

Teace Snyder

## **RISE**

RISE is Teace Snyder's sixth novel and sixth publication. He operates, and can be contacted through, his website [www.teace.ca](http://www.teace.ca), which he created and launched in 2007. He lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where he can often be found majestically grooving out with headphones, wearing dirty clothes and riding the bus.

By Teace Snyder

Original Concept by Derek Riggs

Also by Teace Snyder,

[www.teace.ca](http://www.teace.ca)

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a novel

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**RISE**



## CHAPTER 1: FALL

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 1996*

*The leaves finally fell in November. They covered everything. Piled on cars and stuffed in gutters, they gave a decaying color to our hometown's curbs and alcoves. Like fresh cereal they crunched under my feet, painting my shoes with flakes of red and yellow. The air stung cold and a brisk wind rustled the freshly fallen mounds of the dead, bringing more to their sides. Soon the trees would be empty—their bare-bark-skeletons knee deep in their own remains.*

*Our school was on the tip of the forest. Seemingly isolated from the rest of the town, it stood on the only flat land for miles. A baseball diamond, football field and basketball court surrounded all corners but one—a steep dive into a deep-wooded-graveyard as far as the eye could see. The other kids would play games. I played in the forest.*

*I ran as fast as I could, but I knew I could never escape. Everywhere I looked there were more and more leaves, skipping off the ground as my heels peeled through the piles. Puffs of mist shot out of my lungs and vanished behind me as I pumped my arms and legs wildly. The screams of my peers, back in the open fields, faded the further I ran. The deeper I journeyed, the more alone I found myself, until, as my lungs finally gave out and my legs shook with fatigue, I clamored behind a tree and pressed my back firmly against it for support and cover. I smacked my lips together and swallowed the stale thick saliva that begged for water to wash it down. My chest rose and fell a foot with every breath, but still I tried to stay calm—to listen to the leaves.*

*No animal calls. No muffled traffic or signs of life—only a faint breeze that slithered through the branches. The clouds blotted out the sun and a brooding grey mass crawled steadily overhead. My eyes drifted shut as I strained my ears to take in everything around me. My hands clutched the bark of the tree I leaned against—tense and terrified as I heard the soft rustle of leaves—the slow drag of footsteps through the forest. My eyes opened and I held my breath. I clenched my jaw and turned—creeping my sight around the side of the tree-trunk to catch a glimpse of who, or what, had followed me.*

*A short figure lurked in the distance, dragging his legs as if they were anchored to the dirt. His arms and head hung limp as he wobbled from tree to tree, using his ears to navigate. I crouched behind the trunk and squinted to try and spot a stain of blood or tear in his clothes—something to indicate if his ragged posture was from a wound or simply exhaustion. But as my eyes dissected him, I realized I knew more than the doomed state he wandered in. I recognized him.*

*He was the youngest brother of the family that lived a few miles away from me. Matthew Simmonds—six-years-old, with a bulbous head of brown hair, he looked*

*like someone out of a Charlie Brown comic. I knew him best from trying to get rid of him. He would always follow around his older brother, Sebastian—my best friend, and one of the only kids I knew who didn't try to assert male dominance over me. We first met in first grade. He quickly became known as 'Ass-Chin', an abbreviated version of Sebastian, and I quickly became known as the 'Quiet Gay Kid.' Not because I was gay, at that age kids didn't even know what the word meant. But because when I was teased I didn't stand up for myself. So after a few days of being isolated from, and by, the rest of the kids, Sebastian and I found ourselves sitting alone together. After a few weeks we were playing together. And, not long after that, we were both sent home for beating up the rest of the kids together. That was before Sebastian's little brother was old enough to walk, let alone follow us. And it was before we were sent to different schools to keep us from acting out together. It worked—during school hours anyway.*

*Matthew stumbled over a root sticking out of the ground and fell flat on his face. He lay motionless for a moment before gradually rising to his feet again—looking right at me. His eyes locked on and his lips peeled back as he released a guttural-moan. He extended his arms forward—reaching for me in the distance—and began walking in the same slow drudge that he had before. I stepped away from the tree, no longer camouflaged or hidden. I double checked my surroundings for other ghouls but could only see barren bark and abandoned hills. I bent down and picked up a fallen tree branch to use as a club. Matthew had followed me for the last time.*

*If he kept groaning he'd attract attention. If he kept following me, others would follow him. I had no choice. I took deep breaths to counter the adrenaline as I came within a few feet of him—staring into his empty eyes full of confusion and what little remained of the boy he was. I raised the branch above my head and took aim. His expression animated and turned to fear—something was wrong—the undead don't feel. Suddenly, a pair of hands grabbed me from behind and slammed me to the ground. My club tumbled out of my hand and the wind was knocked out of my lungs. I lay face down in the dirt with a knee square in my back, holding me in place as whoever held me dug through my pockets and patted me down. Matthew stood motionless—silent—watching whoever had attacked me pull a hunting knife from my jacket.*

*I sputtered and wheezed, trying to take in a breath between the dirt in my mouth and the shock of being caught off guard. I squirmed and tried to flip onto my stomach but I was held down. I dug my fingers into the soil to find a rock just big enough to use as a weapon. I gripped it tightly and waited for the person atop me to shift their weight enough for me to break free. Matthew took a seat against a tree—the little bastard had planned this. I scowled at him and pushed with all my strength—bursting off the ground and turning around to face my attacker—the rock clutched in my hand finding it's place on their forehead. Matthew cried out and leapt on my back, knocking me off balance and on top of the person I had just bludgeoned—Sebastian—Matthew's older brother and my supposed best friend.*



*“What the hell!” I shouted, tugging at Matthew’s arm wrapped around my neck. Sebastian groaned and rubbed his forehead, flopping off his back and onto his stomach.*

*“Leave my brother alone!” Matthew yelled, as I flung him off me and scrambled to my feet. Sebastian sat up and rolled his eyes—pulling his hand away from his head to reveal a smear of blood on his palm.*

*“Fucking... ow” Sebastian slurred.*

*“What are you doing?!” I demanded, raising the rock up to keep Matthew from jumping on me again. Sebastian smacked his lips together and resumed holding his bleeding head—trying to think of a response.*

*“Using... a decoy,” he muttered.*

*“What?”*

*“You’re in so much trouble!” Matthew shouted, practically in tears.*

*“Shut up, Matt!”*

*“Using a decoy,” Sebastian repeated. “Bandits could... use ghouls to track other people... and then loot their stuff,” he explained, reaching out his hand to return my hunting knife to me. “You have to be on the look out for... bandits.”*

*“You’re bleeding, Seb!” Matthew cried, calling his brother by the nickname their parent’s used. His tiny face swelled up with brooding tears and he looked to me to make things better. I dropped the rock and groaned—I was an only child for a reason—my parents didn’t want to deal with this kiddo crap more than once, if at all, and neither did I.*

*“I know I’m bleeding,” Sebastian replied, using his sleeve to soak up the blood. “If this fight were for real... you would have gotten stabbed,” he continued, turning his attention back to me.*

*“I know. I wasn’t careful enough,” I admitted, placing my hunting knife back in my pocket. “But, still, you shouldn’t have used your brother like that, I could have killed him.”*

*“What!?” Matthew cried, taking a step back in horror—not realizing that I had mistaken him for a ghoul.*

*“I didn’t, did I? Relax.”*

*“I’m telling!” Matthew screamed, turning and running back towards the school. Sebastian stood up to chase after him but quickly fell over—disoriented from what I had to assume was a concussion. He hit the ground hard and didn’t move. I rolled my eyes and took off running behind Matthew. His short-slow-legs made him an easy target, but he squirmed and fought as I snatched him up in my arms. “Let me go!”*

*“Calm down! We were just playing a game!” I announced, doing my best to help him understand. “We do this stuff all the time—your brother will be fine,” I assured him, stepping over Sebastian as I put Matthew down against a tree. He scrambled to the side, trying to escape once more, and I lunged after him only to feel the same rock I had struck Sebastian with land hard against my forehead. Matthew clutched the stone and pulled back in case I tried to come at him again. But rather than reach forwards, I placed my hand to my head and fell backwards—landing on top of Sebastian. I held my aching head as a trickle of blood dripped down my face. Matthew sobbed loudly and approached me to see if I was ok.*

*“I’m sorry!” he shrieked, about as guilty and distraught as I’d ever seen anybody.*

*“Please stop making noise... it’s ok, I’m fine...” I groaned, feeling my throbbing head move aside as Sebastian rolled out from under me to rejoin the conversation.*

*“What just... happened?”*

*“Please don’t tell mom and dad!”*

*“Stop yelling, Matt.”*

*“Is that my blood, or... Why are you bleeding?”*

*“I didn’t mean to!”*

*“Matthew I promise not to tell anyone if you stop crying and be quiet right now!” I stated, savoring the few moments of silence that followed.*

*“Did... my little brother just kick your ass?”*

*“Shut up.”*

*“Ha ha ha... ow,” Sebastian exclaimed, lying down again and flopping his arms out to his side. “Are you... dizzy too?”*

*“A little.”*

*“Why would you try to kill me?” Matthew asked, standing over us—hurt and confused.*

*“I wouldn’t. I just thought you were,” I said, pausing to think of how to explain what his brother and I were doing out here without actually telling him enough for him to understand.*

*“An undead?”*

*“Uh. Yeah,” I admitted, opening my hunting knife to use as a mirror to examine the gash on my head—about half an inch above my left eye and already clotting.*

*“You... did good, Matt,” Sebastian chimed in, trying to ease his brother’s nerves enough to get us all off the hook when we went home, bloodied and concussed.*

*“Thanks,” Matthew said, turning from distraught to pleased. “Do you have a first aid kit in the fort?”*

*“What? What fort?” I asked, playing dumb as I turned to glare at Sebastian.*

*“The one you guys made out here.”*

*“You told him!?” I shouted, sitting up—outraged and betrayed.*

*“Uh... well,” Sebastian muttered, unable to think clearly let alone think of a reason why he’d been so stupid. I clenched my teeth and put my hunting knife away so I wouldn’t lose my head and stab him. The fort that we’d built was the biggest secret of our life—one that we’d suffered through countless groundings and arguments to keep hidden. We had sworn to never tell anyone, under any circumstances, what we were planning there. And now, looking at Matthew’s innocent face I couldn’t help but feel that the most important thing in the world to me was about to disappear. I punched Sebastian in the nose.*

*“Agh!” he cried, pulling his hands to his face as I shakily rose to my feet. “He follows me everywhere... he would have figured it out eventually!” Sebastian replied, standing up to follow me.*

*“Fuck off! I’ll do this by myself!”*

*“I won’t tell anybody, I promise!” Matthew insisted, walking behind Sebastian as he wobbled quickly after me. A gust of wind pulled the leaves off the ground and swallowed the sound of his pleas for me to ‘wait.’ I trudged forward, setting a course for home, only to stop as I felt Matthew grab my arm and tug me until I turned around. He was crying again while he pointed to Sebastian lying face down in the dirt—unconscious and helpless. I took a deep breath and held it—realizing I couldn’t leave him and trying to think of what to do now.*

*“It’s ok, Matt. Help me carry him—the fort isn’t far from here.”*

## CHAPTER 2: MUTINY

Ellex Vussel, London, 2018

I pretended to be relaxed. Taking deep, slow, breaths, to let my brooding stress diminish; slouching in my seat and firmly griping it's armrests. My eyes drifted up to the ceiling as the air conditioner released a muffled click, and my attention shifted from thoughts of bloody murder to those seated around the table with me. The boardroom was cooler than usual. Only half of its decrepit members had the nerve to come in for my last day. But even those who had bothered to show their faces did so only to swoon over their impending promotions: to shake hands and pat each other on the back, celebrating their successful coup like vultures and snakes. They continued on as if it were business as usual—rubbing their chins and frowning their brows as they watched the quarterly earnings presenter reach his conclusion of the blackest of blacks. And, but for my longstanding foreknowledge of my removal as CEO, I might have been foolish enough to invest myself in their futures. Like them, I might have been foolish enough to solely devote my life to the frivolous pursuit of money and success. Instead, I pretended to be relaxed.

As the presenter finished satiating the promise of bonus checks, he turned to a former friend of mine seated at the front of the table. Nathan Gills, my protégé and near full confident of twenty years, stood up and buttoned his blazer. He took two long strides to the front of the room, cleared his throat, and looked right at me. A smile spread across his face and he extended an arm out towards me as if to pay me tribute. My thoughts returned to bloody murder.

“Today is as bitter sweet as Ellex Vussel himself,” Nathan exclaimed, conjuring a light chuckle from his room of lackeys. “On the one hand, this company stands on the brink of creating a better world. Of offering people a life without suffering and a future without disease. It is a truly remarkable day and each and every one of you should be proud to be a part of it,” he continued, pausing for the room to applaud themselves. Nathan kept his eyes locked with mine, savoring his supposed victory. My expression remained blank and unwavering, coldly observing his satirical goodbye. “While on the other hand, we set forth to create this new world without the wisdom and council of the very man responsible for it's vision—without the genius and dedication of my mentor and life long friend, Ellex Vussel. It is a bitter sweet day indeed.”

I turned my eyes away for a fleeting moment, hearing the sound of the door open as a troop of waitresses softly carried platters of champagne to the table. I hadn't touched a glass of champagne since the death of my first wife, Eden, nearly ten years ago. I stared at the glass, clenching my jaw and reminding myself to pretend. Nathan couldn't help but release a muffled smile, a candid admission of his sinister glee.

