

# The Hibernia Strain



Albert Peterson

## Annotation

Socially inept self doubter Matt has managed to etch out a regular life for himself. When he's landed in the deep end of a situation beyond his control due to a viral outbreak in Ireland, can he not only win over the girl of his dreams but save them both in the process?

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**Albert Peterson**  
**THE HIBERNIA STRAIN**

*In memory of Mum*

“Emm... can I have a double cheese burger please.” The emotionless generic response of, “That’ll be just a minute. Would you like anything else?” leads me to shake my head, lean against the counter and wait as the assistant busies herself getting my order.

I scan around the hectic takeaway. It’s two AM, and all the nightclubs have emptied out. The swarms of wobbly legged, glazed-eyed party goers have thronged onto the streets and turned the many food joints into frantic, noisy auction houses. All pushing and shoving, cash in clumsy hands, trying to be the next to gargle their orders towards the staff.

I feel sorry for anyone who works the weekend nightshift in takeaways. It’s hard work and they tend to take a lot of abuse. It’s the same in all the towns and cities across Ireland on a weekend, and here tonight is no exception.

My eyes finally land on the screen of a security monitor nestled away in a corner behind the counter. Intended to be hidden from customers prying eyes; it’s at an acute enough angle for me to make out the display.

The images are from the street outside. Various couples embrace. One guy is getting sick from enjoying too many pleasures of the bar. Others engage in the usual antics that you would expect at this hour of the night.

I happen to notice a woman standing with her back to the wall, underneath the camera; she’s all alone. The video quality isn’t high, but I can make out that she has a pretty face and that there’s a scared look on it. As the camera auto pans to the left, I can see why. Two shadowy figures are standing around her, closing in, in a menacing manner.

I watch keenly, my eyes glued to the screen. I see the woman’s lips shape themselves in readiness to let out a yell as one of the figures swings a fist in her direction. I have just enough time to see the blow and the resulting blood trickle from a cut on her cheek before the camera scans another area of the street.

I wouldn’t classify myself by any means as a hero. As a matter of fact, I’m the exact opposite, gutless. I find that doesn’t sound as bad as calling myself a coward. But despite my aggression free nature I can’t stand to see guys being violent towards women.

My knee jerk reaction is to reach over the counter and grab a container of salt, knocking over various napkin containers and food boxes as I do. This apparent act of drunken bravado draws cheers from the crowd around me and shouts of anger from the staff. I don't pass any heed though as I'm already making my way through a sea of short skirts and sweaty beer-stained shirts.

*Surely someone has stepped in to help her?* I think to myself as I near the exit. While I push the door outwards, I notice straight away that, in fact, no one has come to her aid.

The two assailants must have pushed her to the ground; they now have their quarry truly at their mercy as they stand over her, grabbing at her as she tries to fight them off from her now seated position on the cold concrete.

I sprint towards them and make up the twenty or so metre distance in seconds. Great, they haven't noticed my approach. With my hand full of salt, I barge into the duo, knocking one over.

"Bastard," I snarl as I flail my fist towards the face of the second and unleash my handful of salty justice into his eyes. A follow-up with a knee to the stomach and the guy is temporarily subdued, clawing at burning eyes and moaning. A scumbag style kick to the stomach of the first ensures that he stays on the ground.

I can't help but notice the sickly grey tint to both their skin, similar to how skin looks when someone is choking, and the colour drains from the face. Whatever the reason they're really unhealthy-looking. Now I know why they looked so shadowy on the camera. This strange complexion helped to blend them into the dullness of the night.

I need to weigh up my options. Do I hang around to see their reactions? I may be comprised of a small frame with decent strong muscles, but I'm certainly not the type who goes around smacking lads about the place or provoking fights.

Another more sensible option would be to vanish from the scene. So, before the creeps can reassemble, I take the woman's hand, pull her to her feet and usher her with a tug in my direction. I lead her around the corner and down the street.

*What the hell am I doing?* This show of bravery is a far cry from my usual shy reserved self. *Shit, now what...?* My inner monologue of uncertainty doesn't last long. I'm brought back to reality by the woman

calling to me to slow down. It's only now I realize I'm half dragging her behind me, her hand tightly encased in mine. She's finding it hard to keep up in her high heels.

We slow down, turn into a side alley and stand in a shop doorway.

"Do you think they're after us?" she whispers.

She's standing so close to me that the smell of her sweet perfume dances around my nose. My intensified breathing draws the sweet smell in like a vacuum. Combined with the buzz of my adrenaline flowing, it makes me feel dizzy.

I notice I was correct in my previous analysis of how perfectly pretty she is and I can't help but realise instantly how attracted I am to her.

I pull my sleeve over my hand and dab the cut on her cheek to clean up the traces of blood that have licked down her jaw line to her chin.

At first sight, I guessed she was roughly the same age as me, twenty five. Now on closer inspection and through her makeup, though, I'd say she's more like twenty one.

I try to sound reassuring in my response, "I don't think so. Who were they anyway?"

"I don't know," she responds with an appreciative look in her eyes as I finish cleaning her face. "I was waiting for my friends and next thing I know I'm being attacked. Thank you so much..." she begins but halts mid-sentence at the sound of approaching footsteps.

She steps in closer, her body pushing up against mine. Her ample chest pressed firmly against my own. Our lips are within inches of each other. Her blue eyes, widened with fear, are locked on mine. A shivery tingle runs through me, but I quickly regain my composure to focus on the impending trouble at hand.

We barely breathe so that we can listen more acutely. I can make out multiple footsteps indicating there is more than one person. *Did they follow us?* We had fled so quickly that I was sure they wouldn't find us.

As the footsteps draw closer, I place her behind me, leaving me in a better position to pounce on our pursuers. The footsteps stop then start intermittently. They're right beside us now. I tense my body, poised to strike.

A young couple stumble past us, hands everywhere and lips locked. Totally oblivious to us, their voyeurs, they disappear further into the darkness of the alleyway.

Both breathing a sigh of relief, I risk a peek from where we stand just in time to spot a Garda car passing on the roadway outside the alley. We take this as a signal it should now be safe enough to leave the safety of our doorway.

“Okay,” I say, “maybe I should get you a taxi?”

“That would be great,” is the reply, followed by an outstretched arm. “By the way my name’s Emma.”

“It’s nice to meet you Emma. I’m Matt.” I shake her hand with a comical nod. She unexpectedly latches onto my arm as we leave the alley and stroll to the nearest taxi-rank in the opposite direction from where we’ve just come.

“I’m guessing the Garda car was en route to pick up our friends?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I hope so. I wonder what the deal was with them anyhow.”

“Trying to mug me, I guess.”

“Yea you’re probably right. It was more than likely junkies looking for money to get their next fix. Anyhow, not to worry you’re safe now Emma.”

“I know.” A beaming smile spreads across her face. She tightens her grip on my arm, much to my approval, and we carry on down the street.

We make small talk along the way towards the taxi rank. It turns out that she’s a student in a local college, studying to become a primary school teacher. She does, however, come from another county. Coincidentally it’s the same one I originate from, Sligo.

She grew up on a farm in the countryside, whereas I was raised closer to the city. I tell her that I work nightshift in a local factory and that I was getting a post-work bite to eat before our unusual introduction.

“You probably should message your friends to let them know that you’re ok,” I suggest.

“Maybe I will but then again maybe I won’t. I’m kind of pissed with them to be honest. If they weren’t so late meeting up with me then this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I see,” I say with a disgruntled tone.

She must have picked up on this as she quickly adds “But then again I wouldn’t have met you if they did show their faces on time, so it isn’t all bad, right?”

I smirk in agreement.

We finally reach the line of taxis and walk up to the first one we see.

“Ok then this is you,” I say as the driver nods to acknowledge us as his next fare. “I’m so sorry this happened to you, and I hope you’ll be ok.” I gesture to the now slightly swollen pink mark left on her cheek.

“Oh I think I’ll survive.” We both share a grin.

I feel an awkward nervous sweat building up. This always happens to me when I’m about to do something I don’t feel comfortable doing.

I’m a shy guy who doesn’t usually stand out in a crowd. I watch my friends chat up the good looking women on nights out while I sit back and pretend I’m satisfied with my beer and general lack of confidence.

Now here I am. Fate has landed me in this situation where I’m talking to possibly the most beautiful girl I’ve ever laid my eyes on.

*Christ, I hope she doesn’t want to shake hands goodbye!* Mine are clammy with sweat, and I doubt very much that that combined with a salty residue from earlier would leave her with much of a positive lasting impression of me.

I tuck my hands into my trouser pockets. I’m not sure whether it’s a delayed surge of adrenaline from earlier, but I build up enough courage to say, “So...ahem, I was wondering...ahem if I could get your... em... your.”

I look down at my feet. My tatty converse trainers hardly convey the image of someone she would be impressed with. I can picture the type of guy she would normally date. Tall, well dressed and well groomed with good looks equal to hers and possessing a confident extrovert personality. *Bail out now Matt; a girl like her is way out of your league!*

“My?” she chirps.

“Your number.” I manage to choke it out.

I feel so mortified. I can tell my face has gone a deep beetroot red. Damn my apprehensive demeanour.

I look up, and her eyes are staring straight at me. Her eyebrows raised in a quirky questioning manner, at first, then drop into a slight frown.

“I don’t know if my boyfriend would approve of me giving out my number to handsome men, even one who’s my knight in shining armour.”

I’m pretty sure I can feel vomit knocking at the back of my throat. No, wait, that’s just my testicles imploding since I realise I never want to attempt to ask someone who is this far out of my league, out again because this is what happens when I do.

“I understand,” I whimper like an injured puppy.



Her face lights up with that delightful grin of hers as she laughs out, “Matt I’m kidding. I don’t have a boyfriend. Look I’ll give you my number in the taxi if you have nowhere else to be.”

It takes few moments for the realisation of what’s just being offered to me to sink in. *Did she really just ask me to get in the taxi with her?*

My train of thought is interrupted by the driver asking in a slightly annoyed voice, “So will we be leaving anytime soon.”

I look at Emma who is already sitting in the back seat, her hand extended in my direction beckoning me to join her. I don’t take a second longer and get in beside her, close the door and buckle up. She gives the driver an address. I recognise it to be in the direction of the city’s main college. It isn’t a long drive, about ten minutes away.

This situation is totally new territory to me. I sit looking past the front seat, out to the road ahead. There aren’t really many other cars on the road, mainly just taxis bringing people home after their nights out on the town.

We pass by the takeaway, where all the commotion happened earlier. There still seems to be ongoing trouble. Three Garda cars have arrived at the scene. There’s a lot of shouting, as well as people fighting and running around.

“Wonder what all the commotion’s about?” the driver enquires. We don’t answer. He doesn’t seem to notice, though, carrying on with his end of the conversation.

“Looks like you both picked the right time to go call it a night.”

This time I reply with a begrudged, yet agreeing sigh, while I continue to gaze out the window at the scenes unfolding. He must have picked up on our lack of interest in having a conversation with him as he now seems content enough to turn his attention back to the road and carry on driving in silence.

Outside it seems to be turning into chaos. Fighting appears to be breaking out all over the place. The Gardai are outnumbered and have lost all control of the situation. This is proven to me by the sight of one officer being jumped by two women while trying to wrestle a troublemaker off a colleague.

A Garda van pulls up as we leave the scene in the taxi’s rear view mirror. *What in the hell is going on?* Sure, the Gardai have to deal with brawls on a regular basis, but this is different. This kind of reckless havoc doesn’t happen here. Were we really the cause of some sort of mini riot?

Emma and I look at each other. A puzzled look is etched on her face. I'm sure mine's displaying the same uncertainty. I pray the camera outside the takeaway was a live video feed only and didn't actually record the events or else we might be getting a friendly visit from the boys in blue. I waive this idea and instead reassure myself that I didn't do anything wrong. This self realisation of innocence settles me, and I relax into the seat.

Emma's hand finds mine in the gloom. I whisper, "Crazy night huh?"  
"It sure was," she replies, "but it's not over yet."

She leans towards me and kisses me tenderly. This takes me by surprise, but I certainly don't resist. Instead, I allow myself to melt into her soft lips. They have a faint hint of strawberry flavour to them. Fruity lip balm I presume or maybe she had been drinking strawberry cocktails. The source isn't really that significant. The main thing of importance right this instant is that I'm getting to taste it.

She pulls away and whispers in my ear, "When we get to my apartment I'm going to show you just how appreciative I am".

I'm not sure if it's the remnants of alcohol in her system or if is she usually this seductive, but I love the fact that she is so forward. It saves me the terror of having to initiate it.

I catch a glimpse of the driver smirking in the mirror. Hah. I'm sure he's well used to this scene playing out in his backseat every weekend. I feel a sly grin starting to break across my face, but it doesn't get a chance to form as Emma has her hand around my neck and pulls me closer to carry on kissing.

I comply and our lips and tongues collide again in a passionate onslaught. This continues for a couple of minutes when suddenly the driver yells, "Shit" and slams full force on the brakes.

We're both slammed forward. My seatbelt tightens around me and holds me there until the forward inertia stops, and I'm thrown back into my seat with a thump. I'm fine, so I check on Emma. She appears ok, although she is clutching her neck. She might have minor whiplash.

"I'm fine", she insists when she sees me looking at her.

The driver asks if we're ok and on confirmation he switches off the ignition and gets out of the car muttering, "Stupid bitch".

I observe outside the car and notice that we're quite close to the college. It's also clear that the car is wedged up against the roadside kerbing.

Next, I see a woman, in her early twenties, standing in the middle of the road. She seems unfazed by the fact she could have been run down and looks even less so by the raging driver walking towards her, shouting profanities. *Is she drunk? Or is she high maybe?*

I urge Emma to stay in the car as I unbuckle my belt and get out. I have a clearer view of the woman now, and with the aid of the street lights, I can plainly see her face.

My face drops. She has the exact same pale hue to her skin like the thugs from earlier in the night. She also has some bloody looking wounds on her face and arms. We definitely didn't hit her with the car.

An eerie feeling washes over me and I can't help but feel really fucking uneasy. It's too big of a coincidence to have two bizarre events happen in one night, with such similar factors involved.

The driver meanwhile has positioned himself face to face with the woman and continues yelling at her. He begins to shake her roughly by the shoulders when she remains unresponsive.

I'm totally unprepared for what happens next. She snaps out at his throat. Her teeth cut deep into the soft flesh around his Adams apple. As she pulls her head backwards, it reveals teeth and lips stained red with the driver's blood.

The driver first falls to his knees; blood is streaming out of the sadistic looking wound, and then he unceremoniously slumps to the ground, face first. He's just lying motionless. Is he dead? Has he passed out from the pain or shock? I can't tell for sure. *Fuck! What should I do?*

I half hiss / half whisper an order to Emma to get out of the car. She obviously has witnessed the entire episode and is just sitting there frozen with her hands covering her mouth; in an attempt to subdue the screams which I'm sure are bursting to escape.

I didn't notice him at first, but arriving on the scene is a second individual; a tall man. It's difficult to make out his age as he's cloaked in shadows. Does he know what he's just stumbled upon? He might have witnessed it all and unlike me is willing to help. If he's here to lend a hand, then, I'll help too! He reaches the woman, but instead of pulling her away from the driver, he instead helps her to subdue him further. *What the hell!*

Without attracting the attention of the psychos, who are now kneeling over their victim; holding him down, I help Emma slide herself out my

door. We proceed to back away from the scene, our eyes on the duo the entire time.

We certainly can't help the poor bastard now, even with the numbers being two against two. Or maybe I'm just too much of a chicken-shit to go to his aid after what I've just witnessed.

We slink away. When we're at a safe distance, Emma lets out a petrified jumble of words. I can't really make out much of what she's saying though. I stop and grab her. The alarmed look on her face frightens me, although, I'm sure my face must express a similar, horrified look.

I know for a fact that we're close to where Emma lives. I convince her to lead us there, explaining that we'll ring the Gardai once we're safe inside.

She leads on, choking the tears back. It only takes us seven minutes of fear fuelled sprinting to get to her front door. She fumbles her keys into the lock and bursts in.

"That was Toma," she exclaims.

"Who's Toma?" I enquire.

"She's a Lithuanian girl from my college course. I only spoke to her this morning. She was going to visit her grandmother in the old folk's home. What happened to her?"

She looks at me with utter disbelief. I have no answer, so I remain quiet, take out my smart phone and dial 999 for the emergency services. It rings twice before a woman's voice answers, "Emergency service how may I help?"

"Yes hello, I'd like to report an assault," I explain.

She continues to take all the necessary details before telling me to stay where I am, and a Garda car will come to visit us at some stage, although she adds, "It might be awhile as there's an overwhelming amount of calls in tonight." I hang up and put my phone down on the kitchen table.

Emma is on the couch in the sitting room. Elbows on her knees, with her head embedded in her hands. I amble over and sit down beside her. I inform her as to what the operator said, and she agrees that waiting here isn't just the best option, but it's our only option really.

She decides to get up to make some coffee. I slump back on the couch and take in my new surroundings. Typical student digs. A bit of a dump with minimal furnishing, a chunky outdated television, sits in front of me adding to the clichéd student cheapness. It's very neat and tidy nonetheless.

Emma returns after a few minutes, sits down again and hands me a steaming cup before nestling in close to me. She's also had time to change into more casual wear instead of the skimpy, sexy outfit from earlier. I can feel she's still shivering with nerves.

I take one look at the mug and shudder. I don't drink coffee. It repulses me. The bitter taste of the brew insults my taste buds. I take a sip so as not to offend her and then place it down on a coffee table. She does likewise and then rests her head on my shoulder.

The Gardai will hopefully be here soon, so I encourage her to rest her eyes. She places a delicate kiss on my cheek before getting more comfortable.

It's so late at this stage that there are slight signs of red beginning to streak across the horizon. It's the beginning of a new day. *What on earth is it going to hold in store for us?*

Rays of sunlight have begun to shine in the window. I watch as they slowly creep along the faded paint of the apartment walls, progressing steadily until they flicker in my eyes causing me to squint.

Emma dozed off some time ago. Her head's now resting on my lap. A slight, damp patch of drool has seeped from the corner of her mouth onto the crotch of my trousers. I can't help but hope she doesn't wake up and think that it's something else.

Its two hours since I rang the Gardai, but there's no sign of them still. They must all be busy putting a dampener on the mini riot we started. I let out a groan at the thought of it. A groan, that just so happens to be loud enough to stir Emma from her sleep.

"What was that?" she asks as she sits up and stretches out her neck and shoulders before looking at me and noticing the wet area on my jeans.

"Oh," she remarks while shrivelling up her nose, at what she deems to have been a groan of pleasure.

"No, no no," I interrupt, "it's not what you think."

She smirks at me and exclaims her relief, "Phew, I'd be a little disappointed if that was all ya had."

I'm taken aback by her cheekiness but manage to repay her smile with one of my own.

"Still no Guards huh?" she questions, while looking at her phone, choosing to ignore the several messages she's received from her worried friends no doubt.

"No sign yet."

"Well that's a pain in the face isn't it," she complains.

