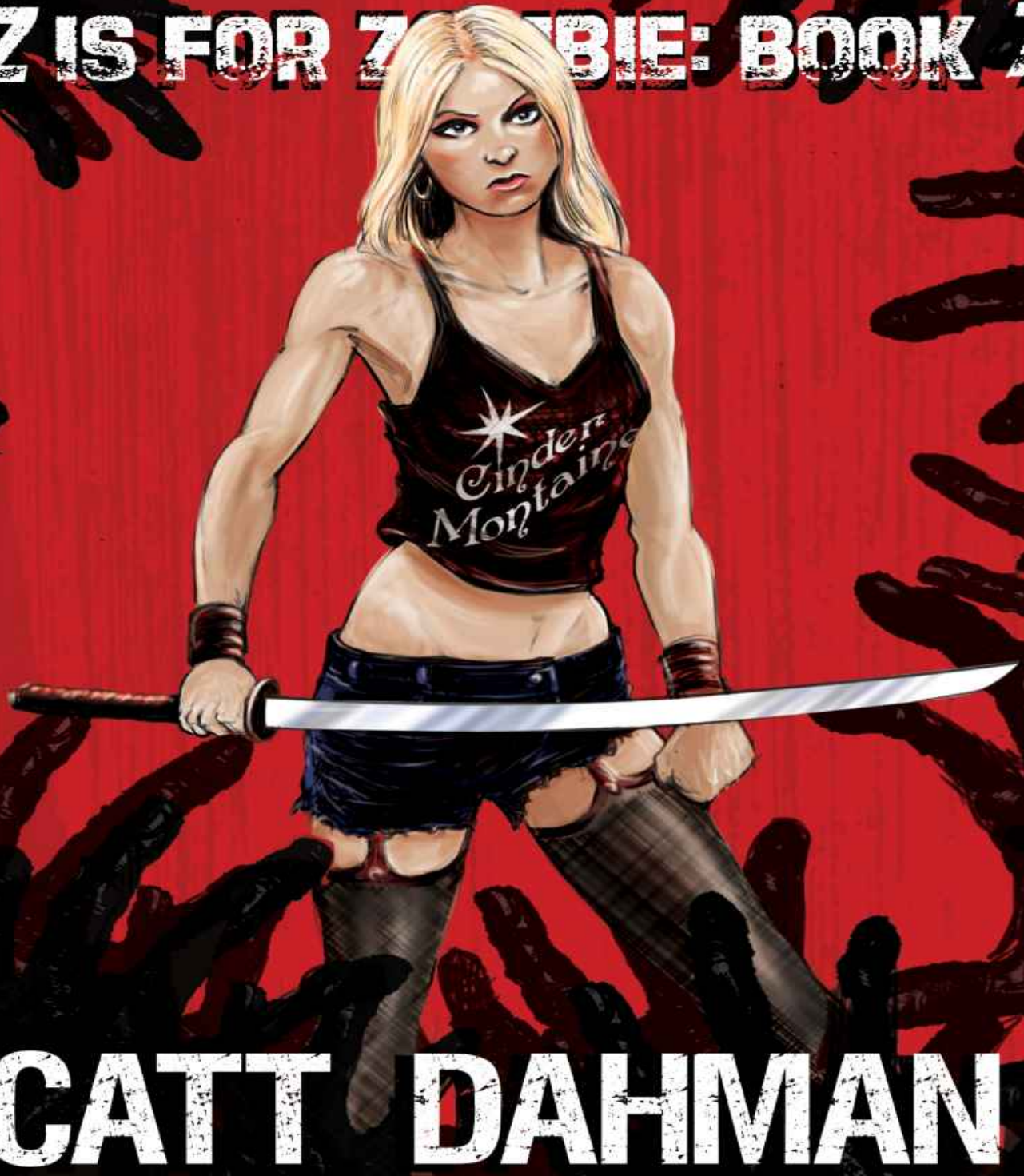


# AVENGING ANGEL

Z IS FOR ZOMBIE: BOOK 7



CATT DAHMAN

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## Chapter 1 Bad Memories

The street resembled a war zone with colors faded to dull grey, rubble in disorderly piles, metal twisted into abstract art, and glass thrown about and covered with dust. Broken asphalt was thrown like an unruly child who finished with toys. Shops stood wide open, the doors kicked in long before, dirt and trash covered the floors, and shelves emptied of all merchandise. Some buildings burned and fell into themselves, the timbers fragile with age and destruction. Molten plastics formed brittle pools of faded, dirty colors.

Items that once were used for specific purposes in one world were now used for different purposes in the new one.

Plastic funnels might be used for medical reasons and a tube of mascara for message writing. Cell phones, jewelry, and electronics were worthless while food, water, and ammo were at a premium, proving beyond a doubt that the radical gun-toters were right and capitalism was a failure.

Cars and trucks, once a source of need, pride, and status, stood at curbs, rusted, their tires and interiors stripped for other purposes; someone wrote *wash me* in the dust of flaking paint as a joke. Cars were no longer used and certainly not washed as they were in the past; no Saturday nights began with a wash and detail job. Car seat fabric might be used as a bed or toilet tissue, the stuffing for a fire starter, and the seat belts used for holding items in a wheel barrel.

In balance to those remains, were human and animal bones, most torn apart and pushed into doorways and alleys where they fell and rotted into the pavement. Weeds grew through rib cages. Some showed marks of a bullet or blunt object that shattered skulls, some gnawed gashes deep into the marrow, and some were torn apart and lay in piles. Others were burned or were yellowed and marked with tiny bits of dried skin,

Victims fell, were killed after being infected, burned, or eaten alive as they struggled, screaming. If anyone were around, he would have used the attack on another to run, died trying to help, or watched helplessly. Who could say if it were worse to be the one eaten alive, screaming for relief, or the one who watched a loved one or friend suffer that fate?

At least the dead didn't relive the horror in nightmares.

Only the ones who lay beside the guns they had used to take their own lives died on their own terms. Rains washed away bloodstains, but the water ran red into the drains. Rotten remains and feces bred disease and insects. The microscopic life had terms as well.

A pack of wild dogs, once pets, slept there a while, picked at burnt food, but people came along and slaughtered them in fear, left the fur and bones to decay. A pet shop was unburned, but no humans crossed the threshold since the remains in the cages were pitiful and reeked with an eye-watering stench.

Rats darted inside at times to feed as they bred in the rubble of the city streets, left nests and droppings as they took control of what was once a human-owned area.

Outside the city past the broken highway and rusted vehicles, neighborhoods, with once well-kept lush green lawns, sprinkler systems, pools, hot tubs, trampolines, swing sets, and nice houses, were also similar to war zones: with garbage, rubble, and long, dried brown grass in abundance. While some of these homes burned or fell into a pile of bricks and wood, many stood in disrepair, stripped, and left empty.

Long before, looters took everything useful: bedding, first aid, hygiene products, food, utensils, clothing, furniture, and everything that could be repurposed. Only personal items remained such as photos, electronics, and memories, and sometimes lawns full of bones.

At one end of the city was what once was considered a safe zone: a building stood for any who needed a safe place to stay a few days.

Inside, bedding was folded and stacked neatly as were some sweat pants and tee shirts in various sizes, lanterns, basic medical supplies, a little food, and water.

Directions were written carefully on a wall in English and Spanish for anyone who came in and found the place of safety as he flew by the outlying areas on the way south. People were welcomed to clean up, eat, drink, and rest but were not welcomed to come any farther until contacted and checked for signs of infection or for nefarious purposes.

It was an unsafe approach, but it was heartless not to at least offer some basics for those in extreme need although soon it would be discontinued as lawlessness spread among those outside the city. Along well-traveled roads, far less would be found. Looted neighborhoods and small towns'

citizens often met visitors with armed adversaries and roaming, hungry zombies, their eyes blank except for when they caught sight of prey.

The zombies themselves were strange things. If a piece of skin were torn away, it would rot and attract flies, but the bodies themselves, even if ripped open, wouldn't rot. The same prions, which kept the brains mushy but oxygenated enough for the zombies to retain primal needs, kept the creatures moving, always wanting to eat and were driven to spread the infection. If anything, the zombies over time eroded. A passing rat or bird might nip at them, but the flesh wasn't tasty. Falling rubble sometimes abraded the creatures or broke a limb that might be torn away.

As clothing and shoes wore away or fell off, zombies left skin behind on bricks and on the rough pavement, and the elements wore away at them. Those infected by a bite wore down the fastest as the prions struggled to keep the brains functioning, despite a nonworking body.

They were dead zeds, and many fell into heaps, finally to be destroyed by insects. Red zeds were those who contracted the Red virus, or Diamond Flux, and came out of comas, angry and intent on biting, eating, and spreading the plague. If a doctor checked them, he would find a working body and primal brain function. Most of those shambling about were Reds.

The rest of the city was blocked off by derelict vehicles and carefully positioned rubble that didn't provide a true barrier for people on foot who could climb over, but it did slow down the zombies, kept them from coming into the city, and stopped them from to where survivors lived. If a horde came again that way, it would give the others time to prepare unless the horde came as a force of thousands, which was always half expected.

At Hopetown, a heavy fence circled the compound, which once was built to house a cult leader and his loyal followers, but now it was the safe haven for those who rebuilt after Z day. An apartment building was protected as well with walls and a fence so that the population could grow and remain at about two thousand people as some came, and others went on to new places.

Color was at Hopetown. People worked and laughed again. Life moved forward.

A barn and pens for the cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, and chickens, were in the main area, well as ponds for fish, and huge fields that produced corn, tomatoes, beans, onions, potatoes, and beets, lettuce, cabbage, and spinach, and everything else imaginable. Fruit trees could be seen for miles: citrus,

peaches, wild plum, apples, and pears, as well as vines of berries and grapes.

Before the world ended, it would have seemed strange to be so excited over the colors, scents, and tastes of fresh fruits and vegetables except for a bunch of green-thumbed persons and chefs, but after the world went to hell, after all the fresh food rotted away, and after people lived on canned food, the sight of a tart, ripe green apple might be a fight-to-the-death item.

At all times in the daylight hours, the crops and animals were carefully tended, improvements were made to the buildings and sewage systems, children were taught, cooking was done, wagons were designed, and training was practiced. It was all about security, more supplies, sanitation, food, education, and crafting-needed items. Those who sat in offices barking orders were at a disadvantage, those who knew about crafts and mechanics, and those who would work hard and could teach skills were invaluable.

There was no welfare, but instead, people worked hard and thereby could depend on having plenty of food, clean water, good medical care, and safety at all times. Public drunkenness, public drug use, petty crime, and a lack of working were simply punishable by the guilty person being removed from the compound; rapists, murderers, and pedophiles were hanged without ceremony.

Strangely without courts, each could tell his side without lawyers, show evidence or give testimony, and have justice served immediately; crime was the lowest of all time within the compound. There was little fear of crime from within, yet there was rampant crime outside the fences.

In the first years, the founding members of Hopetown worked hard to fortify the compound, and while attacked several times by massive hordes of zombies, they remained safe and able to expand as they gathered everything they could find.

Year three after Z day, the members of the compound had a routine and were settled. The neighborhoods close to them and parts of the city were both stripped of useable items and cleared of walking dead. They planned to continue searching for useable items until they had everything they could use, and then they planned to block the city from both zombies and raiders who might try to get in.

Usually any meetings were basically about going over plans and events, but *this* time, the conversation turned to a new topic of interest.

“I know it’s insane,” Alex said again for the tenth time, “I can’t explain it, but it makes sense to me. It’s like a closure.” They sat in a small group, discussing possibilities.

“I think it’s cool; I saw that movie.”

“It isn’t a movie; it’s us,” Mark grumbled at Hannah, making her laugh. As stern as he often looked, he could never keep the twinkle from his eyes. “We have children and friends here. Families. Do you really want to do something?”

“Stupid?” Len offered. He had done plenty of things, which in retrospect seemed foolish, especially since the Red took over the world, but he felt uneasy at purposely looking for trouble.

“I know how crazy it is,” Alex said, “but we’ve mentioned it a million times and wondered. On one hand, yes, we’ve seen and been through worse, but I still wonder about it. What was it like? It’s like one of the last stones to turn over.”

“Under stones, you sometimes find bugs,” Len said as he rolled his eyes, “why do we want to see if bad things happened there? They happened everywhere.”

“They were at the mall, despite knowing a terrible illness was sweeping the world. Why? Because they were reaching for normalcy in shopping for sneakers and an Orange Julius,” Hannah said dramatically, making her adoptive mother, Beth, cover a smirk. “Then, it was too late. From everywhere, they came...zombies moaned and shambled towards the mall; they came, quickly surrounded it, leaving the people inside to be trapped like rats. The rest...we can only surmise.”

“Now, we see why you are always in the plays the kids perform,” Len said as he poked her in the ribs, getting a giggle. She was bright enough to always make him consider her points, and she knew it.

“I think that’s right, though. Don’t we all wonder what happened there? Were there people caught inside? Did people run there and hide and get trapped?” Alex added, “and better yet, think of all that might still be there....’cause no one is nutty enough to loot a mall in a zombie invasion.” He knew he had made a point as Len and George exchanged glances.

“Or maybe it burned.”

“Maybe it did.”

“I’m in,” Julia said, despite Matt’s dirty look at her. He was training to be head of security one day after Len, and he was very tense about anything

security related.

Once he had been ready to take chances, but now he was always overly careful. She was one who enjoyed adventures of any kind and survived many that were dangerous. "I've always wondered about the mall, and besides, we really have stripped everything else...think of...Victoria's Secret waiting for us," she responded as she winked at Matt.

"That's cheating, Jules," Matt sighed. He knew he was outvoted right then.

"Okay, think of all those bomb diggity sneakers waiting for you, just in your size," she replied.

"Bomb diggity? I'd say that's ghetto, but then the whole world is ghetto," Teeg sighed, "and I vote yes even though the black guy always dies."

"The black guy lives in the movie, Teeg," Hannah told him.

"In the movie...riiiight. Excuse me if I don't feel safe based on a movie made a million years ago when no one believed zombies ever could be real."

"They knew it was real; the government is always doing bad experiments to find new biological weapons, and those movies were commentaries about that but also a social and political commentary."

Teeg gave Hannah a dirty look and said, "It was so about no one believing the black dude."

"They believed him when they saw them."

"Sure they did, Teeg...well...not the ones who were eaten. And the black guy lives in the remakes, too."

"I feel sure I'll be fine then. Ohhh, let's separate; I'll be right back, and don't mind me; I can run in high-heeled shoes," he teased.

"Gotta have big boobies, too," Hannah told him, "in low cut tops and short shorts with the high heels."

George nodded. "That was certainly persuasive, thank you, Hannah and Teeg. I have a great mental image of Teeg wearing high heels and wearing short shorts. I guess it's just a matter of who goes and when I get the feeling you all want to go."

He knew this was in some ways a diversion from other things they had discussed. It was a little easier to talk about movies and a mall than to worry about why some of the infected zombies eroded and fell apart in the



weather; the original Reds were alive and well, just pissed off, hungry, and ready to bite.

The first time anyone reported seeing zombies having a type of horrible, primal sex, some gagged. While they knew the creatures still had primal instincts such as the need to feed and drink left, zombies have a lasting need to breed never crossed their minds

“Are we going to talk about the pregnant zom?” Mark asked quietly.

“Yuk. Do we have to talk about it?” Hannah asked.

“No. I still think she was knocked up before she got Red, and it’s still in her,” Len said. He personally finished off a woman who was infected through an attack. A squirming, tiny fetus was wiggling in her belly, which made Rae and him sick since the fetus was also infected and hungry. It was the worst thing he had ever seen.

“Steve says they are alive...the Reds anyway, so why can’t they reproduce?” Julia asked.

“Because that’s too horrible to imagine,” Alex said, “and why would they? They have no reason to reproduce since biting reproduces them.”

“They wouldn’t survive anyway. What would they eat? They can’t walk or hunt, and they couldn’t nurse, right?”

Misty gave Mark a dirty look and said, “I’m gonna heave. Stop.”

“So how do we decide who goes?” Alex grinned, changing the topic again.

As much as George hated to talk about that, it was better than talking about zombies breeding and making guesses. Maybe Len shouldn’t have shot and killed Dr. Henry Diamond, the man who designed the virus; he might have had the answers. But then, again, the man lied more than he told the truth.

Because gasoline was either ruined or nonexistent, most people traveled by foot, but because they also had horses, some could ride or use a wagon drawn by a pair of mules to transport goods. However, the slow mode of transport left them open to attacks by raiders and zombies. There wasn’t much room in their saddlebags to carry their own supplies much less to bring anything else back. The guarding party would need to be large for this trip, something that made Len, Matt, and George nervous.

Hannah wasn’t happy that she and her brother were left out of the search team since she fully supported the idea, but mainly she worried that both her parents were going without her to protect them. Who would be as good

as she was at taking care of parents? She only felt better as some of the rest also whined about being left out. Mark and Matt were in charge now that the rest were going out, and Hannah did know she could get by with a lot more than if her parents were around.

“Don’t get into trouble,” Beth warned.

“Mommmyyyy,” said Hannah as she tried to look shocked.

Jet shrugged. “I’ll watch her; you can depend on me.”

Beth groaned, “And I am supposed to feel better now, Jet?”

“I don’t feel a bit better hearing that,” Kim growled, “that means no hare-brained schemes or talking the little ones into mischief or tying anyone up, no ripping off the kitchen....”

“Or skinny dipping,” Beth continued, trying to recall all the trouble her kids had been in. “No short sheeting beds, and George, don’t give them ideas!”

George grumbled good-naturedly, “I just tell them stories about the mischief when I was a kid...good harmless fun...” He hugged Hannah close. As much trouble as the girl could be, she was brave and strong, and few could imagine how hard it was for her growing up and going through puberty during an apocalypse.

Jet, at twenty, was also at a difficult age, between childhood and manhood. Some, like Matt, had no choice three years ago. He was thrown into leadership during various missions that Julia dragged him on. “I’ll behave, Beth and Kim,” he said as he winked at both the teens.

Beth, Kimball, Teeg, and Carl rode ahead of the group as scouts. At one time, Teeg had been scared of the horses and learned to ride only because he was needed, but now he rode almost as well as Kim and Beth. Beth watched him with a little smile on her face.

“Whatcha looking at me for, Beth? I have pudding on my face? Scrambled eggs?”

“No, I was just seeing how at ease you are in a saddle.”

“Awe, you’re proud of me, huh?” He gained an infinite respect for the magnificent animals and took pride in knowing how to ride properly as opposed to falling off as he did in the beginning.

“You used to be so scared; it was hysterical,” Beth laughed, “but you worked on it, and you ride as well as I do.”

“My fear was hysterical? Gee, Beth, thanks.”

“Well....”

“You know Juan spent extra hours with us, teaching us,” Teeg said, remembering the man sadly. “He was a good man, never complained about our taking so long to learn; I miss him.” When Juan died, Teeg cried beside Beth, sick with grief.

Beth absently rubbed the emerald band on her right hand. “He was a great man. I miss him, too.” She glanced at Kim who nodded sincerely. While Juan and Kim were adversaries for Beth’s affection, she was been in love with Kim, and she loved Juan dearly. Kim respected and liked Juan a lot; it was impossible to dislike a man as generous, brave, and caring as Juan had been. Juan also saved their adoptive son Jet’s life and was a good father to Hannah, Jet, and Katie while Kim was gone; Juan died a hero.

Beth still missed his humor and help and knew, despite the competition, Kim missed Juan as well; besides, Beth loved Kim with all her heart since shortly after meeting him.

“He sure adored the twins,” Kim said. They were Kim’s biological children with Beth, but Juan cared about them and made sure they were safely born. Georgie and Stevie were a year old and a handful that the other kids would have to deal with for a few days. That alone made Kim grin, thinking of the havoc the girls would cause Katie, Jet, and Hannah while their parents were gone. He mentioned it to Beth, and they laughed.

“Those are some wicked bad girls, you guys. You better get them some serious home training,” Teeg noted, “Georgie hit me with a rattle last night, and that rotten Stevie just laughed the whole time; they know what they’re doing; don’t let those cute faces fool you.”

“Look at their parents,” Carl muttered, “can’t blame the kids.” He teased his friends but kept an eye out for any movement on the road. He still missed his monster truck and thought about when it blew up with the C4 and Juan inside; he shivered. The loss of the truck was bad, but the loss of a friend was very difficult.

“Whatever, the twins are all Kimball.” Beth gave the rest a mock stern look as she too looked around, watching. She looked at Kim as they passed a memorable landmark: the turn off to the airport where Kim, Len, and Nick were crucified by a renegade army of misfits called the Reconstruction Army or RA. Kim unknowingly clenched his fists that were mangled by the men who tortured him. “You okay?”

Kim nodded at Beth, breathing through the bad memories. “I imagine Len will feel bad too when he passes through here. It was very bad.” Some

of the men of the RA pounded spikes in the men's hands. Others were eaten alive right in front of their eyes; intestines and flesh stretched and chewed away. Luckily, Kim hadn't seen when the wild dogs and wolves ripped into the women and children who were with the Reconstruction Army.

Beth sighed, knowing it had been horrible. Juan had to save Kim's life the night RA tried to burn him alive on a crudely made cross, carrying him in a fireman carry with Kim's gunshot wound pouring blood. All around, the place had bad memories.

Back behind them and to one side was George's former home and neighborhood, where Beth shot her first person, or zombie, and then plenty more when they were trapped there. Yes, some good people were killed, but they left the front yard a bone yard full of zombies. Julia's parents were buried there: victims of the Red and subsequent infection and both shot as a safety issue and as a kindness so they didn't have to walk around as monsters.

To the other side and behind them, was a hospital where they met, helping out when they could and waiting for the infection that swept the globe, then the United States, then Texas, then their city. The hospital was where the building tumbled in on them after the bombs, where they fought against raiders and zombies, where some very good men and women died in a battle, and where their friend Tink turned into one of the walking dead and had to be shot.

There was no place that wasn't a memorial to a friend who had died, but it was also the same place she had met Kim, become pregnant with her twins, found her adoptive children, and made close friends. The hospital parking lot was still littered with the bones of humans and of zombies, burned, and torn apart by a massive explosion and fire.

A half mile behind the four, rode Len, the head of security for Hopetown and a former Marine; Rae, a former Israeli soldier with a strong sense of loyalty and justice; Big Bill who was a gentle giant; and Rev, a former computer nerd, turned fighter. Together, they made an unstoppable team.

Behind them rode Alex, who had brought up this scheme, and Julia, the toughest one of them all, the one with a burning hatred of the zombies and a desire to kill the infected, no matter what shape or situation.

Several times they saw shamblers, but the creatures didn't notice them, so they kept on riding, ready to pick up the pace or to shoot if needed, yet a

shot could bring all the zombies around. Mostly, they saw dead zeds and not the faster Reds that were far more dangerous and aware.

Len paused for a look to the left, remembering the battle at the airport and rubbing his own palm. He guessed all of those bodies still remained as bones, stripped by wolves and wild dogs, which had done their damage. The entire night of battle had been a nightmare.

Unless the Reconstruction Army returned to real life and Len could torture them to death, he wouldn't feel his vengeance was complete. He wanted to beat them with his bare fists: for all the women they had raped, for the people they had forced to race over a bonfire and then who were burned alive for entertainment, and for the ones who were taken prisoner and then used and whipped as slaves, like they had Kim. The RA beat their backs bloody and made them sleep in putrid mud puddles until the wounds filled with infection. They had done almost as bad to Mark, raped Andromeda repeatedly, and beaten Earl almost to death, and those were just the ones Len knew about.

When they all caught up, Kim was scanning the area below with binoculars, shaking his head at times. Beside him, Beth talked to herself softly while Teeg made little noises of unhappiness and sighed a lot.

"I'm not believing this," Carl said, "Alex, damn your ideas; these are just wrong." He had seen a lot, just like all the rest, and had been in his share of battles and scrapes, but the scene he was looking at was a bit of a bad memory. For the first time, he wasn't involved, but he was watching it which was equally just as horrific.

Alex wondered what made his friends look shocked as they looked down at the mall from the highway. He picked up his own binoculars with dread. While they saw horrible things in the last few years, usually the most violent or sad events stood out, but this time, it was more than that.

The mall wasn't huge, like the big cities had, but it was a good-sized, two-story structure with a large parking area all around it. Aimlessly, zombies, their clothing rotted away or in tatters and faces empty, shambled and circled around the few cars in the lot and parking places. "Damn my stupid ideas," he agreed.

It was something right out of the movies with the desolation and moving figures, and yet, it was real. For some reason, this one sight brought out every emotion from the past three years, showing them that something once

an idea on film was their reality. It was as if a nightmare merged with reality.

Most were Reds, mouths drooled, eyes unfocused, faces pale but capable of animation when prey was sighted. Whether dressed in dirty pajamas or gowns or in street clothing or mostly naked, all of their lower bodies were caked in dried or wet feces, and their chests were covered in old vomit and dried blood unless they had fed recently. The Reds were moving at a faster clip than the others who looked more eroded and battered.

Those hungry enough chewed at their own fingers, gnawing them away without pain. They never reacted to pain. Some left streams of urine on the pavement as they shambled. The smell was eye watering.

“We shouldn’t have done this,” Alex said quietly, “I wish I hadn’t seen any of this.” This scene brought back the original fears and mourning for a world that came undone.

He thought a few females looked heavy, either because they fed well or because they carried unborn fetuses waiting in their bellies.

Len shrugged. “We imagined it anyway; in the movie, didn’t people wonder why they still came to places like this. They said the Reds were there because the places were familiar or something?”

“I think so,” Alex said, “old habits.”

“We’ve seen them many times. They stand around or walk around until the hive mentality hits; then, they flock, right?”

“Yep,” Kim agreed, “so it isn’t familiarity that drives them; they don’t remember anything. So what are they doing?” He thought about everything Hannah said. He looked at the scene with more curiosity now.

The wandering ghouls numbered about a hundred or so, maybe double that if they were able to see all around the area. Each one walked toward the mall alongside the doors, then went away, and then came back again, in repeating patterns.

While none of them moaned as they did when they saw and heard potential food, they still were drawn back every time they started to walk away, and since most were barefoot, they left bits of skin behind as they shuffled along. Bare feet showed bones and were mostly free of toes, worn away on the asphalt.

Kim noted the lack of bare skeletons, only a very few and only a few piles of waste. Some of the creatures were thin. “They haven’t found food, but they’re still here. Why?” He saw that more were joining the others from

the edges of the parking lot and from the streets where cars were still in line, some doors opened. The scene was the same as it was three years before.

“Why are you trying to be logical?” Beth asked. She hated the things and wished she could kill them all, not caring who or what they had been before; they were monsters.

“Because there is a strange logic to them and what they do, Beth. Based on your experience, what are they doing?”

She frowned and looked again. “Wandering around aimlessly...no...not aimlessly...but not directed either. Ummm...they are waiting? What the hell?” Now, she was curious.

Len mumbled, “Yup.”

“And why would they wait here?” Kim asked.

“You think there are people in there?” Beth asked. “No way, the things would be in larger groups and beating at the doors if they had seen them. You know they don’t stop trying...unless...no way. You can’t be thinking that.”

“What are you all thinking?” Teeg asked.

Len sighed. “Unless they’ve been in there a really long time...like years....”

“I don’t even wanna think what you all are thinking,” Rev said, “those people...we’re going to get them, huh?”

“Maybe there aren’t people in there. We don’t know,” Beth argued.

“We’re gonna check though, huh?” Carl asked again and cursed.

Alex rubbed his eyes and thought a headache was coming on. He had never imagined this. “Dawn of my ass, but we are.”

## Chapter 2

### Hannah

Hannah and Jet rode to the safe zone in an easy silence. He guessed she was deep within her own mind, trying to come up with some mischief. He adored his sister since he first met her, finding her wilder than he was, more free to voice ideas, and fearless. She was what he wanted to be, sometimes.

Very seldom did people appear at the border building to use the bedding, food, and water, and if they did, they usually took items and ran away if no one were around, so that the items need not be replaced. It was a never-ending chore to check. Boring. Today, as they prepared to relieve the others who were on guard there, Hannah thought it seemed different, somehow. Something was in the air.

“You hear that?” she asked. She was antsy all day since her parents left, and maybe knowing that two of the people who loved her most were on a trip caused her anxiousness. Len, Julia, and Alex were the next closest to her, besides Jet, and they were gone, too. If he had gone, Hannah knew she would have been jumping constantly.

“Usually it’s quiet, ” Jet said, trying to hear over the clicking of the horse’s hooves on asphalt. Len always said something was ‘hinky’ if it felt wrong, and Jet thought that was what this was: hinky.

Everything looked the same. It smelled the same. There was a buzz of voices, but usually people here were bored to silence on safe-zone duty. Had the buzz been the moaning sound of zoms, they would have been flooded with adrenaline like Pavlovian dogs hearing a bell.

