but she didn’t want the girls. Her lover didn’t like children.”

“Why didn’t you get custody and let her go?” Del tilted his head, trying to understand.

“I would have been OK with that, but she had already made other plans. The man she’d fallen for had a farm outside the city.” Patrick motioned with his forehead toward where Del thought the city gates should be.

“I thought outland farms were extinct,” Del said.

He scratched the back of his neck with a well-clipped fingernail. Laboratories raised all the livestock for consumer consumption. The elevator continued to rise.

“Not that kind of farm.” Patrick cleared his throat. “He raises shamblers and sells them on the black market.”

“Who would buy black market shamblers?” Del wrinkled his nose as if a skunk had trotted into the small space.

“Anyone without a conscience looking for cheap knock-offs to use as scare tactics or terrorist cells.”

Del thought of his own squad. The paperwork for the original ten had been stamped in bold blue and red with the words “guaranteed free-range.” The facility had paid the wranglers a pretty penny for quality. The squad wouldn’t be as effective had they been farmed.

“How do you know all this?” Del asked.

“Because Mary, that was my wife, told me before I locked her in the attic with the kids.”

The elevator chimed. The doors slid open to reveal a short hallway leading to an exit. Patrick shuffled forward as Del shook the correct key free from the others on the chain. He unlocked the last lock and let in a fresh breeze. Patrick filled his lungs with air and exhaled in a long, slow breath before continuing.

“She hadn’t wanted me to have the girls. She said I had deserted her too many times while I was trying to do my duty, and she was bitter. She met this guy, and he talked her into setting the girls free. That’s what he called it. Setting them free.”

Patrick took a step toward the edge of the roof as he gazed up at a flock of drifting clouds. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” He motioned toward the sky with his chin.

“Yeah,” Del said distracted by the man’s words. “But what did your wife mean by setting them free?”

Patrick turned and pierced Del with a scowling glance.

“She had injected them with the infection. They were turning into zombies. She was taking them to the farm. That’s why I locked them in the attic before they changed. I couldn’t let her take them to the farm and be sold. I couldn’t let her get away with it. They could have grown up, gone to school, gotten married. I could have had grandkids.”

Patrick dropped his chin to his chest and let out a long sob. Leaves murmured in the slight breeze as a small bird twittered to rest on a branch. Del shuffled his feet in the gravel and chewed on the inside of his lip.

“What happened next?”

Patrick lifted his head and huffed before continuing.

“After the girls turned, they attacked their mother. They didn’t leave enough of her to turn.” Patrick lowered his voice to a whisper. “I had to put them down before the authorities came and carted them off to be trained. Do you have kids?”

Del shook his head.

“Not yet, but we’ve got one on the way.”

Patrick pursed his lips into a small smile. He stared at the passing clouds.

“Why didn’t you tell someone?” Del asked.

Patrick let out a bitter laugh.

“I wanted to during the trial, but the dump truck they assigned to my case told me I’d be charged with slander in addition to murder if I took the stand. So I kept quiet and watched the rest of my life go up in flames.”

A brisk wind flapped Del’s coattails.

“How come the story never made the news?”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you,” Patrick said, shaking his head.

“Try me.”

Del crossed his arms and waited. Patrick shuffled toward the edge of the roof. Del wouldn’t have blamed the man if he’d tried to jump, but he doubted Patrick would leave the rest of his story untold.

“Have you seen the safety billboards?” Patrick asked.



“You mean the ones with the guy in the suit surrounded by half-naked women?”

“Yeah,” Patrick snorted. “That guy is the head of the Community Safety Council. He’s the one that deploys the troops to outbreak sites. He decides where to build up the walls and where to tear them down. He’s the one that pardons the criminals and hires the guards for the city. I’m guessing he even hired you.”

“You’re saying Theodore Marquet owns the farm?”

Patrick nodded.

“Do you have proof?”

Patrick shook his head and dropped to his knees on the gravel rooftop.

“The only thing I have is a vague idea of where it is.”

“Well, that’s a start, but without proof, I don’t think anyone will believe it.”

Del ran a hand through his hair and glanced at his watch. Patrick had an hour to live.

“You believe me?” Patrick asked, squinting up at Del.

“I don’t know,” Del answered. “But we’d better head back inside.”

Del helped Patrick stand, shuffled him back to his cell, and unlocked his restraints. Slipping the pen from his pocket and tearing a piece of paper from his notebook, Del handed the items to Patrick through the slot.

“Write down what you know about the farm. I’ll see if there’s anything I can do to postpone your extermination.”

“Hey, man,” Patrick said. “I’ll write down what I know, but you don’t need to postpone anything. I’m ready to die. I don’t want to hear my girls screaming in my nightmares anymore.”

“I’ve still got to try,” Del said, tapping the door before jogging back to the office.

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Del’s attention to detail had earned him high praise in every job he’d held. He circled the pristine room looking for something to sabotage and wished he’d been more of a slacker. He had oiled the trapdoor that morning. The harness wasn’t necessary, so there was no point slicing it to ribbons. He couldn’t even lock the door and lose the keys because the closest guard station had a spare set.

If Patrick had shared his story last night instead of this morning, Del might have had time to fashion a replacement for the prisoner. The previous exterminator had managed it twice with a sculptor and a slab of pork. No guarantee accompanied such a proxy. The third time the man had attempted the ruse, the management had discovered his scheme. They exterminated him along with the original quarry.

Del shouted in frustration at the situation and heard his squad moan in reply. Overfeeding them was out of the question. He knew from watching during the original outbreak their appetites never diminished.

The clock chimed once. Fifteen 'til the hour. Del trudged from the room to retrieve the prisoner.

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"Please, put your arms through the slot," Del said in a flat voice.

Two arms wiggled through the opening.

"Don't look so down," Patrick said as he palmed the pen and paper back to Del. "I'll see my girls soon."

"Don't you want to live?" Del shackled the man's arms before opening the door and attaching the collar.

"Nobody lives forever. And besides, there's not much left in this world for me."

"Do you have any regrets?" Del snapped the leash to the collar.

The lights in the room buzzed. A fly crashed into the bulb. Patrick tilted his head and twisted his mouth into a frown before answering.

"I can't say I regret marrying Mary. I'd never have had my kids. I can't say I regret being deployed. I saved a lot of people." Patrick blew out a breath and tilted his head. "I guess I regret not seeing what was coming. I could have saved my girls."

The ankle restraints swished along the floor with his every step. Patrick nodded to the guard behind the glass as they walked past. The light at the end of the hall flickered. Without another word, the two men traversed the final corridor. When they reached the extermination room, Del stopped.

"We can keep walking."

“No, I need to go. And you need to be around for you baby.” Patrick flicked his chin toward the closed door. “Is this the place?”

Del led Patrick into the room and strapped him into the leather harness. Unfastening the restraints, Del tossed them on the desk. He watched as the leash slithered to the floor. A stack of paperwork waited for his signature.

“Any last words?” Del asked.

Patrick smiled.

“If I walk.” Patrick swallowed. “Don’t let me walk for long.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Del promised as he squatted, grasping for the trapdoor’s handle and pulled.

The silent wheels rolled in the tracks. Del stared into the milky eyes of his squad. Their bony fingers seemed to lengthen as they reached toward their prey. Why did they have to be so competent?

“And if the opportunity ever comes, take out the farm,” Patrick whispered. “Just not at the expense of your family.”

Looking up at the man swinging above him, Del gave a slight nod. The clock chimed the first eleven. Del walked to the crank and turned the handle.

“Goodbye, Patrick.”

Patrick spun in the harness and saluted as Del lowered him through the trapdoor into the waiting arms of the squad.

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Rebecca Snow is a Virginia writer whose cats could conquer the world if they didn’t sleep so much. Her stories have been published in a number of anthologies and online. You can find her blathering on [cemeteryflowerblog.wordpress.com](http://cemeteryflowerblog.wordpress.com). She’s stalkable on Twitter @cemeteryflower. You can also follow her on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/cemeteryflower). Look for the bloody handprint. Originally published in Library of the Living Dead’s *Live and Let Undead*, “A Mile in His Shoes” is currently being expanded into a novel.

## *Anna Taborska*

### *Picture This*

Picture this: you've been hanging around for years in Uncle Geoffrey's stinking dark house, waiting for the old codger to pop off so you can inherit his loot. You've wasted your youth listening to his plaintive gibbering and cleaning out his bedpan. Finally, you can't stand it anymore. You wait until he's asleep and then you put his pillow over his face and push down hard until he stops kicking. Then you dig a hole at the bottom of the garden and bury him in it. At last you're free to live your life the way you deserve.

But Uncle Geoffrey comes back. And he brings with him Aunt Mildred, cousin Hildegard and a dozen other decomposing occupants of the local cemetery. They shuffle grimly towards the house. You try the back way out, but are stopped by a rotting corpse with green guts dangling from its bloated belly. You bolt the doors and secure the windows, but from somewhere to your left you hear the sound of breaking glass.

Then the front door comes flying off its hinges, and enter Uncle Geoffrey, his face grey and his eyes still bulging from the strain of breathing mucus-covered pillow instead of air. He moves towards you stiffly, rigor mortis turning his fingers into talons and his legs into rigid planks of wood. He's drooling down the front of his gown, and his bloodshot eyes never blink. From the way he's staring at you, you can't tell if he's overcome with rage or if he just wants to rip your head off and eat your brains.

You fumble with the shells of the shotgun you've just wrenched from the cupboard in the corner. You aim at Uncle Geoffrey's head and pull the trigger. Uncle Geoffrey's head explodes. But Uncle Geoffrey just keeps coming...

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Anna is a horror writer and filmmaker. Her debut short story collection, *FOR THOSE WHO DREAM MONSTERS*, will be coming out later this year. You can view Anna's resume and watch clips from her films here:

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*Ally Thomas*

***Zombie Wolf***  
***The Next Generation Excerpt***

By Ally Thomas  
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**Introduction**

The following is a short excerpt from a new paranormal fantasy series by Ally Thomas entitled, “Zombie Wolf”.

Here’s a synopsis of the first installment, “Zombie Wolf: The Next Generation #1” to be released later this year or in 2014:

At twenty-four Zachary has been through many zombie outbreaks and knows how to stay alive. He's been so good at killing zombies for so many years that he makes a living at it. He claims it's the reason he has the nickname the 'Zombie Wolf' because he's a werewolf who kills zombies. However, that's not all there is to it. Zachary is no ordinary werewolf.

Zachary's destiny unfolds when he comes face to face with the next generation of zombies and an innocent bystander is bitten. He considers killing the attractive girl because she's as good as dead. But when he sees she has a mark, same as what he was born with, he knows he must save her.

**3015 A.D.**

“We’re not killing her.” I stood between my team and this girl I had just saved from an existence worse than death. The coffee shop was demolished and we were knee-deep in dead ex-zombies. It had been a normal seek and destroy mission on Earth until this had happened. But I wasn’t backing down, not until I knew who she was, and more importantly why did she have the

same mark I had been born with. She was a werewolf too, or at least I was determined to find out what she was before she died.

“Call it in,” I growled to Rex.

“No,” he shouted at me, knowing better than to mess with me as he pushed against the other two guys on my team who held him back. Zombie Wolf was not just a nickname I had gotten for being a werewolf who had killed massive amounts of zombies over the twenty-four years of my life. It was part of my blood. Literally. I couldn’t be killed by them and I couldn’t be infected.

“Maybe we can talk about this,” McCormick offered.

Simon nodded, tugging on Rex’s dark green shirt. Neither of them moved forward one inch. They all had seen my transformation a time or two before, when the fighting got really bad. I had saved all of them more times than I could count. But Rex was the asshole of my team, and the Earth representative. I regretted having made him my point of contact when I visited Earth. I had never used my weapons on any of them, but that could change very quickly.

“Call it in,” I repeated. Slowly and very deliberately, I popped my neck. My eyes flashed gold. I held one hand on the girl’s shirt, trying to keep her still.

Exasperated, Rex conceded to my command and placed his index and middle fingers to his right temple. “This is a mistake.” He mouthed back to me as he made the connection with the Containment facility on our planet. With our implants installed soon after we were born, cell phones weren’t needed for work. They weren’t really needed at all in the year 3015 A.D., but we still had them for personal use because it looked cool. Unnecessary, but cool. And for jobs like this one on Earth, we had to blend in as best we could until the zombie killing started.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw McCormick hit Simon in the shoulder. “Look man.”

“What?” Simon asked.

“She has the same mark Z has. Look.”

I ignored that they were now staring at my neck and the girl’s neck. I knew she had the same birthmark. That had to mean something. *Was she like me? Was she truly like me?*

I heard Rex verify the location and coordinates. The room immediately filled with a blue mist that I knew would do two things: clean up the zombie mess and make a big enough

distraction for me to vanish. I grabbed the girl by the elbow, probably rougher than I should have, and pulled her into my arms. She fit perfectly against my body. I sighed. *Wouldn't you know it? I'd meet my mate and she was dead, or soon to be dead? No one could survive the new virus I had been getting reports about. Luckily, I already had it. I had been born with it. No blood virus affected me. I was immune to everything. That's what made me 'unique' as my mother phrased it.*

"We're getting out of here and you're not going to leave my side." I whispered to the girl, letting my lips brush past the top of her head. She was a few inches shorter than me at six feet. My height I had acquired from my dad's side of the family. Werewolf descendants of his ancestry were extremely tall. I wasn't seven-foot-tall like him but when I wore my 'zombie killing' hiking boots I came close.

"Or what?" the girl snapped back.

"Or you die. My friends are ready to kill you." I grabbed her shoulders, facing her toward the team I had been assigned while on Earth for my mission. "Humans have itchy trigger fingers." I shook her a little, hopefully to drive my point home. I had about thirty more seconds as they bungled around in the fog before they realized I was gone. "You want to stay here with them?" I asked.

"I'm as good as dead. I know that."

"Not necessarily," I replied.

"You have a cure," she whispered.

I heard the astonishment in her voice. I didn't have to see the shocked expression on her angelic face. I had heard that voice before. It was about time I tested the cure I had been working on. Rex and the guys thought I was nuts. But Rex and the guys didn't understand a lot of things when it came to me and who I really was.

"Possibly," I said, wrapping her arms around my waist. "I've got you. Don't let go."

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"Where are we?" She asked me that question when we surfaced in the familiar surroundings of my room on my planet.

I already loved the sound of her light, whimsical voice. Pointing at my favorite chair, I offered it to her, grumbling to myself as I considered my options. I didn't really want to tell her just how far from home she currently was. *Space travel was very*



*difficult the first time. What could I tell her? 'Fancy this, I zapped you to Kepler 1. Welcome.' Ugh. Hopefully she knew about the outlining planets that had been cleared for human habitation in 2063 A.D. It amazed me that some humans still didn't know they could leave Earth and travel to other planet, ones not infected with zombies. It was still an option for any of us, werewolves, humans, vampires, whoever. It never occurred to the humans to consider space travel in the face of ongoing outbreaks.*

I shoved off my boots and tossed them in the corner. I ran my fingers through my shortly cropped black hair, thankful I had recently gotten a haircut. For obvious reasons, zombie killing and space travel made me sweat. *Get to the point*, I thought. *You don't have time for that. You don't know how long she has!*

"You're in my room. That's all you need to know," I uttered, turning away to quickly change my t-shirts. I'd have to forego the shower. I hoped the tone I used with her made me sound like a bad ass and an individual not to be questioned.

She glared back at me. It melted my heart. I gritted my teeth. *Fucking fate. This is why I don't date, especially on Earth*, I said to myself as I tried to ignore her beauty. Her small frame made her look like a petite doll resting in my chair. I thought of my charming self that I changed into when I needed a huge favor from my mother. It never worked on my dad because I was too much like him. He could always see through my crazy schemes. 'You get that from your mother I'm afraid,' he told me often. Watching the girl try to assimilate where she was, I elected to present my charming self to her.

"How do you feel?"

She swished her big blue eyes side to side, analyzing my room, and rubbed her hands along the bite wound on her right wrist, examining it. "I feel okay. Is that normal?"

"I don't know really. The virus works fast on humans. You were born on Earth?"

From my favorite large lounge chair, she smiled at me and flipped her legs out from under herself. She couldn't sit still. The virus was working on her.

I knew what she was. I wanted to know if she knew. The 'w' word didn't come up with unless the person brought it up.

Crossing her legs again - left knee over right and then right knee over left - she couldn't get comfortable. "I'm not human."

"What are you then?" I asked.

“I’m were.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever, dude. Werewolf, you know.” She flicked her long blond hair over her shoulder and then gathered it up into a ponytail and started playing with it.

I wanted to bury my head in her thick hair. I’d never seen such a honey blond hair color, except maybe on some of the fledglings of the vampire angel, Michael. All my kind had the ‘dark look’ as we call it. Both my mom and dad, a vampire and a werewolf had black hair and dark features.

“That’s not what my family calls it,” she retaliated. “It’s just being ‘were’. I haven’t gone through the change yet, so technically I’m not...”

Before she could finish her sentence, she started convulsing. Her blue eyes rolled up in her head. This was not going to be easy...at all.

I rushed to her side. Of course, she was oblivious to my movements, but I knew I had to keep her from getting away from me or leaving my room. It was my only chance. It was her only chance.

I wrestled with her, finally pinning her into the large recliner. “Hold still,” I shouted. *Christ, I don’t even know your name*, I thought. The realization stabbed into my heart. *How fucking sad*, I said to myself.

“How fucking sad, is this?” I asked her as she thrashed about. At times, her long hair covered her face.

She growled at me. Viciously. Sadistically. When she threw her head upwards, I saw the demon virus surface in her white eyes. She struggled against me, biting, snapping, heaving her head, the only part of her body she could move, at me. A faint smell of roses hit me. *Strawberry shampoo*, I wondered. *I’ve got to at least know your name*.

Suddenly visions of my demonic aunt flashed before my eyes. The stories my mom and dad had told me. The images I had seen myself, in my nightmares. The snakes. The hounds. The pits. The pain. The torture. The sacrifices. It was the origin of the new virus, the one I had feared my entire life would finally arrive, the one passed on to me when my demonic aunt had bitten my mother when she was pregnant with me. Succumbing to it and becoming one of them was Hell for human, werewolf, vampire, or

zombie. The virus didn't play any favorites. Somehow my mother survived and I was born mostly normal. It didn't affect me. Well...sort of.

Even with the countless transfusions I had been given since birth, the blood virus didn't leave me. It was a part of me. It was in my DNA. It was the reason I was a different type of werewolf. It didn't matter if most people I met didn't 'get me' or understand what I was. I knew I'd never be rid of the virus, and I'd probably never be understood by another. *One day I want to meet my aunt and show her what I am*, I thought. *I knew on a new level why my mother despised her sister now. She was the reason this girl before me was fighting for her life.*

A pain surfaced on the side of my neck. My birthmark burned again, same as it had when I had seen the zombie bite the girl. Amid the chaos in the coffee shop, the tingling sensation had gotten my attention. *Was it a call to another creature like me?*

Now in my room, the girl slammed her head into the back of the chair, whisking her golden locks over her shoulders. I got a glimpse of her neck. The mark on her neck was glowing as well. I knew I had a chance to try something insane.

Maybe my cure would work. If not, the girl would be dead quick enough like the others infected who didn't make it. But I had to figure out something. A cure had to exist for this new virus that was jumping species. Werewolves, vampires, humans were all at risk now. We had been getting reports about instances of such cases.

Afterwards I wouldn't have time to send a seek and destroy distress signal to my dad or my team. I didn't want to be destroyed or have this girl destroyed, but we'd need to be if this didn't work.

I repositioned my body on the girl again, this time straddling her. I growled at her, baring my teeth. The zombie wolf was always in me. I didn't have to work at it anymore. He was only a moment's notice away, always waiting, always ready. All I had to do was visual the zombie wolf and I'd turn into him. To what degree I transformed, sometimes did matter. I could control how far 'zombie' I'd go.

When my long claws came forth, elongating and extending from my fingertips, I felt the zinging sensation. *Fuck*, I thought. *I hate that feeling.* But I didn't will them to retreat again into my hands

again. There was no turning back now.

I watched as they grew longer, some twenty-four inches – one inch per year of my werewolf age. My claws were as strong as steel. I slammed my hands down into the rungs of the recliner chair. They dug in further than I had intended. My claws ripped through the soft pillow fabric, slamming into, and then pass, the metal frame. My muscles filled out, the upper portion first followed by my thighs and legs. I stopped changing any further in front of the girl. My sunken skull face I could save for another day. She didn't need to see the complete zombie wolf just yet.

The girl paused for a moment. With the basic appearance of my werewolf self, I had probably scared the last fiber in her being.

"You've never seen the likes of me, have you?" I asked, my wolf sense bringing out the cocky attitude I possessed.

Her eyes widened. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry to say it gets worse."

She simply nodded.

"If this doesn't work," I said to her. My eyes flashing werewolf gold. My mouth full of the one inch razor sharp demon teeth I had inherited from my demonic grandfather who was the other member of my mom's family who she refused to let me to meet. "If this doesn't work, we're both dead," I told the girl.

Telepathically I sent the signal to my dad. He'd have to destroy us both. My mom would never forgive me, but I had to know if the girl was like me. She *had* to be like me. I couldn't be one of a kind, a freak of nature because of a demonic blood virus.

When I sank my fangs into the girl's neck, into her birthmark same as mine, she calmed down for a few moments. The burning sensation in my neck subsided as well. I worked feverishly sucking away the poison. Its bitter taste was the first thing I felt sliding down my throat. As I drank from her, spitting out the poison in between breaths, I hoped and prayed I'd eventually taste blood. Then I'd know the virus had been cleaned out of her system. She had to be worth saving.

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"Zachary, we need to talk."

When I opened my eyes, my vision registered everything upside down. *This can't be right*, I thought to myself. *Did my cure not work?* Quickly I realized my dad was standing in the middle of my

room, and I was hanging from the ceiling upside down. His tall, muscular frame commanded a presence that was all his own. Seven feet tall. There was no missing him in a crowd. He wore a tightly fitted gray t-shirt and black nylon gym shorts which was his normal attire and complimented his dark looks. Black hair. Gold eyes. Rugged features. *I was my dad's son through and through*, I thought. Except for the scarring and tribal tattoos I had across the right side of my face, from the virus, I looked just like him. My mom had told me that many times.

"The old man saved your ass again," my dad said.

Dad was not old by any means. When you're immortal, how can you grow old? He had been a pure werewolf for a very long time.

"Thanks," I said, understanding that tone he took with me when I had fucked up. "Can you let me down?"

Casually he strolled over to my corner of the room. I hung upside down by a few sturdy ropes, one wrapped around each ankle. He sighed loudly, blowing steam in my face.

Momentarily, I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Son, explain to me one thing. You go on a mission to kill zombies. And you bring one home? What is this girl doing here on *our* planet?"

I wiggled around in my constraints. "That's a great question, Dad," I offered, hoping I could stall long enough to cut myself down. Before I could move, he reached up and slashed the cords with his long claws. There was no getting around my dad. He'd see right through me in an instant.

I fell in a heap on the floor. When I collected myself and stood up, I saw the girl. She had been placed in a large steel cage on the other side of the room, probably for her own protection. Instantly I was angry. *Calm down, Zachary*, I told myself. *Dad will not deal well with you if you freak out.* I ran through my options in my head.

"Son?"

*Fuck it*, I thought. *I'll just tell the old man the truth. I'd tell him what had been buzzing around in my head since I had seen the girl. My wolf sense could be way off, but I didn't think so.*

"Look at her neck," I said. "Do you see it? I have the same mark, by birth, Dad. How would she have that unless she was born with the virus too? I had to save her. At the least, I had

to try. I think I got all the poison out. Can you tell? I'm mean..." I paused because I could tell he had suddenly become very alert, very calculating, yet unsure of the situation. He was paying attention to my every word.

I heard the girl growl and then whimper.

I wanted to go to her, but I held my ground, hoping to appear stoic, regal like my dad was. "No other werewolf has a mark like that. It has to mean something. "I can't be the only one of my kind," I said.

I heard the girl whimper again.

Throwing up his hands, he glanced over at the girl and then back at me. "This is not me. This is you. Will you please? She won't quiet down for me."

I didn't understand what he meant until I saw her face and her liquid blue eyes. She was upset.

Dad kicked his heels a time or two, making his way slowly to the cage where I stood. "That's why you saved her?"

"Yes," I snapped.

He frowned at me, rubbing the stubble on his chin.

The girl growled several times at him, so my dad moved to the other side of the cage away from her and me.

"Why is she caged up?" I asked, tracing my hands along the steel rod, hoping she'd come closer to one of the sides, preferably my side. Finally I stopped near the steel door, opposite her at the other end. The cage covered much of one side of the large room. I motioned for her to come to me, sticking my hand through the bars.

"I didn't want her to get away. What were you doing?" Dad asked as he finally placed his hands on his hips in frustration.

"I didn't have a chance to finish my experiment."

"Zachary, this isn't something you need to get involved in. Just let it go. I'll call Containment. We'll act like it didn't happen. We don't need *this* kind of trouble."

Instantly I reacted. My body went rigid. She wasn't going to be put down. I owed it to my werewolf heritage to try to save her. I had heard my mom's version of my mom and dad's romance. Dad had never gone into details, but I knew what he had done to save my mom because she had told me. I wasn't anybody's fool. I decided to use some of my mom's logic on my dad.

“Did you leave Mom in Hell to rot when she was turned into a vampire? Did you? A daughter of Satan? When she drank Satan’s blood, you were there. She told me. You were there to see her change into a vampire. That was not by accident. You knew then who she really was, and how important she was. She wasn’t evil like everyone thought, and you knew that. You never doubted her even when she did. Her exact words. Over the years, you’ve done everything you can to save her. Every time she has needed saving. Mom told me!”

“Your mother is a writer. She exaggerates,” he replied, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. “Who is this girl to you anyways, Zach? You don’t even know her?”

“I get that. I’m not an idiot.” I tried to control my rage. “I’m not sure, Dad. But I felt it when I saw her in the coffee shop. I don’t want to regret later that I could have done something, you know? I don’t want to live alone, being the only freak of nature, a werewolf zombie even if it means I can walk among them undetected. I don’t want that! If I don’t try to save her, I won’t know. Now will I? What if she too was born with the new virus? What if that makes her unique like me?”

“That would explain the mark. Maybe she was born with the virus. Who is her father or mother? Your aunt? This may be beyond your abilities, son. I’m sorry. We don’t save zombies. We destroy them. We have to stay on top of this situation before it gets worse among the vampires and werewolves.”

“It’s gotten worse, Dad. It’s jumped species. I know it.”

“Do you have proof,” he challenged.

I pointed to the girl in the cage. “She’s a werewolf, Dad. She told me so.”

Not believing me, he grunted.

Using his same logic, I rebelled. He had to understand what he was saying. Rules were meant to be bent sometimes, even broken.

“Before there were zombies,” I began. “Werewolves used to kill vampires. And yet, you didn’t kill Mom. You were there to protect her.” As best I could, I faced Dad head on. I made a point to thrust my chin up and glare up at him like I had seen my mom doing on more than one occasion. With his height, he had no problem looking down on me, but he had to know I wasn’t backing down. I hadn’t backed down against Rex and the others,

and I wasn't backing down now. As insane as it seemed, I wasn't wrong about this.

Dad searched my face for many minutes. The silence in the room thickened. I could hear only the girl's ragged breathing as she fought the poison.

Trying to remain calm, I refused to look away from my dad, glaring up at him. I was ready to take on the world. *My god*, I thought. *What has happened to me?* I turned my attention back to the girl. She had slowly approached my side of the cage and stood near me, also glaring over my shoulder at my dad. Her blonde hair was tousled amid her face, but I could see the distrust behind her eyes. Even in her chaotic state, she looked adorable.

In typical parent fashion, my dad reached out his hand and rubbed his fingers through my black hair, somewhat shaking my entire body. He was unbelievably strong. He did that dismissal move on me when he wanted me to know that, for now, he was tabling the situation. I knew it wasn't over.

"We'll have to address this if your experiment doesn't work. Okay?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

Finally he patted me on the shoulder. "I forget how stubborn, like your mother, you are." He chuckled and walked to the door.

Realizing I had gotten my way and he was leaving me to my task, I watched as he lingered at the door. "You know," he said. "You are the son of a vampire with healing blood. Maybe that can help."