"I'm sorry it's come to this, old friend. Truly I am," he continued as a shimmering glass of golden bubbly was placed before me. "And though I could spend the night singing your praises and recalling our far better times together, I know there's now too much bad blood between us to share this moment. I know there's too much passion in you to compromise and too much determination in me to submit. And so there you sit and here I stand. Our paths are at a crossroads. And though the world may never be the same, I hope that in the future we meet again," he stated, raising his glass of champagne along side every other backstabbing son of a bitch in the room. "Thank you Ellex. Whether you believe it or not, you will be missed and remembered fondly. To Ellex," Nathan finished taking a quick sip from his glass. A light flutter of applause filled the room as I took to my feet to respond to Nathan's farewell. I looked down at the glass of champagne resting on the table before me, untouched and unwanted. I reached down and picked it up, holding it delicately between my fingertips as I poured it out onto the carpet. The room fell silent and I gently placed the now empty glass back on the table.

"Pardon my candor, but I don't see the need for pleasantries or compliments in company that is neither pleasant nor complimentary," I stated, scanning the room of awkward glances that quickly darted away as soon as my gaze approached theirs. "This is not a 'goodbye party' or a 'fond farewell', this is 'get the fuck out'; 'we want everything you gave us, except you'. Pretending otherwise is only an excuse to ease your guilty consciences and I'm afraid that's simply not something I can assist you with. You will have to live with what you've done and the mess you've made. You will have to live with the mistakes of directing this company as you have and the decision to sever it from my guidance, the only thing that made it of any merit to begin with," I continued, returning my focus to Nathan's now stern expression. "But of course greed is a hunger more powerful than the minds of men. And as you feed it and nurture it with your ill-gotten desires, you manage to temporarily fool yourself into believing that you've accomplished something. You manage to fool the world into thinking that you're successful and that you know what's best. When really, all you know is your greed, your desires and that insatiable hunger for more, more, more... The truth is I haven't been sitting here in a bottled up rage, plotting my bitter farewell. In fact, as I think about it, all

I've felt today is a giddy sense of elation to finally be free of your poisonous influence and boundless retardation. And with that, old friends, I will bid you farewell. Though, whether you've come to the realization or not, I will fare far better than the likes of you," I finished, an empty and awkward silence a tribute to the truth of my words.

Nathan stared at me—his eyes, full, among other things, of the perpetual cool he kept no matter how deeply he lied or how publicly he tried to humiliate me. I humored him by returning his stare for a fraction of a moment, reading his predictable and simplistic train of thought. A victorious grin curled my lips and I thought to myself how I would cherish the look in his eyes long after he was dead. He believed he'd won. He thought he'd outsmarted me. But, like always, I knew better. I didn't have to pretend anymore. I turned for the door and made my exit.

My bodyguards peeled away from the door, following closely at my sides down the long hallway to the elevator. I passed countless secretaries and employees who I'd likely seen every day but had never noticed until now. They smiled politely and muttered timid 'goodbye's.' I nodded an admission of their presence in response, indifferent to their feelings or thoughts on the matter of my departure. However, as I passed their dull, thoughtless stares, I couldn't help but consider what the everyday man's place in all this would be; how unjust a changing world can seem to the simple minded and unprepared commoners that lay the foundation for great men like myself to rise above them. To anyone without the sense to contemplate such things, or people, greater than themselves, no doubt it would seem cruel, even criminal. But their lives were only of importance if they contributed to a greater good, and those people working to enact it. Their service to me had been paid and for that I was grateful. But it would be foolish of me to think of them as worth saving, or granting a prolonged needless life. I ceased acknowledging their goodbyes and hastened my pace to the elevator.

"Ellex!" Nathan cried, approaching quickly behind me. I paused a moment, curious as to what further insult his presence would bring me. "I'd like the chance to talk with you if that's alright."

"Very well. This is your chance."

"Alone."

I took an exasperated breath and looked down at my watch to double check if my helicopter had arrived yet. Five minutes to spare. I had no desire to discuss anything with Nathan. However, strangely, the look in his eyes had changed to one of muddled sincerity. No doubt he regarded this moment as if it had some great significance. I decided to humor him

and instructed my bodyguards to leave us so that we could speak in private.

“What is it?”

“I meant what I said in there. Weren’t you listening?”

“Sorry, the champagne distracted me.”

“It’s only customary, Ellex,” he exclaimed, annoyed by the cold demeanor I insisted on keeping. “And, I told them a hundred times not to give you a glass, I apologize for that.”

“Good. All better now.”

“Stop it!” he shouted, temporarily drawing the attention of those within earshot. I glared in their direction and they quickly shuffled away. It was uncanny for Nathan to raise his voice or crack his cool. He had my attention. “I know you too well. I know you think I wasn’t being sincere; that you’ve rationalized what’s happened as if I’ve done everything wrong, and you’ve done everything right. But that’s simply not true. The decisions you were making, and the things you were supposedly doing for the betterment of this company, made no sense at all.”

“My apologies. You’ll have one less yacht to fuck supermodels on.”

“Don’t pretend this is about money. You were killing this company, Ellex. Don’t you see that? Dividing every department into ten factions, firing people for no reason, privacy infringement and a few other things I gave you the benefit of the doubt not to mention to the board, or, our lawyers. I’m worried about you, Ellex. You’ve always been secretive but—”

“But you never guessed the secret,” I interrupted, no longer interested in humoring a dead friend. “Didn’t you ever wonder why after twenty years I still kept you at a distance?”

“I accepted you for who you are. Whether you told me everything or not,” he replied, noticeably dismayed. I shook my head and let my frigid scowl warm to a smile. Nathan really was hopelessly naïve.

“We were genuine friends for a time, Nathan. But some things are more important than even the most important people in our lives,” I explained, seeing his eyes shift as if he wished to object. “You disagree, I know. I’ve always known. And it’s because of that; it’s because of today and the days to come, that I’ve kept you at a distance.”

“Let me help you.”

“I’m not the one who needs saving,” I stated, secretly appreciating the irony of my words. “You’ve always been the sort of fellow who was content to change the world. But this world will never change. It is only those who seek to redefine it that can spare the future from the mistakes of the past. Change, Nathan, is not enough,” I finished, being both as candid, and as vague, as I had ever allowed myself to be with him. He looked at me with confusion and frustration, unable to understand our final moment together for what it truly was. The crossroads he had so eloquently mentioned was only then coming before us.

“What are you talking about Ellex? You’re not making any sense. Even for you, you’re sounding crazy.”

“From the vantage point of the ignorant there is no discernible difference between wisdom and insanity,” I said, looking down at my watch as nearly four minutes had passed. My helicopter would be arriving any moment. “In any regard, I suppose on some level I respect you for sticking to your convictions. That, if not a future, is something we still share. Enjoy the rest of your life,” I finished, turning to the elevator where my bodyguards stood, holding the door open for me. Nathan looked on, heartbroken and defeated. His lips parted trying to grasp words to reach me but he remained silent. I nodded slightly as the doors closed, choosing to acknowledge his stifled goodbye, but only because I knew it would be the last time I’d see him alive.



## CHAPTER 3: TIRED

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

My brother, Seb, taught me how to shoot—out in the forest where we used to play. Back when I still thought of him as family, he'd put the rifle in one hand and the bullets in the other—helping me every step of the way. He kept his shoulders behind mine for the first shot. I was so small the gun would have thrown me back if he hadn't. But he was there. Telling me to close one eye, to pace the shot with the beat of my heart. Hold my breath—squeeze the trigger, don't pull. Ready—aim—fire. And when it went off and the can he'd set up as a target fell over, I felt the first rush of what I was born to do. Unfortunately, even after everything I've seen and done, he's what taints my memory most. I tried to focus on the cans I'd shot all those years ago as I stared down at the soda in my hand.

“What was it like over there, sir?” a new recruit asked me. I slowly twitched my head out of reverie and looked at the boy. We sat alone in the base's rec-room—empty at 03:00. He'd spent the past ten minutes trying to small talk, but I hadn't said more than a couple of words in response. He yammered about home, telling me about his girl, his mamma, the fifteen football trophies he'd won before he realized he was still too dumb to get a scholarship, and, not least of all, about coming from a long bloodline of patriotic men who served their country. If I were still my rightful rank, I'd have told him to shut the fuck up and report back to his quarters. Teach him right before he went to school. But ever since I got back, I just couldn't get my mind straight. I picked up my half eaten vending machine sandwich and took a bite, in no rush to swallow or answer his question. But he kept staring at me doe-eyed, making it clear that what he'd just asked was the only thing on his mind. I put my sandwich down. Truth was, I needed someone to talk to me as much as he needed someone to talk to.

“Everyone's different. But for the most part the feelings the same,” I explained, shifting the wad of bologna around in my mouth as I finished my sentence. “Going to war feels like being alive.”

“Like a rush?”

“Yeah... One hell of a rush.”

“Cool,” he exclaimed, enthusiastically nodding his head. “Wanna know the biggest rush I ever had? One time when I was skydiving I pulled the cord and my shoot didn't open. I actually shit my pants in mid air,” he

laughed, hopped up on fond-memory-adrenaline. “Didn’t know what the fuck to do so I just kept pullin’ and pullin’ on the cord. Praying to God, beggin’ for mercy. Like he even gave a damn. But maybe it worked cause the fucking thing finally opened. Came down so hard I almost broke both my legs... You ever been sky diving?”

“I’ve done a few HAHO jumps, yeah,” I replied, trying to remember the good without the bad. “But that’s not the feeling I meant,” I continued, watching his smile shift to a dull stare. It took me a moment before I realized he needed me to elaborate. “All right... you ever been in a fight? Not some sissy shit with your friends or your dad but a fight when you know that if you lose, you won’t walk away?”

“No. I been in plenty of fights though.”

“Yeah, but that’s the difference. It’s like a switch in your brain that just goes off and takes you with it. Only it’s a different rush for everybody. Like ordering pizza for fifty different guys. Some are gonna bitch about the toppings, some are gonna leave the crust, and some are just gonna sink their teeth into whatever the fuck they can get and rip it apart. They’re all eating the same thing, just some find it hard to swallow.”

“So we get a lot of pizza then?” the kid asked, missing my point by a mile.

“Nevermind,” I sighed, taking a short breath and giving up on explaining it to him. He’d see what I was saying soon enough. “Just remember to follow your orders, no matter what kind of rush you get.”

“I will. Don’t wanna end up like that fucking psycho Simmonds,” he stated, talking about me like I wasn’t in the room. I looked coldly at him, realizing just now that this whole time we’d been sitting here he’d already heard who I was but just didn’t know it was me. My thoughts turned to bashing his head into the corner of the table until I could scoop his brains out with my thumb. I took a few breaths to keep calm and put my head back on straight. He was right after all. For what everyone said I did, for the supposed mistakes I’d made, I might as well be a psycho. It was the fact that I wasn’t one that made it seem that much more unforgivable, not just for everybody else but for me too.

“Who the fuck told you that?” I asked, disgusted by the gossip and lack of discipline.

“Some of the guys heard a rumor. Don’t know who or how exactly.”

“If command won’t talk about something, it means subordinates should shut the fuck up about it,” I snapped, reminding myself to calm down. The boy looked spooked, like he’d just done something he

shouldn't have, without even knowing it was wrong. I reminded myself to be calm and took another deep breath. I glanced back at the boy who now sat quietly, withdrawn and confused. But it wasn't his fault. If I were him, I probably would have done the same. Suddenly, my curiosity about what rumors were circulating the base crept into my mind. Pretty soon, I cared more about hearing what he'd heard than shutting him up. "Look... I don't give a fuck, all right? But, what exactly did you hear about Simmonds?"

"I heard he just went completely fucking crazy. Mowed down like twenty civilians."

"What else?"

"I don't know... he got demoted, suspended... Whole fucking base thinks he's crazy but I guess the psych evaluation they gave him didn't say so cause he's still around, right?"

"Yeah... he's still around," I sighed, swallowing hard, choking on the memory. I raised my hand to my forehead and shook my head, closing my eyes to try and cope. It wasn't twenty civilians, it was six. And I hadn't just snapped and gunned them down—I'd followed orders, based on shoddy intelligence, and been hung out to dry for not keeping my mouth shut about it. I'd tried to go to command—I'd tried to set the record straight. But that wasn't what they wanted to hear. And hearing that I was all torn up about it wasn't helping their conscience much either. Nobody knew except them and me. And it wasn't hard for them to make the decision to cut me loose and pit their word against mine—only thing that wasn't set in stone about the whole fucking mess was whether or not they'd try to send me to jail if I kept on talking about it. And then, just as that thought crossed my mind, the kid suggested the very same thing.

"I thought they locked people up for that shit... Court-martial em' or whatever it's called."

"It's not that simple," I replied, standing up to leave the table to think someplace quiet. The boy looked up at me, as clueless as a sperm in a toilet.

"Why not?"

"Because if they Court Marshal him, they have to publicly answer for the mission that put him there in the first place. Which, once again, we should not be talking about," I exclaimed, picking up the crust of my sandwich and throwing it in the trash. The boy nodded, realizing that the subject was pissing me off something serious. I turned and walked away, heading down the hall to process what I'd just heard. The truth was that I knew command would have to do something about the rumors that were

circulating—I knew that they’d have to either make an example out of me or come clean about the whole damn mess. But I also knew all too damn well that the last thing they’d want people to know was what I’d seen. And, as usual, I didn’t want to know either. Way I thought of it, I didn’t have a choice, and, likely, I wouldn’t have much time left to make choices either. I’d have to run while I still had the chance and hope they’d leave me be as a deserter so long as I stayed hidden and stayed quiet. It wasn’t about justice, it was about forgetting the past and saving my own neck. I had plenty of experience doing that.