He held up his hand, and his head cocked to the side in an unconscious imitation of Kimball. He dismounted, tied his horse, and motioned Hannah to do the same. Over time, he learned to be overly cautious to his sister’s dismay. She rolled her eyes at him but complied. She gave in to being stealthy, but she made up for that obedience by grabbing her katana and waving it dramatically.

He started to glare at her jumpiness and made a mental note to complain later, but with Hannah, while she was being silly and funny, he could always bet her brain was working a mile a minute. She wasn’t just being cheeky but felt something was wrong; he saw it in her eyes.

Worse yet, he knew she hoped for some trouble they could solve.



Despite her impulsiveness and quick temper, irritatingly condescending tones, and habit of demanding to follow him as only a little sister could, there was no one he trusted more to have his back. Hannah would die before anyone hurt one of her family.

Jet walked in to find Andromeda with her hands half-heartedly raised and her guard partners, Jim and Sadie, pale and animated as they tried to reason with a teen boy who was covered with blood and aiming a pistol at all three. The boy looked scared, not angry, just scared with big eyes and shaking hands.

Andromeda, a pretty black woman whom Hannah had once respected but now disliked for reasons only Hannah knew, was dressed like a warrior, always in leather and tall boots. She didn't seem scared, only concerned. She was another one who was dependable, willing to fight ferociously when needed, but because she and Hannah didn't get along so well, Jet didn't spend time around Andromeda any more than what he had to.

On the ground lay another man who was in a pool of blood, being tended by Izzy, and an older Hispanic man who issued curses in Mexican. He looked frustrated as he packed gauze into a wound that reddened quickly.

"Hi, Andie. Sadie...."

"Get your hands up," the boy demanded.

"Whoa. Let's calm down; what's going on?" Jet asked. He tried to sound strong, but in his own ears, he sounded like the confused, scared, Gothic-dressing boy he had been years before. He cut his hair and removed the piercings a while back, so now what everyone else saw was a tall, handsome young man of twenty who had filled out, stood strong, and looked self-assured. He tried to look older and calmer than he felt at the moment.

"Hey, Jet, glad you happened by," Andie said.

"I was out alone and came by." Jet hoped they understood his message that Hannah was there but hidden. "Can I help you?"

"He's working on Jud," the boy said.

"I see that."

"I said raise your hands."

"I bet Izzy could use Sadie's help; Jud needs more help. Do you think you could let Sadie help your buddy?"

The boy thought for a second and then nodded. Sadie went to help Izzy stop the bleeding, glancing to Jet to figure out his plan. Kim often chatted

calmly with people in the worst situations while evaluating them; this is what Jet did.

“I’m Jet. You met Andromeda and Jim? That’s Sadie. Who are you?”

“Dave. That’s Jud. They shot him.”

“Andie did?”

“I didn’t,” Andie snapped, “they came in with him already shot, and this one, Dave, yanked out his gun and demanded we help his buddy. If I had shot at them, they’d both be dead.”

“That’s true,” Jet admitted.

“Told you,” Andie said.

“Dave, we have no problem helping people, but it has to be done with security in mind, ours and yours. Are either of you infected?” Jet talked calmly and didn’t know that he had the same soft, understanding tones that his adoptive father, Kim, often used to make people relax.

“Huh?”

“Bitten? Are you bitten? I don’t think you have been, right?”

“No, we’re not bitten. How’s Jud? Is he gonna be okay?”

Sadie shook her head. “It isn’t good. He’s shot, Jet. And his neck is cut really deep; a fraction more and he would have died on the spot.” She didn’t look at Dave but spoke only to Jet. To everyone’s credit, none of them reacted when they saw Hannah.

Without a word, Hannah slipped behind the boy and set the tip of the katana at his shoulder blade so it poked him, making his skin sting. “You feel lucky, Punk?” she laughed. Now that they had control, she was the usual, careless, crazy sister Jet knew so well. She really liked playing a role.

The boy lowered his gun, and now he was the one who held his hands up in surrender. Jet waved him down as he scooped up the pistol, checked it, and glowered. “An empty gun, really? You held us at gunpoint with an empty pistol? Put your hands down.”

“You could get killed holding out an empty gun.”

“So? If it were full, I would have stayed and fought,” Dave said, “you gonna gut me?”

“I would for holding a gun on my brother,” Hannah told him. She meant it, too. Hannah cast Andie a look that clearly said that she didn’t care about the gun held on Andie; she knew how Hannah felt. Dave sat, defeated, no longer full of the fire and anger he showed a few seconds before. “If I

could, I would gut you nice and slowly, but then I am supposed to be civilized, so what's the story?"

"Civilized," Jet agreed.

Dave might have remained stubbornly silent, but he shared since he felt hopeless and expected to be gutted anyway. He wanted someone else to know the things he had seen and what was going on outside safe zones.

Dave and his group of people had been traveling a very long time, having come from Georgia and the surrounding areas, headed west, and then possibly south to the western states.

Many places in the East were getting low on readily found canned food and were stripped of game by surviving hunters and the desperate, hungry zombies. They had as many as fifteen at times with them, and as few as eight at other times as they stayed in reliable buildings and homes for weeks, searching and finding food and water. Big cities were in burned rubble from the bombings, so they moved among the smaller towns.

As long as they were quiet, they did fairly well with the zombies since the creatures gathered in larger hordes to wait out any survivors they might find.

Some areas were fairly safe, but others were filled with the moaning ghouls. Several times over, large parts of Tennessee burned as if someone were trying to wipe the state away, and maybe he was. Someone could have been a pyromaniac having a thrill or survivors could have been trying to take out more zombies or maybe accidents caused the fires. In the long run, who cared? No one.

Kentucky had more supplies and was a lot easier to travel through. But zombies from colder areas already moved down into that area so they didn't freeze like some did in the more northern states plus Canada. People figured it was a flocking habit or a hive reaction, but the reason wasn't clear.

What was left of Missouri was crawling with Reds.

In Arkansas, the landscape was prettier, the zombies were fewer, but the food was harder to find without hunting for game.

At each state border and outside many towns were make-shift blockades where the National Guard or desperate citizens tried either to keep zombies out or tried to lock them inside; bodies, stripped by time, animals, and insects lay in bleached-bone and rag piles.

There was a warning, but in a normal small town, the number of Reds who attacked others might be a quarter of the population, at home, and

violent. The entire town population would be fully infected within hours; then, of those left, there would be suicides, murders, accidents, and normal illnesses, and if a half dozen walked out of the chaos, it would be a miracle.

Dave told them, “We’ve fought a lot of them. Sometimes, we lost people, and sometimes we put down some people or watched others do it. They were bitten or even...well...chewed up. We saw a lot of hurting people: sick, starving...bad creatures you couldn’t even imagine, but a lot of those creatures, we killed. Again. I mean we put them down for good. Shot ‘em or hit them in the head.”

“Red zeds die and become dead zeds,” Hannah said in a singsong voice, “the head is the way to a zed.” Sadly, these were the rhymes taught to children, now.

“So you saw a lot?” Jet asked.

“Sometimes. We saw thousands that we had to sneak by. Sometimes we saw a hundred at a time. Most times we were quiet; then, we ran and ran until we got away from them. Sometimes we fought them, like I said, but it was always rough ‘cause they bite and we didn’t wanna get bitten. We also saw some regular people, humans, yanno,” Dave said.

His friend, Jud moaned with pain, and Dave grimaced.

“Some were okay; some were bad. I don’t mean all were evil or even trying to be bad like you’d think, but people got hungry or scared, and they shot without thinking or tried to get food or weapons.

You can see it in their eyes: the fear and desperation. People lost kids or husbands or wives...they went crazy. Those went dangerous. People had no jobs or no places to go, so they roamed, and they saw it all. It was scary. Everything was busted up and gone for miles, nothing but garbage and emptiness. Sometimes, people acted like the zombies; they just moved around and stared at things with no emotion....”

“Were there many?” Andie asked.

“More than you’d think. We fought some, and sometimes we won; sometimes we lost: winners take all; the situation was bad. Kids were the worst. You get about twelve or so of them in gangs, and they’ll kill for a can of tuna; they’ve forgotten what it used to be like. Maybe they don’t wanna remember anyway.”

“Dangerous twelve year olds, I can imagine that,” Andie said with a sharp look at Hannah. Although she stopped listing all her fears of Hannah to Hannah’s parents because the list went on deaf ears, Andie still got chills

thinking of her suspicions that Hannah chopped up her own family with an axe and killed an innocent woman for her criticism of the girl.

“Choppy, choppy,” Hannah responded. Andie felt goose bumps on her arms.

Jet motioned for Dave to go on.

“I don’t wanna go on about what we saw and had to do out there. *It was bad* is enough said. Over that way, we ran into something new, at least to us. A girl cried for help, sounded pitiful, but she was the bait, a trap. We should have known, but we felt bad for anyone hurting or needing help.”

“Unless he points a gun, an empty gun, at people,” Andie snorted.

Dave frowned. “People came out and took us at gunpoint. You know people used to say ‘never go with anyone who has a gun; a person should try to fight him and never go back to his lair’, but we didn’t think about that.

Thing is they seemed like good people, a family, didn’t curse or act mean, and I couldn’t imagine they were bad people. They lived in a nice farmhouse, and that’s when it all started: horrible things.

It was a nightmare; I wished they would just kill us, but they didn’t. There we were, and then things got worse; one of ours got loose,” Dave said as he began to cry. “I ran. Jud and I ran, and all we had was that empty pistol we grabbed as we ran....”

“What happened?” Hannah was curious. Even Sadie and Izzy listened.

“They shot at us and hit Jeb. We just kept running. I guess it was adrenaline, but he kept running, and finally we were too tired to move. Jeb was scared to death they’d catch us again. He said I needed to go on and get away, but hey, we’re buddies; I stayed. I ran and left the rest, but I didn’t leave Jeb, weird huh?”

Dave and Jeb found a house with some food, a little water, and a few supplies. Dave said they debated, and then Jeb calmly said that he’d rather die than be caught again by those who had way-laid them on the road. He used a knife and tried to cut his own throat, but Dave took the knife and bandaged him as best he could, begged and threatened until Jeb got up and went with Dave to find safety farther away from the farmhouse. The bullet wound and neck gash bled out, and the pair barely got to the safe house.

Then, they saw Andie, Sadie, Izzy, and Jim. “I don’t trust no one, now; I thought they could fix Jeb and we’d be okay,” Dave finished, “I just wanted this to be over.”

Sadly, he looked over at Jeb.

“He didn’t make it,” Sadie said, “sorry, we did try.”

Dave cried a little and then wiped his eyes and nose on his shirt. “I know you tried. Thanks. Now, I’ve screwed up with you; here I am anyway. I wish I had died long ago. Really.”

“First of all, I am sorry about your friend, but you are safe with us. We seriously won’t hurt you,” Jet explained, “drink and eat; get yourself comfortable, at least.”

“They shot everyone else?” Andie asked.

“No. And if you’ll let me have some ammo, I’ll go back to kill a few of them if I can.” In fact, the group might even want to help him kill people, too. “If I can’t, well, maybe I can at least put a few of my friends down so they don’t suffer anymore.” He didn’t mention it, but they could tell he would save a bullet for himself; he had the thousand-mile stare.

“Your friends are alive?”

“If you call that being alive, then yeh,” Dave said as he met Hannah’s eyes with a hard stare, “I owe it to Ponce and the rest at least to put them down so they don’t have to go through any more....”

“Ponce?”

“John Ponce. He is with us...been with us a year and was gonna lead us south where he thought it was best. He dreaded that stretch of road for some reason, said he had been here before, and the situation went bad. He’s a good man, better than me. I aim to gut them like I figured you’d do to me.”

“Ponce.”

“Yes, Ponce. Why?” Dave wondered why they belabored the name.

Hannah looked at the others. Dr. Henry Diamond, the designer of the infection, inoculated Ponce, and although Ponce was immune to a bite from a Z, he was contagious if he bit anyone. They called them hybrids since they craved raw meat, had a higher pain tolerance, and carried the infection in body fluids. Hannah’s mother hated hybrids with a passion but respected Ponce for his help; Len had a chance to kill Ponce but didn’t, saying he was repaying a debt.

Hannah kind of liked Ponce, and for sure, she respected the man.

“He’s a prisoner?” she asked.

“Last I saw. Do you know him? How do you know Ponce?”

“Yes. Weird as that is, we do. We always got along well, but he had a bad time of it when his group went really bad,” Jet said, “small world after

all. He was with the remains of an army, and they were taken over by some assholes callin' themselves the Reconstruction Army."

"And they had it out at the airport, not too far from here, he told me."

"He tell you about those jerks trying to crucify some men? One was my dad," Hannah said, "there was a zed break out inside, and Dad got away...."

Dave nodded. He knew bits and pieces of the painful story.

Hannah hummed.

"I feel bad for your friends. That's unreal," Andie said, "too bad we can't help you."

Hannah stood, knotting her long hair back into a tight ponytail. "We can. Let's go get Ponce and his friends out."

"Ummm...you're just a girl though," Dave said.

It was the one thing guaranteed to set Hannah off, proving how wrong he was. Jet groaned aloud.

Hannah stared at the boy a few seconds and then got one of her looks that meant she was going to do something incredibly stupid that their parents would be livid over. The first thing that the parents would ask was why Jet didn't do something to stop his nutty sister. Jet groaned again, "No."

"Jet, you can go back and get more help if you want or at least let Matt and Mark know. I'm going to help Dave. Can you double on one of their horses so he can ride?"

"Oh, hell, no, Hannah. I am not nearly crazy enough to let you go or for me to go tell Mark or Matt. Matt will kill me."

"He won't kill you, and we need a horse for Dave," said Hannah as she shot Dave a crazed grin, "Matt is cool, and he doesn't kill people...well... not us anyway. He will be very pissed off, however. He's only three years older than Jet, and he is learning to run security. I need a horse, people."

"Take my horse," Izzy said, watching. He feared Hannah far more than all of the rest put together, especially if she threw one of her fits. She glared at him once, and he gave in.

"Can you ride?"

"Never tried," Dave admitted, "I can try, I guess." He was on his feet and ready. The girl was crazy, but she made Dave feel something he forgot long ago: hope.

"He held a gun on us, and you want to go rescue his friends, just like that? What if he's trapping you? Are you crazy? Why would you want to do

that?” Andie yelled. “For Ponce? You wanna be the one explaining to your mother that you risked your life to rescue a hybrid? She freakin’ kills them.”

“A what?”

“Long story, Dave,” Hannah glared back at Andie.

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Get on my horse with me then,” she ordered Dave, “we’ll at least look around. Jet, tell Mark....”

“Nope, Izzy, you tell Mark and Matt what is going on. I’m going, too, Hannah if you plan to. It’s one thing for our parents to kill me, but Mom and Dad will kill me more if you go alone.” Jet knew that made no sense, and he also knew Izzy struggled with speaking English, so they could get a few things accomplished before Mark and Matt got someone to help translate.

Dave got on the horse with Hannah, clutching her desperately as he looked down at the ground. Both Sadie and Jim wanted to go. Jet knew this situation was ‘going south fast’ but didn’t know how to stop it. No one here was senior-in-authority really. Andie reluctantly decided she would go along, and although Hannah started to argue and complain, Jet said that it was the only way he would condone the plan. Andie might be many things, but she was dependable and a strong fighter.

Hannah muttered something to Dave that made the boy glance at Andie with a strange look. She hated this, but with Jet’s help, they had a better chance, and their parents wouldn’t be so hard on Hannah for this stunt.

Dave gave directions as they went, finding it a lot faster than if they were on foot and wounded. He pointed out the house where they rested and where Jeb and he found food, water, and the knife he had. Andie went over to check out the house and nodded as she climbed back into her saddle, letting them know the boy’s story checked out so far. She still watched him with suspicion.

“That’s it?” Jet asked, jaw open. The farmhouse was large, with a barn, a once-tidy yard, and a few rusted vehicles to one side. While the windows were carefully boarded up as a safety maneuver, a few zombies shambled about the tall grass aimlessly, only a little interested in the house but not able to move on either. They had obviously seen prey at some points and didn’t know where the people were. The house seemed cozy and a pleasant refuge.

They stayed hidden as they watched the house.



“The first night, they took a girl; she was a student. I think...name was Connie. The basement was the place where they do it all so that you can see and hear all; you know what’s coming. They gave her something that made her all drugged up and sleepy, but she came awake, screaming when they started on her leg....”

“Her leg?”

“Yep. They tied it with a tourniquet thing? Whatever it’s called. And then they lopped the leg off, using a hot iron thing to stop the bleeding,” Dave whispered. “They had a spring with ice cold water, and that was how they could wash everything in the basement.”

“Why?”

“To clean it.”

“No, why did they take her leg?”

“You know, they had plenty of stuff they’ve looted. The food was the best we had eaten in some time...canned crap but still food and water...not a lot, but steady. They wanted us healthy, fed, yanno. They don’t need weak ones. And they acted as if they were sorry, that we mattered, and that they wished they didn’t have to do it, but I don’t think they give a shit what they were doing, or they’d not do it. Right?”

“Connie’s leg?” Andie prompted.

“Oh yeh, they cut it off and then the other one the first night. The next day, her arms, and I guess the shock, were too much. I don’t know about doctor shit, but Connie just died. She screamed, and then she lay there all dull and crying; it smelled like burning pork roast,” Dave gagged, “I admit it; I cried like a baby watching it.”

“Why did they cut her limbs off?” Andie persisted, “was she injured?”

“No, not until they cut on her. God, she just screamed and screamed, and they said they were sorry, but they kept going, and we could see her, locked in a cage and handcuffed. I’ll never forget those screams.” Dave’s eyes were glassy.

“Her leg? What did they do with it?” Hannah demanded.

“I didn’t tell you? Their children, the kids are Reds; they fed them,” he said softly. “They fed them her leg.”

### Chapter 3 Farm House

Hank and Peggy sat at the heads of the dinner table with the children, Elizabeth, Rachael, Samuel, Thomas, and Rebecca who picked at the

warmed ravioli, green beans, corn, and peaches. “We gave thanks for the food, so show you appreciate it by eating it. Not everyone has food and a family.”

They always ate the big meal at noon.

Elizabeth glanced at her father and ate another spoonful of beans. Sometimes, she sat and daydreamed about biting into a juicy, tart green apple or about munching a buttery ear of corn.

A handful of roasted pumpkin seeds or a crispy, greasy taco sounded like a dream. Peppery, crisp bacon and fluffy, scrambled eggs would send her drooling out of her mind.

Samuel and she were supposed to take their turns later after lunch washing out the cages downstairs; she hated it, dreaded it, and thought it was horrible, but she wouldn't say a word. It was sinful to dislike her chores so strongly.

Once, there were nine people in a group when she lay in the road and pretended to be injured to lure the people over closer so they easily could be taken prisoner. One was sick, and she was in the barn where the youngest kids weren't allowed, now.

At least, it wouldn't be her turn to lure anyone again for a while.

A girl and then a young boy already were rendered. Momma and Daddy took each one and prayed with each, or over each, whatever the case might be, and then shackled each one to a table in the basement so each could be offered.

They had medical supplies, and Momma used something to help the offerings so the victims didn't suffer so much. It made them drowsy and more relaxed, but the people still screamed and cried with pain and fear when the cutting began.

They always begged and pleaded, but the limbs were removed. Because of the lack of electricity and refrigeration, only one at a time could be offered so it would stay fresh.

What else could they do? If anything else were possible, they would have done that.

A long time before, Mary was bitten by the demons that now walked the earth (*'because there was no more room in hell, so they roamed the earth,'* Daddy said). Some people who talked on the radio, a Christian station, no less, said those bitten had to be put down, but even Elizabeth understood

that “putting down” someone was another term for *murder*, and no one was supposed to murder.

Momma and Daddy said that the youngest two members of their family were alive inside the husk of demons that the rest saw; their souls were fine inside the terrible possession that had taken place.

But in their state, they were dangerous and couldn’t be trusted as Satan was the Master of Lies, so the little girl and little boy were kept safe in the basement, in a huge, well scrubbed dog cage surrounded by toys and blankets and other things that they no longer seemed to recognize, a place where coon dogs were once raised.

It was bad to keep people in cages, but the brain fever was dangerous, and the children might stray or be hurt.

That was one cage that would have to be washed out because Aaron and Mary weren’t able to eat politely or void their bladders and bowels in proper ways.

At the table, Daddy asked them, “Do you think Mary looked a little better this morning?” He was a handsome man, his face scrubbed clean and hands still soft, despite all the work he did. He was almost obsessively clean about his body and clothing, even now.

“Maybe a little. I thought she listened more to the evening prayer last night,” Samuel answered.

“Aaron’s eyes look more alert,” Rebecca added. She was the oldest of the children and spent many extra hours praying for her brother and sister to return to them. She also had the least tolerance for disrespect and slapped the first girl hard right across her mouth for cursing, before they rendered her.

Elizabeth knew the little girl didn’t hear or know a word of the prayer but moaned because she wanted more food; however, she, too, nodded as expected.

Rachael quickly nodded, too, for fear Rebecca would slap her for showing doubt; a doubter was like a rich man and likely would not get through the needle’s eye to Heaven. Daddy always said that rich people were doomed to hell.

Mary and Aaron only moaned for more food, voided themselves in the cage, and stared out of the metal bars without interest in anything when the curtains were pulled back.

If any one of the other children got a hand close enough, the caged children would bite. That was how Mary infected Aaron; he got too close to her teeth while watching her in the cage.

Rebecca said that Aaron allowed doubt and fear to let a demon into his mind. Elizabeth didn't say what secrets were in her mind; she didn't think her siblings would ever get better, and in her darkest moments, she wished that they would die like in normal times, and then they wouldn't have caused her family to live this way.

Elizabeth didn't understand how a demon got into the mind, but it was only after a bite to the skin that the person was infected. Maybe, it was a demon, and maybe it was a plague. Demons got into the young, the confused, and the non-believers.

Not infected. Possessed. It hurt her head, trying to make sense of it all; it was easier to believe and have faith.

Neither one looked a bit better than when he and she first were bitten and were changed from loving the family to whatever they were now.

All the prayers, songs, and stories read to the little ones didn't change a thing, for they just hissed and stared blankly. However, Elizabeth didn't point that out, either.

When they first fed the little ones, Elizabeth vomited, but that was okay because Momma and Daddy said it was hard to do such a thing and to make sacrifices when they never were called before.

Seeing the little girl and little boy grab at the bloody leg, tear greedily into the flesh, and pull at it with dirty teeth was sickening.

The people in the other cages watched, vomited, and cried out, sometimes cursed, sometimes prayed. The fat, skin, and muscle vanished into the hungry mouths. Mary held the food the longest, and it looked digested later. Her hair grew some, too. With Aaron, the food came back out quicker, partially the same as it went in, and he was always paler, thinner, and less animated.

Aaron and Mary became painfully thin and moaned and whined in hunger for a long time until Daddy explained the solution was to feed them. They couldn't kill the children, and to let them sit and starve was cruel and an abomination. "Suffer the children to come unto me," Daddy quoted. And then he said, "Eat of my flesh...." He said that meant it was okay to give the babies food to keep them alive, and when they did, the two stopped

moaning, becoming much calmer once sated. But they still snapped their teeth if anyone got too close to them.

But they got hungry again. Like anyone did.

Daddy always spoke to the people first; he explained that none of them were God-fearing and likely brought on this final plague with their evil ways. “If *thine* eye offends thee, pluck it out,” Daddy said. In time, there would be a second coming, and all would be taken in a blaze of glory, but the children’s souls needed to be cared for until that time.

It was the end of times, but it sure was dragging out. Elizabeth didn’t say that either.

“Is it feeding time tonight?” Thomas asked. Nothing got to him; he never questioned a thing and always reinforced what Daddy and Momma said. He even claimed that when the *food screamed* while he was helping to take a body apart for rendering, demons were leaving their bodies.

Elizabeth thought it was just pain that caused the screaming; she didn’t say that, but she didn’t really know things like Thomas did. At eighteen, he was five years older than she.

“I don’t think so. We need to save food for them until we know we can get more,” Momma said logically. Only six were left in the cage.

When Elizabeth and Samuel washed the cages, letting the spring water fill the buckets they tossed at the cage, the people inside the cages shivered and cursed. They didn’t use the soap and were scrubbed when they were pulled from the dirty cage.

One begged and cried, but the other five were always angry and said terrible things about Aaron and Mary, calling them zombies.

Elizabeth never saw a movie, but she knew what it was. She knew what television was although they didn’t have one. They owned a radio that they listened to for the music, but after things changed, there was no more music to hear.

She wasn’t sure what the word *zombie* meant except that Daddy said it was about a place far away called Haiti where the people practiced witchcraft and demon worship. Daddy said that the people and place had absolutely nothing to do with her little brother and sister since neither had ever been to that country.

Elizabeth used a mop handle to slide food through the bars of the cage that held the six people, for fear they would grab her.

As always, two of them tried to behave nicely and tell her how wrong this was, but she knew that without food, her brother and sister would die. It was okay not to “suffer a witch to live” which meant that those who were witches and witchlike could be rendered for food.

One man said her brother and sister were the walking dead, but Daddy laughed and was not angry like Elizabeth would have guessed.

He said, “Was Jesus Christ not the walking dead if you look at it that way?” He explained to them that he was being facetious, showing them how silly their words were when they twisted them.

“All clean?” Daddy asked.

“Somewhat clean,” Elizabeth told him, “they all needed a good scrubbing.”

“And when we get them back, we’ll scrub them until they glow.” He smiled at his children who just moaned with their blank stares. “Hello, Mary, how’s my girl? And Aaron, Daddy misses hearing your voice.” He leaned close to Elizabeth and Samuel. “I think they both look better today.”

Both still had the milky cataracts over blue eyes shadowed underneath with purple, a few smudges of blood and dirt where they never came clean, and bites on their arms that never healed, never got worse, but just smelled vile and wept pus sometimes. They were slightly thinner than they were when this began but did not grow or change much in over a year.

“Mary got some poopie in the pan, Daddy,” Elizabeth told him. It was a pure accident, of course, as they went wherever they wanted, but it happened, and it was something to cling to.

“She did?” he asked. Samuel nodded eagerly, too, “that’s fantastic.”

If Elizabeth understood more, she would have known that when her father was pleased, his eyes did take on a little shine.

But the insanity he and his wife latched onto when they lost their two children and when the virus spread to the family was always right there on his face. Neither was evil, but both were very sick in the mind.

Thomas, Rebecca, and Rachael brought down tubs and buckets, struggling with the weight. “All of it, Daddy?”

“All. I think it’s helping a lot.”

One of the prisoners groaned as Thomas used gloves to dig in and toss meat to his siblings: two legs, two arms, two hands, buttocks, and random flesh from the rest of a body. The torso and head were never rendered; they were deemed unclean.

“Shelly?”

“They cut up Shelly?” the prisoners questioned and complained. One cursed again. She was kept in the barn where only Daddy went, saying she was sick. A woman wailed in sorrow.

“Is she safe for them?” Elizabeth asked. Her sister was chomping on the fingers of a hand, teeth grinding against bones as she sucked at the blood greedily. Aaron ate a fatty piece of buttock.

“It was only a cold at the most; we watched her, and she was safe. She repented at the end and went quite easily,” Daddy told them.

“You’re a sick mother fucker,” one of the men yelled.

Daddy and Thomas moved as one, grabbing the cattle prod and a type of spear Thomas formed from a broom handle and a knife.

Jabbing the people, the males worked the group so they all went to one side while the man who yelled was herded to the other side close to the cage door.

Rebecca held a gun but didn’t know how to use it even as she pointed it at the people, warning them to stay back. They would have rushed the door anyway, like the two did who escaped the night before, but Thomas poked hard, drawing blood, and Daddy shocked harder.

In seconds, the yelling man was out of the cage and on the floor with the rest screaming threats and begging for freedom. Thomas gave the man a few pokes to take the starch out of him before they dragged him to the wall and then chained him to a pipe with handcuffs on both wrists and ankles.

Out of breath, Daddy pointed at the man and said, “You will not speak that way in front of my children.”

“Or what? You’ll cut me up and feed me to the zombie kids?”

Elizabeth felt the blood wash out of her face. What a terrible thing to say.

“If you are fortunate. Keep in mind men once gave the Lord *burnt* offerings....” Daddy’s voice was deadly serious and scary.

The man blinked a few times since that fear never entered his mind. Being burned alive was indeed a terrifying consideration, and these people would no doubt be up for such. He went quiet.

Thomas set the last bucket of body parts near the cage of people and the cuffed man. “I don’t see any reason to bring you food and water after you’ve acted like this; if you get hungry, you can eat what my brother and sister eat; you aren’t too good for that.”

Elizabeth followed her family upstairs but hesitated with a glance back at the cage of weeping people and the man who sat, bleeding on the floor of the basement: another mess that would have to be cleaned up. She resented that he caused another chore for her. In addition, Mary voided her bowels while eating, which was very disgusting, but as usual, she missed the pan.

The drain on the far side, where she washed the people's waste, seemed to be stopped up, and it smelled very foul. "I'm not washing you down again, so if you can, you better just hold it a while. That's disgusting," Elizabeth told the people.