She grabs the TV remote and switches it on. It takes a few moments to warm up before displaying any images. She flicks through the multitude of early morning kids shows until she lands on the news.

"Let's see if we get a mention," she says jokingly.

It's hard to ignore the fact that she seems less upset and helpless than she was last night. It's like she's more in control and has an attitude of; *it can't be helped, so let's just get on with it*. This surprises me a little after seeing how shook up she was over the Toma girl last night.

We both stare at the screen in anticipation of last night's incidences flashing up in front of us. Instead, the news reader informs us of a variety of violent altercations, which took place, during the night. Each occurred in different places in the west side of the city. Yet, all were close to the same area where Emma was attacked, with the exception of a few which were dotted elsewhere around the city.

There's not a lot of information, except that the attacks were all carried out in a highly aggressive manner.

A press conference with the Garda commissioner doesn't shed any extra light on the reasons for the vicious sounding outbursts except that several arrests were made, and many people were hospitalised.

"Well that explains why they haven't come to us yet I suppose. Sounds like they have their hands full," I say, not taking my eyes off the screen.

"We're just gonna have to sit tight for the time being so?" Emma suggests more as a statement than a question.

I can feel her eyes examining the side of my face, so I take a few seconds before turning to look at her.

"You should go to bed and get some proper sleep. You look awfully tired. I'll stay up and wait for them to arrive".

"Are you sure you don't mind?" she enquires.

"No, it's fine. I'm usually up this early anyhow," I lie.

"Ok then." She yawns as she stands up and stretches before shuffling off towards her room. As she reaches the door, she turns to me and offers me a sleepy smile.

"If you're hungry help yourself to whatever you can find".

"Thanks," I reply as I wait for her to close the bedroom door before turning my attention to the TV screen again.

The Garda guy is asking for any witnesses or anyone with information to come forward. I allow myself a sarcastic sneer at his expense. There are two witnesses right here, which they know about, but don't seem in any rush to get to. *Typical.*

The newscaster moves on to a different story about parliament in Britain, passing a motion to make contributions to farmers, who suffered financial loss during the ovine culling last February. *Boring and off topic!*

My attention quickly drifts away. I take out my phone. No messages of concern like Emma had. Not that I was expecting any.

It takes a second for me to realise I don't have any coverage. This is strange as I always have full coverage in the city. Maybe this apartment is in a weak signal area. *No, wait.* I rang the Gardai earlier with no reception problems. *What a nuisance!* No network coverage also means I can't use the Internet.

I try turning it off and on again but to no avail. I slip the phone back into my pocket and decide it'll probably fix itself after awhile.

I pull off my shoes and leave them neatly to one side. Next, I position two cushions against the armrest of the couch and then lie down and get comfortable. That's one benefit of not being overly tall. It makes it easier to turn a couch into a makeshift bed, that doesn't break your back.

As I lie on my side, I gaze once again at the TV. I have a million thoughts running through my head, yet I'm unable to concentrate on any one of them.

The noise of the TV starts to become distant and I can feel flickers of sleepiness descend upon me. I need to fight them off. The Gardai might come knocking, and I won't hear them. My eyelids tremble with the heaviness.

I'm about to nod off but manage to shake my head abruptly to wake myself up a bit. *Take that tiredness! Matt one, sleep nil.*

I wake to the sound of a solemn voice on the television. *Damn it,* I fell asleep after all. I take a quick look at my phone. Through groggy eyes, I see that I still don't have coverage. I was asleep for nearly two hours. The time is now ten AM.

My attention is drawn to the still serious sounding reporter on the screen. He's standing on a street that's near the city centre. In the background, I make out multiple Garda vans parked everywhere. There are lots of officers, clad in riot gear, lined up across the street too.

The reporter is almost shouting at the camera to make himself heard over the deafening noise coming from further up the street.

I look on in distress as he tells us viewers about violent clashes, which broke out, earlier in the morning, having now erupted into chaotic mayhem. A group of people apparently started attacking anyone and everyone that came within range.

The Gardai now seemingly have the mob cordoned off on one section of the street. The reporter continues, "They seem to be now concentrating



their violent conduct towards the Gardai themselves.”

He’s mid sentence when the cameraman drops his camera, followed by him dropping his microphone and making a run for it. At first I don’t understand why, but the discarded camera then reveals images, of the Garda line being breached and the unruly horde charging down the street before it cuts back to the studio.

A surprised and obviously shocked presenter tries to compose herself, stuttering and being generally unsure as what to do next, means the news is swiftly cut to a commercial break.

I speedily get up and barge into Emma’s room without knocking, shouting, “Wake up,” as I go. To my misfortune she already has gotten up and is getting dressed. She doesn’t have time to pull her bra up fully before I get a look. I quickly turn around and march right out the door again, apologising profusely as I go.

Emma follows me out a few moments later.

“Are you mentally defunct or is there something else wrong with you that you don’t know how to knock.” I blush intensely, but it fades as she changes her tone and asks me what exactly was so important?

Like a scolded child I point towards the television screen, which once again has returned to the news. The Garda commissioner from the earlier press conference is once again giving a speech. We magnetically move towards the couch and sit down shoulder to shoulder.

“We are urging people to stay well clear of the areas affected. Extensive damage has been caused to shops, cars as well as many casualties. Extra Garda resources are being drafted into help deal with the problem, and we hope to have the situation under control soon.”

When asked what sparked off the hostility he answers;

“As of yet we are unsure why the fighting broke out. There were no protests due to be held today or any kind of marches that may have gone out of control. At the moment, we are still looking into whether or not it is linked with the public brawling that occurred last night. I would like iterate once again that

people need to comply with the Gardai and stay away from the areas affected.”

By now Emma, who has coverage, is on her phone and is logged into Facebook. She swipes down the screen, scrolling through the various posts. Commenting on some and replying to messages from friends.

Her face drops the more she reads. I peek in. Some people have posted pictures of the bedlam. Some are quite disturbing; people being mauled and cars on fire.

Some comments are from people in the hospital who just managed to escape with minor injuries from the fiendish attackers.

I freeze up as I look at one picture in particular. Someone has managed to get a close up of one of the attackers. He has the same pale characteristics as the guys from last night. *Is this all somehow connected?*

“What the hell is going on out there?” Emma asks me.

“I wish I knew, but I’m sure the authorities will sort it out. I mean what’s the worst that can happen, right?”

“I hope your right,” she answers.

“Of course I am.”

“I suppose there won’t be any sign of the Gardai coming here anytime soon then. I know you probably want to get home but would you mind staying a little longer?” Emma asks.

“Yea I guess I could manage that. If you feed me,” I suggest jokingly, changing the subject, partly because I’m hungry, partly because Emma’s hot and partly because I don’t fancy trekking across town with all the shit going on.

I lean back on the hind legs of the chair and pat my stomach. Emma kept her end of the bargain. A homemade pizza whipped up from scratch followed by dessert of pancakes, topped with blueberries and maple syrup. She's actually pretty good in the kitchen. That's another positive attribute of hers for me to add to the list.

We had a good chit chat over dinner. I found out she has no brothers or sisters. Her mother is a doctor and her father a surgeon. Both are currently on holiday in France.

She has a really easy going personality rounded off with a sunny disposition. Pretty much everything I had expected from meeting her last night. And the fact that she doesn't have a boyfriend is the cherry on top.

I look across the table. Emma is running her thumb along the rim of her plate gathering up some syrup before proceeding to lick it off. She catches me watching and with her thumb still in her mouth she mumbles, "What?"

I devise a plan to make a move on her.

"Fancy watching a movie?" I enquire, hoping for an accepting reply.

"Sure, why not. There's bound to be something on the TV."

*Excellent step one was successful.*

We quickly tidy up the dishes, go into the sitting room and plop ourselves down on the couch. The day is flying by so quickly. Its six PM already and the Gardai still haven't shown up. I'm starting to doubt they will at all. This is a good thing. It makes me feel a little less worried about us getting in trouble.

Emma powers on the television with the remote but gets nothing but static. She flicks through all of the Irish channels in order. All display the same snowiness. This is very odd indeed, but I quickly dismiss it as the British channels are working.

We don't make it past the first channel however, as the images cause us both to freeze on the spot. I'd be forgiven for mistaking the scenes of carnage on display as being those from a horror movie. They are, in fact, a live feed from the evening news.

It's no longer just the Gardai involved. The army is now on the scene too. However, despite the reinforcements, it looks like they're fighting a losing battle.

I can't help but be reminded somewhat of scenes from years gone past, of the violence spawned from the troubles in Northern Ireland between the Irish Republican Army and Ulster Volunteer Forces.

News helicopters beam back images of grotesque ongoing assaults on soldiers. In return, the soldiers are shooting back tear gas, and what I imagine are rubber bullets.

The reporters are trying to reason with each other what exactly is happening. In truth, it's obvious they don't really have a clue.

The banner scrolling across the bottom of the screen reads, "*Riots reach chaotic levels in Ireland.*" I can't help thinking this can't be real. What I'm watching just can't be happening.

It's too crazy, but there it is in full colour on the screen in front of me. There's bloodshed and anarchy unfolding on a dumbfounding scale.

I look at Emma. She's watching the screen in silence, mesmerised. I don't say a word.

*What's the worst that can happen? Things are a bit out of hand. It'll pass, right? The chokehold of the ongoing recession has probably finally gone too far, and people are just venting their anger. We don't need to worry, we're plenty safe here.*

Without warning, Emma pulls out her phone and states that she's ringing her parents to let them know she's ok. She dials the number and lifts her phone to her ear. I can hear the ringing from the earpiece until it goes to voicemail.

She hangs up and rings again. She gets the voicemail again, except this time she leaves a friendly message saying, "Hi Mom. Just a quick call to let ye know I'm fine, and I hope the holiday is going well. Chat soon. Love you."

She didn't mention anything about the trouble brewing outside. I suppose since they're on holidays maybe they haven't even heard about the riots. There's no point in giving them undue reason to worry.

I can see that Emma is a tad upset. I hope she isn't worried about the riot because I've convinced myself that it's not going to affect us.

Getting up from her seat, she switches the TV off, walks over to the window and proceeds to stare blankly out at the late evening sky.

Unsure what to do in the awkward silence, I decide to join her.

Looking at the streets outside, you would never tell that such trouble was going on just a few kilometres away. There are people going about their business as usual.

The sky is dark with clouds, and it's threatening to rain. Damn unpredictable Irish weather, it can never make its mind up.

"I don't fancy that movie anymore if that's ok," Emma breaks the silence, taking my hand and leading me in the direction of her bedroom.

I didn't have a *step two* planned, but it looks like I didn't need it after all.

She opens the door and in we go. The curtains are pulled tight, but there's just enough light still penetrating through the material, to illuminate the room in a dull hue.

We get to the bed, and Emma sits me down first then lies me back before kneeling over me. She rests her left hand on the bed beside my right shoulder to steady herself and with the other she runs her fingers through my hair, all the time gazing at my face.

I rest my hands on her hips, and she takes this as a signal to begin kissing. Her pouting lips feel so soft and full against mine. A delectable warm feeling that is only made better by the sensually erratic movement of her tongue in my mouth.

I run my hands up and down her back, and as the kissing becomes more passionate I get bold enough to chance putting them under her top. She doesn't complain.

The feeling of my hands on her skin draws a breath of pleasure from her lips.

I grab her hips again but this time I run my hands along her sides and up her ribcage until I reach her bra.

Instantly she breaks away from kissing and kneels up. *Aw crap, my busy little hands have gone too far.* I find myself to be wrong as she unhooks her bra and pulls her top off exposing her impressive cleavage.

I just stare stunned and in awe. She smiles and wrestles my top off me before once again kneeling over me and continuing kissing.

With her breasts pressed against me, I can't help but get a full blown erection. That of course combined with the fact that her free hand has wandered down the front of my jeans.

I can't take anymore and roll her off me and onto her back. I kiss her neck and work my way down the side of her right boob and cut back in towards her stomach. She's moaning and sighing gently the entire time.

I reach the waistband of her sweatpants, and when I don't receive any orders to halt, I teasingly tug them off her to reveal cute super girl underwear.

Now I just need to concentrate and go to work with all my A-game foreplay moves.

Several minutes have gone by, and I've obviously been doing a good job pleasing her as she whispers to me to get a condom from her bedside locker.

I don't hesitate and root through the drawer until I unearth a well hidden box of Durex. To my dismay however, I open it to find it empty. I hold it up to show her and she curses. Inside I'm cursing too. So close yet so far.

"What a pain," Emma states, giving voice to both our disappointment, as she stands up.

Now that she's standing I can get a clear view of the fantastic body she has. This of course does nothing to stem the frustration I'm feeling right now.

She walks up to me, and while kissing my chest she begins undoing my belt buckle.

"Well I guess if we can't have sex I'll just have to repay the favour then wont I."

As she kisses lower and lower down my body all I can do is mumble in agreement, like a moron. A lucky moron!

We're both lying here in silence, resting ourselves after our energetic activity. I still can't believe that actually happened.

I'm lying on top of the duvet with my boxers on. Emma slid under the sheets still naked. She's drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face. This of course makes me smile too.

I decide to take the opportunity to wander back to the sitting room and check for any updates on the riot.

The room is dark now so my hand fumbles about the top of the bedside locker trying to switch on the lamp. I find the switch and flick it on, but nothing happens.

My eyes have adjusted enough to the gloominess to make my way to the door. I flick the light switch on the wall. Nothing happens again. Is the power out?

I try the TV; it's dead too. There's no electricity at all. Is it a power outage or has Emma's circuit breaker tripped?

I go to the window and look out. Everywhere is in darkness. Something is definitely wrong.

I grab my phone. Still there's no reception and on top of that the battery is now dangerously low. *Perfect.*

I need to get back to my place. My pet cat needs feeding and I need a change of clothes.

I already know Emma doesn't have a car, and I left mine near the takeaway last night. I hadn't realised that I'd be getting in the taxi too. Speaking of which, I have no intention of getting another taxi or venturing outside on foot again in the dark after the creepy attack.

*What a pain in the ass. What to do?* Then it hits me. My friend Shawn, I'll ring him to come and collect me.

Shawn is a graphic designer by day and a freelance artist by night. If ever there were a poster boy for insomnia then he's the guy.

He works for a big, high profile company in the city, but it's in his own time that his talent really shines through. Creating amazing works of art that often keep him up all night and see him go bleary eyed to work the next day.

Coffee isn't his only drug of choice, but he consumes so much of the stuff that it seems to keep him powered like a liquid battery.

He can be loud, sarcastic and likes to shoot his mouth off, but he's a good laugh. He's also been my closest friend for years. He's someone whom I can always depend on and trust.

I borrow Emma's phone from the couch and dial his number. I'm sure she won't mind me using it.

It rings several times. *Shit, he's not going to answer.* I'm about to give up when I hear, "Hey what's up man?" echo down the line.

I can hear Pink Floyd playing loud in the background. He still has power anyway.

"You're ringing late. Or is it early? What time is it?" "Time for you to payback one of the many favours you owe me," I laugh.

I slowly and meticulously explain the situation, and he agrees to come right over. He lives at least twenty or so minutes from here, but he won't have to pass near the danger areas. I can hear he's already grabbing his keys as I hang up the phone.

I quietly steal back into the bedroom and grab my clothes, then just as quietly leave again. I get dressed in the sitting room, then sit and wait alone in the dark for Shawn's arrival.

My mind starts thinking back on the happenings of last night. *The taxi driver must surely have been found soon after we fled the scene. There's no way of knowing if there were any witnesses. What exactly was the deal with the Toma girl?*

The day with Emma was a good distraction, but I already had so many questions and no answers. And with the power outage and riots on the streets I now have even more.



The entire night has passed allowing dawn to sneak up on me. Just like yesterday morning, I once again find myself watching as the sunlight slowly creeps along the powder blue apartment walls.

Emma slept through the whole night without waking. I, on the other hand, didn't sleep a wink waiting for Shawn to get here.

I tried ringing from Emma's phone several times but all I got was the service provider message stating, "The customer you are calling may be out of coverage or have their mobile powered off." This unnerves me as Shawn is always punctual and always has his phone charged and good to go.

I try one more time. Again no luck except this time it's because this phone has now lost coverage too. I wonder what is happening in the world outside.

The TV is still dead so I can't check the news and of course the internet on this phone has ceased working now too.

With daylight now broken and there still being no sign of Shawn, the logical and cheapest thing to do is make my way to the bus station and get a ride home.

I rouse Emma from her drowsy state, explain to her that I need to go and that if she'd like we should meet up again sometime. I also tell her if a random friend of mine turns up to tell him he's too late.

I've just given Emma a kiss goodbye when she sits up in bed with the sheet wrapped around her to spare her modesty. She pipes up, "Breakfast. I'm going with you and you're buying me breakfast."

I'm somewhat taken aback by this. I knew she was forward, but didn't think she was so demanding. I don't answer for a second and just stand there gawking at her.

No, now that I look at her she's not being bossy. I think she just wants the company. She's lonely maybe, or possibly is interested enough in me to want to spend another morning with me. Whatever the reason is I'm not going to argue, after all I do have condoms at home.

I make a quick bite to eat to tide us over while Emma has a quick shower and gets dressed. We eat our small pre breakfast meal, *hmm preakfast*, of toast and fruit. I have juice and Emma has coffee.

With our stomachs filled a bit, we ready ourselves to go. We plan on heading to the bus stop nearest to the college. This means we can walk by the location of the other night's debacle and check it out.

We're just about to leave the apartment when I spot a portable radio on a table by the door. If it has working batteries in it, then we might catch a news report.

I pick it up and flip the switch on. Emma must have been listening to it while she was getting ready to go out last night as the volume knob is turned way up and I get hit with a blast of white noise.

I change to another station. It's the same story, more static. I try a couple more but no luck.

"Emma your radio's broken or something."

I look at the time. It's now ten past seven, and there'll be no news until half past anyhow. I turn the radio off again and decide it's best to make a move for the bus as we'll miss it if we wait around.

Out the door we go. Emma locks it and double checks that it's secure. I stick a note to the door knocker for Shawn in case he arrives and wonders where we've gone.

We begin to retrace our steps from Friday night. It's noticeably quiet out. We don't meet anybody at all. It's a Sunday morning. Everyone else is still in bed nursing hangovers I assume.

As we get close to where we abandoned the taxi, I can clearly see that it's still there. The lights are still on. It might be unmoved because the Gardai are doing some sort of forensic examination.

We advance a little further, taking our time and making sure not to get too close. *What's going on?* There are no Garda cars and the area hasn't even been cordoned off with a police line.

We don't mutter a word to each other as we edge a little closer. It's becoming more apparent that the crime scene hasn't been touched. Untouched that is, except for the driver's body. There is nothing left from where he lay, except some blood stains spattered on the ground.

*Did he survive?* It's possible the wound wasn't too deep, and he managed to get a passing car to bring him to hospital or even call an ambulance. But why then is the car still there in the same position with the front wheels against the kerb and the tail end sticking out to the middle of the road? Why hasn't it been towed away or at the very least moved to a safer position on the roadside?

I'm suddenly aware of a car approaching. It's the first sign of another person since we left Emma's apartment. It's approaching fast, well over the speed limit.