## CHAPTER 4: DINNER TIME

Sebastian Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

“Dinner’s ready!” my wife, Anna, shouted—standing at the bottom of the stairs for just the right amount of time before she had to pull the potatoes out of the oven. She hustled through the living room and touched my shoulder. “That means you too. Come on.”

“Just give me a minute,” I replied, folding a hook over a florescent-blue-LED-vibrating-gelatin-worm—my best selling fishing bait, and what I spent most of my days making by hand.

The sound of a stampede rumbled down the stairs as the twins, Sarah and Susie, rushed past one another to get to the table. Their strawberry blonde hair was half way done up into ponytails—frilled out, and held together by a couple orange-scrunchies. They slid into their chairs and put their napkins on their laps—reaching for what was already on the table.

“Now hold on!” Anna snapped, smacking their hands away from the biscuits. “You wait for your father and brother. That is, if they care to join us?!”

“I’m coming,” I sighed, putting my gear down and reaching for my cane. I made my way to the table, passing by the stairs to yell up to my son, Archer. “Archer, come on! Dinner time!”

“Can we eat now?” the twins asked.

“You can serve yourselves. But don’t eat before we say grace.”

“Looks good,” I commented, taking my seat at the head of the table. I rested my cane against the leg of my chair and pushed it forward, accidentally bumping into Elvis—our old hound dog lying under the table. Anna took the seat opposite me and smiled, thanking me for the compliment. The girls piled up their plates and picked up their silverware, eagerly staring at the stairs. I scratched Elvis under his ear with one hand and slipped him a bite of roast beef with the other. Anna stopped smiling at me—of the opinion, and rightfully so, that her cooking was too good to leave to the dog. We all sat quietly and impatiently for a moment, waiting for Archer. But I was in no mood to go hungry for someone too lazy to walk to the table. “Alright, everybody—you know the drill,” I grumbled, raising three fingers above the table and counting down. “Three, two, one...”

“Dinner time!!!” we all screamed as Archer finally decided to come out of his room and join us.

“Alright!” he shouted, slumping down the stairs as he slipped his cell phone into his pocket. He brushed his long black hair out of his face and pulled up a seat across from the twins. Elvis licked my fingers, asking for another helping, and I pulled my chair forward again to get him to stop.

“It’s about time,” Sarah exclaimed, practically drooling on her plate.

“Shut up.”

“Hush,” Anna commanded, giving the twins and Archer quick glances to let them know what was what. “You’ll give your thanks to God, and then you can complain about each other,” she finished, folding her hands in front of her face and closing her eyes. The rest of us followed in suit and Elvis put his head back down, realizing he’d gotten all he was gonna get from me. “For health and strength and daily bread we give thee thanks o’ lord—Amen.”

“Amen.”

“Amen. Amen.”

The twins started shoveling food into their mouths as Anna and I began building our plates. Archer took a few vegetables and a biscuit, avoiding most of what Anna had made as he’d done ever since he started high school last fall. He moped and scowled and kept to himself, never saying anything and certainly never saying anything good—at least to me or the family. But for someone who never spoke he sure did run up a lot of minutes talking on the phone—calling all kinds of kids I’d never met; who didn’t come by the house other than to honk their horns and drive off with my son and the allowance I gave him. Showing up fifteen minutes after curfew, if he was lucky, and never bothering to use the phone we’d bought him to let us know. My father used to say ‘the only thing harder than being a teenager is having to put up with one.’ I used to take offense to that philosophy—now I sympathized.

“There’s gonna be a fireworks display later tonight if you’re all interested,” Anna announced, looking at Archer as she said it. “Some kind of big opening ceremony for the new shopping mall.”

“Can we get cotton candy?” Susie started. “And glow sticks?” Sarah finished.

“As long as you make a point of eating the right one this time,” I joked, getting a grin from Anna and blank stares from everyone else.

“You **may** get cotton candy and glow sticks **only** if you finish your homework before we go,” Anna continued, laying down the law.

“And make sure you do your **own** homework this time,” I added, slicing open a biscuit and filling it with gravy. “No more trading Math for English.”

“We don’t do that,” Sarah protested, willing to say anything to keep from having to write an essay. Susie said nothing—neither agreeing, or disagreeing, with her sister—a telltale sign that Sarah was lying.

“Well, from the striking similarity in your spelling errors and long-division, I have reason to doubt that,” I exclaimed, as Sarah accepted my judgment—letting out an exasperated sigh.

“How about you, Archer?” Anna asked, trying to include him in tonight’s family outing despite his reluctance to so much as eat with us. He momentarily pulled his attention away from the ‘staring contest’ he was having with his food and shook his head. “Are you sure? It’d be good to have you.”

“I already made plans with my friends,” he stated, suddenly rushing through what was on his plate.

“They can come too,” I suggested. “It would make spying on you a lot easier,” I laughed, getting blank stares from everyone this time. I cleared my throat in an attempt to stop appreciating my own joke—it didn’t work.

“What your father means is that we haven’t seen much of you lately.”

“I’m busy.”

“He has a girlfriend,” Sarah suggested. Susie nodded in agreement.

“Shut up, brats!”

“Don’t tell your sisters to shut up, Archer. Only your father and I can do that,” Anna instructed, hiding the fact that she was happy to hear the news.

“Yeah, jerk!” the twins replied.

“Girls, shut up,” Anna stated, rolling her eyes. I wiped away a single tear—finally able to stop chuckling about my joke. “If that’s true, and you do have a ‘friend, who’s a girl,’ know that she’s welcome to come over for dinner anytime.”

“Not likely,” Archer scoffed, finishing the last bite off his plate. The sound of a car horn came from just outside the driveway and he lifted his head. “Thanks for dinner,” he exclaimed, clearing his setting from the table on his way out.

“Remember, no later than ten o’clock!” Anna hollered—her words dulled by the sound of the front door shutting. A moment later we heard muffled voices and a car pulling away. Anna sighed and smiled reassuringly at me. She then turned suspiciously towards the twins as she cut into her piece of roast beef. “So, girls... what do you know about Archer’s girlfriend?”

“Her name’s Brianna, but he calls her Bree,” Sarah said.

“Like the cheese?” I asked, rubbing my leg as I felt it start to stiffen up.

“No, like the town in Lord of the Rings,” Susie replied.

“Does she go to school with him?”

“Yeah, they’re in chemistry together.”

“That explains why his science grades have been slipping,” I commented, pulling my hand away from my leg as Elvis started licking my fingers again.

“She’s a cheerleader.”

“Really?” Anna and I exclaimed, looking at one another with equal surprise and concern. A smirk curled her cheeks up and I raised an eyebrow—Anna was a cheerleader when we started dating.

“Yeah. She’s a total conformist,” Sarah added.

“That’s not nice—I’m sure she’s a lovely girl.”

“Her picture’s on Facebook—I can show you,” Susie suggested, pushing away from the table and walking out of the room to get to the computer. Sarah chased after her, leaving her empty plate wobbling into Anna’s waiting hand—she looked gleefully at me for a moment, biting her lip as a big grin spread from ear to ear.

“He’s fifteen—stop thinking about grandchildren.”

“Oh hush,” she chuckled, gingerly stacking the girl’s plates and clearing them from the table. “I’m just happy for him is all.”

“Well, I’m still worried,” I complained, wishing I could see Archer happy rather than hear about it from the girls. “A man needs to show respect where it’s due if a man’s due any respect.”



“Stop quoting your father—it makes you sound like a stitched-pillow.”

“Thanks, I’ll be sure to mention that to him next time I stop by his grave,” I exclaimed, standing up and leaning on my cane. I made my way over to Anna by the sink and put a hand around her hip. “My father doesn’t get enough exercise all cooped up down there—he could use something to roll around about.” She laughed and gave me a quick kiss to shut me up.

“I don’t know. I mean, other than chemistry, his grades are fine. He has plenty of friends; he gets out of the house. Should we be worried?” Anna asked as the girl’s shouted to us from the other room.

“Here! We found a picture where she’s mooning the camera!”

“No, we shouldn’t be worried,” I replied, shaking my head to show my appreciation of my son’s choice in women. “We’re the parents of three kids in the digital age—we should be terrified.”

## CHAPTER 5: ROUTINE

Derek Riggs, Los Angeles, 2018

My job description is to: effectively summarize the function of all executive-level transactions that involve, or relate to, our subsidiary companies overseas, and forward my summaries to middle management with the purpose of keeping a well documented, easy-to-read account of all spending. In addition to that, everyday I think about killing myself and the people I work with—not necessarily in that order.

I routinely wake up at 05:00 and ride an exercise bike for one hour—utilizing interval training to maximize my cardiovascular capacity and, simultaneously, simulate real world conditions of being chased. I periodically rotate this routine with endurance rides—using my weekends to go for long practice cycles upstate. However, I never exceed more than three days of consecutive high-intensity exercise—rest is an important part of any regiment. I cross train as well—running and engaging in combat-jujitsu three times each week. I do not weight train since too much additional muscle mass would only limit my endurance capabilities and strain my body for it's caloric intake. I haven't killed anybody yet, but I am confident that when the time comes I'll be ready.

The office has three emergency exits. In the event of an outbreak, or fire, the two closest to my desk would be the most crowded. Fat, slow, panicked people would clog them—attempting to push past one another in a futile attempt to reach freedom—inevitably resulting in more corpses and a greater threat to the living trapped inside. My previous plan was to leapfrog the few desks to the furthest exit and then ride my bicycle down the back alleys—avoiding the congestion of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. But due to the recent move of a desk, to accommodate a new employee, I now feel it more practical to simply run to the exit. My apartment is only four blocks away—a short ride even at a casual pace. I do not bring my guns, crowbar, or katana with me to work as I feel they would draw too much attention—I keep a six-inch retractable blade in my pocket instead.

“Hey, Tracy, you coming out tonight?” Greg, the office's alpha-douchebag, asked the new employee seated at 6 o'clock from my desk. I kept my head down, trying to ignore them as I cycled through the online news feeds for anything peculiar.

“Oh yeah, it's Jared's birthday party tonight, right?” she replied.

“Yeah, we're all going to O'Byrne's to celebrate.”

“Oh... I don’t think I’ve met him yet.”

“Ha, no, it’s the bar around the corner,” Greg continued, never one to shy away from a chance at a new conquest. “It’s a really great place—we always go there when someone has a birthday, and at least a few of us make it back the following morning.”

“Well, I just started—so I’d want to be sure I’m one of the few.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.”

I glanced at one of the tiny mirrors taped on the side of my monitor to see Greg’s dumbass grin as he leaned against the side of the cubical wall with one elbow. I pumped an imaginary shotgun and pointed it at the tiny mirror—grinning too. Tracy adjusted herself in her seat, realizing that this wasn’t a simple invitation and that she’d have to either flirt or fart to get him to leave.

“What time are people going?” she asked. I looked away from my ‘window to their conversation’ and continued scrolling headlines—the final deployment of troops to our latest war, a football star got stabbed by his wife, and a trillionaire CEO leaves Eden Corp. I clicked on the last link.

“We’re all heading out after work—probably about 5:30,” Greg exclaimed. “You should come—get to know some of the people around the office, when they’re not around the office.”

“Are you going, Derek?” she asked, turning her chair towards me and addressing the back of my head. I hadn’t spoken to her yet, and the one eye caught staring at her in my monitor-mirror was the closest I’d come to an introduction. But, even still, the idea of attending any kind of social event with the people I worked with made me want to recite the latter part of my job description. I politely placed my right hand on my necktie, pulled it above my head, and pretended to hang myself with it. Tracy laughed. Greg didn’t.

“Derek doesn’t like hanging out with us,” Greg explained, trying to smile so Tracy would think he had a sense of humor. “That’s ok though. We all like it better that way,” he finished. I placed my tie back down and gave him a ‘thumbs up’—approving of his assessment of office politics.

“Well, thanks for the invite. If I feel like making an appearance, now I know where to appear,” Tracy stated, turning her chair back to her desk. Greg gave me an aggravated parting glance before returning to his group of likeminded imbeciles. I kept my eye on Tracy for a moment before I returned to work.



## CHAPTER 6: THE FORT

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 1996*

*The fort was more of a cave than a fort. Sebastian and I had started digging it together almost one year ago. Every weekend or day after school, that we weren't in detention or under lockdown by our parents, we'd come up with some excuse to leave the house and find our way into the forest. Located nearly a full mile from any building or road, we had dug the cave into the side of a thirty-foot-high dirt cliff that stood across from a shallow stream. Its entrance was concealed by thick, heavy, fallen trees that we had managed to cluster together in a crisscross pattern. This required anyone who wanted to get inside to slide through multiple trunks and branches. However, when we were designing it, we hadn't considered how to get someone inside while they were unconscious.*

*Matthew had been crying on and off during the short trip from where his brother and I had fought to the entrance of the fort. I tried to console him—reassuring him that Sebastian would be all right and that nobody would get in trouble. I could only hope I was right. We placed Sebastian beside the stream and I knelt down to scoop up water and wash his wound. As the blood staining his head cleared away, the gash became visible—a long deep jagged rip running from the top of his forehead to his left temple. The layers of skin and fat had torn and a tiny segment of skull lay visible underneath.*

*"We need to get him to a hospital!" Matthew cried, sucking in a trembling breath as he stood over my shoulder, looking at Sebastian's cut.*

*"We will, don't worry," I said, placing Sebastian's head down and pulling him away from the stream and into the recovery position. "Stay here—I'm gonna go get some bandages."*

*Matthew took a seat beside his brother and put his hands in his pockets. The sun would go down in an hour and, with Sebastian unconscious, it had taken us nearly thirty minutes to walk what should have taken only five. Though I didn't want to have to suggest it to Matthew unless absolutely necessary, it looked like we might be spending the night here and making the bike home in the morning. I didn't know what reaction to expect from our parents and I didn't want to think about it. They wouldn't come looking for us—they'd send the police looking for us. And if they found the fort, we'd not only be forbidden from ever seeing one another again, but would likely see our fair share of time in a juvenile penitentiary.*

*I lowered my left shoulder and stretched my neck as I bent down and slid between branches. I pushed aside a camo-tarp and stepped into the familiar pitch black. I slid my hand up to the top level of a shelf and twirled my wrist until I felt the tip of a flashlight. I pulled it down and powered it on. A burst of light shone across the ten-foot*

reinforced cave that Sebastian and I were proud to call our fallback position. I scanned over the stacks of rations and supplies—canned food and bottled water that we'd taken from home or stolen from the local grocery store, sleeping bags and camping supplies that we'd claimed were lost or destroyed. But the real loot we'd gathered wasn't from pickpocketing or working a paper route. Instead, Sebastian and I had broken into our own homes under the guise of burglars—smashing windows and making off with some of our most prized and essential items: a crow bar, rope, an axe, hatchet, lamps, fuel, portable gas stove, shortwave radio, walkie-talkies, batteries, tool kit, soap, flares, glow sticks, six survival guides and nearly a crate of ammunition for our rifles, shotguns and .45 caliber pistols. I picked up the duffle bag of medical equipment and unzipped it—flipping through its contents until I came across one of many packs of bandages and a bottle of aspirin. I turned off the flashlight and returned it to its place on the shelf.