"Let us go, and you won't have to clean anything," a woman snapped.

Elizabeth felt anger rising. "Well, once you get eaten, I also won't have to clean anything, so think on that." And she slammed the door, leaving them in dim lantern light.



## Chapter 4

### Mall

Since zombie movies were at least part of the pop culture, no one intentionally went to the mall to shop or for security when the infected people awakened from comas and began biting and hunting for humans to feed on. When more and more became infected and hunted the streets, no one decided it was a smart idea to pop into the mall. It was accidental that anyone was there at all.

Stores and businesses closed down when warned by the CDC about the Diamond Flux or Red Plague sweeping across the globe, and most people wouldn't have gone to work anyway for fear of being infected or bitten or fear of their own families being neglected.

Trying to get out of the city, a family of three struggled to get past the traffic that was backed up with wreckage and stalled vehicles for miles. When a hundred or more of the moaning, filthy monsters tracked and fed in a horde, the family jumped out of their car, and with many others, they ran.

Many were snagged and attacked by the faster Reds. In this type of fleeing, one only had to outrun the slowest other person to make it.

There were other small places to take refuge, but the mall was the largest and closest, and that's where they ran, just like characters in a movie, not realizing until later that they had done something so stereotypical under the circumstances. When they got the doors secured and could take deep breaths and think, they looked at one another in disbelief: they chose a mall. It was funny but not laughable.

“Can they get us?”

“No, I don't think, but I can't run anymore,” the boy's mother told him. Her name was Joyce, and she was close to passing out from total horror. The soles of her sneakers were coated with blood from rushing past those that the creatures brought down and fed on. She took the shoes off of her child and then her own, throwing both pairs as hard as she could, disgusted by the gore.

That they made it without being bitten was surprisingly good. Many ran, but children and older people quickly were caught. Fighting back did nothing, as the things felt no pain.

The eight of them talked some, introduced themselves, and then went into one of the store to find beds, food, and water.

The next day didn't look any better since outside in the parking lot, zombies shambled and shuffled, knowing their prey ran past but unsure where the *food* was.

On the road, more creatures stumbled car-to-car, dragged away people, and ate them alive when they found them. Blood ran all around, and bits of flesh, intestines, and body parts lay tossed away to rot on the pavement.

Once in a while, people tried to dart for safety or fought back, but the Reds had the weight and numbers. Periodically, screams tore through the air so that those in the mall could hear the shrieks of pain.

They all slept in the same store, and without a lot of planning, they gathered make shift melee weapons, stored extra water, and gathered all the food and liquids they could find during a week of hard work.

That was plenty to keep them going for years if needed, but they, like almost everyone else, waited for someone in charge to come along, rescue everyone, and put the United States back together again.

In the time they had, they did what they could to stay occupied, sometimes looked out the upper windows, and waited for help that never came.

They finally decided that maybe help would never come and that this was all they would ever have; it was depressing in most ways to think this was their lives now, but at least they had that much.

"Did you hear that?" Tell asked.

"Gunshots, we always hear them...sometimes anyway...used to hear 'em more...why?" Joyce asked him as she helped her son set up a golf course in the lobby. She tried always to keep something fun going on for the child and anyone else to prevent total depression; it seemed they were always one step away from suicide.

"Dunno, but it was three at once; that seemed like a signal. Anthony went to see if it were anyone."

"I know it's someone, but unless it's the military who have come to help us, then I don't care who it is."

"It could be good," Tell told her.

"Nothing's been good for a long time," Joyce whispered so that her son didn't hear her. He was six then, and now three years later, half of his life was spent in this stupid mall, hiding from zombies. It was enough to make everyone just give up.

Anthony jogged to the open area, still calling the rest to join them. He looked both excited and perplexed.

“What?” Joyce asked. She refused to have hope again.

“You’ll think I’m done gone crazy, but it’s some people on horses....”

“Horses?”

“Yep. And they have guns, and I went to the roof, okay, and we made motions to talk; they want to help us and get us out of here if we want. So the zoms didn’t notice.

“Out to where?” Lacy complained, “out with the zoms so they can eat us?”

“Hey!” Joyce snapped, as Patrick looked at them wide-eyed with fear.

“She means to where...as in where is safe? Are they just passing through?”

“I didn’t have that much conversation with ‘em, but I got the impression they have a better life than we do; they’re clean, well fed, and look very happy, considering everything that’s out there,” Anthony explained. He said they were going to come in through the far entrance. He was almost dancing with excitement.

“What if they ain’t safe?” Robbin asked. “How do we know?”

“I ‘spect they wonder the same about us...I mean...is this not the total movie thing to be in a shoppin’ mall with zoms running all around us? I’m the black guy; you got the kid and over protective Momma and serious Dad.” Anthony pointed.

“You got the Gothic chick all dressed in black; and Lacy in her fancy shit; Tell, the old guy; and Robbin, the bitch. This is all just perfect to have some people come up on horses to rescue us,” he was almost yelling now.

For a second, they just stared at him.

“I’m not a bitch, you freakin’ asshole,” Robbin told him, “Lacy is the bitch.”

“Screw you.”

He held his arms out to show his point was proven.

“Stay here. I’ll go with Ant and see what’s going on,” Bart promised Joyce. After all this time and more than anything, news of what was going on outside the mall seemed precious to him. Talking with new people would be amazing.

There were a lot of gunshots and sounds of boots slapping the pavement while the people ran; then, Anthony opened the door, and five people ran

inside, eyes adjusting to the dim light.

There was Kim, a tall cowboy with reddish hair under a cowboy hat, a quiet attitude, a fast grin for everyone, and an infectious calm nature. Beside him was a woman with clear green eyes, Beth who surveyed the situation and looked a little like the actress Demi Moore. She looked as sweet as sugar but yet could be ice cold when necessary.

Carl was a rangy man, dressed in his usual flannel shirt and faded jeans, a dip of tobacco in his lip. He nodded a hello to the pair of men who greeted them. Teeg was a handsome black man with an athletic build, big smile, and sensitive, intuitive eyes, and then there was Alex, a handsome, well-built man with sharp baby blue eyes. He looked happy to be in the mall.

“My God, it’s like the movie,” Alex breathed.

“Movie?”

“An image in my head...the old zombie movies....”

“Kind of like that, I suppose. We dug in and stayed. I think we’re scared to go outside, not knowing about things.” Anthony shook his hand, “are things better out there?”

“No and yes,” Beth said, “The zombies are still out there, a lot of them. They didn’t go away as you saw; it is still dangerous. There are bad people and a lot of bad going on. But we live in a place with full security, and we help people when we can. We have two doctors and some nurses, food, water, and about two thousand people.”

“Two thousand?” Bart asked. It was a lot of people compared to those in the mall, but few when he thought that the city housed over a hundred thousand at one time.

“About. We have a governor and head of security; he’s outside with the horses and some more people. We grow food, so it’s fresh, and we have cows...milk. We are doing well. Not saying it’s perfect, but we are making it.”

“We’ve been here...years...just waiting, I guess, in a fucking mall. Excuse my language but....” Bart didn’t know what to say, fresh fruits, meat, and vegetable? Amazing.

“What do you do?” Carl asked.

“Well, teach Patrick who is six and ice skate. The women and girls play with the clothes, read a lot, and play board games.

We have added security to the doors, made our living areas nice...not a lot. We’re starved for information about what’s going on out there. We

haven't been outside in a long time."

"You see the zombies out there?" Teeg asked.

"They are all over the US...sometimes one or two...sometimes a thousand or more, but inside where we live, they can't get in," Alex said, "we came here, this sounds weird, but it was my idea to see the mall with zombies around it, just a morbid weird thought, and here you are."

"Where is the rest?" Anthony asked.

"They came down with Red, and then many were bitten and infected by their own family members. Normal illnesses, accidents, starvation, and people who were...violent..." Beth explained. "Many people died. You know about the bombs?"

"What bombs?" Anthony asked.

"We bombed ourselves...the big cities...the government or whoever... they blew it all up so that the zombies wouldn't take over. Imagine several millions of those things coming out of just Dallas."

"That explains the tremors. But not everyone was infected."

"There wasn't a right choice," Carl said, "in that position, I dunno, maybe I would have, too. Until a few thousand of them have you pinned, you can't imagine the fear and...what is it?"

"Revulsion," Alex added, "those things are an abomination. Seriously."

"Come on and meet the rest. They want to hear news, too." Anthony led the way, telling him he knew how clichéd they seemed waiting in a mall. The rest were impressed with the comfortable sleeping arrangements, the food and water supplies, and melee weapons. After the shops were cleared out, those doorways were covered, so even if a shop on the bottom floor of the mall were over run, the rest would be safe on the upper floor.

"No zombie body in the fountain," Alex nodded, "good."

"We got it out."

"No shit?"

"I'm yankin' your chain. We found a total of two Zs in the beginning and took care of them; then, we had a few people stop in over time," Bart explained. "They moved on, never saw them again, and yanno...they probably didn't make it. A few were bitten, and we couldn't let them in. Saw a few killed right outside the door...."

"That happens," Kim said.

They met the others and were appalled at the pale faces that looked at them curiously. Seeing Patrick with his white face and lack of sunshine

made Beth feel horrible for the child. She unconsciously rubbed her arm where she was tanned from the sunlight. "I bet you'd love some fresh food, a doctor, sunlight, and even school," she said as she smiled at the boy.

"School? Okay," Patrick said as he grinned.

"I have an eight-year-old daughter and twins younger than you," she told the little boy.

"I used to be a dentist; you need one of those?" Bart asked.

"Big time, let's hope we have the supplies you need," Alex laughed, "does that mean you'd like to join us?"

Joyce glanced at the others but nodded. "Very much so. It seems like a dream that you are here." She brushed away tears and held her son. "Tell me you have fresh peaches...."

"All you want...fruits and veggies; Beth's brother is one of our doctors, and he is all about fresh food we grow, sunshine, and some fun; children are very busy with us; they have teachers: put on plays and sing. Do you remember Cinder Montaine?"

Anthony frowned. "That's weird to mention her; the first year we were here, all I did was hum those old songs. My momma loved 'em...."

Robbin said, "I remember that, Ant; you sang all the time, same songs over and over."

"She didn't make it. In fact, California didn't make it, to be honest, but Cinder's daughter, Jilly Montaine is with us, and she teaches the children to sing and put on shows for us. Maybe you can sing with her, Anthony," Alex said.

"About time we had some men around," Lacy muttered as they began packing up some things they didn't want to leave behind. She licked her lips as she looked at Kim and Alex. Unlike the other women, she used make-up every day and thought she looked great.

"He's gay; Alex is," Beth whispered to her.

"The other one is hot."

"Kim?" Beth smirked.

"I may have to have some fun with him," Lacey said confidently.

"I don't blame you," Beth said, "only, make sure it's after he gets our five kids to bed; the twins always want double story time, and Katie is eight and full of trouble lately. Hannah and Jet are liable to be into messes, too, so if you can wait until they're asleep, it would help."

Lacy let her jaw drop.

Robbin, hearing the exchange, giggled. “Slammed. Wow, Lacey, zero for two. Hope there are more men for you to go after.” She laughed as Lacey went to get her own things ready. “That was priceless,” she told Beth.

“Last thing I have time for is jealousy,” Beth said.

Kim outlined the plan again so that everyone knew what to expect and what to do. Luckily, the people in the mall stayed in shape and could run if they needed to. Len and the others waited for them to come out or communicate something.

“Now, I’m not so young, and I can’t run, so if I can’t go....”

“No way, Tell,” Carl said, “our Governor George whom we told you about is about your age, and since day one, that man has been the heart of the group.”

“He can shoot, and he’s smart, and his friend Tink....” Beth couldn’t say anymore without her eyes filling with tears.

“They proved everyday that age is no barrier to survival when you use your brain,” Alex said, pointing to his head, “I have seen an older man act fully heroic as well as kids doing brave things. I think you’ll be a good addition, and I bet you’ll love it with us.”

“I’ll help ya, Tell,” said Patrick as he grinned at the older man.

As soon as they went out the door, every one of them shuddered with disgust.

The zombies gathered closer to the door the group was leaving by, and knocking them down wasn’t enough as they could crawl and grab people unused to running from them.

The moaning began at once. Kim shot the first one in her head, glad to see the explosion of blood and brains come out the back before she dropped to the parking lot where stray strands of dried grass grew randomly.

The up-close view of a zombie’s head exploding was a shock.

Big Bill raced forward on his horse, thighs holding onto his horse tightly, leading a second horse so Beth could jump into the saddle.

It took a few seconds to get Joyce on the horse with Beth as Big Bill reached for Patrick, holding him securely. Kim slapped Beth’s horse’s ass, and the pair of mounts took off; Joyce, her head whipping back and forth while she tried to watch her son, held on tightly to Beth.

Bart made a startled move and looked a little confused, but Kim told him, “They are a hundred percent safe, now.”

“You sure?”

“Big Bill will keep Patrick safe, and no one rides better than Beth.”

Len brought a horse for Tell, and Kim helped him get up on it. Surprisingly, the older man, Tell, used to ride years before, and the art of riding came back to him at once. He grinned, despite the circumstances.

Then, Len yanked Robbin up with him; she had a flutter in her stomach as the handsome former Marine skillfully helped her up.

“Getting hairy,” Teeg stated as more zombies shuffled closer to the small group.

“Get us the fuck out of here,” Lacey demanded. She scooted farther away as if she were about to run, but the way she faced was partially blocked, and she wouldn’t get far. Her eyes went wide.

Rae and Julia both shot at only the zombies they could hit without accidentally hitting one of their friends, but more of the ghouls gathered quickly, and both women had frowns of concern that Kim recognized.

Lacey jumped on the horse that Julia had on a lead rope, and at the same time, a zombie scratched at the horse; Lacey went up and over, falling onto the ground as the horse bolted in fear.

“Get up,” Julia snapped. She was impatient with worry and fear.

“I’m trying, Bitch,” said Lacey who was furious. Her knees were skinned.

Had it been a better time, Julia would have smacked her in the face.

Anthony dodged the horses in order to help Lacey but was cut off by the zombies who pressed forward as they increased in numbers.

Kim helped Jessica up on another horse, but the gunshots and moaning made the horses nervous. The stench caused the animals to roll their eyes in discomfort and fear. Both Julia’s mount and Jessica’s mount reared almost at once, and both women landed hard on the ground.

Julia yelled obscenities in Mexican.

Rev was right there. Bart got on a horse while Rev tried to pull Lacey on with him, but the girl was in a panic, and between the three of them on the ground and the two rearing horses among corpses, the situation was chaos.

Kim pulled Anthony’s arm, and they ran toward their friends and safety. A mall shuttle bus on deflated tires stood close by, and Kim yelled, “Head there, and climb in.”



Julia and Teeg helped Jessica to move faster as she clenched her jaw and limped on a badly injured ankle. She hissed every time her foot came down, but she kept her eyes on Kim and Anthony who climbed in and stood on the bus.

Alex kept up the gunfire as Carl pulled Lacey along with him.

“I can’t,” she complained, but he pulled her anyway.

Big Bill finally returned after off-loading Patrick and Joyce.

Beth lay in the grass, steadily sighting her targets in the scope of her Ruger Mini 14 ‘Ranch Rifle’. “One shot, one kill, Len,” she whispered to herself.

When she was nervous, she remembered when Len had taught her to shoot. After five shots and five hits, she had to load a new magazine and finish one of the zombies. She then began on the rest who moved closest to Kim and the girl on the shuttle.

Big Bill dodged a fleeing horse and moved toward Julia and the limping girl. Julia swung up onto a horse, and Big Bill reached with one arm, held Jessica tightly, and took off with her hanging on. To her credit, she gritted her teeth with fear and pain, waited until he found a clear patch, and then pulled her up behind him on his saddle.

“Hang on, Missy; we’re almost home free.” She laid her head against his broad back, feeling safe already but still shaking.

Kim, Anthony, Alex, Teeg, Lacey, and Carl stood on the shuttle amid a sea of stinking monsters that moaned and drooled.

Rae, Beth, Julia, and Len made every shot count, but they soon would have to move positions as the ghouls figured out where the four were and were steadily heading that way.

“You think it’s better? We didn’t fight the things in there,” Lacey screamed.

“Calm down,” Kim said.

“This sucks...idiots.”

“Shut up, Lacey,” Anthony said quietly.

“Excuse me? We are standing on a fucking bus, Ant.”

“Yep, three-fourths of us done made it to safety, and these people done risked their lives. If you had paid attention...Jeez, girl.”

Rev yelled from his horse, came closer and then backed away, tempting the zombies to follow him. A few well-placed shots cleared the back end of the shuttle, and Teeg and Carl moved, pulling Lacey along.

As Teeg slid over to the ground, Lacey pulled away, fell on her butt, and almost rolled off of the roof of the shuttle. Carl lost his balance, fell off sideways, and barely caught himself, but it was enough to bruise his knee as he pounded the pavement.

He cursed.

“Go,” Teeg said. He helped Carl to his feet, and the two bashed at the zombies to get through. Rev was there in a flash, but it took Teeg’s help to get Carl into the saddle. He looked as if he wanted to stay, but Teeg ignored it and hit another zombie in its head.

Time was gone, and Teeg was trapped between the horses that took off at a run and the bus; a horde of zombies was with Teeg, but no one could put them down for fear of hitting him.

He figured this was it for him. It was time to take it like a man and hopefully not go down screaming too much. He had his gun and could finish himself if needed.

This wasn’t how he planned things. Facing where he thought his best friend Beth was, he clasped a fist to his heart and reached it out to her. He thought ‘goodbye’.

Beth let out a scream.

## Chapter 5

### Hannah

Sadie and Jim fired at the few zombies that shambled around the farmhouse on foot, trying to look confused and desperate. “Anyone here?” Sadie called, “hello?”

“No one is here,” Jim yelled back at her as they ran to the porch and banged against the heavy door. He made plenty of noise. They stomped and slammed around, hoping the few ghouls would stay back long enough for them to get inside the house.

The door swung open, and Hank caught Jim before he could fall. “Come on in; we’ve got you.”

“Thank you. That was too close,” Jim replied and slumped.

Sadie joined them, and she and Jim pretended exhaustion as they collapsed to the floor, but the fear that wrapped their guts was real. “Thanks....”

Although Jim and Sadie pretended to gasp, they looked at the family who stared back with frank curiosity and some wariness.

Hank and Peggy looked the pair over carefully. “Where you folks from?” Peggy told one girl to get them water, but Sadie and Jim wouldn’t touch a bit of water or food from these people.

“All over...been traveling...worn out now.” Jim got pointers from Dave about things to say. “Good to see such pretty little ladies,” he said as he smiled disarmingly at Peggy, Elizabeth, Rachael, and Rebecca, gaining Hank’s full attention.

Thomas said with a frown, “We tend to lead them away, not kill them unless it’s a desperate thing; they are sick and possessed people; they have souls. It’ll be work to bury them. Work for me.”

“Sick? Those are monsters. Why would you bury them?”

“The apocalypse and the end of time aren’t easy, Son. There’s no more room in hell, so the dead walk; the chosen will rise to Heaven, and all of this will be cleansed. They aren’t monsters; they are just walking the earth until we are called.”

“I don’t believe in all that,” Sadie said casually. She saw the people trade glances, as Dave said they would, feeling that they had their next victims ready to be put into dog cages in the basement.

“Souls...no...afraid I’ve just seen monsters trying to eat us.”

“Well, you can be a nonbeliever, but you will see the truth,” Peggy said, “but there’s time for that later; you need to rest, and we have food.”

“Food,” Sadie echoed, feeling as if she might vomit at the thought of these people and their idea of food.

“Let me show you a place in the basement where you can get some food and get cleaned up, where you can rest and be safe,” said Hank as he smiled falsely, “it’s safer down there away from trouble; you can relax. We go there for safety.”

“We appreciate it.” Jim smiled back. Under the flap of his over shirt, he caressed the butt of his pistol. Hannah and Jet, experts on stealth, led Dave and Andie in quietly, so they crept in behind the family, guns already leveled and ready. Jim and Sadie kept the family’s attention focused.

“One thing,” Sadie began.

“Drop it, Thomas,” Dave said. He knew the young man was the only one who carried a weapon for safety; the rest used guile; soft, twisted words; and muscle to get their ways.

Hank glowered. “I see a wayward sheep brought wolves back to the door.”

“Sheep? You stupid son of a bitch, if you had any learning from the Bible, then you could have used it to give people hope, and you could have followed the Bible and loved people, like your neighbor. And helped people. You’re just a nut, using that to control the rest and justify being a monster.”

Peggy sniffed, “You are deluded.”

“You’re with him?” Thomas asked accusingly.

“I guess we are,” Jim admitted. Seeing what these people became made him depressed. In some way, he hoped that the family was just confused and that maybe Dave misunderstood the danger.

“That thief tried to steal from us, and he attacked us. We fed him and his friends, and that’s what he did?” Thomas asked. He sounded very believable.

“Fed? Fed some of us to your infected kids,” Dave screamed with fury.

“Son, you need help. We tried to help you,” Hank said.

“You ate our food, and we offered you friendship and fellowship,” Peggy added.

“That’s what you call butchering people?”

“What are you going on about?”

Before anyone could do anything, Dave fired the pistol at Thomas; three of the bullets hit him. When the borrowed clip was empty, he stood, defeated, wanting Thomas to suffer more for his crimes. In Dave’s mind, he saw the situation over and over as they cut off legs and fed them to the monster children.

Peggy and Rachael scrambled to the ground, grasping at Thomas, but he was bleeding heavily and died within seconds.

It wasn’t the plan to kill anyone. Jet sighed. Plans never went as planned. The family seemed reasonable, but someone such as Len or Kim would have known at once if he were deceitful.

“My son,” Peggy wept, “how much more must I endure?”

Jim and Sadie traded looks; what if Dave killed an innocent person? They had no proof of anything he said. This was not right.

Hank held an arm across the other children who openly wept. “You come into my home at my invitation and murder my son? Get your mother,” he ordered Samuel and Elizabeth as his wife grabbed at Hannah’s boots, trying to reach her face and scratch her eyes out.

Hannah kicked the hands away easily. Her gut feeling was that these were very bad people, but she could see the rest had doubts.

“I regret your son was killed, but we are not here to play games. Dave asked for help to free his friends. I’d like to see your basement,” Jet said. He was also unsure of the facts. If Dave set them up, there would be hell to pay.

“I refuse. You’ve done your damage; now, you can get out of my home. My sick children are down there, and I won’t have them upset.”

“Sick with what?” Jet demanded. His stomach fluttered as he felt relieved that it all might be true, and if so, Dave did do the right thing.

“One of the horsemen galloped in, and there was plague,” Hank said mysteriously.

“Zombies? Are you talking about Red? It wasn’t a horseman; it was a nasty scientist who was a sick bastard.”

“We don’t associate with witchcraft, Boy. My children are ill,” Hank snarled, “but you do look like witches yourselves.” He looked at Jet’s dark hair and tattoos and Andie’s leather shirt and boots.

“Yep, I’m the most bad ass witch you’ll ever meet, and I wanna see the basement,” Hannah snapped.

“I just want to see it. If we are wrong, then that’s one thing, but you’re talking in circles about horsemen and sick children. Dave said they are zombies.”

“Oh, he is casting stones, is he?” Hank barked.

Dave said this was the whole family, so Hannah, Andie, and Jim went to the basement door, leaving Dave, Jet, and Sadie to keep guard. At this point, Jet wanted to keep a watch on Dave. “Let us know,” Jet told Hannah.

Elizabeth felt a sense of shame that she wasn’t prepared for. Daddy explained it all very carefully, and it made sense, and yet, she felt ashamed that they harmed anyone, much less fed the people to her siblings.

She suddenly felt guilty. She also felt angry and sad about her brother. But more than all of that, she felt dread for when the people saw what was downstairs.

Rachael and Samuel pulled Momma to the sofa; they sat in a line while Momma wept. Rebecca used a soft, pale blue, knitted throw to gently cover her brother.

Hannah carefully walked down the steps. The stench hit her first, but she breathed through her mouth and let her eyes adjust. To the left was a cage with two children; both moaned at her while reaching through the bars, their personal items untouched in the cage. They locked away two zombie children, just as Dave claimed.

“It’s like Dave said,” she yelled to her brother.

Jim leaned to the side and partially hit a bucket as he vomited, groaning from the sight and smells. He hadn’t seen his family after the plague but could not imagine his own children shambling about, moaning for flesh, staring out of the dead eyes forever. Could he have put them down? He brushed away tears. His mind filled with images of his family.

Hannah stood and watched them in sheer horror before Jim touched her shoulder, grasping her to keep his mind intact.

“Hannah?”

“Hi, Ponce,” she managed a sickly smile for him. Jim grabbed keys and began opening the door and handcuffs. Ponce looked tired and pale, nothing like the strong man they knew before.

“Of all people....”Ponce began, “hold up. We need to soap up and wash; we stink. We can’t carry these disease germs upstairs or around these people....”

“I think so, too,” Hannah agreed.

“Hang on, let me get some stuff,” Andie said as she darted upstairs and then came back down with towels and sheets and more soap, stopping just for seconds to tell Jet the situation was everything Dave said and worse.

Only four remained: three in the cage and one in handcuffs next to a pitiful bucket of fresh blood and flesh. A man inside the cage died of a heart attack. Terror and shock took his life before the people with saws and axes could.

“A man is held prisoner by some nuts in a basement and finds his rescuer is crazy Hannah; now tell me if you’ve heard this one before, ” Hannah smiled at Ponce.

“When I heard the gunshots upstairs, I was hoping for something good, but I thought I died and was seeing a ghost when I saw you. And if you are crazy, it’s like a fox,” Ponce told her.

“I didn’t...I mean...we figured Dave was telling the truth, and we’ve seen bad things....”Andromeda looked at the moaning children with pure disgust, wondering how even parents could keep them that way.

The dead man in the cage was fly-covered, and dried feces were in both cages. The drain was stopped up with all the filth, including bits of slimy skin and clotted blood, so it slowly drained, leaving the nasty water, several inches deep in spots. It would take massive scrubbing to get the scent from her hair and the squirmy feeling off her skin.

In stunned silence, Jim looked at the children.

A woman used the cold spring water and soap to clean herself, stripping gratefully with no embarrassment, dropping filthy clothing onto the ground. She might have kept scratching and clawing her skin to rid it of the dirt if Ponce hadn’t taken her hands and told her she could bath later. She wrapped herself in a sheet and held her hands over her ears. “They moan all the time. It’s always in my ears, the noise.”

Hannah looked at the children again. Without saying anything, she shot the little girl in the head and then the little boy. The girl was a perfect headshot. To her, they were monsters released from hell on earth and could rest now. Howls came from upstairs.

Jim jumped reflexively, wiping more tears off his face.

Rachael lunged for the door, and no one shot her in the back, knowing the ones downstairs could deal with one, unarmed young woman. Jim took the stairs a few at a time, coming down to see what was happening. “You fools...what have you done? Those are my brother and sister. Murderers.”

“Ummm...” Andie shivered, “they’re infected.”

“Murderers! Killers! You killed them.”

“They were zombies. How can you let anyone you love be that way?” Ponce snapped.

“And didn’t you kill people to feed them?” Andie asked.

“They were baptized,” Rachael snapped back. Andie shrugged at the others, not knowing what that had to do with it. “And they are my family. They didn’t ask for this.”

“No one did.”

Rachael snatched the keys and began to open the cage, ignoring the other people. To her horror, she saw that Mary was no longer moving, but Aaron raised an arm to her. What kind of people killed children? She would gladly rip these fools to shreds if she could.

“Don’t do that,” Hannah warned.

With a defiant glance at Hannah, Rachael slid to her butt next to the children.

Knowing the girl must be insane and trying to save her from a bite, Andie shot the boy in the head since Hannah’s shot just shattered his jaw and didn’t kill him.

Hannah seemed to be satisfied with only watching after she warned the girl. The boy’s head popped open in the back, splattering Rachael’s face with gooey brains, bits of skull, and stringy blood. Rachael wiped at her face but rocked the children in her arms, crying harder for her loss.

“That’s really sickening,” Andie said. Despite what she was a part of, the scene was sad to watch.

Ponce watched as he finished cleaning himself, wrapping a towel about his waist. “Rachael, did you get that blood in your eyes or mouth?”

“Shut up,” she said.

Ponce helped a man, a third person, get clean and then poured cold spring water over the man’s head. The man didn’t react too much, but tears ran down his face as Ponce helped him. He wondered why he even bothered to speak to the girl.

The woman sat on a pallet, unable to go up the stairs. “They cut people up and fed them to those things,” she said dully.

“I know. But that’s over. Dave came and got us, and we are here to help you,” Andie said, “how ya doing, Ponce?”



“I’ve been better,” the man admitted, his eyes haunted by what he had seen. He worried about how dull all the rest seemed: so depressed and hopeless even though they were rescued. “Rachael?”

The young woman turned to him. Her blue eyes were filmy and leaking yellow pus-like tears.