As it nears the abandoned taxi the car doesn't slow down, instead it maintains its speed and swerves out past the stranded taxi. The car's wing mirror shatters as it clips the side of the taxi. The driver doesn't slow anything, just motors on and disappears into the distance.

"I don't know what's going on Matt, but I'm scared. Can we just get out of here please?"

I'm inclined to agree with her suggestion and we hurry our asses in the direction of the bus stop.

Along the way, there's still no sign of any other people. The ominous feeling that's been resting in the pit of my stomach is starting to overwhelm me. It's virtually as if this area of the city was abandoned. Almost like there was a bomb scare or something.

*Holy shit, was the area evacuated for a bomb threat, a chemical spill or something of that nature? We wouldn't have heard any breaking news reports with all the communications being down.*

Surely the army or Gardai would have gone door to door to make sure everyone was out of the area. I was awake all night so I definitely would have heard knocking. What if there was no time for that. All these possibilities are running through my head as we finally come within viewing distance of the bus stop.

There waiting are two buses. Even from here I can hear the hum of the engines. *Great.* That must mean the bus service is still running at least.

As we get alongside the first bus, I make out that there are no passengers queuing outside or waiting onboard either bus.

I cautiously approach the door of the bus nearest to us. It's closed. I reach out and pull down on the emergency open lever located to the right of the door. It squeakily slides open. Inside is silent like a crypt. My arm hair is standing on end. *Man up will ya, Emma's watching!*

I advance up the two steps and peer down the length of the aisle, but there's nothing to see.

I get off and move on to the next bus. The door is open on this one and with no driver to greet me I get on reluctantly.

Emma is stuck to me like my shadow, following my every move. *She must be freaked out. Hell I'm freaked out.*

I glance down the aisle. At first I don't see anything until I happen to catch a glimpse of something stirring between a set of seats near the back.

"Hello," I say, my voice shaky but loud. There's no response. "Hello," I repeat, this time sterner, as I edge down the aisle.

I place my hands on the headrest of each seat as I pass. Each one I manage to handle is like a little victory over the nervousness coursing its way throughout my body. There's still no answer.

As I get to about three seats away I notice the figure of a man hunched over against the window with his back to me. He's quivering slightly. I speak a third time, "Hello is everything okay?"

No reaction, just a continued trembling motion.

I stretch out and put a shaky hand on his shoulder. This is enough to provoke a reaction, as the *victim*, who was apparently playing possum, whips around towards me and grabs my left wrist with both hands.

I immediately recognise the face before me. *What the fuck are you doing here?*

It's our taxi driver. However, now he's a gaunter, paler version of his former self. He throat bears the sign of the nasty bite wound which has crusted over into a blackish scab. I can't think of any other reason for this outlandish behaviour other than he must have contracted something from that Toma girl. It could be possible she had rabies or some condition.

I start struggling to break free. It's no good I can't get loose. His arms are scourged with bloody sores. They're vile looking and have a discernible whiff of rotting flesh that turns my stomach when I inhale.

The more I thrash about, the tighter his grip seems to become. Like a crocodile compressing its jaws down on a helpless wildebeest, its grip becoming more vicelike with every struggle of the prey.

I stand my ground and try pounding him with my free hand, but my strongest blows don't seem to be causing him to flinch much.

I'm about to land one more punch when a mouthful of spit, the makeup of which contains as much blood as it does saliva, lands squarely on my cheek. The disgusting dark greenish red mixture slides down my cheek and drips off to the floor.

The sight of this is enough for Emma to fly into action and she grabs an emergency fire extinguisher from the drivers' area. One swift blow to the head is enough to loosen his grip on me as well as two of his teeth.

“Hands off, he’s mine,” she threatens the now unconscious heap. This girl is unlike any I’ve met before. By looking at her you would assume she was a girly girl who wouldn’t be able to protect herself. How wrong you’d be. She’s either got a lot of courage or some seriously underlying anger issues.

She picks up a randomly discarded hoody from one of the seats and wipes the grim fluids off my face.

“Now were even,” she spouts as she taps her finger against the cut on her cheek from the other night.

I don’t have time to muster a laugh or a smile as meanwhile three more sick looking excuses for human beings have come aboard the bus. They’re slowly shuffling down the aisle towards us, making disturbing growl like noises and throwing fearsome looks in our direction.

Amongst the trio are two men, one of whom looks in about the same condition as the taxi driver. The next one looks fine except for that all too familiar grey tinged skin. And the final lurker is none other than the Toma girl.

Her appearance has diminished considerably since we last saw her. Her facial skin has sagged, and the veins look as if they’re almost protruding through her skin. Her eyes are bloodshot and bulge in their sockets. The rest of her bared skin is in the same condition.

She appears to be the leader of the group as she’s first to make a move for us. Letting out a frightening howl, she quickens her advances towards us. Albeit, not a major increase in speed as it seems her apparent cell degeneration is causing her significant problems with her motor functions.

I’m frozen to the spot, my body stiff with fear. I feel like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. Emma is shouting my name and pulling at me to move, but my usual cowardice has made a triumphant return at the worst possible time. If I don’t move I’ll end up like one of the rest of these sickening pukes.

“Emma get out the emergency exit,” I manage to spit out.

I feel her let go of me. *Good. Run! At least you might get away safe. You might even think I sacrificed myself to hold these mutants up to give you time to escape.* It’s the usual story. I dream of being a hero, but when it comes down to it my imagination is as far as my heroism gets. I’m such a pitiful loser.

The wretched Toma is practically upon me. All I'm able to do is close my eyes in anticipation of what's to come.

Whoosh! It sounds as though a jumbo jet has flown by my right hand side. I feel cool droplets speckle across my face.

I open my eyes and before me is a white fog. Thick and scented like chemicals. The realisation of what's happening takes a second for my brain to register but as Emma flings the emptied fire extinguisher towards the front of the bus I snap out of my daze.

"Move," she barks. I back away from the filthy choking coughs emanating from in front of me and we both make a hasty retreat towards the exit beside the back seat.

I pull the bar to release the door and push it open but don't go any further because awaiting us outside is a mob of at least six more of these infected. A fire extinguisher won't be enough to save us this time.

The gang of miscreants is gathering outside the exit in a huddled group. Not attempting to climb to us. Instead, they're waiting for our inevitable attempt to flee from the bus.

Our options are limited to say the least. We can either descend into the menacing band of monsteroids or stay on board and somehow try to overcome the other three. The outcome of the latter, I'm sure, will simply result in more swarming onto the bus so I can dismiss that as a choice.

I realize it's my turn to grow a pair and give Emma a genuine chance of escaping. If I hurl myself into the group I might be able to make a big enough gap in the crowd for her to follow me and make a run for it.

"My turn," I announce in my bravest voice possible.

I glance quickly in her direction, not letting our eyes make contact as I'd rather she doesn't see the watery fear building up in mine.

I return my attention to outside the door and pick a spot to bombard with my torso.

"Follow me and run away as fast as you can," I shout as I ready myself to jump.

I go for it, but find myself needing to grab hold of the door frame as an unexpected impact knocks me backwards.

Mangled bodies are sent flying in every direction. A huge, shiny 4x4 jeep with bull bars on the bumper has rammed into the group, decapitating some and pinning others against the side of the bus.

I don't recognise the vehicle, but as the passenger window rolls down I hear a familiar voice, over the howls of annoyance and pain emanating from around us.

"You fancy moving your arse there mate." Shawn has finally decided to make an appearance.

"With pleasure," I respond grabbing Emma's hand and pulling her with me as I jump into the open trailer part of the jeep.

Once were safely aboard, Shawn floors the accelerator and the jeep lurches into life. We hold on for dear life as we get bounced around the back as Shawn powers away from the bus leaving a furious looking Toma standing in the doorway.

When we're a safe enough distance away, he pulls up and lets us in.

"New friend?" he greets as we pile into the front seat.

"New wheels?" I answer. He grins with a wry smile.

"Yea but it's only a loaner. It suits me huh?"

"Oh to a tee," I say mockingly. He gives me the finger as he grins.

I make all the necessary introductions.

"About time you got yourself a girlfriend." I blush profusely.

He locks the doors before I can reply and starts driving again. He continues, "We have to keep moving. It draws their attention if we stay in one spot too long."

*Their attention?* He seems to know more about what's going on than we do.

"So do you have any idea what's happening?" I question.

"To put it simply, it seems there's been some sort of outbreak, and we poor saps are stuck slap bang in the middle of it. This shit seems to take control of ya and turns you into some sort of friggin' zombie, like your friends back there on the bus," is his unbelievable reply. *Unbelievable yes, but it certainly would explain everything that's been happening. But how did this all come about?*

As if he was reading my mind, Shawn suggests, "Turn on the radio, and it will explain everything in more detail."

I oblige and twist the volume button, but there's only static, the same as the radio at Emma's apartment.

"There no reception," I argue.

"Tune it to the 89.6 frequency. It's a government emergency broadcast."

I tune it in and sure enough there's a reception. A clear voiced man is speaking. I recognize it as being our president's voice. He must be safely sheltered away somewhere with our other government officials. Standard protocol in a disaster situation I presume.

"How did you know to tune it in to that frequency?" I question.

"Earlier when I couldn't get a signal I just did an auto scan and the radio locked on to it. Simple enough really, even an idiot could figure that out".

I feel my cheeks burning.

"It's good to see that even in a disaster you're your usual sarcastic asshole self," I say with furrowed eyebrows. He's intentionally trying to



embarrass me in front of Emma. I know it shouldn't even register in my thoughts after we've just had such a narrow escape from a dangerous situation, but I can't help wanting to look good in Emma's eyes.

"Yep, well I did learn from the best," he sniggers back. I let out a chuckle.

"Ok start listening now."

I stare at the radio and listen intently. I hear the president's voice stop. There's a crackle, and he starts again. It must be a recording playing in a loop.

---"This is your president speaking. As of one AM Sunday the 3rd August, Ireland is in a declared state of emergency. Information as of yet is limited, but what we do know is that a highly contagious viral outbreak has occurred and citizens are requested to remain in their homes.

Emergency and communication services appear to have been compromised but please rest assured that if you remain in your homes then this situation will be resolved with minimal casualties.

We have made contact with our allies overseas via military communication systems and assistance protocols are being negotiated.

The army is currently being deployed to assist so do not worry help is at hand. I ask you to follow any orders they may have without fuss.

In circumstances where staying at home is not a viable option, it is advised that you make your way to the nearest Garda station or town hall. These areas will act as safe zones for the duration of this epidemic.

As for the virus, our top scientists have been able to learn that it is spread via human body fluid exchange so avoid contact with saliva, blood and any other fluids. It does not appear to be an airborne contagion.

You can trust that your safety is my primary concern, so that is why I'm urging you once again to stay indoors. This is a life or death situation so please do not treat it in any other way. Ration any food you may have to last for as long as possible.

I will provide further broadcasts as I receive information. So for the moment lets all pray for a speedy and safe conclusion to this affair. That is all for now. Godspeed”---

There’s a crackle, and the loop begins to repeat again. I turn the volume down. Nobody says anything.

*State of emergency huh? Things must be really bad. Hmmm, I guess we just witnessed firsthand how bad. Stay indoors. That’s good advice and here we are travelling around town like fools. Can they figure out a cure? Is a potential cure even possible to concoct?*

Shawn breaks the silence. “Well we won’t be going to any safe area,” he states with a cynical laugh.

“Why not?”

“Because I passed that way to get here and the whole place is fucked man. I mean, it’s like well and truly fucked. We’re just lucky it hasn’t spread on a large scale to this side of the city yet. And I mean YET. It will spread here; it’s just a matter of time. Our only safe bet is to get the hell outta the city, as far away from here as we can.”

This resonates in my brain. Society was collapsing all around us, and we were completely clueless. We thought it was just some random, violent thugs out to cause trouble when, in reality, the picture was bigger, much bigger!

I look over at Emma who has been really quiet this entire time.

“You ok?” I enquire.

“Does it not upset you that we just maimed and probably killed several people back there?” she retorts.

True this realisation never dawned on me until now. I guess in the heat of the moment I had overlooked this fact. I turn away in silence. Remorseful thoughts are running true my head.

Shawn butts in, “Look it was them or you. They wanted to kill you, so it was self-defence, ok? Anyhow, you can hardly call those shitheads human anymore. They’re more like a pack of animals now.”

*Yea that’s a valid point. I shouldn’t feel guilty. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that they wanted to cause us harm on the bus. Of course, I don’t want people to die, but if it’s them or us then I’ll always pick us.*

With dismay in her voice, Emma shouts at him, “Maybe they did have bad intentions but they’re still people. They’re just sick is all.”

“Okay okay, Jesus I’m sorry,” Shawn apologises half heartedly. “Anyhow, I don’t know why you’re feeling so bad seeing as I’m the one who actually ran them down sweetheart.”

“Nice friends you keep Matt,” Emma utters as she throws her hands in the air in a frustrated gesture.

“Shawn apologise,” I order in an ushering tone.

“Matt I’m not going to apologise for speaking the truth, just because you want to get in her knickers.”

I hear Emma let out a disgusted, “Ugh” beside me.

“Shawn,” I exclaim, this time in a more assertive tone. He looks at me, and I raise my eyebrows insistently. He silently mouths to me the words, “Okay fine,” as he throws his eyes up to heaven.

“I’m sorry if I offended you Emma. Sincerely I am.” Shawn’s declaration seems genuine enough for Emma to accept reluctantly. *Jesus these two are as stubborn as each other.*

The cab of the jeep falls quiet again.

“Well if everyone is finished making friends then maybe someone has some useful suggestions what to do next?” I say breaking the hushed atmosphere.

“Well, leaving me home would be a start,” asserts Emma with a scowl on her face.

*Oh she’s pissed off.*

“Fine if that’s what you want then there’s no problem there,” Shawn says almost joyfully. He changes course and directs the jeep back towards the vicinity of Emma’s apartment before even finishing the sentence.

I try to lighten the mood a little and ask Shawn how he obtained his new set of flashy wheels.

He starts by telling us how he had left his place to come and pick us up. He was walking to his car, a beat up old Volkswagen Bora, when he noticed a big deal of commotion happening out on the street. Much the same as what Emma and I had witnessed outside the takeaway.

There were people running for their lives’ from a horde of menacing figures. Others who were not fast enough to escape were been assaulted both sexually and physically.

The route to his car was blocked, so he doubled back to his place and looked for something to defend himself. The obvious choice being a short bladed samurai sword he acquired on a holiday to Japan some years back.

He points to the back seat, and sure enough to support his story there's the sword lying in its sheath.

He brought me one back from that trip too. It's currently is in my house, but that's no good to me now. They're lethally sharp but obviously only used as display objects. Also, to my own knowledge, it's illegal to own them in Ireland. Not that it's an issue right now.

From there, he sneaked out the back to avoid an encounter with the 'Virus Squad' as he calls them. By that stage, it was obvious to him that the shit had hit the proverbial fan, and the city was in full riot mode. And what do people do during riots? They loot and rob.

So Shawn decided to pay his local motor dealer a visit at three AM and helped himself to a new ride. He also tried ringing me several times but couldn't get any coverage.

From his description, I learn three things. Firstly, his network must have gone down shortly after I rang him the first time. Emma's phone is obviously on a different network, so it didn't go down at the same time.

Well the second thing I already know, Shawn is an egotistical maniac, and three, it sounds like the aim of those infected is to try and pass the virus on to those who are uninfected, not actually kill anyone.

It's fair to assume that like most viruses they use up the resources at their disposal until they are depleted thus resulting in the virus itself dying out. So death for the host is probably inevitable after becoming infected. But how long? A day? Two? A week? There's no way for to know.

By the look of Toma's physical decline, I'd wager that she's not far from death's door. But I could be wrong. Also, judging from the taxi drivers' quick transformation the initial effects seem to be fast acting.

So in this case the virus seems to be intelligent enough to be able to control the infected person and make them pass it on to the next unlucky sod, ensuring its survival. But for how long? Until there are no more people left in the country to infect? Now that's a scary thought!

*If that's the case, and these zombies are running loose around the city attacking people, then is locking yourself up at home really going to make you any safer?*

We arrive at the car park belonging to Emma's apartment complex. Shawn pulls up as close to her door as the jeep can go and leaves the engine running. There's no sign of anyone life around.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask in the hope that she’ll change her mind.

“I’ll be fine,” she insists.

“Okay I’ll see you in then,” I offer.

Pleased by this, she looks over at Shawn and thanks him sincerely for having saved our skins earlier. The signs of anger towards him appear to have waned slightly. Maybe the scale of the situation has finally sunk in.

He accepts the gratitude and wishes her the best of luck, but I know him well enough to be able to tell he doesn’t really give a rat’s ass.

Emma gets her key ready as I take the sword from the back seat and remove it from its sheath.

We hop out of the jeep and dart for her doorway. When we make it she quickly inserts the key.

“That’s funny,” she spouts, “It’s not locked. I thought for sure I had locked it.”

I clearly remember she did lock it as she checked it twice to make sure.

“You did, and you double checked it,” I reply.

This whole scenario just got real dodgy.

“I probably just had a blonde moment,” she insists as she turns the handle and walks in. I follow close behind with a tight grip on the sword’s hilt.

The place is the same as we left it, but I still find it awfully strange that the door was unlocked. I slowly skulk my way from room to room, gradually and carefully opening doors and checking if there are any unwanted intruders. I puff out sighs of relief with each unoccupied one I find.

I come to the last room which is Emma’s bedroom. Opening the door I find a young man standing there, staring me down. A glowering look on his face. He’s handsome, blond haired, and I’d judge him to be in his early twenties. I raise the sword in front of me and assume an aggressive stance.

“Who the hell are you?” I yell.

“I’m Emma’s boyfriend. So I guess the question is WHO THE FUCK are you?” is his stern reply.

This unexpected response throws me. I’m filled with a mixture of hurt and relief. Hurt because of the betrayal of Emma’s lies about being single. Relief because it’s immediately apparent from the way he talks and holds

himself that he's not another one of the infected; instead he's just a pompous dickhead.

I lower the sword to my side unsure how to answer. Before I can think of anything to say, Emma enters the room and barks, "Why the fuck are you in my room Jason?"

He answers with a sleazy sounding, "Don't be like that babe. I was worried about you and came over to see if you were okay."

"I don't need you to check on me you cheating scumbag. How dare you come onto my property when were broken up. What gives you the right?! How do you even have a spare key you creep? Leave the key and get the fuck out."

*Broken up? So this guy is an ex boyfriend. My heart and spirit feel revitalized on hearing these words.*

"But babe you know I love you."

His voice really irritates me. Now is a chance for me to show Emma that I can stand up for myself and her. To show her that I can be confident.

With my new and improved self belief, I lift the sword once more and point the tip in Jason's direction. In a powerful voice I bellow, "She doesn't want you here, so I suggest you leave now before I make you leave."

Emma must have noticed the change in my deportment as I catch her looking at me in her bedroom mirror, a look of admiration on her face.

A now obviously disgruntled Jason begins to move and circles past me towards the door, making sure to give a wide berth to the sword blade which is gleaming in the sunlight from the bedroom window. I follow him out and march him to the front door. All the time he's seething profanities at me.