I emerged from the fort to find Sebastian sitting upright, holding his head with one hand while using a pocket knife as a mirror to examine his cut. Matthew seemed calmer now that his brother was awake again and I released a deep breath—relieved myself.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, taking a seat beside Matthew as I pulled the bandage out of its packet and began unwrapping it.

"I can see my skull," he replied, giving an awestruck grin inspired by either the spectacle of gore or the part of his brain that was now damaged. "It doesn't hurt as much when I poke it."

"Don't put your finger in it, you'll get infected," I answered, moving his hand away from his head so I could wrap a bandage around it. "The cut still hurts at least a little bit though, right?"

"Fuck yeah."

"I got you some aspirin—just let me finish with this and then you can have them."

"He's gonna need stitches too, right?" Matthew chimed in, familiar enough with his brother's injuries to know part of the treatment.

"Yeah. I think so."

"I'm gonna have a scar."

"Yeah," I muttered, feeling uneasy about this whole experience. I knew I'd done what was necessary to defend myself, but in all of our survival exercises together, Sebastian and I had never seriously hurt one another before. The guilt was killing me. "Look... I'm sorry, I didn't know it was you."

"Hub?"

"When you snuck up on me."

"Oh... I know. It's ok... I'm a fucking ninja."

*“Ok. Good. But... what’s our cover story?”*

*“I fell.”*

*“Again?”*

*“Yeab.”*

*“Your parents are gonna think you have vertigo.”*

*“What’s vertigo?” Matthew asked, as I removed the bottle of aspirin from my pocket.*

*“Really bad dizzyness.”*

*“I am dizzy,” Sebastian remarked, closing his eyes as he popped a few aspirins into his mouth. “And a little nauseous.”*

*“Can you walk?”*

*He thought a moment, making a painful face at the suggestion alone. “I kinda just want to lie down.”*

*“Alright,” I sighed, glancing uneasily at the overcast sky. I stepped over to Sebastian and helped him to his feet—walking in the direction of the fort. Matthew followed closely on Sebastian’s other side. He made a pensive face as we came to the cluster of trees.*

*“I don’t wanna go inside,” Matthew stated, stepping back from the entrance. “I wanna go home.”*

*“Your brother needs to lie down, Matt,” I replied, helping Sebastian slide through the branches. He was weak—keeping one hand on me or the wall at all times. He breathed through his mouth and swallowed apprehensively. “It’s ok—I’ll turn on a lamp in a second and give you a tour. Just wait here.”*

*“It’s almost dinner time. We need to go back or we’ll get in trouble,” he continued, looking around to try and pinpoint which direction led home. I gave him a frustrated look and retreated into the fort to help his brother find a sleeping bag. I lit a lantern and spread out a tarp as Sebastian sunk down to the ground to take a seat.*

*“I think I’m gonna puke,” he said, closing his eyes and lowering his head.*

*“Here,” I replied, handing him the plastic pack I’d taken the bandage from. “If you don’t feel better after you lie down you can use that.” He spread out on the sleeping bag and put his hand to his forehead. I took a few deep breaths—trying to decide on how to tell his brother that we couldn’t leave.*

*“Derek?” Matthew asked, approaching the branches and peering into the dim lamp-lit cave.*

*“Hold on a second,” I muttered, finding my way back outside. Matthew stood waiting for me—tense and uneasy. I cleared my throat and decided not to humor his desire to go home. “Look, Matt... we’re gonna have to spend the night here.”*

*“What?”*

*“Your brother needs to rest.”*

*“He can rest at home.”*

*“The sun’s going to go down in a couple of hours and I’m not going to drag him through the woods in the middle of the night,” I explained, my tone stern and unsympathetic.*

*“Then I can go for help.”*

*“And what, bring people here? What if you get lost? Or what if you fell or something happened to you?”*

*“Then you go for help.”*

*“We don’t need help, Matt,” I snapped, losing my patience. “Your brother’s going to be fine, we have more than enough supplies here, and we’ll head home as soon as the sun comes up.”*

*“But we’re gonna get in trouble!”*

*“Your brother and I will, you won’t,” I insisted, watching his face fidget as he tried to come up with any excuse to leave.*

*“Derek, I don’t want to sleep here.”*

*“I know, and I don’t care,” I stated, stepping aside so that he could enter the fort. “You might as well get used to the idea of sleeping here, Matt—pretty soon it’s going to be our home.”*



## CHAPTER 7: UNWELCOME WELCOME

Sebastian Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

Our farmland was mostly empty—barren fields of overgrown grass that still sprouted the occasional cornhusk every spring. I let neighbors and people from town come as often as they pleased to take as much as they could carry. Some even planted a few things of their own, but nothing of the sort that would draw the wrong kind of attention to my property. But it had been nearly ten years since I'd bothered to plant anything and my sentimental fondness of the land was beginning to fade. Our family only bothered to use the house and the barn across from it. But because we lived square in the middle of so many empty acres, it didn't make sense to sell the land without the house. I couldn't trust someone else not to flip it over to big retail, like so many have before. So I held onto it, just like I had ever since my father passed away—leaving everything to my brother and me. Only my brother Matthew didn't care to call the farm home. He didn't even care to visit home. And as I sat, holding the phone—ready to call him for the first time in years, I debated whether or not I wanted to invite him back.

We'd always fought growing up, as brothers always do, but it wasn't anything that kept us from being together. In fact, before we had our falling out we spent nearly all our time together. Matthew followed me around whether I liked it or not. And despite my best attempts to lose him or trick him into staying home to play videogames, he always managed to track me down. My best friend, Derek, hated it at first until we decided to bring Matthew in as a member of the special team we were making. Hidden deep in the forest and kept secret from everyone, we planned and plotted our escape together. Practicing fighting and shooting—going home every night with new bruises and different excuses. When I think of it now, it seems like the dumbest thing we could have ever done. But maybe I only say that because of what it did to my brother and me.

He'd been temporarily positioned at a military base in Virginia. From what I'd heard, after bumping into an old friend of ours, he was scheduled to leave soon but couldn't tell me the details of where or when. I'd learned this nearly three weeks earlier and had only just gathered the courage to pick up the phone and actually call him. I leaned forward on my bed, my bad leg stretched out straight in front of me so that I could adjust it every few minutes. My wife was downstairs, pretending to busy herself with housework she'd already done so I could have my space. The

twins were coming back from school in an hour and my son, Archer, would find his way home just short of finding the end of my patience. I had plenty of time and no more excuses to put this off any longer. I raised the receiver to my ear and dialed the number, dealt with the operator and waited to see if he'd answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey Matt," I stated, taking in a deep breath. A few moments passed and nothing was said. The last time we'd talked he'd hung up on me before I could finish saying 'hello.' "It's been a long time... how've you been?"

"Same old."

"Good... I bumped into Jared Franklyn... he told me you're getting out of the service sometime soon. Is that right?"

"What did he tell you?" Matt snapped, paranoid as always about my place in his life.

"He just... said that you're getting out is all... Quite an accomplishment—ten years," I continued, small talking around the reason I'd called. "Do you get a medal?"

"I get to leave."

"They don't give you a medal for that?" I joked, adjusting my leg. Matt didn't laugh. He sounded like shit. Like something was bothering him even before I called. I made sure to try and keep my tone both upbeat and neutral so he wouldn't think I was provoking or antagonizing him. But as I listened to his uneasy breathing into the receiver, I realized there was little chance of that.

"Look, I understand that you felt obligated to make this call. But that doesn't mean we have to talk to each other."

I uncomfortably swallowed and looked around the room for something to distract me—any reason to think about anything else. Unfortunately, it was my turn to talk.

"What are you gonna do now that you're getting out?"

"Find something else."

"I mean, where are you gonna go?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"How far ahead is it?"

"Stop it," Matt growled, taking a breath and a pause. "What do you want?"

“I want to invite you home,” I replied, hoping he’d remain on the line long enough to hear me out. “To visit, or, maybe, to stay for a while. I don’t really know... But I wanted to invite you anyway.”

“You know the only reason I’m talking to you is because this is the last time you’re gonna be able to find my number.”

“Yeah... I was kinda wondering why you haven’t hung up on me yet.”

“I’m not gonna lie, Seb—I think about you from time to time... about your wife and your kids and your house... I think about you and your family and about how I’m not a part of that picture for a reason.”

“You still can be... I talked about it with Anna—she’d love to see you again.”

“No. No, she wouldn’t.”

“Well, I want to see you again,” I admitted, realizing it was true as I said it. There was a long pause. I held my breath.

“If it’s any consolation, I’m sorry I tried to kill you that day,” Matt stated, mentioning what he’d done to me for the first time since he’d done it. “But I hate getting reminded that you lived,” he finished, smothering any hope I had of having my brother back. “Goodbye, Seb.”

“Matt, wait,” I exclaimed, hearing the receiver cut out as I said it. I lowered the phone and placed it on the bed beside me. I could hear Anna downstairs, rummaging through a few pots. I reached over for my cane at the bedside and pulled my leg back so I could stand up. I kept one hand against the wall as I made my way to the stairs and walked down to meet her.

She stood by the sink—scrubbing a pot so hard I half expected her to file it down to nothing. Elvis was curled up by her feet—he rose his head as I came to Anna’s side. She turned and smiled gently, ignoring the phone call I’d just made with the hope that I would too.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked, folding my arms and leaning against the counter.

“Lasagna—one with spinach, no meat, and the other with no spinach extra meat.”

“And what are the girls doing tonight?”

“Ballet and hockey.”

“Huh... you’d think that twins would like more of the same things,” I exclaimed, making my wife smile. She put the pot she’d been

scrubbing down and swapped it for another. I watched absentmindedly, in no mood to get back to work or sit in front of the TV. I couldn't stop thinking about Matthew.

"You know, a lotta nick-knack garbage has been blowing around since that mall opened up," Anna commented, annoyed by our new neighbor. "People think that just cause there's an empty crop beside the parking lot that they can leave their junk lying around," she continued. "I would have thought people knew better than that in this town but—"

"I invited Matthew to the house," I interrupted, bringing my brother up despite how my wife got whenever I did. Anna put down the pot and turned slowly to look at me—her face filled with shock and disgust. "I told him he could visit or stay if he wanted."

"How could you do that?" she gasped, smacking the sponge she'd been clutching into the sink. "I don't even want to hear that man's name, let alone have him in our house near our children!"

"I had no choice, Anna."

"Why?!" she shouted. Elvis slowly pushed himself off his stomach and slunk away into the other room. I looked at Anna in a way that she'd know there was nothing to worry about but she didn't relax.

"I had to ask because there was a chance he could have said 'yes.'"

"And what did he say?"

"He said 'goodbye,'" I sighed, watching Anna loosen up as I spoke. "That he doesn't ever want to talk to me again,"

"Good... At least he has some sense."

## CHAPTER 9: START OVER

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

A cold sweat slid down the back of my neck as I sat on a bus, traveling along a forlorn highway in the middle of the night. Everyone else was asleep. Their heads all leaning to the side, resting on one another's shoulders, or, using the wide windows of the bus for a pillow. The man seated beside me snored against the glass and I gripped my armrests, watching the ceiling as the passing streetlights painted it orange and black. I couldn't sleep again. Didn't know exactly how many hours it'd been since I left the base but I knew I couldn't stand another minute waiting for a verdict. Putting up with cold stares and gossipy bullshit from every rank, color and creed. Twiddling my thumbs like some kind of criminal, hoping for the best out of something that all I wanted to do was forget. But, it wasn't until my brother called, inadvertently reminding me of the last time I'd run away from home, that I decided I couldn't wait one minute longer.

I didn't buy the ticket to reach a destination. The first bus leaving the station was more than good enough. And as I glanced out the window, catching eye of the lights of a nearby town, my mind returned to the offer my brother had made me—of going home. That he'd managed to forgive me, even after all these years, was surprising enough. But the fact that he'd actually offered me a chance to see him face to face again, to live in his home, with his wife and children, was something I couldn't believe. I wondered if he was terminally ill. I wondered if something had happened in his life that suddenly made him think of me as a priority. But mostly I wondered that if I did decide to take him up on his offer, whether or not I'd be able to control myself if I ever saw him again, if I ever saw Anna with him again.