“Ah, shit,” said the other man, waiting to get clean, who backpedaled but wasn’t fast enough. Rachael, mostly turned but still human enough to move fast and feel fury, made a frantic leap at him. She simply attacked the first person she saw.

They rolled together in the nasty water.

“Get her head up,” Andie ordered, trying to get a shot. But Rachael’s face was near his neck. Ponce slammed into the pair, punching at Rachael; she sank her teeth into his arm. He pried her jaw loose quickly and fell back as she took another chance to lunge at the man beneath her. His blood poured out of his throat.

Andie yanked the woman in the sheet up the stairs, pushing her when she faltered. The man who was clean ran after them, tripping a few times but getting to the top of the stairs. He couldn’t imagine feeling those teeth on his flesh.

Hannah shot as did Jim, both hitting Rachael in the head and killing her. The man on the ground looked up at them with his hand on his own neck; he tried to stop the blood flow while suffering from pain and fear. Jim hesitated, but Hannah stepped up and shot the man twice, wincing as she did. “Go on up; we’ll be there in a minute,” Hannah said.

“Why?”

“Would you just go? I bet they need you, and it’s just Ponce and me left. He can’t turn, Jim; he was inoculated and is immune to the bite.”

Jim didn’t like the idea, but he couldn’t think of why he shouldn’t go upstairs. He kept looking at the dead children even as he tried to drag his gaze away from them. After he left, Hannah looked at Ponce.

Hannah pointed to the bucket of flesh and blood. “I imagine you’re starving.”

John Ponce rubbed his aching, cramping stomach without thinking. He hated the craving and the need for raw meat. It might be a long time before he could find an animal.

To eat human flesh, especially the ones who were prisoners with him, was unthinkable. Still, his stomach ached, and the prions in his brain,

although altered, made the sight of meat like a drug he needed.

Many times, he wished he died and was not changed. He sat with a gun to his own head and pondered firing. He hated being a prisoner, hated the family and the zombie children, hated what they did, but Ponce also understood in some way how they felt. His eyes were full of guilt and shame.

“I need you strong, not weak and craving,” Hannah told him. She knew allowing the eating was kind, but to invite him to partake of the flesh was cruel, also. She was curious to see what he chose; would the need be strong? How tough was this man?

He scooped up a piece of a body and ate, watching Hannah thoughtfully. “You know a lot about it.”

She shrugged. “It pays to know things. I’m not judging you. You didn’t ask for the inoculation, right?” She was faintly disappointed in him for his choice. Some would die before giving in.

“They said it was an inoculation. I guess at that point, only Diamond himself and those who received the treatment knew the side effects, but, my God, we were all so scared of being bitten and turning.” He wrapped part of a clean sheet around his wound. It would heal. “We were scared, and we trusted him.”

“You didn’t understand it?”

“Not really.” He swallowed greedily, feeling the cramps begin to abate. “I’ve never hurt anyone to eat raw meat, for it wasn’t hard to find, and anything seemed better than becoming a zed. But, here I am.”

“She can’t feel it now anyway...that girl...she’s gone. You aren’t like those things,” she said.

“Doesn’t make me feel any better. I feel like a monster most of the time.”

“That chick, who is with us, the pretty black woman, Andromeda, she calls me a monster, but she doesn’t even know the half of it,” Hannah told him.

He had tears in his eyes. “I hate this.”

“I do as well.”

“Henry Diamond destroyed the world and our humanity with it. I always wished I could have just hurt him over and over. It was not enough that Len killed him; it was too easy compared to what he did and what he made me into. I’m weak.”

“Maybe so,” Hannah said.

“Monsters, all of us,” Ponce said.

“Angels. He says hybrids are Angels, the new species evolved to take over the world,” she quoted from memory. “What would this family make of that? I bet they would think Angels are terrifying, beautiful, strong beings who strike down the demons.”

Ponce laughed without much humor. “You think? I’m curious as to what they’d think, too.”

“Because they don’t love us, we’re all monsters. People are scared of me anyway, Ponce. I’m quick to action; I don’t think; I’m violent; I am trouble, but my parents would die for me. They’d feed me, no matter what I was; it’s all about perspective and who you love.”

“Shades of grey.”

“For the most part. You break your own rules and beliefs when you love someone, and you can do terrible things and justify them.”

“You’re a smart girl, just like I remember.”

“Smart? Very screwed up in the head.” Her big blue eyes were full of pain and sadness.

Hannah walked to the bucket and pulled out a small slab of flesh, looked at it curiously, and began to eat it. Ponce watched her.

Very gently, Ponce brushed her long blonde hair to the side from behind her and bared her neck; she allowed it, like a kitten pacified. He stroked the scar that lay in a patch across the back of her neck, rubbing the flesh tenderly with his thumb.

“Who did this for you?”

“My mother, Beth.”

“She despises hybrids.”

“Yes, she does.”

“And yet, she did this for you.”

“She removed my number that the bastards tattooed on my skin. Number twenty-two.” Hannah licked the blood from her lips.

Ponce thought about that. “Beth is a complex woman; I knew that from the second I met her. She never hesitated to kill hybrids or to call us abominations and vowed to kill all she found. But she was always kind and respectful to me, and she removed your number and kept your secret.”

Hannah let tears fill her eyes. She hated being this vulnerable, and yet, it was also a relief. “She loves me.”

“I’m twice your age, and I want to talk more. I have a lot to learn from you, Hannah. Would you kill hybrids, too? Your own kind?”

“Yes, I’ll kill Zs and hybrids and insane people...my own family. If anything, Ponce, it’s gonna take a lot of blood to soothe what I know I am. I’m all messed up.”

“And how does your mother, Beth, feel about that?”

“I am her avenging Angel,” Hannah said as she turned to look at him, her eyes endlessly deep. In them was a place no one would want to go. She was rage and compassion, fury and love. In her soul was a pure insanity that nothing or no one could touch but could only look at from a distance. “Let’s go. We have the rest to deal with.” Her insanity vanished behind the mask she wore.

Upstairs, the groups’ members stared at one another. Andie and Sadie helped the man and woman find clothing while Jim, Dave, and Jet kept watch on their prisoners. Samuel, Elizabeth, Rebecca, Peggy, and Hank looked haggard and pale with sorrow. The parents now lost four children to this group.

After Ponce dressed, they told him they waited to see what he thought should happen to the four left. “They’re misguided and crazy with grief,” Ponce said, “but they are very dangerous because of their beliefs.”

“The drugs barely took away any pain; they felt each and every time someone cut off their arms and legs or when they burned them; they screamed until their voices went hoarse, and they suffered,” Dave said.

“We had no choice. Do you think we asked for this? I am just a man; the end of the world is God’s plan.”

“That’s bullshit,” Dave said. “If you think any god would do this to people, then you are really warped. It is a disease made by a man; man did this to man. And you are a man who killed other men.”

“No,” Hank said simply.

“Would you do it again?” Sadie asked dully.

“Yes. Those were my children,” said Hank, looking askance.

“Shelly, the girl you had in the barn, I saw her flesh; it was bruised and bitten. *You* bit her. Are you a hybrid? Inoculated?” Ponce asked.

“A what? What’s a hybrid? There’s a cure? Where?”

“Not a cure...an inoculation against the infection. I received the inoculation. I can’t be infected, but if I bite you, you will be infected by my saliva,” Ponce said.

“You’re a liar.”

“You just like to bite young girls?” Hannah asked, “what’s wrong with you? That’s sick. Were you playing at being a zombie...seeing what it felt like?”

“Pervert,” Sadie added.

“He didn’t do that,” Peggy said.

“I have no reason to lie. The tissue was bruised and bitten before her death. You can see it in his eyes; he did it, or was it Thomas? Both maybe?” Ponce suggested.

Peggy looked at her husband in confusion.

“They are masters of lies,” Hank said.

For some reason, the old arguments were wearing thin, and four of her children were dead and unburied. Hank should just stop saying the same old things.

“He bit Shelly; he tortured her,” Ponce said.

Peggy stood but didn’t make any moves at those holding guns. “I’m just tired. They can have me.” Ponce reached for her, but she pulled away and walked to the door.

Any one of them could have forcibly pulled her back, but instead, they just watched her. Things George drilled into them filled their minds as they wondered what the woman’s terms were. Her children cried out, but her husband didn’t make a sound as she opened the door, went out, and closed it behind her.

Sadie went to a window that had a peephole and looked out.

Peggy swept her arms around herself as she twirled in the yard, attracting the three zombies that were still around. For a while, she playfully darted away, but then, as she was grabbed, she went silent and solemn until the first bite.

She screamed a long time, but she didn’t fight the monsters that bit off her fingers and then tore out her throat. When she bled out, her face, locked in pain, still seemed far away.

Jet motioned to Samuel, Rebecca, and Elizabeth. “Get up, and get out; if you survive, you do, but I doubt you will. Go!”

Elizabeth refused.

Jet finally got Dave to help, and they forcibly hauled the three out the door and slammed it. As long as the other zombies stayed with their mother and the trio ran, they’d make it out of the yard without a problem.

Elizabeth saw her mother, partially eaten, twitching back to become a dead zed. The Reds were still hungry and moaned. Finally, the survival instinct kicked in, and the girl took her brother's hand, and they ran for the woods. Rebecca followed a little behind.

Hannah itched to shoot them in the legs as they ran but didn't. Rebecca tripped, and Hannah turned away, not even curious now.

"That's called mercy," Jet told Hank, who sat alone on the sofa. The man stared back without emotion. "Your kids might live and grow up with a little bit of sense now, away from you."

"We didn't do anything wrong. No one asked you to come hurt my family."

"Dave did. He asked, and we did. Do you think normal, sane people could hear that you were kidnapping people and feeding them to zombies in a basement and not try to stop it?" Jet asked.

"My children," Hank said stubbornly.

"Mister, they were gone as soon as they were infected. Just their bodies were left. The right thing would have been to let them have peace: put them down and bury them with dignity. No one would want to live as one of those things."

For the first time, Hank's eyes wavered, looking confused. "I loved them, though."

"Shelly was my girl," the woman said, "I loved her."

Hank cast her a look of further disapproval.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Jet told her, "I'm sorry you needed to know how she died."

"Unlike people such as him...." She looked at Hank. "I understand facts and truth; he's just a pervert hiding behind religion. Everyone hides behind something, but he's insulted my faith. I am Christian, the real kind." Hawking back in her throat, she spat a wad of phlegm into Hank's face. "Go to hell, buddy."

Ponce felt guiltier about eating the flesh; he struggled not to vomit, and he caught Hannah's gaze on him.

She easily taught him a valuable lesson that he'd never forget and that would punish him for being the cause of this botched rescue. She might be crazy, but she was also Beth's daughter in the way she handed out bitter pills and lessons on the hardship of being human or half-human and having self-hatred.

He would never forget this or stop feeling sorry for the lost little girl who was Hannah.

Hannah took a rope and tied Hank securely to a chair, making sure the knots were tight and wouldn't come loose. "Give her your knife, Dave."

"Huh?"

"Give it to her." Hannah said.

He handed it to the woman who watched them.

"We're going now. You decide how it ends, your terms," Hannah told the woman. "Here's a box of matches. When you are finished, you know what to do. You be the judge and decide his fate. It's fair."

The woman gave Hannah a nod of appreciation. She didn't know what she would do, but at least these people gave her a choice, which was precious. She would think about it for a while.

"Hey...." Andie began, "we need to...."

"Clear out, and let justice do the rest," Hannah snapped. She was about to say more, but a gunshot silenced her.

Jet motioned them to stay still and darted into the bedroom where the shot came from. He even notice that Jim slipped away, but he and the other man from the basement were in the room. The man had a hole in his head.

Jim saluted Jet and fired his pistol into his own head. Just like that, two lives were snuffed out. They saw too much to ever close their eyes again, lest the nightmares drive them insane. Neither wanted to remember all that they saw.

Jet rubbed his temple, returned to the rest, and shook his head. In this new world, there were no pills for depression, no asylums for the wickedly insane, and no treatment for any who was in excruciating pain.

Jet, Hannah, Ponce, Dave, Andie, and Sadie filed out the door, closing it behind them. Hank and the woman remained.

"Come back to Hopetown with us?" Hannah asked Ponce and Dave after they put down the four zombies in the yard.

"Will I be welcome?" Ponce rubbed absently at the bite on his arm that wasn't infected but still throbbed with pain. He took the kit Hannah offered him and treated the wound so it was clean and bandaged.

"Somewhat," Hannah said, "Mom will want to hear about everything and see you. She'll welcome you. And Uncle Len will want to hear all about things, and maybe this will keep Mark and Matt from killing us for this stunt."

“Don’t bet on it,” Andie said, “you get to explain to the gate security that you are bringing in a hybrid.”

“Sure,” Hannah said, “I think he has valuable information, and Len is cool, so I’ll be glad to.”

Dave stepped away. “I can’t repay you for all you did for me. I couldn’t live with their having my friends and what they were doing to them. I need some time....”

“You can come with us,” Jet offered.

“I know. I believe you, and one day I may show up and join you, but right now, I have this need to roam: maybe help people or maybe chase down Elizabeth, Rebecca, and Samuel. I don’t really know what I have in mind, to be honest.”

Hannah understood that. She shook his hand, and the rest did the same. They watched him, knowing he was about to walk away, wondering what, if anything, they accomplished besides getting Ponce free, stopping torture, and losing a friend. “I hope the house burns to the ground and covers that basement,” Hannah said.

“We’ll check, and if the house doesn’t, we’ll light it,” Jet promised, “Matt and Mark are so gonna kill us.”

“They won’t. Jules, Mom, Dad, and Len would have done the same; it was something that needed to be done.”

Dave looked ready to change his mind, but he took the rifle and ammo Jet handed him and waved. There was a lot to take in and think about before he felt as if he wanted to be around more people. “I can never thank you enough.”

“Be safe. That’s repayment. Be a kind person,” Jet said.

“I don’t know how I can ever forget all this. I know why Jim and the other guy checked out,” Andie said as they mounted the horses.

“Those are just another few bad guys who were stopped, Andie,” Hannah said. “Alone, I would have minced them with the sword; they were bad people. We’re all bad people in ways.”

“They were mentally ill,” Andie argued, “sick.”

“Kill ‘em all, and let God sort them,” Hannah said.

Andie gave her a withering glance. “Hannah, you’re going over the edge.”

Hannah smiled and giggled. “I’ve been over the edge for three years. I’m as crazy as they were, but I don’t torture people and feed zoms. I retaliate.



Face it, Andie, I'm a product of my experience now," she said dramatically.

Ponce muttered so only Hannah heard, "You're an avenging Angel, a product of an experiment gone wrong. Welcome to my life."

They rode.

Hannah whispered her usual prayer

*I wish. I hope. I pray.*

*That we all find peace this day.*

*And if it all turns out badly,*

*I think we'll be okay.*

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## Chapter 6 Mall

Teeg still fought but didn't feel hopeful until Beth screamed. He didn't want her to see him ripped to shreds. Kim and the rest yelled and stomped, trying to get the ghouls to notice them instead.

"Shut up," Lacey demanded, "they're gonna come back to us."

"That's the plan," Kim yelled louder, "come on, zoms; come get me."

"Shut up," Lacey screamed again, shoving him.

Kim's boots slid on the top of the shuttle, causing him to slid backwards and land hanging off the bus. If Anthony hadn't grabbed his shirt, Kim would have slid over the side and landed on the pavement.

Although she was too far away for him to hear, Kim could somehow hear Beth cursing a blue streak and threatening Lacey with all kinds of bodily injury; he grinned, despite the bad circumstances.

Teeg lunged to the ground, rolled, and moaned like a ghoul as skin scraped off his shoulder and arm, but he kept down in the roll, knocked several zombies over, and sprang to his feet.

Len was close, firing a barrage at those he could hit, and Julia and Rae 'peppered' the rest, opening a narrow break in the stumbling monsters. This was the one and only chance Teeg would get, and he took it.

And lost his footing.

Kim, Alex, and Anthony slid off the shuttle, kicking those they could, shooting several in the head. Anthony yanked Lacey to the ground by her hair, keeping her from falling with a crisp upwards motion that made her screech. "Act right, or I'll feed you to 'em."

"Asshole," she muttered, rubbing her scalp.

"You have been warned," he snarled.

Kim used his gun to swing like a baseball bat, smashing the zombies to either side, motioning Anthony to do the same with his bat.

Alex finished off a woman who snapped at them. Finally, there seemed to be progress as they not only held the ghouls off, but also actually were able to get further along the parking lot.

"Why don't they bring the horses?" Lacey demanded.

"It isn't safe, and they have to move positions to keep the rest safe. We're fine," Kim said, "and by the way, next time you shove me, I will let

them have you. If you shove one of my friends, I will skin your fucking body and let them go at you slow; do we have it clear?" His voice was dangerously calm.

"You can't do that."

"Really? Wanna bet on it? Ask Ant if he wants to fight for you."

"Ant?"

"I'd cheer if he skinned you, you dumb bitch." Ant bashed a zombie down and kept swinging until its head was a pudding-like consistency. Ant was livid.

Lacey screamed as she watched Anthony and forgot to watch the ground. A battered and shot zombie lay face down on the broken asphalt but still clawed at her ankle. She brushed her hair off of her face as she wiped at her leg.

Alex recoiled, "Don't get that into your eyes." He dodged a crawler, got tangled for a few seconds between two others, but finally finished them. He cursed at them and stomped at one angrily.

"Am I infected?" she screamed.

"I don't know. But wipe it off. If you have a wound or anything... depends on your eyes," Kim said. He looked at her with a little sympathy though.

Teeg and Alex jumped around, smashing at skulls as the crawlers snatched at their feet. "You saved my bacon, Alex; dumbass, you could have gotten hurt." Teeg patted his friend's back. "Thanks."

"Ain't nothing, but a thang...."

"Chicken wang," Teeg finished with a chuckle.

Once at the edge, they were able to join the rest, turn, and fire into the shambling zombies who followed them relentlessly. In a few minutes, they were able to put the zombies down, finishing those on the ground, as well.

Rae sighed with relief and finally smiled; she was very concerned. Tell and Bart shook hands with everyone, thanking all.

Anthony did the same and said he admired the help they gave to the group. "You guys kicked some ass. You got some bad ass women with y'all..." He gave Beth, Rae, and Julia nods of admiration.

"Bad ass is Julia's middle name."

"Ah, Bethy, you got that right, *Chica*," said Julia as she cracked her knuckles, "Rae, that was some good shooting."

"Ehhh, it was not my best, damnit. But thanks."

“They said the blood could hurt me,” Lacey complained to Len.

“We can watch for symptoms,” he said, “blood from those things is very dangerous. Are you bitten?”

“No.”

“So? What’s up?” Len asked.

“I was scratched.”

“Like I said, we’ll disinfect it and watch for symptoms.” Len said.

“And? That’s all? What good is that?” Lacey asked.

With no warning, Beth stepped in close, hauled back, and hit Lacey in her jaw, snapping the woman’s jaw to one side.

Robbin wasn’t a fan of Lacey’s, but she jumped up swinging, getting one punch to Beth’s arm.

Julia was on Robbin in a flash, pinning her to the ground and popping her in the face without mercy; Julia’s adrenalin still pumped.

“Girl fight,” Anthony said, grinning.

Kim held Beth as Len grabbed for Lacey. Teeg and Carl separated Julia and Robbin after taking a few punches themselves. Rae was ready to add to the fight if anyone else jumped in. She hoped someone would.

“Damn, girl,” Carl said.

“What was that for?” Robbin demanded.

Beth told her that Lacey pushed Kim, cursing throughout the explanation, hardly holding herself back from fighting again. “That’s my husband she put her hands on. She shoved my husband, and now she got her ass whipped Texas style.”

“Lacey? Why?” Robbin looked perplexed, “you shoved him?”

“Look, I’m scared, and I don’t like this shit. I didn’t ask for their help or for them to come get us, and now I have blood on me,” Lacey yelled back.

Robbin gave Beth an apology and shook hands with Beth and Julia. “Sorry. I didn’t know Lacey was capable of that sort of selfishness...unreal. Lacey, next time, you don’t get any help from me.”

“If the infection doesn’t get you, I may kick your ass again,” Beth warned Lacey.

“Anytime, you get froggy, then jump.”

Beth rolled her eyes and hugged Kim. She hugged the rest. “I thought you were a goner, Teeg,” she said.

“I think I was until you started caterwauling; that noise got my ass in gear,” he laughed, “Alex saved me, for a gay guy, he’s a stud.”

Alex cracked up laughing; the tension was finally broken. “Yep, the gay guy saved your ass; remember that on poker night....”

“Nope, gonna win all your money again. I’m almost a multi-millionaire.” These days, having cash was useless except for Texas Hold ‘Em. Teeg always seemed to win big, but not one caught him cheating. Yet.

“Do you see anything?” Lacey asked Anthony. She used water to wash away the blood on her face and then patched her scratched ankle.

“A bitch.”

“No, in my eye, stupid.”

“I ain’t lookin’.”

He walked away from her.

“What’s next, Boss?” Tell asked Len, “I like the way you all hold your own.”

“Well, for starters, we don’t always have such a half-assed rescue. I apologize, but those things began swarming in a hive mentality. That happens sometimes, not always. No way to predict it,” Len said as he looked at Lacey.

“Panicking is the worst thing anyone can do because then the plan falls apart fast. Variables are added too fast to consider. We don’t jump at horses, push or shove people, get selfish, or act foolishly. That gets people killed. Your bullshit caused us to make mistakes, and I am pissed off.”

“I was scared. Get over it. It’s done. I’m the one hurt.”

“And pushing people doesn’t keep you from being scared. Keep your head in the game,” Len snapped, “good job for the rest of you. Teeg, you scared the shit out of me but good teamwork, people. It’s nice to meet the rest of you. I imagine you have a million questions, and as soon as we get going, we can answer some.”

“You’ll be amazed at Hopetown. Wait until you taste what the cooks make, and Patrick, I bet you will have so much fun with the other children.”

“Can we go outside?”

“You bet,” Kim said, “my daughter is a little older than you; her name is Katie, and all the students play on the playground. In warm weather, they swim like fish, and they have shows and singing, all kinds of activities. You can even climb a tree.”

“A tree?” Patrick asked, mouth open. The look was heartbreaking.

“The kids have real tree houses that are super safe and fun. We have dogs and kitties....”

“Dogs?” Patrick repeated, “Can I pet one?”

His mother wiped away tears.

“You can pet them all,” Kim promised, “The kids have cookouts with hot dogs and marshmallows. You can eat fruit right from the tree, go fishing, and ride a horse, too.”

As he said those things, it occurred to him how much they worked to make life seem more normal. The things they had now, some of which were taken for granted, were precious to a child who never had a pet or climbed a tree or played with other children. “And we have showers.”

Bart cleared his throat. “He’ll love all that. I think we will, too. A shower?”

“Hot water...solar power.”

“It sounds like heaven,” Jessica added.

“And we play baseball,” Carl told them.

“Baseball?” Anthony whistled, “I am so in heaven. I can’t thank God enough for bringing you to find us. Lord be praised, but y’all are a miracle.”

“If you’re any good, people will fight to get you on their team,” said Teeg as he laughed, “I’m terrible at it; no one wants me. We’re glad we could help. You have a good voice; we have churches and a choir....”

“You think they’d let me be in the choir?”

“I can guarantee it. We aren’t radical, extremist religious nuts. Beth, Kim, and their kids go to the Catholic services, and the Southern Baptists joined with the Evangelical people who hold up their hands during the service, like being at a concert, but....”

Alex added, “You don’t have to go; no one makes anyone go.”

Teeg added his ideas. “Like Jewish people have their religion, there are strict religions that require people to decline some goods or do certain actions on specific days, but we work on all of that. People who are non-believers aren’t hassled; it’s all good.”

“I wanna be at your church then,” Anthony told Teeg.

They walked or rode horses as they went along the back way to avoid more contact; some walked, and then they traded off. Carl’s knee and Jessica’s ankle kept them both in saddles.

Alex said, “You don’t even have to have a religion. You can go look at trees or whatever on your allotted church time. We have two or three meetings a week, depending on attendance.

“You, Muslim?” Lacey asked Rae with a sneer, “terrorists are.”

“I don’t know any terrorists to ask about their religion. I attend the Catholic church with Beth, Julia, and Len,” Rae told her.

“I do the progressive Evangelistic singing and dancing with Misty, but Mark is Catholic. Their kids trade off.”

“My new church with you is just black?”

“Not at all. We’re the Hispanics, who aren’t Catholic, and Johnny and Conner are white, and so are Jilly Montaine and her man, Pan. Nick comes with us at times; he was the brother of the President of the United States.”

They saw wrecked vehicles.

“Meh. That’s a mess.”

Because the rest saw people in a panic on roadways, the zombies, and then nothing afterwards, they all stared as they traveled, looking at the cars and rubble.

“The bombs did some of this, but what you see is from the people fighting, looting, scrambling for supplies, and trying to stay alive,” Len explained. Things fell from the blast, burned from it, were hit by storms, and burned by people....”

“All this damage? Why? It’s like a war went on,” Tell said.

“It was a war,” Kim said, “gotta think how people were chased and fought...got supplies...used Molotov’s, shovels, baseball bats, and guns. They fought for their lives.

Then, there were the rest of the army and the Reconstruction Army, and finally, we came through fighting and getting what was left, killing zombies.

People had sick family members in their homes, and when the zombies attacked, the fighting was rough, spilled onto the street, and got between cars. They fought it out, and zombies were smashed up. The gasoline, unless it was treated, didn’t work anymore.”

“Are those bodies?” Robbin asked.

“Yes. Some are the zeds or Reds that were killed. Some were healthy people fighting them. Who do you think will come along and bury billions around the world?” Len asked.

“They are all just left here. I had no idea,” Bart said. “What will happen?”

Len shrugged. “I dunno. I guess nature will take over, and hundreds of years from now, people will find bricks and junk in piles but all grown up with the weeds. Nature seeks a balance; it’ll take it all back.

Humans will carve out places as best they can like back in the old days, and we'll start over. Maybe archeologists will wonder what we did with our cell phones and computers and televisions and microwaves"

"Maybe," Alex agreed, "or maybe we will have screwed up so badly that we'll be extinct in a few hundred years."

"Hard to believe that we had televisions, computers, and all of the other tech stuff...electricity, and now, we are back to the Dark Ages," Bart said.

"Not total Dark Ages. We do have the knowledge of before, anyway," Beth said. "We have a bunch of solar panels, so we have hot food and hot water; we can have limited lights at night, but lights...."

"Do you know scientists have found flint for starting fires that is over seven hundred thousand years old?" Len asked. "George told me that back when they were excited to use fire; I guess some are the same here."

He pointed around them. He motioned them all to gather at what used to be a park but fell into ruin and decay and was an overgrown bit of land. A stream ran along one side where the horses went to drink and eat the long grasses. "I teach my groups to use flint, now."

"And I can make a fire with one," Rae stated.

"Me, too," Carl said.

"When we get back, everyone will go through a gate check to make sure that no one is infected. Those suspected will have a comfortable place to rest, clean up, drink water, eat food, and read books...for at least few days to be sure.

Those who check out clean will be allowed in and can get settled. Your necks...the backs of your necks will be checked, too, because of military inoculations."

"A cure?" It was the old question people asked over and over.

"No, it makes people kind of immune to the bites, but they still have some of the same symptoms that the zoms have. I bet the military doctors didn't talk to you. For inoculation."

"What about necks?" Anthony rubbed his.

Kim laughed. "They put tattoos on those they inoculated."

"I ain't got a tat," the man said, "I want one."

"We got someone who does that," said Kim as he pulled up one sleeve to show his wife's name, the Jet, Hannah, Katie, Georgie, and Stevie (he didn't know one day he would have another three added).

"Anyone Injured?" Len asked. "We better do a check."



“My ankle,” Jessica said.

“It isn’t bitten,” Teeg examined it again and told Len. “Sprained. Not a mark on her; it’s just a sprain. He patted her with plastic gloves.” I put some cream on the ankle that will numb it; also, we have a good wrap on it. The doctors can take a look, but you aren’t bitten or scratched. Take some Tylenol, and drink this water for me.”

Carl held out a leg. “Screwed up knee, thank you very much, Lacey.”

Julia examined it and wrapped it more securely for him, making him wince. “It’s just bruised, but I bet it smarts a little. I think you’ll be off of it for a few days.”

“I ought to kick her ass for that, too,” Beth muttered.

Patrick showed Julia a chewed thumbnail since she asked to see all injuries. She looked very serious and thanked him for showing her.

After checking him with his mother’s help and finding him clear, she added a band-aid to his thumb after cleaning it thoroughly and putting a cream on the little torn nail. “Try not to use it too much until the nail is better.” With a wink at his parents, she patted his head.

“Thank you, Miss Julia,” he beamed.

Joyce held her hands up and said, “Nothing on me. Nothing on my legs; Jessica, check me?” Beth helped, saying the woman looked fine. Joyce and Bart relaxed and hugged Patrick as he watched the proceedings curiously. Teeg and Rae were checked, then Beth and Kim, then Len and Rev. They were cleared.