We reach the front door, and he steps outside the threshold.

"You wouldn't be so tough without that sword you faggot," he says.

"Well if that's what you think I am, maybe I should shove this sword up your ass and see how much you like it you homophobic shithead."

To psych him out, I fake a lunge forward. He stumbles backwards and lands on his arse. I grin widely, and as I'm shutting the door I laugh out, "See ya around precious. That is if those freaks don't see you first."

He kicks the door several times in frustration before walking away swearing and muttering to himself.

As much as I don't like the guy; I hope he doesn't attract any unwanted attention with his noisiness. That could result in us being

discovered too.

I go into the living room. By now, the sun is shining fully in the window where I had watched it ebb its way across the wall this morning. I let my attention slip momentarily as I gaze at the dust particles glistening and dancing around in the brightness. I take a deep breath.

“Emma,” I start, “I know you don’t really know me, but I’m asking you to please come with us. I don’t think it’s safe to be here on your own, what with asshole ex’s inside and sicko nutcases outside. I’m worried for you. I was thinking we could give you a lift somewhere safer like your parents’ farm? I’m sure they’ll be worried sick!”

She tries to interrupt, but I’m on a roll and don’t give her a chance as I carry on my rant.

“I mean what if something happens? Your mobile doesn’t even work. How will you get help?”

I’m nearly red in the face and panting from my outburst. My recently acquired confidence from the sword wielding is shunted aside momentarily.

Emma responds in a very matter of fact kind of a way.

“Okay look, firstly like I said the other night my parents are abroad on holidays at the moment so it’s possible they don’t even know what’s going on over here. And secondly, fine I’ll go with you but only to make you stop your raving. It’s a little embarrassing to say the least.”

She grins cheekily.

“It’s a deal,” I utter, relieved that she’s changed her mind.

“I think you’re on to something though about going to my parent’s farm. It pretty secluded so it should be free from unwanted visitors.”

“Great then we have a plan,” I chirp.

With our arrangement in place the mood in the room lightens and I feel more at ease.

“Answer me this Matt. Why do you care so much about looking after me? I mean, as you just said, you hardly even know me. Like your charming friend out there assumed, I’m just a bit of ass that you want to ride right?”

The surprise of this sudden crude question leaves me flustered. My confidence levels are now definitely back down in the dirt where they usually reside. I’m no good when put under this type of pressure.

Growing up as a shy kid lacking in interpersonal skills meant I never fully adjusted to dealing with certain situations. Being a loner is in my

nature and it's how I get along best in life. But who truly wants to live that way? I don't, I never have, but ever since certain incidents when I was younger I just turned inward and away from society. The result of which is my being completely awkward in many everyday conversations but especially emotion based ones with the opposite sex.

"Well you see," I begin to stutter.

Emma saves me from any further humiliation by flashing me that perfect smile of hers and saying, "I'm just screwin' with ya. You really do make it too easy."

She comes over to me and slides her arms around my waist, pulling me in close.

"I never did get to thank you properly for rescuing me the other night. Let's just say last night was a minor indication of my gratitude," she says as she runs a finger seductively from her perfect lips over her collar bone and down towards her flawlessly formed breasts which are nestled revealingly in her skimpy string top.

I'm almost drooling as she pulls away, leaving me standing there trying to conceal a semi, with thoughts of last nights' fun racing through my head.

"I'm just going to throw a few things in a bag," she toots as she trots off to her bedroom seemingly unaware of my tent pitching abilities. *Jeez, that girl is one fucking prick tease.*

I throw the sword onto the couch and go into the kitchen to check the portable radio for any updates. I turn it on and tune it to the government broadcast station. The same message is still playing. I listen to it again in case there might be a bit extra added to the end.

As I listen, I rummage around the cupboards throwing random packets of food into a discarded box. This might have to feed us for awhile.

With my entire concentration focused on the radio and supply foraging, I fail to hear the stealthy feet make their way up behind me.

By the time I notice the person's reflection in the glass of the window it's too late. I'm dragged to the ground and subdued by the full weight of a grown person pressing down on of me.

*Who the hell is this?* My immediate assumption is that Jason has decided to teach me a lesson but it quickly dawns on me that I left the front door unlocked after I persuaded him to leave. Some other randomer freak could have snuck in.



I'm spun around onto my back and my shoulders are pinned to the ground restricting my movement. This isn't Jason that's for sure, it's an infected.

All I'm able to do is use my arms to hold back the advance of a grim looking face, but even this is futile as he traps my arms above my head. I'm totally defenceless.

We're eye to eye as he begins to wretch, not dissimilar to a cat before it coughs up a hairball. I foresee what's going to happen next so I suck in a deep breath, tighten my lips together and squeeze my eyes shut just in time as the manky liquid spews from his mouth and flushes over my face.

The smell is revolting. It stinks like the dressing on a cut that was left on too long and reeks of dead blood and puss and shit like that, except this is ten times more potent.

I continue to struggle but it's no use. I don't open my eyes or mouth for fear that some of the solution might happen to go in.

My lungs begin to burn; telling me I need to inhale more air, but I know if I do I'll be inviting the infection into me.

My chest starts shaking as I'm about to let out a gasp. *Shit*. I exhale heavily just in time to hear a loud gurgle.

Suddenly, I'm free from the weight that was bearing down on me. All I can hear is Emma shouting at me to hold still.

With my eyes still closed I feel her wiping the crud from my lips, but it's too late, I've already inhaled a hefty mouthful of oxygen and along with it surely some of the soon to be deceased's oral discharge.

"Fuck," I scream out long and hard knowing all too well I'm in serious trouble.

Emma, realizing the consequences of the dilemma I'm in, switches her tactics to panic mode and starts chucking pots of water over my head and face in an attempt to cleanse me.

All the time my attacker continues making disturbing noises but they're fading fast. Emma follows up the dousing by giving my face a rough scrubbing with a towel.

"You can open your eyes now."

I do, to the sight of her face above mine with tears streaming down her cheeks. Some droplets run into the sides of her mouth. Others collect at the tip of her nose, fall freely and splash against my nose and forehead.

For a split second, I'm perfectly content with the knowledge that somebody seems to care so genuinely about me. The flash of self gratification is fleeting however; as I spy the now departed remains of a fat lump of a man lying to one side. His throat pierced by my sword. The gurgling noise was him making his dying gasps for air as the blood from his wound choked out his lungs.

What a horrible way to go. I hope these poor contaminated unfortunates aren't in any way conscious anymore and are simply mere puppets unable to comprehend or feel what's happening to them.

Emma is still hovering over me crying. Is she upset because I'm in a major dilemma or is it because she just killed someone, no something more like, which earlier she protested so strongly against doing? Maybe it's a little bit of both. It's irrelevant right now regardless. I really do have such a pointless habit of wondering stupid things at inappropriate moments.

I pull myself together and lift my sorrowful ass off the floor.

"Salt. Where do you keep your salt?" I ask while spitting profusely in an attempt to remove as much as I can from my mouth.

"I don't have any. I don't keep any. Added salt to food is bad for your health."

She's crying hard and unable to complete her sentences. I root through her presses and find the one that I earlier noticed had herbs and spices in it. I spot a jar of nutmeg and grab it.

I recall from somewhere in the far recesses of my brain, a conversation I had with Shawn about how nutmeg can be toxic if eaten in a large dose and doing so can trigger severe nausea. Or, *puke your ring up*, is how he phrased it.

I toss the lot in to a glass of water and gulp down the horrid mixture in one long swig. It's difficult to swallow, and my taste buds are fighting me every drop of the way.

The reaction is almost instant, as my stomach rejects the lot and I start gagging everything up again, all over the kitchen worktops and floor. Great big warm mouthfuls of vomit.

When I can't heave up any more, I go to the sink and put my head under the tap. I gargle and rinse my mouth out for another minute ensuring I've spat out everything possible.

*Have I done enough?* The only one way to find out is to wait and see if I transform into one of them. But how long does that take, minutes? Maybe

even hours. Judging by everything we've seen up to this point, I reckon it won't take too long.

Emma who has now stopped crying comes over to me. Her pretty eyes are all bloodshot.

"You don't like me just because you want to get me into bed do you?" she asks. I shake my head.

"You like me because you're genuine and sweet."

I shrug my shoulders.

"Well in that case, you have to be okay because I like you very much too Matt. So promise me you'll make it, so when all this is over you can bring me out for that breakfast date you owe me."

"I promise," I answer, despite the fact that I'll probably be trying to eat her face by tomorrow and not in the good sexy way. We hug but it's hard to enjoy it this time.

With all the niceties completed we both know what the next course of action is. We're going to have to go our separate ways. It's too dangerous to stay with Emma and Shawn. There's no guarantee I was able to completely clear the infectious fluids out of my system. I could change into a slobbering monster at any given moment.

"Get the things you were packing."

Emma obeys and nips quickly to her room; returning a few minutes later with her things. I grab the small box with the bits and pieces of food in it.

I take her hand and lead the way to the front door. I scout the surrounding area outside and upon seeing that the coast is clear we make a run for the jeep. Shawn is still there with the engine running.

When he sees us coming he unlocks the doors, reaches over to the passenger side and swings the door open.

"What took you guys so long and who was that irritating dick that came out of there and was begging me for a lift?" he asks as I help Emma in.

"Emma will explain later," I reply hurriedly. He looks at me be muddled.

"You know that old abandoned hotel by the lake that we go to? Make your way there and wait for me. I'll follow you both in a day or two."

I turn my attention to Emma.

“If I don’t show assume the worst and stick to the original plan and head to your parent’s place.”

She nods but says nothing. Shawn tries questioning my words.

“There’s no time Shawn. Just hit the road and drive hard. Keep her safe for me.”

He still isn’t sure what’s happening, but I know he trusts me enough not to question any further, so he answers with an abrupt, “Ok,” followed by a reassuring thumbs up.

I gently stroke Emma’s cut cheek once with the back of my fingers.

“Stay safe and I’ll see you soon.”

She says nothing. Her eyes are beginning to well up again so I hand her the box of food before kissing her forehead. I shut the door before things get too emotional and tap the roof. On hearing my signal, Shawn salutes me goodbye as he puts the jeep in gear and pulls off.

I don’t stay to watch. Instead, I turn and retreat back to the seclusion of Emma’s rundown digs. As I run I hear Emma’s poignant voice trailing from the departing vehicle.

“Mountain View, our farm’s name is Mountain View.”

*I’ll need to make sure I remember that.*

After returning inside, I lock the door and start pushing as much furniture as I can against it. When I’m satisfied it’s safe, it dawns on me that all I’ve eaten in the last two days or so is the pizza yesterday and some toast and juice. I never did get my chicken wrap.

My stomach growls in time with my thoughts. I don’t really want to, but the pangs of hunger are strong enough to force me into approaching the blood and vomit drenched kitchen. The corpse is still lying there, giving me the creeps.

“You stay right there,” I gesture with a wagging finger. The bloodstained sword is lying to one side. I pick it up and gingerly wipe down the blade.

I decide to avoid the rest of that part of the kitchen entirely and instead rummage around some of the blood splatter free cupboards.

I come across Emma’s stash of chocolate. She’s obviously a big chocolate fan. Being a self confessed chocoholic, I understand her addiction and cast no judgement. Instead, I grab a large handful of various treats and abandon that area of the house, locking myself in the bedroom. I barricade myself in; ensuring I’ll be undisturbed.

I go to lie on the bed. As my head hits the pillow, Emma's scent lifts into the air around me and I breathe it in through flared nostrils. I think of how intoxicated I was by this smell when she stood so close to me in the alleyway. I hope she'll be safe. I know she's in good hands with Shawn.

I tear open the wrapper of a chocolate bar and take a voracious bite. Even though I'm hungry, my stomach still doesn't feel quite right after the dose of nutmeg earlier.

As I'm chewing fingers of tiredness start to caress my mind. It's only the afternoon but I haven't slept since yesterday morning. I'm fading fast.

I can't help noticing I have a warm sensation around my extremities. *Is this a sign that it's the beginning of the end for me?* I say a prayer in my head and plead with God to protect me. It's all out of my control now.

I decide to give being courageous in the face of adversity a go. There's no point in crying now. I slide the sword alongside me underneath the bed covers and then curl up.

I swallow the final gooey mouthful of my snack as I drift off into a deep overdue sleep, with thoughts of the beautiful Emma rippling through my psyche.

*Please let me keep my promise.*

**SHAWN**

Twenty seven minutes! It's been twenty-seven minutes since either of us said a word. It's half an hour since we drove off and left Matt behind in that shithole of an apartment.

She's sitting next to me in the passenger seat with a vacant expression on her face. I'm staring out the windscreen of my new wheels at the road with a puzzled look on my face. I'm still trying to make sense of the piss poor excuse for an explanation she gave me as to why we had to leave Matt behind.

Matt, who is the closest thing I have to a brother, made it plenty clear that it was vital we part ways for a while and that *Emma* would explain everything. I know Matt well enough to listen when he has his serious face on.

Unfortunately, once we pulled off and Matt was out of sight, all I got from her was a minute or two of sobbing, before she spit out a muddled hysteric account involving somebody named Jason and nutmeg flavoured vomit.

Matt's got a level head, but when it comes to women he's made some dodgy choices. Although he's never really talked much about it, I know he's gotten messed around pretty bad a few times.

It occurs to me that she may be shaken up and upset, and that possibly some restraint and compassion may be in order on my behalf. BUT NO! The situation is too serious, and besides, that's never been my style anyway.

I mean, who is this person sitting beside me? Did she flutter her eyelids at Matt just so she'd have a convenient knight in shining armour to escort her through this mess that's going on? Who is this Jason character she mentioned? Some ex boyfriend from what I could gather from her rambling.

I turn my head and give her the eyeball in an attempt to provoke a reaction of some kind, conscious of the fact that she may still be a bit bent out of shape from our little exchange earlier. I get nothing, not a flinch!

I turn my head and face forward again. The roads are empty except for the odd car I see speeding by on other roads in the distance, and the

increasing number of cars I'm encountering, apparently abandoned on the side of the road.

Frustrated by the lack of response from Emma regarding when, where or even if we'll see Matt again, I turn back to her and without thinking I say in a crude tone, "So who the hell are you again?"

I regret my lack of finesse almost immediately. The aggressive manor of my question doesn't go unnoticed by Emma either, as it seems to have opened the flood gates on something that had been brewing since the journey began.

She springs to life with a barrage of indecipherable ranting and abuse, from which all I can make out, is along the lines of, "How the hell did I let myself get caught in this situation with a juvenile psycho like you," which I think is a reference to our earlier argument.

I hear Matt's name interspersed in the verbal avalanche, but I can't tell in what context. I'm no stranger to provoking this kind response in women, but given recent events, and the fact that it's been ages since I've slept, my ability to tune it out is failing me.

I find myself wondering if Matt's sudden need to be alone wasn't an elaborate ruse to unload this toxic chick on me. I dismiss the thought as unlikely... but possible.

In an attempt to break her rant I shout back at her, "If you're so interested in Matt; why did you leave him back there?"

She pauses for a moment as her eyes tear up. I can't tell if this is a result of sorrow or rage.

In a more focused and accusing voice she looks at me and says, "Well YOU didn't hang around too long after he asked you to leave either."

I dig my fingernails into the steering wheel in an attempt to restrain myself. In my sleep deprived state I can't take this shite anymore.

I take a sharp turn off the road into an empty supermarket car park and bring the car to an abrupt stop in the first parking space I see.

Turning in my seat to face Emma, I raise my finger in an aggressive gesture and begin a rant of my own.

"Listen to me you bitc..."

Before I get any further Emma cuts in with, "You can't park here; it's a disabled parking spot. You ignorant prick!"

There's silence in the car. I'm left with my mouth open and my finger in the air like a knob, totally at a loss for a response to such a random, off



topic criticism.

The beginnings of a coy smile form on the edge of Emma's lips, and the two of us let out a muted chuckle as the tension dissipates.

For the first time she starts speaking to me in a more natural tone. She explains all that's happened and why Matt stayed behind.

I realise at this point, that it's concern for a mutual friend that has us both on edge and it's possible she's not the opportunistic succubus she first appeared to be... the girl is alright.

With tensions relieved for now, it seems like a good time to pick up a few essentials. The supermarket is locked up, but the sight of that box in the back seat that Emma brought from her apartment, filled with *supplies*, is motivation enough for me to justify a bit of breaking and entering.

The content consists of a half empty bottle of diet Cola, a packet of biscuits and five tins of beans. Her pathetic selection of food reeks of student lifestyle.

I'm not sure of the best way to approach this little heist, especially considering Emma's reaction to my story about how I got my new jeep.

I've never been overly sensitive about rubbing someone the wrong way but I'm not stupid either. I'm well aware I'll be spending the next few hours in tight quarters with her and she's already pushed me over the edge once.

I glance back with a cringe at the beans, and while considering the best way to approach things, I'm taken by surprise with the sudden, sharp sound of shattering glass.

I turn around to see Emma awkwardly making her way through the broken window, with one leg on the ground and the other on the three foot high window sill.

I happily cross my arms and smile at the sight I'm faced with, as Emma's skirt rides up revealing a pair of little white panties covered with tiny love hearts. What a girly girl, just Matt's type.

She stumbles as she lands with a shuffle inside the supermarket, quickly yanks her skirt back into place and without pause, turns to give me a look that would kill a goat. I raise my eyebrows and grin back in response.

Once we're both inside the supermarket, her first stop is the girl's toilet. I suspect her change of view on looting is as much a result of her desire not to pee outside, as it is the realisation that this infection thing isn't as temporary a situation as it first appeared.

I stand guard outside, and when she comes out we stay in eye contact as we shop for *essentials*. She gets what she wants while I grab a pack of two hundred pep pills and raid the tinned food section, taking a bit of everything except beans, I fucking hate beans.

Despite our little make up in the car park, conversation is still at a minimum between the two of us and that suits me fine.

It's obvious there's something there between her and Matt and even more obvious she's worried sick about him. I was a little concerned myself but I know Matt, he's far too stubborn to die when he's chasing a bit of tail as tasty as Emma.

We carry our haul outside in shopping baskets and start loading up the car. As I busy myself packing away the food, I see Emma staring blankly into the boot.

"Don't worry, you can't get rid of him that easily, believe me, I know."

It's a small and essentially meaningless reassurance but the effect on her character is immediately apparent.

Once the car can hold no more and I'm struggling to get the boot closed, I take a quick glance over at Emma who's getting into the front passenger seat. Taking my chance, I grab her supplies box and quickly fire it across the car park and out of sight. The boot snaps closed, and it's time to hit the road again.

"Can I drive for a while," Emma asks, "It might help me get my mind off it all."

I give her what she wants after a light hearted but genuine warning about putting a single scratch on my VW.

As I switch with Emma and un-tense my back into the leather bucket seat, I realise this is the first time I've rested in nearly two days.