Our eyes locked for a moment as my mind raced with new possibilities. He had deliberately given me an idea.

"Are you fine with me sharing your mother the details on this sit..."

I heard him pause, not finishing his sentence or word.

"If I don't show up for dinner, yeah tell her... Uh..." I didn't want to predict the outcome.

"Do you need my help?"

"No. I've got this."

Again he watched me for several minutes, not saying anything. "Well if you reconsider, call me." He tapped his fingers to the side of his face along the temple area. "I won't be far away."

I nodded.



Dad was a man of few words sometimes, but I knew he had my back. He was my 'Go to' man if things got really crazy, and I didn't take that lightly at all. He returned a nod and closed the door.

\*\*\*

Once the girl shifted a second time between werewolf and zombie, I knew I had to get into the cage with her before the zombie version stuck. It wouldn't do for me to simply watch her from outside the steel bars of her cage as her werewolf self merged permanently with the zombie monster. And the version of zombie I was looking at was the same demonic creatures we had seen at the coffee shop. With her werewolf ancestry, she looked like a demonic werewolf, crazed and uncontrollable. It reminded me of myself when I was in full 'zombie wolf' mood.

Now as I watched the girl shift back and forth, I realized I hadn't gotten all of the poisonous blood out of her system, so it was time for Plan B.

Unfortunately, performing Plan B meant I had to get up and close to her, essentially taking my life in my own hands. Knowing you're immune to the zombie virus is one thing; getting mauled by a crazed werewolf zombie in a cage is quite another. My past fights with human zombies in their raging sickness amounted to a few cuts and scratches. My claws did my work. If I got blood on me, I simply washed it away. Having the zombie virus in my blood just meant I could smell them out faster than everyone else. That was one of my many secrets with zombie killing. Any injuries of mine healed, and they healed quickly. Trying to reattach my arm before dinner was going to be hard to explain to my mom and dad.

When the word 'heal' crossed my mind, I recalled what my dad had said about my mother's vampiric blood. Supposedly, she was unlike other vampires. Those turned by her could heal anyone's injuries. She had saved others on many occasions, a few times with my dad. Even though I was skeptical, it was just the thing I needed right about now.

Suddenly I heard a loud buzzing sound in my ears like a warning going off in the back of my skull. The implant in my head radiated a piercing signal of hesitation as I stared at the lock on the cage door. My arms and legs became frozen in place.

Dad had told my mom the situation, and they were both at their battle stations, controlling my implant. *These are the situations*

*that arise when having two supernatural and overprotected parents can be more than a person bargains for*, I thought to myself.

I wanted to will my legs to work. I wanted to walk away from the girl who I wanted to save as she struggled with the poison now raging in her body because I knew what the end result would be, for both of us. I felt the implant sizzling in my head, directing me to keep the door shut and wait it out. Dad had definitely told Mom because, above everyone, Mom knew what I was about to do and she didn't want to lose her only son. I cursed the fact I had the implant in my head and was allowing myself to be directed by my overzealous parents. I had to do the unthinkable and unleash the beast.

Z, I whispered mentally to zombie wolf inside me. *Make haste.*

As I told you before, the wolf is always ready. It didn't take long for my long claws to sever the frozen mental connection I was under and shoot forth from my fingers tips. I yelled out in pain and slumped to the floor on one knee. The implant burned in my temple, and I knew I had to get it out. I reached up with my index finger and sliced into my head. I heard the girl scream.

With one of my claws, I managed to flick it out from under my skin. Knocks pounded on the door to my room. Mom and Dad did not want to let me finish this on my own. I rushed to the door and shoved the broken recliner against it. That would give me a few minutes at most.

Quickly I yanked the door of the steel cage open and stepped inside with the girl.

Being in a human form briefly, the girl fell in my arms. I'm sure I was a sight because I wasn't able to stop my full zombie wolf transformation from happening. The demon teeth. The claws. My werewolf features pushing forth. My pale sunken face with black skull eyes and my extremely angular canine features. My muscles large and protruding. Standing on two legs I probably looked ghastly.

"You can't look at me," I told the girl. "Okay?"

She clung to me, crying. "I don't care. I don't care. I know you want to help me. Please tell me what to do."

"I won't leave you," I said, hoping I made sense with a mouth full of teeth.

"I know," she replied.

“Your name?” I asked, barely audible at this point. I realized the only thing I wanted to know at that moment was her name.

“Sasha. My name is Sasha.”

“Zach,” I replied. Pulling her into my arms, I embraced her in the middle of another werewolf zombie shift she was having. I heard the door burst open and my mother scream when I sunk my teeth into Sasha’s neck. I forced my will upon the girl, commanding Sasha to return the bite and bury her fangs in my neck. With any luck, the vampiric healing blood of my mother racing in my veins would heal Sasha and extinguish the virus or my blood virus would transfer itself to her and she’d be very much like me. Another zombie wolf. Only time would tell.

###

This story continues in **Zombie Wolf (The Next Generation #1)** by Ally Thomas (*Coming Soon*)!

### About The Author-

Amazon bestselling author Ally Thomas loves writing paranormal books that showcase vampires, werewolves, zombies, witches, and any furry monsters who go bump in the night. Her Vampire from Hell series has been on the Top 100 list in Fantasy at Amazon since 2011.

Ally is currently working on the next installment of her popular paranormal fantasy series, the Vampire from Hell as well as exploring her passion for vampire romance. Learn more at <http://allythomas.wordpress.com/about/contact-me/>

### Books by Ally Thomas

All books are provided in ebook and paperback. Go to Ally’s Amazon Author page at <http://amazon.com/author/allythomas> for more information.

### The Vampire from Hell (Part 1) - The Beginning

According to Rayea, the oldest daughter of Satan, the origin of vampires started in Hell, and it started with her. Rayea isn’t daddy’s little girl, even if he is the most powerful fallen angel

around. He wants her to take an active role in the family business. But she's not interested in his schemes for world domination. Instead she wants to spend her time shopping on the Internet, rescuing humans from a horrific eternity, and practicing martial arts with her seven foot hellhound. Then one day everything changes. . *(Both the ebook and paperback versions have excerpts from Parts 2 and 3, so the reader can experience the Vampire from Hell series in this sampler offering.)*

### **The Vampire from Hell (Part 2) - A Vampire among Angels**

Living a life with an overbearing father can be a challenge. For Rayea whose father is the fallen angel, Lucifer, it's been torture. In the second installment of the Vampire from Hell series, Rayea finds peace when she visits the House of G. There she hopes for a new beginning among Blick's angelic friends, only to discover a vampire from Hell may not be welcome.

### **The Vampire from Hell (Part 3) – A Vampire on Vacation**

In the third part of the Vampire from Hell series, Rayea travels to Earth hoping to meet her online friends, leave her disturbing past with her father behind her, and embark on a new future without her meddling family.

### **The Vampire from Hell Returns (The Vampire from Hell - Part 4) – Late Summer**

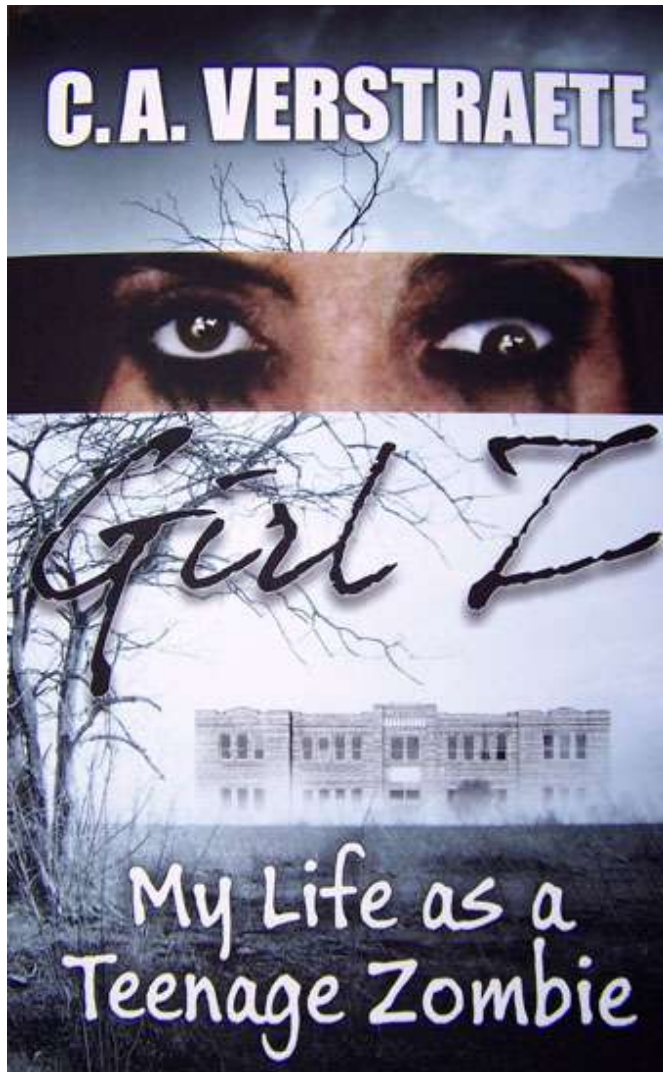
Blood of the gods has brought a new dimension to Rayea's life as the vampire from Hell. In the fourth installment of the Vampire from Hell series, Rayea juggles her new responsibilities and starting a relationship with her best friend, Blick. Additionally, Rayea realizes her sordid past with her family is catching up with her, and she's going to have to deal with it once and for all. When two of her friends go missing, she knows she must begin a search to find them. And the first place she has to look? Hell.

### **Fanged Love - The Prequel**

In one night Grace realizes her lover is destined to ultimately be her greatest enemy. Following Nathan into a world of bloodletting and vampirism was a bad idea and she wants out.

Grace plans to escape the clutches of her controlling boyfriend as she learns he is selling her to the top buyer, a woman he met on the internet called the new Medusa. Grace's plan quickly changes when the Angel of Death shows up, telling her she has sent for him. Will Grace seek salvation in the arms of this stunningly, handsome man known as Demetri? A few characters you have met in the Vampire from Hell series appear in this new series.

C.A. Verstraete



While there is a certain satisfaction that comes with reading or writing a longer story or book-length fiction, flash fiction offers its own surprise in a compact form. So, I offer these small tidbits for your reading pleasure...

*Beauty really is only skin deep?*

**Beauty in the Eyes of the Beholder**  
**By Christine Verstraete**

She was the most beautiful girl in the world, well, in my world.

For days, weeks, all I'd seen was ugliness, horror and decay until I saw her.

I tried not to stare at hair like glistening gold; long legs; a shapely body under that black dress.

I longed to reach out and caress the small cross tattooed on her neck.

I called out, anxious for her response. "Hello, Miss?"

No answer.

I slowed my approach, not wanting to startle her.

"Hey, are you okay?"

As she turned my heart sped up a bit... and then I swore it stopped.

She stared at me with eyes the loveliest shade of blue - if you ignored the whitish film slowly creeping across each iris.

She gave no other indication anything was wrong, but her dead stare told another story.

With a huge sigh of regret, I raised the gun and took aim.

\* Inspired by this beautiful photo of a woman's back at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/robof07/8716205653/in/explore-2013-05-07>

*Who can live without music?*

## **The Day the Music Died** **By Christine Verstraete**

"We're musicians, not gypsies," he yelled, slamming the guitar case to the ground.

They all held their breath at the outburst, worried someone would hear, worried *they* would come...

The group huddled in the middle of the wooded grove, wondering what to do next.

It was foolish, they knew, to hang on to their instruments, to struggle with the heavy cases as they ran from place to place, fleeing for their lives.

But it was hard to let go. Music had been their lives for years.

Music was life.

Low moans floated in on the breeze.

Music could now mean their deaths.

\*Inspired by an eerie photo of these musicians at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/alexzaitsev/8697805663/in/explore-2013-05-01>

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Here's a small "taste" of my upcoming book, *GIRL Z: My Life as a Teenage Zombie*, which releases August 1. You can read more at my website, [www.cverstraete.com](http://www.cverstraete.com). Pre-order at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

### **Synopsis for *GIRL Z: My Life as a Teenage Zombie* by C.A. Verstraete**

*Life can suck when you're sixteen. It can suck even worse when you're not-quite-dead.*



Sixteen-year-old Rebecca Herrera Hayes faces every teenager's biggest nightmares: bad skin, bad hair, and worse ... turning into one of the living dead.

Becca's life changes forever when her cousin Spence comes back to their small Wisconsin town carrying a deadly secret—he's becoming a zombie, a fate he shares with her through an accidental scratch.

The Z infection, however, has mutated, affecting younger persons like her, or those treated early enough, differently. Now she must cope with weird physical changes and habits no girl wants to be noticed for. Then she meets Gabe, a good-looking part-Z like her, and fears falling for him. After all, how can he, who shows hardly any Z symptoms, be interested in someone like her?

But time is running out... Becca needs his help as she and her cousin Carm search for their missing mothers and fight off hungry Zs.

Most of all, she needs to find something, anything, to stop this deadly transformation before it is forever too late...

## **Prologue**

A virus. A freaking virus.

I'd been sick before, you know, measles, mumps, kid stuff ... but not *really* sick.

Never like this.

This ... this couldn't be happening.

I tuned back in to the doctor's explanation...new diet, pills, *blab-blab-blab*...and let his words fade again into the background.

Gone was the golden tan I'd nurtured over the summer with tanning cream and hours sunbathing by the pool with one of my cousins. My skin had a weird grayish tone, like I'd rubbed myself with fireplace ash.

I gazed at my legs, now mottled with strange gray blotches, and my pretty pink toenails peeking out from beneath the sheet.

The machine next to me made a frantic *beep-beep*.

I turned and caught my reflection in the metal canister sitting on the table next to the bed. Whimpering, I rubbed a hand

over my cheek, wondering at the scaly texture, while at other times I felt almost nothing.

Large, deep brown eyes under ebony bangs stared back. I saw a decent nose.

Spots.

I took in the pinkish patches and my uneven skin tone, which reminded me of those old battleships on the PBS show I'd watched with my aunt.

For the first time in my sixteen-year-old life I was ... ugly.

I struck the bed frame over and over, the pain barely registering. The machine's *whir-click-whir* turned into a wail almost louder than mine—*beep-beep-beeeeeep*.

A nurse in blue scrubs rushed in and tried to reassure me, even as she attempted to keep me immobile on this slab they called a bed.

"Relax, it'll be fine," she said.

"No, it won't," I yelled, "it won't!"

How could looking like freaking King Tut without his wrappings ever be fine?

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Bio: C.A. (Christine) Verstraete is a big Halloween fan who enjoys a good scare or two. Her short fiction has appeared online and in anthologies including *Timeshares* and *Steampunk'd* from DAW Books. Her YA book, *GIRL Z: My Life as a Teenage Zombie*, releases August 1. Stop by her website at <http://cverstraete.com> or visit her blogs, <http://girlzombieauthors.blogspot.com> and <http://candidcanine.blogspot.com>.

*A.R. Von*



*(0.5 DreamZ)*  
Prequel

*By*

*A.R. Von*

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~Wunder~

*Why?* Why the torture? Each and every single night since I became a woman I awaken sweating, panting, hot and bothered from the pure sexual torture. Many times with my hand rubbing my most intimate place. A dream, so many dreams. Each one is different, but all contain the same faceless dark haired stranger.

“UGH!”

The only things I know for sure is he is tall, has raven black hair, the same color as mine, but much shorter. He has the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen. Glowing eyes that seem to be able to see into my soul. My heart’s deepest desires and he always grants them to me without pause. It was strange at first, seeing him and yet not. Not being able to make out his facial features, except for his eyes. I got used to it throughout the years, I guess. One thing I DO know, is the way he makes me feel, always!

So much passion, heat and desire. He makes me feel beautiful, irreplaceable and wanted in a way, I imagine, every woman wants to feel.

Frustration at its finest. This latest dream seemed more realistic than all of the others. I still feel the ripples on

my skin from his touch; the most intimate touch I've ever experienced, the only touch from a male I've had in such a manner. The goose bumps are just starting to go away. His caress is always so sensual and arousing. My mouth is still dry from all of the panting I've done, my panties are drenched and my heart is still pounding.

No words could ever describe my desire to meet this man of my dreams. That is—if he truly does exist. I'm going to be 25 years old and have zero sexual experience. I'd give anything to feel even a portion of what I've felt during these amazingly satisfying yet torturous dreams. *Anything!*

When I finally do get out of bed and stroll towards the bathroom, the floors feel extra cold on my overheated feet. "Definitely starting off with a cold shower." I turn on the water full blast cold, toss my sleep shirt and panties in the hamper and brace for the shock of cold water against my flesh. "ACK!" Holy crap does it sting. But hey, it works. My body no longer feels the intense heat of arousal, just the residual tingles left after the orgasm, still lingering along my body. I fully submerge after adding some hot water to the mix, when I hear banging on the bathroom door. I jump slightly and slip a bit, almost landing flat on my ass. Luckily, I have fast reflexes and right myself quickly.

"Wunder? WUNDER?? Are you all right in there?" My dad is a real worry-wart when it comes to me. The best dad ever!

"Yea dad. Water was cold. That's it. I'm fine."

"Alright hun. I'm making coffee now"

"Ok, dad. I'll be out in a few," I answer him with now chattering teeth. I've only added a touch of hot water and need to add more, so I can get washed up and get out. It's just that my body is super sensitive after these dreams.

*EVERYTHING* feels more intense. But the shock of cold water is the only thing which seems to help tone down my racing hormones and heated flesh to at least some semblance of order, so I can function properly and keep my next pair of panties dry, for now.

Raising the temperature a lot more, I get all washed up. Making sure not to stimulate any of my sensitive parts by lingering any longer than necessary. I try to push the haunting dreams to the back of my mind, instead of having them hovering in the forefront, teasing me as you would a dog with a juicy steak. After drying off, I jump into my daily uniform consisting of all black. Black cargo pants, T-shirt, my steel-toe combat boots and I head to the kitchen.

I know my dad is going to want to have the traditional '*morning chat*' with me. It's a ritual with him and I honestly don't mind it. As long as it puts his mind at ease, I'm good. "Morning dad" I grab a mug off the counter and peck him on the cheek at the same time.

He has a slight smirk on his face. "Morning, Wunder. How was your sleep?"

I can tell he's trying really hard to suppress his knowing smile. "It was fine. I slept...Nothing special. Same as usual" I say with a grin while adding sugar and powdered milk to my coffee. I miss flavored creamers. They're very hard to come by these days. There aren't many factories left in the world for the distribution, though I've heard there once was. The last time I had it was about 2 years ago now. "Dad, have any new shipments come in?"

"No, not since last month. Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking of a nice creamy addition for my coffee. It's been so long since I had any flavor to it. Besides sugar that is. It would be nice, you know?"

"Yea, it would. Who knows when we'll get more. I'll ask around to see if anyone heard of any of the other areas getting their hands on some. I'm sure someone will make a nice trade. If they have any on hand. If not, I'll put the word out and we'll see what happens." His smile brightens as if his mind has wandered off to a happy place.

He never shares with me about what brings him these secret smiles...ever. I can tell when he's there in his *happy place*, because his eyes glaze over and his smile is relaxed. No tenseness to it whatsoever. My dad is so handsome. I never

understood why he hasn't dated anyone since my mother—Yea, at a solid six feet tall, full head of dark brown hair, hazel eyes and a killer personality. I just can't understand why no one has shown any interest in him.

I've asked him about dating once and he looked seriously hurt by the question and said he's just not interested. I left him alone after that. I know he misses my mother, but I would rather see him happy. Whatever his choices are with relationships, or anything else he has going on, his happiness is all that matters to me.

I might have a normal life now—well as normal of a life a freak of nature that lives in a world filled with infected people can have. Normal...as in training daily to fight and kill to stay alive as well as keep others safe. But it was a bit difficult for me growing up. No mother, abnormal genes and being raised by a single parent, my father, Lance.

Don't get me wrong, he's the best father a girl could ask for. I think he did an excellent job raising me. He taught me everything I know and then some. Well, with the exception of a few minor details that a father prefers not to discuss with his only daughter, you know, the 'sex talk'.

When I was checked over just recently, the doctors determined that I could have children, just like any other woman in the world. As a result, my dad actually had one of the local female physicians give me *the talk*. Oh yea, that was fun! I believe I had Doc Smith blushing when I blurted out everything I knew. Which I have mostly learned from the guys at the training center and my team mates. They always speak openly and boldly of their conquests and love lives.

Then of course, there are my dreams. I've not told her about those though. She said I knew an awful lot for not having experience in that area. THAT made me blush and we ended that conversation right there.

My dad couldn't look me in the eye that evening when I got home. I was smiling the entire time, knowing how awkward he felt about having to send me to someone else for the *talk*. I didn't tease him or anything though, despite my



constant grin. Well, I did in my mind, but I knew he would be even more uncomfortable if I did. I couldn't do that to him. He's had enough to deal with, just having to hold on to the secret. The secret which lives within in me. He's kept it for so long, on top of having to continue living with the loss of his one true love and soul mate, my mother Jasmine.

There are some others beside my dad and myself, who know what I truly am, but not many. My dad had no other choice but to try and find out more about me and what to expect as I grew and developed. He wanted to be prepared in case of anything happening because of my DNA. There seems to be no other part zombies of any sort around. So, he went to a couple of his closest friends who worked in the medical field, and they ran a multitude of tests on me. Comparing me to other humans, other zombies, even a few animals (to date there's never been an infected animal of any type).

I don't remember much about most of it. I was way too young to hold those memories. I do recall lights, very bright ones and some smells. I now know what one particular scent was. *Zombies*. Boy, do those suckers stink! I think it's my heightened senses that make it so bad. I'd describe their scent as a combination of the stink in the air which comes into a car window when driving by an old sewage plant on a very hot day, combined with a rotted corpse. The smell of death reeks!

My dad always tells me he doesn't smell them the way I do. Not even close. He can only smell them when he's up close and getting personal with handing them their death. One of those *'up close and personal meet the end of my machete'* types of meetings. He's been by my side for all of it. He still is to this day. Even every month, when I have to go renew my proof of living, he's right there by my side.

He insists on being there in case any changes occur within me. So, I won't have to feel alone or frightened.

All they do to process anyone for their proof of living (which everyone has to go through no less than once a

month) is prick your finger to draw a bit of blood. I guess you could say it's somewhat similar to what a diabetic would do to test their blood sugar. Except in this case, they're checking for a different sort of abnormality within. You know, *the fucked up infected kind*.

It's an instant result, which I learned took years to develop. A color coding or some crap like that. If you're clear, you get a new proof of living card, updated with your finger print, photo, blood type, test date, bar code and an expiration date.

*If you fail?*

Well, that's a whole other story that I've yet to have the horror of knowing. The procedures are very hush- hush. I think it's kept this way, so people won't have a fear of being tested. Best to keep them in the dark, so there's no hesitation for monthly testing. There would most likely be a riot of sorts if the truth did come out. But what do I know?

Gathering my thoughts to the present, I shake my head to clear my mind. "Sounds great dad...thanks! I appreciate you asking around." I hurry now and finish up my last bit of coffee and toast.

"I know how much you'd enjoy a special treat in your coffee too. I better split." I quickly wash my cup and plate as I glance over at my dad. "I have training this morning and then a patrol with the team the rest of the day. I'm not sure how late I'll be tonight. You know it's never the same. Something extra always being tossed in or suddenly remembered."

"Yeah, I gotta go too. Check up on those supplies and look into our chance for a luxurious cup of coffee, then get to work myself. You be safe out there and don't go soft on anyone during training today."

"What do you mean *go soft*?"

At my reaction, my dad burst into laughter

Ignoring his expression of amusement, I continue with my defense, "You know I can't use all of my strength on

anyone I train with. I'll break a bone or something. You of all people know how that goes."

"I do know, Wunder. But when I heard that Tank pinned you yesterday I was a bit shocked. You've never gotten pinned before. It's like you're not paying attention or something lately. Just don't let your guard down. Focus on the now and kick ass!" He says with laughter still lingering in his voice.

"Tank tricked me. That's the only reason he was able to pin me. He faked some serious injury. I bent over him to check and make sure he was all right. I thought I seriously hurt him. My guard was down because I was concerned for my team mate. I won't fall for that crap again. I told him as much too. He's the only one there who knows I can best him no matter what. He knows all about the *real* me. I didn't think he'd pull a stunt like that. He's such a pain in the ass!"

With my frustrated description, my dad is shaking with laughter.

I still feel the sting of embarrassment because I was taken down. The first pin in my training history by my team 'equal' Tank the Skank. *I'll get him back. Oh, you bet I will.* Payback is a bitch and revenge is a mother fucker. The idea of sweet retribution brings a smile to my face. I'll think of something to pay him back. "Bye dad. Love you."

"Love you too."

Leaving the kitchen, I stop at a panel by the entryway and press on the four corners of the panel my dad installed years ago. It silently pops open, and reveals a small walk-in which is loaded floor to ceiling with weapons of all sorts. I grab my weapons belt with a high powered Taser attached. The belt is loaded, with different weapons like an expandable baton and some other odd and ends I'll need throughout the day. I change things over here and there. Depending on my mood and what's planned for the day. I *always* have at least two guns on my person and a nice amount of sharps (aka knives, daggers, throwing stars and sword) in my duffle.

*Ready for war...* another daily routine for me. I never leave the house without weapons. You never know what's going to happen. What might lurk around a corner or even right in front of you. So, I prefer to play it safe, instead of being sorry.

With my gear now packed, I make my way out the door being sure to lock it up tight. *Wow! It's such a gorgeous day out.* So bright and a perfect temperature. I'd say it's at least 70 degrees in the sun. I love this time of year when the weather is like this. It brings a smile to my face and an extra bounce to my step as I make my way to the training center.

There are a few people milling about, moving on with their day. Not many paying much mind to me at the moment. A few smile and give me a quick wave which I reciprocate. Most are tending to this year's harvest, so we all have enough produce to last throughout the year. Others are going to either a training center similar to the one I'm heading to, or some other daily activity.