“Kim,” Len called his friend over. He was looking at Lacey’s ankle.

“What is it?” Lacey demanded.

“Just looking,” Len told her. He looked at her scratch. While bites were a given for the spread of the infection, scratches could go either way and often proved to be fine if it were a zed.

Reds often were covered in their own infectious blood and fecal matter, and a scratch easily could spread the germs. Zeds that were bitten and then infected might spread it with a scratch, but it depended on how fast they turned and their over all conditions. Also, more decomp meant more infection.

Len didn’t think it would help to ask the girl which kind scratched her.

There was only a small scratch on Lacey, hardly an inch long, with just a little blood, something that looked as if it were made by a cat’s claw or a thin branch. It was practically nothing.

However, the one who did this must have been a Red and had all kinds of infection on his hands, allowing the tiny bits of blood to enter Lacey's blood stream in the small cut.

She was infected.

Most people would have a little scratch that would start healing the next day and be fine by the third day. *This* particular scratch wouldn't work out that way. The cut was puffy at the edges, red, angry-looking, and scary. In the center, yellow pus already formed into a crust that smelled terrible, a stench, which once smelled, became unforgettable: such as rotting eggs, ruined meat, spoiled milk, old diapers, slimy bog waters, and vomit. But more than that, it smelled dangerous and *busy*. Those fast, purplish bruises formed around the wound, painting Lacey's leg all the way to her knee, along with swelling and discoloration.

"Does it hurt?"

She looked afraid to answer. Len used plastic gloves and pressed the flesh gently, letting some of the pus flow free, wiping it away, and relieving the pressure that was already building. That always hurt so badly, but it relieved the pain for a while. Lacey tensed with the pain and then relaxed as it settled into a throb. "Yes. It hurts. What's wrong?"

Len looked her over and sat back and said, "The blood on your face didn't do anything; your eyes are clear, and you're okay with that. When you received this scratch, the thing's hands were dirty with spit or blood, and it opened up your skin with its nails." He hated this part. "Lacey, you're infected."

"No," she argued as she stumbled to her feet, "I am not."

"I'm sorry...."

Beth rubbed her knuckles against her shirt. She hit the woman, and if her saliva met a cut on Beth's hand, she would also be infected. Without thinking, she looked to Kim. He grabbed Beth's hand and looked at it carefully, but there weren't any marks. "Nothing."

"Give me the alcohol," Beth demanded. It wouldn't help, but she felt better swabbing her hand. Kim took the cloth and scrubbed for her. "Use gloves," she warned him.

"I don't need them," Kim said. What he meant was more than the words alone conveyed.

"What about me?" Lacey asked. "What do I do now?"

“This is what it is: You are infected, and I’m sorry, but you will turn. What you decide is called *your own terms*. How do you want to handle that part?” Alex asked her.

“You can’t mean that...*my terms*?” Lacey spat furiously.

“I watched a lady named Gina drink some gin and tonic in a tall glass with ice and take a handful of pills to help her decide for herself. I’ve seen people use a gun and handle it fast that way. People have asked me to take care of it for them,” Kim said. “I’ve also seen some ignore it and let it go until they turned, and then I put them down so that they wouldn’t live that way and harm others by attacking them.”

“Your choice,” Alex said softly, “people should be afforded the dignity to decide for themselves.”

“You can’t go any further with us. It’s spreading in you very fast.”

“You wanna shoot me, or I can kill myself; that’s what you have to offer? I never asked you to come get me out of the fucking mall where I was safe and uninfected,” Lacey screamed as tears rolled down her cheeks. She tried to think past the nausea and the throbbing of her ankle and her head.

“Awe, man,” Anthony said quietly.

“Just glad it isn’t you, huh?” Lacey asked. She leaned over to vomit until her stomach ached but was empty. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You decide for yourself what is right and best,” Alex said, “that’s far more than the zeds got; you have a choice in this. Imagine how they felt having no choice and being stuck like that forever unless someone bashed in their heads. We have a choice to say goodbye and to die how we want. I know I don’t have the guts, but how could I ask a friend to do it? Hard choice. But I know these fine people will do it right, and that’s my choice.”

“He’s right...you can,” Carl began and then cocked his head to the side. He looked at Len questioningly, confused. Something felt, as Len said, ‘hinky’.

Len’s jaw dropped before he could cover it. He felt sick.

“You mean if it were you,” Beth said to Alex. Unconsciously, her hand crushed down on Kim’s hand.

“Lacey, you have to decide, now,” Len said.

Lacey yelled a few curses and ran away from the rest, never looking back as she fled them; only a few watched, disinterested.

“I’m out of here; you’re not gonna shoot me like some rabid dog.” It wasn’t too long until she turned. Lacey was going the other way, or Julia might have taken a shot at the girl’s head, not wanting a zombie to come around.

Rae even raised her gun for a second before registering Len’s face. The shot would set off a barrage of emotions. She felt kicked in her gut. She thought and shook her head sadly, and Len gave her a nod.

“We’re going to start walking. Let’s leave the other three horses for Beth, Len, and Kim? Carl? Teeg? You want to come and help me?” Rae asked. She whispered to Rev and then said, “See ya, Alex. God speed.”

“For sure, Foxy Roxy Rae,” Alex said. Rev waved silently. Carl nodded and followed, holding his head down, sick to his stomach, and wishing he weren’t there.

“Beth, you and Jules wanna go on with Teeg?” Kim asked.

Julia stared, still putting it all together in her mind.

“You mean if you had to make a choice. Right, Alex?” Beth asked him. Next to Julia, Alex was her closest friend. The three were very close.

“I love you, Beth. And Jules. You two go with Teeg, okay? And you tell Kevin how brave and cool I was.”

“No,” Julia screamed, launching herself at Alex. Big Bill plucked her from mid-air and wrapped her in his strong arms. Despite her kicking and punching, he managed to carry her as he moved down the road, taking the blows as she fought to get loose. Julia was a fighter, and few could have held her back.

“She’s having some problems with this, I guess,” Alex said. His face was going hotter with fever, and he motioned to his leg. “Bitten right above the boot.”

“Because of me,” Teeg’s eyes filled with tears as he replied.

“You wish I hadn’t saved your handsome ass?” Alex asked and chuckled, “get out of here, or you’ll make me sad. Take Beth.”

“Are you sure, Alex?” Kim asked.

“Positive. It’s okay; it’s like I told that girl; this is better than what the others got. I got to see the mall...go figure...wow. Anyway, it’s my terms, and that’s just fine. You take care of my sweetie, Hannah, as she’s liable to take this badly.”

“I will.” Kim shook hands with Alex and then hugged him. Len did the same, then Teeg. “Beth? We need to get you out of here so Len and I

can....”

It was the reason her friends admired her, and in all the world of chaos, she survived. It was why Kim loved her and why she became a mother to three adopted children. Beth’s face went from pale and sad to gentle and kind. She looked strong. Her jaw set firmly; she took a deep breath. “Alex, Honey, who do you want to be here with you and take care of things?”

“I don’t want any of you to have to do it, but if I do it, I’ll be shaking and may screw it up,” Alex sorrowfully said, looking at the ground. “I’m sorry to have to ask...maybe I’ll just....” A wave of nausea hit him as his stomach clenched. Raw meat would settle the pain. His vision felt a little foggy.

“Are you ready?” Len asked, “we can wait, or we can talk first...we can....”

“Ahhh, stop putting it off. I need this while I can still think right and be myself. If I wait, then I’ll get scared, and the fever is already making me feel weird; it’s moving fast in me....”

He hoped that was enough. The nausea was bad, the fever was getting bad, and his calf ached all the way into his groin. In a little while, his head was going to be more dizzy and slippery than it was now, and he would not be himself. He could feel the infection nibbling at his mind and erasing his sense of self. “It’s going extremely fast.”

“We need some privacy, okay?” Len asked Beth and Kim. This was his offering to keep them from seeing it and for his taking on the responsibility alone.

“I can handle this....” Kim was uncomfortable and knew Len was miserable.

Beth held up one slender hand that held her rifle. Her face was a mask of calm. “You boys go on and let me spend a bit of time with my friend, okay?”

Kim didn’t want his wife to do this and cry later, but he saw her look of determination and love for Alex. He nodded and stepped away, turning his back and walking a few steps away, giving his wife and his friend the respect and privacy they needed. It was the only gift he had for Beth: his show of belief in her ability.

Len rubbed at his eyes. “Allergies,” he said and saluted Alex and Beth and moved away as well, going to stand with Kim.

“Hannah is going to be so pissed off; you know how she is. She’s going to throw a fit and do something wicked,” Beth told Alex.

“I bet she will.”

“Lord, now I’ll have to listen to her rant. Gee thanks, Alex.”

“Sorry, I am dying and pissing off your kid,” he chuckled, “take care of her, Bethy; she is amazing, and she’s going to be a more amazing woman. She’s the future.”

“Alex. She’s a hybrid,” Beth told him.

“No shit? Wow, Beth, I’m speechless. Who knows?”

“Kim. Me. Len. You, now.”

“Going to the grave with me....” Alex laughed again, “I wish I could be around just to see what comes of that. Let me amend my prediction; she’s going to be a warrior, Bethy. I’m so proud you’ve kept her secret like you have. You are so strong, but you always doubt that, but that right there is how strong you are.”

“I love her,” Beth said as they walked a few steps.

“Despite your hatred for the inoculation plus everyone you love that turned hybrid with the infection, and despite the set rules you have in your mind, you would never harm a friend, and yet, you volunteered to come out here with me ‘cause you know I love you and you’re giving Kim and Len a break,” Alex said. “Tell Johnny I believe in her. And give my best to Mark and Misty; you know whom to include. And please take care of Jules.”

“Do you remember when Julia would fight with Roy and start cursing in Mexican?”

Alex laughed hard. “She was always a spit fire; I remember now,” he kept talking while Beth allowed him to get ahead of her. He might have known what she was doing, but he kept laughing and focused on Julia and her infamous temper and rants. He was bringing up things she did for the last three years, pointing out the funniest of the situations.

Beth didn’t think it over but raised her gun as Len taught her, exhaled, and pulled the trigger with perfect precision.

Alex dropped gracefully, and Beth turned so fast she didn’t see him hit the ground.

Kim had a worried look, and he and Len both were wet-eyed. Beth didn’t want to talk or hug anyone as her eyes went blurry with tears, but she did a job as she was drilled to do many times. If she thought about what she had just done for very long, she would start screaming.

Three years before, Beth went into shock from the shooting of all the zombies and didn't even know them, much less could be called a close friend of any.

"Burn his body, please," she asked as she passed her friends, "I don't want a dog digging him up."

Len and Kim traded glances but slid bandanas over their lower faces, gathered wood, and started a fire to cremate their friend. The pyre was in the middle of the road, wouldn't spread, but would reduce Alex's remains to ashes.

As the body burned, they didn't stand there to smell the flesh burning; it would have been too much; they walked back to Beth, drank water, and got on their horses.

Julia finally fought her way away from Big Bill and dodged Teeg. Carl snagged her shirt, but she pulled away and ran. She cursed in Mexican all the way back down the road, running as fast as she could in combat boots and with a pack on her back. She stopped running as she caught up to Kim, Len, and Beth.

"Jules, come on," said Beth as she held out a hand to pull Julia up onto her horse, "get up here."

"Is he...I heard the shot," she said as she looked at the body burning.

"I did it. And he went peacefully, Jules. We were talking about you and how you always fought with Roy and cursed. He was laughing so hard..."

Julia let Beth help her as she put a foot into the stirrup and pulled herself up with her best friend. "You were talking about me?"

"Of course. It was funny, and it made us smile."

Julia hugged Beth. "Swear to me right now that you won't leave me alone. Swear it, Beth."

"I swear, you and I all the way to the end. Together."

Julia, who never cried, put her face against Beth, and let her friend be strong this time as she cried, soaking Beth's shirt. Beth would cry later when Kim could hold her and when she could be weak and let it all out. Her chest ached as did her throat from holding back the feelings.

She glanced at Len. "I understand you and Kim and the things you have had to do. It sucks."

"Always does. Sometimes more than other times," Len said, "if I die in the next five minutes, Beth, know this, you are my greatest pride: the way you have risen up and not just survived but have become a strong woman."

God help those who get in your way. I am really proud of all you have become.”

Kim’s eyes looked far away. At one time, Len kind of lost his reason and went on a spree of making every one suffer who harmed innocent people, skinning them and acting as judge and executioner.

When he was bent on pure revenge and vengeance, he said that he was being Len and that he was channeling Len’s personality to get his work done.

Beth did the same a few minutes before when she helped Alex go out on his own terms. He knew the strength and the toll it took on a person’s mind.

“Len, sometimes, I think someone besides Henry Diamond created monsters, but it takes someone bitch-cold to do these things.”

“I fed the man who abused my niece to the gators in Florida,” Len said. He never said what drove him and what fueled his temper and need to punish those who deserved it.

He never told anyone what got him through the tasks such as having to shoot an infected, good person and friend. He never told a soul his secret. “He touched my niece at night, and she screamed when it was bedtime. My sister didn’t know; the asshole just slapped her around. I could have turned him into the law or something; he would have gotten time in jail; there’s a delicate balance. His place was to vanish and never hurt a little girl again.”

“I’m sorry, Len,” Beth told him.

“That’s what I think of and what gets me through it. I kill him over and over, and it does not make me whole, but I did it, and I’d do it again. Sometimes the good guys do some very bad things,” Len sighed.

“It can be difficult.”

“I created what you all have become, huh? Based on my hatred of gator-bait boy. Well, if so, you’re my monsters. I created you, and I love you.”

“Maybe it takes one to survive one,” Kim said.

“We will abide.”



## Chapter 6 Hopetown

Johnny performed her gate duties flawlessly although she cried as soon as she saw the many tear-stained faces of her friends and saw that Alex was missing. She wiped her nose and went by strict protocol.

Conner clasped her hand and squeezed, hoping she would be okay and take pride in that she was so well trained and dependable. When a group returned and the count was one or more off, it was a sad day, but losing Alex was almost too much for many of them.

Each needed to be checked verbally, and then they slipped behind a screen for a body check for bites, scratches, and the dreaded tattoo on the back of the neck.

After that, each was allowed to enter the second paddock, and each gave background information. Then, each would either be quarantined if any doubt remained or allowed to go into the camp. Everyone coming back was checked out and allowed in.

Teeg put an arm around Johnny and whispered what happened as she openly cried. Conner joined them to offer support.

Mark, George, and Matt met them as they came in. The welcome committee took over to help the new people find a place to sleep, to show them around, explain the rules, and explain all they offered for everyone. The newcomers heard all about Hopetown but were still in shock as they took it all in. It wasn't a war zone, but a busy beehive of activity, and everyone waved and welcomed them to the group.

Len faced the three men. "We lost a civilian. She was infected but ran away and was not put down because of other circumstances. The people who were brought in have been in the mall for three years. Isolation with limited contact with others. We also lost Alex to a bite to his calf. It was red, confirmed. He asked to be taken care of, and Beth handled it." Len reported to the men as if he weren't the head of security. The information was vital.

Len's voice cracked with emotion as he related the information.

Mark opened his mouth to speak but didn't know what to say. George took in a deep breath and looked at the ground.

"I can't believe...." Matt shook his head.

Matt took Julia into his arms as she turned to him, a little surprised at her show of emotion in public, and led her away, motioning the rest to go on. She was pale and dizzy, telling him how terrible it was. "I'm so sorry, Jules, take deep breaths...." he suggested. He seldom saw her vulnerable. "Let's go sit a while."

Halfway to their rooms, Julia faltered and then fainted, and he scooped her up and ran all the way to the medical bay where Doc and Steve checked her, listened to the stress she endured, and ran a few simple tests. He initially figured she was dehydrated from all her crying and made sure she drank bottled sports drink that he offered her.

He sent Matt out to wait and then allowed him back in to find a very irritated Julia.

Although he was sad and upset about Alex, Matt came out of the medical bay later to see anxious friends, and he was grinning like an idiot, which made no sense to those who waited for the news. "She's fine."

He was going to be a father.

Julia grumbled. She was devastated about losing Alex, mad at Matt for his happiness over her pregnancy, irritated, and shocked that she was pregnant, and happy she was going to have a baby. Her emotions rolled over and over as she didn't know which one to latch onto, prompting Matt to say she was already hormonal and emotional which got him a slug in his arm, along with a frown.

She was far along in her term,

She hadn't realized she was pregnant, she was far along, but wouldn't show until the end of her seventh month, anyway. However, she was six months along, they figured. She mistakenly thought she was just gaining weight.

She wished Alex knew.

The news made Beth happy, but then she began counting and went to Doc and Steve, leaving everyone to wonder what she was doing.

She walked back out of the clinic and told Kim he was an asshole. Kim dropped his misery at once and swung her around, happy, as he was going to be a father again.

It was the best and only good part of the day.

"We do have birth control," Beth's brother Steve said which earned him a barrage of name-calling from Beth. His own partner Tory was pregnant and about to deliver, so it made Beth more irritable to see him smirk.

She had yet to deal with losing Alex, and Mark shadowed her every footstep while trying to comfort Misty who was inconsolable over Alex. Mark finally handed Misty off to Johnny, Teeg, and Conner so they could go cry together as he was almost pulling his own hair out by then.

“Beth, Kim, I know this is a bad time with losing Alex, and God help me, but I’m going to cry too when it hits me. I know you just got the good news....” He ignored Beth’s glare. “But it’s Hannah and Jet.”

“Are they okay?” Beth almost panicked.

“They’re fine, not a scratch on them.”

“Why aren’t they here to greet us? We have to tell Hannah about Alex; she loved him so much....”

Mark huffed, “Again, I am sorry, but, my God, they pulled a stunt.”

“Worse than usual?” Kim asked.

“Who is tied up this time?” Len asked.

“No, I mean a stunt as in taking the horses and three of our people and going outside the safe zone with a boy who brought in a gun-shot friend. They went to rescue a bunch of people. Alone.”

“Huh?” Kim tried to make sense of that. “They left here? And went outside?”

“Took Andromeda, Sadie, and Jim. They sent Izzy back to tell us they were gone,” Mark explained as he pulled at his hair again.

Kim didn’t like that. Sadie and Jim were just learning how to handle things and weren’t trained yet. Hannah, with her brother, made sense but taking Andromeda was odd. “Why?” was all he asked.

“This boy came along with a wounded friend and held Andie and all the rest at gun point, trying to get his buddy some help. The guy died. Jet and Hannah came along and settled things, but the boy had friends who were taken prisoner. He wanted to borrow ammo to rescue them or something... not sure on that part, but then he mentioned one of the prisoners, and Hannah got a bug up her ass about it.”

“Who?” Beth couldn’t guess.

“John Ponce.”

Beth had to sit down. “Ponce was a prisoner somewhere? Who had him?”

“Some religious nut family, wait until you get that freaky story. They had children turn into a Red and a zed, and they locked them in the basement in a dog cage, got that? Okay, so they were feeding people to the kids.”

“Feeding them?” Len sat down, too, “that’s insane.”

“Healthy people they caught.”

“Pure insanity.”

“Oh, no shit, Len. It was a riot; let me tell you. You won’t believe the story, but they did it and kept people locked up to give to the children.

Ponce was one of the group members they had down in this basement of horrors. The kid...Dave I think was his name...got away and found the safe zone, and Andie, that’s who Hannah went to rescue: John Ponce.”

“I can imagine it,” Beth said quietly to Kim. She knew her daughter felt a kinship with the man. “Okay, then what?”

“The good news is that Hannah and Jet are fine, and they brought Ponce back; we let him inside; I mean what the hell, yanno? Matt and George said okay on that.”

Len nodded. “It’s a weird case that we can break the rules for. John Ponce, I’ll be damned.”

“You can get the long version later, but that basement was a horror show, and everybody was done gone crazy as hell down there, but Ponce, I guess. All the family was killed, and none of it was easy...zoms got some...some shot...except three that Jet let go. That boy, Dave, may have gone after them since he said he couldn’t face people right now. I know it’s confusing.

So all that was there were the crazy Dad and one of the women who was a prisoner who stayed with him. You can imagine she was pissed off. With a knife and a box of matches that Hannah shared with her, she probably pulled a Len.”

“Hey,” Len objected.

Kim knew how the kid felt, not being able to face normal people after seeing pure horror.

“And Jim and another man that they rescued blew their heads off.”

“What? Why?”

“You’ll get it on the long version, but they were pretty well nuts, watching them; well, they tied the people, washed them, and put them on a table.

Next, they gave them something to take the fight out, and then they would remove the legs and cauterize. Arms and cauterize. Buttocks and parts, and they were right there to see and hear screaming.

Sadie, Andie, Hannah, Jet, and Ponce came back,” Mark finished, out of breath, and mad all over again. “I am really pissed off, especially at Jet. He

knows better. I wish I have gotten to kill those nuts, too. I'm just pissed off in general."

"I know, but I am sure Hannah out-talked him and convinced him to go. I bet it was all her idea," Beth added; she knew her kids. "What did they claim?"

"Not much. Jet is trying to say he was the instigator, but Hannah claims the same. She says they had to save Ponce, and get this, she says that Len would have done the same. Andie says it was Hannah, and Sadie claims she doesn't know."

"Is everyone channeling me and blaming me?" Len got some aspirin for a headache that started. It was a hell of a day. "What did you do with our wayward kids?"

"I bitched at them for an hour, making them stand at attention," Mark said, "I went over all the ways they screwed up and the rules; I yelled a lot and sent them both to their rooms and told them not to dare peek out.

I sent Andie out and said I needed to think over what she did, but she went along to make sure they didn't get killed on this stunt. I don't think there was a huge amount of danger, but I am pissed royally at them for ignoring protocol."

"An hour?"

"Yeh."

Kim grimaced. "I think I'll go two hours on them. Beth, you want an hour or two?"

"I am going to skin them both," she said.

Len was side tracked as Kevin was brought to him. Kevin had to tell the man that Alex died on the mission.

Beth left the rest and found her children waiting in their suite. Hannah and Jet were both cleaned up and sat up straight on the soft green sofa together, eyes cutting to the side at one another. For a while, Beth paced in front of her children, deciding what to say. There was so much.

"Okay. First of all, whatever I say, you will sit right there and not move a muscle and not say a damned word. Understood?" They nodded. "Your dad is going to chew you up and spit you out for this stunt, and I am going to let him.

You were both very wrong to break the rules, no matter what you thought. You are too young and too immature to make choices like that. That you did it proves my point."

Hannah nodded quietly.

“First. We live in a hard time. There is life, and there is death. It sucks, but we do the best we can and work hard as a unit with rules and ideals. You cannot do as you please. I have just learned I am having another baby.” Hannah and Jet both couldn’t help but look at her and grin. “That is something I have to think about. Another baby. That, my children, is life. New life. Today, we went out to that mall, and we brought back survivors, and we screwed up even if we followed rules and protocol. That’s on us.”

Jet wanted to ask questions but just tilted his head, curious now.

“We lost a survivor when she did all the wrong things and got bitten. That is death. But because we lost the rules and proper way to do things, we made mistakes, and one cost us dearly.” Beth took a deep breath. “My dear friend Alex was bitten; Alex is dead.”

Hannah gasped and shoved her hand over her mouth, raising her knees in almost a fetal position. Jet grabbed her arm and clamped down with horror. Gulping as she squealed into her hand, Hannah rocked as she cried.

“He was bitten, and he decided his terms. I walked with him and kept him talking even if I were dying inside. He was already going over, but I walked behind him, and I shot him. Me. I did it. I shot Alex because we made a mistake, and he was infected. Can you even imagine how I feel?”

Jet met her eyes.

“Now imagine me coming back in pain and finding out what you two did. What if one of you had to do what I did: to walk behind and shoot the other in the head. Jet, do you want to do that for Hannah?”

He shivered and shook his head.

“Hannah, do you want to shoot your brother? Do you want to do that and then burn him in a fire?”

“No, Ma’am,” she stuttered and hiccupped, still wailing.

“That is all I have to say on this matter. You have sat and worried about what your dad and I were going to say. I have said it.

Now, you both just think on it, and when you have thought enough, you owe Mark, Matt, Sadie, and Andie an apology. You owe George and Len one as well. You can both pray for poor Jim.

I know your hearts were in the right place, and I am so proud of your bravery and the fact you both are such good fighters, but I will be damned if I can stand for one of my babies to have to be shot in the head, too,” said

Beth as she spun and left the room. Jet fell over against his sister, crying as it all hit him.

Kim looked in, hearing the last part and didn't spend two hours dressing them down; both were chastised and made aware of what they did wrong. It was a terrible lesson they would never forget.

That night, he held his wife while she cried for her friend and the next day and for weeks afterwards. His wayward children would act contrite and keep quiet as they worked harder than ever. They did issue full apologies that they meant, and when they came to Kim and Beth, both held them and told them how much they were loved.

That time was forever imprinted on the siblings, and they never forgot the lesson. Jet set a goal for himself, learning rules and protocol for everything, and eventually he was Matt's second, always dependable and unyielding about the proper ways to do things. He only had to look at Kevin to remind himself how loss felt and what it looked like.

Hannah understood and worked hard to learn everything she could, shadowing Len often and asking for more training. While Jet learned one lesson from everything, Hannah learned another.

She regretted the meanness she showed Ponce when they rescued him. Why didn't she learn mercy and kindness, along with her other lessons?

When she was ready, she planned to kill every single zombie on the planet by herself so that her mother would never again have to go through the pain of shooting a friend. She cursed the inoculation everyday of her life because she was forced to have it, but now, she accepted it, knowing she could go out and kill the monsters without fear of them.

Hannah embraced her destiny.

## Chapter 7

### Z Year 7

The day and evening began wonderfully. The weather was perfect, and everyone was busy all day with work and social activities. As night came and the night air cooled, Beth called Hannah to walk with her, holding her daughter's hand.

When they came to the bonfire, Hannah saw everyone she loved sitting and waiting, and there was a big table with a cake and bowls, and they shouted a 'Happy Birthday' to her: she was now nineteen.

Katie danced over to her, hugging her tightly; she was twelve, the age Hannah was when all this began but far more innocent.

Hannah didn't let go of her little sister even as the twins, Georgie and Stevie, aged seven, ran to hug her; followed by Ben and Neal, her little brothers; and Jet, her handsome, smart, strong twenty-four-year-old-brother. Mark and Misty's brood: Zane, Lex, John, and Lenny, were there, already begging for cake while Misty sat watching them with her belly big again. Jilly Montaine held her baby Cinder, and Johnny held little Roxie whom she passed to Conner so she could take Jilly's baby.

Jilly sang beautiful songs to Hannah that made everyone feel good and then some fast, old pop songs that made people dance and cheer.

Then everyone put away guitars, and Jilly sat down again. Hannah cut her cake and licked the frosting with delight. Katie must have designed the birthday cake, as it was big, pink, and covered with frosted roses and tiny blue flowers and tasted of almonds.

Julia sat content with Matt and their children: Thury, Hagan, and the youngest, Bryanna, all named for friends who lost their lives. Steve and Tory's kids ran or toddled everywhere, and they scrambled to keep up with the little ones. Hannah laughed a lot and opened gifts: a new cross bow, bad-ass boots, a brush and comb set in real silver, and a pendant from Jet that was real amber and contained an insect trapped within. It caught the light and sparkled with a deep gold.

Hannah knew that the insect was an analogy.

Beth and Kim didn't have a gift for her to unwrap but handed Hannah an envelope with a few words written inside. They chose a beautiful blood bay horse for Hannah, and that was her gift; Katie had drawn a horse on the



paper in exquisite detail. Len gave her a sharp, wicked knife that she could use instead of her stand by knife that was worn to a sliver.

Misty and Mark gave her a quilt that Misty laboriously sewed, each square embroidered with a name of a dear friend. Hannah traced Alex's name sadly. Hannah had a pile of special gifts.

Teeg, Carl, and Maria gave her the last gift and grinned like fools as they did so. It was something Carl found and polished to a rich glow. Hannah found under the wrapping paper a new katana that was real with its own sheath that Teeg worked on for hours with wax and oils. It was much more than Hannah could have dreamed of.

One never knew when a birthday would be more than cake and a few songs. When the day was chosen, that person got special gifts, and it was a very big day. This was Hannah's special birthday. Brushing back her long blonde hair, she thanked each person and basked in the fire's warmth.

Only a few people were not at the gathering, but Hannah knew they'd be along soon.

Over the last few years, John Ponce, whom she and the others rescued, went out to seek more survivors and bring them in. They wanted to incorporate a new building to house them all. The building once was a big office building, but it was perfect, and the land around it made excellent gardens. Never did anyone go hungry or unsatisfied. Ponce wasn't there.

Zane and Katie held hands, nervous that both sets of their parents, Kim and Beth and Misty and Mark might disapprove, but no one said a word. The children ate cake.

It was perfect until Doc sent word that some were needed to come quickly to medical bay. Children were sent to the main house or with others to where they lived. The original group that survived, mostly in the hospital, trudged to the medical bay.