The last time I'd spoken to Seb was during the summer almost four years ago—the first time in nearly a decade. He just picked up the phone and called me out of the blue one day. Only this time it wasn't because dad had died; it wasn't because of some legal matter or family obligation. It was because he wanted to try and talk to me. And that was the really shocking part of it. As far as I was concerned I was as dead to my brother as he was to me. And learning from him of all people that that wasn't the case was just too much to handle. I hung up the phone. And when he called back again and again, I just kept hanging up. Eventually he got the idea.

I breathed uneasily—feeling like I was somewhere else. My mind rolled around, jumping from happy memories of growing up on the farm to the bitter realization that I could never go back. I wondered if, after I left, my parents kept my room the way it was or if they tried to hide it. Maybe they tore down my posters and burned my things while my brother still lay in the hospital bed, barely breathing. I wondered if they ever forgave me, or if they went to their graves with what I'd done. My father was always too stubborn and my mother was too strict. They were probably happy I ran away. Saved them the pain of looking me in the eye to tell me they didn't love me anymore. Because, at the time, I wasn't sorry. At the time, I thought I'd killed my brother.

I remembered my first day on the road after leaving home. I slept beside the highway—refusing to hitchhike until I got far enough from town that no one would recognize me. I used the backpack of supplies I'd thrown together on my way out of the house as a pillow. But I couldn't sleep. I listened to the crickets chatter as I watched passing headlights—expecting each one to be someone coming to take me away. Lock me up and give me what I deserved. But when I set out the next day, and the next—getting farther and farther away—I realized that I wasn't in any trouble, I wasn't on the run. I was forgotten.

I managed to find odd jobs in different towns. Never settling down or getting too comfortable. The idea of leading a normal life didn't appeal to me anymore. I had my shot at that and I missed. But after a few years of wandering I began to need more than another destination. So I decided to grant myself the privilege of serving my country—fulfilling an old dream of mine, and, moving on with my life. But the military was a hard place to call home. And now, I didn't even have that anymore. Now, I was back on the run. And despite the familiar sensations of guilt and regret, deep down I knew I wasn't doing anything wrong. Just like old times. Because the truth was, when I fled home years before, I felt like a man for standing up to my brother—for putting him in his place. It was thinking of everyone else that made me feel like I'd done something wrong. And since that day, I've made a point of keeping a distance from everyone else.

The bus eased to a stop in the back lot of a rest station. Neon lights hung from the sides of the building, showing spots of litter wedged into the cracked concrete. I released my grip of the armrest and stood up as the bus's lights turned on and the doors opened. A couple of passengers waddled off to use the bathroom before they'd head back out onto the road. I moved slowly behind them, stepping out into the cool night air. I slung my bag over my shoulder and looked out onto the neighboring small town—a patch of light between dense forest and

endless roads. This place seemed as good as any from the map I'd looked at. It even reminded me of home, before I ruined the memory.

The bus driver stepped off behind everyone else and stretched his arms to the side, nodding politely to me as our eyes met. He pulled a cigarette out of his breast pocket and slid it into his mouth, taking a few steps away from the bus in my direction.

"I tell yah, people weren't made to squeeze in those things," he exclaimed, glancing back at the bus. "Like sardines in a can," he chuckled, taking any opportunity to talk to anybody. I hesitated from walking away, eyeballing his pack of cigarettes. He finished lighting his own and held the pack out for me. I nodded politely and took one.

"Where are we?" I asked, using his lighter and handing it back to him.

"Ephesus. Or, as I like to call it, an indoor toilet on the way to someplace better."

"Is there something wrong with this place?"

"I was just kiddin'. Don't think there's anything wrong with it. Far as I know it's just an easier place to get groceries than driving to the next town. Ain't much more to it than the few buildings you see. At least that's what a few folks from here told me when they hopped on the bus a few months back."

"Does it get a lot of people coming and going?" I asked, taking a short puff of my cigarette and rolling my tongue around my mouth to get used to the taste. I didn't smoke.

"Mostly just people passing through. Where you headed?"

"Sightseeing," I stated, thinking of a story I could feed him in case anybody asked about me. "Taking pictures of old houses and churches from all over the country."

"That so? What for, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A catalogue," I explained, accustomed to lying on my feet. "Say, you wouldn't happen to know when the next bus comes through here, would you?"

"Not sure. This time of night doesn't see much traffic. Next one probably won't come by till morning or later."

"Know if there's an inn around?"

“There’s one a couple miles down the road,” he said, pointing past a few distant houses to a flicker of light. “You thinking of extending your stay then?”

“Till tomorrow anyway,” I replied, dropping my cigarette and stepping on it. “I’ve got places to be. But I’m in no rush to get there.”

“Well, suit yourself. I can drop you by the inn on my way past if you like?”

“No,” I answered, already scouring the tree line for a different direction than the one I’d told him I would travel down. “I’d prefer to walk... sightseeing and all.”

“Fair enough.”

“Thanks for the cigarette. You have a good trip,” I finished, shaking his hand and turning my back. I walked quickly down the road he’d pointed me towards, glancing out of the corner of my eye to see if he was watching me. The bus driver finished his cigarette and headed into the rest stop. And, just as he did, I turned away from the road and made my way towards the forest. Because despite what I’d told him, I knew exactly where I was and where the town would lead anyone who might try to catch up to me. Over the next few days, I’d cover my tracks. Then, once I knew I’d made my escape, I could start my life over again.



## CHAPTER 8: CLEAN UP BY REGISTER 1

Derek Riggs, Los Angeles, 2018

Nowadays it should be second nature to prepare for the apocalypse. But, despite the countless threats to our species and its brittle infrastructure, people have never been more aloof. Shopping malls are more popular than churches. Panic rooms outnumber bomb shelters. Hospitals are understaffed and unprepared for anything other than the daily death toll. And, despite the popular consensus of trendy fears, the globe isn't warming, it's rotting. Everyday more and more hungry mouths are born into an environment of starvation and depravity. And even those, who can afford their piece of mind, are still trapped on this planet, blissfully unaware of how vulnerable they are and how soon they are going to die. So, when it comes to my life—surrounded by so many thoughtless chimps—the very least I expected of myself was to be prepared for humanity's greatest threat. And, as I rightly regarded it, the only true threat worthy of my unwavering devotion—infection.

I pulled a can of beans off the counter and examined it thoroughly for puncture marks or abrasions. The expiration date synchronized with my bi-monthly rotation of canned goods. Its wrapper was a lightly coated cellophane-like-paper product that could ignite easily if kindling was needed, without producing an excess of toxic vapor that could congest an indoor fire pit. I gently placed the can into my shopping cart and continued down the aisle, stopping briefly to adjust the katana strapped to my back, concealed by an unseasonable poncho that would serve to protect me from blood splatter, should an outbreak, and subsequent incident occur.

The woman who works the Sunday nightshift at the grocery store shot me her customary cold stare before returning to smile at the customer in front of her. I grinned slightly, indifferent to her contempt—an unforeseen byproduct of my refusal to flirt or engage in coitus with her when she had tried to seduce me many months prior. Now, rejected and hurt, she tried to exact her revenge through meaningless disgruntled facial expressions, exasperated tonal fluctuations and 'bitchy' remarks. She had become a dependable part of my Sunday night shopping experience. Though, I suspected, she was unaware of my amusement.

I passed the aisles of frozen foods, then the hormone and antibiotic filled meat products, scoffing with disgust at the most recent displays of innards and flesh. That people regularly choose to treat their

bodies no better than the cattle they slaughtered for sustenance was ironic in my mind. Though, having once attempted to converse with another individual on the matter, I had since learned that people strangely develop an affinity for the things they eat. It seems, to their underdeveloped profoundly ignorant minds, that life is worth shortening for the sake of fleeting, frivolous pleasures. They understand their own stupidity, yet fail to correct their decision-making process. Not surprisingly, my confidence in the where withal of my fellow man is correctly abysmal. And, but for my complete confidence in their impending demise, I suspect I would grow overwhelmed by the prospect of an eternity in their midst. Fortunately, I know the truth. And whenever I find myself bogged down by society, I calmly remind myself that they'll be dead soon. Only the strong survive.

I parked my shopping cart parallel to the conveyor belt that the woman who hates me was operating, making sure to go around the cart in case the need to flee arose. Her facial expression remained cold, and she purposefully kept her eyes from meeting mine. I stared at her, pondering her thought process. After a few swipes of her wrist and the accompanying beep of barcodes, she looked up and shook her head.

“Why do you always wear a poncho when you come here?”

I felt socially obligated to answer her question. But, having no desire to be forthcoming or truthful in my response, I chose not to.

“It’s not even supposed to rain,” she continued, clumsily grasping my goods and gathering them into paper bags. I continued to stare at her without saying a word. “Sooooo... Why do you wear a poncho?”

The human body contains on average eight liters of blood. I wore the poncho to provide protection from the bodily fluids of those around me. Of course, stating something of the sort to her would no doubt result in yet further alienation and scrutiny. So, instead, I shrugged my shoulders and kept my mouth shut.

“Nevermind,” she sighed, rolling her eyes over to the cash register as my total came up. “116 even,” she stated, glancing at the customer in line behind me as I pulled a wad of cash from my pocket. I removed exact change and stuffed the remainder back in my pocket. I reached my hand out to the woman but she ignored me, still staring at the customer in line behind me. Now though, her facial expression had changed to one of surprise and... fear. Her posture was rigid and her eyes were wide. Something was wrong.

“I’ll take that,” a man’s voice grunted, as I felt the tip of a pistol graze against the back of my left temple. I turned my head just enough to

see down the length of an arm that was fully extended over the top of my parked shopping cart. The man stared sternly at me, his hand firm and unwavering. He was clean-shaven and wore a black hoodie that concealed much of his face from an overhead angle. He had clearly accounted for the cameras above us that the store used for inadequate security. He had waited for a moment when there were fewer customers. And, as I recalled my walk through the store to gather my goods, he had been idling here for some time. If he were no more than a crack addict hell bent on his next fix, I'd have killed him already. But something about the look of his cold eyes gave me the impression that, at least mentally, he was a formidable foe. I concealed my glee as best as I could, slowly turning the wad of cash in my hand towards him. He snatched it out of my left hand and I used his gesture as cover to unbutton my katana with my right. Our eyes remained locked and I wondered if he recognized in me what I saw in him.

“Take whatever you want,” the woman courageously whimpered, as she took a step back from the register. The man’s eyes temporarily shifted in her direction and I slowly began to slide my katana out. The poncho I wore served to conceal the fine movements of my arms. Like a lion in the grass, I lay in wait for the right moment to strike.

“Put everything in a paper bag,” the man instructed the woman. She quickly began gathering bills from the register and stuffed them into a bag. The man’s eyes, however, had returned from instructing the woman to meet my own. I could tell that he expected me to be afraid and that he could clearly see that I wasn’t. I hid my excitement as best I could. “Give me the rest of your money,” he demanded, adjusting the gun in his hand to exemplify the point. I slowly reached into my pocket with my left hand, removing the remainder of my cash. I finished removing my katana with my right hand. I held the blade along my leg, unbeknownst to both the woman and the man.

For almost twenty full seconds the man and I had locked our eyes to one another’s. Cold and calm. He gripped his gun tightly, his finger pressed against the trigger. I gripped my sword tenderly, adjusting it in my palm to the perfect angle for my upcoming strike. Then, as I held out the remainder of my cash with my left hand, I broke our long standing eye contact and looked quickly to the side, directly behind where the man stood. While I knew that only a large display of cereal was where my eyes fell, my gesture had the desired effect in my opponent’s mind. The man temporarily broke his focus and twitched his head enough to the side to give me the opportunity I had waited for. I turned clockwise at full speed, my poncho flaring out like someone tossing a pizza in the air, as I brought the sword up from my waist across the man’s shoulder joint. I finished my

gesture in a crouched position, calculating the blood splatter would fall in the direction of the woman who hates me. I heard two loud screams, one from the man, and the other from the woman, accompanied by the dull thud of the man's now severed arm falling into my shopping cart full of groceries. I emerged from my crouched position to see the man slide down to the ground, clutching the gaping wound where his arm had once been. The woman shrieked hysterically, completely drenched in his blood. I glanced down at my poncho to see that a small spurt of blood had landed on my side. I quickly removed my garment, careful not to get any blood on my hands. Then, after wiping my sword clean with it, I held the poncho up for the blood-soaked woman to see why I had been wearing it, placed it on the counter, and casually made my exit.

## CHAPTER 10: RETREAT

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

The bright blue water was dulled by my sunglasses as I looked out over the endless ocean. Six ice cubes, 4 ounces of mango rum, 4 ounces of club soda and a slice of lime rested in a tall glass beside me. Three wood beach chairs sat an inch deep in white sand. Clear skies stretched out over gentle waves that glided softly onto the shore. My wife, Hanna, lay comfortably next to me in one of her many bikinis—her perfect twenty-eight-year-old body lightly baking in the sun. I picked up my beverage, feeling its cool condensation wet my palm. My son, Desmond, played in the water while one of his nanny’s kept watch. And I thought to myself how perfect our last day in this dreadful world had been. I thought to myself how proud and relieved I was to have made my escape and realized my vision. I kept quiet of course. But on the inside, my heart pounded victorious. Today I would no longer change history. Today I would remake it.