I love the rush of training. It's one of the only things that allows me to vent and feel...really feel ordinary on a daily basis, even though I have to hold back my full potential. I know this is the one thing I can do really well and be able to feel normal the entire time. Today though is extra special. I've just thought of how to get Tank back without doing him any harm. Well, not much harm except maybe to his huge ego. I can't help but to smile. He's going to flip out, once he experiences a *Wunderwedgie!*

~~~~~

My favorite part of each day is patrolling. It's the best when there's some action. What I mean by action is when some of the zombie scum aimlessly wanders into our area and we get to give a no mercy beat-down.

There are six of us altogether on my team known as RIP 1 (Resilient Infected Police) in this area. There's myself, Tank, Adam, Jonah, Sky and Zoot. Each team has no less

than six members, no exceptions, ever. It's been that way from as far back as the older members can remember.

We've lost quite a few members throughout the years, thousands. All casualties of this fucked up zombie horror that's plagued the world for over 30 years now. It seems to only get worse as the years pass.

Investigators, scientists and civilians are all still trying to find the outbreak's origin, hoping once the source is found, an end can be brought and we can all finally live in peace. Well maybe not in total peace.

A zombie free life would be fan-fucking-tastic! I'd love to not have to kill anymore. While I DO enjoy the rush and adrenaline I get from the fight and the knowledge that I just kept at least one person that's not infected safe. It just eats me up inside, knowing that the infected I just took down was once a human, with a normal life; possibly a very happy one and might of even had a family. No one deserves to become an infected.

The worst part is when we have to put down a younger infected. I feel as if I lose a piece of my heart each time I have to neutralize one. It's so sad; we've even had some infants that have had to be brought to rest. I don't care if they call me a chicken shit or whatever other name in the proverbial book—even I have my limits.

It's been 6 months since any of us had a nice zombie pounding session and we all recently petitioned the head of RIP to allow us to travel further out from our town, where I constantly sense hundreds of those fuckers, creeping like the creeps they are. I've only had a slight sense of their presence. So, I know they're no less than 5 miles out.

It drives me crazy to know they're out there and I NEED to let out some of my frustrations by pounding on a few thousand pounds of zombie flesh until they are all no more than rancid chop meat and I end up in dire need of a shower.

I have what you'd call the itch to bitch. But I can't do that around my team. They don't want to hear it. So, instead I press on. "Tank, did you hear anything from Sterling yet?"

He's the only one on our team that knows the truth about me and my special abilities. He's like the goofy big brother I never had and my BFF all rolled in to one gigantic package.

He doesn't turn to look at me, but I know he sees me through his peripheral vision. He's good like that. Eyes everywhere at all times. Plus, he's a bit pissed at me for what I did to him during a training session today. He's actually patrolling commando right now. Poor guy...*not!*

"Not yet, Wunder. We're all waiting, just as impatiently as you are, to see some action. It's been too damn quiet and the same training regimen day after day just isn't doing it for any of us."

I look away from him and sigh. "I know what you mean. There has to be something we can do to get the go ahead to venture further out. Maybe I should approach him—?"

"I *doubt* that would work. It's not just Sterling that makes the decisions you know? Besides, the main setback is the little fact the big guys are all worried that if we leave, there might not be enough fighters left behind to protect everyone, if any infected suddenly came this way."

Just then, I felt a shift of movement and focused on it. "Tank?"

"Yo."

"I sense some moving closer. I'd say 20 to 30 give or take."

"Shit! How close?"

"Not *that* close. I can't tell exactly, but..." I pause to try and get a better feel for the exact number and how many are moving toward us.

"Let's give it a shot, Wunder. We'll go as a group and ask if we can scout the area where you're sensing them and take action before they get too close. We won't know until we

try. You've never steered us wrong yet. I don't see why we would be denied right now."

"And what will we say to them Tank? Think about it for a minute. None of the heads know what I'm about and I plan to keep it that way for as long as I can. I don't want to be a permanent pin cushion or labeled as a freak for the rest of my life. No, thank you, sorry." I take a deep breath and wait to see if he has anything else to say after listening to my lovely rant but he remains silent and looks a bit guilty.

We both turn our heads to the sound of a vehicle coming fast right in our direction maneuvering the last second to avoid hitting us, then coming to a hard stop. Tank and I look at one another and our other team members who are gathering around us and we move toward the vehicle as a solid unit.

All the windows roll down simultaneously and there is a total of five people within. Two are unfamiliar to me and the others are a part of various RIP units.

"Wunder, Tank." Ron, the driver and also Sterling's right hand man speaks up first. "Sterling wants you two to come along with us to the next town to help assist the supply truck and some other RIP members that are trapped. They're completely surrounded by over a hundred infected with no more ammo and no way out." He nods his head toward the members in the back. "Lane and Elliot are going to take your place here until we return. Sterling wants his best for this and you two are it."

The two RIP members that are to stand in for me and Tank are now exiting the vehicle and introducing themselves to Jonah and the others.

Tank and I look at one another with knowing smiles and hop right in, taking the now vacant seats even before they cooled from the previous passengers.

Ron peels out, even before we get the door closed and gets right to the point. "What's going to happen right now is we're going to pick up one more member, Justin who's readying another vehicle. You two are going to go with

him while we take this one. We're going to park approximately a quarter of a mile out from the rendezvous point and foot it in with guns a blazing and swords a chopping. We want everyone that matters in one piece, no bites and as many infected exterminated as we can make happen. We have eight people to extricate at this point. There were twelve originally. But four had no patience to wait. One got infected and took his own life while a zombie was gnawing at his ankle. It's not going to be pretty. I hope you're both ready."

"We're always ready." Tank states, while I'm thinking the exact same thing.

We're all loaded up with weapons beyond imagination and getting closer to our rescue mission fast. No one abides the speed limits posted. We haven't done that for years!

I'm sensing them stronger and stronger as we draw closer. There are more than a hundred but I keep that to yours truly. I cannot give myself away. I shift myself toward Tank. He and I are seated in the back while Jonah drives. I catch his eye; give a slight shake of my head and motion for him to look at my hands.

Luckily, we have done things like this before and have a way to communicate without words to one another. Putting up one finger and doing a double zero signal. Then, he glances back at my face and I nod my head for him to look back at my hands and put up one finger with the double zero and a plus sign.

His eyes widen, but he catches himself and clears his throat.

Then, I sit and think, *"how in the hell are we going to get through over one hundred infected fuckers and all come out in one piece?"*

Tank shoulders me back to the present. The vehicles are slowing down, getting ready to park, so we can start tracking it to our destination. I'm formulating a plan of attack in my head just like my dad always tells me to do. *"Be prepared for anything Wunder and always make use of what's at your disposal."*

Anything can be used as a weapon.” I turn to Tank and tell him, “I have a plan...”

~~~~~

After taking only a few minutes to dish out the new plan, we go in groups of two and surround as much of the area as we can. Each of us holding machine guns with the ammo draped over our bodies like we’re Rambo wannabe’s. We’re strapped with a shit load of other killer weapons as well that say, “*THE END*” with their actions alone.

I have a ton of 2-in-1 magnetic throwing stars circling my waist. One of my all-time favorite weapons. There’s a 2.5 inch star stuck on top of a 3.5. Makes for double the weapon and I’m one accurate throw!

We’re all in place and waiting for the signal. There are already a good thirty or so VERY dead infected littering the streets.

After a heart beat passes, Ron shouts, “Everyone grab cover!”

Gun fire erupts and all hell breaks loose. The infected don’t stand a chance against guns. Especially, when each person firing is an accurate shot. We’ve already taken down at least thirty and they are still coming on strong. *These fuckers are fast!* Luckily, bullets are faster or we’d be zombie toast.

The infected bodies are piling up higher and higher. I don’t recall ever seeing such a sight. *It’s fucking great!* Tank stops to reload while I’m still shooting up a storm. “Hurry Tank! I’m almost out.”

“Got it. All set!”

Perfect timing! When Tank starts firing I hear the tell-tale *dick click*, letting me know I need to reload. Swiftly reloading and ready to fire, I hear Ron shouting in the distance, “Look out!”

Both Tank and I turn toward his voice and see Justin surrounded by about eight infected. I think fast and hand Tank my gun while removing stars from my belt and making

quick work of four of the fuckers. Dropping them like dead fruit falling from a tree on a windy day, then making work of two more.

Justin is kicking one of the bastards in the face repeatedly.

Then, the other of the original eight has her eyes set on me. She starts running full speed at me like a freight train.

I kick up my pace as well while pulling out my dagger and slicing her throat before she even knows what hit her.

Justin is still fighting with the one bastard he's been kicking for what seems like forever.

An easy kill for me since this infected is practically lying on the ground. "Justin move, *NOW!*" I make quick work of stabbing the fucker in his cranium, I then snap his head clear off his shoulders.

"Thanks Wunder."

I give a slight nod and hand him the only gun I have left which now leaves me with just a few stars, four grenades, my dagger and bare hands to finish off the few that are left.

He takes off toward Ron while shooting down a few zombies in his path until the gun empties, making it to Ron and getting a new piece locked and loaded.

Tank runs up beside me while I'm trying to sense how many are left. It's difficult to explain how I can sense the infected and tell the count. It's almost like a second pair of eyes floating around and seeing everything through night vision goggles. Similar to green hued auras...I only see three—no make that *two* left.

Ron gets one right between the eyes and it drops hard.

I sense more behind the warehouse and I tell Tank as much, so we head in that direction. I only sense seven of them. But there's no way I'm about to let any of them live. I pull out a star and separate the smaller one from the larger one and am ready for the kill.

What we see before us is an absolute horror. The four infected are feeding on two children, one no more than

eleven years old. The other victim is even younger—so tiny and helpless.

I quickly swallow the lump that forms in my throat and aim for the kill. I drop two within a few seconds and Tank takes down the rest with his gun.

I don't sense any more infected around as far as my senses go. But the children that were just attacked are going to come back once the infection runs its course. "Tank...I—I can't. Those poor kids. What are we going to do?"

Just then Justin, Ron and two others come running around the corner and stop in their tracks. "Oh shit!" They shout in unison.

"I got this ya'll"

I shift my eyes and look at this monster of a man. This dude is HUGE! I thought Tank was large and in charge. But this guy makes him look miniscule. His accent sure as hell does not fit his look. But who am I to judge? I've not heard many accents except for some German, Irish and Italian throughout the years. I'm thinking a Texan; maybe.

He looks at all of us and his eyes stop right on me. "Ya'll go about your business. I'll wait and take care of what needs to be done here. Go on. There are others that need you."

We are all staring at him.

I turn to Ron and he gives me a nod. Right now, I honestly don't care what the guy's name is or even who he is. I just can't stomach this part of the job. *Those poor kids*. They barely got to live and now...?

"Let's go, Wunder. We need to get the supply trucks back and help whoever is left and get them settled in their new homes. It's one long ass night for us." Tank tugs my arm to get me to start moving where we need to go.

We walk back a bit slow to where the supply trucks and others are and I see some of the other RIP members moving infected bodies, so a path is clear for traveling through. Both by foot and by vehicle. I mean the ground is covered with infected bodies beyond belief right now.

Just then, I hear someone say, “We need to pile them in the center over there, so nothing in the surrounding area can catch fire when we burn them.”

A faint recognition flows through me. *That voice.* It’s so damned familiar. I feel warmth in my abdomen and every tiny hair on my body is standing on end. I look to my left and cannot believe what I am seeing. *I think it’s him.* The boy—make that *the man* from my dreams. *It has to be!* It’s as if I’ve seen him before and I’m feeling the same warm feeling I experience in my dreams whenever *he* is near. I only see his side profile. *But WOAH! What a profile.* He’s built like a man who works out daily. A sleek, tall and incredibly attractive piece of perfection. I want to see his full face. If only he’ll turn around.

I’m staring right at him, mentally asking him to *please* look at me over and over in my mind.

Suddenly, he stops chatting it up with his friend and whips his head in my direction.

*Those eyes! Oh my god—Those eyes.* They’re beautiful. He’s beautiful. I’m rooted to the spot. I cannot look away as he stares at me.

He looks stunned. He says something and his friend turns to him. But it seems as if he brushes him off.

I try to read his lips, but all I can make out is the words *shit* and *myself*. I can’t stop the smile that blooms on my face. *Did he just say he shit himself? For real? Nah, it can’t be that.*

He says some other words to himself or his friend maybe?

I try, but I just couldn’t make them out from this distance. I’ve never been a good lip reader. Right about now, I really wish I would have practiced more. I need to know what he’s saying. His gaze is so intense and I feel as if I should move towards him. I get a moment of doubt. *What if it’s not him?* The one from my dreams...

Tank nudges me. “Wunder? Come on woman. Let’s go. I would like to get some sleep tonight at least.”

“Yea, alright. One thing first. Do you know who that guy is right there?”

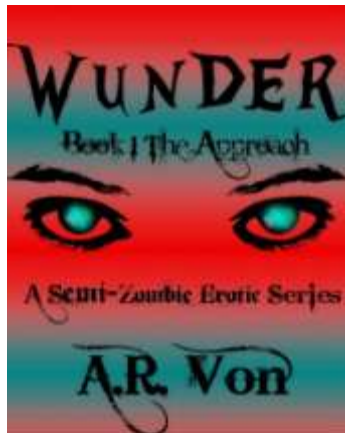
“Which one? There’s more than one over there you know.”

“The one with the jet black hair, bright eyes dressed in all black. He’s standing next to Raul.”

“Oh yeah, that’s one of the new guys. His name is Pete. Don’t know anything else about him though.”

I forced my eyes away from the man I think might be my destiny and follow Tank in the opposite direction. I feel dream-boat’s gaze on me as I walk away. It’s fine. I’m not worried. He’s going to be coming to live in *my* town now. I’ll see him again. I know it. I feel it in my soul...

The Wunder Series



<http://tinyurl.com/WUNDER-KINDLE>

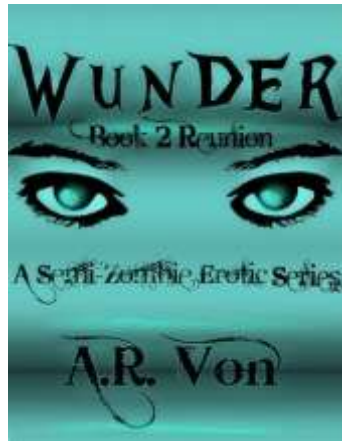
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#### BIO:

A.R. is a mother of two entertaining teen boys (as well as a lovely fawn Chihuahua, whom she considers her furry daughter.) She's also a wife to a delightfully handsome and amazingly funny man-beast.

She's an avid reader of many genres which include (but are not limited to) erotica, paranormal, ménage, fantasy, YA, western (she has to have a hot cowboy, or two, here and there) and some historical.

She also loves to exercise, listen to music, hike, cook, dance and write. She writes to free her mind of its constant wondering and loves the fact she can share it with readers that have the same passion for a great story.

She loves to hear from her reader's and chat away, so feel free to reach out to her any time.

<http://dreamzofdragons.blogspot.com/>  
OR at: <https://www.facebook.com/ARVon2>

Annie Walls

A FAMISHED SHORT STORY

# BLACKBALLING THE DEAD

ANNIE WALLS

## Dedication

To Alisha, Mac's biggest fan.

## A Note From The Author:

This short is a companion to The Famished Trilogy.

Then...

When the door of the quaint house opened, annoyance flared up, which is a familiar feeling. The short brunette peered back at me with a flushed face and puffy eyes. She was cute, and no doubt in any other situation I'd charm her legs open. My mother couldn't be subtle about anything. I hadn't even spoken to this girl yet but deep down, I knew.

I held up a finger. "Excuse me a second." Shifting the brown bag from Jason's Deli to my other arm, I slipped my phone out of my pocket while walking down the sloped driveway.

"Yeeees," she answered after the first ring in a conspiring voice.

"You're trying to set me up!" I gritted out in a low tone.

"Why would you think that?" Innocence oozed out like honey from a jar.

"You have a criteria. She meets it with flying colors. Except she looks like she's on her death bed." I looked out at the rolling hills that made up the streets of Chattanooga. The setting sun allowed the hills to cast shadows along the dips and curves.

A sigh went through the phone. "Jaclyn doesn't have anyone to help her, Mac. Like I said, she just moved here to go to the community college. I can't get away from the store right now. So be kind to my newest cashier." I didn't say anything while I fumed. She knew it or else she wouldn't have told me to be kind. Another sigh. This one sounded exasperated. "I'm getting old! Is it too much to ask for grandchildren from you? By the rate you're going I'll be 75!"

My lips twitched. “You have grandchildren. And stop being dramatic, forty-nine isn’t old. I have it on good authority you’ll outlive the cockroaches.”

She laughed, knowing I’m kidding. “At least she’s not a stripper.”

The irritation that had dissipated returned ten-fold. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you? I might as well go ahead and tell you... I can’t wait for you to meet your new daughter-in-law. Found her down at Saucy Sally’s, love at first sight. The pregnancy is going□”

“That’s not funny!” she interrupted. “I’m not saying get serious too soon. Wouldn’t it be nice to have someone to come home to? Besides me?”

I blinked and scratched the scruff on my face. “Think my honey would get mad if I practice impregnating Jaclyn? Guess we’ll find out. Bye, Ma!” I snapped the top button on the phone, and slid my finger across it to shut it off. It wasn’t her fault she was lonely and wanted someone to coddle while I was gone. My brother and his wife lived two states away with the whole two point five kids and the white picket fence. Not that he ever invited me over to see. Anyway, I just didn’t want anyone waiting around for me.

It wouldn’t be fair because I’d die in the field just like my dad. With honor, but I wouldn’t be leaving anyone behind. I wouldn’t subject anyone having to accept my death as heroism when it felt anything but.

Jaclyn watched me from her small porch as I walked back up the drive. “Sorry about that.” I held up the bag. “Soup and Tylenol.”

A small smile touched her lips. “You didn’t have to.” She opened her door and waved me in. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I flinched and followed her into the kitchen. I doubted any of what she heard was bad, but I trusted she wasn’t hoping for anything my mom sprouted. Looking around the kitchen, the only things she had on the counters were a microwave, a jar of instant coffee—nasty but you got to do what you got to do—and a dish drainer with a lone coffee cup in it.

Jaclyn looked at me as I set the bag on the table. “She’s proud of you and only wants someone else to be proud of you, too.

Although, I don't feel up for any baby making sessions." The wry tone wasn't lost on me.

Trying not to wince, I said, "You heard that?"

"The whole neighborhood heard it." I guess I should feel relieved Jaclyn knew my mom's antics, but I was endeared more than anything. She rubbed her forehead. "I really need that Tylenol. My body hurts all over."

"You have the flu?"

She shook her head. "No, I had to get some vaccinations to start school. I went to the clinic yesterday, they were giving them out for free."

"You went to the free clinic? No wonder you feel like shit."

A glare shot from her brown eyes, but she rolled them. "Gee, I didn't think to use my hard earned cash from working at the general store for a prestigious doctor. I don't really need to eat after all." The sarcasm flowing out of her endeared me just a little more. "Besides, I've never reacted well to vaccines. It won't last."

"Need me to do anything? Warm up that soup?" I pointed to the container she put next to the microwave.

"I'm not hungry, just tired. You can go. I know you only have a few days of leave left. You're going overseas, right?"

I nodded, not really wanting to talk about it. She probably thought I'd rather spend the time with my high school buds at Saucy Sally's only to leave with no money and bad case of blue balls. Even though the place would disgust me more than give me a hard-on. Casting a glance around her house, I caught sight of her little TV and the DVDs surrounding it. Her couch was in the middle of the space and the bedroom was beyond that. "We can watch a movie."

She peered at me, looking for any signs of pity or sympathy I assumed. "I don't have cable, so it's the only thing to watch."

Even though she felt like shit and obviously getting worse, we found ourselves laughing at our one-liners and sarcasm well into the night. I didn't even remember falling asleep.

\*

"No, Gwen! Ben didn't want to, and I'm very proud of Mac's decision. You should be, too." My dad said, but it was

muffled through the wall of their bedroom. I sat at the table eating Lucky Charms.

“I’d be more proud if I thought it was his decision.” My mother threw back at him. I wished they’d shut up and not argue. He’d only be here for another week and we’re supposed to go fishing today.

“Leave it alone. The ROTC program will prepare him.”

Time disappeared. I sat on the couch with a mouth full of popcorn and my thumbs tapping the game controller rapidly in my hand, killing zombies on the screen. The phone rang and soon after a wail sounded throughout our house. I ran into the kitchen to see my mom crumpled in a ball on the floor. Looking back at the TV, the screen was red in hue from zombies feasting on my avatar. My mom growled from the floor. I snapped my attention to her, and she hurled herself at me with dead eyes.

My eyes sprang open but squinted in the morning sunlight. Sweat gathered like dew on my upper lip. My mouth tasted like someone shit in it. I sat up from the couch, rubbing the burn from my eyes. The TV screen softly moved with the old-as-hills DVD player’s screensaver. The bedroom door was cracked open, but Jaclyn was probably still sleeping. I don’t even remember her going to bed.

I walk into the kitchen and opened drawers to find a spoon. The jar of instant coffee was calling my name as I twisted it open and stuck the spoon in. Squeezing my eyes shut, I stuffed the spoonful into my mouth. The bitter grains rubbed against the roof of my mouth. I filled the coffee cup with water and downed it. I stood a moment. Fuck it. I took another giant spoonful with a water chaser.

Walking back into the living room, I froze, noticing Jaclyn’s body on the floor behind the couch. Adrenaline pumped into my veins. “Shit! Jaclyn?” I bent, feeling for a pulse, and jerked my hand back when I found none. Goosebumps spread up my arms and my breathing became heavy. I ran to the other side of the couch plopping on it and reaching for my phone on the coffee table.

It seemed to take a million years for it to boot up. When it did, numerous text and voice messages popped up. “What the hell?”

Where are you?

Answer your phone!

Call me!

An eerie groan came from behind the couch. As I lifted myself up to see what it was, Jaclyn flew over the couch, knocking us both to the floor. Pain splintered through my head when it hit the coffee table. Panic rose and almost seized me, but I grabbed her face. She kept screeching while snapping her teeth at my face with dried and cracked lips. The whites of her eyes were completely full of blood.

“The fuck?” The thunder of my heartbeat plunged into my ears, making my voice seem far away. I kicked up my feet and threw her off me. She crashed over the coffee table and into the TV. DVDs scattered around her.

I jumped up and went for the door, but she was right behind me. Her arm had twisted in a weird way, and she could only grab me with the other. She managed to throw herself at me, and we hit the wall. I maneuvered around and put her in a headlock. She immediately went to bite my arm, but I tightened my hold on a pressure point, hoping she'd pass out. Her muffled snarls and desperation kicked a chill up my spine as she struggled. Twisting her other arm to keep her from grabbing me, I realized how clammy and cold she felt.

Snorting from the vileness of it all, I released and kicked her away from me, and she fell face first into the couch.

I watched, dropping into stance as she righted herself without being stunned and came for me again. Punching her in the nose, thickened blood emerged out abnormally as her head snapped up right. I grabbed the large umbrella perched next to the front door and swung in an uppercut. The impact caused her to fall back on the floor, but she sat up. I swung it again hitting her in the head and finally stabbed her in the eye with the point of it. Pulling the umbrella from her eye socket with a sickening noise, bloody matter came with it, but she was still.

The silence that followed was deafening. I dropped the umbrella, keeping an eye on her corpse. Blood seeped out onto the cream carpeting. My arms shook and the shaking took over my body. I just killed a civilian. Dropping to my knees, I stared at her one-eyed corpse. Maybe it was just self-defense? No, it was instinct. I'd never hurt a civilian, let alone a girl. I'd spent the past four years

of my life protecting them and planned on doing it until I die. She should have passed out from lack of blood flow, but she didn't.

As the adrenaline calmed down, someone screamed in the distance. I ran to the front window and peered out. There was a car crashed into a brick mailbox down the road. Other than that, I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, but I could hear it.

My phone trembled as I looked at the messages again. A few of them were from my mom and even more from my commanding officer.

Putting the phone to my ear, I started with the first received at three o'clock this morning. This wasn't out of the ordinary. She passed on the Collin's Curse to me. Insomnia. Although, mine wasn't as bad as hers, she said it would get worse in time. "Mac? Sorry to bother you, but I'm out in the garage working on my project and the neighbor is banging on the door. I called the police, but there's a busy signal. Could you come home please? He's scaring me." The heavy metallic banging could be heard in the background. Beep. Next one received at four-thirty six. "Honey, where are you?" Her voice shook and my body broke out into a sweat. "I'm barricaded in my bedroom. I tried calling your brother, but...just stay where you are. I love you." The last one at received at five oh four. "Please be OK," she whispered and barely audible from crying.

I hit the call back button. It went straight to voicemail. By this point, I gasped for breath. I dialed my brother, Ben. Another voicemail. I didn't bother checking the messages from Sarge. I dialed him instead. "Collins. You're alive."

\*

Four years later...

A tap sounds at my door. "Go away! I'm sleeping!" I snap the lie because at least I'm trying to. It's in the middle of the night for fuck's sake. The door opens, which only pisses me off more. "What?"

Guido's disgusting form darkens the doorway. He stands sideways and his chest glitters from all the gold he wears there. "Git up Mac boy. Git yer little bag of goodies. I need yer services."

"For what? Unless someone is dying, it can wait till tomorrow." The only person I'd get up in the middle of the night for isn't here. My best friend is on his own death wish mission.



“Might be too late, see? Purty boy done brought back some dame. She’s sick. Infection.” He wrinkles his nose. “Nasty cut. Yew should see it.”

Pretty boy. He’s talking about Rudy. I sit up and try not to show how relieved I am the bastard is still alive. I’m trying not to think of the implications of how he got to Julie, let alone get her out. I’m assuming it’s her that’s sick. “She’s not going to turn, is she?”

He shakes his head. “She wrecked ‘er car. Didn’t know she had a gash on ‘er head. Now, she all feverish. She could heat the place up.”

“Fine.”

After putting on a T-shirt and straightening my dog tags underneath it, I slip on my boots and tie them quickly. My medicine bag is already by the door when I pick it up and glance at my bed. No need to make it, I’ll be right back.

He takes me to the women’s dormitory of the community he’s been building on for around three years. The room I walk into automatically makes me want a tetanus shot. It smells like someone had a sex marathon in a puddle of vomit. The chick on the bare mattress catches my attention. The heat on her face emanates to my skin before I touch it. Flushed with fever hell... she needs pain reliever and IV antibiotics. I sigh, I have a lot of work to do. “Where’s Rudy?”

Guido smiles and shows his need for dental hygiene.

“Gettin’ me some dead ‘ems.”

I repress the urge to look revolted. This cockroach and I have a very loose, uneasy truce. Keeping my mouth shut on his extra curricular activities with zombies is important. “This isn’t Julie.” I state.

Guido’s eyes draw together. “Who’s Julie? Chickie is Kan, purty boy told me. Don’t want nothin’ happenin’ to ‘er. Won’t be happy he said.”

I bend down in front of her. No, she is not Julie. The complete opposite, really. Who is this girl? The position she’s in on the bed causes her T-shirt to stretch across her chest. Nicely rounded—a little more than a handful, I’d bet money on it.

Guido interrupts my prognosis. “You gonna help her or keep staring at her? Yew boy is paying me good to nurse her sweet ass back to health.”

“Shut up and get out.” I wave my hand towards the general direction of the door.

When the door closes behind him, I glance at a huge pack at the end of the bed. First things first, I search for the gash. It looks like it’s been cleaned recently, but puffs around the edges in an angry red. The gash itself is raw and bleeds a bit. Her body trembles when I feel it. Her flushed cheeks round into a heart-shaped face. Breaths come out of her in soft pants. The biggest problem is her dread locks. They’re crusted over with blood around the gash. They soak it up like sponges. She trembles again, giving me a show down her V-neck shirt.

“Better be glad you have nice cleavage going on, or I’d shave these fuckers off.”

I reach for my bag as she responds. “I have to put the fire out.” Drowsiness thickens her voice. “It will draw zombies while I sleep.” Her eyes open to look at me. They are light surrounded by thick lashes. Nice.

She tries to get up, but I gently push her back down. “I’ll put your fire out.” I say, only half joking. After giving her a little dose of fever reducer in her arm, I begin setting up an IV of antibiotics and look back at her to find her still looking at me.

She smiles, touching my face with surprisingly rough fingertips. “I miss the beach.” She says as her eyes drift closed.

I blink at her sickness-induced conversation and inject some heavy narcotic for any pain she might have, which I should try and ask her about, but all I can manage is, “The beach?” Didn’t we all?

Her eyes pop open and she shakes her head a little. “Your eyes, dumbass. They remind me of the beach.”

“Think I’m handsome, do you?” That’d be no less than awesome.

“Maybe.” Too bad the medication makes its way through her system. She passes out on me.

As I clean her wound and rinse her hair of encrusted blood, I study the rest of her. Her boots are caked with dirt, dried blood and famished debris. Lean and cut with feminine muscle, her arms have thin threads of scabs all over them. I swallow, taking in the rest of her.

I suture the gash closed not really paying attention to it. She needs clean sheets on the bed. I have half of mind to take her

to my room, but think better of it. I don't know her, and her sweet face isn't enough to convince me she isn't crazy. You have to be to have survived this long. Not to mention, the very familiar bandana tied around her dreads.

I run to my room to use an iron to sterilize sheets. When I get back, I have to lay her in the floor while I put them on the bed. She's not all muscle but soft in the right places. When I put her onto the clean sheets her face falls toward me. Her lips are parted as a thick thread of drool drips from the corner of her mouth onto the sheet. I laugh, but after all the medication I've pumped into her she doesn't respond.

I go to the end of the bed, picking up the pack. Underneath it sits a pistol crossbow. There was an arrow in it ready to be shot. They are store bought and look as old as everything else she has. The pack has a double-sided axe and a machete hanging from it. They both look worn from use. Where the hell did Rudy find this girl?

I'm almost reluctant to see what else this girl has, but I have to find out. I dig through it, coming up with canned food, clothing and at the very bottom, a laptop. I almost dismiss it as a means for pictures and home movies from before the outbreak, but the massive amounts of different cables give me pause. Why would she have these? I open the laptop and power it up. A strange screen pops up. A strange logo stares at me, waiting for a command. It tells me to push escape for the operating system. I expect the desktop to be a picture, but it's a plain blue with dozens of unrecognizable icons.

When I open one, an intricate line of babble looks back at me. Upon opening the other ones more babble I don't understand, but I know enough to know this isn't an ordinary laptop. The question is, what should I do with it?