Steve looked especially worried. Hannah suspected he knew something.

"I was sworn to secrecy, and for once, I kept my mouth closed," Doc began.

"For once," Kim muttered.

Doc rolled his eyes. "You all know George has been tired lately and has rested more and has let Mark handle things. Here it is straight up. He has cancer. It began with a sore on his side, and I believe it settled in his body. It's all in his organs now."

Mark sighed.

“He said he was under the weather and would come later,” Beth said.  
Someone gasped.

“We know he’s on up there in age now, and he’s mighty tired. He came in earlier tonight and said he felt his time was about over. He’s resting comfortably. He takes painkillers, but tonight he’s pretty sober and wants to talk to everyone. I feel you should say your goodbyes. It could be tonight, or he could last months....”

“Tonight?” Kim asked, “no, that isn’t possible.”

Doc said, “But we know George and how he thinks. I will bet anyone he has a stash of those painkillers since he asked me to bring him a nice gin and tonic. You know what that means. Please don’t upset him; let him have some peace. I think he’s chosen this day so he doesn’t have to suffer anymore.”

Everyone followed Doc’s directions uneasily, knowing that since they were called and George came of his own free will, time was short.

They filed into the room: Len, Mark, Misty, Beth, Kim, Johnny, Julia, Matt, Benny, and Hannah. In the hall stood Conner, Teeg, Carl, Pak, Jet, Big Bill, Rae, Walt, Charles, Pan, Andromeda, Rev, Steve, and Nick. More people stood outside the building.

“I miss Alex,” George said. Like a shepherd, he knew his flock and missed even the one.

“He’s...he didn’t make it back, George, you know, but he specifically said he wanted to go out on his terms as you taught him, and he was very much at peace at the end,” Len said. “We all miss him.” He knew what point George wanted to reinforce.

“I’m sorry to ruin your evening, Hannah, but I was hurting a little too much,” said Len.

“I understand.”

“I don’t think I am going to say something for you to think on for months such as special things to each of you; you know me and how I am. It has been an honor and a privilege to work and fight and live beside each of you. I have told you that every day.” His voice carried strongly as he tried to make sure everyone heard. “You all made this; you are Hopetown, and you are my family. I am so humbled that I could help in any way as governor.”

“We are honored, George, to have known you and to have fought alongside of you; that has been the greatest honor of my life,” Len said, his

voice cracking, “you dreamed Hopetown, and it was. Thank you for our very survival.”

“Amen,” Teeg said.

“Hannah, I am sorry to ruin your birthday, but I do have a gift there on the table.”

She took it with trembling hands. Unwrapping it, she found a lovely ring, a band set with rubies. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“That belonged to my wife. When you wear it, you look at that color; it’s blood red. You always remember that blood alone doesn’t make a family. You are my family because of love. Use that to remind you that you have a family here and you are special. Blood of our blood.”

She slid it onto her right hand and showed him. He seemed pleased and nodded. “Now stop the sad eyes. We have business to conduct.”

“Business?” Julia whispered.

George nodded, “As Governor of Hopetown in the year Z7, I hereby convey Governorship to Mark. May I have a second?”

“I second that,” Kim said immediately.

“I do as well,” Julia said.

“I do,” Beth said.

“So it is passed that Mark will take over as Governor of Hopetown and lead as George has taught us. So say we all?” Matt asked.

“Yes,” said the chorus.

“So be it.” George smiled weakly. “I would talk longer, but my friends, I am in a bit of pain and am very tired. I know Alex must be waiting on me. He’s waited a while now, hasn’t he?”

I’d like to sit alone with Benny, my oldest friend. It’s high time for a drink and a rest.” He eyed the gin and tonic. “Don’t concern yourselves or think poorly; you all know I have always said a man or woman has the right to die and seek peace on his or her own terms. Now, it is time for me to have my own terms respected. I always said I would go out on my terms. Goodnight, my friends.”

Hannah spun and ran crying from the room; several followed. They nodded at George with tears or with brave fronts as they left him alone. Len appeared to be the most miserable, so Kim and Beth walked with their arms around him.

Julia joined them as they walked down the path. None would sully George’s grand exit with anything more than what they did.

Steve handed George something to prevent nausea as he began his journey. Benny sat alone with his friend, talking about old times as police officers and about old friends. George didn't say anything when Benny suddenly cried a few times but patted his friend's hand.

Quietly, without a show, George swallowed his pills from his stash and sipped the delicious gin and tonic, savoring it. He did it this way to keep Steve and Doc from feeling as guilty.

The cancer showed on his side, but was also in his stomach, liver, and lungs, feeding and growing as it took over, causing pain. George didn't want to lie there eating pain medication and screaming when the meds no longer worked; he wanted to leave the world in peace and with his dignity intact. He and Benny sat silently. George took the syringe that Doc loaded earlier with a large dose of morphine and injected himself.

Benny took George's old, gnarled hand and felt the power and goodness of his friend's spirit. In the man's hand were hard work, dedication, a sharp mind, kindness and justice, love, and hope. George forced people to survive and do their best from his own sheer will.

"I love ya, old man," Benny said, "seems I sure am leaking at the eyes."

"I love you, too, Benny. Take this message to the others: Zane's time will come again; look to Zane. I feel there will be battles, and he is the strength for Hopetown. I think there's so much more to come for everyone: good things...powerful things."

"He can't do his little magic tricks anymore," Benny said. Zane once caused fire to consume some very evil people who killed his family, saving himself and a friend, Gabe.

He also sent little lights around a room to unbelievers, allowing them to feel their loved ones at peace. He protected Len, Kim, and Nick when they were almost crucified.

He summoned his dead mother's spirit and watched her unleash a pack of wolves and wild dogs on the evil Reconstruction Army to finish them off and to stop their reign of terror and torture. But he never again did his little tricks in the years since.

Now, he was just a normal little twelve-year-old.

"Tell them: Look to Zane," George was so dizzy he could hardly speak. "He is the Omega. Zane. My terms. This is George's terms." He fell asleep with a smile, and in a few minutes, his breathing stopped, and he was still.

Benny wept, his head on the bed, holding George's hand.

George went out on his own terms, but, oh my, it was so painful for those left behind. “Lord, give me strength,” Benny prayed.

He stood and then went outside where people waited, knowing what was about to happen.

There was a lot of crying and hugging. All wondered what they would do without the *rock* they leaned on. From the beginning, they all depended on the four old men who were the backbone. Tink, then Thurman, and now, George. They were gone.

Benny told them how peaceful George was, that he felt in control, and was satisfied with going out on his own terms. “Lean on Mark, Len, Kim, and Matt. They have strong shoulders and backs and can be rocks.” But Benny was sad beyond words. He was all that was left of the four.

Hannah stared at the ruby ring.

Mark looked overwhelmed with his new title although George had been training him for years. He wondered how a small town, country deputy sheriff ended up as a leader, no, a Governor of a huge group of people and how in the hell would he make the right choices and do the right things. He looked at Len, Kim, Matt, and the rest; he knew they would be his guides.

They, in turn, would be his rocks. This wasn’t something he asked for or wanted, and yet, here he was, and his duty was to serve these people. Misty laid her head against his shoulder, believing in him fully. He didn’t think he could do this.

Benny saw Zane in the shadows, watching uncomfortably as young people will, fidgeting and taking it all in. What did George mean? What was coming and what would Zane do? Benny didn’t know, but as he watched Zane, he saw the boy was young, immature, fanciful, but good because even in the shadows, he was like a light.

Benny would tell the others in a while, but for now, it was mourning time. Now was the time to add another carved cross to their graveyard. Besides, Benny wanted to think about George’s last words and what they might mean for all the survivors.

What did it mean that Zane was the future?

Chapter 8  
Year Z 10  
Beth

Ten years seems like forever, yet it seems as it passed in a flash. Year Z 3 when I lost Alex and Year Z 7 when we lost George were hard years. I'm lying.

Every year was hard after the zombies came. No matter how secure things were and how much food we had, we all knew that all around the world were those things just waiting to eat us alive. Just because the wolves didn't howl at the door didn't mean they weren't outside, waiting in the woods. Read *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Hannah was a grown woman, not the child full of mischief and smart remarks, but a woman, grown tall, fierce, confident, and beautiful. On her horse were basic supplies, plus a rifle, a katana, and a cross bow that she could use as easily as some ate with a spoon. On her belt was a handgun.

She stood five feet ten, almost five eleven, and an inch taller in her boots, all lean muscle and power; she was like a cat that would unwind and pounce. Blonde hair flowed long, but she kept it tightly braided off of her face, and she wore no cosmetics. Her features were sharp, nose straight and dignified, intelligent but distrusting eyes, wide set and blue. She had full lips that always seemed to be smirking, and I suppose she was.

Men and boys stared at her and made inane comments to get her attention, but she didn't respond to them. Her focus was on being the best with every weapon available and building those muscles. Big girl, Big dreams.

She had a mission in her mind: in fact, she had a few. She wanted to destroy every zed on earth, and if anyone could, she could.

She wanted to eventually find a man worthy of her, who could handle her strong spirit, and who would appreciate her power. She wanted to see places in the United States and find out what happened and how all fared.

Hannah wanted to reach out to other settlements and share ours with them for trading. Simply, my daughter needed to be doing something, working on a goal, and making changes in a world that was ruined.

In ways, she was perfect for that.

Inoculated against her will when she was twelve, she was a science experiment that went a little wrong. She was lethal if she shared bodily fluids with anyone, could infect a person, craved raw meat at times, but she was also stronger and had a higher pain tolerance than anyone who was not inoculated. She was also immune from the infection if bitten.

She was not immune to the crazy people out in the wilds who did unspeakable things. But then again, my beautiful, wonderful daughter was not quite sane herself. In a time before, she would have been given pills to take and would have sat in therapy a few times a week at the very least.

Her siblings cried as she left the suite to travel. I held back my tears, wondering if I would ever see my strange, but amazing child again. Her father cried a little, too.

She wouldn't be alone.

Len was going with some travelers to a settlement in Oklahoma to help them for a while like he did often; he had the need to roam. He would be with them for a while.

Ricky, the son of Ivory Joe who helped save Kim's life once, was going, as was Lance, the brother to Matt who had yet to find his place in the community. Sadie, who became close friends with Hannah, was joining them, as were Anthony and Robbin, the ones saved at the mall. The last traveler hurt my heart as well. My son, Jet was going.

When did the boy-turned-man not watch out for his little sister, protecting her and always siding with her antics? It wasn't a huge surprise, but I hoped not to lose both children.

Jet was Matt's second for security for years, and if anyone could protect Hannah, it would be the big, strong man who once Gothic and grungy and was now handsome and muscular, tall and self-confident. He stood well over six feet, maybe six foot four, as he was taller than Kimball.

They saddled up; Hannah was on the lovely blood bay mare we gave her for her nineteenth birthday. They went through the first paddock, and I held myself back from begging them not to go.

Mark and Matt saluted them, and Johnny opened the next gate. Then, Conner opened the final gate, and they rode out, eight people I knew and cared about, all promising to come back and visit soon, promising to settle down one day, promising they would be in touch.

Of the eight, I would see less than half again.

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## Chapter 9

### Hannah

As they left the compound, each had a mental picture they carried along. Hannah's was of her family; it was the same one Jet took in his mind.

Anthony had an image of the last baseball game he played there and Andromeda the woman he spent some time with.

Sadie thought of the food they were leaving and wondered what it would be like to be hungry. In the cellars were more food than people in the old world could imagine: jellies and jams of all kinds of fruit carefully canned and dated, canned vegetables, dried nuts and herbs, bags of ground wheat and corn, dried beans, and pickled items such as eggs and veggies, smoked and salted meats, and that was just what they added daily.

Shelves still were loaded with canned and packaged foods and MREs from ten years ago. Some of the fresh food gathered every day was eaten, and some was stored away as they rotated the stored food.

Sadie ate better these last ten years than she had the ten years before.

Robbin would miss the business, work, play, noises of children, the sounds of the animals they kept, and the constant movement that happened in Hopetown.

Ricky had a picture in his mind of his family, but he wanted to see the world again and to take those mental pictures with him. Maybe he would paint or draw them.

Lance would miss family and the water; he had a terrible fear of not ever having fresh water or of never being clean. He wanted to see the ocean, no matter how bad things looked at the coast; he wanted to watch the waves roll in.

"It should be easy going for a while," Jet said. That meant the way was passable.

In some places, the cracked and eroded highway was overgrown with tall grass and was breaking further as tree roots shoved the asphalt upwards as the trees grew, despite the conditions. Mostly pine trees had sprung up. Fields were forests of scrub pine, the barbed wire long gone. Cars lay in junk heaps, crashed together in jumbled piles of rusted metal, broken glass,

rotten tires, and big diesel trucks were almost unrecognizable, all caused by the event, wind, rainstorms, and other elements of nature.

The group, having left Len at the Texas border, walked their horses south, along the edge of the roads where once a few small towns had been, the buildings now in piles of old wood grown over with ivy, mold, grass, and pine trees.

Hannah stopped at one spot and puzzled over it. “I remember that.” A broken, huge letter *M* was leaning on a tree. The yellow color was still there although very faded. “Mack Ds?”

“McDonald’s, famous for its hamburgers and French fries. People drove up to a window, ordered food, and then took it home to eat. Or the customers could go inside and eat. Kids liked the food and the playground.”

Hannah nodded to Lance. “I remember now. I went there to eat.” She kept looking back as if in fear the large *M* would follow them. “My sister and brother got the toys: Barbies, Matchbox cars, Hello Kitty toys, and super heroes.”

Jet pointed out a spot. “A park or a rest stop: a person could stop his car, pee in the bathrooms, buy snacks, and check directions, using the map hanging on the wall.

“It looks haunted,” Sadie said.

Lance agreed, “Do you know people used to buy and sell grass, trees, soil, flowers, even water, and oxygen?”

“Didn’t they have it? I mean...water was from a tap, and everyone breathed air,” Hannah said.

Lance laughed. “They wanted the best air or best water, filtered. They wanted better grass, a better color of green.

“They could have filtered the water. We do. And we grow grass; why buy it?” Hannah was confused.

“You didn’t do it yourself; you bought it already fixed for use.”

“I don’t understand that,” Hannah said finally, after thinking about it for a while.

She looked over a car lot of old, rusted vehicles and had a memory of a car dealership with a woman who had bad manners or talked about manners, and there was something about a zom. Hannah had shot her gun there, but she pushed most of the memories out of her mind and didn’t quite recall the details, as if it were a dream she had awakened from.

A few ghouls stumbled about in tatters of old clothing or were naked, but they had been zeds and had eroded badly so they walked on leg bones that rubbed away on the ground.

They didn't groan or moan, but hissed through old, worn out vocal cords, and the prions just about had given up on controlling those useless bodies and brains. People shot them from a distance, using scopes, but didn't pay much attention to them.

An old home stood with heavily boarded, dusty windows and a battered open front door. Bones littered the yard and porch where insects and animals had stripped them. That was a fairly common sight as many had tried to secure themselves and homes but had been over run, the inhabitants of the house long gone.

They found a ranch-styled house still standing on a hill where they made camp, a fire was built behind the structure out of sight. Hannah purified water they drew from an old well; it looked clean and was cool. Jet and Lance brought back a deer that the others cut up and began to cook.

Later, Ricky licked his fingers and sighed. The venison, potatoes baked in the coals, onions, and corn grilled were their meal. The rest of the meat would be carried for dinner the next night, supplemented with a few cans of vegetables they found in the remains of the old house. Len taught them to live on what they could find as much as possible.

They set up guards but slept well in their own sleeping bags in the house.

Before going to bed, Hannah curiously walked through the home. There was a kitchen because families then ate dinner alone or in restaurants with strangers, not in common places with people they knew. Wasteful.

There was a living room where parents sat before huge televisions, laughing with the audience as they were cued, and they watched famous people acting foolish and uneducated, or they cheered for teams who played in stadiums where fans wore the same colored shirts and ate stadium foods. Endless hours were spent before televisions and in those stadiums.

There was a desk with a computer, something Hannah missed: being able to find answers with a few clicks. It was so much easier than looking in books or learning by doing something or being taught. She didn't recall much of what she learned from the computer, however.

In the master bedroom was a closet the size of a small room with clothing packed into it. Hannah picked up a high-heeled shoe and looked at it closely. These were used for dress up in plays; she tried wearing one on

stage, but to imagine women choosing to wear them daily was confusing. Why would they need so many in so many colors and styles, and how did they squeeze their toes into the pointed ends everyday and above all, how did they walk in them? And why?

Crystal, cloudy bottles, tiny and fascinating sat together. Hannah opened a bottle and sniffed as an old, but lovely scent perfumed the air, flowers and musk. Another bottle had a fruiter, lighter scent. Hannah took the tiny one that smelled of y'lang y'lang, her mother's favorite scent.

On a bedside table lay an old book: *The Stand* by some man named King. A lamp had fallen to the side, and the bed sheets, once expensive and soft, matched the coverlet and pillowcases and were marred by rat droppings.

Under the table and behind a door were a diary that Hannah ignored, some photographs chewed to bits, a box of junk jewelry, and a rat-gnawed plastic thing, about eight inches long, green, and shaped like a penis. Hannah found old batteries inside. She could guess the intention of its use but not the reason for it.

Everywhere were so many things that belonged to the people who had once lived in this house. How could they have used so much, and why did they want to? She could remember living this way but didn't know why she did.

She opened the door of a child's room and closed it again. It was full of toys and old faded wallpaper that reminded her of her siblings' bedrooms ten years ago. She could almost hear Tracie yelling, "Mommmyyyy," and feel her fingernails puncturing her arms when the girl threw a fit. Bad memories.

"Choppy, choppy," Hannah muttered, not even realizing she spoke aloud.

In the bathroom, Hannah did look at the big tub with longing. She took a few rolls of tissue paper and stepped out. Of all this, a tiny vial of perfume and toilet paper were all she saw of value.

"You doing okay?" Ricky asked her.

"Sure. It's like a museum of the past, interesting to look at, but worthless."

The next night, they abandon the first choice for a campsite because as soon as Sadie, Hannah, and Jet saw that someone filled the house with religious symbols, filling every surface and wall, and that many footprints were fresh, they backed out wide-eyed and jumping at shadows.

Only after the night passed peacefully and they had set up camp the next night would they explain to the rest about the people in the basement they had found years before.

“Historical District,” Jet read aloud the faded sign.

“I wonder what the history was?”

So far, most of Jefferson, Texas looked burned to the ground, but as they canted to the left and not directly through the town, a few unburned sights remained. “That’s amazing,” Sadie said, “that old house...was it like Greek or French or something? This isn’t New Orleans.”

Hannah knew about those places and had looked at pictures but had no answers. The lawns were terribly over grown, trees were tall but some had fallen, causing damage. The original neat white paint was scraped and weathered to a dull shade of grey, and some of the glass was broken, but the old house was standing behind giant azaleas and magnolias.

Built over a hundred years before with care and craft, the house still had its elegant columns, wide porch, and stone steps.

“Can we look?”

Jet and Lance nodded. As they picked their way through the fallen wrought iron fence and gate and over the grass and moss covered rock walkway, they stared at the three-story beauty.

Inside, was neither a computer nor a television, only dusty, dirty velvet drapes, faded rugs, and a lot of old furniture that, beneath the dust, was beautiful and strong.

Lance lit an old lamp and watched Hannah’s surprise. “They used oil lamps in the old, really old days.”

“And candles. And they used a scrub board?” Delighted, Hannah skipped from room to room. She rubbed her hand along a quilt, thinking of Misty.

“Why wasn’t it stripped?” Ricky wondered.

“See how the water has been up? Until recently, I bet the water was up almost to the top of the porch, and for some reason, people didn’t want to wade into the water, I guess.”

Anthony marveled at a big cypress, the Spanish moss hanging from the branches as if it had been festooned with decorations and watched everything curiously. Birds filled the clear blue sky. “I like it here.”

“I think people came here, shopped, ate out, and looked at the old houses.”

“Why?” Hannah asked.

“They were curious and amazed how people lived back then without electricity and other modern things. I think people admired life before now; don’t you miss things from before Year Z?”

“No. Not at all,” Hannah said. She hated life before when no one who loved her or felt appreciation for her abilities.

“I miss some things,” Lance admitted. He stopped and used his binoculars.

“There’s the water,” Jet said. He looked at the slightly sloping land. Although grass grew in places along the brick streets, it was still mainly clear with cars and trucks tossed into the remains of shops, and mud and trash left behind.

In a few minutes, they saw a taller stone building, maybe granite, that was partially flooded but standing strong. Buildings around it had burned. To the right were more buildings, some destroyed and some standing, a railcar turned sideways and punched through at one spot.

Jet’s horse didn’t object as it splashed into the few inches of water that lapped lazily over the brick roadway.

To the right, they saw a rusty-red railroad bridge with huge sides that made a trellis. They splashed towards the battered traffic bridge, which crossed not far from the other one. Jet said there must be a river near.

The water got deeper.

“That bridge isn’t passable,” Lance said. It had been hit many times by floodwaters carrying trees, cars, and anything else it could capture. Chunks of concrete and pieces of metal had fallen away. Other than a thin strip of concrete and parts of the railing, the bridge was useless other than possibly by foot. “We can swim through and go over.”

“Swim the horses?”

Yup, Dismount and swim with them while holding on to the saddle  
Floodwaters did this.

Sadie blanched. “Do you see over there?” She pointed to some gnarled trees that hung with moss and kudzu over the water, which lapped in brown waves, a yellowish film caught on the top. Green mucky slime lined the edges of the black muddy shoreline at a distance. “That’s a snake.” She thought they had missed it.

“Could be harmless.”

“Could be a cotton mouth.”

“Does that mean you want to back track?” Lance asked. We need to be looking for a spot to camp soon.

“I’ll swim, but so you know, there are snakes.” She unhappily followed Lance into the water.

When Jet plunged into the water last, he didn’t think it was a good idea to mention the alligators lying on the bank, each as long as a man was tall. They curiously flopped into the water but didn’t approach the swimmers.

“You had to say you saw them,” Robbin complained to Sadie as she rocked back and forth on her butt as she sat on the muddy bank.

“What?” Jet squatted and looked at the thin stream of blood from a pair of puncture wounds on Robbin’s shin, “no way.”

“Way,” Sadie grimaced, “you wanna suck out the poison?”

“You don’t do that anymore.” Jet looked over the injury and bathed it well with antibacterial lotion.

Robbin could only say the wound was fairly small and brown and hurt when the snake bit her. After bandaging her leg, he helped her to her horse and said they needed to find a camp soon, warning her to stay calm and assuring her she would be okay.

Up on the left sat a house that wasn’t a big Greek Revival but looked sturdy, was on a good spot, sat high from the water, and was located in a smart place to watch for trouble. Thunder rumbled as they rode up.

“Looks as if we have a bad storm coming up...could flood again.”

Lance and Jet returned with smiles. “Warm, dry, and fireplaces, looks like a good spot for the night or more if it is still raining.”

Once they unpacked the horses, they led them across the yard to stable them and were shocked to find old, but useable hay and sweet-corn horse feed and a trough that was already filling with rain. The barn was dusty and smelled of mice, filled with old junk, but dry and great for the animals.

“We are lucky as hell,” Lance said, “they can stay dry and rest.”

“Us, too.” Jet grinned.

Soon a cheerful fire was blazing in the fireplace, and Sadie swept out the dirt from the furniture and floor. Some was lovingly covered with faded pink sheets, and while nothing was fresh, the furniture wasn’t dirty underneath the sheets. They pulled off cushions from the couch to throw over the floor.

Robbin relaxed on cushions, her shin slightly bruised and angry red around the fang marks, but while she claimed it hurt like hell, she wasn’t

short of breath or getting sick.

Jet said maybe the snake didn't inject much venom or was non-venomous, but he gave her an antihistamine anyway. She was obviously reacting to the bacteria and whatever nastiness the snake shared. He slathered antibiotic cream on the bite, put a loose bandage on, and gave her some antibiotics to take with a meal. Jet checked often on Robbin, but other than a slight fever and some pain, she was okay.

"Guess if the rain has to happen, it is for the best for me to relax," Robbin said.

Over the fireplace, Sadie and Anthony got a thick stew cooking: squirrels, a few vegetables, and some dried pasta.

"Do you miss home?"

Hannah nodded. "I miss everyone, but this is nice, too."

The scent of the stew was mouth-watering, the dim light was cozy and golden-warm, the feelings were very relaxed.

After they ate, Lance shared a book he found and told them it was about the town: the water way was a bayou where paddleboats once came down from the north to New Orleans. He thought that like in the past, the little town would flood again.

It was pleasant to drowse around the fireplace in the dry, old home.

At one end of the big rectangular room, a door opened to a large hallway; on the opposite side of the long hallway were two bedrooms. A bathroom was at one end of the hallway, and at the opposite end was a door that opened outside to a large, wooden front porch.

On another wall in the big room were over-sized windows, looking outside on the porch. Opposite the windows was a door leading from the big room into the dining room.

In the dining room were two other doors. One led to a shredded-covered porch, and the second door led into the kitchen and an eating area. A door in the kitchen led into a large living room/bedroom. This room also had a door that led out to a very small porch, covered with a shingled roof. This was the door closest to the driveway and garage, so everyone, family or friend, entered there.

The spacing wasn't crowded; in fact, the floor plan was open in kind of a fat upside down L-shape. Everyone had room to pull mattresses in and line them up in the big room, in the dining room, and living room/bedroom, giving everyone comfortable places to sleep in sleeping bags.



Rain pounded on the roof, and thunder shook the unbroken windows; they had taped and covered the windows that were broken.

Despite the storm that continued for the next two days, it did, indeed, flood the bayou until it rose and took back the banks, brick streets, the lower level shops, and homes, and it moved rusted vehicles again.

Somewhat like the young people before them who slept in the bedrooms, as well as in the big room in this well-built, old house with memories and ghosts of the past that flittered about them, these young people camped in the big room before the firelight, played cards and read aloud. They, too, slept well in this well-built, old house. This was a kinder, simpler time: their bellies were full; they were clean. In ways, it was as if the zombies had never been.

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## Chapter 10

### Roads Less Traveled

In Nacogdoches, the group looked at the problem with curiosity as they rode out to see if Stephen F. Austin University survived. Almost as soon as they took that route and got in the thick of the university area, the moaning began, and while there were many zeds with their thin, torn bodies and haggard faces, there were many more Reds than ever. Students who were already ill were sent to their dorm rooms where they changed and began their infernal hunt for food.

Some, far from home, miserably crept back to their rooms as they were told and went into comas on old worn mattresses with no one to care for them.

Most couldn't even make it down the hall to the bathrooms and lay in their own waste. Universities couldn't do anything for the kids since the whole world collapsed, presenting bigger issues.

In the relatively close quarters of the university setting, those who didn't get sick with Red were quickly attacked and left mangled. College towns were disadvantaged.

Jet realized they were almost pinned within seconds as the Reds came from all sides, many in filthy, gore-crusted SFA tee shirts or pajamas. If they weren't dressed in such dirty, faded clothing, the ghouls might have looked like a sea of purple and white as they attacked in a horde. As it was, they made a wave of purplish grey and dirty grey, along side the white bodies, maroon blood, and brown filth.

Hannah fired at them but was wide-eyed with worry, not for herself, but for her friends and especially for Jet. Her horse danced with flaring nostrils and rolling, fearful eyes; she missed a shot entirely as two people on horseback darted forward, and she saw flashes of color and light.

No kidding, a girl was dressed in black leather with strips of red in her braids and complex, red designs on her clothing; her horse was garishly decorated with red lacquered hooves, a braided tail, and a mane with red shiny things hanging off.

The other horse and person were decorated in shades of blue, but the tail flickered with pieces in the blue shades, silver and gold, so it was like blue fire.

They looked like circus horses.

Before she could get her mind back on what was happening and the imminent danger, she saw a dark skinned man wearing leathers with dramatic little yellow pieces of cloth on his black horse's mane and tail; another man who resembled the first one had his short hair and scalp colored green but had little color on his horse except for the hooves that were shiny green and glittery, making the huge thing look like a horse of the apocalypse floating on a terrible poison, fogging the ground.

Hannah wanted to stop and laugh at this spectacle. In all the grey of rot and decay and horror, these people looked like comic book characters. They looked silly, and yet they used swords and rifles like experts.

Had Jet not yelled her name, she might have sat there all day watching the entertainment, wondering what comic book she accidentally fell in.

A man in black raced by her and motioned her to cover him as he fired at the zombies, causing blood and brains to coat the ground in a sick pudding-like mess.

Hannah drew her eyes from his horse's silver hooves, silver-braided tail, and his silver, thick arm guards and helmet to shoot her own weapon.

A sixth woman rode a roan with purple accents braided in, making it almost a lavender ghost, creepy, pretty, and weird all at the same time. She led the way through a path they easily cut through the zombies.

Hannah followed, hearing Lance and Sadie snickering behind their hands. Jet was confused; frowning, Anthony showed disgust that these were their help; Robbin, openly curious, turned her head back and forth to see it all and to see Ricky shaking his head.