I was neck deep in a job last night, designing an identity for some nobody start up company, whose idea of a logo brief was, "*Give me a unicorn with an exploding galaxy behind it, but keep it simple.*"

Like usual, I was avoiding fatigue with coffee and a few special blends of my own. The days seem to meld together when you're an insomniac, never sleeping but never really awake. I had to gather my thoughts and make sure I wasn't dreaming when I got the call from Matt about pale faced weirdoes sucking the blood from unsuspecting taxi drivers.

I'm still making my mind up about how real any of this actually is, although Emma has far too many clothes on for this to be a dream of mine.

Once we've been driving for a while, Emma starts to talk, opening up and telling me a bit about herself. I've no real intension of listening, but I don't see this as a reason to stop her now that she seems to be on a roll.

I lean my forehead against the passenger window and stare out into the distance. I'm noticing the bright, fresh greenness of the Irish countryside turning into an unsettling version of itself, as we pass what can only be described as an endless string of victimless accidents. There's plenty of blood, and I think I even spot limb or two as we speed past, but no bodies.

From what I'm witnessing, it's hard to interpret what events could have led to this carnage but there's no doubt they were bad.

My mind starts to wander, drifting as close to sleep as I usually get. As we drive down this stretch of road; this twisted version of what would yesterday have been a mundane commute for hundreds of people going through the motions of their normal everyday lives, I consider the chaos that's going on everywhere. With this apparent self-destruction of society I have to wonder if this is now the new *normal*, the next inevitable evolution of society. *Is this the new everyday world we're gonna be faced with from now on?*

The realisation of this possibility leads me to further ponder as to whether this world of entropy and random violence, where we're forced to live on reaction alone really makes any less sense to me than the everyday life of nine to five. A life where people collect their dog's shit in the street and smile every morning to people they can't stand. A world where everything everyone says is coded to such a degree by social convention and political correctness that they're not even sure what they're saying themselves. Yeah, I think I'll fit in about as well in this new world as I did in the last. Roll on **Society 2.0**.

I waft back to reality and to the realisation that my thoughts are becoming less than rational. I've rarely been in a worse state than this before, and I can't afford to be in anything but top form in this situation. I need time to rest properly and to eat something more substantial than the cold slice of pizza I ate for breakfast yesterday.

I can't tell if it's been hours or minutes since we left the supermarket, but I notice that the previously chaotic scenes outside my window have taken a more structured, sinister complexion. We're now encountering wreck after wreck of head on collisions, as if people were intentionally ramming each other off the road.

I'm also suddenly aware of the reason for my return to reality, the background noise of Emma's life story or whatever has ended. I look over at her wondering if she finally said something that required a response of

some kind from me, only to see it's the worrying developments outside that have rendered her silent.

While distracted by a particularly bloody wreck, she grazes the right hand side of the jeep against an upside-down VW Beetle.

I breathe in heavily and bite my lip. It's obvious she's uneasy and trying to keep calm in the face of the sights we're passing, so I try to express gently that it might be a good idea for me to take over behind the wheel again for awhile.

By the time I feel I've gotten my point across she's in tears and angrily telling me to calm down stop shouting at her. Despite her protests, she seems more than happy to relinquish the responsibility of driving and she begins to climb over to the passenger seat.

I waste no time in hopping out and running around to switch seats. I give the damage a quick inspection on the way, it's barely a scratch; I overreacted.

It's not my style to lose my cool so much. I need to get some rest soon. I try to muster some kind of apology, but I'm pre-empted by Emma's urgent tone saying, "Look, I know, I know, it's getting to both of us. Can we just get out of here please?"

That's all I need to hear. Just as I'm beginning to turn and face the road again, I spot something over Emma's left shoulder on an adjacent road in the distance, over the river. It's a group of five figures standing around an upturned car

It's immediately obvious there's something unnatural about the scenario. All I can make out from this distance is there are another two figures outside the upside down car, one pinning the other down.

By this point, Emma, who I imagine was starting to wonder why I was staring at her so intensely, has copped that I'm focused on something in the distance behind her and she swings her head around to investigate.

The only noise in the car is the hum of the engine as we both strain to see what the two struggling figures on the ground are doing. The movements are far too random and violent for CPR. I quickly glance back at the five figures overlooking the spectacle. My blood runs cold as I realise all five of them are fixated directly on us.

The implications of this development hit me like a smack in the mouth. The nearest junctions connecting our two roads are about two kilometres behind us and five kilometres ahead of us.

I don't waste a second, as I stress all two hundred horses under the bonnet to their limit; the VW roars forward.

This action acts like a starting pistol to the creeps across the river, who dart towards their piece of shit car in perfect synchronicity.

Emma who apparently hasn't noticed that we were spotted is shoved back into her seat. Before she can disapprove, she sees the car driving in parallel to us with six sets of ominous eyes peering over at us. Her automatic reaction is to buckle herself in, in a frenzy of frantic arm movements.

They're pulling ahead of us. I don't know where they came across that car or what kind of over funded boy racer souped it up, but they're going to cut us off and there's nothing I can do about it.

I grab the open can from the cup holder and down the liquid inside, spilling a good third of it down my chin as I do.

The can contains the sweetest, most sugar saturated sports drink I could find in the shop earlier. I opened it as we pulled off when Emma started her driving shift, and I dropped in at least twenty pep pills to dissolve. The idea was I could sip it throughout my next turn behind the wheel.

There's no time for sipping now, as I dodge and weave through the jagged wrecks scattered along the road. I need to focus. The menacing car is still speeding along parallel to us, all the while slowly pulling away towards the bridge up ahead.

I can feel myself getting carried away again, so in the three minutes or so it will take to reach the bridge I need to quickly review the situation and the few options available to us. We can;

Stay where we are and try to prepare for their inevitable arrival, making it six against two.

Go back the road we came, giving us little or no advantage in out running them, not to mention the fact we'd be going the wrong way.

We could switch to four by four mode and sail up the embankment where their overpowered racer can't follow, making a clean quiet escape; except the entire length of the motorway is clad in high tensile crash barriers. Besides, a clean and quiet escape, that's not really getting into the spirit of things now, is it?

That leaves option four... I've got a plan.

I know the bridge we're heading towards well. It's stuck in my head because I nearly lost the front of my car to a speeding truck three weeks ago, while trying to pull off onto the road we're currently hurtling down.

An awkwardly placed wall and the general lack of pruning of the roadside trees make it a death trap, and that just so happens to be what I need right now.

The jeep is reaching top speed. I tell Emma to watch the road and take the wheel as I focus all my attention on the car across the river. They're about five car lengths ahead of us now and still pulling away slowly.

She seems to trust me enough to do what I've asked without the need for an explanation. I've got to get the timing perfect and I'll only get one shot to time this right.

I begin to ease off on the accelerator, allowing them to pull even further ahead. Emma looks at me with a mix of urgency and puzzlement on her face. I see her stare at me in my peripheral vision as I focus on the other car.

She pauses for a second or two before her expression drops and she turns a shade whiter with the realisation that we're not trying to outrun them; it's a collision course we're on.

I continue to subtly reduce my speed, as they put more and more distance between us, hoping they're stupid enough to think they have us well beaten.

My eyes are glued to their car as I use every brain cell I have to try and judge their speed. I know we'll lose sight of each other on the approach to the bridge and I need to predict when they'll pop out the other side.

As they disappear behind the trees I straighten up, snap back control of the wheel from Emma and unleash the full power of the VW. There's just enough road left ahead to reach ramming speed by the time we reach the junction.

It's all down to the accuracy of my prediction now. I block out Emma's protests but they do inspire slivers of self doubt. *What if I've placed too much faith in the jeep's durability? What if I don't get the timing right? They could build up enough speed to cause us some serious damage. What*

*if I'm in the middle of a sleep deprived, pep pill fuelled craze and leading us to disaster? Thank fuck I went for the jeep with the bull bars.*

Whether its adrenalin or the pep pill cocktail taking effect, I'm feeling sharp, I feel good. I can see sweat droplets dripping off my hands and running down the wheel, I'm barely even aware of Emma's presence next to me anymore but I know she's shouting something.

If this is Society 2.0, well then I'm going to be a contributing citizen. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, I didn't even realise I had a smile on my face.

The exit of the bridge is approaching at a blistering pace, thirty metres... twenty metres... ten metres, with no sign of the anything. *I fucked it up.*

At the last possible second, just as the self doubt is at its highest, out shoots the car. I catch a quick flash of the emotionless, dead eyed faces before the shock of impact and the detonation of multiple airbags shocks me back to reality. T-Bone!

I come to my senses to the sight of a large bloody chunk of hair, with scalp still attached, smeared across the shattered windscreen.

We're at a dead stop five metres down the road and facing the opposite direction. I feel rattled to my bones, like I've just been rolled down a mountain in a barrel, straight into a brick wall. I think the small finger on my right hand is broken along with what feels like a cracked rib on my right side.

Emma has a trickle of blood running down between her eyes, and she's nursing her right leg.

I clumsily grope around and flick on the wipers, only to see the little stump that's left of the wiper wiggle about doing absolutely nothing to help the situation. I find this sight quite funny and without thinking I turn to Emma with a chuckle. She obviously doesn't see the funny side.

...Matt would have found it funny.

Not much can be seen through the shattered, bloody windscreen, so I poke my head through the hole in the door next to me, where the window used to be.

I look around to check on our would-be pursuers. It's clear that four of the six are no longer a threat, especially the one and a half of them spread



across the bonnet in front of me. It's a grizzly sight. I turn my head and gag a little.

I regain my composure and step out to survey the damage. I'm struck by the calm of our surroundings, the speed, the adrenaline, the anger, the excitement, all replaced by the serenity of the Irish countryside.

The sun is beginning to set, filling the sky with a red tint and apart from the slight rustle of the warm breeze through the grass, there's dead silence.

The car they we're travelling in is mangled beyond recognition. The jeep tore through it like it was made of tinfoil. The VW has seen better days too. The bull bars took the brunt of the smash, but it's sitting lopsided on the road with the front end pretty torn up. It's hard to judge the extent of the damage with two carcasses still clinging to it, but by the looks of it the radiator is leaking a bit.

As I approach the wreck, I see that two more of them are clearly dead, there's no doubt. Another is still in the car, in the back seat where the car took the least damage. She's twitching and making an intermittent gurgling sound. I'm not even sure if that means she's still alive or not. The last one is still trying his best to crawl towards me, but at this stage it's apparent he's no more of a threat than any of the others.

He looks to be in his mid twenties, dressed like any average person, a white hoody over a t-shirt and jeans. His clothes are covered in stains of all kinds, most of which are quite obviously blood. His face is white as a ghost with a large, badly infected gash torn along his left cheek.

I bend over and look into his eyes. I get close and meet his gaze; I see nothing. No pain, no fear, no hatred, only drive, the drive to reach me. He's not looking at my eyes; he's looking at me, like I'm an object. I'm his goal, his sole objective in life.

The sheer single mindedness of him raises alarming implications. If you're in a world full of pale faced spooks whose only purpose in life, even beyond their own safety and existence, is to reach you and end you, then what chance do you really have?

I stand back up and begin to contemplate the moral question as to whether I should leave him this way or finish him off, and if the latter, then how? Does it even really matter?

I look around at my handy work. All of this happened because of me. With the multiple mangled bodies gruesomely scattered around me I realise

how unhinged my thinking was becoming. I was losing myself.

I glance back down and see the last of the group has stopped moving. His eyes are open and they're no more dead now than they were a few seconds ago, but he's gone. I just killed all these people, and I did it with a smile on my face. *Does that make me a monster?* I don't feel any guilt or remorse. It was either them or us. The only feeling apparent to me at this moment is satisfaction in my victory.

I raise my hand to my forehead and turn around. Emma is standing in front of the jeep, motionless. Her face confirms it all. From what Matt said she's seen some pretty messed up stuff and she kept it together but what I see in her face now is shock.

Her ruffled clothes are fluttering gently in the wind as it starts to spit rain. She's standing in the beam of the one headlight left on the jeep with a slight slouch, putting all her weight on her left leg, clearly rattled after the crash. It's shock on her face alright but she's not looking at the bodies around our feet, she's looking at me.

"What were you thinking? You could have killed us," her voice is low and bewildered.

"You just killed all these people," she continues, this time backed with a little more aggression.

The accusing tone of the statement hits a nerve and I feel the urge to defend myself. With renewed feelings of confidence in my recent actions; I begin to lay out exactly what's on my mind.

"Look Emma, it's time you realize things aren't the way they were. We're not driving to the shopping centre to buy skinny lattes. We aren't obeying the same rules of society that we're used to anymore. This is something new, and survival is the name of the game. It's the law of the jungle from here on, '*Kill or be killed*', and these guys at your feet are the predators. We could never have out run them, I saw my chance and I took it. The reason they're dead is because they came after me, and I was better."

She's not happy with my ranting, but offers no argument either. She's smart, she knows I'm right.

Having said all that, it wasn't that coherent and logically thought out in my mind as it was all happening. I was reacting on instinct and maybe something else, something more primal... but she doesn't need to hear that.

The downpour that was threatening hasn't arrived, and the clouds are parting just enough to reveal the sun hanging low in the sky.

I walk up to her and in a softer voice I say, “Are you hurt badly? Let me see your leg.”

She lifts up the hem of her skirt. The pain is evident on her face as she reveals a shallow scrape in the middle of some bad bruising that’s already starting to turn a yellowy purple.

“It’ll get worse before it gets better, but it’s nothing you can’t handle, from what I’ve seen,” I tell her in an attempt to be reassuring without sounding patronising.

She manages a smile as I dab away the blood droplet from between her eyes and before I can lower my hand she gently takes hold of it with both her hands.

“Oh, your finger!”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” I reply.

We’re standing here motionless, hand in hand as the warm tones of the setting sun illuminate her face and the gentle breeze is playing with her hair. The space between us has reduced to nearly nothing at all.

“Thank you for saving us,” she says, almost whispering. The gaze of those big brown eyes of hers penetrates to my core.

All of a sudden there’s an uncomfortable pause. I get the feeling we’re both thinking the same thought, the thought that Matt’s dead, meaning there’s nothing wrong with this and even if he isn’t, we’re all adults here, surely he’s dead... isn’t he???

The pause turns into an eternity and I start feeling like a bastard. The moment passes and we both move off like it never happened. I’m not sure where either of us expected it to lead anyway.

The less time we have to spend on the road the better. It’s quiet now, but there could be another gang of spooks along to take over this group’s place at any time and the car’s headlight will stand out like a homing beacon in the fading light.

I poke the bodies off the front of the VW and use the expended airbag to clean off as much blood and bits as I can. It’d be a shitty way to get infected.

Before we pull off, I kick out the shattered front window, which is going to make the rest of the journey very uncomfortable. Luckily, we’re not far from the hotel from what I remember.

I'm still buzzing after the pep pills and I want to be in control if we meet anymore trouble, so I take the wheel, which suits Emma fine.

I'm thinking clearer now with the blood flow restored back to my brain again after our *close encounter*. We're not bad people, Emma and I; we're just victims of being caught up in the moment and a very romantic setting. *Well, except for all the corpses.*

Humph, cock blocked by a dead man. You better be dead Matt, or else I'll kill you myself.

**MATT**

I wake with an immediate understanding that I'm not alone in the room. It's dark out with hints of silvery moonlight fighting to break through a cloud infested sky.

I can just about identify the outline of the shadowy, hooded figures that surround me on all sides. I don't know how they could've gotten in without me hearing them; I had the doorway so well blocked up.

My scrambling hands urgently search the bed covers for my sword. I can't find it.

As my eyes grow more accustomed to my gloomy surroundings, I notice one of the prowlers removing something from under his attire. It's my sword. The cheeky bastard. I resort to hurling curses towards them.

Two grab me from either side before I get a chance to move, and hold me down by my shoulders while two more restrain my legs.

The evident ringleader proceeds to slowly extend the blade in my direction until its smooth flat side lies flush against my face. The cool steel would be refreshing against my warm flesh if it wasn't being held in such a sinister fashion.

He flicks his wrist and I wince in pain as the tip slices my skin. I try to scream but my throat feels like its paralysed. No sound will come out no matter how hard I try to summon it. I'm powerless to do anything.

Without warning the hands that were restraining me remove themselves and I have my freedom of movement again. I scuttle backwards until my back is jammed up against the headboard.

With no sign of an escape route I decide to position myself in a cradle like pose with my knees tucked in to my chest, and I bury my head down into my lap. It's the same defensive stance that I used to take if I got scared when I was a kid.

I hear a voice mocking me, "You useless good for nothing little runt."

It sounds awfully familiar. *It can't be him. What would he be doing here?*

I look up and sure enough I recognise my uncle's fat, ugly face unveiling itself from behind the hood. It makes no sense for him to be here. How did he even know where to find me?

“I’ll finish you right this time,” he taunts as he raises the sword above his head and draws down an almighty swing that severs my throat.

I lurch upright in the bed clutching my neck and panting for air. My clothes are drenched with cold sweat. It takes a few seconds to realise where I am and that I was only having a nightmare. It felt so real.

I’m dying for some water as I have a major case of cottonmouth. I forgot some important information from my conversation with Shawn regarding nutmeg. Ingesting large amounts of the stuff can have unpleasant side effects including dry mouth and sometimes feelings of impending doom. Apparently recreational drug users sometimes consume it to give themselves a cheap high. *That explains the shitty dream then.*

My uncle huh, I thought I’d left him in my past, blocked from my mind never to bother me again, but I guess not.

I reach out to the bed side locker for an old bottle of Emma’s water and place it against my lips. The coolness and wetness provide instant relief to my parched mouth and throat.

I sit motionless in the bed. Apart from the now relieved dryness and a case of slight dizziness I feel like myself again. That is, I don’t have any overwhelming desires to go around running amuck amongst society and convert others into infected zombies.

A sense of relief washes over me. It looks like I’ve been spared the indignity of wandering the streets as another infected mutt. I tense up at the thought of how close I came. To say I’m very lucky would be a massive understatement.

I decide to blame the nutmeg high for the mellowed out and indifferent attitude towards death before my sleep. My usual self would have been freaking out and unable to get a single wink of slumber.

I look at the time. The clock reads ten. I must have slept about eight hours. Eight hours!

My concern turns to Emma and Shawn. I wonder if they made it to the hotel in one piece. I have no other choice but to believe they did.

I lean back against the headboard. The thick padding cushions my head. It’s a hell of a lot nicer now than in my nightmare. I try piecing together everything that I’ve learned so far.

*People are becoming infected but despite their condition they still seem to be vulnerable to injury and death just like normal people. The first*

*thing that seems to be affected is their vocal abilities and the longer they survive the more seized up their limbs become. This could prove advantageous. The virus may be controlling them but it's obvious that they are intelligent enough to think out ambushes like the one on the bus. They don't seem to simply be mindless drones but instead appear to work together. The president said that communications were down. Is this because the virus has turned them into such impressive hunters that they intentionally aimed to sabotage such a vital commodity?*

I close my eyes to help myself think more clearly. I have to focus on planning what to do next. My main priority is linking up with the others, but it's at least sixty miles away, so going on foot is not really an option. I'll have to obtain transport somehow. My car is still across town so I can't see that happening.