I look to Kan still sleeping and hardly looking like a computer geek, but the best ones don't look nerdy nor do they speak of what they can do. If I turn her in, she'll be thrust into doing whatever they want from her. My stomach drops at this thought, especially since she's the perfect candidate they're looking for. I can always just turn in her name as alive and active. Nothing else, but what if she has something against her? Am I willing to take that chance before getting to know more about her? And what the fuck is it anyway? I usually wouldn't have a problem turning

this in, but I never thought I'd come across the likely person. Especially considering the morons that surround me on a daily basis.

I'll wait and find out as much as I can before I come to a decision. After powering the laptop down, I stuff it back into her bag. So Rudy doesn't want anything happening to her. Knowing the fucker's standoffish quirk and attitude against women in general, she must be something special. I can't wait to find out what it is.

\*

Sitting at the bar in the Clap Trap, I'm taking in all the empty cages and beams. It seems Guido is pretty desperate for famished. It's still warm out, so of course he had Rudy go looking for them. It's obvious Rudy was in a big bind when he got Kan here. He knows he could have come to me, and I would have helped Kan free of charge. He probably came looking for me here, since he knows I hardly sleep.

The alcohol makes itself known in my bloodstream. The mildew smell of the bar is no longer pronounced. Maybe I'll catch some good shuteye tonight.

Reece sits beside me, rubbing his tattooed head. A habit I think he does when he's drunk and wallowing in his past. "Come on. I'll give you one for free," he says. There's a bead in his goatee getting ready to fall out.

"No way. If I wanted a prison tattoo, I'd do it myself." I doubt I'll ever willingly put an open wound on my body in a world full of famished. Reece is always trying to give someone a tattoo. He needs a new hobby.

A massive shadow drapes over Reece and I as the squeak of one of the famished cages open. The bitch boys are stuffing one in. A female, and she puts up one hell of a fight. Snarls ensue from her throat, and she's unaware of her tits bouncing everywhere.

"I see you haven't lost your touch. Where did you go? A strip club?" I joke at the source of the large shadow.

"Damn, Rudy." Reece says, eyeing the zombie in contempt, but he brightens and looks back at him. "Think of anything yet?"

"I told you if I ever think of something I want on my body forever, I'll let you know." Rudy sits in the stool on the other side of me, his body tense, but he shakes his head, watching the zombie with a hint of disdain. Rings circle his eyes as if he's lost sleep. "You should see the one he wanted up there." He jerks his chin up to the loft overlooking the Trap where Guido spends most of his time doing whatever he does.

I screw my nose in revulsion. "I'll pass."

"I have to go, but I wanted to talk to you first."

This might be interesting. "Wouldn't have anything to do with your newfound taste in women, would it?"

Reece raises the bushes he calls eyebrows and leans in to hear the answer. Rudy's jaw clenches, but he realizes it and goes for neutral. "It's not like that."

Trying not to look surprised or happy about it, I say, "Where did she come from?" I almost curse myself because he looks at me sharply, already knowing I looked through her stuff by that one question. I should have worded it differently, but something flashes in his eyes. He's worried about this one. I pick up my moonshine to sip on it.

"I don't know. She crashed an SUV near the base. She was going right in the middle of the dead zone."

Surprise causes moonshine to go down the wrong pipe and up my nose. The burn waters my eyes, and I cough until I can speak again, "What fucking for?"

"Same thing as me. She has someone there. I have a couple of rounds in the ring, so we'll be here for a few weeks at most. Says she'll help me get into the base, and Guido's rounding up a few guys, too."

This all makes a lot of sense. He's paying for it, but at least he won't be going by himself anymore, but for some reason, I want to go on the death mission, too. He continues, "I need a favor."

Even if I want to, I can't. "You know I can't go."

"That's not what I need." When I glance at him, he's staring at me as if he can convey what he wants though ESP. I almost laugh, but his features sharpen. He's serious. Deadly so, and I already know I'll do what I can. "I need you to keep Kan under wraps."

It's what I expected. "Already figured I should look into her more before coming to any decisions. But why would you care?"

"Because she has no problems wanting to help. I believe she thinks she owes me. She has some conclusive theories." He glances at the dance floor filled with drunken bodies. "She can hold her own. Even when sick and dizzy and riding piggy back, she fought the famished." He looks back at me with that intense stare he has. "We were a split second from being trampled by them."

"What?" Reece says at the same time I say, "Piggy back? Really?" I'm a tad envious, but at least I know what it is now. They connected during the heat of battle.

Rudy smirks at us while tightening his bandana. The one he doesn't normally wear. "Not something I'll forget anytime soon. Kind of badass, but she doesn't know much almost like she's been... hiding and somehow a loved one ended up at the base in the dead zon—" He cuts off, catching sight of something across the warehouse. Smacking the bar, he rumbles, "Time to go."

Reece and I follow his line of sight and laugh as he strides to the side door of the Trap.

"Hey! When's your next fight?"

"Day after tomorrow," he throws over his shoulder.

He looks back at me, saluting with a tipped smile. Poor guy is always running away from women. Looking back at the redheaded hooker who scowls at the slamming door, I don't blame him a bit.

\*

Then...

Climbing into my car, the radio gave me the same news as the Sarge. Right then, the big cities were in states of emergency with everyone being told to stay in their homes. From the look of it, there's nothing anyone could do. If Jaclyn would have had cable, we'd have found out a whopping eighty-one percent of the country was sick.

I didn't know it yet, but my commanding officer was dead within twenty-four hours of our conversation. Everyone died, because they did the exact same thing as I did. Instead of following strict orders, I went to my mom's house. I still have dreams about everything I saw on the way, but I never stopped to help anyone. According to the Sarge, anyone sick or bitten was considered

dangerous. He was extra interested in Jaclyn's symptoms, but I didn't really know or pay attention since she said it was normal.

The car still sat in the driveway. I held my firearm up when I noticed the driver's side door was slick and shiny with blood, and the garage door wide open. My mom's wooden table was turned over, but it looked like a struggle and not something she did for the project itself. I reached a shaking hand to turn the doorknob of the house. When I opened it, blood covered the hallway walls. A handprint stuck out to me, and my eyes burned as they took in the kitchen. More blood streaked the floors with footprints. Even on the spot I had found her curled into a ball the day we got the call.

I strained to hear anything going on further into the house. From the voicemail message, I knew I needed to see the bedroom. I had to know.

Upon investigating, all I found was more gore and no bodies—meaning she probably left the house on foot—as one of them. My throat wanted to close in on itself as I dropped my arms to my sides still gripping the pistol. I swept the room with my gaze, landing on a folded flag in a glass case. Backing out of the room, I swallowed repeatedly. A ringing started in my ears as I walked down the stairs before a high keening sound came from the top. I turned in time to see a man stumble down the stairs, taking me with him. We turned over twice before we landed. Teeth snapped in front of my face as I held him back to shoot him. The aim was a little off and I got him right in the face as blood and thicker things stuck to the wall and my arms.

I jumped up and ran to the sink as my body trembled and scrubbed my skin clean, watching the frantic movements of my own hand under the water. When I was done, I leaned against the counter. There was only one thing to do. Report for duty.

\*

Now...

I walk in Guido's loft without knocking not bothering to look around at his appalling abode. He shoots me an irritated glare, but my eyes go directly to Mago sitting on the couch—a stark contrast against the light color of it. That's right, he's here for a put on show. I would apologize for interrupting, but I'm not sorry. It's not like they were doing anything important. Guido's rolling his cigarettes.

I ignore Mago. Even though I don't want to say what I have to say in front of him, I do anyway. "You're getting some guys up for Rudy?"

Guido nods, "Yeah. So? Purty gorilla payin' for it."

"Count me in."

"Why? Who gonna git me my shit? No good to me dead. And all those peeps goin' might as well be dead now. Unless yew want to bring back gorilla boy as a dead 'em, I know he got ta have—"

"You're a sordid human being." I spit, cutting him off before he says what I think he's going to say. Rudy already hit the jackpot in the—I'm a huge motherfucker—gene lottery. I don't want to think about the bastard's—my junk's so heavy I always have to reposition it—problems. A smile stretches across Guido's face as if he likes people thinking he's disgusting. "Doesn't matter what happens to me, I'm replaceable."

"I don't think so, we gots somethin' special yew and me." Guido glances at Mago. "Yew gonna bring back Mac boy as a dead 'em?"

Sitting back against the couch, Mago steeples his fingers with dark, dangerous eyes. "I condone your idiosyncrasies. Not revel in them."

I laugh because I'm right there with him. Guido turns back to me, "Fine, but I need some supplies before yew leave and another fight from purty boy."

"No more fights." I glare at him, daring him to argue with me.

He doesn't, knowing he has what he has because of me. "All good," he mumbles, returning his attention back to his cigarettes.

Suppressing a comeback, I turn and leave. The door doesn't close behind me, and I look over my shoulder to see Mago standing on the landing. The door closes and he speaks, "You know what you're doing?"

"Yes, and I don't need you speaking a word to anyone. It would be good to have your help."

"It's not time."

"Not going to stop these people from getting killed."

"You can stop them," he says.

"No, but I can prolong it."



\*

When I make it to the Trap, Rudy is already there taking shots of moonshine before his fight. "You throwing this one?"

Smiling, he shakes his head. "If I was, I wouldn't tell you." He's right. The last time he fought, he let Isaac kick the crap out of him, but it was because of the deal he made with Guido.

"Kan wake up?"

Rudy shifts in his seat and situates his package discreetly. "Yeah, but she's not coming."

I snort, "Right." And I let it go when I see Guido walking towards us. "Good luck, man. I didn't bet on your ass this time."

He answers by taking his shot before I walk away. I'm heading toward the hallway to leave when the outside door opens. Glinda walks in and she laughs with Kan.

Kan says something to her and Glinda gives her a look. I scoot up against the wall to watch them and absently pick glue from my fingers, an unfortunate result of making arrows. She turns her attention to the warehouse with wide eyes, taking everything in. Walking to the bar, she grips her pistol crossbow as if she might have to use it any minute. Glinda grabs her, pulling her away from where they stand. Glinda hands her a shot that looks to be tequila from the color. She takes it easily and keeps looking around. They laugh at something being said. The sound carries to my ears even over the music.

I notice when Kan spots Rudy because she freezes and steps back as if she doesn't want him to see her. Candy walks up to Rudy as I smirk at how he tenses up. She rubs him and Kan watches curiously. She looks away and takes in the assorted famished littered throughout the warehouse.

The DJ announces the fight and the patrons scream the announcement with him. A barely-there top catches my attention. It's a small tank top and huge tits are poking out the sides and over the top. Peaches, the source of the slutty top and every single bout of crab rumors, strolls up and smiles at me.

"Why don't you leave something for the imagination?" I snap and send a scowl her way. My reputation holds up as she walks away, muttering something I've heard before. Why can't they come up with something original so I can at least laugh? I look back to Kan, but she is gone. I bump myself from the wall in pursuit.

I find them watching in the back. I go back and forth between the fight and Kan. It's just as entertaining watching Kan like she has never seen such things. According to Rudy, maybe she hasn't. The crowd cheers on and off and at one point Kan chews her finger.

The announcer claims Rudy is the winner. His face is a little bloody, but he's holding onto a rib. I'll have to check him out to make sure he hasn't injured it too badly. I look back in time to see Kan being pulled away by a nasty sort of fellow I've never talked to but know his name is Gary. It's my job to know everyone's names. Following them to the dance floor, he's groping her when she turns and swings her fist, knocking him a good one. She shakes her hand out as he falls back to the floor with no one catching him. People laugh and continue dancing around him. I almost laugh at the indignant look on the pervert's face, but stop when I realize Rudy's right. She can hold her own.

Tapping him in the shoulder with my boot, I tell him, "Get the hell out here!" Gary jumps up and runs off, leaving behind a trail of body odor.

She stares at me and I smile. Looking stunned, she gives me a half smile in return causing me to wonder if she remembers our conversation. I melt into the crowd as I hear Glinda telling her they needed to leave. Glinda the good witch my ass, more like Glinda the Wicked Hooker of the West. She hates me and with good reason.

\*

Then. . .

When I opened the garage door to leave the house, I had a huge problem causing my blood pressure to spike and more adrenaline kicked me into high gear. More of them were piling into the garage. The one in front moved its veiny arm in the way just as I was smashing the door closed using all my weight. The thing groaned, but I kept pushing as thick blood dripped down the doorframe. A crack came from his arm, but the door was getting harder to keep in position. The sheer number was overwhelming my strength.

I dropped back and took off for the stairs, remembering where my mom's car was parked. Bodies fell through the door landing on the floor in the place I just vacated. I heard them groaning and shuffling around as I made it into a standing position.

Entering the front bedroom, I slammed the door closed just as I heard them on the stairs. I pushed some furniture to keep them out longer and looked out the window. Dozens of them were walking down the street to surround the house. The gunshot must have drawn them.

Opening the window, I climb out and maneuver myself along the ledge to the rain gutter before jumping and landing with a loud metal thud on top of the car. The impact caused my knees to jar my nerve endings, but it didn't last long. After checking out the situation, the majority of the growing crowd was inside the garage. Gripping my gun, I shot the nearest ones so I could make it to my car. After hopping in, I stared out at the scene before me, knowing it was only going to get worse.

\*

I was so screwed, but I didn't care. Bringing the bottle to my lips, I gulped it in rapid succession. I had a few days to get my shit together, but I doubted that would happen. I hadn't slept in days, maybe for a few minutes at a time, but it didn't matter. I accepted a position on an ongoing field mission, meaning I'd be dead soon.

People watched movies and read books about this sort of thing. I always laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. There would be extreme emphasis on military jargon and weaponry or all the important people are safe, but no one else. Most of the time media and literature gave way too much power on politics or scientific explanations. Secondary characters honor bound to defend their country, but who didn't seemingly give a shit about their dead loved ones when only the main characters were able to save theirs or show emotional pitfalls when they couldn't. Bullshit.

In reality, there were revolutionist strategically placing this shit and now sitting back and laughing at the superb job they'd done. Nothing was safe. No one was safe. Anything and anyone that could help was already gone. They were the first to go. While everyone else scrambled to adapt and change because there was no going back. That was not to say there weren't people who wanted it, because there were. Of course, they were living in a fantasy.

A knock sounded at my door, but I didn't care. I stayed in place on my couch. My roommate answered the door. I forgot his name, but we hated each other. He was assigned to pick up trash.

Yep. Trash. These were the majority of the remaining people and it had only been less than a week since the outbreak.

"Thank god. That asshole is drinking again. Give him a blowjob or something," he said to our visitor.

I lifted my head above the couch to see Carrie push him out of the way in a storm of auburn hairs coming out of her short ponytail. "Don't fucking talk to her like that, garbage man!" Roomie slammed the door and took off down the hall.

She shot me a grateful look as she sat down beside me on the rundown couch. "Hey."

"Hey yourself. Think you can get him a new housing placement?"

"I'm working on it, but they'll just replace him and the grass isn't always greener and all that. People are coming in everyday though."

"Has to be greener than that brown, crunchy fucker."

She laughed, a sound I hadn't heard very often as of late. "Hang in there. It's not like you'll be here a lot..." Trailing off, her face went pensive.

"You're sad." I said, surprised.

"Of course I'm sad. Where else am I going to get my booty call? Surely not from brown, crunchy fucker?" I was glad she made light of it. A reason I liked her.

I pulled her camouflage-covered hips to straddle me. "Let's try to get it out of your system." My thumbs brushed along her dog tag chain to her collarbones as she shook out the rest of her hair from its binding. She ran her hands up my stomach, pulling me closer by my dog tags. "Hey now," I mumbled, following my thumbs with my lips. I loved collarbones and hers had perfect prominence and dips.

She rocked her pelvis, grinding against me. "I've had a rough day, and I need a rough fuck."

I felt my lips tug into a smile. Another reason I liked her. "Whatever you say, private."

\*

A few days after my old roommate moved out, I found I'd be getting another one.

The squawk of the CB sounded in my bedroom. I wanted to throw it out the window. Walking in there, I picked up the hand

held, “What the fuck do you want?” I lit a cigarette, inhaling quickly before blowing the smoke out.

“You might get a roommate in a few days. Civilian. His choice. Quarantine ward is putting him through hell for fighting. He’s in the cages.”

“Name?”

“Rudolph Garrett Hawthorne. Want me to send a file?”

Rudolph? I laughed out loud. He probably wouldn’t last, so why not? “Yeah, and send him over when he clears.”

A few days later, I was getting ready to start my training, when the knock came. Opening the door, I immediately knew I should have looked the file over more. I knew he was twenty-four, engaged and a business graduate student with a 4.0. After reading that, my brain hit the hypothetical snooze button. I crossed him off as some kind of corporate ladder climbing nerd and tossed the file in the bottom of a drawer.

Saying the guy was large would be a massive understatement. Being shorter than average had nothing to do with this. Even him being three steps down we were head to head. Fuck me, I probably only came up to his chest. A beard covered his face in the same brown color as his short, messy hair, and he looked ready to pass out on his feet. But what caught my attention the most was the bow strapped to his back along with a guitar and a quiver full of arrows. He held his duffle loosely as if it weighed nothing.

I spent the next few years bunking with him off and on. He wouldn’t ever know it, and I’d never tell him, but him showing up at the quarantine base changed my perspective on the outbreak. I was suddenly not ready to die, so I took my training seriously instead of half-heartedly.

Rudy handled the outbreak with a sort of calmness I envied. Although, he didn’t lose people like I did, he’d been through so much shit before the outbreak it was like he woke up, saw zombies, flipped up both middle fingers and said, “Fuck you world. I’ve been through worse and you’re not getting rid of me yet.”

There was a lot of shit we ended up doing without consent... like going on looting trips off base. A lot of them. I figured if he was going to drink my alcohol, he could help get it. The first trip I’d never forget. After that, it was like he couldn’t sit

still and wanted to leave the base all the time. All it took was that one taste of freedom.

I was really surprised to figure out—he hated how women treated him—usually like some beefcake stallion. Most men would take advantage of that, and even though I was sure he'd done it before, he loathed it and loathed himself as well. For what exactly, I'd never been able to figure it out, but he did. And his weird relationship with the leech, I came to the conclusion long ago was more like siblings than an engaged couple.

"What's with the blonde?" I had finally asked him, referring to Julie when I was on a short weekend break from the community. We had been shooting arrows, but eventually downed a bottle of Jim Beam. Of course, he drank more than me this time and I let him because Julie had been over to our house that day. For some reason, her visits always bound him up tight. It was also the first time I figured out I could get him to talk when he was drunk. I only had to ask. I could probably ask him sober, but I'd never worked up the nerve.

"What-do-you-mean?" This came out in a jumbled slur. All one word. He was sitting on the kitschy couch bent over holding his head in his hands. His bandana was MIA, and his hair was all over the place because of it. He'd grown his hair out, well so had I, but he did it because it got on Julie's nerves. I was sure.

"I know you're engaged but..."

"Fuckin' nothin'."

I took the last gulp from the bottle and said, "OK. Whatever you say, man."

"Our dad died. Her dad, but you know...he was like my dad, too. He died and fucked everythin' up." He raised his head as he said up, popping his lips on the p. "We started whorin' around on each other. Guessin', can't get past it." After kicking off his boots, he lay back on the couch and adjusted himself while doing so. "Never had a dad."

I scoffed, "I did, and they aren't all they're cracked up to be."

"Why?"

"Served twenty-two years and died in the field. Never married my mom. Only thing he gave me was the attitude to serve. Look where that got me." I lifted the bottle to drink, but

remembered it was empty. "Doing whatever that repulsive moron wants just to keep an eye on the place."

One of his eyes sprung open, bloodshot from the booze. The community was always a curiosity for him. "I wanna go."

"Sleep it off, dude."

Just a few days after that, I was called to Birmingham. A new Coalition development started there and was being kept on the down low for the time being. Theories were going around about the revolutionists' next move. I sat in front of my new lieutenant going over reports and updating my status at the base and the community I resourced. "I understand you've been staying with a..." He picked up a paper, but I knew he already knew the name without looking. "Rudolph Hawthorne for the past two and half years?"

"Yes."

"We've been watching him. And even though you didn't know it, you have, too. Tell me about him."

I went on autopilot. "Keeps to himself. Helps with maintenance at the base."

"He came with a group of people, most of which he didn't know. Started a fight and could have held his own against three men, had weapons. Seems like a good candidate for recruiting. His background gave us pause. What do you think?"

"No," I said, a little uneasy.

"No?"

"I mean he's not mentally capable. A little unstable. You can if you want, but I wouldn't recommend it." He stared at me for a long time, but my last sentence seemed to appease him.

He nodded, "OK, I'll write it off, but I still want to talk to him."

Shit. Walking out into the hall, I ran my hands through my mop of girl curls. Another Collins Curse passed to me from my mom. How the hell was I going to keep Rudy from enlisting?

\*

Now...

I hate playing cards, but I find I like it just to spend time with Kan. I'll do anything to keep her mind off going to that stupid base, but she's bound and determined. Russell, a moron, sits across the poker table in the Clap Trap and steals a glance at Nick's cards, another moron.

“Hey! You’re fucking cheating!” I belt out. Gangly Russell straightens up, trying to look innocent. Nick flashes him a deadly look.

An elbow catches me in my side, but Kan tries to hide her smile behind her cards. She whispers to me, “You’re an idiot. He would have given away if Nick had anything.”

“So you knew?” She nods, and I steal a peek at her cards. “Oh, thought I was helping you out.” I whisper. “Carry on,” I say to the table and Kan laughs beside me. I like hearing her laugh, but I hate that it makes me feel guilty.

I thought I had one up on her until she folds. Nick folds, too. Too bad. This could have been interesting. Turns out she’s smart to fold, I lose after putting all in. Shooting her a look, I stand up, which only causes her to laugh even more until Reece steps up behind her.

When she sees him, she glances at me. “Got to go, Mac.” The crossbow resting on the table is pulled from it as she stands and leaves. They’ve been spending an awful lot of time together, and since he’s well into his forties, I don’t think it’s anything sensual. Rudy watches them leave from his place at the bar, seeming more confused about them than me.

“Where are they going?” I ask him as I walk up.

His eyes cut to me. “You probably know more than me.”

“She’s staying with you, so I doubt it.”

A smile follows a snort. “Shows what you know—”

A scream cuts through the warehouse over the beat of the bass. We set our sights on it. A chained famished has his mouth on an arm of a woman named Lucy. “Shit!”

\*

That’s how I find myself pacing in front of an extremely pissed off Guido and a smiling Mago. We were in the small workout room that smells like piss and the beat of the party continues on in the Trap. Lucy had decided to turn and be put on display. Kan got all righteous and sexy as fuck and shot the zombie bitch in the middle of her own Clap Trap celebration. Lucy was newly turned and would have lasted a long time, therefore pissing Guido off, so here I am doing damage control.

Kan has a weird thing with zombies and their souls but the fact is, she is right and doesn’t even know it. It’s a huge secret though. I know why Mago’s here, but Kan is why he looks amused



at it all—a rare sight for him. He never finds anything at the community amusing, and the fact he finds Kan so, is discouraging. I don't like his attention on her.

Mago's currently laughing and stroking his pointy beard. "She rendered a rabies metaphor when I inquired her about it."

Guido just glares at us both. "We had a deal, Mac boy!"

"I didn't do it this time and it's not like you can't get more.

Kan's actions are her own. You act as though I told her to do it."

"Yew put up a fight on Lucy."

"Not out of the norm for me. And if I remember correctly, Kan tried to talk her out of it, too."

"You git me a new dead 'em?"

"Do you think about anything else? I'm starting to get worried and fuck no, I won't."

Guido lifts a shoulder, but there is tension around his eyes. "Had ta ask. But chickie need ta figure whut she doin'. She can't stay for free." With that he walks out with the music from the Trap blaring in while he opens and closes the door.

"Special acquaintance you have," Mago mentions.

I glance at him. "She's not just an acquaintance, and you leave her alone."

"You depart for the base soon? The general mentioned it. I guess you got your permission."

"Day after tomorrow. You get Mya transferred?" He nods. "Good."

"This community might be full of incompetent absurdity, but the revolutionists are organized extremists."

I sigh, wishing he'd tell me something I don't know.

\*

I'm packing up my arrow booth from the marketplace. There's no telling when I'll be back. I hate doing it right now, especially since I can't get my head out of the bed. The smile on my face must be contagious because everyone smiles at me when they walk by. Probably wondering what's wrong with the asshole, but not going to complain.

Walking into my room, I put several boxes against the wall. I catch sight of the stupid skirt Kan had on last night laying haphazardly in the corner in the exact same spot I tossed it. It looked ridiculous on her, but not because it wasn't hot, just not her

thing. Chuckling, I pick it up and stuff in a bag with other dirty clothing.

I notice my compound bow is missing, so I know she still has it at the target range, but when I get there the range is eerily empty. Chills race up my arms as I walk out to the parking lot where the rest of the team is packing up vehicles. Rudy catches me walking up and turns the other way. Kan is nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Kan?” I question and try not to panic when everyone looks at me confusedly.

“At the target range,” Rudy answers. “I saw her there not even thirty minutes ago.” His neck starts getting red as his jaw clenches.

“You saw her?”

“That’s what I just said.” The words are a rumble. He looks to the distance to calm himself I suppose. “She’s here, probably in the Marketplace. She’s been collecting jars of moonshine.”

“I was just there packing up my booth.” Dread washes over me when the conversation Kan and I had earlier this morning flashes to the forefront of my mind. I scowl at our audience and they back off to resume what they were doing beforehand. “She left.” I state.

“Fuck. You haven’t even looked for her.” It’s no less a growl as he stalks past me to go look himself.

I follow him. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“You ever think that some things just aren’t your business?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I’m kind of shocked at the vehemence coming from him even though I know what it is. Rudy is the most laid-back guy I’ve ever known. “Well, no. Not really.”

The glare he shoots me could turn someone to stone.

“This isn’t.” That’s all he says about it as we ask around for Kan. My heart sinks lower, and Rudy is looking more worried by the minute. Turns out, no one has seen her since she shot Zombie Lucy last night. Except Rudy and I.

Rudy stops to lean against a wall with his hands on his knees, breathing heavier.

When he looks up, he’s pale like he’ll throw up.

“Something bad happened,” he says, his earlier attitude dust in the wind. Anger and irritation snakes its way through my limbs.

“No, it didn’t. She left. I told her about Julie.” His glare returns with a vengeance as his face twists. For a minute I think he’ll say something, but he pushes away from the wall in a hurry through the courtyard.

He throws, “I know,” over his shoulder. When I catch up to him, he continues, “Why would you think Julie has anything to do with her missing?”

I cut him a sideways look, “I know you’re not that dense.”

Stopping, he turns to face me, crossing his arms. “What you’re implying is dead wrong. I know Kan, and she wouldn’t leave the team like this. She’s mad at the omission, not the context. So this is what we’re going to do. Look for her because she would do the same. We can start at her house. You and Reece know where it is. Then if she’s not there, we’ll go to those fucks that held us up and shot you in the ass in the middle of downtown. They could have followed us back.”

That throws me for a loop, but only for a second. I almost laugh—Kan wouldn’t go back to that house. She knows we’d look for her there. Plus, he didn’t see the flare of devastation on her face when I told her about Julie. There’s no doubt in my mind she left on her own. “I doubt she’d be with the weird mongrels because according to Kan’s description, those guys were from the base. So no, it would be a waste to look for her. Just because you’re feeling guilty for not telling her...all because of some infantile hang-up of being alone. We need to continue with the base mission.”

Something sparks in his eyes. “The fuck we are.”

His fist flashes, splintering pain through my nose as blood spurts out. Sucking air through my nose, blood goes straight to my throat and I taste it. I raise my hand to wipe blood off. “Did you just sucker punch me?” Fuck him, now my nasally voice matches my height.

A smug smile touches his lips. “Bringing up a childhood complex is a low blow, even for you.”

My body heats up and releases adrenaline in my veins. I’ll show him low blow. I aim my fist at a rib that gets bruised all the time, he releases a grunt and the next thing I know, both of our fists are flying. I get a good one in his eye. Yells commence from the parking lot, but it doesn’t stop us. Pain hits my cheek and dots burst in front of my eyes. Somehow we end up on the ground with Rudy holding me down as Reece and John try to pull him off. I

keep aiming for that rib and Rudy uses his knee to hit me in the jaw causing my head to snap sideways and agony slices up my jaw.