"If you can't beat 'em, baffle them with bullshit and color," the man told Hannah. His name was Neal. "I know we look different, but it works with many. Not with zeds since they don't care."

"We're not far," said the woman in purple. Her frosted roan almost looked purple.

"We appreciate the help," Jet said. Trying not to laugh, he took everything and everyone in, felt this group was good as they had sane eyes and smiles that rang real, but he was confused about the strange clothing. "Ummm...we don't mean to seem unappreciative or critical at all, but...."

"We know," said a woman, "it was my idea from second one to look like super heroes. I did it to deal with the stress and horror I know, now, but at the time, it made sense. We kept it up for a few reasons: One...."

“It baffles the enemy with the bullshit if they are human,” Neal said again, “right, Sarah?”

“Yup.” Her red hair gleamed. “Imagine...no...you experienced it...you see a bunch of nuts with all this color and what do you think? We have to be crazy, right?”

And it was about us as a group; it made us solid. It also made it all a little less terrible...usually...having to deal with everything. And if we can't be super heroes, then who will be?” She introduced her brother in the blue as Jake and the woman in purple as Kee Kee or Yuki formally.

Raul was dressed in yellow, and his brother, Jamal was dressed in green. “We just like the colors,” he said as he laughed, “we have a few more with us; some less colorful and a few more colorful. This is toned down compared to how we began.”

“It's pretty,” Sadie said, “different.”

“Oh, we are very different,” Neal promised.

They followed the group to a part of town that looked blocked off by ruins, cars and big diesel trucks, huge metal trash containers, and wire. Once they were inside and were checked for infection, they went to what was a small but fairly tall hotel. It wasn't a lavish or large area but felt safe enough.

They were asked if they were thirsty or hungry, but they weren't as they had eaten venison and replenished the water the night before. Sadie offered the wrapped steaks, a bag of wild garlic, and some small, very sweet red apples they picked. They wanted to contribute to a meal.

“Hot damn, thanks,” Neal said, “we can cook the meat and add some canned vegetables.”

In the lobby, emptied of all but cushions on the floor and tables in a corner, a man turned around to greet them with a warm handshake for each. He was of medium height and not especially memorable but for his soft, warm, brown eyes. “I'm Adam, welcome.”

Hannah realized that she knew him. Running the information in her mind, she finally remembered where she had seen him.

She thought, “Do you remember a girl with an axe, a few dead bodies on a porch, and a bowl of hot, delicious stew in Year Z 1?”

Adam looked her over and said, “Hannah, I always wondered what became of you and if you made it.” He hugged her. “You grew up.”

She stopped and explained to her group how they first met, just after the Reds began attacking and as she was standing on her front porch, moving the bodies of her parents, brother, and sister after dispatching them. Adam shared a meal with her, even inviting her to go with him if she wanted.

“That simple meal gave me hope, Hannah, that others would be so kind and willing to share with a stranger.” He couldn’t help but admire that she had grown into a beautiful woman, very tall and strong. Her eyes were lovely.

“Is that your color?” Hannah pointed to an aqua, faded bandana tied about his thigh.

“Yep,” he said as he laughed. It was the color of *Hannah’s* eyes. “We like color.”

“My mom’s favorite color, my adopted mom, you know about the other one,” she added.

He nodded, remembering.

Others who came in and out to meet the group had bandanas on their legs or pieces of colored material, but none except one wore as much color as Sarah: a girl who had all shades of pink painted on her clothing and rose-colored boots. Her hair was bleached almost white with pink stripes painted through it; she was very pretty, but the pink was almost overpowering.

“Happy to see you all,” she said as she waved and smiled. She was twelve, and this was all she knew. They called her Pinky.

When they told the rest where they were from, Adam said that they had heard of Hopetown and had heard that the members were hard assed about rules. But they didn’t know what would be required to fit in.

Hannah laughed, “If I can survive it, then anyone can. Jet and I were so bad growing up? Horrible but we did fine. You can’t rape, rob, hurt a child, or beat women.

We use common sense about crime, there are no murders, and there is no reason for stealing. People just get along, or if a man slaps his wife around, he gets his ass kicked. You murder; you hang. You get lazy and drunk; you get tossed out.”

“Makes sense.”

“When you behave, you have a job you enjoy and are good at, and it’s something you take pride in everyday. Everything is important. We have an artist; you’d think that would be a stupid job, but he teaches the children art

in classes. And you work and have fun with people. You don't 'clock' in as they used to call it."

"Seriously?"

"I rode guard duty; I always wanted to be at work; I felt proud of my abilities. When you want a break, you take it. You eat, too," said Hannah as she laughed.

"Later, when you are tired, you finish and go eat with everyone. People take off at different times and work on teams, and we have entertainment in the evenings: playing card games, singing, dancing, listening to music, and watching plays. The kids are always busy."

"Interesting."

"We have a governor and a head of security. Whatever you need, you can ask for, and people will help. Everyone is important. A teen girl who sits with children is as valuable as anyone else."

"Some days, people have time off; we play baseball games, swim during the summer, and participate in all kinds of activities; we even grow our fresh food," Anthony added.

"Fresh as in...really fresh? Vegetables and other foods?"

Jet had been on the road long enough now to already miss that; these people must dream about it. He began to list what they grew. Lance and Sadie jumped in to help.

"I've never heard of half of that. I have had olives, and they are good," Pinky said, "and real milk?"

Anthony nodded. "We don't grow olives, but sometimes, we have some in cans or in jars from before and pickles that people actually make and all types of pickled vegetables."

"I love pickles: sweet, dill, sour, " Pinky sighed as she listed her likes.

"I was that way: like you when I joined in Year Z 3. I bet I drank a gallon of milk the first day, and when I tasted butter, this sounds crazy, but I cried like a big ole baby. The next day, I started on buttermilk."

"Butter? Buttered milk?" Pinky didn't know what that was. What was it that made a grown man cry? It must be amazing.

"Butter is smooth, creamy, salty, and sweet, and buttermilk is sour, thick milk you can dip cornbread in."

"Corn bread, I know," Pinky said, "we have it on holidays."

"We have it a lot. I like it with turnip greens, pinto beans, corn, and pork chops."

“You’re killing me,” Adam moaned.

Adam and the rest shared stories and then asked for stories about the new people, puzzled by the whole mall rescue that Anthony and Robbin shared. “A mall? Could you have been more cliché?”

Anthony chuckled. “I know. Sometimes I can’t believe we got outta there; if we hadn’t, we’d still be hiding there.”

“Sorry, you lost a friend. Did that girl, Lacey ever show up again?”

“Nope,” Jet said, “and we didn’t see Dave and the crazy kids again either, but John Ponce shows up at times.

He told them about the beginning: how they lost Juan and his parents, the battle at the airport and Zane, and then about the religious family, and things from the later years.

“Why do you call him a hybrid?” someone asked.

Lance explained about the inoculations and what they meant to John Ponce, and finished by saying that Hopetown, other than liking Ponce, didn’t welcome hybrids.

The people who sat around them went quiet. Adam moved his hand, made a motion to indicate everyone should be quiet, yet no one said a word, just stared at the newcomers.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Lance...ummm...Yuki was inoculated. It’s something we figured out the hard way.” It was the part Adam left out of his story. He still didn’t describe how a man could sleep with Yuki and then become infected: chasing her and almost killing all of them. Her memories of being inoculated were hazy, but they figured out parts of it.

Anthony tensed, wondering if they were about to have a fight and maybe be bitten and infected by this group. Sadie scooted away closer to Lance. Jet’s hand inched to his pistol.

“We don’t mean you any harm,” Adam said. “We’re now as afraid of you as you are of us. We didn’t know people had a name for the inoculated or that anyone hated us. We never really thought much about inoculations except to be careful with what we carry.”

“I doubt that you fear us as much as we do you,” Robbin muttered.

“Only the zeds hate you if they can feel hate. Everyone hates us,” Neal said. “Wow. Go figure that.”

“You were given the shot, too?” Hannah asked confused about how they found one another.

“We found the remains of a medical team who was doing some of the inoculations: their papers and the inoculations themselves. Yuki was immune, so we all sat and talked it over: did we want to be like her or stay like you. We knew both sides. Half of us decided to take the inoculations.”

“You...you chose it? Why? Why would you?” Lance blurted. It was the craziest thing he ever heard.

Adam took a deep breath. “I didn’t. They did. Five did. We went to see them afterwards as planned, but they were gone, no note or any explanation. The people I was with died as I told you, and I found the people I knew later by accident really.”

“We left because it was easier; we knew they would look at us the way you do now with fear and worry,” Yuki said. “No matter what they said, we knew we had changed in everyone’s eyes. I didn’t know anyone called us hybrids or wanted to kill us.”

“You carry the prion,” Jet said.

“And what if you do, too? What if everyone were infected and only some changed? I feel exactly the same, but pain is easier to take, but I get cravings that hurt if I don’t get raw meat: animals, not people,” Neal said. “I’m still me. It never changed my mind or who I am inside.” He pointed to his head and then his heart.

“But we’re immune,” Sarah added. “We can fight hard and up close with no fear unless we are...well...being eaten.”

“I won’t say I am happy to hear that you are hybrids,” Jet said. “I don’t know what to think. I guess I know how Mom felt about knowing about John Ponce and hating the inoculation but liking him all the same.”

“You liked us fine until you knew. Why be prejudiced because of that? It’s like skin color or religion and hating someone because of that.”

“I never worried that someone of a different color or religion would bite me,” Anthony said.

“I don’t bite,” Adam told them.

Hannah could see her group was about to pack up and leave with bad feelings on both sides, and more than anything, she wanted a chance to talk to people like herself and her age. “Stop. Everyone just stop. When I was twelve and after Adam met me, a military unit came around and forced me to take the inoculation, too.” Her voice was high with stress and anxiety.

Her friends looked at her as if she dropped a bomb.

“Wow,” Adam said, “guess no one knew?”



“You what?” Lance asked. “Why are you saying that? Your mother...”

“Mom and Dad know. Len knows. Mark knows,” she said. “I didn’t ask for it...like Yuki...it was against my will. But I have never bitten any of you. If I had told all of you, would you have hated me? I’ve always been just me. No one told because Mom loved me anyway.” She almost cried.

“Oh, Hannah,” Sadie had tears in her eyes. “Didn’t you worry someone would find out?”

“Every day.”

“Carla,” Lance said. He was talking about a woman who was a hybrid, who attacked innocent people, spread the infection, and caused many deaths.

When she begged for mercy for herself and a child, Beth thought of those that this woman had fed on while they screamed in pain. Carla stabbed people to save herself, and Beth remembered the horror before aiming and killing them both with no regrets. Some of the members of the Reconstruction Army, a group that tortured people to death, cannibalized many people and were hybrids.

But they knew others, such as Ponce, who were normal and didn’t eat people.

Jet, on hands and knees, reached over to Hannah, yanked her hair to one side, and grabbed the back of her neck. Everyone shuffled, but she didn’t cry out, only allowed him to look for her tattoo. He stood. “There’s a scar.”

“No shit. Mom cut it off me; it hurt like hell, but it needed to be done so I would be safe.”

“My God.” Lance stared at her. Having a tattoo cut away sounded painful.

“If you hate and fear me, then you do, but I can’t help it. I have never let it change me. Did you hate people infected with AIDS back in the day?”

“They didn’t bite people,” Jet screamed at her.

“Neither do I,” said Hannah as she stood, facing him.

“Yet.”

She had never slapped her brother, but the pop rang out as her hand left a red mark across his cheek. Jet turned and left the room.

“I don’t care,” Robbin said, “I guess you wouldn’t sleep with people ‘cause they’d get infected or wouldn’t bite them either. You take care of cravings; we like Ponce; who cares?”

“I don’t care, either,” Ricky said.

“What do you use to color your hair pink?” Anthony asked Pinky, “what? I changed the subject. Who cares?”

“Berries,” Pinky told him, “what’s AIDS?”

Sarah promised to explain later. “Are you okay, Hannah?”

“I guess. I have a habit of shocking people.”

She told the rest that she planned to trade for salt close to the ocean if the people had it; she thought they did, and then she would take it back to Hopetown. She also wanted to kill zombies and take out any rebel gangs they encountered.

Adam laughed. “I always pegged you as a tough girl.”

“I chopped up the medical nuts who did this to me. I have a vengeful streak towards anyone who wants to harm my family, my friends, or me. I wanna see the coast though. I want to know what it’s like now, and I want to find people like me. I just didn’t know I really would.”

Jet stayed outside and volunteered for guard duty, refusing to speak to or about his sister. She ignored him as well. The rest of the group shook off Hannah’s news and acted as if nothing changed as they were shown places to sleep or places to put their sleeping bags.

“He’ll come around,” Adam told Hannah as they walked, “I think he’s had a few shocks today.”

“I guess. I don’t know if they’ll still want me with them. I hope they do.”

“I think they will. I hope maybe we can all go together, and maybe if we stay outside Hopetown, we can trade for some fresh food from your home when you go back with the salt. We’ll get you to help us know what to trade.”

“I’m sure they’d let everyone in...with quarantines, of course...me too now that it’s known. Books about how to do things will be good to trade if you find them in good shape.

“We may need more choices in case books might be used for fires.”

“Why did you take the inoculation after saying you wouldn’t?”

It had been awhile since Adam had learned how to protect himself and had gone back to his neighborhood to find his grandmother. He had put her down and then buried her but stayed on his own, finding the people he knew.

But he still didn’t take it for a while and felt perfectly safe. “I hated the zoms so much; they represented what we had lost, and they weren’t poor, pitiful people: they were monsters, absolute horrible monsters.”

“I agree,” Hannah said.

“I hated losing Chase; she was a good friend; I was filled with hatred and wanted an edge so I could kill every zom I could find...like you feel. I didn’t think about it a lot...having the immunity to the infection; I just did it one day when I was pissed off.” It had been awhile since Adam had taken inoculation

“Are you sorry?”

“I’m sorry the world sucks so badly that I had to do it. I’m sorry the bastards designed this, unleashed it, and killed the world. I’m really sorry that being fully human wasn’t enough to kill them all. I don’t hate it, just as I don’t hate a rifle, but I hate when I have to shoot someone who is infected, didn’t want it, and is suffering.”

“That’s not a full answer.”

“No. I don’t regret taking it. Yes, I regret taking it. It’s both.”

“I hate it,” Hannah said.

“The zeds get rotty and erode. The Reds still function, and they reproduce.”

“You know that? Good. It’s sickening.” Hannah said.

“We found a nest, and I won’t go into it ‘cause it’s revolting, but their spawn grow fast...maybe double, and they are faster. Adam said.

There aren’t many yet, but in another ten years, the things will be as deadly as hell. Give ‘em a few generations, and they’ll be fast and maybe able to think or plan instead of just act like hives.”

“Scary. We need to wipe them out. I wonder what my mom would think about your having the immunizations? I think she would go hell bent into the middle and burn them.”

Adam thought about that. “What do you hate the most? The inoculations and being a hybrid, as you say.”

“Being alone.” She hoped he understood her. Other people could hold hands and have a kiss, but she never could for fear of infecting him. She didn’t get to be like other boys and girls, who liked one another, felt puppy love, had romances, fell in love, got married, and had children. Hannah was always on the outside looking in.

Adam held her hand. “You aren’t alone. And you’re beautiful, Hannah, and smart and wonderful.” He waved at a man and then gave Pinky a quick hug goodnight. “Sleep tight; don’t bite the bedbugs.” She giggled.

Adam was showing Hannah around. “That’s where I sleep. Alone, in case you wondered.”

“I see.” She blushed and felt her stomach flutter.

“There’s never been anyone else,” Adam said, his big brown eyes sad.

“I’m glad.” She walked into his room, nervous but smiling.

He kicked the door closed and locked it behind him.

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## Chapter 11

### Roads Diverged

Jet elbowed Lance as they ate yet another meal of venison and canned food, missing their fresh food. Every day, just like the people of Hopetown did, they went out to look for food and supplies, quietly dispatched zombies with melee weapons, and checked for breaches of security. Unlike their people, there were no safety drills, training programs, social events, sports, or work in gardens and with herd animals.

“It’s as if everyone else lives in the caveman days,” Lance grumbled.

“I didn’t know how good we have it. Camping was fun, but this is all they have day after day?”

Lance kicked at some trash. “They move around. Nomads.”

“Cavemen,” Jet said again, “in ten years, there won’t be skills or education, just hunting for food and struggling. How can this be the best humans can do?”

“It isn’t. You know, this conversation alone shows we’re growing up if we are suddenly concerned over skills and education.” Lance laughed. “Can’t you hear Mark, Len, Matt, and Kim saying all this, too?”

Jet chewed at his lip. “I guess they thought it ten years ago, and that’s why we have what we do. But there have to be others who are still going, right? That’s why we’re out here even if Hannah says it’s to kill Zs.”

“Hot damn...more canned beans.” Lance winked. He held the can up to show Adam, and they all shared a good laugh.

Adam knew the newcomers were disappointed, and he thought back to when he teamed up with Chase Malone and a bunch of others. They had a secured place where they could have grown food and built up a life. Had they not found the inoculations and medical notes and separated, things might have gone differently. Chase would be alive because they wouldn’t have gone to Hopetown but would have made their own home.

Flutters of activity filled their days. Adam felt it was again like when he had been fourteen and he and his group had been forced to decide whether to take the inoculation or refuse it.

People gathered in pairs or went off alone to think it over; he wondered if Hannah’s friends would accept the inoculation or refuse it? Would they join Adam’s group or go off alone, again?

Now, there were so many choices in a place where ten years ago there had been no choices.

He wanted Hannah to stay with his people or with him, no matter what the others decided.

“I don’t think we’ll settle down in one place but will travel and kill all we can along the way. I can’t go back, now. I’ve been out here too long,” Adam said.

“You didn’t pick it the first time you had the chance,” Lance said, “the inoculation, I mean.”

“Nope. We tried to get to Hopetown and were tripped up by a simple car wreck; how normal was that? Zombies and raiders were everywhere. But then, I did choose the shot. I wanted to live.”

“I know,” Lance admitted, “it would be better if once you were immune, they would stop attacking, huh?”

“It makes sense they would, but they don’t,” Adam said.

“I like the travel and seeing things. My father, uncle, brother, all of them are back at Hopetown, and I’m not gonna cut off that possibility of being there with them.” Lance sat back after the meal, wanting to move again; there was so much for him to see and so much information to take back to Hopetown. Ricky agreed with that since he had a lot of family members, as well that were waiting for him.

Jet didn’t say anything, but Hannah could read him well enough to know how he felt, and she wouldn’t let him take the inoculation, anyway. Hannah would never let a sibling turn into a hybrid, nor did she want to deal with family members if she did.

“Never fear being bitten again; it’s tempting,” Sadie said.

“But you can be bitten and eaten. The only difference is that you don’t turn,” Lance explained again to her.

Sadie nodded. “I can’t stand the thought of turning into one and walking around, not knowing things.”

“No. I can’t. I have to be me,” Anthony said, “I won’t do it.

“We’re all still us,” Yuki giggled. People laughed with her. “I’m me.”

“I’m in,” Robbin said. Once it was out there, she relaxed. “I am always scared of being bitten or scratched. Remember Alex? If he had been immune, then it would have been fine. I’ll never forget Beth having to put him down after they got us out of the mall.”

“Mall,” Adam echoed.

“Well, then do what you need to do, and let’s move south a while. There are zombies down there to kill and folks to meet,” Jet said.

That was as much of an acceptance as he could give to what they were deciding. Not for the first time, he wished Len or Kim were there or maybe Julia or Mark who would take over and make all the hard choices and give them guidance. How they learned what were the right things, he didn’t know.

Back at home, Jet had helped Matt with security, always remained calm and sure of himself as he kept everyone safe, but out here, he was a nobody that no one wanted to listen to anyway.

In the beginning, Len felt this way, but he, unlike Jet, earned everyone’s trust and loyalty and led the community.

“We want to be watching for rebels and Zs. I’m guessing that many went south to find food and better weather and that not all are great people,” Jet began.

“Some are okay, and they have come through, saying people found food in the Gulf, but I wonder if it’s safe...between the bombs and hurricanes that have hit....”

“Many?”

“Four that we know about that caused upheaval this far. Dams and levees are broken, so they have heavy flooding now. But you know people who grew up around New Orleans, and even if the city is totally gone, they know things and can get Gulf food and swampy food such as snakes, frogs, and ‘gator. Fruit grows there.

Mexico is a wasteland so we’ve heard, so people don’t go south west now.”

“But it’s going to be potentially dangerous: people are headed there, so Zs are headed there.”

“QED,” said Hannah as she grinned.

“Huh?”

“*Quod erat demonstrandum*,” she said, “never mind. I was poking at your logic and hinting it would be proven when we see it.”

“Why?”

Hannah looked at her brother with an exasperated frown. “It was a joke.”

“Was it funny?” Lance asked.

“I thought it was,” Hannah said, “skip it. It was funny in my head.”

“Says she’s funny in the head,” Lance quipped.

“We can help you,” Adam said, “we could all go south with you. We could all see it for ourselves. It’ll be safer.”

“Another joke?” Jet asked.

“Jet. That’s rude.”

“It’s a joke, too,” he said. But he knew that she knew that he wasn’t really kidding around; the quirky crew made him nervous.

“They saved our ass at the college,” she reminded him.

“Yep,” Jet agreed. His agreement with something he didn’t feel was very Len-like. He continued his thought. “I think we could all think about how to work better as a team, right?”

“I agree,” Adam said.

Hannah smiled at him.

“We can work on what to do in situations and anticipate what the rest will do. We can combine our styles.”

“I ain’t painting myself or my horse,” Lance muttered, getting a nod of approval from Anthony and Jet.

Lance and Jet chafed at the delay. Jet was frequently irritated that his sister followed Adam everywhere, applauded every choice he made, and slept in his bed every night.

Jet had never shared his little sister, so maybe that was why he found the behavior so irksome, but in some ways, Adam acted as if he were king and had found his queen to parade

Less than a week later when they rode out, the groups were unusual. One group was large enough to make Jet and Lance feel targeted for attacks since they could no longer remain stealthy. Hannah, Adam, and his main group rode first, then Hannah’s friends with Robbin and Sadie slightly apart from them, and then the rest of Adam’s crew. There were twenty of them.

Jet couldn’t define all the reasons this bothered him.

Yes, he hated seeing his sister with Adam because for all he knew, she was just settling for any man. That wasn’t Jet’s business.

His business was that of their original group: two were now hybrids, something that Jet still didn’t care for, but they did it by choice. He could accept his sister’s being a hybrid, except that Hannah’s not telling him bothered him, but she didn’t have a choice in the matter. He could hardly look at Robbin and Sadie now.

Having so many people and horses and gear and noise made Jet jumpy. Maybe the others had fun with the colors and self-images of themselves as



super heroes, but Jet found it ridiculous.

They colored their horses; ran into situations in which they had no real training for: just what they had received over the years with experience; and thought they could do everything. They never seemed to be working as a team, only alone or in pairs.

Jet always felt close to his sister, but it wasn't just finding out her secret, but it was that she had been and always would be separated from him by a prison. He rode in silence most of the time, brooding.

"It's as if we're in a parade," Jet complained.

Pinky heard him and smiled. "Adam always does everything for everyone else; he always has. He tried to take care of that writer he hung out with, Chase Malone, but she thought she was taking care of him."

"The one who died after the car wreck while going to Hopetown?"

"Yup. Adam lost his granny and then Chase and everyone else; I think it's good he finally has someone of his own."

"Hannah?"

"Of course." She touched her horse with her boots, and in a pink flash, she rode to catch Jamal and Raul.

Adam was stopped on the broken pavement. "Looks like a blood bath," Adam said, as he looked over a pile-up on the highway.

He didn't see the plane crash on the highway close to Hopetown like the others did, but he was as horrified as they had been when they saw something from the skies sitting crumpled and burned on the roadway.

It was impossible to know why this plane had been airborne and what had happened to make it crash here, but the once huge, soaring jet had bellied down, crashing into cars and mangling the metal and setting many of them on fire. It didn't look as if anyone could have survived this crash.

Maybe an infected person had been bitten by another and spread the infection among passengers and then the crew. Maybe they had beaten at the cockpit doors and gotten inside. The pilot could have been infected. It was possible that the crew had crashed the plane after turning; it was also possible the pilot had crashed on purpose, taking out many of the infected. This was an example of a story that was horrific, no matter what but was untold.

The tail section was ripped away and spun half-way around to spill out personal effects and people, most still strapped into seats or torn apart upon

impact to leave pieces and parts all over the highway in the long path the airplane cut.

Zombies came around later, and although they preferred fresh kills, some feasted on what they found hours and then weeks later, leaving the rest for scavengers to pick apart.

The part of the plane around the wings was burned, leaving metal skeletons, melted parts, and ashes behind. It must have happened as people fled the area and ended up in the road blocks because the unburned vehicles had open doors and the remaining bodies spilled out; yellowed bones were picked clean. Close to the plane were burned, crumpled bodies that could have been zombies or humans as neither had a chance once the plane came down.

For some reason, the area looked freshly traveled, but not looted, around the huge pile of wreckage. There were so much rubble and destruction, so much was burned, twisted, melted, and ripped that even a decade later, it felt as if there were traps and dangers everywhere. All of this was left to the monsters.

Jet whirled his horse around as he saw movement in the long grass, along the highway; whether it was an animal, some zombies, or humans, he didn't know, but the speed suggested fright and desperation, probably humans then.

Low moaning announced the Reds as they shambled forwards from behind the wreckage where they had been, moving about the trash and vehicles.

From one direction, a large group shuffled into view, some falling over broken and cracked concrete, and Lance looked in that way, trying to determine how many were headed their way. As far as he could see, zombies were walking raggedly on the broken highway. "They're hiving, must be thousands."

All at once, the smell was on them, ahead of the crowd: rot, vomit, urine, feces, and infection. There were faded tatters of clothing, pale, naked flesh, and crusted gore. A few females had distended bellies.

"For us? They're after us?"

Lance shook his head at Ricky. "No, I think it's just our bad luck; they hive at times, we know. It's just as if they move around as they look for victims."

“Someone is running from them.” Jet didn’t see any more movement from the grass except for the zombies who were shambling that way. For some reason, Jet’s skin crawled, not just because of the approaching zombies.

“Some have gone by; they’re going to notice us and come back,” Adam said. “That’s three sides. Look at all the ones that already have gone through here. We can’t get through.”

“Then we go back and circle this mess,” Jet said. He just had turned to scan the way they had come, when two women of Adam’s group fell from their horses; the whine of bullets was a split second behind.

One had her chest blasted, and the other took a bullet in her side and stomach; neither girl moved once she hit the ground. A squealing horse went down with a messy belly wound; the one riding the horse immediately started to shove and push to get loose, but his leg was trapped beneath hundreds of pounds of dead horse. His face was a mask of pure terror as he realized how bad this was for him. Cursing, he demanded the horse get off him.

The zombies that already had gone by on the road turned and began moaning while making their way back again as they saw the humans. More untangled themselves, moving from the core of the airplane wreckage and into the road, drooling with hungry anticipation.

Ricky made a yipping noise and then slumped; the blood poured from one thigh. He was shot, yet he stayed in his saddle.

Ricky slid off to the ground as his horse panicked. He yelled as he rolled into the clawing hands of a pair of zombies who dragged him down when he tried to stand.

Jet started walking toward Ricky as did Sadie. Sadie shot both the zombies although most of her bullets missed them.

Not far away, Hannah wiped at blood that splattered over her hair and face as Jamal’s face almost vaporized. Raul leaped to the ground to pull at his brother’s arms, he tried to get him up and back onto a horse, but the man was dead. Raul was so busy trying to help that he failed to notice the crawler that grabbed at his feet, tripping him. Hannah screamed for him to move and looked for her brother and Adam.

Jake had a hand down to grab Raul, but another ghoul made a quick move, causing the man to be pulled between the creatures and Jake, so they fought over him. Jake landed on his back, hitting his head on the pavement

and passed out. The back of his head split on a block of sharp-edged concrete, soaking it in red.

The ghouls grabbed for Raul. He kicked and punched but was covered by the monsters quickly. His peels of screams overlapped. He couldn't stop watching the monsters rip at Jake's face even as several bit into his scalp and arms.

"Head into the wreckage?" Jet yelled. No one was doing anything or coming up with a plan. Faced with thousands of zombies on either side and the hidden shooters from behind, Jet believed moving into the rubble and abandoned cars seemed the best plan. For the hybrids, the best bet was to face the zombies, but being bitten and infected wasn't the greatest fear; being torn to shreds and eaten alive was the greatest.

Some of the creatures still went towards the shooters.

"Get 'em," Jet whispered to himself. He saw Hannah was still safe but as confused as the rest of them, and Adam didn't seem to have a clue as to what to do. He felt a wave of pride for his sister who slashed at them, bashed open heads, and lopped off parts as she fought back. Adam stayed in one place but kept firing his gun.