It dawns on me the taxi from last night is still abandoned just up the road from here. As far as I can recall, the driver left the keys in it. I can easily make my way to it undetected. Without any other alternatives, I decide this is the most logical conclusion.

With the basis of a plan figured out my spirit feels lifted slightly. I'll get to the hotel and it'll be safe there. The three of us will be. There'll be plenty of room to hide and all the facilities we need like running water and a kitchen.

I opt to wait until darkness falls fully before hitting the road. There'll be less chance of being sighted with the shadows acting as my cloak.

Half an hour passes and the night has taken hold. It's time to make my move. I unblock the bedroom door and move through to the kitchen. The stench of the corpse has become highly pungent. So much so, that I have to cover my nose and mouth as I raid the fridge.

I take a fresh bottle of water and some easy to carry bits to eat. Typical student, there's flip all to choose from, so I make do with a banana and another bar of chocolate and stuff them into my hoody pockets.

I un-cordon the front door and take a step out into the balmy night air. It's a typical late Irish summer night for when we have a spell of good weather, which isn't too often.

It isn't as dark as I had hoped, but it'll be enough to conceal my movements as long as I'm careful. I close the door behind me as quietly as possible and proceed on my way.



I notice curtains ruffling in some windows of the surrounding apartments. Scared residents keeping lookout no doubt. I wonder if it's possible some people mightn't even know about the disaster unfolding.

These people probably think I'm crazy venturing outside. I can't help but think the same. After all, the darkness may hide me, but that just means it can conceal other would-be assailants too.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Should I go back and wait until daylight? No, I'll carry on. Indecisiveness is my enemy in this situation. Any wrong move or decision could have dire consequences.

I make my way along the route that Emma and I had used in the morning, using walls and bushes to mask my presence.

In the distance I can see signs of buildings burning. They form an orange glow that eats into the skyline. Some aren't all that far away and feel a little bit too close for comfort, as it indicates there could be enemies nearby.

I can also make out what sounds like gunfire far away. Presumably it's the army fighting. They're pretty much the only ones with guns in Ireland. I wish we had the American lack of regulation on gun control here. It would come in mighty handy to be packing some weaponry right about now.

Now and again I spot bodies moving in the distance and avert my course enough to ensure I keep off the radar, but at the same time not allowing myself to stray too far from my destination. So far I've managed to remain unnoticed every time.

It appears there are a lot more infected roaming around the place compared to earlier. Does this mean more and more people are falling victim all the time or do they just prefer to skulk about at night time?

I maintain my stealthy approach towards the car. When I eventually get close, I crouch crestfallen behind a hedge. Not too far from the abandoned automobile two dreary looking teenage lads are shuffling about, neither coming or going. They just seem to be loitering.

To top off my bad luck, the parking lights of the taxi have been on this whole time and now they're only glowing dimly. The battery is surely going to be too weak to get a turnover from the engine.

Contemplating my options yields two results. I can make a dash for the car and hope to god that it starts before I attract attention or attempt to find some alternate form of transport. The latter seems like a better idea but I can't formulate any sort of plan how to actually go about it.

The longer I wait here amongst this hedging like a peeping tom, the greater the risk of being discovered. I need to make a move now, one way or another.

With no inspiration or other plan forthcoming, I decide to revert to my initial arrangement. I wait patiently until there are no eyes peering in my direction, and then I sprint towards the kerb stricken car.

I keep a low profile as I run, looking somewhat similar to someone running towards a helicopter in the movies. What I wouldn't give to have a chopper come and fly me out of here.

I manage to reach the car unnoticed and slip in the driver's door. I huddle into the seat. The keys are in the ignition; at least I was right about that. I peer over the top of the dash and wait until the two teens eventually saunter off into the distance.

I switch off the lights to give the car every chance of starting. I pop it into neutral and pump the accelerator as I try turning the key.

Rrrrrr rrrrr rrr r... The battery dies a pathetic sounding death. Now what do I do? I sit motionless for a moment, racking my brains. Maybe I could try a push start. It'd be difficult on my own, although the road does slope significantly back the way. Is it even possible to hill start a car going in reverse?

I wish the internet was working on my phone so I could Google the answer. The only way to find out now is to go ahead and try.

I examine the road behind me and surmise a trajectory for my roll. I turn the key to the on position and then release the handbrake but the car doesn't budge at all. The rear left wheel is marginally caught on the kerb. Not badly caught, but just enough to prevent the car moving without a measure of force being applied.

I straighten the steering wheel so that all four wheels are aligned. Opening the door, I stand up and push backwards. As I do, the sight of the hoodlums from before sprinting towards me is enough to make me shit a brick.

The pitiful sound of the engine must have attracted their interest. How the hell did I not spot them before now? They're only two hundred metres away and closing fast.

I have approximately twenty seconds to get myself out of jail here. I push hard and the car rocks but doesn't move. I try again. Same result. A

quick panicky glance over my shoulder reveals the hunters have halved the distance. There's only time for one more try.

I step back and make a barging thrust into the door frame. The metal and rubber dig deep into my shoulder, but I'm too preoccupied to notice any pain.

The car tyres crunch on the tarmac as they slowly begin to turn. I drive my feet hard against the ground and give one last almighty heave with all the strength I have in me.

The runners are just a matter of metres away. I have no choice but to jump in the car. I slam the door behind me and lock it just in time before they finally catch up to me, and start banging ferociously on the windows.

The car has freed up enough from the kerb to begin rolling slowly down the incline under its own weight. It's still not fast enough to try to start it. I'm going to have to get the timing just right, otherwise I'll cock it up and end up stationary and helpless in the middle of the road.

I'm beginning to pick up momentum, so I make good use of my mirrors to ensure the best possible position on the road is maintained.

Aggrieved eyes stare in the windows, intent on capturing me. One to the left of me, the other to the right and here I am stuck in the middle with Drew, that being the name on the taxi drivers identification, that's stuck to the dashboard.

They're struggling to keep up as my speed grows steadily faster. I can see that I'm starting to run out of sloping road and it will soon level out. I'm still not going fast enough.

Bang. A heavy hit shatters the passenger side window but it stays in place. Thousands of little glass pieces make up an intriguing jigsaw puzzle.

There's a second wallop and the window caves in, sending glass everywhere.

A little more speed is all I need. I just hope they aren't clever enough to somehow jam up my wheels.

As if he was somehow reading my mind, the jerk on the driver side, who obviously can't run anymore, decides to fling himself into the path of the front wheel in a last ditch effort to slow me down. The car bumps and kicks slightly, as it bobbles over what looks like his leg, but it doesn't slow down.

Meanwhile, his longhaired companion has made a failed attempt to lunge in the broken window. His efforts have fallen well short, but he did

manage to hold on to the window frame.

Blood streams from his fingers as shards of glass pierce deep into them. He's being dragged along like a rag doll and it's hindering my speed. This combined with the fact I'm about to reach level road means it's now or never to try the start.

I depress the clutch, and knock the gear stick into reverse. I quickly release the clutch pedal and start giving it some throttle. The engine chokes for a second before roaring into life and jerks backwards as I over-rev it.

The sudden increase in speed dislodges the window hanger and he tumbles along the road. I slam on the brakes. The car jolts to a standstill.

Throughout this entire harrowing experience, I've tried to maintain a level of composure. I've tried to prevent my humanitarian side from snapping; not wanting to cause harm just in case the zombies could still have a chance to regain their former humanness.

The only problem is I'm feeling this ordeal is finally catching up with me and something has sparked inside of me. These grunts are no longer human. All they care about is devouring society. My society, and no matter how cruelly it may have treated me in the past, I can't stand seeing it being brutalised in such a manner, even if I am a coward.

There certainly is something of an affinity between the defenceless general public in all this and my own mistreated upbringing; both being tortured by an overbearing and seemingly unbeatable force.

These infected, despite being victims themselves, are no longer human and there's probably no hope of getting them back. They're nothing but sadistic bullies now. Meat puppets to a domineering virus master.

I see red. Knocking the gear stick into first, I floor the accelerator.

I have no feeling of joy or satisfaction as I mow down the lowly miscreant. The thud against my bumper doesn't exactly fill me with remorse either. If I'm going to survive, if I'm going to protect those few I care about then I must be callus.

Leaving the hit and run behind me, I get back to following my agenda and head for the hotel. It's about an hour's drive.

I wonder if the others made it safe and sound. In that beast of a jeep they surely wouldn't have encountered any problems. Every possible scenario is running through my head but I realise there's no point in dreaming up contemplations. I'm only cluttering my brain with unnecessary distractions.

Speaking of distractions... Emma. It's typical, I finally meet a girl like her and Armageddon decides to begin. She's brave, smart and the right mix of in your face, yet sensitive. Oh ya and not forgetting the hotness levels.

I can't help allowing myself to fantasize about how good she'd be in the sack. If my impure thoughts and previous encounter are anything to go by, then I wouldn't be disappointed.

I feel a little embarrassed when I wonder just what she'd think of me if she could glimpse at the images in my head right this minute. I allow myself a slight laugh out loud at the notion. Ah testosterone, even when the world is in jeopardy, it can still leave men sexually yearning.

With my voyeuristic imagination satisfied for the moment I turn my attention to the radio. I tune in the emergency station, but there's no reception from it.

Did something happen to the president? Was his secure location also compromised? It's not altogether unlikely. If the infected really are as cunning as they seem to be then there's no reason they couldn't figure out how to get to him.

I wonder if it's possible the virus is able to use each individual's own knowledge to its benefit. If that's the case, then how do you beat something that knows its enemy's secrets? Maybe you don't. Maybe you just run and hide and try to outlast it. After all isn't that my plan in essence? Escape to the countryside, lay low and hope the military, scientists or somebody else comes up with an answer. One way or another, that's all I can do.

On the constructive side, I'm not a doctor or medical researcher who can formulate a cure for this condition. On the other hand if the whole population is turned into zombies there's no way I can kill them all. It's not physically possible. So yes I'll run, and I'll hide, but if the need to stand and fight arises then I won't falter. That however will be a very last resort.

I recall Toma's degenerative state, and how I predicted that she had a week maximum to live before her body would cease to function. With this presumption I decipher that if we can hold out and avoid detection for maybe a month, the virus may spread throughout the population and then proceed to die out naturally. It'd be even better if there were some sort of divine intervention, but realistically this is at least a slice of hope to cling on to.

I'm so engrossed in my own little world of thoughts and possibilities that the impact comes without any warning.

The lack of a seatbelt and the fact it's a direct hit on the driver side leaves me with little hope of avoiding serious injury.

The airbags deploy, but do little to protect me as I'm sent reeling around the inside of the car as it rolls several times.

The car must have ended up on its roof because I can woozily make out the floor looking down on me.

My body isn't in agony, but I know I'm not right. I can't really think or breathe. I feel dizzy and unable to focus my vision. I'm groggy like I've been on the beer for a few days straight.

The last thing I see before I pass out is a single pair of feet outside the window. The door opens and I'm slowly dragged out of the wreck.

Friend or foe I can't tell, but I'm at their mercy whoever or whatever they are. As I try to adjust my vision I'm able to make out the outline of a bloody face mouthing some inaudible words at me. It's too late for anymore as I slip into unconsciousness.

**SHAWN**

We're motoring along admirably considering our transport has survived two head on impacts in a single day. That being said, the purr of the engine has been replaced by what sounds like a bucketful of nails in a washing machine.

My mind is put at ease a little however, now that I can't see steam leaking from the left side of the crippled bonnet anymore. The fact this is simply because it's dark now isn't lost on me, but you have to take whatever little positives you can sometimes.

Despite the warm summer night, the lack of a windscreen is making the journey a nightmare, with no protection from the unrelenting stream of air blasting into my face.

I just can't keep warm, and I'm actually starting to worry my eyeballs are going to dry up and fall out of my head.

The two of us attempted conversation for a while after getting back on the road, but Emma gave up after ten minutes of having to shout just to be heard and crawled into the back seat, before wrapping up tight and lying down to hibernate.

I'm driving way faster than I should, especially since the one remaining headlight is bent downwards, providing a very small visible area of road in front of me. I'm in the middle of the road, using the centre line as my only guide, with no idea what is more than ten feet ahead of me.

I've no real means of telling where we are either, as I can't even see any road signs, but I know the area and I'm just hoping I'm lucid enough to get us there on memory alone, making adjustments as we encounter each junction and roundabout.

As I squint, and strain to focus on the speeding dashed white lines disappearing beneath the front of the jeep, the only positive I can think of is there's no chance of me nodding off at the wheel.

We're in the middle of the country; it's about as rural as it gets but we're close now. The hotel is down a side avenue just over the next hill.

I pull in and park underneath some low hanging branches before cutting the lights and engine. Remaining seated I take the opportunity to



close my eyes. I place my thumb and index finger on my ice cold eyelids and gently rub them in the hope it will somehow have a rehydrating effect.

It's the longest moment of relaxation I've had in a while. My body is crying out for a few hours rest, so the sooner we're out of this shattered shell of a vehicle and get secure in the hotel the better.

I turn around to rouse Emma. She's already up and ready. The unexpected sight of her silhouette in the back seat sends a shot of adrenalin throughout my system, returning me to a full state of alertness.

"Why are we stopped in the middle of nowhere? Where's the hotel?"

She's talking in a low whisper, which seems loud in the absolute calm of the undergrowth.

"It's just over the hill; we're on foot from here. I want to scope the place out before we make our presence too obvious. We mightn't be the only ones with the bright idea to come here."

As we leave the car far behind and walk through the ridiculously overgrown avenue in complete darkness, the sound of the lapping water from the lake shore to our right is our sole frame of reference for direction.

Emma's struggling with the tangled mess of briars we're crossing in order to keep up to me, her floaty skirt and bare legs taking the occasional graze.

I slow down, allowing her to come up close behind me. Placing her hand gently on my left arm she quietly asks, "Are you sure there's a hotel around here?"

Her enquiry exposes a lack of confidence in my navigation abilities, but it's a fair question. After all, we did drive here in almost complete darkness, and I am now leading her deeper and deeper into thick vegetation, in what must seem like the middle of nowhere to her. Frankly, I'm a bit flattered she's put this much faith in me, given my less than stable behaviour lately.

Luckily, I know this area like the back of my hand and truth be told, I know the route better in the dark than I do in the daylight. I've been here so many times in my younger days.

It's an old disused hotel from the twenties that overlooks the lake, it's long ago been reclaimed by nature. The route in is so obscured and overgrown that few people even remember it exists. The only ones being the old coot that owns the land and some of the older locals, all of whom are convinced it's haunted.

I discovered it late one night in my teens after I was kicked out of the car belonging to some bird I had met in the local pub. She was taking me back to hers, but was less than impressed when half way there I threw up in her lap while leaning in for a snog.

Out of pure frustration, she opened my door and literally pushed me out onto the road. She barely even slowed down. In hindsight I can't say I blame her. I might have had a few too many that night and with my sense of pain still dulled by whiskey, I actually found it hilarious.

After stumbling around lost in a drunken stupor for a while, I must have wandered up the overgrown lane to the hotel, because the next morning I woke up inside it, covered in scratches and bruises. I was in an old rusted bath tub, next to the window I'd broken to get in through.

Throughout the rest of our teens, Matt and I ended up using it as a place to bring girls and let the spookily romantic lakeside setting create the mood while the alcopops cooled in the lake water.

Emma, who's still holding my arm leans in and asks, "So how do you and Matt even know about this place?"

I waste no time in giving a suitable vague answer, "Fishing trip."

It's too dark for her to see the smile on my face.

It's been a while but the area hasn't changed a bit. I'm almost feeling nostalgic.

The hotel sits in a large clearing in the centre of the wooded area. As we're approaching the edge of the greenery, even before the hotel is in sight, it's apparent that there's light coming from the area ahead of us.

I hunker down and approach the edge of the clearing, concealing myself in one of the denser bushes. Emma follows my lead. It's hard not to notice how the dynamic between us has shifted lately. As we're sitting here undercover, her focus is on the glow coming from beyond us, but she's keeping very close to me with both arms now held loosely around my left arm and her cheek pressed against my shoulder.

I poke my face through the bushy foliage; from where we are we've got a complete view of the crumbling building and the surrounding open area. The sight I'm faced with causes a swell of anger to rise up inside me.

It looks like a full house and whoever the idiots inside are, they've the place lit up like a Christmas tree inside and have built a fire outside.

Although their presence wasn't obvious on the side we approached from, I know all this illumination will stick out like a sore thumb from

across the lake, despite the tree cover.

This pack of knobs are ruining what is possibly the most secure place for miles, they're broadcasting its position to half the fucking countryside.

I stand up and begin to plough forward out of cover and into the opening with the intention of busting in there and straightening these pricks out. Even in doing so, I can't tug free of Emma's grip.

As my face begins to clear the leafy barrier, I spot the outline of a motionless white face just inside the cover on the opposite side of the hotel. Without hesitation I turn and reverse course, bundling Emma back into cover.

This sudden unexpected reversal of direction causes her to trip and fall backwards onto the soft undergrowth, taking me down with her. I land as softly as possibly right on top of her, leaving us face to face again.

*Shit! Did he see us?* I don't think we were spotted but I'm afraid any movement might highlight our position. I carefully raise my index finger and press it to Emma's lips, although I think she's figured out the situation already.

There might be just the one of them over there, but for all I know there could be ten of the bastards. We've no choice but to stay perfectly still for the moment. If he'd spotted us I think we'd know by now.

Unfortunately, the two of us are stuck indefinitely in this embarrassing position, there's that awkward feeling again.

With the poor glow coming through the leaves, I can't make out Emma's face clearly but by the twinkle of reflected light from her eyes I can tell she's looking at me, I can already feel the blood draining from my brain again.

The temporary distraction is broken as I'm suddenly aware of a sharp crack nearby; there're footsteps approaching. Whoever it is, they're making an effort to be stealthy, but that's next to impossible with all the dead wood and twigs scattered around.

Did he see us and circle around? The sound is getting closer, heading directly towards us. Every instinct tells me to rush him head first, strike before he gets the upper hand, but it should be next to impossible for him to pinpoint us in this light, in such thick cover. If I'm patient I might get the opportunity to surprise him as he passes.

He's almost here. I have an overpowering urge to adopt a defensive stance instead of lying on my belly on top of Emma. It feels wrong to be so

vulnerable, but I've got to keep in control.

He's right on top of us now. I can feel Emma's heart thumping alongside mine. I see his feet. He's come to a stop two yards from our heads and is just staring out at the hotel.

The smell of his rancid Adidas shoes, dripping with various bodily fluids is enough to bring vomit to the back of my throat. I begin to slowly wrap my right hand around a grapefruit sized stone that's lying next to Emma's head in preparation for a surprise attack. However, before I can execute the manoeuvre I feel Emma's petit fingers wrap around my wrist and squeeze. She's subtly shaking her head.

She's picked up on something! This isn't the guy I spotted across the way at all. There's more than one of them, a lot more. *Shit!* I hear them now, they're all around us. The woods have come to life with the noise of them moving.

There must be twenty of them at least. We were never spotted at all, they have no idea we're here. They're gathering here just inside the tree line for a coordinated surprise attack on whoever's inside the hotel.