We had flown out of London within hours of my departure from Eden Corporation—Nathan’s concerned attempt to ‘patch things up’ still itching in my mind. Our destination, and home for the foreseeable future, was my private island located in between Taiwan and the Philippines. I had purchased it just over ten years ago and it had required almost as much time to reach completion. It was my self-designed utopia, built for our family vacations and our eventual retreat. Complete with an Olympic-sized indoor pool, gymnasium, movie theater, salon, spa, all organic farm, state of the art laboratory, 2600 square foot mansion, bomb shelter, sewage treatment plant, detention area and a tiny village to house my near sixty staff members employed to maintain the island—I could now spend the rest of my life far away from the life I’d had. Because when my jet took off and I watched London disappear over the horizon, a strange thing happened inside me—I felt the calming relief of a life less significant. I felt pure elation and joy as the fears and uncertainty that had accompanied my work melted away. I had succeeded. At long last, my dreams were no longer dreams. And as I looked out on the ocean, living blissfully in the moment, I realized that it was the only time since the death of my first wife that I had felt completely happy. I finished my drink and turned to address Hannah.

“He seems happy, doesn’t he?” Hannah looked to the water, watching Desmond jump in the air and crash into a wave.

“Very.”

“I was worried he wouldn’t adjust well,” I admitted, reaching over to reposition the beach umbrella that saved me from tanning alongside my wife. “It would have been difficult for me to change so much of my life at his age.”

“Well, he’s a very accommodating young man. And we’re very lucky parents for that.”

“I just wish there were more kids for him to play with,” I continued, seeing one of my bodyguards leave the beachside hut and head in our direction. “Every time that the cleaning woman brings her daughter to visit, I feel like she’s only there so that I’ll give her mother a raise.”

“Or maybe it’s because Desmond has the only videogame consoles on the island?”

“Either way, we’re getting used.”

“Well get **used** to it,” she joked, turning to lie on her stomach as the guard came within a few meters of us—trained not to look at my wife or what she tried to show off.

“Sir, you’d asked me to notify you,” the guard stated, equally as well trained not to mention business in front of my wife. I nodded and stood up from my chair.

“Have the nanny bring him to the theater for dinner. I think it would be good to watch a movie while we eat,” I instructed Hannah. I then turned to walk the short distance from the beach to the mansion.

I have a fixation with open spaces. I believe that people weren’t meant to be confined in cluttered homes, in office buildings or cubicles. I believe that the people who deserve to be alive were made to roam the earth as if it were theirs alone. So, naturally, when designing the home we would occupy on my island, I put a great deal of consideration into how much space could be maintained without forfeiting security of functionality. The sniper towers on the roof saved me the trouble of having multiple armed guards at the doors. The passageways to the bomb shelter were concealed, as cliché as it might seem, behind bookshelves and cabinets. And, most importantly, my laboratory, the central hub of my daily activities, while seemingly isolated and invisible to anyone unfamiliar with the layout of the home, was easily accessible for all crises, both unforeseen and otherwise. I entered the lab, pausing momentarily to allow the air compressor to remove all scraps of sand and dust from my person. Then, with eager anticipation, I made my way to the mainframe—the last and greatest vestige from my time at Eden Corp.

This computer and, more importantly, the network of associated programs that it controlled, was conceived of in a time of great sorrow. Like many brilliant men, my most profound inspiration was born in the ashes of my dreams. Standing at the side of my first wife, Eden, alone after our guests had finally left me to grieve in silence, I took her cold pale hand in mine and allowed myself to cry. I allowed myself to hate and rage as if it were not her day of judgment but my own. I was livid at the world around me. At a society that sanctioned the breeding of criminals in lowly slums—raised to strike down the innocent hard-working people in this world; to strike down my wife, use her like a toy, and then squeeze the life from her. I was livid that the only ‘justice’ this world had to show was to send those responsible for such unspeakable crimes to rot comfortably in a cell as if the loss of their time was some sort of consolation for all that they had done. I was devastated by the reality of mankind and the unyielding indifference of self-proclaimed ‘good people.’ But more than the pain I felt and the sorrow that consumed me, in that moment, for the first time in my life, I was free of my moral inhibitions. I was free of my shadow conscience that had been conditioned to follow me like a naïve pup trained to swallow the bad along with the good as if nothing could be done about it. In that moment of sorrow, I understood the greater purpose of my pain. And, since that day, I have worked tirelessly in the name of reform.

I gently pulled my favorite antique office chair, which I had retrofitted with wheels and the ability to recline, away from my computer console. The monitor powered on followed by a larger central screen that stood nearly as tall as myself just in front of the console I worked on. Though ‘old-school’ in my approach to utilizing computers by stubbornly insisting on continuing to use a keyboard and mouse, I was quite proficient with code and concept—devising, long prior to the original mainframe’s design, a clone console that could discretely monitor and intervene with the original mainframe’s programming without anyone other than the clone’s operator being made aware. Of course, the original console was still safe back in London, under the supervision of my once good friend Nathan. And, but for my far superior clone of Eden corps mainframe, I could not have brought myself to either leave the company or attempt to pursue those within it to overlook the nature of my actions.

I stretched my hands over the keyboard, savoring the moment. However, as I did so, my mind drifted back once more. Perhaps given time and resources enough, Nathan could understand the depths of all the peculiar things I’d done in my final months with him. Perhaps given time he might even understand the part of myself that I kept from him and

why. But, as I took a long slow breath, locked in pensive deliberation, I realized that my lingering nostalgia, both of my late wife and of Nathan, was the final tribute to the momentous task that I was about to realize: the rebirth of the human race, the opportunity to grant those worthy of life, the positions of privilege and praise that they deserve. The chance to cleanse the filth of a world built on generations of misled, ignorant commoners and the sentimental hogwash of those who foolishly believed anything short of a miracle could change them. In the world I would build, only the strong would survive. But first, everyone else had to die.



## CHAPTER 11: THE END IS COMING

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 1996*

*Matthew sat on a tarp wedged against a crate of ammunition. His knees were propped up and he kept his arms tightly wrapped around them. He kept quiet—wearing a sleeping bag to try and stay warm despite the fifteen-degree-drop that had accompanied the night. Sebastian lay sleeping, snoring softly. The dim flame of the lamp illuminated the inside of the fort in the otherwise black forest. And I sat with my legs stretched out, deliberating what to say to the new member of our team.*

*“Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat?” I asked again. He shook his head without looking up or at me. I reached over to a Tupperware container and peeled the lid off, removing an energy bar. “What time do you usually go to bed?”*

*“When my mom says to,” he replied, speaking so softly I could barely understand him. I gave a muted-exasperated-sigh as I unwrapped the protein bar in my hand and took a bite. I chewed slowly, putting the lid back on the bin, but not before tossing Matthew a chocolate bar. He looked at it a moment, eventually reaching forward to pick it up. He ate without speaking.*

*I didn’t blame Matthew for being uncomfortable. After all, he and I had never had a conversation, let alone spent any significant period of time together. And now he was trapped with me in the woods, his brother was wounded and it was a freezing night. It was also the first time he’d been away from his parents. All things considered, he was handling it really well. I didn’t expect us to enjoy ourselves or have a pleasant conversation. In fact, if I didn’t think talking would help cheer him up, I would have just curled up and gone to sleep. But I could see how miserable Matt was and the idea of him telling on us terrified me. Matthew wasn’t going to feel better without a damn good reason. And the only thing I could think of was treating him like an adult and telling him the truth about what his brother and I were up to.*

*“What did Sebastian tell you about this fort?” He ignored the question—staring at the tarp draped over the entrance as it lightly flickered in the wind. “I’m not mad, Matt... In fact, I’m happy you’re here. You can be a part of our team now.”*

*“What team?” he asked, turning to look at me.*

*“You mean Sebastian didn’t tell you why we built the fort?”*

*“He said you built the fort in case the world ends.”*

*“Not in case the world ends—when the world ends,” I stated, watching his curiosity turn to apprehension. He swallowed uncomfortably and took a moment before speaking.*

*“When’s that?”*

*"I don't know... there's no way to know. But it's going to happen. And when it does, only the people who are prepared will survive. That's why your brother and I built the fort. And that's why we spend so much time in the forest practicing for when it happens."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Well, we exercise... we come up with scenarios, like the one today. They're kind of like playing games, but you have to take them completely seriously," I explained, reaching over to a shelf and grabbing a couple of survival guides. I stood up and handed them to Matt before returning to my seat. "We collect supplies, map the area surrounding the fort, figure out where good lookout points and fall back positions are. We practice shooting and fighting. We even spy on people sometimes to get better at sneaking around undetected. Because, after everything we have now is destroyed, we'll still have to survive," I finished, watching Matt look through the hunting guide before returning his eyes to mine.*

*"But our moms and dads already know how to do all that stuff."*

*"No, they don't," I snapped, my tone stern and defensive. "Our parents only know how to survive in this world as long as it stays the way it is—just like everybody else."*

*"You're wrong. They know," Matt insisted, still of the opinion that his parents could do anything. He defiantly put the guides I'd handed him aside and returned to his sullen posturing. I shook my head—discouraged that I had to convince him of something so obvious.*

*"Matt, your parents don't even know that the world is gonna end! They think everything's gonna stay the way it is and that nothing's going to go wrong."*

*"Maybe they're right."*

*"God dammit, Matt!" I shouted, smacking my hand against the ground. "Do you know how many people die from diseases every year?! Do you know how many bombs there are in the world pointed at us right now?!" He shook his head. "And that's not even the real threat! Those are just a few things that will go wrong when the end comes and people start to turn on each other! And don't tell me it's not going to happen! That's what everyone says who's too dumb to see the truth! And your parents are no different! They won't know how to take care of us when the world ends; they won't even know how to take care of themselves! So, it's up to us to prepare for them!"*

*Matthew sat silently. He kept his eyes locked on the tarp covering the exit. He looked scared. And I realized that he might not be old enough to be treated like an adult yet. I took a few deep breaths to try and calm down so I could explain things better. Sebastian muttered something in his sleep and rolled over to face the wall of the cave.*

*“Look... I understand that you’re scared. I was too when I first learned about this. But... if we prepare for what’s going to happen, then we can help our families and other people when they need it most,” I stated, watching him struggle to understand. He unbuckled his arms from his knees and picked up one of the survival guides again, staring at it apprehensively for a moment before replying to me.*

*“Derek... I’m just a kid,” he exclaimed.*

*“Yeah... I know,” I replied, re-thinking how much I’d tell him and how far I’d push the matter while he was in such a fragile state. We sat silently for a moment before I decided to try again. It wasn’t the nice thing to do. In fact, I felt like a pretty big asshole for pestering him about this. But if Matt was going to be a member of the team he couldn’t hide behind his age or make excuses for his weaknesses. The end was coming. And not even children would be spared.*

*“I know how the world’s going to end,” I confessed, confiding my greatest fear in him so that he wouldn’t feel alone. “I don’t know exactly when... but I can tell you that the things you’re going to see—the decisions you’re going to have to make to survive—aren’t for kids. So when you tell me that you’re **just** a kid, I think to myself that if that’s the case, having you around might not be such a good idea... It’s time to grow up, Matt.”*

*Matthew looked at Sebastian—his head tightly wrapped in bandages that were beginning to bleed through. Matt adjusted himself in his seat and pulled the sleeping bag more tightly around him. He seemed like he was going to cry—like his world had already ended and being trapped here with me was hell. But he didn’t cry. He didn’t complain or bargain with me about leaving and making the trek home through the dark. He took it like a man, even if he was just a kid. I respected that.*

*“How will it happen?” he finally asked, after a few minutes of inner struggle and uncomfortable silence.*

*“A virus,” I answered, taking a deep breath as I glimpsed into the future. “It’s going to spread all over the world, infecting people and making them turn on each other. But... this virus isn’t like other diseases. It travels through your bloodstream until it gets to your brain and then,” I explained, pausing as I tried to find the words to continue.*

*“And then, what?”*

*“It turns your brain to mush and you die... but... it doesn’t end there.”*

*“Hub?”*

*“The infected person dies but the virus doesn’t... it takes control of their body after they’ve stopped breathing and turns them into a ghoul—the ‘living dead.’ It’s called Solanum and it’s what’s going to destroy civilization as we know it,” I finished, intensely locking eyes with Matthew with the hope he’d finally understand. He didn’t*

*speak. He didn't move. But I could see something change in him. Now he knew. He'd learned what everyone else refused to see or hear. He was a part of the team.*

*"Matthew! Sebastian! Derek!" a distant voice shouted, startling Matthew and I. He opened his mouth to respond but I dove across the fort and pressed my hand firmly over his mouth—glaring at him so he wouldn't try it again. I then reached over and picked up the lamp—blowing out the flame and disappearing into the darkness. I held my hand firmly over Matthew's mouth and closed my eyes, focusing on the sound of footsteps and the cry of our names—someone was coming.*

## CHAPTER 12: INFECTION

Wes Korbut, Washington D.C., 2018

I took a few swigs from my water bottle and smacked my lips together to try and pinpoint the weird aftertaste it had left in my mouth. However, as I stared at the firm yet gelatinous ass of the woman riding the exercise bike in front of me, I could feel the taste fade away as my mouth began to water. My brother, the flaming homosexual that he is, chatted idle minded to me, failing to recognize both my infatuation with the woman in front of us and my lackluster ability to have a discussion while simulating biking up a hill. The woman stood up on her bike to make it to the top of the hill and I quickly turned my attention to my brother to keep from entirely redirecting my blood flow.

“What?” I gasped, only catching the tail end of the last sentence he’d said. Between the blaring techno music, the constant hum of the exercise bikes and the screams of pleasure the woman was making in my imagination, I was about as close to legally deaf as any straight man could be.

“I said, if you didn’t wear such heavy clothes you wouldn’t sweat so much,” he repeated as I flinched with embarrassment, hoping that the woman hadn’t overheard.