The horses could only get through parts of the wreckage. Robbin and Anthony bravely grabbed Ricky. On foot, they raced into the burned out cars, ducking to hide. At least they still tried and fought. Neal and Yuki fired at the ones who were searching for the man trapped by his dead horse, but for every one they shot and killed, another two or three took its place.

The zombies quickly covered the area so thickly that neither could put the man down before he was bitten and stripped of flesh, fat, and muscle. He hit at their mouths, pushed aside their clawing hands, yet they held on, biting into the flesh and taking off his fingers first, chewing hungrily through the joints.

It was bad luck on his part and a failure to get free of the falling horse.

He screamed a long time as they bit his arms, then his scalp, face, and finally his neck and upper body as others bit and gnawed at the horse; they didn't prefer animal meat but wouldn't ignore hot blood that was available. Blood pooled under their feet. The man was unrecognizable in mere minutes.

The people shooting at the group had hoped the group on horseback would provide enough of a diversion and feeding that they might escape

from the hive activity of the zombies, scared beyond thought at the thousands that moved their way.

They ran quickly through the long grass. Although panicked, they did manage to hit Sarah and another man to stall another dozen of the creatures before the zombies were on top of them. Only one of the people had time to press a gun to his own head while the rest, screaming, were ripped to shreds in a massive attack.

Ten years of survival vanished.

It had only been bad luck that they were passing through this area when the zombies went into horde-mode. They didn't think before acting; they merely acted in self-preservation. If they contacted the group on horses and worked with them, they would have all gotten away safely.

Neal saw that Jake was either unconscious or dead as a few began to rip bluish intestines from his stomach and simply nodded his thanks to Lance as he helped Yuki onto Neal's horse before he yelled and motioned that one way was fairly clear.

Sadie tried to get off her horse to run into the plane wreckage where she could hide or make her way across. She took a few painful, mind-numbing bites from zombies and was thankful for her choice she made in becoming inoculated. The bites hurt horribly, but her pain tolerance was better now; she couldn't imagine what the pain would feel like if she not had the edge such as it was; the pain was almost too much to stand. She left a trail of blood behind her as she darted from car to car.

To one side, Robbin, Ricky, and Anthony motioned her to come to them. Both men were covered in blood, and Robbin looked terrified. "My God, they're everywhere," Sadie whispered as she slid in beside them.

"We are screwed, but we made it out of the mall parking lot. We can do this," Anthony said. He watched for Jet and Lance to come help.

"We gotta move," Robbin said, "to the left then through and over; don't stop."

"It's like an obstacle course," Sadie said.

"I can't," Ricky said. He thought they were safe until the crawler crept from under the car and attacked his arm before Anthony could bash in its skull.

Sadie reached for Ricky, and with no fear of infection, she examined his arm. Below the elbow, the flesh was torn off, and he was bleeding out,

despite the tourniquet Robbin put on him. Sadie paused to re-tie it and add another. His leg was a mess of gore, too.

“Adam, Jet, and Hannah are through. Lance, Yuki, and Neal are through, I think. Maybe. Girl in the lime is down. Pink girl is through. Shit, it’s just us.”

“They shot us,” Anthony complained. “What the hell was wrong with them? Where are Jet, Hannah, and Lance?”

“They’ll come get us, Ant,” Sadie said.

“They can’t; it’s too thick.” Robbin shook her head and clenched her eyes closed a second. Everywhere between where their friends had ridden and where they hid now were zombies, moaning, looking for food, falling, shambling, and twitching: some were not dead.

“They have to,” Sadie insisted.

“Not gonna happen.”

“Then, we do it your way, and wait for them; let’s go through the wrecks.”

“Ricky can’t,” Anthony disagreed, “his leg is messed up. If we were on flat ground, yes, but if we are carrying him, we can’t climb.” He didn’t take the time to realize he was also bitten on the arm and bleeding, but the women saw it.

“We aren’t leaving him,” Sadie said.

“Didn’t say we would but....” Anthony pointed out the man’s arm. “He’s infected.”

“I know,” Sadie said, “but we can’t.” None of them had the strength to do what was needed. Anthony must not know he was bitten, she considered, and she wondered about telling him, but since Robbin held back, Sadie did as well.

“They’re coming,” Robbin whispered.

“Move.” Anthony dragged Ricky as they headed for another wreck and then dropped him as monsters converged on them too fast. They were surrounded.

Anthony ran the other way, motioning them to follow him, not acting as a coward, but in a blind panic as the things reached for him, trying to grab him.

At the edge of all the clutter was a car that still had windows intact, and he jumped inside, slammed the doors behind him, and slumped to the seat to catch his breath.

The zombies slapped the windows a few times.

“Ant,” Sadie complained as Ricky was dropped and Anthony ran away, “get up, Ricky. We gotta go.”

“Do it. Do me,” he muttered, his head dizzy and arm and leg shrieking with pain as infection set in and began to take over his system. He vomited. And then said, “It hurts so much.”

“Robbin?”

Robbin knew if she fired a gun, the ghouls would find them huddled behind the car. “We can’t. They’ll find us.”

She yanked her knife out and, gritting her teeth, tried to cut Ricky’s throat to give him peace quietly, but she wasn’t knowledgeable about using a knife for this and sawed at his neck, making Sadie cry out in revulsion. Ricky gurgled and moaned.

“Stop it,” Sadie whispered, “he can’t stand it.” But Ricky was already dead.

Robbin stabbed and sawed. “It’s done. He’s gone,” Robbin said, “oh God, Ricky...” She leaned over and vomited.

“We need to go, Robbin,” Sadie told her, “let’s make a run for it; either way, you decide, but let’s go, please.” She cried in her hands. “We have to go, now.”

As the zombies came around the side of the car, they drooled as they saw live food.

Sadie went to her feet as Ricky turned his head amid all the gore on his neck and hissed. Robbin threw her head back and screamed as Ricky’s teeth grated against her shinbone, mashing flesh and nerves; blood poured.

“You’re okay. You are immune. Get up and let’s go,” Sadie told her. She bounced in place.

Robbin used her knife and stabbed Ricky in his eye over and over, trying to make his brain stop functioning as he continued to gnaw at her skin, gulping flesh.

Sadie hit him with the butt of her rifle, bashing at his head angrily. Robbin stopped her attack to roll under the car and peek out at Sadie when Ricky stopped moving. “It hurts so much, Sadie.”

“What are you doing?”

“Go away. Just go,” Robbin said, “run. They’ll follow you.”

Confused, Sadie looked around. She couldn’t get through the way they were headed as more blocked that way. She used her gun and threw it when

it clicked empty, but Robbin wouldn't look at her from under the car.

Sadie ran the other way, following the route Anthony had taken. From the car, he looked out at her and seemed to be saying something. *Robbin lost her mind*, Sadie thought.

Sadie yanked open the car door and slid in. "I can't run anymore."

Anthony groaned.

"I know. We're stuck until they move along," Sadie said. She relaxed on the seat, staring out at the zombies who bashed at the windows, unsure if they would hold.

As it was, that wasn't something she had to worry about. With everything happening so fast, she had forgotten about Anthony being covered in blood and not being inoculated. That wasn't a groan of agreement; it was a moan.

Sadie began screaming as he lunged, pinned her, and began to feed.

From under the car, Robbin watched the monsters walking around. A female zombie shuddered and wailed; to Robbin's horror, a fetus plopped out onto the ground right beside her, pale and malformed. It grunted.

With her last bit of sanity intact, Robbin shot herself in the head just as zombies on either side of the car began to pull on her.

Jet jumped as they heard Robbin's shot, wondering who was shot. Of their group of twenty an hour before, seven remained.

Lance verbally drove them to keep riding, making a big circle that put them south of the plane wreck. There was no way any more of the group survived, and any rescue attempts would be suicide.

The sky was fully dark, and danger was outside when they stopped to make a quiet camp in a big house that sat far away from everything else. They ignored the ranch overseer's home and went to the big place to rest for the night, all quiet and sickened.

Hannah sat still while Adam cleaned and bandaged her upper arm where she was grazed by a bullet.

Yuki wasn't infected since she was immune, but her lower leg was gnawed to the bone, and she lost a lot of blood. All they knew was to keep the wound clean, and despite her screaming, she managed to cauterize the blood vessels with a flat knife and a hot fire. The main threats seemed, at first, to be shock and blood loss, which they dealt with by getting fluids into her.



“Her leg is now gnawed flesh, bone, and burned skin. She can’t use it,” Neal said stoically. “It’s got to come off.” Yuki screamed when she saw the damage; it looked like a zombie who was chewed and then eroded.

“I don’t think she can survive the shock and blood loss,” Adam said, “let’s get her stable first. And we need to watch for infection.”

“She’s immune though,” Jet pointed out.

“To Red. But those things have a ton of bacteria in their mouths; she’s not immune to regular infection. Think of what they eat and all the germs. Human bites are filthy, but this must be ten times as bad, and it’s to the bone.”

“My leg,” Yuki complained. They gave her pain medication, but it was more than just pain; she knew her disadvantage in having one leg and was disgusted to have been chewed on. Neal sat next to her, holding her hand. “I want my leg back. Please help me, Neal...my leg....”

“The rest? Do you think they’re waiting for our help?” Hannah asked.

“I saw most go down and then were attacked,” Adam told her, “Sarah was shot and killed. Jake, I think Anthony and Ricky were bitten.”

“Oh.” Hannah took that in. “Robbin? Sadie?”

“I don’t see any way they could have made it, Hannah. Between the shooters and the Zs, we didn’t have much chance,” Lance said. “They would have done something to let us know, right?”

“I’m afraid they need us.”

“They’re gone.”

“Why did they shoot at us?” Neal asked.

“From how things looked, I am guessing they thought if they shot us, we would slow the Zs and give them a chance to get away or something. From the screams, I don’t think they made it either,” Lance said, “I think it was all timing, wrong place at the wrong time. And we panicked.”

“There was nothing we could do,” Adam said.

Jet didn’t mention that Len and Kim would have thought of something.

In the night, Yuki’s fever soared.

“Kee Kee needs different antibiotics,” Neal said.

“That’s all we have. Maybe the leg needs to come off,” Jet said. “Do you know how to do it?”

“Me?” Adam asked, “no, you?”

None of them knew how to do the surgery and thought their inept abilities and shock would kill her for sure. Neal decided just to keep

cleaning the wounds, but it made her scream hysterically with the pain, and after a while, he stopped.

In their nightmares, they saw the slaughter again and again. Pinky withdrew and didn't speak unless spoken to. Mostly she stared into space and shivered, or sometimes she awakened from bad dreams and cried out.

On the fourth day, with red streaks running up her leg and hip, Yuki died. They buried her.

Hannah and Adam left the group for a few days and then joined them again without details. She told Jet the barest of information, and he felt her slipping farther away from him.

Jet wanted a smaller group but not in this way. It crossed his mind that people weren't meant to be out in this world fighting against an enemy that had a larger number.

They went back to the road but took routes that were less populated before the infection.

In Beaumont, an aircraft carrier was tossed onto the land by a passing hurricane and sat derelict. They knew what it was, but it seemed like a giant monster left by the sea, a haunted place of another time, and although it was a curious sight, they had no way to go onboard and didn't want to risk it anyway.

The ocean, lapping onto the beaches, was interesting to Hannah and the others as they looked at what the water washed ashore and tasted the salty spray. For hours, Pinky splashed in the water and picked up shells that she lined up on the beach.

With a friendly welcome, an old fisherman and his wife took them in. For weeks while they were staying with the couple in their weathered but sturdy house, the old couple taught them how to gather food from the sea, so they enjoyed crabs, squid, fish, oysters, and shrimp. The old people had a lemon tree that produced the tart fruit that was so delicious on the seafood.

The man said a settlement was not far away, which lived off of this type of food. So when they were ready to visit the settlement, they were able to trade for salt to take back to Hopetown. The settlement was well setup and busy but had an air of lawlessness and felt temporary even if it were ten years old.

In the other direction was Houston and Baytown, both were destroyed by several bombs. Zombies from there were flash burned and mangled by the radiation, and no one had any desire to see any of the remains of those

places or the rubble that were left behind. The only positive point was that the zombies that survived the bombs looked to be eroding faster, maybe from radiation.

Pinky finally showed interest, but it was in a hammerhead shark that they drew pictures of, so she could understand how it looked beneath the waves. She was a little disappointed that it wasn't something she could bring on land to examine in detail.

"The Zs want to eat us. People think we're disgusting and want to kill us. How are we supposed to inherit the world?" Adam asked one evening.

"They don't know you're inoculated unless you tell them and explain it," Lance snapped, "unless you bite them."

"I think they can look at us and know," Adam said quietly. He had lost the carefree, hopeful attitude and now had frown lines on his face.

They took the other horses they caught again and loaded bags of salt, which would hopefully last years, on their backs.

They stayed off the major interstate highways and went along the back roads that were in somewhat better shape. Some towns were burned, and one had been hit by a tornado that left a swatch of rubble a mile long.

They traveled in the Angelina National Forest for a while, enjoyed the peace and good hunting, and then traveled in the Sabine National Forest where it was less populated and quieter.

Then they went back in a northwesterly direction to avoid Shreveport, Louisiana. They avoided people as much as people avoided them. Adam and then Hannah scrutinized the people that they shared a campfire with so relentlessly that the guests all moved on as soon as possible.

They rode back to the house in Jefferson where they stayed before when Robbin was bitten by the snake. Some came down with what looked like influenza, so they rested and regained their strength.

Adam, Neal, and Pinky found the house just as charming as the rest had, and it was a good place to stay as they made plans for the future.

A few days later, they rode into the Hopetown area after having been gone a half a year.

Someone called Beth and Kim, and they were at the gate, waiting for their children. "I don't see Anthony, Robbin, Sadie, or Ricky," Beth said.

"That girl must love pink." Mark marveled as he saw the girl.

"Information?" Johnny did her job although she was excited to see Hannah, Lance, and Jet.

Jet reported, “We merged with another group when we were surrounded by Zs that were hiving. Then five civilians opened fire on us, for what we presumed was a tactic to save themselves from the horde. All five of the civilians were killed.

From the other group, either gunshots or Zs killed the ten people; only three are with us; all are hybrids. Of our group, three of us made it out alive, and the other four died in combat.”

“We’ll need you to step behind the screens for body checks and tattoo checks.”

“They aren’t marked; they found the inoculations and used them,” Jet said.

“Okay. This way.” Johnny and Conner were curious.

“Hey. Where’s Ricky?” His grandfather Ivory Joe worked the gate and asked about him.

“Sir, he lost his life in combat. He was shot off his horse. Those who shot at us are dead, however,” Lance added.

“My grandbaby?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Oh, Oh, I sure didn’t need to hear that.” Ivory Joe slumped. Some people filled his place, and others helped him walk to his wife, son, and daughter-in-law to give them the news.

“What’s in the packs?” Matt asked as the horses were led in.

“Salt,” Jet said, “we went to the coast. It’s salt.”

“Good job. Damned fine work, Jet.”

As soon as they came through the final gate, Beth embraced her children, asked questions, and fretted over their weight loss.

Hannah hugged her mother and said, “Mom, I have to stay in the quarantine houses with Adam and Pinky. All those who had the inoculation do.”

“Of course,” Beth said. She was shocked to find her daughter already revealed her secret.

“John Ponce is here. He brought in a few people last night, so you can see him.” Kim ignored Beth’s pleading look to break the rules for their daughter, but obviously, Hannah’s secret was out.

“Oh, is he?” Hannah shrugged, “okay.”

“Get cleaned up, and we’ll bring dinner down, meet your friends, and see you in a little while, okay?” Kim wondered why Hannah didn’t care

about seeing Ponce.

“Sounds fine, Dad.”

Lance hugged his brother, Matt, tightly before going to see their father and the rest of the family. “Tons to tell you,” he whispered.

Jet looked around. “Is Len here?”

“He should be back in a few days. He was here a few weeks ago. He has helped to train people in other places in security.”

“Okay.” Jet looked at his parents with concern and made a little nod towards Adam and Hannah.

Kim and Beth led Jet to a table off the path, and Jet waved for Matt and Mark to join them. Others watched but knew it was private. “What’s wrong, Jet?”

“Everything,” Jet quickly explained about meeting the other group members that were all hybrids.

Beth frowned. “I tried to see them as just regular people,” Beth said and nodded, but they aren’t, are they? Worlds apart.

“And Hannah wanted us to give them a chance ‘cause she was infatuated with that guy, Adam, so she blurted out her secret.”

“I see,” Beth said, “I suppose the news will be all over the place fast.”

“I understand why it was a secret.”

“Good. Others may not.”

“No one has to know she was always one, Mom. Those people didn’t get their inoculations from the military personally; they found the papers and meds and chose it for themselves. Sadie and Robbin took the shots.”

“They still have them? The medical protocol?”

“Adam does. I already warned Conner to confiscate that bag so it could go to Doc and Steve and protocol could be decided on from there.”

Kim patted Jet’s shoulder. “He’s a smart one.”

“You did the right thing, Jet,” Matt said, “I’m proud of you.”

“While the girl Yuki or Kee Kee was dying, Hannah and Adam disappeared a few days. They found the five who shot at us and tracked them back to where the rest of their people were holed up. What those people did was cowardly and wrong. They were nothing but murderers, but they were scared when they did it.”

“They deserved to die for it.”

“And they did, Matt. But Hannah and Adam also tracked the people from where they came from: back tracked, and there were more people. I

don't know about the rest and what they thought was right or wrong.

Adam and Hannah didn't either. They went in and shot every one of them: men, a few women, some kids. I don't know how I feel about it, but I wouldn't have done it."

"They shot them? Why?"

"Because of what the five others did. They said they were all evil, whatever that means to Hannah and Adam."

"Damn," Mark said.

"Then you went on south?"

"Yes, and for every Z we saw, those two waded in at once and cut them to ribbons which I'm glad of, but it was as if each one tried to do more than the other...to be more bloodthirsty.

Adam isn't a bad sort, but he's got her wrapped up with him, and she likes him. He's just one pissed-off man.

Len would have a field day telling Adam about real anger and what justice is. He is more about revenge and fury than justice."

Beth held her son's hand. "That bothers you. Hon, you know I have gone that way before, had my mind so clouded with anger and hatred that I was brutal; it happens."

"But you came back out," Jet told her, "and Dad did, too."

"Yes."

"Hannah doesn't laugh anymore."

Mark rubbed his hand through his hair. "You can't reach her now? You have always been her best friend."

"No. Adam is the only one she responds to at all. Sometimes she listens to that girl, Pinky, who is crazy as a loon. The nut begged us to get her a shark and let her keep it. She has no sense of reality, really."

"A shark? What the hell?" Matt broke in.

"No kidding."

"But back here with her family...." Beth began.

"She has already said she wouldn't go with us but would stay with those like her. She's done something...."

"Put a wall up," Mark said, "she's drawn a line between us and them."

"Exactly. She's one of them. She talks about being the weapons that will take back the world. But twelve hybrids died on that highway. They didn't do so well after all," Jet said bitterly.

“I can only try with her,” Beth said, “maybe Ponce can get through to her.”

“Adam won’t let him,” Jet said. He stopped speaking as Andromeda walked over to them purposefully. He sighed, not wanting her to interrupt the conversation and not wanting to deal with any drama.

“Beth, your daughter....”

“What Andie? She just got here.”

“She’s staying down in quarantine with the hybrids that came in.”

Matt nodded. “We know, Andie.”

“I know,” Beth added.

“Why would she?”

“The group the others ran into had some military supplies, and they used the inoculations on themselves. Twelve of them died anyway of gunshots or being heavily attacked by zoms. Only Hannah, the leader Adam, and the girl they call Pinky had the inoculations and survived the attack.”

Andromeda thought that over. “What about Robbin, Anthony, Sadie, and Ricky?”

“Ricky didn’t get the shot. He was perfectly human, just like Lance and me, Anthony, too. Robbin and Sadie are two of the hybrids who died anyway,” Jet said. No one had lied yet, but truths were held back.

“I think Ivory Joe will be thankful Ricky didn’t take it,” Andie said.

“Maybe so,” Mark told her.

“So, Hannah has to stay down there with the others. She knows that, Andie,” Beth said.

Mark and Matt nodded in agreement. This mollified Andie somewhat. “So we aren’t going to have hybrids running around potentially infecting anyone? “

“Nope. No reason for a panic. They are isolated.”

“Why would they do that? Get inoculated?” Andie asked.

Kim stood. “I guess each has his own reason, but since it’s too late to take it back, does it matter? They’re isolated, and they came clean about it.”

“I’ve told you before. No one hears me. Hannah is not right; it’s more than just this. That girl changed into something ten years ago, or maybe she was always that way, but you all ignored it. She’s dangerous. She’s an angry person.”

Andromeda noted that no one brushed her off. While they didn’t agree with her this time, no one told her she was being foolish and to shut up. “I

need to go share that much with Ricky's family, that he was human and didn't do anything abominable."

Beth made a request to Mark and Matt before she and Kim took dinner to the quarantined area. Jet went to see his siblings, glad to be home with his family and friends.

They picked at the food. Pinky was the only one, besides Ponce, who enjoyed the variety and asked what each thing was. "How long will the quarantine be?" Adam asked.

"For as long as you're here." Beth said.

"Really?"

"I trust John Ponce fully, and he's here as well, so why would we let you walk around our settlement?" Beth asked.

"I'm not a threat. I don't bite," said Adam as he chuckled.

"It's also for your safety," Kim said. Johnny, Conner, and a few more he knew well were close to the table with guns. "They are protecting you as much as enforcing the quarantine."

"Why?"

"People don't like hybrids. I'm sure Hannah or Jet told you that."

"Except you like Ponce's being here."

"I do."

"And your own Hannah."

"Indeed, I do."

"It's Pinky and I who are in danger from your people then, right?" Adam felt cornered now.

"You got it," Beth told him, "my daughter could sleep in her room, I imagine, if not for this situation."

"Mom...."

"Hannah, I am only asking you to spend a little time listening to Ponce and hearing what he thinks; he knows you."

"I know her better," Adam said. His feelings were hurt by this reception.

"I speak my mind. What I'm saying is this: Ponce and Hannah have not let a day go by that they didn't curse the men who gave them the inoculation. Every day they wish they could go back and not be changed. They had no choices.

You had a choice twice: once you did the right thing, and then you did the wrong thing. You had no right to offer that inoculation to other people, but let's ignore that for a second. You had absolutely no right to entice two



people from here, Sadie and Robbin, to take the shots or give the inoculation to them.”

“They made that choice,” Adam said softly.

“And it was a wrong choice. You weren’t forced to have it, and you weren’t bitten, so why in the hell would you decide anything like *this* by yourself? It makes a mockery of good people who didn’t want it but were forced to such as Ponce and Hannah. How dare you make such a foolish choice? How dare you offer it to others and play God?”

“But we’re the hope for the world. We’re the bridge between the infection and you. We’re supposed to make things right and....”

“Inherit the world?” Kim asked, “You are the new species?”

Ponce coughed, “We aren’t stronger, Kid; we’re weaker. They lied. We have the weaknesses of the infected and of the uninfected.”

“You’re an idiot,” Adam said.

“Perhaps,” Ponce agreed calmly.

“My daughter didn’t get a choice. You did,” Beth said, “and what now? You want to play superhero; kill all the Zs, all the bad guys, and a few good ones; and go on as if all were fine?” Beth laughed harshly.

“Honey, I’ve already been there, done that, and I’ve done it far better than you could ever dream of. We fought the Zs against all odds; we fought the Reconstruction Army and won. I have had to shoot good people who didn’t ask or want to be infected, and I have watched a woman and child beg for their lives right outside this gate. I heard them ask for mercy, but they were hybrids and spilled innocent blood, so I blew their heads off,” Beth told them.

“Guess that makes you worse than I am morally,” Adam said, making Hannah cringe.

“Nope, it means I do things on my terms. I do what I believe in my heart is right. And I believe that we humans will inherit this world and we are fine with a few good hybrids such as my daughter and Ponce with us. We don’t want anyone with us inheriting anything if he made a dumb ass choice to join those damned things.”

“You don’t get it, and you never will,” Adam said. How could she understand that he wished he *hadn’t* made that choice, but he was now so angry that he could hardly think.

“The snake should have never been allowed into the garden of Eden,” he blurted. The temptation had been much bigger than anything else.

“Well, if you see a snake, it’s best to kill it or get away from it, not pick it up and embrace it.”

“Hannah, Pinky, we’re going. Get what you want to take, and we’re going now. I don’t like it here.”

“Now?” Hannah asked dully, “didn’t we just get here?”

“How long before they come down here and put a bullet into us?” Adam asked.

Johnny scowled. “We don’t do that shit to people.” But she knew it crossed her mind to shoot this kid.

“I want the medical stuff we brought, so we can leave now,” Adam said.

“The inoculations and notes?”

“Right. It’s mine. That asshole took it.” Adam pointed to Conner.

Beth shrugged. “I spoke to Governor Mark and Head of Security Matt; they agree it doesn’t need to be out there for people.”

“It’s mine.”

“It’s burned up by now. I asked for it to be destroyed.”

Adam grabbed for Beth’s hand, intending to pull her across the table towards him, but Kim drew and placed his pistol against Adam’s head. Conner and Johnny both raised their rifles. “Reach for my wife again, and you’re dead,” Kim said.

“Hannah, will you stay a while and talk to us and Ponce?”

Hannah looked at her parents, loving them so much, but she felt connected to Adam now as well. Together, they tried so hard to clear the earth so they could have space of their own. Jet and Lance wouldn’t look at her. If she stayed, Adam would go, and she’d never see him again and might never find any man who was like her, who would love her.

She didn’t belong here. She was a monster.

Taking Hannah’s silence for acceptance, Adam got Pinky up and threw everything into their saddlebags, filling Hannah’s for her.

“You say we don’t belong here. Okay. That world doesn’t want us either, but we’ll carve out a place for ourselves. You could have bridged the gap, but instead, you’ve cut the ropes.

One day when people tell stories, and they will, children will ask why humans and hybrids couldn’t work together and get along; they will say one name. Beth,” Adam said.

“You aren’t the bridge. You are a mistake. You were too chicken shit to fight on the right side, so you bailed,” Kim said, “let them go if they want to

so much. We'll ride with them to the end of the safe zone."

A man went to fetch horses.

Hannah dropped her gaze, got her bags, and took Pinky's hand. "I love you, Mom and Dad."

"We love you, Honey. We hope you can come back when whatever is driving you lets go. Forgive yourself and come home," Beth's voice shook, "come talk to Len."

"Beth..." Adam looked back once. "You've fought the bad men with guns at your gates, and you've fought the Zs with their poisonous bites. What happens when an army of us march: having both the poison and the guns?"

Beth knew it was a threat even if he were just talking to hear himself and was full of false bravado; the idea might appeal to him one day for real. "Same as always, I'd kill you where you stand."

"Not if Hannah were leading the army."

"Adam," Hannah snapped, "Stop it."

She allowed Adam to whisper to her and relaxed with his softly spoken words and nodding. Tempers were too hot on both sides. It was just talk. In time, this would cool off, and they could all speak calmly and get along.

"This has to stop," Andromeda said as she stepped out from behind a tree, her pistol on Hannah, "I can't believe you let him threaten us."

Beth positioned herself between her daughter and the woman holding the gun. Johnny and Conner didn't know whom to cover.

"You've gone too far, Hannah," Andie called out, stepping closer, "it's time this ended. You need to be put down."

Hannah had her own pistol out, unsure of what to do but terrified of Andie.

Several things happened at once or were separated by split seconds, and in the chaos, it was impossible to know what anyone else was doing.

Andie and Hannah both fired at one another, their bullets rang out, and Beth moved between them.

Hannah began screaming as Andie and Beth both fell, but before Hannah could get off her horse, Adam had his own horse and Hannah's horse moving.

In the confusion, Hannah didn't know whom her father shot at, but Kim was crazed with emotion and shot Pinky; the little girl landed on her side.

Hannah screamed.

Johnny ran to Andromeda and Beth, yelling that if Andie moved, she would shoot her where she was, but neither woman was moving at all.

Conner shot at Adam, not knowing if that were right, but it felt damned good to try. Adam's shoulder twitched with the hit, but he and Hannah rode hell bent for the end of the safety zone, never looking back although Hannah sobbed the whole time.

John Ponce stood with his hands raised, scared he would be shot for some reason and would be unable to help anyone because of the infection he carried in his body that could be transferred to anyone bleeding.

Julia. Matt. Mark. Then Carl and Teeg ran down to the gate, unable to figure out what was happening as they took in the scene. All three shots and three were on the ground.

“Kim? Johnny? Status?” Mark bellowed as he ran.

Kim slumped to the ground, crying, holding Beth in his arms, and rocking her.

Matt felt gut kicked as he knew this was the *end of the road* for at least one person.

Johnny stared at Mark with somewhat of a blank look. She struggled to speak; then as trained, she answered, “Two dead. One dying, Sir.”

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About the author:

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Z is for Zombie Order:

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Event Horizon

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