"God dammit!" I manage. Sam and Ty help Reece and John. They finally get him to stop struggling, and I jump up, running my hands through my hair to get debris out of the curls. Rudy has blood flowing from his lip and his eyebrow is split again with some of his hair stuck in it. He looks at me knowing I have more to give if I really wanted to hurt him. I guess we both needed to let off a little steam. I glare at all of them and stalk off.

\*

Then...

I hurried down the tree-canopied sidewalk. Even as cold as it was, children played and laughed in all directions. It all seemed heightened than the last time I was here at the base, but I'm only here for a minute. Smoke from one of Guido's homemade cigarettes flowed from my mouth. Rudy didn't know about the revolutionists. It's not common knowledge. So I had to tread carefully with what I'd say. I'd go under pretense of his recruitment.

Bursting through the door, Rudy startled but kept playing his guitar. Poindexter was perched beside him on the arm of the chair, did a cat stretch and hopped off. "I can only stay a minute."

Rudy looked up, noticing my cigarette and set his guitar to the side. "What's wrong?"

"Did they talk to you?"

He smiled, "Yeah, but I think they tossed the idea when I said, 'When do I get a gun to play with?'"

I laughed. "No shit?"

He shook his head, "Nah, man. Haven't heard a word."

Sitting on the couch, I said, "Listen, if they say anything, just bail. If anything bad happens at all, fucking bail. Use the spot we use when we loot. And go here. It's the community. Follow the famished." I handed him a sheet of paper.

"You seem to think something will happen."

I didn't hesitate. "I've just been thinking, we should have a back-up plan, you know? Something you need to have anyway."

"Sure. Thanks. Might go anyway. I wasn't in my graduate studies to fix fucking toilets."

"I'll trade with you." I joked.

After that, the base was infiltrated as suspected. The sheer number of them overpowered our soldiers. It wasn't a good sign. Less than a week later, Rudy showed up at the community.

\*

Now....

I'm a fuck up, but everyone thinks they are in some way, shape, or form. I've been in my old bed for days contemplating the meaning of life. Not really, just the meaning of the empty jars of moonshine sitting on my old desk and why someone would loot an old folded American flag in a glass case. It was gone. I should have grabbed it when I had the chance.

I roll over and get a whiff of my own body odor and immediately sit up, figuring I've wallowed enough. Time to go find somewhere to clean myself up, and head to Birmingham to get my ass lashed for going MIA.

I hop down the stairs and turn into the kitchen when I see it. On the refrigerator is a note written in Sharpie. The words alive, safe, and the date stick out the most, a year after the outbreak. I can barely see through the water in my eyes and have to hold myself up against the fridge.

\*

I don't realize how much time has passed until my lieutenant asked me where I've been for the past week and a half.

The worst thing that happens though is when I'm sent in to see the general. General Stevenson. He throws some grainy pictures on top of the table. I look at them and my stomach sinks, but irrational anger takes hold. Rudy and Reece stand over Kan, and from the looks of it, she's naked and covering herself up.

"This young man." His finger lands on Rudy. "According to you, is supposed to be dead." I swallow. This is what happens when you try and protect people. When you care. "And just who might this young lady be?" He asks as his finger lands on Kan.

Thank god I can talk myself out of anything.

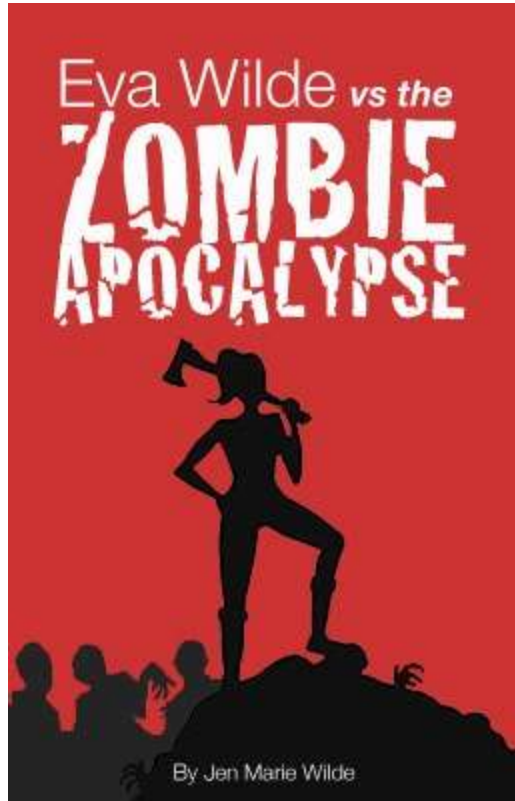
\*

It takes about twelve hours for me to track down Rudy without being seen. I'm watching famished bite and claw at a new fence being put up around the community's parking lot when Rudy appears. He hops in the driver's side door of his truck with me sitting in the passenger seat and startles when he sees me. "Shit, Mac. Where the fuck have you been?"

He doesn't look well. A beard covers his face and tension thickens the air around him as he stares at me. Ignoring his question, I ask, "What happened?"

I expected him to grip the wheel, clench his jaw, or stare out the window, but he does none of that. He only looks down into his lap with slumped shoulders, almost like he doesn't want to talk about it. The words that come out of his mouth leave me hating myself more than ever.

*Jen Wilde*



For my husband, Mike, who loves zombies.

Thank you for your never-ending support, love and enthusiasm – and for showing me that zombies are awesome.

This is for you.



## Prologue

We all looked at each other, eyes wide in shock, struggling to believe what we saw.

*For anyone still in Sydney or Melbourne who are uninfected, you are urged to stay inside and lock your doors and windows. The infected have become severely deranged and extremely violent. We have received countless reports of the infected biting and even killing anyone they come across, including their loved ones. Do not approach the infected. I repeat; do not approach the infected. If you have been bitten, you are requested to go to the nearest hospital or medical centre for treatment as soon as possible.*

More footage of the streets was shown then, this time of the infected. Their eyes were an eerie white, skin grey and spattered with blood, their faces and arms covered in open wounds and lesions.

“Zombies,” whispered Ben, staring slack-jawed at the screen.

“Oh come on, Ben,” Jo scoffed, putting her hands on her hips. “The media always over dramatises things. I doubt it’s that serious.”

“You haven’t seen the guy just outside the door,” Ben replied.

“We need to get rid of him. He’s infected. He’s been bitten, and he’s starting to look just like them,” I said, motioning to the infected people on the screen.

My stomach turned as I heard the sound of the bell ringing as the door of the diner opened, and slowly shut again.

“I hope that was him leaving,” I whispered as I unlocked the door and slid it open an inch.

I peered through the gap, but could still see the infected man trying to pull himself up onto the counter. “He’s still there.”

“That means another one just walked in,” Wyatt said as he switched off the television and stood close behind me. Any other day I would have shivered in his close presence, but right now we stood on the edge of the end of the world, and we had to survive.

I heard a loud groan and someone, *something*, shuffling through the diner, edging closer to the four of us hiding in the tiny office. I held my breath, trying desperately to stay quiet. Slowly, I began sliding the door closed, but it was too late. A rancid,

decomposing face appeared on the other side of the entryway, its dilated pupils burning into me in desire.

I screamed, almost knocking Wyatt over as I jumped back into him. It let out a terrifying screech as it crammed a long, freshly mauled arm through the opening in the door.

The putrid smell of day old rotting flesh filled the room as its maggot infested hand swiped at me frantically. The mere sight of it filled my stomach with bile, but I knew I had to focus on keeping us alive.

I threw myself forward against the door, pushing it sideways as hard as I could. Wyatt leant over me onto the door, helping me slam it into the infected arm. Ben tried to grab it and push it back onto the other side of the door, but it was swinging wildly, its yellow fingernails covered in dried blood. Jo backed herself up against the far wall, screaming in fear.

I put all my weight against the door and together Wyatt and I forced it closed, and by the sound of the sickening crack I knew we had broken the bone, but the possessed arm didn't stop. Instead, it kept waving around, only now it couldn't grab us. Ben pushed the shattered arm back through the door and we slammed it shut, locking it fast.

For a moment, everything fell silent. I leaned off of the door and tried to catch my breath. I could feel my entire body trembling. My heart pounded so hard I thought it would explode.

I could hear it, the infected monster, groaning and sniffing at the other side of the door. The groan turned into a loud growl, and it furiously rammed itself into the door. Ben and Wyatt threw themselves against it to stop it from breaking in.

"What do we do?" I asked, my legs feeling so unstable I thought I would collapse.  
No-one answered.

I leaned my arms against the door again, helping Ben and Wyatt keep it closed, while Jo slid down onto the floor, her knees up against her chest as tears streamed down her face.

Over the growling I heard the bell ring again.

Another one had come for us. All that stood between us and these mindless creatures with an insatiable hunger for human flesh was a thin sliding door.

We were trapped.

\*\*\*

## Chapter One

The setting sun glimmered through the window, veiling my bedroom with a golden glow. Outside I heard the sounds of Friday night traffic, people either making their way home from work or heading out to celebrate the arrival of the weekend.

Even though I lived on one of the busiest streets in Melbourne, I never took much notice of the noise. The trams, the cars, the people, the constant sounds of the city; I found it comforting. It meant I wasn't as alone as I sometimes felt. I had expected to eventually adjust to living on my own, but something about it never felt right to me. More than anything, I hated having no-one to come home to.

Leaning over my dresser, I looked closely at my reflection in the bedroom mirror, concentrating as I slowly glided my black pencil liner over the outer corner of my eye.

Turning my head left, then right, I made sure I had mastered the cat eye look perfectly, when I heard a knock on my apartment door.

“Be right there, Jo!”

It never takes me long to get ready, all I need are my favourite pair of jeans, a singlet, my motorcycle boots, eyeliner and sometimes a brightly coloured scarf, and I'm ready to go.

It's the middle of Spring, and while the top half of the world is getting colder, Melbourne is getting deliciously warm, so I opted for a black singlet and magenta scarf to go with my standard jeans and boots tonight.

Standing back to take one last look, I smiled cheerfully – a kindness I always gave to myself when I saw my reflection. I let my long, dark brown hair hang down, its ends tipped with turquoise. My deep hazel eyes are overshadowed by my long dark lashes and arched eyebrows that would make me look serious, if I didn't smile so often. My lips, thin and asymmetrical, are not the typical full lips that so many women want and men lust after, but they are exactly like my mother's, and that's why I love them. Sometimes, if I squint hard enough while I smile in the mirror, I can almost see my mother smiling back at me. Wrapping my scarf loosely around my neck, I picked up my faded brown satchel from the bed and headed for the door.

Jo, my dearest friend, and I were going to the local bar to have a few drinks and see Wyatt and his band perform.

I could feel the butterflies start to come alive in my stomach, a sensation I always felt around Wyatt. I couldn't help but smile again at the thought of him. Pulling my door open, Jo greeted me by standing in model pose, with a hand strategically placed on her hip and her head tilted to the side.

"Like my new dress?" She waved her hand up and down the short, strapless, neon orange outfit. Her long, flame-red hair fell down passed her shoulders, framing her heart-shaped face perfectly. Her bright blue eyes looked up at me expectantly, her grin lighting up her face as she waited for a response.

While inseparable, Jo and I are two very different people in regards to fashion sense.

While I dressed more for comfort and paid no attention to what is popular, Jo dressed to impress and followed the trends religiously. On the surface, we appeared to be different in every way, but as friends for more than a decade, the history we had with each other created an everlasting bond.

Ever since we met, on the first day of high school, we had been there for each other; from helping each other with homework and boy troubles to the toughest times of our lives.

When I lost my parents just a few years before, at nineteen, Jo never left my side.

During that time she became my rock; we consider ourselves sisters now. Working together as waitresses at Pop Rocks, a 1950's nostalgia diner where Jo is the Manager, allows us to see each other almost every day. Although we have so much fun there it hardly seems like work at all.

"It's very... bright," I answered, as politely as possible.

Jo's arms dropped to her side, disappointed.

"You look beautiful, Jo."

She perked up again.

"Thank you! And may I say you look as angsty as ever." Jo looked down at my motorcycle boots and grimaced.

"I'm not angsty. I'm comfortable. And I'm perfectly happy in this outfit, thank you!" I said as I swung my door closed and locked it behind me.

“I know, I know,” sighed Jo as we started down the stairs of my building. “Little Miss Comfortable. That’s you! If you ask me, you’re a little too comfortable. You gotta get out of your comfort zone and do something exciting! Something bold!”

Jo smiled at me cheekily, and I knew exactly where she was headed with that speech – I had heard it many times before.

“Jo, please don’t start.”

“Come on, Eva. Tonight’s the perfect opportunity for you to tell Wyatt how you feel. Step up! When are you gonna make your move?”

I sighed as the butterflies in my stomach twisted and turned. I had been building up the courage to ask Wyatt out for over a year now, ever since we first met. At the time, Wyatt had just moved to Melbourne from Cairns to study Architecture, and came to the diner looking for a job. After Jo hired him and he started working with me, we grew into such good friends that I became terrified of ruining the friendship.

“I’ll tell him. I will. I’m just... waiting for the right moment.”

Jo rolled her eyes, she’d heard that before, too.

We turned the corner to see our tram about to leave and started running to catch it. I laughed as I heard Jo struggling to jog behind me in her six-inch heels. We climbed up the steps and onto the tram, falling onto a seat as it started to move.

Jo looked me in the eyes as she caught her breath.

“If you don’t tell him soon, you might miss your moment.”

## Chapter Two

We zig-zagged our way through the crowd, meeting our friend Ben at the bar. Friday night in Melbourne meant packed bars and busy streets as everyone flocked to cafes, bars and clubs, staying up until sunrise and sleeping all day Saturday.

Everyone, it seemed, except for me, Jo, Wyatt and Ben, who all had to get up bright and early the next morning to work at the diner.

“You’re just in time, they just started their first set,” Ben yelled over the noise.

Shorter than most guys, but taller than me and Jo, with olive skin and dark hair – always perfectly styled – Ben always captured the attention of women.

Ben and Jo ordered drinks while I glanced over towards the stage, looking for Wyatt.

Over the busy crowd, I could see him standing to the left of the stage, strumming his guitar as they started playing Sweet Home Alabama. The butterflies spun out of control in my stomach as I leaned on the bar to watch him.

Wyatt was very tall, with broad shoulders and masculine arms, but not over-the-top with muscles. With his light brown and always messy shoulder-length hair, bright green eyes and huge smile, I knew I was in trouble the second I saw him all those months ago.

My heart sank a little as my gaze shifted to the dozens of girls swooning over him just in front of the stage, each one vying for just a moment of his attention.

“Eval Here...” Jo tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a beer.

“Thanks!” I said, turning back towards the stage.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Wyatt in the distance, smiling at me.

Seeing my surprise, he waved in between riffs, causing all the girls at the front of the stage to turn around. I tried not to notice as their jaws drop at the sight of me, sitting at the bar in my singlet and boots, drinking beer straight from the bottle.

I’ve always loved who I am and would never change anything about myself to fit in, but I couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious when I saw those girls glaring at me in disbelief.

“He’s got all those bleach blonde clones literally throwing themselves at him, prancing around right under his nose, and he’s only lookin’ at you, Eva,” Jo said into my ear, smiling broadly.

I glanced sideways to see Jo wink provocatively at me, and the corner of my mouth lifted in a half-smile. I hope she’s right, I thought as I waved back at Wyatt.

\*\*\*

I sat at the bar, sketching on a napkin, while Jo and Ben rocked out to The Living End’s *Prisoner Of Society* on the dance floor.

“Another beer?” asked the bartender, taking away my empty bottle.

“Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

I looked up from my doodling, noticing the words Breaking News flashing up on the television screen behind him. I couldn’t hear it over the noise in the bar, but the caption sliding across the bottom of the screen read:

*Fears grow in Sydney after an outbreak of the Halienza Virus at Trinity Hospital, leaving twenty dead and hundreds more infected.*

On the screen, I saw footage of scientists in white lab coats and protective masks using droppers to place a red liquid into test tubes, followed by unsteady amateur footage that made me shudder. It looked like a war zone, with dozens of people bleeding and running frantically through the streets of Sydney. Another caption moved across the screen:

*New reports of second Halienza outbreak in a Melbourne hospital.*

“Hi there.”

I jumped, so immersed in the news report that the voice behind startled me.

“What’re you drawing there?” Said the young man, taking a seat next to me as he gestured to the napkin. He was short, but cute, with blonde hair, blue eyes and a charming grin.

“Oh, just doodling, really.”

I reached over the bar to take the freshly opened beer the bartender was handing to me and placed it directly over my sketch.

Noticing I was trying to hide it, my new friend moved the bottle to take a closer look.

"It looks like a..." he furrowed his brows in confusion. "A face with a... bullet hole in it?"

My cheeks warmed into a blush. People often felt uncomfortable when they saw me drawing such violent looking images. I thought I should explain.

"Uh, yeah. I'm training to be a Special Effects Makeup Artist, like in the movies? So I'm just sketching a bit of a... flesh wound."

He looked at me blankly, seeming completely uninterested.

"Oh, so you like doing all the gory stuff, like blood and guts and..."

"And brains and burns and corpses... Yep."

For a moment he didn't say a word. I'd always received mixed reactions from people when I tell them my dream is to be a Special Effects Makeup Artist. I can't say I blame them.

In high school, while all the other girls proudly proclaimed their desires to be doctors, lawyers or psychologists, I was the only one dreaming about being on the set of Saw II, designing blood-soaked hacksaw lacerations. Needless to say, I wasn't exactly Miss Popularity.

"That's new. Buy you a drink?" he gestured to the bartender while moving his bar stool closer to mine.

"Oh, no thanks," I said as I held up my beer.

"Already got one."

I smiled awkwardly, not wanting to be rude.

"You're drinking beer? Come on," he scoffed as he gestured for the bartender to come over again. "I'll buy you something nicer. How 'bout a cosmopolitan?"

I looked at him blankly, raising an eyebrow.

"Ah, no thanks. Beer's fine. Not really a cosmo girl," I said, going back to my sketch in an attempt to subtly get the message across that I wasn't interested.

"Ha!" he laughed. "Every girl's a cosmo girl! It'll be my treat."

He leaned over to the bartender to order the drink, when an arm pulled him back by the shoulder.

"The lady said no, thanks."

It was Wyatt.

I watched as the man turned around to see Wyatt standing there, tall, dark and unimpressed. He looked at Wyatt, then looked



at me, shrugged his shoulders and walked away, deciding to go try his luck somewhere else.

"You're welcome," Wyatt said as he sat down next to me and asked the bartender to bring him a bottle of water.

"Thanks, but I can handle myself, you know. I didn't need you to save me," I replied, trying not to sound so relieved.

Wyatt lifted his palms up in front of him apologetically.

"Sorry, I was just trying to help. I can go get Cosmo Boy and bring him back for you if you like?" He smirked.

"No thanks"

"Didn't think so," he said, dropping his hands onto the bar with a smile.

My butterflies took flight again, and I tried to think of something to say.

"You on break?" I motioned to the stage.

"Yeah," he replied, taking a swig of his water. "Gotta go back on in ten, but... Will you stay? After?"

I could see Jo and Ben pushing their way through the crowd as he spoke.

"I want to talk to you about something," he said, looking at me intently, watching my reaction.

"Oh, yeah of course. I'll be here," I replied.

Just then, Ben came up behind Wyatt, wrapping his arm around him and kissing him on the cheek.

"You are rockin' it up there, man!" he yelled, clearly drunk.

"Thanks, man," Wyatt grinned, his eyes still on me.

I tried to match his gaze, but I felt very aware of Jo's penetrating stare.

She looked at Wyatt, then at me, then back at Wyatt, and smiled so widely that I thought she would hurt herself. Ben and Wyatt started making their way back to the stage, while Jo propped herself up on the stool next to me.

"What was that?" she asked, still smiling.

"Oh that? Nothin'. Wyatt was just asking me to stay back after they finish... he wants to 'talk' to me about something," I said as I drank my beer, trying to act casual.

"Hells yes!" Jo squealed as she slapped me on the thigh.

"This is it, Eva! This is it! Your moment!"

I loved seeing her so happy for me, and I started to think she might be right. I smiled, hardly able to wait for the final song of the night. *Maybe this is my moment.*

## Chapter Three

Jo and I sat alone at the bar while the bartenders collected all the empty glasses and bottles. Ben took a taxi home long before last call, too drunk to stand on his own.

"I don't know why he does that to himself all the time!" Jo had said when he left. "All he does is make himself sick. And we have to open the diner in the morning," she continued, looking worried.

There had always been a spark between Ben and Jo – they were constantly flirting with each other – but either they are both too stubborn to admit it or too oblivious to notice.

Either way, I decided long ago to stay out of it; I had enough trouble sorting out my own love life, let alone someone else's. Besides, Jo occupied herself by running the diner every day, while Ben was busy training to be a paramedic – they hardly had time for anything else.

"Ugh, what's taking him so long?" Jo moaned, leaning back on the bar. "We've been waiting here for twenty minutes!"

I tried to be patient, but ever since Wyatt asked me to stay behind I had been waiting anxiously for closing time. Now that everyone had gone and it was suddenly quiet enough for me to think clearly, I started to get nervous.

"You don't have to stay, you know," I nudged Jo. "I'll see you at work in the morning bright and early, you'll be the first to know everything... if anything happens."

Jo looked at me as if I had just told her that her shoes were out of season.

"Absolutely not! I have been waiting for this just as long as you have, missy! I'm not waiting until tomorrow for anything!"

"Okay, okay, calm down," I laughed.

"No!" Jo said jokingly, jumping off the bar stool and stamping her foot on the ground.

"I will not calm down. What's he trying to do? He asks you to wait here for him so he can talk to you, then leaves you hanging, like he's so cavalier!" Jo was prone to being overdramatic, especially when it came to me. "You know what I say?" Jo asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"What do you say?" I replied, going along with her little performance to pass the time.

"I say you march back there and go get him! Go make your moment happen!"

I laughed, but couldn't help but think she had a point.

Jo sat back next to me, ending her faux tantrum.

"No, I'm serious. Maybe he's waiting for you. I bet he's sprawled out the dressing room couch, waiting for you to come and ravish him."

She leaned back on the bar, threw her arms up in the air and tilted her head back, much to the delight of the bartenders cleaning behind the bar.

"Or maybe he's just taking his sweet time!" she added, springing back up and yelling it towards the stage.

Suddenly, she turned around, leaned over the other side of the bar and threw up.

I jumped up to help her and hold her hair back.

"Clearly Ben isn't the only one who's had a few too many drinks tonight," I sighed.

"Come on, you can stay at my place tonight."

Jo sat up, wiped her mouth and shook her head.

"No! Not until you get your butt back there and have your freaking moment!"

And with that, she was back over the bar again.

"I'll call a taxi and get her a bucket, you go do whatever it is she's nagging you to do," said one of the bartenders, irritated.

"Fine. I'll be right back, Jo."

I walked across the deserted dance floor, climbed onto the stage and disappeared behind the curtain.

Turning into the hallway, I heard voices coming from one of the adjoining rooms. I recognized Wyatt's voice, and from the conversation I gathered he was talking to one of his band mates.

"I saw a couple of groupies hanging out by the bar, waiting for us. A sexy redhead and a rocker chick. Which one you want?" I heard the mystery man say, and I stopped in my tracks.

"Neither. I'm going home," Wyatt replied.

"Whatever, man. I saw you chatting up the rocker chick before. You keen on her?"

I held my breath, waiting to hear his response.

"Pfft, nah. She's just a girl I know from work."

"You mind if I have a crack at her?"

“Go ahead. You won’t like her though. She’s one of those girls who goes on and on about how independent she is, how she doesn’t need a guy to save her or whatever. She’s pretty boring, actually,” Wyatt said, apathy in his voice.

My heart sank deep into my chest. I didn’t know whether to run away or confront him about his hurtful words.

“Ugh. I hate those girls. So annoying. Alright, I’ll take the redhead,” the other voice replied, and I heard their footsteps coming towards the hallway.

I started to turn around and walk away, but I stopped myself. Even though I could feel tears welling up in my eyes and a lump forming in my throat, I knew I had to stand up for myself.

Wyatt and his band mate made their way into the hallway, and froze in place when they saw me standing in front of them. Wyatt’s eyes widened and his face went pale as it dawned on him that I had heard their conversation. I recognized the other man as Tom, the lead singer in the band.

“Good luck, man,” Tom smirked and pat Wyatt on the shoulder before pushing passed me and heading back towards the bar.

“Eva, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean...” Wyatt started, but I interrupted him.

“At least now I know what you really think. I better go – before I start to bore you,” I snapped, storming off in a hurry.

I wanted to say more, to tell him I didn’t have room in my life for anyone who didn’t respect me for who I am, to ask him why he asked me to stay, but I couldn’t hold back my tears any longer. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry over him.

I pushed my way through the curtains, hearing Wyatt running down the hall behind me. Jumping off the stage, I saw Tom sitting on a stool next to Jo, who looked half-asleep, leaning her arms on the bar. As I got closer I saw he had his hand on her thigh.

“Leave her alone,” I said through gritted teeth as I slapped his hand away.

“Eva!” Jo sprang up, suddenly awake. “How did it go? Did you have your moment?” she smiled.

“Not exactly,” I sighed as I helped her off the stool. “I’ll explain when we get back to my place. Let’s go.”

I pulled her along as I hurried out of the bar and onto the street.

*Thank god*, I thought as I saw a taxi waiting for us.

I laid Jo down in the back and jumped in next to her, slamming the door shut as Wyatt ran out of the bar. I gave the driver my address and didn't look back as we drove away, leaving Wyatt behind.

## Chapter Four

I woke up to the hot sun shining through my bedroom window and onto my bed. My eyes struggled to open, last night's mascara caking them together like glue. I drove my face into the pillow, trying hard not to remember the night before.

Groaning, I reached my hand down the side of the bed and searched around for my phone to check the time. When I held my phone close to my still-adjusting eyes, the first thing I noticed was the fifteen missed calls from Wyatt.

Sliding my thumb over the screen to unlock it and clear the calls list, I cringed when I saw the time. My shift had started half an hour ago.

I jumped out of bed and ran into the living room to wake up Jo, who had spent the night on the couch, but she was gone.

"Jo?" I called as I walked into the kitchen, seeing a note on the table.

*Thanks for looking after me. Sorry about The Douche. Stay home today, I'll deal with him.*

'The Douche,' I presumed, was Jo's new name for Wyatt. I rolled my eyes at her suggestion to stay home to avoid him – no way would I stop living my life over a guy, no matter who he was. I felt sick wondering what Jo meant by 'dealing' with him. Knowing her, it would involve a lot of drama.

In a rush, I tied my hair into a ponytail, pulled on my trusty jeans and boots, threw on my favourite tee (grey with a large wolf printed on it), wrapped a maroon scarf around my neck and grabbed my satchel, throwing my makeup bag in there so I could put eyeliner on at work.

Thank god I live so close to the diner, I thought as I slammed the door shut behind me and started running down the stairs, the glare of the sun making me squint.

Walking out onto the street, I noticed how quiet it was. A part from a few sirens in the distance, everything was silent. No cars, no people, no trams. It was deserted.

I looked at my watch, seeing it was just passed ten o'clock. It was Saturday morning, meaning most people in this neighbourhood were either sleeping in or too hungover to move.

But it had never been this quiet before.

I wondered if I should have taken Jo's advice and stayed home, but I quickly shook off that thought, knowing I'd be better off at work with something to distract me from my pathetic broken heart.

Except Wyatt.

I looked at my watch again. Wyatt was working today, too, and his shift started in thirty minutes. I felt the butterflies return, only now they were sickly, like they had been spinning out of control for far too long.

I wanted to shrug it off like it didn't matter, like it didn't tear me up inside, but I would only be lying to myself. Deep down I knew it was his loss, but right now I just felt... crushed.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone shuffling slowly behind me, groaning loudly.

*Probably still drunk.*

Saturday morning always brought party-goers and up-all-nighters stumbling into the diner for a hangover cure. I put my headphones in as I picked up speed.

Walking towards the diner, I noticed Wyatt's car wasn't parked in its usual spot down the street – as a bright yellow Chevy Impala, it's very easy to spot. Relief washed over me; he hadn't arrived yet.

I pushed the door to Pop Rocks open, causing the bell above it to jingle. Ben and Jo were standing behind the counter, chatting while they wrapped napkins around cutlery in preparation for what would surely be a busy day.