“Yeah, well... If you didn’t spend so much time shopping for your workout clothes so guys will ask you out...” I replied, pausing to take a deep breath. “Maybe you wouldn’t expect your own brother to dress like your wing man,” I exclaimed, hoping that the woman had overheard and would pick up on the fact that my fit, gorgeous, brother was gay and that my fat, self-conscious ass was both straight and single. From the back of her head, it was hard to gauge a reaction.

“I’m just saying, it’s one thing to maintain homeostasis. But it’s another thing to sweat out your own swimming pool to try and do it,” he casually replied, barely affected by the workout we were doing. The woman’s head turned slightly to the side and I cringed, turning in my brother’s direction to mouth the words ‘shut up’. He glanced at the woman, realized the reason I was acting so strange, and rolled his eyes. “I was only kidding,” he continued, grinning widely. “I know you only sweat so much because of the stress of being a wealthy doctor who volunteers to take care of sick children and puppies,” he finished, able to keep a straight face up until the ‘puppies’ part. The woman’s head was now almost completely turned and we made fleeting eye contact as the cycling

instructor hit the bell for the end of class cool down. I smiled awkwardly at her until she turned her head back around. I tossed my sweaty headband at my brother in muffled frustration. He laughed and stuck out his tongue.

“I don’t understand how you can do this to yourself every morning,” I whined, taking another swig from my water bottle. Only this time, the aftertaste was stronger and more pungent. “Ugh... I think there might be something wrong with the pipes here. Does your water taste weird?”

“I don’t drink water anymore.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Since I went on my new all natural diet. I only eat organic, remember?”

“And water isn’t organic?”

“I don’t know what they put in that stuff,” he scoffed, unaware of how funny and retarded what he was saying was to me. “There’s no label on the tap, brother.”

“So something has to cost twice as much and have a lot of excess packaging to make it into your body?”

“You can never have excess package in your body,” he joked, winking past me at a man who had picked up on our conversation. I turned to see the man smiling back at my brother and grumbled to myself how easy he made flirtation seem.

After we dismounted the bikes my brother made his way over to the man he’d been eyeball fucking and I glanced timidly at the woman. She noticed my interest and, as women typically do, chose to ignore it—waiting instead for me to work up the nerve to try and talk to her. I watched my brother’s casual posturing and suggestive grin and thought to myself that it wasn’t just a gay thing to be that good at flirting, it was a confidence thing. So, with gut wrenching determination and a little less blood flowing to my brain than I’d like, I approached the woman to try and have a conversation.

“I didn’t think I was gonna make it up that last hill,” I exclaimed, grateful that my voice didn’t crack mid-sentence. “You think the instructor would make everyone cycle back to get me if I didn’t?” The woman gave me a confused stare, missing my point.

“These classes can be pretty tough when you’re just starting out,” she eventually replied. “It’s a good idea not to push yourself too much.”

“True... but I don’t want to fall behind. Besides, no pain no gain, right?”

“I suppose, yeah.”

“How long have you been coming that it comes so easily to you?” I asked, awkwardly sipping my water despite its inexplicably foul taste.

“Just a few years.”

“Wow, hope it doesn’t take that long for me to get caught up,” I exclaimed, noticing her awkward posturing as she turned slightly in the direction of the change room. Suddenly, it occurred to me how out of my league she was and how much of a fool I stood to make of myself. I decided to wrap things up as a sick feeling creep into my stomach.

“Anyway, I gotta go make sure my brother doesn’t sweet talk himself into being late for work. See you around.”

“Till next time,” she replied politely. I walked solemnly to my brother’s side, my stomach still turning in knots. He was just finishing up his conversation, collecting a number from the man he had flirted with. I waited a few seconds for them to say their goodbye’s.

“How’d you do?” he asked, tucking the business card he’d received into his pocket on our way to the change room.

“I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

“No, really,” I answered, tossing my water bottle in the nearest garbage, suspecting the sick feeling in my stomach wasn’t just nerves. “I don’t even know if I’ll make it to work today.”

“If you did well enough to spend the day with her, you don’t have to lie to me about it. Don’t worry, I’ll cover for you,” my brother said, grinning until I shook my head in noticeable distress. We entered the change room and sat down beside our lockers.

“I wish that were the case, but, no... look, my stomach’s really starting to hurt so, I’m just gonna head home. Let everyone at work know, ok?” I explained, clutching my sides as pulses of throbbing pain emanated through my body. I took deep breaths and fluttered my eyes, feeling dizzy.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” I assured him, pulling my clothes out of my locker. “But I think I’m gonna skip showering. I need to lie down.”

“Ok,” my brother sighed, accustomed to my stubbornness. He slung a towel over his shoulder and closed his locker. “Text me how you’re feeling if you want me to grab you something after work.”

“Sure, thanks,” I replied, sliding on my pants and packing up my bag. My brother made his way to the showers and I did my best to keep from passing out on my way out of the gym.

I stumbled out onto the sidewalk like I was drunk, making my way past street vendors and hurried pedestrians. It was just before morning rush hour and I was glad that the sidewalks were mostly clear. I found my way to the nearest subway entrance and leaned heavily against the railing. The jolts of pain were growing stronger and more frequent, spreading out from my stomach like a fire in a haystack. I hated using sick days when I was actually sick. But from the way I was feeling, anything other than lying down would probably kill me. I slid my pass into the subway validation machine and breathed heavily. I caught a few other people in noticeable distress, pressing their hands to their sides as they awkwardly tried to maneuver the crowd, and my mind returned to the foul water I had forced myself to drink. It didn’t seem like it was just me. A lot of people seemed like they were sick. However, just as my thoughts turned to whom to sue in the event of a water treatment error, my train arrived and the doors opened. Clusters of people flooded out of the doors, some of whom appeared fine, while others, unbelievably, looked even worse than I did.

I forced myself to keep standing and stumbled onto the train. My hand slapped up against the cold metal support railing and my knees shook out from under me. The people on the train watched me struggle, but no one dared to approach or lend a hand. I was afraid—every second I felt worse and worse. But more than my panic, an odd sensation grew in my chest—my heart was slowing down; my stomach was ceasing up and my head felt like it was about to explode. My eyes met those of another passenger, clutching her gut as if something were about to explode out of it. She looked afraid; she looked terrified. Something was wrong. Something was really wrong. I tried to scream but could only moan. I fell to the floor and my face slammed against an empty seat. My body began to convulse and a frightened tear crawled out of my eye. The other passengers on the train quickly changed seats to stay as far away from me as they could. I was poisoned—I had to have been. The other people on the train watched in horror, frozen in place as blood started to sputter from my mouth. No one would help me while I was like this... Oh my god, I’m going to die.



## CHAPTER 13: FAMILY FIRST

Sebastian Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

The farm has been in my family for generations. My grandfather purchased the land and built both the house and the barn just before entering the Second World War. Like me, he suffered a crippling injury that restricted his lifestyle. So much so, that the burden of work and the obligation to provide for his family fell on the shoulders of my, then, young father. The two men fought often—each of the opinion that they were the man of the house. They grew distant over the years, living under the same roof without respect for one another. And by the time I was born, their relationship had withered away to nothing more than contempt and resentment. All I remember of my grandfather is the cold stare in my father's eyes when he was in the room. When he died, I was barely four years old. But as a final spiteful act, my grandfather saw fit to leave the farm that my father had worked so hard to uphold, in my name. And, consequently, I inherited the animosity of my family's father-son-relationships.

My brother, Matthew, was born to a more hospitable household than the one I'd had as a child. And my dad showed him the attention and unbiased affection that I never had. I suppose all parents struggle to be honest about whether or not they love their children equally. But when I became a father I swore to never let myself be the kind of man to my son that my father had been to me. Of course, that was before Archer was a teenager. It was before he treated our family without respect, disregarded my advice and came home as late as he pleased without so much as an explanation or an apology.

I snapped a padlock shut on the chain around the barn door—sliding the key back into my pocket and reaching for my cane. I'd spent the morning in the barn trying not to think of how angry I was. But every time I heard a car drive past or a sound in the distance my ears perked up and I peaked out the window like a guard dog on watch. My son, Archer, didn't come home last night. Instead, he'd texted us to 'let us know' at two in the morning just before his phone 'died'. My wife, Anna, reminded me that I had been just as foolish at his age, and I reminded her that that was no excuse. I barely slept I was so worried. But now all I could do was plan on how to yell at him when I saw him next.

Elvis trotted gingerly at my side, his tongue hanging out as he pushed his nose against my free hand to remind me how much I liked

petting him. But today I wasn't in the mood. He eventually got the idea as I stepped onto the front porch and dropped into a chair. I grumbled bitterly as I looked out over the open stretch of road, glaring at a tiny red-dot as it appeared over the horizon—a car I recognized as one of Archer's friends. I glanced at my watch and shook my head—almost 10:30 in the morning. The car pulled up to the house—keeping just enough distance so that I couldn't identify the driver. It sat motionless for a moment as I waited patiently by the door for my son so he could face the music. A moment later he emerged from the car and trudged in my direction—sulking and avoiding eye contact. I could only imagine how he'd try to justify his behavior, and I'd spent the whole day preparing for just that.

“Sit down,” I stated, as he walked up to the door, trying to head right past me as if I didn't even exist. He stopped and gave an exasperated sigh. “Now,” I insisted, pointing at the chair beside mine. Archer did as he was told and took a seat. I shook my head and rubbed my brow—looking at his glazed expression as he stared at the red-car driving away, ignoring me and how much trouble he was in. “If you give me an explanation, I'll cut your punishment in half. But if you give me excuses I'll double it.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You don't look sorry,” I replied, promising myself that I'd be harder on him this time than ever before. He kept his head low and his mouth shut. “Well, what the hell happened Archer?”

“I just couldn't make it home.”

“Why not?”

“The car died and we were stranded.”

“Which car? That one?” I asked, gesturing to the red-car as it disappeared over the horizon.

“Yeah.”

“And your phone happened to die too, right? And you couldn't borrow someone else's to let us know you were ok, or God forbid, call us so we could come and help you?” I snapped, seeing through his lies. He stayed quiet—my words empty and meaningless to him. I clenched my jaw and shook my head—mad as hell. “What are you rebelling against, Archer? What did your mother and I do that was so awful that you feel the need to treat us like this?”

“I told you—I couldn't make it home last night,” he exclaimed, becoming defensive about his own lies and excuses. “I'm sorry you were worried—you shouldn't have been.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“It never is,” he stated, pushing himself out of his chair and walking into the house. I reached for my cane to pursue him but could only move fast enough to see him disappear into his room. I stepped up to the bottom of the stairs and shouted after him.

“When your mother gets home you can beg her for leniency, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re grounded for the rest of the year!”

The house was quiet and Archer didn’t bother responding to his punishment. I huffed obscenities, feeling a pinch in my leg—hobbling over to my armchair and placing my cane aside. Elvis crept behind me, hanging his head low in case I decided to yell at him next. But as I flopped my backside down and picked the remote control up I heard a fast paced rumbling head down the stairs. I turned to see Archer wearing a backpack stuffed with clothes as he headed full speed for the door.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?!” I shouted, swiveling my chair in his direction as he passed. He ignored me—wearing a pair of headphones and sunglasses. “Archer! Get back here!” I demanded, my leg too sore to shoot up and chase after him.

Archer slammed the door behind him and ran down the front steps just as the red car that had dropped him off pulled up to the house again. A young woman sat in the driver’s seat—the same young woman who the twins had showed Anna and I a rather unflattering picture of—Archer’s girlfriend, Brianna. And as I watched the two of them drive away I realized that Archer’s recent disregard for his family and responsibilities had nothing to do with either one. He was young and in love. I pondered for a moment, coming up with too many ways to punish him to think clearly. But the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t help but second-guess myself. A grin crept its way onto my face and before I knew it I was smiling. I of all people knew the dangers of young love. Archer and me weren’t done arguing by a long shot, but at least now I understood what he was fighting for.

I forced myself to my feet and made my way to the medicine cabinet we kept near the kitchen sink. I opened the mirror and reached behind it for my pain medication. Not that it did all that much after using so much of it for so long, but, given the number of orders for custom made fishing bait I’d received lately, I’d need all the help I could to relax. I took a glass from the dish dryer and held it under the faucet, turning the cold water tap and filling it up. I let it settle for a second as I hobbled back to my chair. The well we pulled our water from made it come out of the tap almost completely white, and if I drank it as it emerged, my body reprocessed it in a way Anna didn’t much appreciate smelling.

I pulled my worktable up to my chair and popped my medication into my mouth. I raised the remote in my hand and pushed the on button so I'd have something to listen to while I worked. The TV powered up, but rather than hearing the sound of my sports highlights, the sound of screaming came blasting out of the speakers. I shot my head up and dropped my mouth open, reading a line of text on the bottom of the screen that said 'Breaking News'. Elvis's ears perked up and he began barking—curling his lips and arching his back. My jaw dropped as the images that were shown revealed crowds of people swarming over one another—covered in blood: panic filling their eyes. I peeled my gaze away from the violence long enough to read the headline—Global Riots Break Out. And suddenly my heart pounded so fast I could barely breathe—Anna had taken the twins into the city.

## CHAPTER 14: OUTBREAK

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

I could never sleep more than a few hours and even then it was rarely uninterrupted. If a bird squawked too close to me, I'd come to. If a twig snapped in my vicinity, I'd reach for my gun. And if something touched me or spooked me in a way that made me snap out of bed, chances are I'd have to stop myself before I did something I shouldn't. So, over the past few days of walking through the forest and trying to sleep under the trees, I was understandably more fatigued and agitated than usual. The sun struck my eyes as it peaked its way through the morning fog and the overhead leaves. As always, the first thing I did in the morning was whip my head in all directions to see if anything, or anyone, were around. Nothing. Nobody. Good.