I hadn't credited the spooks with having two brain cells to rub together when I first saw them, but it looks like what I was starting to suspect is right. Their single mindedness is evident by this fellow's lack of concern for his own wellbeing. He's covered with lots of untreated, bleeding and infected wounds, probably inflicted as he himself was being infected.

On the other hand, this show of structured coordination confirms what I was afraid of; they're fully capable of using full intellect to achieve their obsessive goal of spreading their filthy infection.

I have to do something to warn whoever's inside. With a bit of a heads up they might still have some chance of defending themselves or possibly even getting away, but there are at least three spooks within a few metres of us now.

What can I possibly do without completely fucking us both over in the process? The answer is simple I'm afraid, nothing, nothing at all. It's a noble thought, to risk sacrificing ourselves and potentially save at least some of the crowd inside the house, but these guys are out of luck today.

Why should I make a possibly suicidal choice for Emma and me to save these people who mean nothing to me, people who didn't even have the sense to keep a low profile? This is survival, and there's no question who's earned it here. But... they are people.

The spooks are all beginning to silently step out into the clearing, converging on the structure with no audible method of communication to synchronise the start of their advance.

There must be forty of them now, all out in full view, slowly but steadily closing the distance to the hotel from every angle in one big enclosing circle. They're not tripping over themselves to get there either. Patience is the key to any successful hunt.

Their plan has worked, and the fate of the people inside is already sealed at this stage, there's no escape for them. The time for heroics has come and gone.

The two of us are still in the same position, unwilling to move and risk being discovered. All we can do is look on in silence.

Unexpectedly, the front door opens wide and out walks a young girl holding a saucepan in her hand. It looks like she's coming out to cook something on the fire. She's no more than fifteen years old, and is looking back talking to someone as she walks. I can hear the faint sound of laughter from inside as she passes through the doorway. She doesn't know what she's walking into.

What have I done? Am I actually going to let this happen? I question it as though there's a possibility of intervention now. I've made my choice, and it's poetic justice that I'm forced to lie here and witness the consequences.

Emma's view of the unfolding situation is obscured by the dense vegetation we landed in, but I have a clear line of sight.

The open door triggers a burst of acceleration from the horde and the whole scenario begins to play out in the only way it ever could have.

My perception of time seems to slow down as the girl's head swings around on hearing the approaching rumble of feet from all angles.

I desperately want to look away and block out reality with some forced visions of my happy place, but the guilt gnawing at the base of my skull obligates me to watch as penance for my inaction.

She manages to release the initial whimper of a scream before being rugby tackled to the ground and lost under the weight of five bodies. I hope it's enough to kill her outright and spare her an existence as a spook.

The rest continue straight for the hotel, held off momentarily at the open door by a man holding a semi-automatic shotgun. He seems to be shouting something out into the trees as he goes down.

Did he see us? Was he cursing me for my self-preservation? I feel tears escaping from their ducts as I struggle to restrain the volcano of emotions inside.

They persist on, attacking every window and door, climbing the walls and rotten drain pipes, anything to breach the structure. Their previous calculated calmness has been replaced in a flash by a coordinated viciousness unlike anything I've ever seen.

With all the focus now on the hotel, this may be our best and only chance to get away. I'm weighed down by the guilt and self doubt from what's happening, exacerbated further by the panicked shouting still coming from inside, but it's now or never.

I give Emma a nod as I begin to get up, but she pulls me back down firmly and directs her view upwards. Whilst I've been preoccupied with the

hotel massacre, she's been keeping an eye on something else from her vantage point in the undergrowth.

I arch my neck carefully, and assisted by the half light of the fire, I can make out what Emma's been looking at. Up a large tree about ten metres from where we are, there's a small figure clinging to the trunk, paralyzed by fear. This must be who the man with the gun was trying to shout to before.

My first thought is one of complete selfishness, as I consider the likelihood that we'll be spotted by the little figure while making our exit, causing him or her to call out and bring the horde down on all of us.

My second thought is, if anything more selfish, as I'm beginning to see this little person, whoever they are, as a means of some kind of redemption. Surely if I risk it all and save this last remaining member of the group I can redeem myself in some way?

Before I know it, I'm off Emma and sprinting towards the tree. An over powering need to be away from this place has driven me to a hasty, poorly thought out course of action.

Stealth and subtly have gone out the window. I'm working totally under the assumption that there's too much happening in the hotel for my movement to be noticed.

When I reach the tree I step onto a lower branch and reaching up with my right hand grab the scruff of the kid's tiny hoody, and in no gentle way tear the child loose of their grip before hopping down and hitting the ground running.

It's apparent now that it's a boy who looks to be about ten or eleven, although it's still hard to be exact in the darkness. I was anticipating that the shock of being grabbed without warning would cause him to freak out thinking he was being attacked, but he seems almost catatonic.

The only indication of life is the warm sensation of piss soaking into the arm of my jacket as I catch up with Emma, who wasted no time in heading back in the direction of the jeep.

The jeep seems so much further away than I remember. My heart feels like it's about to explode. The stress of carrying this kid coupled with years of living a generally unhealthy lifestyle has taken me to my limit.

The sound of my clumsy movements through the woods are a distant memory, all I can hear now is the thumping of my own heartbeat. I'm about to drop to my knees when I see the sparkle of moon light on the shattered jeep window. *Thank fuck!*

Despite the seriousness of our situation, I feel the need to maintain the illusion of control over myself and hide the fact I'm about to vomit from overexertion.

I toss the urine soaked little fella into the back seat, before strapping myself into the driver's seat.

It's a safe bet that we weren't followed and are out of harm's way, at least momentarily. I have to take a moment to let my heart catch up. I can see Emma watching with concern as I put both hands on the wheel and drop my head down between them. I haven't done that much sprinting in a long time, or ever. I'll be fine in a minute.

"Shawn, are... are you ok?"

I lift my head sluggishly to answer, only to be faced with the sight of Emma holding a tin of kidney beans that had been rolling around the floor of the passenger side. The scary part is she has a face on her like she's about to cave my skull in with it.

My reflex reaction is to reach out and grab the tin before she decides to use it. The second I see my hands out in front of me I cop on to what's happening. I'm white as a sheet after the dash through the woods. I was on the brink of passing out. The state of me has her freaking out; I must look just like a spook.

The little compartment light over our heads picks this moment to fade out, and the shock of sudden darkness triggers Emma's commitment to her course of action. I see the silhouette of the tin raise slightly in prelude to the blow.

I clumsily move to deflect her panicky swing, managing only to take the edge off it before the tin connects with a crack just above my left eye, followed by a rush of fiery pain.

"What are ya at? It's me ya fuckin idiot."

My loss of composure causes my accent to revert to that of my childhood, exposing my country upbringing.

On hearing the enraged words I've spit her way, she leans back with a mix of relief and concern. She hangs back as I grab my head, double over and wait desperately for the pain to die down to a reasonable intensity.

I feel the trickle of blood drip from between my fingers down the sleeve of my shirt. *I fucking hate beans!*

"Shawn, I'm so sorry, I thought... it looked like..."



The sorrow in her voice is genuine so I try hard to let go of my animosity.

With my head still pounding, the best I can muster is to interrupt her in a quite obviously pissed tone.

*“Its fine, I’m fine, don’t worry about it. Just switch seats with me, it’s your place we’re meeting Matt and I’ve no idea where that is. Besides, I think I’m overdue some rest.”*

As she brushes over my crotch while shuffling across to my seat, any thoughts bordering on sexual are well and truly drowned out by my now throbbing head.

Emma cautiously pulls out of cover onto the road. We’re back out in the open, back on the move with the cool summer night air smacking me in the face once again through the shattered windows of the jeep. This time it’s Emma’s turn to deal with only the one bent headlight and any psychotic boy racers we come across.

The wee fella in the back isn’t saying a word; he’s just slumped against the pile of supplies, his face buried into the back of his seat. I’m in no shape to check on him now, especially as I just sat by and watched his family die without lifting a finger.

“It’ll take about an hour to get home from here,” Emma informs me.

I drop my head back. My body feels limp like a rag doll. When I said I needed some rest, it was an extreme understatement. I close my eyes and try and leave my guilt behind.

The throbbing in my head grows to a deafening roar as my mind drifts to a dark place. The rattle of the jeep is a million miles away now, and all the crap swimming around my head takes its chance to bubble up and manifest itself in the form of a fragmented scene of me walking through the countryside of my childhood holding the little guy’s hand as we go.

Our surroundings are distorting and shifting into something unrecognisable, as we make our way through this place. The warm nostalgic tones give way to a colder grittier landscape populated by remnants of horrific scenes.

What’s left of his family litters the path stretching out in front of us along with countless other remains, their bodies cleared of flesh by the flames surrounding them. There’s no escaping the accusing stare of their empty eye sockets.

The touch of his little hand against mine sears my skin, my guilt encasing both hands like a flame, climbing my arm slowly, threatening to consume me entirely.

Emma's been there the whole time, clasping my left hand with her right, a dented can of kidney beans in the other.

I feel unexpectedly content, as we move onwards together, stepping over the flaming bones on our way forward, the perfect dysfunctional nuclear family for a post-apocalyptic world.

After what seems like an eternity of further nonsensical raving, the random forms of my subconscious begins to coalesce into the sight of Emma's face as I slowly open my eyes.

"Shawn... SHAWN! Wake up."

She's tapping me on the cheek as she tries to drag me back to reality, the morning sun over her shoulder blazes into the back of my eyeballs.

"Wake up, we're here."

By the sound of her voice, she's been trying to rouse me for a while.

"How long have I slept?"

"About an hour and a half, I got a little lost on the way."

She looks surprisingly fresh for someone who's been through all that shit. I can't imagine she could say the same for me. I suppose ninety minutes of extremely disturbing sleep is better than none.

I turn around to check on our passenger. He's wide awake but his appearance is vacant as he looks back at me. I can only imagine what's going on in his head. He's about seven and his cap has Tomas written across it.

"Hey Tom, how are you getting on back there?"

I've always been terrible with children.

"Are you hungry? There's a twelve pack of chocolate bars behind you."

Not a peep.

"You know you're safe here with us, no one's gonna hurt you."

I literally don't know what else to say, so I stop before I make things worse. I'll fix this once we get into the farmhouse and out of the open.

So this is the farm. The motor is still running, barely, and we're stopped at the end of a lane leading up a gentle hill to the house itself. We're about a quarter mile away. From this distance we're presented with one hell of a good view of the house.

“Why are we stopped all the way down here?”

She’s staring at the house as if it just gave her the finger. Without breaking her glare she says, “You see that red car peeking out from behind the house? That car shouldn’t be there, I’ve never seen it before.”

I sit up and strain my bloodshot eyes to see what she’s going on about. *Holy crap, what sort of eyesight does this girl have?*

Sure enough there is the merest protrusion of a red vehicle of some kind visible from behind the house.

“Well, we can’t wait here for Matt, who knows how long he’ll be,” I stop short of adding, “*if he’s coming at all?*”

“Let’s go up and find out what the story is. What other choice do we have?”

We begin to pull off, there’s no argument. I reach for the pep pills again and throw a few in my mouth, something tells me I’ll need them.

Once we’re within several metres of the gates Emma presses a key ring remote, triggering them to unlock and swing open automatically.

We’re in the west of Ireland, as rural as it gets and on first glance, the house itself is similar to the countless farm houses dotted across the countryside. It has a generic stone facade with a scatter of old farm buildings around it, but as we pass through the gates into the yard it’s obvious that Emma’s parents are no farmers.

My first clue is the large wire peacock sculpture in the centre of an immaculately kept garden. The outward appearance of the house from the road is extremely misleading; it looks like Emma’s parents gutted an old farmyard, preserving nothing but the outer shell for aesthetics.

From inside the yard all I can see is the cutting edge of contemporary design. The clean geometric lines of the garden lead my eye to a vulgarly placed hot tub, upsetting what is an otherwise perfectly balanced garden design.

Most of the smaller surrounding farm buildings have been converted also. Into what I’m not sure, but a glance in one window as we pass reveals well-furnished interiors and a pool table, instead of the pile of straw mixed with cow shite you’d expect to find in a typical farmyard shed. I better be nice to Matt if he gets back. If our old society manages to pull through he could be in the money.

With a new wave of twitchy energy starting to wash over me from the pills I feel somewhat better equipped to process what’s going on.

“So, what did you say your parents did again?”

I could tell half way through my question that her attention is elsewhere.

As if she didn't even hear me, she bursts out with, “Who do these people think they are? This is my parents' house!”

I keep my mouth shut and instead shrug my shoulders. She seems agitated and setting her off is the last thing I want to do.

As we slowly pull around the gable of the main house, the extent of the renovations becomes clearer. Practically the entire gable wall of the house has been replaced with a two story pane of double glazing, stretching from a sizeable ground floor open plan living area to a large skylight. The whole place reeks of Celtic Tiger boom time excess.

My thoughts on the architecture are interrupted by a heavy thudded impact somewhere on the front of the car. I'm left looking over the hood like an idiot to see what hit us before we speed up sharply, and I hear Emma shouting in a panicked scream, “Fuck! Someone's shooting at us!”

*Shit!* She's right. Before I know it, without thinking I've stretched back around to the rear seat, bundling Tom down to the ground.

“Stay down Tom! Stay down 'til I tell you to move!”

With one hand still ungracefully stretched around behind me, holding his head against the back of my seat, I swing around to see can I spot the shooter.

Either it was meant as some sort of warning, or they're a really bad shot. The sensation of being shot at isn't like in the movies; you can't just shake off the fear, stand up and face your shooter like the untouchable action heroes I've seen so many times. The fear of a bullet shredding through my body at any given moment is a powerful one, so I'm not sure what to do other than stay down.

Having said that, although it seems like a small calibre rifle, I don't think this car door offers much protection. I place my face close to the window, trying to get a look up at the house towering above us.

My answer comes as I see the guns muzzle flash from one of the first floor windows, right before a second shot smashes through the passenger window I'm looking out of. The bullet misses my head by centimetres, lodging itself in the fabric of my seat right between my legs.

I pull away from the window with a yelp of pain and grab my head with my left hand. The side of my face stings like a son of a bitch, it's

peppered with glass shrapnel and at least one or two pieces made it into my eye, punishing me with darts of pain whenever I try opening it.

It's all happening so fast but despite the shards of fragmented glass that have ripped into my left cheek and eye, I can't help but think how much worse that could have been, as I check my crotch with my right hand.

The shattering glass, coupled with my sudden movement and pain filled shouts, causes Emma to fumble the wheel and take out two ornamental bonsai trees. The last thing I feel are the shards of glass in my head being grinded into my skull as my head makes contact with the dash before my world goes dark with a flash of pink cherry blossoms.

The next thing I hear is Emma's voice, "Shawn, can you hear me, how do you feel?"

*Good question, I feeling great actually.* I don't have any pain and as well as that I have a distinctly positive mind-set. I'm a bit groggy and my memories of recent events are a bit fuzzy, I feel... drugged!

As I finally open my one good eye, I'm surprised to see I'm in what looks like a teenage girls bedroom, covered in pink frills, stuffed animals and what appears to be every boy band poster from the early 00s. It all seems so surreal.

I also notice some new faces. Emma is standing to my left, with a bloody cloth in her hands, in front of a woman who I'd say is in her late fifties. She's washing her hands in a bucket of water lightly coloured by blood, my blood.

It would appear they did some work on me while I was out. I can see in my peripheral vision there's at least one other person there but I can't get a good look lying on my back like this, and I'm quite content to stay this way.

I don't remember closing my eyes again but all of a sudden I'm pulled back to the real world with, "Shawn! Are you ok?!?"

*Oh ya,* I forgot to answer her, and she's sounding a bit less patient this time.

"Where are we?" I ask in a low relaxed mumble, but before she can answer I add, in a more alarmed tone, "Where's the boy, where's Tom?"

I end up knocking over and breaking several bottles or glasses in a pathetically uncoordinated attempt to sit up.

Emma leans in and puts her hand on mine saying, "Take it easy Shawn, he's fine. He wouldn't leave your side and he fell asleep laying next to you on the bed so we moved him to my parent's bedroom. He seems to be doing a bit better but it's hard to tell."

I lie back down relieved.

"You took a fairly hard knock in the crash, your seatbelt snapped; it must have been damaged in the earlier crash so you took the guts of a full impact. I used some equipment from my mother's surgery to remove as

much of the glass as I could and clean you up. I also gave you a shot of morphine for the pain. You've been out cold for an hour, how do you feel?"

I find it hard to concentrate on what's being said and I'm easily distracted by my own thoughts but I heard that last bit.

I lift my hand to inspect my face.

"My face feels wrong. I don't think I can see out of my left eye."

This realisation is enough to harsh my buzz and it's coming across in my voice.

"Calm down Shawn, its ok. It's a bandage. I patched up your face and it's covering your left eye, that's all, everything's going to be fine."

She's talking to me like I'm a lost five year old, in that slightly patronising tone doctors use when they're trying to have good bedside manner. No doubt she picked it up from her mother, not that it bothers me. It's not as if anything really bothers me at this moment in time. I feel like she's talking to a building and I'm inside it looking out at her through a glazed window.

I'm happy enough to comfortably drift in and out of consciousness for another while as the morphine runs its course. It feels like it's been about forty five minutes but in reality how long it's actually been I don't know. Anytime I opened my eyes Emma was there sitting beside me, holding one of the older, more tattered teddy bears to her chest and looking out the window as if she expected Matt to pop over the horizon at any second.

I haven't seen the others at all since I first woke up. They seem to be keeping their distance, which is a good idea as they'd better have a bloody good explanation for why they were first trying to kill us, followed and by a sudden change of heart.

My head's feeling clearer now so it's time for some answers. I shimmy myself into a seated position on the bed.

"Hey, thanks for cleaning me up and all Emma, looks like you picked up some of your Mam's doctoring skills. How are you?" I ask out of courtesy, as it's fairly obvious she came away without so much as a scratch.

"Oh, it's good to see you awake and making sense again. I'm fine except for a cut on my leg."

"Good to hear."

I turn and sit on the edge of the bed for a few seconds before attempting to stand up. I'm unsteady at first but once I stretch my legs and walk to the window I'm fine.

“That’s some sight out there.”

“Yeah I know, this was my room before I moved out, I love looking out at the view of those mountains.”

I don’t see the benefit in pointing out that I was actually talking about the sight of my once shiny jeep lodged half way up a large cherry blossom tree in the garden below us and not the stupid view, because right now I want information.

“Look Emma, I’m obviously missing a large chunk of info regarding what happened and who those people are?”

She starts to recount what happened, never taking her eyes off the lane leading up to the house. After a fifteen minute explanation, I’ve a better idea of what’s going on.

The older woman from earlier is Meg and the man with her was her husband Paul. They’re actually neighbours from a mile or two down the road, who Emma’s known all her life. That explains her familiarity with them.

She didn’t say what they’re doing here though, and I’m thinking that’s because she’s not sure herself. She mentioned something about them usually looking after the house plants when her parents are away.

It seems she hasn’t really been talking to them much since we arrived. There are two others in the house as well, some relations of Megs who Emma doesn’t really know, probably the owners of the car parked out back.