Their heads snapped the door at the sound of the bell, and when they saw me and immediately fell silent, I knew that they had been talking about last night.

"Hi," I muttered, avoiding eye contact as I walked behind the counter and into the tiny office, throwing my bag on the desk against the wall.

Meticulously created to be a perfect replica of a 1950's diner, Pop Rocks had everything from vintage art prints and Coca-Cola posters to the blue and white tiles on the floor flown all the way from the USA.

Large booths lined the large windows all across the L-shaped design, followed by two-seater tables in the middle of the restaurant area and stools all along the counter.



Behind the counter stood a large kitchen island, with plates and soda glasses on one side, a milkshake maker and food preparation area on the other, and a long stove, oven and fryer parallel to it.

A swinging door to the right of the counter led into the back room, which held a storage area, an industrial dishwasher and a walk-in freezer. A sliding door to the left of the counter opened up into the office.

Usually, fifties music would play through the diner – with speakers over the door outside, we would often play music to attract customers – but considering the hangovers everyone had today, it would likely stay quiet unless a customer put a coin in one of the many mini-jukeboxes that sat on the counter.

The office was reserved for staff to change into our uniform; a white dress shirt, apron, black bow-tie, and white hat. No bigger than a walk-in closet, the office had a tall row of shelving and a desk with a small television on it to the left, two chairs and a whiteboard to the right, and a mirror on the far wall.

“I thought I gave you the day off?” Jo asked as she followed behind.

“I’m not going to stop living my life just to avoid him, Jo,” I replied, buttoning up my shirt and pulling my white apron over my head. “And I don’t want you to say anything to him. If he wants to be a jerk, that’s entirely his choice. Stay out of it. Please.”

“Fine,” Jo sighed and disappeared back into the diner, leaving me to clip on my cheesy bow-tie and little boat shaped cap.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I smirked. I always felt silly putting on the uniform, but I had so much fun working in the diner with my friends, listening to old music and pretending we were in a simpler time. My stomach turned, hoping it would still be the same as before.

I began searching through my makeup bag, pushing passed my makeup tools and a few Special Effects products to pull out the eyeliner. Popping the lid off, I leaned in close to the mirror, but stopped when I saw Wyatt standing behind me in the reflection.

“You look beautiful,” he said as he stood in the doorway, keeping his distance from me.

My heart started to beat faster, and I hated that the butterflies were back and more alive than ever. I continued drawing on my eyeliner, ignoring his compliment.

“I tried to call you last night...” he said, looking concerned.

“I was busy, Jo wasn’t feeling well.”

I couldn’t help but notice how miserable he looked, and my heart sank when I realised he must feel sorry for me.

He feels bad for breaking this poor girl’s heart. I hate that. I’m not a victim, I’m not some poor girl. I’m strong and capable, and I don’t need anyone’s pity, least of all his.

I was about to tell him all this when he stepped into the room and slid the door shut behind him.

“I want to explain... what you heard. Last night,” Wyatt started, his shoulders stiffening.

I quickly finished my liner and threw it back in my makeup bag, wanting nothing more than to get out of that tiny room.

“You don’t need to explain anything,” I interrupted. “I totally get it. I thought you were a nice guy; a genuine, kind hearted person. Clearly, I was wrong.”

I could tell by the way his eyes dropped to the floor that I had wounded him, but I pushed passed him and slid the door open anyway, walking out into the diner to start my shift.

Even though it was only the four of us in the diner, the tension was thick.

Wyatt reeked of guilt, while Jo and Ben gave him the cold shoulder and smothered me with over-the-top kindness.

When my parents died, I became very familiar with pity. I know exactly what it looks like, complete with sad frowns and awkward silences. But nothing compares to the look in the eyes of someone who feels sorry for you.

It’s a swirling mixture of sympathy, sorrow, and relief. Relief that it’s not them going through something so terrible, so tragic. I swore I would never see myself in the reflection of those melancholy eyes again.

Needing some fresh air, I volunteered to take the trash out to the dumpsters, which sat in the alleyway down the end of the block.

Picking up two full bags of rubbish from the bins in the kitchen, I carried them out into the stairwell, avoiding all eye contact on my way passed Wyatt, Jo and Ben.

Grey and cold, with concrete stairs leading down into the dark basement, I always found the stairwell to be rather eerie.

Two trolleys sat on the concrete landing, by the double doors that opened up onto the street. I threw the bags into a trolley and pushed through the doors, light filling the stairwell as I made my way outside.

Closing the doors behind me, I noticed how empty the streets appeared, even though it was now mid-morning. I could only see one man, far off in the distance, who stood staring at a brick wall, swaying back and forth.

Another drunk? I wondered as I began pushing the trolley down the hill.

Taking the rubbish out wasn't the most glamorous of chores, but there was one aspect I really loved about it. I smiled as I started running down the street, picking up speed. In one movement I jumped onto the back of the trolley and closed my eyes to feel the wind on my face as I flew down the sidewalk.

After a few seconds of exhilaration, I opened my eyes and jumped back onto the ground, skidding to a stop just in time to turn into the alley and pull up alongside an open dumpster.

Lifting the bags over my shoulder, I flipped them into the dumpster one at a time, holding my nose to avoid the smell of rotting food and filth.

I started making my way back towards the diner, pulling the trolley behind me with one arm, when I heard a moan coming from behind me. I paused to look back, but saw nothing.

I kept walking, only to hear it again. A low, rattling growl echoed from within the metal container. I had never heard anything like it before, and it sent chills rushing down my spine. This time, I walked back over to it to investigate. I held my nose again as I edged closer to peek inside. All of a sudden, something jumped up from inside the dumpster, groaning and covered in garbage.

I screamed as I jumped back in fear, my heart pounding inside my chest.

It rose to its feet unsteadily, and it took me a few seconds before I realised it was a woman in ragged clothes.

Her face was a sickly grey, her skin sallow and glistening with sweat. I tried to contain my shock, but I could see she had been eating rubbish.

"Oh. Sorry... You scared me," I said as I backed up against the trolley.

The woman let out another low rattle as she continued chewing on something that made disgusting crunch sounds when she bit down. A long, fleshy rodent tail fell out the corner of her mouth, hanging there as she struggled to climb out of the dumpster.

I cupped my hand over my mouth in an attempt to prevent myself from throwing up in disgust, and grabbed the trolley as I started running out of the alleyway.

By the time I had made it back into the diner I was dry reaching. Jo asked me what was wrong as I ran into the bathroom to wash my hands furiously, but I couldn't tell her what I had seen.

"Nothing. Just smells bad down there," I lied.

Knowing how sick Jo had been the night before, and how hungover she felt today, I thought it would be best not to say anything. Besides, I didn't think I could repeat the story without making myself sick, too.

"It's so quiet today," I said as I walked back into the diner, trying to forget the sick feeling in my stomach.

Ben and Wyatt stood by the fryer, cooking themselves some french fries.

"I know. It's weird," Ben said, looking out the window. "I barely saw anyone on the drive in this morning. I've never seen the city so empty."

Before I could reply, I saw a man stumbling across the road towards the diner.

"Customer," I said to the others as I walked over behind the counter to greet him as he pushed the door open and walked inside.

"Hi, here for breakfast?" I smiled, handing him a menu.

"Yeah. I'm starving. Feels like I haven't eaten in weeks," he replied as he sat on one of the counter stools.

From the look of his bloodshot eyes and cracked lips, I figured he had been out all night. Wearing a light blue pin-striped shirt with an assortment of stains down the front and torn dark blue jeans, he didn't look well at all.

"Big night?" I asked, switching on the coffee machine.

"I think so. I don't really remember. I feel like shit," he said, rubbing his eyes with his palms. "I woke up in the gutter with some homeless dude trying to eat my leg. The freak tore right through my jeans."

My jaw dropped.

“What the hell? Are you serious?” I asked in surprise.

I turned around to see Wyatt and Ben still standing by the fryer. Wyatt looked as surprised as I did, but I could see Ben was trying not to laugh.

“Yeah. I had to kick him off then I got the hell outta there. I’ll have the Big Breakfast please. And coffee, lots and lots of coffee,” he handed the menu back to me casually, as though he hadn’t just escaped being a Big Breakfast to a homeless man.

I started making his coffee while Wyatt and Ben put gloves on and prepared his meal.

“So, did he actually bite you? Maybe you should go to a hospital?” I asked the man as I carried his coffee over to him, but he didn’t answer.

He just sat there, slumped over the counter with his head in his hands.

“Are you okay?”

“No,” he snapped. “I’m hungry. Just make my food.”

I wanted to return his animosity, but after all the rude people I’d served as a waitress, I had quickly learned to bite my tongue and shrug it off.

Wyatt walked out of the back room holding frozen sausages and bacon and placed them on the stove. I saw the customer’s head snap up then, and he began sniffing wildly and glaring at the meat.

He looked even worse than when he walked in. His skin had fast become clammy and pale, and I could have sworn I heard a low growl coming from his throat. It instantly reminded me of the deranged woman in the dumpster, and I cringed.

I walked behind the kitchen island and stood next to Wyatt. The pain of his hurtful words still lingered in the back of my mind, but I instantly felt calmer in his presence.

“Something doesn’t feel right about this guy. Cook his food quick then let’s get rid of him,” I whispered, watching the customer carefully.

Wyatt looked over at him suspiciously and nodded, flipping the bacon over as it sizzled.

“I think he’s still drunk or something,” whispered Ben as he took freshly popped toast out of the toaster and threw it on a plate.

I looked back towards the counter and saw the man had his head down in his arms again.

Once the Big Breakfast was ready I carried it over to him and placed it on the counter next to his head.

“Sir, your breakfast is ready.”

He didn’t move.

I leaned in closer to him, trying to see his face, but it was covered by his arm.

“Excuse me, sir? Your breakfast is here.”

He still didn’t move.

I watched him closely, waiting for the rise and fall of his back as he breathed.

Nothing.

Slowly, I reached my hand over the counter and gently nudged his shoulder.

His head slipped off of his arm and he slowly slid sideways off of the stool and slammed onto the tiled floor. Even with that hard knock, he didn’t wake up.

I gasped, my eyes wide as I stared down at his lifeless body.

He was dead.

## Chapter Five

“Crap!” I gasped as I stepped back, walking into the kitchen island.

“What’s wrong, Eva?” Jo asked as she walked out of the office.

“Ben! The customer... I think he’s... He’s not moving!” I called, motioning to Ben to come over.

Ben ripped off his gloves and ran around the outside of the counter towards the man.

“Call an ambulance! Wyatt, help me turn him onto his back,” he yelled as he checked the man’s pulse and he and Wyatt carefully laid him flat on the floor.

Jo ran back into the office to get her phone then ran back out again as she dialed.

“I can’t get through!” She yelled as she dropped her phone on the counter and hurried back into the office to use the landline. “The landline is down! There isn’t even a dial tone!”

“There’s no pulse,” said Ben as he opened the man’s mouth in preparation for CPR.

He was about to begin mouth to mouth resuscitation when the customer’s eyes flew open.

Wyatt and Ben moved back in shock.

The man didn’t move, he just lay there, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Ben slowly leaned in closer, lowering his ear over the man’s mouth.

“He’s still not breathing.”

“I... I don’t feel a pulse,” Wyatt said, his fingers on the lifeless wrist.

Ben knelt back just as a gurgling sound emerged from the man’s mouth, sputtering blood all over himself. His bloodshot eyes started darting around the room, his arms slowly rising, reaching for Ben.

Ben and Wyatt stood up and backed away, and for a moment we all just stood there, staring, not knowing what to do.

“Guys?” Jo called from the office and we hurried over to the entryway to see her. “I tried the landline and all of our mobiles, but there’s nothing. Just silence. I don’t understand.”

She explained, pushing her red hair behind her ear.

“I’ve never seen anything like him before,” said Ben, his face white with shock. “I mean, granted I haven’t completed training yet but... He’s not breathing. He doesn’t have a pulse. He’s... dead. But he’s moving. I don’t know what to do.”

I’d never seen Ben look so defeated.

I jumped at the sound of a loud crash and turned to see the plate of food had disappeared from the counter. Slowly, I walked closer and glanced over to see the supposedly dead man had managed to sit up and begin tearing into the bacon and sausages like an animal.

He had reached up and pulled the plate down onto the floor.

“Ben!” I whispered and pulled him over so he could see. “He’s not dead! He’s okay. Sort of.”

The man’s head snapped up at the sound of my whisper, and I gasped when I saw his face. His skin was a sickly grey now, looking even more like the woman in the alley.

He munched furiously on the bacon as he grabbed hold of the counter stool and tried to lift himself up, glaring at us just as he glared at the meat before.

Instinctively, I pushed Ben back and we moved towards the office. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew we were in danger.

My heart started beating faster as I saw his bloodshot eyes slowly appear over the counter, with the same gurgling sound rumbling in his throat, only now it started to grow into more of a growl or a screech.

The four of us backed into the office, slid the door closed and turned the lock.

“Something creepy is going on today,” I said as I turned to face Ben, Jo and Wyatt.

“First, the streets are completely deserted. Then, I saw a woman eating a rat in the dumpster, now this. That guy out there said someone tried to eat his leg!”

“Someone what?!” Jo gasped. “Maybe something’s happened? Has anyone seen any news today?”

Ben and Wyatt shook their heads, but what Jo said had triggered something in my memory.

“I saw something last night, on the TV in the bar,” I replied. “Something about an ‘outbreak’. It was in Sydney though, not here.”



Their eyes widened at the word outbreak, and Wyatt turned to switch on the television as we cramped together in the tiny room, gathering around.

The same news story appeared on every channel, all showing scenes of violence in the streets. Police officers bleeding, men fighting, women and children running frantically. I gasped when some of the footage was clearly in Melbourne, only a ten minute drive from where we were.

“I thought you said it was in Sydney?” Jo asked as she turned to look at me.

Just then, I remembered the last words I saw slide across the screen the night before.

*'New reports of second Halienza outbreak in a Melbourne hospital.'*

“Oh no.” I moaned, unable to take my eyes off the screen.

“Shhh!” hushed Ben, as the news reporter began to speak.

*For anyone just joining us, there has been widespread panic down the east coast of Australia as a deadly outbreak of the Halienza Virus has left hundreds dead and an estimated thousands more infected. What started as seemingly controlled leaks at Sydney's Trinity Hospital and Melbourne's Infinity Hospital has already spread throughout New South Wales and Victoria. We've just had word that the virus has also hit Brisbane Hospital. The virus is expected to spread through to Adelaide and even up to Darwin over the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours.*

We all looked at each other, eyes wide in shock, struggling to believe what we saw.

*For anyone still in Sydney or Melbourne who are uninfected, you are urged to stay inside and lock your doors and windows. The infected have become severely deranged and extremely violent. We have received countless reports of the infected biting and even killing anyone they come across, including their loved ones. Do not approach the infected. I repeat; do not approach the infected. If you have been bitten, you are requested to go to the nearest hospital or medical centre for treatment as soon as possible.*

More footage of the streets was shown then, this time of the infected. Their eyes were an eerie white, skin grey and spattered

with blood, their faces and arms covered in open wounds and lesions.

“Zombies,” whispered Ben, staring slack-jawed at the screen.

“Oh come on, Ben,” Jo scoffed, putting her hands on her hips. “The media always over dramatises things. I doubt it’s that serious.”

“You haven’t seen the guy just outside the door,” Ben replied.

Just then, more footage of the violence was shown.

I watched in horror as at least a dozen police officers attempting to prevent a riot were attacked by psychotic men, women and even a few children, all furiously biting into their skin, tearing them to shreds. I felt sick as I watched the graphic scenes play out in front of me.

“We need to get rid of that guy. He’s infected. He’s been bitten, and he’s starting to look just like them,” I said, motioning to the infected people on the screen.

My stomach turned as I heard the sound of the bell ringing as the door of the diner opened, and slowly shut again.

“I hope that was him leaving,” I whispered as I unlocked the door and slid it open an inch.

I peered through the gap, but could still see the infected man trying to pull himself up onto the counter. “He’s still there.”

“That means another one just walked in,” Wyatt said as he switched off the television and stood close behind me.

Any other day I would have shivered in his close presence, but right now we stood on the edge of the end of the world, and we had to survive.

I heard a loud groan and someone, *something*, shuffling through the diner, edging closer to the four of us hiding in the tiny office. I held my breath, trying desperately to stay quiet. Slowly, I began sliding the door closed, but it was too late.

A rancid, decomposing face appeared on the other side of the entryway, its dilated pupils burning into me in desire.

I screamed, almost knocking Wyatt over as I jumped back into him. It let out a terrifying screech as it crammed a long, freshly mauled arm through the opening in the door.

The putrid smell of day old rotting flesh filled the room as its maggot infested hand swiped at me frantically. The mere sight

of it filled my stomach with bile, but I knew I had to focus on keeping us alive.

I threw myself forward against the door, pushing it sideways as hard as I could. Wyatt leaned over me onto the door, helping me slam it into the infected arm. Ben tried to grab it and push it back onto the other side of the door, but it was swinging wildly, its yellow fingernails covered in dried blood. Jo backed herself up against the far wall, screaming in fear.

I put all my weight against the door and together Wyatt and I forced it closed, and by the sound of the sickening crack I knew we had broken the bone, but the possessed arm didn't stop. Instead, it kept waving around, only now it couldn't grab us. Ben pushed the shattered arm back through the door and we slammed it shut, locking it fast.

For a moment, everything fell silent. I leaned off of the door and tried to catch my breath. I could feel my entire body trembling. My heart pounded so hard I thought it would explode.

I could hear it, the infected monster, groaning and sniffing at the other side of the door. The groan turned into a loud growl, and it furiously rammed itself into the door. Ben and Wyatt threw themselves against it to stop it from breaking in.

"What do we do?" I asked, my legs feeling so unstable I thought I would collapse.

No-one answered.

I leaned my arms against the door again, helping Ben and Wyatt keep it closed, while

Jo slid down onto the floor, her knees up against her chest as tears streamed down her face.

Over the growling I heard the bell ring again.

Another one had come for us.

All that stood between us and these mindless creatures with an insatiable hunger for human flesh was a thin sliding door.

We were trapped.

## Chapter Six

“Please! I need help!”

I froze at the sound of a desperate voice coming from inside the diner. It wasn't another of the infected who just walked in, it was a woman.

“Someone just attacked me! Hello? I need help!”

The bashing on the door stopped then, and I heard the zombie shuffling away. I felt relieved for a moment, but fear struck me when I realised the danger the woman was now in.

“Oh no. No!” she screamed as the shuffling grew faster.

The bell rang, she had run back out of the diner, and when it rang again I knew the infected creature was close behind her. Tears welled in my eyes as I heard her screams fade as she ran further down the street.

“We've got to get out of here,” I said as I unlocked the door and slowly peered through the gap. “I can't see the other one. He must have gone, too,” I shivered.

I wanted to run out of the diner and help the poor woman who had unknowingly saved our lives, but I knew it would be futile. Her far-off screams had already grown silent.

Slowly, I stepped out into the diner to look around, but saw no-one. I turned to look back at my friends, who stood frozen in fear.

Suddenly, I felt something plow into my side, sending me flying through the air and skidding along the tiled floor, slamming against the metal side of the fryer.

I could hear Jo screaming my name from the office and heard Wyatt and Ben running into the diner, but it was too late.

The zombie had me cornered.

My heart raced as it ran towards me, bacon fat hanging out of the corner of its mouth.

Its sinister eyes locked on me.

The look in its eyes sent shivers down my spine. I saw pure festering rage and hunger burning in its pupils. Any trace of humanity had been ripped away, its soul as black as the darkest night.

I wouldn't let my life end at the hands of this possessed being.

Empowered by my desire to live and full of adrenaline, I jumped to my feet and braced for impact, when I noticed the tray of boiling french fries Wyatt and Ben were cooking earlier sitting in the fryer next to me.

I grabbed hold of the handle with two hands, lifted it from the hot oil and swung it forward, hitting the enraged creature in the face.

I watched in horror as it stepped backwards, shrieking in pain as the searing hot oil splashed into its eyes, causing its eyelids to bubble and melt away.

Ben and Wyatt jumped out of the way of the creature as it fell backwards, waving its arms around wildly.

Within seconds, it was up again, running straight towards me once more.

I screamed and jumped backwards onto the counter, trying to slide over to the other side to reach Wyatt and Ben.

The rancid corpse grabbed my leg and started pulling me towards it, thick drool dripping from its cracked lips as it eagerly awaited the taste of my warm flesh.

Wyatt grabbed hold of my hand, trying to pull me towards him, but I knew the monster was too strong.

I screamed in terror as its contagious mouth stretched open and sunk its teeth into my right leg.

Frantically, I tried to kick it off of me, but its grip was too strong.

Searching around for something, anything, I spotted kitchen knives sitting in a wooden holder on the counter, just out of my reach.

Letting go of Wyatt's hand, I slid as the zombie pulled me closer, a string of saliva dangling from its mouth onto my leg as it prepared to bite down again.

I threw myself sideways and stretched my arm over to the knives, grabbing the handle of the biggest one. I knocked the holder over as I pulled out the knife and grabbed the handle with both hands, letting the hungry beast pull me down over the counter and onto the floor.

It made a chilling screeching sound as it pounced straight for my throat.

I threw my hands forward, stabbing it straight through its still searing eye with the knife.

Its body went limp, its screech quietening into a gurgle, followed by an eerie silence.

Catching my breath, I pushed the zombie off of me with shaking hands.

“Eva?!” I heard Wyatt yell as he ran around the counter, unable to see me. He skidded around the counter, sliding to the ground next to me.

“I’m ok,” I breathed as I started to pick myself up.

“Thank god,” he sighed as helped me to my feet.

We backed away from the corpse as Jo emerged slowly from the office, cupping her hands over her mouth in shock.

“I saw him bite you,” said Ben.

He stood frozen behind the counter, glaring at me suspiciously.

“She’s fine,” replied Wyatt.

“They said anyone bitten would be infected. I saw him bite you,” he said again, this time moving forward towards me.

“I said she’s fine,” repeated Wyatt as he stood in front of me protectively.

I put my hand on Wyatt’s arm and moved out from behind him to face Ben.

“Really Ben, he’s right. I’m fine. He didn’t even pierce my boot, see?” I held my leg out to show him.

There were teeth marks on my boot, but nothing more than that. The boots had saved my life.

“Show me your leg,” ordered Ben, unconvinced.

Wyatt stiffened in anger.

“What are you gonna do, Ben? Kill her?” he yelled.

“If she’s been infected we’ll all die!” Ben yelled back.

I stepped in between them, removed my boot and threw it onto the ground.

“See?” I looked up at Ben, showing him my unharmed leg. “I’m fine. It’s ok. I knew I loved these boots for a reason,” I smiled nervously as I looked over at Jo, trying to lighten the mood.

The men softened again, but tension filled the air.

“We need weapons,” muttered Ben as he walked through the swinging doors into the back room.

I sat down at the counter, trying to calm myself.

My heart raced and my mind frantically tried to process what had just happened, but the rest of my body felt numb. I didn't know whether to cry or throw up, but either way, I was alive.

For now.

## Chapter Seven

I ran over to the double doors, turned the lock and reached up to slide the bolts into place. Jo ran over holding a chain from the back room and wrapped it around the handles, locking it into place with a padlock.

We ripped off our uniforms and hats and followed Wyatt and Ben as they dragged the corpse through the swinging doors into the back room.

In a loud crunch, Wyatt pulled the knife out of the dead man's face and threw the body into the walk-in freezer, with Ben slamming the door shut.

We immediately started rummaging through all the drawers in the kitchen, gathering knives of all sizes, the diner's fire extinguisher, even scissors – whatever we thought we could use to defend ourselves.

"I have an idea." Ben said as he ran out of the kitchen.

We followed him through diner and into the office, each of us clutching to a butcher knife. Ben ran over to the lost and found box that sat under the desk and started searching through it.

"Yes!" He smiled as he pulled out a medium sized can of hairspray and a lighter.

I looked at him blankly, wondering what on earth he needed them for.

He then ran back into the kitchen, with us trailing close behind.

Opening the kitchen closet, he started pulling out brooms and mops and throwing them to each of us, then without saying a word, he ran back over to the drawer, pulled out some duct tape and ran back out into the diner, taking a seat in one of the only booths that wasn't right next to a window.

Jo, Wyatt and I followed him and each took a seat at the booth, wondering what he was up to.

"Pass me your knife." He gestured to Jo, and she handed her knife to him, curious as to what he was doing.

We sat and watched in awe as he proceeded to tape the handle of her butcher knife to the end of one of the broomsticks.

Holding it up to show his creation, Ben motioned to us to do the same. We grabbed the tape and started working on our own makeshift spears.



Once we were done, Jo looked over at the hairspray and lighter sitting on the table.

“What are they for?”

“If it works... A flame thrower. But it probably won’t kill them, maybe it’ll slow them down. I don’t know.” Ben answered, reading the label on the hairspray can.

I looked at him in shock, wondering how he suddenly had such expert knowledge on homemade weaponry.

“I play a lot of post apocalyptic video games.” He smirked, reading the curiosity in my expression.

“What else do you know about...” I paused, not knowing what to call the undead creatures that now wandered the streets.

“Zombies?” He asked, finishing my sentence.

“Do you really think that’s what they are?” I asked, fearful of his answer.

“I don’t know what else they could be,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “First, a virus spreads across half of the country. Classic cause for a zombie outbreak. Then, that guy said he was bitten, and he died. He *died*. Minutes later, he gets up and he’s all deranged and decaying and has an intense craving for human flesh? Sounds like a zombie to me.”

As much as I hated to admit it, I knew he was right. I’d seen my fair share of zombie movies and watched every episode of *The Walking Dead*, I knew a zombie when I saw one.

But never in my wildest nightmares did I expect to be *living* it.

“So what do we do?” Wyatt looked up at Ben, taking a break from his weapon-making,

“Well, I don’t know how much of it applies,” replied Ben as he shifted uneasily in his seat. “But if these zombies are anything like the ones from the video games and movies, the only way to really kill them is to destroy their brain, like Eva did with the knife in the eye before. But it’s hard, really hard. The best way to survive is to stay away from them. To run and hide. We have to be quiet, we need to gather weapons and food, and whatever happens, we can’t get bitten.”

I couldn’t believe it. My head started to spin as I tried to process everything he had said, and I felt my body start to go numb with fear. I suddenly felt light-headed at the thought of spending the rest of my life being chased by ravenous, wretched zombies.

*This can't be happening*, I thought as I stood up from the table.

"We should eat. It's well passed lunch time and none of us have eaten yet. We'll need our strength." I said, even though I wasn't feeling very hungry. I needed to distract myself from my terror, even just for a few minutes.

I walked unsteadily into the kitchen, with the others following close behind.

We spent the next hour in silence, making ourselves salad sandwiches and quietly eating them on the floor behind the counter, out of sight from any deadly passers by.

We decided it would be best to not have burgers – Pop Rock's signature meal – because the smell of cooking meat sizzling on the stove might lure more zombies our way.

Even though the doors were locked and bolted, it would only require a hand-full of zombies to break through the windows.

Besides, after seeing that monster try to tear into my leg earlier, drool dripping from its mouth as it craved my flesh, meat had lost its appeal.

As I sat on the cold tiles eating my sandwich, I thought about what Ben had said, about weapons, destroying brains, running and hiding, all the things we now needed to do to survive.

It made everything that had happened last night seem so unimportant. So trivial.

Yesterday I was complaining about having to wake up early for work, now I don't know if I'll even wake up at all tomorrow. If I'll even be alive that long to experience such a blessing.

All the little problems of yesterday had been completely washed away and replaced by one sole focus: survival.

Finishing my sandwich, I brushed the crumbs off of my lap and stood up, watching the windows intently as I walked towards the office.

"Eva, where are you going?" Jo asked as I walked passed her.

"To watch the news. If we're going to get through this, we need as much information as we can."

## Chapter Eight

Through the windows we could see more and more of the infected starting to fill the streets. Quietly, we huddled together in the office, glued to the television, waiting desperately for signs of this nightmare coming to an end.

“It’s getting worse.” Ben murmured, almost as though he was talking to himself.

I listened closely as the reporter came back onto the screen, noticing her eyes were red and puffy, as though she had been crying.