One of them, whose name she thinks is Fred was the trigger happy prick who apparently panicked at the sight of my pale face as we rounded the house, and thought it a good idea to shoot it off.

It seems the older woman spotted Tom in the back seat before I pushed him into cover and she ran into the room knocking the gun from Fred’s grip before he could get a third shot off.

According to Emma, the old woman was nearly hysterical as she ran out to see if we were ok after hitting the tree, weeping apologetic sobs as she opened the door to see Tom curled into a ball behind me, and my glass encrusted face embedded in the dash board.

After the rest came out, they dragged me from the car and carried me upstairs to Emma’s old room while Emma raided her Mam’s medical safe.

Apart from carrying me in and helping Emma take some of the glass from my skull; they’ve been keeping to themselves, as Emma tells it.



She said she's never seen Meg act cold and distant like this and speculates they've been through something bad in the last day or two. *Haven't we all?*

I turn to Emma's vanity mirror to inspect my damaged mug. The degradation of my general appearance since I last seen it is shocking. The bandages are covering my left eye and most of the left side of my face. Apart from a few small patches of blood soaking through to the outside layer they're really well administered. I'm so pale, maybe I'll have to cut that Fred some slack, I'd have shot at me too.

"Well I think it's about time I go down and meet the gang, don't you? Find out if they know any more about this mess than we do. I gotta check in on little Tom first. Where's your parents room?"

"It's the fifth door on the right."

It's obvious she hasn't much inclination at present to do much of anything except keep vigil out the window.

As I make my way to her parents room, I'm struck by how much bigger this place is inside than it looks from the outside. I pass picture after picture of Emma's parents in settings ranging from black tie events, to European holidays, to camping at some festival in the seventies by the looks of it. They seem to get around.

From where I am, I can see down off the landing onto the open plan ground floor where Meg, Paul and a much younger guy, who must be this Fred character, are standing in a group.

I'm too far away to hear what's been said but they're having a heated discussion about something. Fred's acting like he's just heard something he doesn't like from them and is passionately counter-arguing whatever his point is.

He's the only one of them who doesn't have his back to me and spots me crossing the landing in the distance. He stops mid sentence, watching me in silence, trying to look calm as I pass by.

The other two turn to look at what's caught his attention, quickly turning back once they've seen it's me. I don't like what's happening. Are we perceived as a threat of some kind? Do they think they'll be thrown out now the house's rightful owner is back in the picture? It's probably best not to read too deeply into it right now, my head's not on straight and I may simply be misreading the situation.

By the time I reach the fifth door I'm out of sight of the trio. I turn and face the door before pausing for a moment outside. How's this gonna go down? The poor kid lost his family no more than four hours ago, and in such a horrific way, not that he saw much of what actually happened.

I wonder if he's even old enough to know they're gone. He understood enough to keep his head down when it was all happening, or was that what the man with the gun was shouting to him?

The fact he hasn't asked so much as a single question about the situation seems to suggest mental trauma more than understanding. Either way he needs someone to talk to him. It looks like he stuck with me, poor little bastard. All I see when I look at him are his family's spiteful eyes looking accusingly back at me. Does he have a grasp of everything that went on at the hotel? Does he see me as the man who betrayed his family? I've stalled enough; it's time to face the music.

I open the door and step into the room expecting to see Tom curled up in a ball, asleep in the bed. Instead I'm faced with the strange sight of an unfamiliar girl on a foot stool, leaning over as if she's looking for a contact lens that's fallen under the tossed, empty bed. I definitely counted five doors.

She hasn't noticed me come in yet. I knock on the wall inside the door to announce my presence. It echoes across the large minimally furnished bedroom.

She quickly looks my way to investigate and without pause she effortlessly swings around to a standing position, facing me with her arms out by her side and with a smile on her face she greets me in a theatrical manor with, "Ah! Look who it is, it's the hero."

I'm taken aback, how do you respond to something so bizarrely random like that from someone you've never met before? I feel like I'm missing something, she seems a bit off but if nothing else, she strikes me as very interesting.

Before I have to think of a response she continues with, "I've been hearing all about you."

With that a small head appears from beneath the bed, it's Tom. This partly explains the exaggerated manner of her greeting; the playful tone was for Tom's benefit. She must have been talking to him when I came in.

Nothing about her is what you'd call *normal*. She looks to be about my age and at first glance you'd be forgiven for writing her off as an emo, with

her head full of pitch black hair except for one streak of red that runs across her forehead and down over her right ear. She's wearing impossibly tight jeans and black lipstick, but it's all juxtaposed by her incredibly cheerful, friendly demeanour and her t-shirt with some motivational kitten themed message that I can't really make out.

I realise I'm staring so I break the silence with, "Hey Tom I've been looking for you. How've you been wee man?"

I wasn't really expecting much of a response and I don't get one, he looks almost amazed to see me, it could be the bandages.

I walk across the room and sit on the bed with my hands on my knees. He crawls out from under the bed and sits beside me, mimicking my posture by putting both his hands on his knees. I pull the cap he was wearing from my pocket. I've had it since I picked it up in the car as we arrived at the house.

"Here, you lost something buddy," I say as I pull it down over his head, "How've they been treating you here? Did you get something good to eat?"

Without looking away from one of the less girly teddies that he was hiding under the bed with, probably from Emma's room, he replies in a muted voice, "Fish fingers."

*Ugh, what are the rules for talking to young children again?* Everything I say sounds so patronising, so instead in an effort to engage with the new girl I ask, "Hey, did this nice lady bring you some fish fingers? Those sound good. I'll have to get some of them myself."

I get another nod from him after which the girl chimes in with a smile, saying, "It's Jo. The nice lady's name is Jo. Your *girlfriend* asked me to stay with him after they moved him in here. When I came in he was under the bed, there was no coaxing him out until just now when you came in. I finally got some chat out of him about half an hour ago. I heard all about how you saved him from the baddies who followed him and his neighbours to that old haunted house by the lake. Like I said, you're quite the hero."

Hah, hero? If only she knew. I force a smile in response before she adds, "Come on, I'll introduce you to the others."

I turn my attention to Tom again as I stand up to leave and say goodbye, but before I even start, the alarm on his face is evident. He obviously doesn't want me to go for whatever reason.

“Listen Tom, I’ve got to go and talk to the people downstairs and then I’ll be back up to talk to you again. You can show me where you got those fish fingers from and we’ll see if we can find a few chips to go with them.”

There was nothing patronising about that, I’m bloody starving and I want fish fingers.

As we’re leaving the room the last thing I see before I close the door behind me is a scared little boy crawling back under the bed. But if I judged what I saw outside on the landing a few minutes ago correctly, then this meeting isn’t something I want the wee fella tagging along to.

We start off down the hallway towards the stairs. Only Meg and Paul can be seen downstairs now, quietly looking out the massive gable window.

I’ve got some questions to ask Jo before we reach them but she beats me to it by asking, “So, Shawn isn’t it? How’s the head? You were a mess when they carried you in.”

With a smile, I say in my most charming voice, “Nothing a little morphine couldn’t fix.”

She isn’t someone you’d miss in a crowd with her distinctively eclectic, quirky look. I’m interested enough to ask with genuine interest, “Who are you?”

She replies, “Well like you already know my name is Jo, I’m Fred’s fiancée.”

*Ah, Fred you wanker.*

“He’s downstairs; I’ll introduce you in a minute. Fred is Paul and Meg’s nephew. We were on our way to visit them from back home in Connemara and we gave them a call when we heard some weird stuff was happening. They told us their car was attacked on the way to this house to take care of the plants for the owners and they were afraid to go back out on the open road. It was late when we got here last night to help them home but they won’t even let us leave now.”

The initial confident quirkiess that dominated her personality back in the bedroom has given way somewhat to a hint of anxiety. Her fingers flutter through her hair as she continues, “I’ve known them for years now as level headed people but their behaviour today is making me nervous. It can’t be all that bad can it?”

It’s obvious by her talk that the two of them have had no firsthand experience of what’s been happening.

After a few seconds pause I reply with, "It's bad enough, but we're in about as a good a situation as we can be all the way out here in this mansion in the middle of nowhere."

It's obviously by her reaction that isn't the answer she was hoping for.

We carry on to the stairs in silence. In an effort to change the subject and get some of my questions answered I ask, "So you said Tom was at that old hotel with his neighbours? It sounds like the two of you had a good chat. You know that was the first time I've heard him talk. What actually happened to him?"

She replies with some of the confident tone restored and a hint of maternal concern saying, "I'm not surprised, it's a horrific thing for a six year old to witness, although he doesn't grasp the entirety of what's happened to him. In his words, someone hurt his Daddy outside the door of their house and when his he came in his Daddy was cross and started hurting his Mammy. His friend's Daddy, Dave from next door took him away with them until his parents were better but they left and brought him with them to stay at that old house beside the lake until the people who hurt his Daddy were gone. He got angry and ran away when they wouldn't let him ring his mammy's mobile. He had just snuck out and started to walk through the trees when he got scared a turned to go back. Before he got back he saw one of the white faced baddies who hurt his Daddy earlier. He climbed a tree to hide and from the sounds of it became paralyzed with fear as more and more of what he calls baddies gathered below him and all around the house. He doesn't seem overly aware of what happened from then on, but from the way he spoke about it but I think he knows they're dead and feels guilty about leaving them. The next thing he described vividly was being rescued by his hero."

She nudges me playfully with a smile on her face as she says the word hero.

I can't say I'm comfortable with the term, given the actual circumstances but what can I do but say in a smug voice, "Ah well, it's all in a day's work don't ya know."

She looks up at me with a coy smirk before adding, "It was tough to get that much talk out of him. He's a great little guy but he's understandably confused and in shock. I think he's just managing to cope with things as they come at the minute. From what I can see, he's in good hands though. I know who to call on if I'm in trouble."

She finishes speaking just as we arrive within earshot of Meg and Paul. They both turn to see who's coming with a jolt. They must have gotten shaken up pretty bad yesterday. I can relate, I'm still fairly on edge from my ordeal and I'm not even half their age.

Not wanting to carry on any preconceptions from what I saw on the landing earlier, I decide it's best to play it by ear and act normal. I'm not sure what to make of their gaze, they seem stuck for words.

I break the ice with, "Hi, you must be Paul and Meg. Meg, I understand you helped fix me up after I arrived. I appreciate it, I feel good as new."

*Hah, as if.* I feel like shit. I've got to get some more of that painkiller from Emma.

They stare at me for a second or two before Meg answers me as if she just realised it was her I was talking to.

"Oh yes, yes, of course. It's good to see you up and about."

Her tone is laboured and unnatural. I'm not sure what to make of the two of them. Are they just unable to deal with what's happening? I try again on a lighter topic.

"Emma says you're her parents neighbours from down the road and you're looking after the place while they're away."

If I wasn't looking right at them I'd have missed it, but for an instant while I was talking, they both quickly glanced at each other at exactly the same time before quickly looking away again.

As if she realised how strange it must have looked, Meg quickly replies, "Yes, we're neighbours from just down the road."

Her response is almost an exact repetition of my question, as if she's afraid to elaborate any more for fear of saying something she shouldn't.

I look to Jo for some sort of guidance and it's clear to see from her bewildered expression the odd nature of the conversation isn't lost on her either. She looks as confused and uncomfortable as I feel.

Paul seems to have no compulsion to be involved in the conversation at all, but he does seem as focused on Meg's responses as he is on anything I say. I get the feeling they desperately want me to just leave them be. That's not going to happen.

I decide on one last attempt at civilized conversation.

"I hear you had a close one out on the road yesterday."

That wasn't the most tactful line ever but at this stage I just want to get a reaction of some kind.

With a slightly more confused look on her face, Meg questions, "The road? What are you talking..."

Before she can finish her thought, Paul adjusts his stare towards her in a very quick, subtle movement that has the instant effect of stopping Meg mid sentence. She steps back, moving in closer to Paul's side. Looks like I got my reaction.

I've had enough of this.

"Right, what's going on around here?" I demand.

Before they have time to answer, if they were going to at all, the door next to them opens up. From what I saw during our spin around the house earlier, it's the door that leads out to the back yard and I can tell from the voice coming from the other side that it's Fred.

The opening door obscures his view of Jo and me, and upon seeing the old pair standing in the same spot they were in when they had their last conversation; he begins to talk as he enters.

He's excited and his voice is filled with urgency, fear but above all, anger.

"What were you thinking? We've got to get rid of those two and fast. If neither of you can do it, I will!"

As he enters my field of vision, I see he's loading rounds into a rifle. *You motherfucker!* As he looks up from his gun and begins to turn around to see what the old pair are looking at, every fibre of my being screeches at me to act right now or die.

Before I know it, I'm sprinting straight at him, pumping my legs for all they're worth, with no plan other than to hit him as hard as I possibly can with my body before he can raise that gun to finish the job he started earlier. He barely had time to see me coming before I make contact, flesh shuddering contact.

The collision lands us both on the hard tiled surface of the kitchen floor, making sure he takes the brunt of the impact.

I start to give into the red mist of self preservation as I kneel on top of him and hit him, again and again. I don't just want to stop him, I want to punish him. This fucker was gonna kill me, probably Emma and Tom too.

I grab fistfuls of his hair in both my hands and raise his head in preparation for a blow against the kitchen floor, his dazed eyes trying to

focus on me.

All of a sudden I'm struck from behind. The sharp impact of a shattering dinner plate on the back of my already pounding head is more than I can take, and any bit of bloodlust that I was feeling is well and truly knocked out of me. I slump to one side and fall to the floor, rolling off Fred and onto my back.

Lying face up I see it was Jo who clobbered me. I can see her lovingly attend to Fred with horror on her face as she helps him to his feet and she sees how much blood he's covered in.

I'm getting tunnel vision in my one eye and feel like I could black out. Despite the fact that the bandages slightly cushioned the blow, the indescribable pain in my head is stopping me from focusing my thoughts on any rational plan of action. I'm not sure how much more of this crap my head can take.

I'm lucid enough to see that with Fred is back on his feet. Jo is still holding him, and as he winces in pain trying to stand up straight, I feel like I might let slip a slight smile with the thought that at least I gave as good as I got.

I'm in no state to judge their intent, are they all in on this? I fucked up, and now Emma and Tom could end up paying the price, maybe even Matt, if he actually makes it here.

*Wait.* Despite the splitting pain in my head, I feel something sticking into my back. The rifle! I must have landed on it when Jo knocked me off him.

I awkwardly shift my weight whilst trying to pull it from behind my back with my left hand. I shuffle backwards until my back hits some kitchen presses for me to partially prop myself up against, into a slumped sitting position.

Each of them takes a step back as the gun is revealed. It looks like the clumsy manner in which I'm brandishing the weapon is more unnerving to them than if I was fully in control of it.

What are my options? Do I try and shoot them? They might not all be in on it. Do I just try and shoot Fred? He's got it coming, but am I willing to actually murder someone who's not a spook? Although, in hindsight that probably would've been the result if Jo hadn't just stopped me.

I'm sitting here in pain, trying my best to appear cognitive but sooner or later they're gonna figure out that I can barely see straight right now, let



alone shoot straight and that they could probably just walk up to me and take the gun right out of my hands.

Fred takes a staggered step forward, and in response I direct the gun in his general direction. I could fire a warning shot but I only actually saw him put one bullet in the chamber as he walked in.

What I wouldn't give to see Matt kick the door next to me off its hinges and make his entrance, armed to the teeth. I hold my breath for a second as if it might actually happen, but no. Why can't life be more like corny action films every now and again?

Fred takes another step, a bit steadier on his feet saying, "Take it easy guy, you got the wrong end of the stick about all this."

I think he's picked up on my current compromised state of awareness. I can't really focus too well but it looks like he's trying to conceal a carving knife or something behind his right forearm but he might be genuine.

It's a risk I can't take; my options have just reduced to one. I raise the gun, ready to fire. My chances of hitting him are slim, but hopefully Emma will hear the shot from the other side of the house and she'll be able to get Tom out of here.

"Please stop," Meg pleads to both of us from behind the kitchen island to my left.

She stands up out of cover as she says, "Shawn, Fred's right. You don't know the whole story. Please give us a chance to explain before someone gets killed."

I look at her and pause. Jo stands up next to her.

"Shawn, I don't understand exactly what's happening but I trust Meg completely, please listen to her."

She does sound genuine, and Emma did say she was very concerned with our safety earlier on. The only wild card is this Fred. *Shit!* I took my eye off him like an idiot. He's managed to get close enough to make a grab for the gun barrel. My reflexes are nonexistent and it's all already happened before I know a thing about it.

Not only does he pull it from my hand, but for good measure he plunges the sole of his boot into the side of my face, knocking me to the ground again.

"Ughhh," I let out a groan of pain.

*That was a bit excessive, but who am I to talk.*

I've done it now; I've relinquished the control of my fate. It's time to find out if they're on the level.

As I'm lying here on my side with bloody drool dripping from my cheek, the only thought going through my head is how I wish he had kicked me hard enough to knock me out, at least then I wouldn't have to feel this shitty. I might even have scored some more morphine out of it if they don't plan on killing me.

They must think I'm out cold because all four of them make a joint effort to lift and carry me to one of the nearby recliner chairs. I just let them without saying a word. I'm not sure I could manage it myself at the minute in any case.

Jo starts to jog towards the stairs saying, "I'll get Emma to bring down her medical stuff."

Paul, who hasn't said a word yet, calls her back with authority in his voice, "No Jo! Come back here."

"What? We can't leave them like this."

Meg adds in, with a bit more diplomacy in her voice, "Yes, come back and sit down Jo. We've got some matters to sort out first."

Finally Fred, who has his rifle in hand and is looking at me with contempt, says to no one in particular, "You've got that right."

It has all the feeling of an interrogation as Paul, Meg and Fred sit down on various bits of furniture right in front of me. Jo hangs back in the background, listening intently.

The only one of the three that I feel is slightly on my side is Meg; she's got compassion in her eyes. The other two are cold and indifferent to the pain I'm obviously in.

Meg explains to me how I misinterpreted what I overheard and that Emma Matt and I were never in any danger from them at all. Before she offers anymore explanation, the topic of discussion shifts to Emma and how well I know her and her family.

They all pause and look at each other for a second when I reveal that I actually just met Emma yesterday and I have no idea who her family are, as well as having no relationship with her other than being a friend of a friend.

As the interrogation continues, the dynamic changes, it's as if these revelations have somehow aligned me more with them and they begin to talk to me accordingly.

I'm not sure I like the direction we're going in but I'm still recovering from a boot to the face, what choice do I have only to hear them out?

What have I landed myself in here? Three days ago I was your average paranoid insomniac, content in my slightly numb life, but like it or not, my choices don't just affect me anymore. Emma, Tom and I, we're all in this together now; some weird version of a surrogate family thrown together by the chaos of the world having a hissy fit.

Responsibility was never my strong point though. And where the fuck is Matt? He's taking his bloody time! Despite how it looks, I know him too long to accept that he has just lain down and died while trying to get back to us. Plus I owe him a smack across the head for getting me into all of this.

*To Be Continued...*