*We’ve just had word that all phone lines along the east coast are completely jammed from the record number of calls for help. Thousands are trapped all over the city as the virus takes hold of more and more people. Countless reports confirm that those who are infected can turn violent within minutes and decay at a rapid rate. We here at Channel Three News have barricaded ourselves into this studio, and I suggest anyone watching this do the same. Lock your doors, stay quiet and don’t let anyone inside... no matter who they are.*

She began to choke up during that last sentence.

*Just stay inside, and wait it out. With any hope we’ll...*

She was interrupted by a loud crash coming from behind the camera.

The reporter screamed as she disappeared behind her desk, hiding from whatever had just broken in.

The picture turned sideways, and I realised the camera had been knocked over.

The last thing I saw before the picture went static was a hoard of infected zombies swarming over the news desk, the blood curdling screams of the reporter and the crew suddenly falling silent.

I turned to Jo to see her wiping a tear off of her cheek with her sleeve.

“We gotta get out of here, now.” Said Wyatt, standing up from his chair.

“She just said to stay inside!” Jo had started to panic.

“And look what happened to her.” I said, with the news station only blocks away from us, I knew we weren’t safe at the diner.

“I say we go to Melbourne Central Plaza. There’s a Bob’s Camping store there; we can grab some camping gear and more weapons. Whatever we’ll need to survive. Then, I really need to see if my parents are okay.” Ben replied as he stood up next to Wyatt.

“Survive?!” Jo shrieked, her voice trembling. “How can we survive in Melbourne Central? That place will be crawling with those... those... zombies! Then you want to go to your parents? We can’t be driving all over Melbourne!”

“He’s right though, Jo.” Wyatt put a hand on her shoulder to try and calm her down.

“We’ll need more than just some homemade spears to survive. We need to find supplies, and that’s the best chance we’ve got. But are you sure you want to risk going to see your parents?” He asked, turning to Ben.

“I have to. I can’t just leave them there. It’s fine if you guys don’t want to come, but I need to see them. Maybe they’re locked inside like we are.”

For the first time in my life, I felt grateful my parents weren’t alive. I couldn’t bare going through this knowing they were out there, in danger or infected.

With my parents gone, Jo’s Mum and Dad overseas and Wyatt’s living in Cairns, Ben was the only one who could make it to see his.

“I’ll go with you, Ben. We can find your parents after we leave Melbourne Central.

We’ll definitely need to get supplies from there first.” I said as I stood up next to Ben, placing my hand on his shoulder.

“And if we’re lucky enough to make it out of there alive and find Ben’s parents?! Then what the hell are we gonna do?” Jo wasn’t calming down.

Ben walked over to Jo and held her as she fell to pieces in his arms.

I could see Wyatt was thinking something over in his head, and he sighed as he finally came out with it.

“We can go to my brother’s.”

“What?!” gasped Jo, staring at him blankly.

Wyatt had only mentioned his brother a few times before, but he never once had anything nice to say about him. From what he had told me, his brother was a conspiracy theorist who lived somewhere deep in the woods in a cabin, trying to stay 'off the grid.'

"You mean the brother who's constantly rambling on about the next Top Secret Government mind-control plan? Or predicting a zombie apocalypse? Or..." Ben paused.

"Oh."

"Yeah," said Wyatt. "Looks like he's not so crazy after all. Besides, he lives in the middle of nowhere on a huge block of land, he's got a ton of canned food and supplies – enough to last at least a few months. He's even got guns. It's our only choice if we want to get through this."

I always strongly agreed with Australia's no guns policy. I saw it as one of the reasons this country is so safe. Now, it could be our end. If Wyatt's brother had guns, food and security, that's where we needed to be.

"Where does your brother live?" I asked, looking up at Wyatt while holding Jo's hand as she whimpered onto Ben's shoulder.

"Just a bit further than Cairns." He mumbled, preparing for our reaction.

"Cairns?!" We yelled, flustered.

"Yes. But it's ok. I know the way, it shouldn't take more than forty hours if we all take turns driving... and don't stop."

I started to feel light-headed again.

*Not only do we have to get out of the diner and to Melbourne Central, but then we have to find Ben's parents, and get from Melbourne to Cairns, with zombies crawling all over the place.*

A huge task lay ahead of us, but we had very few options.

"Wyatt's right," I decided. "We can either stay here at the diner and wait for what happened to the news reporter to happen to us, or we can take our chances on the outside. If... No, *when* we make it Cairns, we'll be safe."

"There's only one problem." Wyatt uttered, scratching his head.

"Just one?" Ben asked sarcastically.

"What is it?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know the answer.

“Ben’s car is too small for all of us to fit, and Jo and Eva, you walked here today, right?”

We both nodded.

“Well, that only leaves my car. And it’s parked two blocks away. We’ll have to run for it.”

I slid the door open a little to see at least three zombies walking passed the diner windows.

Jo groaned. “How are we going to get to it? We can’t just walk out the front door!”

I reached for my satchel.

“I have an idea.”

## Chapter Nine

At first, Wyatt was the only one open to my idea, but once Ben and Jo realised we had no other choice, they soon came around.

Within half an hour, I had already transformed Jo and Ben into half-decent zombies.

Using my Bruise Wheel – a small tub containing a four-colour wheel of concealer (red, grey, purple and brown) – as well as some tomato sauce from the diner as blood, they looked undead enough to be able to blend in to the growing parade of zombies outside.

*This just might work*, I thought as I put the finishing touches on my own zombie makeup.

Wyatt walked into the office and slid the door closed behind him, leaving us alone again for the first time since this morning, which already seemed like so long ago after everything we had been through.

“Hey,” he said before walking towards me to take a seat on the desk. “I’m ready to be undead.” He joked as he closed his eyes, waiting for me to start turning him into one of the infected.

My heart started racing as I dipped my makeup brush into the grey concealer and started dotting it all over his face.

I had never been this close to him before, so close that I could almost hear his heartbeat, and I swore it was beating even faster than mine.

“Do you think we’ll make it out of here?” I said quietly, blending the concealer over his eyelids.

“Of course we will. I know our plan is a bit sketchy, but it’s all we’ve got. And after seeing you kick that zombie’s ass before, I know you’ll be fine.”

“I hope so.” I cringed at the thought of that creature, the sickening crunch of the knife going into its skull.

“I *know* so. I mean, I knew you were strong, but jeez. You stabbed that thing right in the face, Eva. It was amazing. *You’re* amazing.”

The butterflies fluttered about in my stomach, but I ignored his compliment. After what I heard last night, I found it hard to trust his kind words now.

"I lied last night, Eva," he said, not opening his eyes even though I had finished applying makeup to them. "Tom's a sleaze. I couldn't tell him the truth. Last year, when our old drummer, Will, told us about a girl he liked, Tom purposely started flirting with her and they hooked up two weeks later. Will was crushed. He left the band because of it." He paused, waiting for me to reply.

"Wyatt, it's okay. We've got more serious things to worry about right now. Forget it." I said, wondering if he was telling the truth.

"No, I won't," he said as he opened his eyes. "If I don't tell you this now, I might not ever get the chance."

He held my hands in his and looked into my eyes, demanding my attention.

"Tom's like a kid who isn't interested in a toy until another kid picks it up and starts playing with it. Not that I think you're a toy... Ugh. This isn't going well." He sighed, pausing before continuing his speech.

"If I told him the truth... If I told him what I really think about you, he'd be all over you. You heard the way he spoke about women last night; he's a pig. No way was I going to let him near you."

I realised I had stopped breathing. I let out a sigh and took in a long, deep breath as I matched his gaze. He searched my eyes, as though trying to read my thoughts.

"So, what is the truth?" I managed to ask, my heart pounding in my chest.

"The truth is..." He trailed off, looking down at our intertwined hands as he spoke.

"The truth is, I think you're the most beautiful, smart, amazing girl I've ever met and I think about you all the time. I love that you're independent. I love that you are strong and that you don't need a guy to save you all the time. I love... *everything* about you."

He looked up at me then, the corner of his mouth turning up into a half-smile as he continued.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about last night, Eva. That's what I've been trying to tell you for months, but I was... I didn't want to ruin our friendship if..." He paused again, closing his eyes as he cringed. "If you didn't feel the same way. But I couldn't take it anymore, especially when I saw that Cosmo Guy



hitting on you last night..." He rolled his eyes. "I knew I had to take a chance and tell you. So, here I am."

He waited anxiously, trying to gauge my reaction.

I had stopped breathing again. The butterflies in my stomach had sparked into a frenzy, sending flutters of excitement dancing through my veins.

What could I possibly say to such a sweet revelation?

Words eluded me, so I decided to do something I had wanted to do ever since I laid eyes on him.

I smiled at the thought of what I was about to do, and Wyatt's shoulders relaxed once he saw happiness spread across my face.

Slowly, I leaned in towards him, and he responded by doing the same. With our lips finally about to touch, I felt the butterflies going wilder than ever before.

*This is it*, I thought.

*This is my moment.*

A sudden loud crash echoed throughout the diner, interrupting our perfect moment and bringing us tumbling back down to reality.

Quickly, Wyatt stood up, slamming the door sideways as he ran out into the diner, with me right behind him to see what had happened.

Ben was standing with his hands covering his ears from the noise, and was surrounded by pieces of broken plates all around him on the floor.

"What did you do?" Wyatt asked Ben, clearly frustrated.

"Sorry, I... I knocked the plates over. It was an accident." He apologised.

"Uh. Guys?" Jo called from the other side of the counter, looking out the window.

We all turned to face the windows of the diner to see at least a dozen zombies stumbling up to the glass.

"I think they know we're here now!" She whimpered as she backed up, side-stepping her way around the counter to grab hold of my arm.

"Time to leave!" Said Wyatt as he ran back into the office to grab our weapons.

"How are we going to get passed them now?" I asked, running in behind him to grab my satchel.

“We won’t, not with so many of them out there waiting for us. We’ll have to hideout in the basement.” Answered Ben as Wyatt passed him his makeshift spear.

My stomach turned as we quickly ran out of the diner and into the hallway, headed for the basement.

*There’s no way we’ll survive this now.*

I followed the others as Wyatt opened the door into the stairwell and started running down the stairs.

“Wait!” I whispered, and they all stopped on the stairs to look back at me. “We’ll die down there. We have to get to the car.”

Wyatt stepped back up the stairs and onto the landing to face me.

“They’re waiting for us out there. We don’t have any other choice.” He said softly, taking hold of my hand.

“Yes we do.” I replied, pulling him towards the trolleys.

I knew we only had two choices:

Leave.

Or die.

## Chapter Ten

Wyatt slowly creaked the door of the stairwell open, peering carefully into the diner. I could see through the crack that dozens of zombies crowded around the diner, growling as they pressed up against the windows.

I held my breath as Wyatt quickly snuck through the door and behind the counter, running low and fast so the creatures wouldn't see him.

I moved forward and watched as he stayed low, making his way over to the other side of the diner, pressing his back up against the counter to stay out of sight.

For a moment, I thought about praying for him, for us, to make it out of here unscathed.

I stopped believing in God the moment I found out my parents had been killed. When the Police woman with those melancholy eyes sat me down and told me the driver of the taxi they were in fell asleep at the wheel and veered directly into the path of a semi-trailer. In an instant, they were gone, and my faith died along with them.

But, as I watched those mindless zombies sniffing and clawing at the glass, their sinister eyes searching for signs of life, and saw Wyatt coming dangerously close to them, I wished more than ever that some omnipotent being was watching over us, keeping us alive.

Slowly, Wyatt reached his hand up towards the cash register, crinkling his nose as he pushed the eject button, causing the cash draw to 'ding' as it popped open.

Peering around the corner of the counter, he breathed a sigh of relief to see the zombies hadn't heard it over their moaning, and he reached into the cash drawer, picking up a coin.

He hurriedly crawled back towards the other end of the counter, close to the hallway where Ben, Jo and myself were watching him, waiting.

He rose up over the counter and slid the coin into one of the jukeboxes.

Carefully, he started flipping through the song choices.

"Wyatt!" Jo whispered impatiently. "Just pick one! It doesn't matter!"

“It *does* matter!” He whispered back, searching the song list. “We’re about to do something completely insane and extremely dangerous – *we need a power song!*”

Jo sighed, exasperated, but I couldn’t help but smile to myself.

Finally, his eyes landed on the perfect song.

“Oh yeah,” he grinned. “That’s the one.”

Wyatt pushed the button and rolled back into the hallway, just as *Rock Around The Clock* by Bill Haley and His Comets started blaring throughout the diner.

“That should distract ‘em long enough.” He said as he locked the door.

This was it.

Our only chance to make it out of here alive.

Wyatt and Ben held the trolleys still while Jo and I climbed in, already loaded with our bags and the weapons we gathered from around the diner.

“Ready?” Asked Ben as he and Wyatt positioned the trolleys up against the double doors in the stairwell. Hearing a loud smash from back inside the diner, I knew the zombies had made their way inside. It was now or never.

“Let’s do this.” I answered, holding my spear in position.

They pushed the trolleys forward, slamming us through the doors and out onto the street.

Even though the majority of zombies had been lured towards the front of the building by the music blaring through the outside speakers, and most were now making their way into the diner, at least a dozen still stood between us and Wyatt’s car parked two blocks away.

They gave the trolleys one last push before Ben climbed in alongside Jo and Wyatt jumped in with me.

Jo ignited the fire extinguisher to help cloud us from the zombies and I began slashing at any who got too close.

I could feel my heart pounding and my arms shaking as we sped down the street, hacking off zombie heads as we zoomed passed.

“We’re nearly there!” Yelled Wyatt as he fought off one of the zombies, gutting it like a fish with a butcher knife.

I could see his yellow Chevy parked by the sidewalk on the next block, and I knew we would be there in a matter of seconds considering how fast we were flying down the street.

“How are we going to stop?” Yelled Jo as the fire extinguisher started to sputter.

Before anyone could answer, the trolleys hit the curb and toppled over, sending us all flying onto the hard concrete.

I winced as I skidded across the ground, grazing my arms on the footpath and coming to a stop against the brick wall of a building.

Opening my eyes, I could see a giant hoard of zombies running down the hill, literally falling over each other to get to us as we lay on the ground helplessly.

“They’re coming!” I yelled as I picked myself up and held my hand out for Ben.

I helped him to his feet while Jo and Wyatt quickly snatched up a few of the knives strewn along the ground from the fall.

Feeling a sharp pain soaring down my arm, I started running fiercely towards the car, too afraid to look at what was causing it.

Wyatt made it to the car first, fumbling around in his pocket for the key and frantically sliding it into the door, throwing a knife, the hairspray and lighter into the backseat.

I jumped into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut behind me as Ben slid into the back.

“Where’s Jo?” I heard Wyatt ask, fear in his voice.

Turning around, I saw Jo was still running towards the car, clutching her spear tightly, with at least six zombies right behind her.

“She’s not gonna make it!” I said as I reached into the back seat, grabbed the hairspray and lighter, and jumped back out of the car.

“Eva! What are you doing?!” I heard Wyatt yell as I ran, but I didn’t stop. I had to help Jo.

“Just start the car!” I yelled back.

One of the zombies jumped at Jo, falling short and clutching her ankle, causing her to fall to the ground.

Jo held her spear high and started stabbing it repeatedly until it let go of her ankle, while I ran up next to her and lit the

lighter as I held it in front of the hairspray can. I had no idea what I was doing, but I had to do something fast.

Just as the other five zombies were about to close in, I pressed down on the hairspray can, sending a huge flame bursting into the air in front of me.

I felt my fingers starting to burn, but I sprayed the flames on the zombies as they came running towards us. I looked in horror as they continued running towards us, now as ferocious fireballs.

Jo stood behind me now, pulling on my singlet, urging me to run.

“Come on, Eva! We can make it!”

I turned and together we ran to the car as fast as we could, Wyatt putting his foot down on the pedal as soon as we jumped inside.

“Eva! You’re hurt!” Wyatt said, glancing at me as he sped down the street towards the city centre.

Looking down at my right arm, I saw a huge gash just below my shoulder, blood pouring out of it.

“I must have landed on one of the knives when we tipped the trolleys.” I replied, suddenly feeling the pain a whole lot more.

“Here, you gotta put pressure on it. Give me your scarf.” Ordered Ben as he leaned forward from the back seat.

I unwrapped my scarf from around my neck and handed to him, and he proceeded to tie it tightly around my arm, stopping the bleeding but intensifying the pain.

“Good thing we’ve got a medic with us” Said Wyatt, relief washing over his face.

I looked in the rear view mirror to see the hoard as they chased after us, trying to ignore the pain in my arm.

Their rotting limbs and decimated consciousness made them slower than us, shuffling more than walking or running. But their animal instincts and ever-expanding numbers made it easy for them to corner their prey. That’s how they were quickly overthrowing the entire population of Australia.

“Fire doesn’t work. I lit those bastards on fire and it slowed them down a little, but it didn’t stop them. Maybe if it was a huge explosion or something that engulfed them enough to melt their brains, but just lighting one or two on fire isn’t enough. We need to remember that. I say we just stick to knives and weapons

that we're sure will destroy their brains." I said, turning to everyone to make sure they understood.

"But when you threw hot oil on the one in the diner, it stopped it... for a second." Wyatt added, confused.

"I know. Maybe because he was so new? He'd only just turned. The ones chasing us looked more... decayed. And they were definitely more brutal." I said, trying to understand how the virus works.

Everyone nodded as we drove further into city, passing half-eaten corpses and straggling zombies on the way.

Melbourne had fast transformed into a war-zone, and I cringed at the thought of what awaited us at Melbourne Central.

## Chapter Eleven

"I feel so ridiculous right now." Wyatt said as he leaned out the window, reaching for the ticket that slid out of the machine as we waited to enter the Melbourne Central underground parking garage.

We had seen more zombies than we expected dotting the streets on our drive from the diner into the city, and I kept a careful watch through the windows while Wyatt waited for the boom gate to rise.

Slowly, he edged the car down the winding slope and into the parking lot.

I felt relieved to see it was practically empty except for a few cars here and there.

Pulling up as close to the elevator as possible, Wyatt parked the car and we climbed out, our eyes searching the vacant floor for any signs of movement.

I pulled my satchel over my shoulder and held my knife close.

After our last encounter in the street and losing some weapons in the trolley crash, we each only had one knife left.

Waiting for the elevator, I felt grateful that the city still had power, although for how long I didn't know, so we had to be quick.

The doors slid open and we stepped inside the elevator, Ben anxiously pressing the 'door close' button repeatedly. We sighed in relief as the doors closed, but gasped in shock when we saw our own reflections in the mirrored doors.

"Woah!" Exclaimed Wyatt as he touched his face.

"Cool!" Said Ben, scrunching up his face and groaning like a zombie.

I smiled proudly at my works of art.

"Ewww," Jo said as she moved closer to the door, looking intently at her zombie-fied face and neck. "I look so gross! Good work, Eva."

She turned to give me the thumbs up as the doors opened onto the first floor, revealing a zombie standing right in front of her.

Before any of us could warn her, Jo faced forward to step out of the lift, screaming when she saw the white eyes of the creature staring her in the face.



Instinctively, she punched the zombie right in the head, sending it stumbling backwards and right over the balcony, falling down to the floor below.

“Wow! Go Jo!” Laughed Ben, and she gave him a high five even though her hand trembled uncontrollably.

Slowly, the four of us stepped out of the elevator, looking around for any more unwanted surprises.

“Time to be zombies,” I whispered as I started stumbling around, trying to walk like all the zombies I had seen that day. The others followed my example.

“Which way?” I asked, looking at Ben.

“I dunno.” He replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“What?!” Whispered Jo, exasperated.

“I don’t know, I think it’s on this floor somewhere.” He continued, looking around at the stores.

“We need a map,” said Wyatt, spotting one further ahead and making his way towards it, still trying to walk like a zombie. “I’m feeling ridiculous again.” He smirked.

Once we reached the map of the mall, we realised we needed to go down one level and walk to the other side of the centre.

“We’ll never make it!” Jo groaned, dropping her face into her hands hopelessly.

“Yes we will,” I said sternly. “We’ve made it this far. We can do it. Let’s go.”

*I just hope it’s open,* I thought as I looked around the shopping centre.

It was clear that some of the stores were open, but not all.

*Probably opened by people just like us, who showed up to work not knowing about the outbreak.*

I tried not to think about what happened to those poor people.

We began our slow shuffle down the escalators and across the shopping centre.

We had made it more than half way when we saw two zombies up ahead, crouched over something, tearing through it like lions on a zebra.

“What do we do?” Jo whimpered, fear in her voice.

“Just keep going,” Wyatt whispered back. “Blend in. If they come too close, hack their damn heads off.”

I started to shake as we edged closer, my heart pounding furiously and my breath shallow in my lungs.

“Don’t look.” Whispered Wyatt as he glanced at me sideways, but it was too late.

I had already seen the fear riddled face of the woman that the zombies were devouring.

She was young, around the same age as me, and wearing an apron.

*She must have worked around here somewhere.*

Tears welled in my eyes and all I wanted to do was pull my knife out from my jeans pocket and start wailing on the zombies, but I knew it would be pointless; the woman was already dead.

As we quietly made our way passed the beasts, trying our best to seem as undead as possible, one of the zombies turned from their meal to look at us.

I swallowed the rising bile back down my throat as it locked eyes with mine while ripping into the woman’s intestines, sending blood and guts spattering all over itself.

“Ok,” whispered Wyatt once we had passed the zombies. “We’re nearly there. I can see it.”

I had never felt so excited to see a Bob’s Camping store in my life, but it quickly turned to dread when I saw that it was closed, the roller door pulled down to the floor.

“Looks like *Bob* didn’t show up for work today.” Wyatt said as we reached the store.

“We came all this way for nothing!” Grunted Ben as he kicked the roller door.

I turned around to see a few more zombies had started to emerge, feeling sick at the thought of walking all the way through them to get back to the car.

“What do we do now?” I asked, trying to pull the door up, but it wouldn’t budge.

I knew we wouldn’t make it back to the car.

For the first time since this nightmare started, I felt helpless.

## Chapter Twelve

"I got this." Said Jo as she pulled two bobby pins from her hair and bent down to slide them into the lock on the roller door.

Ben, Wyatt and I looked down at her, wide-eyed in surprise.

"I lock myself out of my car a lot." She explained as she bit her lip in concentration.

The three of us kept watch while Jo jiggled the lock open and slid the door up high enough for us to duck under, sliding it back down again once we were safely inside.

"You rock, Jo!" I smiled, hugging her tight.

Jo smiled broadly as we started exploring the store, searching for anything we might need to survive the road trip to Wyatt's brother's house in Cairns.

Looking at the row of backpacks along the wall, I had an idea.

"Here," I said, walking over to the racks and passing Wyatt, Ben and Jo a backpack each. "We should have a backpack full weapons, food, first aid kits... So we'll all have everything we need... in case we get separated."

"Ok, everyone pack your bags and meet back here in ten minutes." Added Wyatt, and with that we took our empty backpacks and began filling them with anything we could use.

I packed a dome tent and camping kit, a pocket knife, five hunting knives, a first aid kit, water canteen, a torch and batteries, binoculars, some rope and as many packets of hydrated food as I could squeeze into the two front pockets.

"Hey... guys?" I heard Ben call from the centre of the store as I tied a sleeping bag to the outside of my backpack.

We all ran over to meet him, instantly seeing why he had called us over.

He stood in front of a huge motorhome parked on a small stage, the giant sign next to it promoting a Bob's Camping Giveaway, of which the motorhome was first prize.

"I think I've found a better way to get to Cairns." He grinned.

"Yeah, because that's completely inconspicuous." Said Wyatt sarcastically, staring up at it.

“Well, it’s no more inconspicuous than a bright yellow Chevy Impala,” replied Ben.

“We’ll be able to store heaps of weapons and food in there, and it’s practically zombie proof!” He added as he banged his hand on the side.

“It would be more comfortable. But how would we get it out?” Asked Jo, walking around to the door and opening it. She climbed in to take a better look.

“The same way ‘Bob’ got it in; drive it.” Answered Ben, following her up the steps.

“But... my car.” Muttered Wyatt, concerned about his beloved automobile.

“It’ll be alright here, it’s safe enough. It’s not like anyone’s going to steal it,” I said, trying to make him feel better. “C’mon, let’s take a look.” I smiled, following Jo and Ben inside.

Stepping into the motorhome, I started to feel more optimistic about road-tripping to the other side of the country, which was fast becoming a zombie wasteland.

With a kitchenette, complete with an oven, stove, microwave and refrigerator, four seater dining area, and even a toilet and shower, this would be much more comfortable than Wyatt’s Chevy, stylish as it may be.

Wyatt climbed in after me and walked over to the driver’s seat.

“There’s about a quarter tank of petrol,” he smiled as he inspected the rest of the cabin. “And a CB radio!”

Turning the radio on, we could only hear static.

“We’ll try it out once we’re on the road.” Wyatt said, switching it off again.

“Check this out!” Said Ben as he pressed a button on the wall.

A double bed descended from the ceiling, over the couch along the back wall. “Looks like there’s only one bed.” He winked, glancing over at Jo.

“Calm down, Ben,” she replied, pressing another button, and a double bed came down over the driver’s cabin. “There’s another one here.” She said, rolling her eyes at him.

I avoided making eye contact with Wyatt as we all stood looking at the two double beds, but I could feel my cheeks warming into a blush.

“We won’t be using them, anyway. If we all take shifts driving we can make it to Cairns without needing to stop. I don’t think it’s safe to have the beds down while we’re on the road; anyone not driving will have to sleep on the couches.” Said Wyatt as he stepped back out of the motorhome, leaving Ben looking very disappointed.

“Let’s load it up!” Called Wyatt from the store, and the three of us climbed out and started grabbing as much as we could carry. “Now that we’ve got the RV, we can pack more than just gear for the trip north; grab anything we could use when we get to Cairns, too.”

Wyatt ran over to the counter and started searching through the drawers.

“Got the keys!” He called as he held up a set of keys for the RV.

After we had gathered enough supplies, Wyatt and I surveyed the motorhome, taking note of everything we had brought aboard.

With countless knives, ropes, a few axes, over a dozen first aid kits and survival kits, plastic jugs that Wyatt had filled with filtered water from the tank in the back room of the store, torches, lanterns, extension leads, tents, sleeping bags, walkie talkies, enough matches to fill a drawer and enough dehydrated food to fill three of the cupboards in the kitchenette, I felt confident we had more than enough to survive.

“I think we’re ready to go,” I said, putting my arms on my hips triumphantly. “All we need to do now is get out of Melbourne Central.”

“That should be fun.” Wyatt grinned at me, placing his hand on the small of my back.

My heart started to race as he leaned in close to me.

*My moment!*

I closed my eyes, waiting for his lips to grace mine.

Once again, we were interrupted, this time by the sound of Ben clearing his throat.

I quickly stepped back, my cheeks burning red, while Wyatt clenched his jaw, glaring at Ben.

“That’s new.” Ben smirked, with Jo smiling widely behind him. “Just came to tell you we’ve cleared a path out of the store and the roller door is up. We better go.”

“Let’s do it.” Said Wyatt, stepping into the driver’s cabin and taking a seat.

“Dibbs on the passenger seat!” Yelled Ben as he jumped into the RV, stopping to look at me. “Oh. Unless you want to sit up front?” He winked, gesturing to Wyatt, who was starting the engine.

“No, I’m ok,” I glared back. “I’ll sit back here with Jo.”

After everything we’d been through, I wanted to spend some time with Jo to find out how she was coping.

Ben buckled himself into the front passenger seat while Jo and I strapped ourselves into the bench seats in the dining area.

“Everyone ready? Doors locked?” Called Wyatt, turning to look at me, his eyes sparkling.

“Ready.” I replied, nodding my head as I tightened my seat belts.

“Here we go.” Wyatt said as he started edging the RV towards the door and out of the store.

I looked out the window as we drove out into the shopping centre to see at least twenty zombies roaming around now, and they had all just spotted the big white motorhome driving towards them.

I grabbed my backpack and pulled out two hunting knives.

“Here,” I said as I passed one to Jo. “Just to be safe.”

Jo took the knife and held it tightly in one hand while she closed the window curtains with the other.

“Just to be safe.” She repeated, smiling nervously.

We picked up speed as we approached the hoard, slamming into them one by one.

I cringed as I bumped up and down in my seat, zombies falling under the wheels while others banged on the walls.

“Get rid of him!” I heard Ben yell, and I leaned over to see what was going on.

One of the zombies had climbed onto the front bonnet and was hanging off of the left side mirror, its mouth frothing as its dilated pupils glared eagerly at Ben.

“Hold on!” Wyatt yelled as we approached the exit. “It’s going to be a tight squeeze!”

I braced myself as the RV crashed through the automatic doors, snapping the left mirror off and crushing the zombie against Ben's window, smearing blood and infected saliva along the glass.

"Ugh." Ben cringed as we sped out of Melbourne Central and turned onto the city streets, sending the squished corpse sliding off onto the road.

"We made it!" Jo yelled, almost surprised.

We cheered and laughed as we made our way out of the city.

I smiled wide, feeling the most relaxed I had felt all day.

## Chapter Thirteen

We made our way out of the city, headed into the suburbs to find Ben's parents.

"Should we go there and see if they can help us?" Wyatt asked, slowly pulling the RV to the side of the road and motioning towards a hospital up ahead.

I leaned out of my seat to get a better look at it through the windshield.

There were two army tanks parked out the front, with a wall made of sand bags blocking the entrance into the hospital. I could see at least two army personnel with large guns patrolling the area.

"Well, the news reporter said anyone infected should get immediate medical assistance. Maybe they have the cure?" Ben suggested, pulling a pair of binoculars from his backpack and holding them up to get a closer look.

"I don't know. It looks pretty intimidating. And if that's where the infected are going, I don't want to be anywhere near it." I replied, feeling anxious that we had stopped.

"Well, we're not infected, maybe we could help?" Wyatt asked, looking at each of us to gauge our reactions.

"We sure look infected," Ben said, looking at his reflection in the side mirror, his face still covered in faux lesions and blood. "We should probably take this makeup off if we're gonna go in there."

I pulled my makeup remover wipes out of my bag and handed one to each of them.

The coolness of the cloth refreshed me as I smoothed it over my face, and I felt relieved to look like my normal self again.

I started to wonder if going to the hospital would, in fact, be the best choice for us.

There would be medical supplies, food, and help for us there, and it was clearly protected. It might just be the only safe place left in Melbourne, and it sounded like a much better idea than driving through the outback to the other side of the country.

"Maybe you're right," I said, throwing the makeup-covered wipe into a plastic bag.

"We'll be safe in there. And we can lend a hand."



Just then, an old brown station wagon swerved around the corner behind us, speeding passed the RV towards the hospital.

I unbuckled my seat belt and walked over to stand in between Ben and Wyatt, watching intently. Jo followed and leaned in over my shoulder, and I could feel she was still trembling.

The station wagon skidded to a stop at the blocked entrance and a middle aged man with silver hair stepped out of the driver's seat. Frantically, he ran around the car and threw open the passenger side door, leaning in to help a younger man to his feet.

"He's been bitten," Ben said, watching carefully through the binoculars. "Oh jeez, he's got two huge chunks of his arm missing. I can see the bone. Ugh."

I leaned in closer and realised it must not be the only injury he has, even I could make out the blood stains that covered both the men's clothes.

"I hope they made it there in time," I thought aloud, watching as the older man held his arm around the younger one as they limped towards the hospital.

The soldiers began shouting something as they pointed their guns at the two men, who held their hands out, showing their open palms in response.

I couldn't hear what the soldiers were yelling, but they refused to lower their guns.

The two men dropped to their knees in the middle of the road, and it almost looked like they were pleading with the soldiers.

The older man grabbed hold of the other man's wounded arm, pointing to it and shouting something.

"They're not letting them in." Ben murmured, bewildered at the scene in front of them.

"Why not? They said on the news that anyone infected needs medical assistance.

They did what they were told. They need help!" Said Jo, and I could tell by the strain on her voice that she had started panicking again.

All of a sudden, we all jumped at the sound of gunfire in the distance. One of the soldiers had opened fire on the men.

Jo screamed as we watched the men's bodies thrash violently against the force of the bullets and fall heavily to the ground.

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” Jo screamed, I held her tight, urging her to keep calm, but I felt just as terrified as she did.

“That was ‘medical assistance’,” whispered Wyatt, his jaw hanging open in shock.

“There’s no cure. They just kill them.”

Tears fell onto my cheeks as I stared blankly at the lifeless bodies, being dragged behind the sand bag wall by one the soldiers while the other jumped in their car and drove it out of sight.

“We gotta get out of here. We’ll need to find another way out of the city.” Wyatt said as he started the engine and began reversing the RV.

This whole time, I had hoped more than anything that this nightmare would end soon.

That a vaccine would be distributed and within a few months everything would be back to normal. I wanted more than anything to go back to living my life, to having my trivial little problems.

But now I knew it wasn’t going to happen. I may not ever have that life back again. A twinge of guilt hit my stomach as I realised how much I took for granted just yesterday.

Safety, food, health, friends, freedom – did I ever take a moment to be grateful for any of it? I’m sure I would have, had I known it would end so soon.

But now I knew for sure; everything had changed. We were on our own.

No-one would be coming to save us.

## Chapter Fourteen

We sat in silence during the drive out of the city. After seeing such inhumane violence first-hand, none of us felt inclined to fill the air with chit-chat.

As Wyatt drove through the suburbs, I could see Ben shifting anxiously in his seat.

The neighbourhood streets were just as deserted as the city, except for a few devoured bodies strewn across the side of the road every now and then.

We saw the occasional car speeding down the street, filled with survivors just like us, although most were headed in the opposite direction, fleeing.

Even though the outbreak only hit here late last night, a bond had already formed between the few of us who had survived. I exchanged knowing glances with the others in the cars as they passed us, their eyes just as worried and weary as my own.

I could tell by their blood splattered faces that the infected hit this area hard, maybe harder than it hit the city.

None of this bode well for Ben's parents. I took a deep breath and hoped that, somehow, they had managed to stay alive.

"It's just here," said Ben, pointing to a house on the left side of the street. "The white one with the rose bushes."

Wyatt pulled the RV over and for a moment we sat quietly, scanning the street for any signs of life... or death.

Ben turned to us and nodded, so we each picked up a knife and slowly exited the motorhome.

A cool breeze brushed against my face, and I almost felt peaceful as I closed my eyes to breathe it in. It was late afternoon, and soon the sun would start to set, bringing this – the first day of this Australian apocalypse – to an end. But I knew the horror had only just begun.

I followed Ben through the gate in the white picket fence and admired his childhood home.

A white, two-storey weatherboard, with flower boxes adorning the window sills and a beautiful garden, it was charming. I could envision Ben growing up here; playing on the long front porch, running through sprinklers in the summertime. It appeared to be untouched from the ravages of the outbreak.

I climbed up the porch steps and waited by the front window while Ben searched his pockets for his keys. Wyatt and Jo stood in front of the house, keeping watch.

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw movement from inside the house.

I stepped up to the window and cupped my hands over the glass to take a closer look inside.

My heart sank deep into my chest when I saw them.

There, in the middle of the living room, I saw a man's body. His arms laid motionless by his sides and his head facing the window, his sad, frightened eyes staring into nothingness.

An infected woman crouched over him, her blood soaked hands clawing into his stomach as she fed on his intestines.

The sound of Ben's jingling keys unlocking the screen door awoke me from my terror.

"Ben! Stop! Don't unlock the door!" I whispered as loud as I could, making it sound more like a desperate screech.

"What?" he asked, freezing in place. "Why?"

I didn't know what to say. He walked towards the window, his face wrinkled in agony as he saw my eyes brim with tears.

I gently put my hand on his arm as he tried to look through the window, trying to stop him.

"No," he said, shrugging my hand away. "Whatever it is. I need to see."

Watching him peer through the window, searching the inside of his house, I waited for his heart to break.

When tears filled his eyes, I knew he had seen it, too.

"Dad." He breathed, choked by his devastation.

Wiping his tears away, he took a deep breath in before looking around the living room again. "Where's my mum?"

Confused, I turned to face the window and looked inside. She was gone. He didn't see what she had become.

"Ben..." I started, but I didn't know where to begin.

"She... Your mum, I saw her."

Suddenly, something threw itself against the window, making us both jump back in fright.

"Mum!" Ben yelled, falling to his knees. "No. No, no, no, no, no."

He couldn't contain his tears anymore, they streamed down his face as he stared helplessly what used to be his mother.

Her fingers had been gnawed on, she had chewed her own fingertips off during her feast. Blood smeared onto the glass as she tried to bite through it, her lips and teeth covered in her husband's flesh. I could see from the festering laceration on her hand that she had been bitten. Red raw and inflamed, it had already started to rot.

Wyatt and Jo had joined us, and together we sat with Ben on the porch, crying silently for our friend and his doomed mother and father.

After what felt like hours, I turned to face the garden, unable too bear the sight of the infected woman or her shattered son any longer.

My breath caught in my throat as I heard moaning from out on the street.

Peeking over the porch fence, I saw three zombies shuffling passed the house.

I held my arm out to warn Jo and Wyatt, and they slowly turned around, following my gaze. Wyatt put his hand on Ben's shoulder, signalling him to stay down. We sat on the porch, barely breathing as we watched the zombies continue slowly down the street.

"We need to go." I mouthed to Wyatt, who nodded in response.

"Ben, mate," he said softly as he tried to look into Ben's eyes. "I'm really sorry, but we need to go. It's not safe for us here."

Wyatt helped Ben to his feet, but he pulled away and moved closer to the window, standing face to face with his mother.

She growled at him as she pushed her palms onto the glass, trying to break through.

Ben held his hand up to hers, tears spilling onto his trembling lips as he looked into her dead eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Mum," he sniffed. "I love you so much. Goodbye."

He closed his eyes and inhaled a long, deep breath before stepping back from the window and turning away.

Wyatt and I followed behind as Ben walked passed us and headed for the RV, wiping his tears on his sleeve.

No-one said anything as we buckled our seat belts and drove away.

With barely any cars on the road, it didn't take long for us to make it out of Melbourne. Heaviness filled the RV, each of us

lost deep in our own thoughts as we watched the last of the neighbourhoods fly passed our windows.

As I slowly began to drift into sleep, I felt my heart ache for everything, and everyone, we were leaving behind.

What lay ahead for us remained to be seen, but as Melbourne lay in ruins behind us, I hoped it would be better than what we found today.

## Chapter Fifteen

I gazed out the window, staring thoughtfully up at the clouds as the sun started to set.

I had managed to sleep for a short while, but my fierce nightmares had jolted me awake. All I saw when I closed my eyes were the rancid, gruesome faces of the infected.

I couldn't stop thinking about how quickly this had all happened. A mere twenty-four hours ago, those rabid monsters were normal human beings going about their lives; going to work, worrying about paying bills, picking their children up from school. Their lives changed in an instant. The entire country changed in an instant.

"Eva," whispered Ben as he walked over from the driver's cabin and sat next to me, waking me from my thoughts.

He held one of our many first aid kits in his hands. "Here, let me look at your arm."

He turned on one of the ceiling lights above me while I started unwrapping the scarf from around my arm.

"Ok, it's not too bad," he said as he gently wiped my cut with a cleaning pad from the kit, making me flinch. "It's only about a centimetre deep, so it won't need stitches or anything. I'll just clean it and bandage it up."

I watched him as he took such gentle care of my arm. I had been in awe of his strength ever since we left his parent's house.

"Thanks heaps, Ben. How are you?" I asked, instantly regretting asking such an inane question.

"I'm... I don't know. Just keeping myself busy, I guess," he sighed, wrapping a bandage around my arm and clipping it into place. "How did you get through this when..."

He stopped and bowed his head, unable to say it.

I knew what he was going through all too well. Months passed before I could physically say that my parents had died, as though somehow it wouldn't be real until I uttered those agonising words.

"To be honest, I'm not sure how I got through it," I replied, not wanting to sugar-coat the pain he was going through. "I just did. It hurt like hell, and I think it always will, but I've

learned to live with it. I don't understand why it happened, and I wish it didn't, but it did. I learned to accept that."

It has been so long since I spoke about the death of my parents, that just hearing those words come out of my mouth made me realise how far I've come since that tough time. But my heart ached for Ben, knowing he was only at the very beginning of this shattering experience.

"I know it feels like the whole world is crumbling around you, Ben... and I guess in a way it is, with everything that's happening. And you know what? It's okay. It's okay that you feel that numb. It's okay that you feel like shit. It's okay. Feel it. Then, once you've had enough of feeling that way, let it go. Change it. Shift your focus to the things that make you happy. Remember the good times you had with your parents. But right now, just feel it." I took a breath, surprised at the wisdom I had just imparted. I hoped desperately that I had helped ease his pain, even just a little.

Ben looked up at me with tears in his eyes and hugged me tight.

Seeing the heartbreak in his eyes, I finally knew what it felt like to be on the other end of this exchange. The only difference being he would never see relief in my eyes, I had already survived that tragedy; it didn't scare me anymore.

"Thanks, Eva." Ben sniffed as he stood up.

"No worries, Ben. We're all here for you." I replied, giving him a slight smile.

As he packed up the first aid kit and climbed back into the driver's cabin, I looked over at Jo as she slept. All of a sudden, these three human beings were all I had. Now, a new fear loomed over me; losing one of our little tribe.

*It's us against the world now.*

At that moment, I noticed the RV had started to slow down. Turning to look out the window, I could see we had turned off the highway and were driving through a small town, so I unbuckled my belt and walked over to the driver's cabin.

"Petrol." Said Wyatt as I leaned against the back of the driver's seat, as though he knew what I was thinking.

"Better wake up Jo. We'll run in and grab more food and anything else we find while Wyatt fills it up." Added Ben.

"Cool. Do you think it's safe here?" I asked, looking through the windshield for any signs of danger.



It seemed a long main street and a few houses scattered around the area was all that made up this tiny town. I could see it had not escaped the wrath of the infection; with dozens of devoured corpses strewn along the road and sidewalks and a few shop windows smashed in, the havoc looked recent.

“Not sure. We’ll have to be quick, and careful.” Answered Wyatt, looking at me in the rear view mirror.

I nodded and stepped back towards the dining area to wake Jo.

Slowly, we rolled into the local petrol station, glancing around suspiciously for any movement. Squinting to see through the broken windows of the station store, I couldn’t see anyone inside. Wyatt pulled into the station and for a moment we sat in silence, listening closely.

“Ok. Let’s hurry.” Said Wyatt as he opened his door and stepped outside.

We quickly climbed out of the motorhome and made our way over to the store, peering through the windows carefully before entering.

“I think I see a crowbar behind the counter.” Said Jo as we entered, the bell ringing as the door swung open and closed behind us.

Ben ran straight over to the snack foods, ripping open a packet of potato chips, while Jo ran behind the counter to get the crowbar.

“Just grab everything, we don’t know how long will be in hiding for.” I said as I picked up an empty milk crate and started packing it with bottles of water and snack foods.

Even though we had many packets of dehydrated meals packed away in the RV, I wanted to gather as much food as we could. While potato chips and chocolate bars weren’t the healthiest options, they would at least bring a bit of normalcy to our lives while we hide out in Cairns.

Preparing to pick up the crate to take it back to the RV, I paused when I saw Jo down the aisle. She stood frozen and slack-jawed, clutching the crowbar so tight her knuckles had turned white as she stared wide-eyed out the window.

“Jo?” I asked, following her gaze.

I could see Wyatt standing by the motorhome, holding the petrol hose as it filled it up.

I shifted my gaze behind him and gasped.

What I saw in the distance made me jump to my feet, with fear tightening my chest.

Three sickly grey zombies were lurking up behind him.

“Wyatt! *Run!*” I screamed, but it was too late.

One was already about to launch itself on him.

## Chapter Sixteen

I pulled my hunting knife out of my jeans pocket and leapt through the broken window, running as fast as I could towards the motorhome.

My screams alerted Wyatt to the danger and he spun around, ducking just in time as the hollow creature pounced towards him.

Rushing around the RV, I pushed Wyatt out of the way as I began slashing furiously at the zombie, hacking its head clean off.

Wyatt fell to the ground, his knife sliding under the motorhome and out of reach.

The other two growled menacingly as they edged closer, their glazed eyes hungry for our warm, juicy flesh.

I tried not to panic, but I knew with only one knife between the two of us, we needed to act fast.

I looked down at the decapitated head still spinning at my feet, its jaw mindlessly biting at the air.

I picked it up by the hair and forcefully threw it at the second zombie, its neck snapping back as it hit it in the face, causing it to fall backwards.

I braced myself, my heart pounding as the third zombie ran towards me, drool dripping from its blood stained lips.

In the corner of my eye, I saw the glint of something sharp sitting on the dashboard of the motorhome.

*The axe!*

“Wyatt! Here!” I said as I handed him my knife.

I jumped onto the step of the RV and swung the passenger door open, reaching for the axe.

I screamed as I felt something grab hold of my leg, and turned to see the mangled face of a zombie. Half of its jaw had been ripped off, leaving it hanging only by a few exposed muscles. It clutched to my ankle as it crawled out from under the RV, using my leg to pull itself up.

“Eval” Wyatt called as he kicked the other zombie down to the ground and thrust the knife into its skull in a loud crunch.

I snatched the axe from the dashboard just as the disfigured zombie pulled me through the door and slammed me onto the concrete. I groaned in pain as my head hit the ground hard. Before I could move out of the way, the hideous creature let

out a loud screech and jumped on top of me, pinning me down by my arms.

“No!” I yelled as I felt its top teeth pressing against the bare skin of my shoulder.

Luckily, its semi-attached jaw meant it couldn’t bite down or pierce my skin.

Wyatt ran over and jumped on its back, gouging its eyes out as it tried furiously to latch onto my skin.

He wrapped his arms around the zombie, allowing me to wriggle free.

Nodding at me to use my axe, Wyatt pulled the creature’s head back by the eyes, exposing its decaying neck.

I held the axe over my head and swung it sideways, slicing through the dry, rotting skin. I could see the head was still hanging by some muscle, flopping around but still attached.

I swung the axe again, this time sending the head flying into the air and cracking multiple times as it bounced along the road.

Wyatt held out his hand to help me up, but the zombie I hit with the decapitated head before had returned.

It launched itself onto Wyatt, causing them both to fall to the ground next to me.

I jumped to my feet and grabbed the zombie by the neck just before it bit into Wyatt’s back.

“Hold it still!” I yelled, as I held its hair with one hand and readied my axe with the other.

Wyatt rolled onto his back, grabbed the monster’s arms and kept it still while I slammed the sharp axe into its skull.

Once I pulled the axe out of its slit open head, I kicked the creature off of Wyatt.

Looking around, I breathed a sigh of relief to see we had killed them all. I fell to the ground next to Wyatt as we both caught our breath.

Without saying a word, he grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me into him, hugging me tight. I closed my eyes and rested my head against his shoulder, grateful to be alive and in his arms.

The thought of almost losing him spiralled through my mind. As he held me close, I realised I couldn’t wait any longer. Our time together could be cut violently short at any second.

*This is my moment*, I thought as I stood up.

I grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him onto his feet.

*No more waiting. I'm making this my moment.*

Still holding on to his shirt, I drew him in close so that our lips were only centimetres apart.

Looking up at him, I saw passion and fire in his green eyes.

He looked into my eyes and smiled before he closed the gap between us, kissing me fervently.

A sense of desperation sparked in the way he kissed me, as though he knew, just as I did, that this first kiss could also be our last.

My heart pounded in my chest, but for the first time today, it wasn't out of fear. As Wyatt ran his fingers through my hair, it seemed as though everything around us just disappeared. In this electric moment – the moment I had been waiting for – we were untouchable.

After what seemed like a beautiful eternity, our lips parted and I fell back down to reality.

"Are you okay?" I asked, running my fingers down his cheek as my eyes searched his face and neck for injuries.

Wyatt patted himself down, making sure all his limbs were still intact.

"Yep!" He grinned, taking me by the hand.

"Are you guys okay?" I heard Jo yell as she and Ben emerged from the store with their bags full of supplies.

"Oh no." Ben gasped, looking behind us, and I spun around to see what he was gaping at.

My heart leapt into my throat as I saw hundreds of zombies, stumbling out of houses and stores. They must have heard our violent battle with a few of their undead companions.

I scanned the hoard, feeling sick at the sight. From the elderly to little children, the entire town had been infected. Any who hadn't lay eaten on the side of the road.

Now they were hungry for more.

And they were headed straight for us.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Quick! Get in!” I yelled to Ben and Jo, pushing the door of the RV open as they ran towards it.

“C’mon, Eva!” Said Wyatt as he squeezed my hand.

“I think I have an idea.” I said, looking into his eyes. “Get in and start the RV, I’ll be right behind you.” I promised.

“Are you crazy? If we go now we can make it outta here before they reach us!” Wyatt insisted, tugging on my arm, but I stood firm.

“And leave them to kill or infect others?” I replied, pulling away from him and grabbing the petrol hose from out of the RV.

“Hurry, just go. I handle this by myself.” I pushed him away, but he didn’t move.

Instead he stood there, his jaw clenched as he glared at me.

“Eva. I know you can handle it by yourself, but you don’t have to. Let me help.” Wyatt said sternly.

I could tell he wasn’t going to leave without me.

“Fine. Here,” I said as I handed him the axe. “I need the lighter.”

Wyatt ran over to the open car door and picked up the lighter, throwing it over to me as he gave Ben the keys to the RV.

“Go! We’ll catch up!” I heard Wyatt say to Ben as he pushed him into the RV.

Catching the lighter in my left hand, I started pouring petrol all over the concrete.

Ben jumped into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Wyatt ran in front of me, holding the axe ready to destroy any zombies who came to close.

I could hear Jo screaming my name, but I didn’t look back.

I hurriedly ran towards the hoard as far the as the hose would let me go, drawing a line with the petrol and leading it back to the tank.

I grabbed a broom from next to the petrol tank and unwrapped the bandage from around my arm, cringing as it lifted from my wound.

“Hurry!” Wyatt yelled as I tied the bloodied bandage around the end of the broom and dipped it into the pool of petrol on the concrete.

Holding it away from me, I flicked the lighter and lit the bandage on fire, throwing it onto the ground in front of me. The flames spread fast over the petrol covered concrete.

“Let’s go!” I yelled to Wyatt, who had just swung the axe into the skull of a zombie.

*I hope this works*, I thought as we bolted away from the flames, headed for the RV.

Ben had pulled the motorhome to a stop in the middle of the road, far enough away to be safe from the fire.

Jo pushed the door of the cabin open and waited, urging us to hurry. Wyatt made it to the door first and leapt into the RV, landing on the floor in a loud thud.

He scrambled to his feet to join Jo at the door, holding his hand out to pull me inside.

I glanced over my shoulder as I ran, seeing the flames growing fast, but not fast enough.

Countless zombies were chasing me, their mouths frothing with desire.

The youngest of the infected had the lead of the pack, I could tell they were once teenagers. A young girl, who couldn’t have been more than sixteen, with curly blonde hair and freckles, had sped up ahead of the others. Her skin hadn’t started to decay yet, so I knew she must have been one of the newest to turn.

Suddenly, I tripped on a crack in the road and fell, skidding onto the ground and sending the axe sliding out of my reach.

I hurried to pick myself up, but my body slammed back into the concrete as the zombie girl pounced on top of me. I rolled over, kicking and punching wildly, doing whatever

I could to stop her from sinking her teeth into me, when all of sudden I heard a loud crunch.

It was Jo, furiously hitting the zombie in the head with the crowbar, cracking her skull open. Wyatt appeared beside Jo, pulling the corpse off of me and throwing it to the side.

Jo and Wyatt lifted me off the ground, and together we ran towards the RV without looking back.

We jumped inside and frantically closed the door, locking it behind us while Ben put his foot on the pedal and we started speeding out of the town.

I stared at Jo with wide-eyes, and hugged her tight. “Thank you. So much.”

"I couldn't just let you die. You're like a sister to me, Eva." She said, holding back tears.

"What the hell was all that, Eva? Were you trying to get yourself killed?" Ben yelled from the driver's seat.

"The whole town was infected. I saw an opportunity to stop them from spreading the virus and I took it." I replied, defending myself.

"Don't you remember what I said earlier? Don't be a hero! Besides, it didn't work. You said yourself setting them on fire does nothing." He glared at me through the rear-view mirror.

"I wasn't trying to set them on fire." I replied, grinning at him.

"What? Then... Why?" He asked, confusion spreading across his face.

I didn't answer. Instead I turned and walked over to the couch at the back of the RV, looking out the window at the fire, which had grown much bigger.

Jo and Wyatt sat next to me on the couch, staring wide-eyed at the scene behind us.

As the motorhome turned onto the highway, the petrol station exploded into a huge fireball, the flames soaring high into the sky like a mushroom cloud.

"That's why." I said, turning to Ben as his jaw dropped open in shock.

Deep down I knew that blowing up one little diseased town wouldn't stop the virus from taking over the entire country. But I needed to believe it saved at least a few people from being infected or killed. No-one else would be in danger of stopping there and being ambushed like we were.

"Wow." Gaspd Ben, turning off the engine and walking over to watch the flames billowing into the sky. "You know, after everything we've been through today, it feels really good to know we just blew up a bunch of those monsters."

We sat together in silence, watching the fire burn as the sun set in the distance, a mix of vibrant colours painting the sky. It was an eerily beautiful sight, but one that we couldn't marvel at for long.

"We better go," said Wyatt as he stood up from the couch and made his way over to the driver's cabin. "It will be dark soon."



We need to hit the road. I'll drive a bit more, if that's cool with you Ben?"

"Sure, man." Ben answered, still watching the flames as they burned bright.

Once again we sped down the road, heading north for Cairns.

## Chapter Eighteen

"Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear us?" Wyatt spoke into the radio transceiver he held in his hand as he drove.

He had been trying for hours to reach any other survivors that might be out there, but so far we had heard nothing but silence.

It made me wonder how many others there were like us. The virus would be spreading further and further west by now, hitting South Australia and the Northern Territory.

I had tried to find news of the outside world on the RV's television and radio, but nothing worked. I even tried using the internet on my iPhone, desperately clinging to the last string of hope I had that we could somehow connect with the outside world, but it didn't work either.

Eventually I gave up and slumped into the passenger's seat next to Wyatt.

The night had grown dark, and even though I could hardly see further than the headlights in front of us, I felt safe knowing he was driving.

"Do you think the rest of the world is going to help us?" I asked, knowing he couldn't possibly know the answer, but hoping he could reassure me.

"I hope so," he sighed. "I mean, I know the world is a pretty tough place, but whenever there's a crisis like this, everyone always seems to band together. Like we have."

He smiled at me and reached over to hold my hand, making my heart skip a beat.

It felt so weird, being so utterly disconnected from the world. With the internet and media providing me with any information I needed, I had grown accustomed to knowing exactly what was happening across the globe. Now, all of a sudden, we were completely cut-off.

One thing I was pretty sure of though, was that the virus would be contained to Australia. Surrounded by ocean, it wouldn't take long for the authorities to stop anyone from entering or leaving the country. What might happen after that worried me. Maybe the armies of other countries would come to our rescue, or maybe we would be left to fend for ourselves.

Maybe the world didn't even know anyone had survived.

I had so many questions, and no answers. I might never have any answers.

All I could do was survive. That had become our only mission, our only aim in life.

"How's your arm?" Wyatt asked, snapping me out of my deep thoughts.

"Fine. Ben wrapped it up again for me. It doesn't hurt too much."

"Good," he replied, his lips forming a tired smile. "All we need to do now is get to Cairns. We'll be safe there."

I took a deep breath and looked out the window, gazing up at the stars. I trusted Wyatt completely, and I knew he was right. We would be safe once we arrived at his brother's house.

All we had to do was get there.

The road that lay ahead of us was uncertain, I had no idea what kind of danger awaited us on our journey. But as long as the four of us stick together and never give up, we will all make it to Cairns alive.

I knew this was only the beginning of this new nightmare that would now be our lives, but as I sat there admiring the night sky, my hand in his, it was the happiest nightmare I ever had.

THE END.

## About the Author

Jen Marie Wilde is the alter-ego of an Australian writer, entrepreneur and globe-trotter. When she isn't running her own business or travelling with her husband, she writes fiction on Wattpad.

Eva Wilde Vs The Zombie Apocalypse is her first fiction book, and is the first in a trilogy. Jen is currently writing the second and third books in the Eva Wilde Series.

Follow her blog to learn more about her and her work:  
[www.jenmariewilde.com](http://www.jenmariewilde.com).

This is the end of the book. We'd love to have your feedback and thoughts on the stories you've read. Here is our official fan page:  
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