By my calculations, I didn't have much left to walk through the woods before I'd clear the distance between where I'd last been seen and where I intended to go. My imagination kept me plenty paranoid, thinking of all the people that might come looking for me now that I'd decided to run away. Deserting the only home I'd known, and the only career I'd loved, for the past ten years of my life. Fucked up thing was how much I missed it despite how it had ended. I reached over to my bag and pulled out my rifle, setting it down beside me to try and take away some of the homesick feelings I had. I also pulled out what little remained of a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. My rations were running low, and my water was nearly gone. But I had enough money to refill as soon as I hit the next town. And, depending on just how much it suited my needs, I expected to call it home for at least a little while.

The wind gusted through the sturdy summer foliage and I kept my head to the sky, leaning against a tree trunk for support. I'd spent just about every good minute of my childhood playing in the forest. And sitting against that tree, even twenty years later, the memories still seemed like yesterday. Me, my brother, and that crazy son of a bitch, Derek. I'd never met anyone like him and I could only hope he hadn't gotten himself killed or locked away. After all, even towards the final, strained years of our supposed life-long pact and plan, Derek never wavered. Through middle school, high school and God knows where after, he was a true believer. And, as I looked back over the memories again, he was also the only true friend I'd ever known. Too bad trying to kill Seb all those years ago meant leaving Derek behind to sort my mess out. I wondered if he hated me now too.

I finished my breakfast and pushed myself off the ground, dusting a few leaves off my backside and picked up my rifle to put into my bag. I paused, staring at the barrel, sliding my hand down the grip. I smiled and shook my head. Of all the things I'd left behind in my life, the one thing I couldn't bring myself to part with was my rifle. That, and my sidearm and pocketknife. Shit, old habits die hard I guess. I suppose I was a true believer too, even though over the years I'd convinced myself I wasn't. But, every once in a while, I'd still have dreams about what it would be like if our childhood plan had come true. Sometimes I'd even drift off when I was awake and find myself asking questions about the hard days that I'd spent so much of my life preparing to face. Silly, now that I think about it. Because even after all the tours, the combat and the missions I'd seen, I never felt like I'd gotten the chance to prove myself. Then, sure as I stirred to the sound of snapping twigs, a thought broke my composure. It occurred to me that the reason our pact fell apart and our friendship dissolved wasn't because of everything that happened between us, or, because of the one thing that didn't. Our plan didn't work because we never got the chance to give it a try for real. I regret that more than anything. It would have worked. We were ready. It's the waiting we never trained for... Shit... I closed my bag, slung it over my shoulder, and started walking.

The town I'd chosen to resurface in wasn't so big that I'd get lost in it, and it wasn't so small that I'd stand out. From what the brochures had said and Google maps had shown, it seemed like it was only half way taken over by corporations. And the parts of the small town that had managed to survive the transition were still thriving. In my mind that meant it had character. It also meant a chance at finding work off the books or under the table. Hell, I'd paint fences if it got me a meal and a bed. Might even try to sweet talk somebody if there were a good bar around. Hadn't had much in the way of romance in my life and now that I was starting over again, I couldn't help but consider the idea of settling down. That'd be nice. To have something new for a change.

I hurried my steps as I approached a thinning tree line that bordered a stretch of road. Just as I thought, I was coming up on an entrance to the town. I decided to make my way out of the woods and walk along the side of the road—leaning my neck to the right to try and catch a glimpse of the tops of houses. Sure enough, just over a couple dips and rises in the road sat the first few buildings of, and the big sign welcoming visitors to: Birchwood. Population, fifteen thousand, located in West Virginia, and just about the sweetest sight I'd seen in years. A square, glass like office building stood tallest of all except for a church steeple and a couple of radio towers. Most other buildings were just a few

stories tall. I couldn't spot any big shopping malls or parking lots. But there were a couple of buildings that looked like arenas or warehouses. Seeing the town, I was actually excited to get in closer and explore the lay of the land.

The morning fog thinned as I reached the top of the last hill, before the road dove down into the lower ground that the town had been built on. But, before I could gander at my new home, a car raced past me moving about as fast as it could go. I turned my head quick to the side, catching a glimpse of the driver's pale expression. I scowled and shook my head. His car swerved down the road, veering to the side like some drunk maniac running from the cops. Then, half a second later, I watched the damn fool spin his car off the road and crash into a ditch. I hesitated a moment, contemplating whether or not to go back and see if the man was all right. I didn't move, waiting for him to emerge from his car. Nothing. Shit.

I turned around and walked towards the vehicle, hoping every step of the way that the driver would get out, be all right, and spare me the headache of having to wait for an ambulance. The man had managed to wedge the car in a ditch just before the forest and, from the looks of it, had screwed his ride up pretty bad. I slowed my pace and adjusted my bag as I approached the driver's side door. The man sat motionless with his head drooping down, probably too drunk to keep his eyes open any longer. I reached out and knocked on his window but he didn't move. His hair was just long enough to cover the side of his face and I couldn't tell if his eyes were open or not. I knocked on the glass again.

"You all right?"

He didn't move. Fucker. I raised my head, looking around for someone I could flag down if I needed to use a phone or send for help. But as I did, I realized how light the traffic was. In fact, I couldn't see a single other car on the road. Lucky for them I guess. This guy could have just as easily killed someone if he didn't drive himself into a ditch first. Even still, it struck me as odd that, early on a Thursday morning it would be this dead on the main road to town. I looked back at the man, startled to find him staring back at me—his eyes empty and lifeless; his skin pale and expression blank. His neck twisted around until his shoulders turned towards me and he held a hand up, reaching for me, only to hit it against the glass. He tried again, and again, dropping his jaw as he let out a guttural moan that made the hairs on my back stand on end. I stood motionless. In shock. In complete and utter shock. I had to be dreaming. There's no fucking way that... I had to be dreaming.

The man's hands kept bumping against the glass as he leaned towards me. His lips pressed against the window, gnawing at the glass like he didn't even understand it was there. But the window didn't fog up—not even a little bit. He smeared saliva on the glass, opening his mouth wider and keeping his eyes locked with mine. But still, no vapor—no breaths. If the window didn't fog up, it meant he wasn't breathing. If he wasn't breathing it meant he couldn't be alive. This man was dead. And if he was dead it meant Derek was right. Jesus fuck... it was happening. Twenty goddamn years of telling myself we were crazy and it was actually happening. I smacked my hand to the back of my neck and let out the breath I'd been holding, shaking my head in disbelief.

"Fuck me," I sighed, stepping away from the car and looking back in the direction of the town—population 15,000.

I stood there for a few moments, watching the man hit his hands against the glass with increasing force. His barren lifeless expression looked just like I thought it would. The moans he let out, dulled by the car he sat inside, sounded exactly like I expected them to. Even the rigid curls of his lips and his saliva-drenched protruding teeth fit perfectly to the mental images I'd had of what the infected would look like. But still, something seemed like it was wrong. Something was missing. The undead were never supposed to be a pretty sight and while the man in front of me had only just succumbed, he seemed too squeaky clean to be a ghoul. Where was the blood? There wasn't a drop of blood on the man. There wasn't a bite mark oozing or a wound gushing. Nothing. This man hadn't been bitten, which meant he'd contracted the disease in some other way. He'd even had the confidence and ability to sit in a car and drive himself. And, if he'd made that decision, who knows where he came from, how long he'd been driving, what he was running from, and whether or not he was even aware that something was wrong. This man was the first infected I'd come across, but that didn't mean the infection had just begun. I'd been in the woods for days. It could have started days ago. And, if that were the case, it meant there would be more like him. It was happening. It was actually happening. Fuck me.

Suddenly, I wasn't fighting with disbelief or the hundred different emotions shooting to the surface. Instead, I was reverting to my training in the forest. The switch that goes off inside you when you're being shot at is multipurposed, and looking at the undead locked in the car trying to reach for me set it off just as well. Procedure called for me to kill any isolated zombies, in complete silence, to keep them from following me and attracting more undead. A simple logic. It would only be a matter of time until he broke through the window and made his way out of the car—because, unfortunately, the fucker hadn't been wearing his seatbelt



while he was still alive. I had no choice. However, the fact that the man had no blood on him worried me. The fact that there were no other cars around did too. I still hadn't seen the town other than the tops of buildings. And, it could still be the case that the infection was contained. Maybe it hadn't spread there yet, and this man was a danger not only to me, but to them. I needed to do recon. But first, I needed to remove the known threat. I slowly reached my hand forward and gripped the door handle. I hesitated, remembering once more that he had managed to contract the disease through some other means than being bitten. And, if that were the case, it could mean by simply exposing myself to him, I could become infected as well. But... that was never a part of the plan. No one could prepare for an airborne infection. And if it had truly come to that, then I was dead either way.

I popped the car door open and the man's moan amplified in volume by double. His arms pushed the door towards me and I stepped back to avoid his reach. My rifle was already out of my bag and in my hands, but I held it on both ends, ready to use it as a club. The man slowly stood up, moaning loudly and stretching his arms towards me. I took a step to the side and watched as his eyes followed me closely. His fingers twitched with anticipation as he came nearly within arms reach of me. But, just as he took the final step in my direction to grab hold of me and turn me into something like him, I moved quickly around his side and swung the butt of my gun into his temple. The man fell over from the force of the blow but never stopped moaning. I raised the gun above my head, watching him try to return to his feet, only to bring it down across the back of his head over and over again. Just like we'd trained to do in the forest with coconuts and hammers. His head burst open on the fourth blow and his brains squished against the pavement. Only then did he stop moaning; only then did he stop moving. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

I turned my head as a noise startled me. A car drove down the road heading towards the town. As it approached me I was able to make out the expressions of those inside—warm skinned, everyday people. However, as they came to notice me, rifle still in hand, speckled with the brains of the man who I'd just beaten into the pavement. I could see their expressions lose their color. The woman in the front seat turned around sharply to try and cover the eyes of her children. They sat pressed up against the window with their mouths hanging open, appalled by the sight they saw. It was clear that they hadn't encountered an infected yet, and looking at me, doing what I was doing, was the only thing they recognized to be afraid of. The car sped up and raced towards the town. I watched

them go over the hill and disappear before returning my focus to the crushed skull my gun lay against.

The man's brains were mush. Not simply because I'd squashed them out of his head and smeared them on the road, but because the Solanum that causes the infected to turn into walking dead had made them so. It makes its way through the bloodstream to the brain and turns it into an extra thick smoothie of fried wires and useless nerves. The undead can't feel anymore than they can breath. They can't think. They can't decide. All they can do is walk, eat and moan. And, for whatever fucked up reason, the only thing they're interested in eating is other people. I knew exactly what the ghoul I'd killed was despite the looks of horror I'd received from the passing car. I knew exactly what the dangers of infection were, what the social repercussions would be and how other, uninformed people would react. The only question in my mind was how far had the infection spread and how dangerous was the area I was in?

I wiped the butt of my gun on the back of the dead man until it was clean. As long as I didn't have any open wounds I could safely make contact with it. Though, needless to say, I had my trepidations. I hung my gun over my shoulder this time and strung my bag around the other. But before I could decide on a direction to turn the same car that had passed me speeding towards the town came rushing back in the other direction—the people inside even more afraid than when they'd first seen me. I watched in frustrated disbelief as they headed down the road, kicking up noise and gravel behind them—sure to lure any ghoul within earshot to follow in their direction. But what became clear to me, even more than how utterly stupid and hopeless the average person was in times like these, was what could have possibly scared the people in the car that much. I turned my focus back in the direction of the town. Protocol said to move immediately in the other direction—to head north or find a stronghold. But I just couldn't without knowing for sure. I had to see for myself. I had to know how bad it was and how far I'd have to go to find someplace else to call home. I walked hesitantly to the top of the hill that overlooked the town—ready and willing to fight again.

What seemed like a hundred cars were parked bumper to bumper along the road and spilling off to the sides of it. A few people tried to squeeze in between them, but from the way they were moving I knew they weren't people anymore. Just beyond that, I spotted a large crowd of folks wandering down the streets. I looked for any banners, booths or displays that would indicate there was a fair or a parade going on but I couldn't see anything. The town was overrun, the infection had spread. And as I looked down at the relentless carnage and chaos that had befallen so many people, I felt a wave of despair rush over me. I had

wanted so much to forget, to start anew and rebuild. But now... now I'd never have the chance. Twenty years ago, it would have been liberating to see what I saw that day. I would have been eager to prove myself and to beat every last ghoul into the ground. But that was twenty years ago. Now, despite the vindication of knowing I was right, I wished more than anything that I had been wrong.

I returned my eyes to the few people that walked in between the cars and uncapped the scope of my rifle, raising it to my shoulder to get a better look. I was wrong. The cars weren't parked bumper to bumper, they were crashed bumper to bumper. Broken glass and bent metal littered the pavement. But what really drove home the point in my mind was the color of the hill. All across the crashed cars and the green grass were smears of blood. Across the roads, the buildings and the people themselves were stains of flesh and gore. I lowered the sight and closed my eyes, hearing the distant screams of the few people still able to cry out for help as they ran terrified from their once friends and neighbors. But there was no saving them now. There was no hope for the weak or the ignorant. I knew this then as I always had. But something about seeing it, about being as unable to help them as they were unable to help themselves, took a toll on my conscience. My heart beat faster and my mouth dried. I could feel the familiar creep of adrenaline hit my bloodstream and my nerves tightened up. But I refused to let myself entertain the idea of being a hero. I opened my eyes, stood upright, and turned in the other direction.

## CHAPTER 15: GO TIME

Derek Riggs, Los Angeles, 2018

I felt great. Better than great actually, I felt alive. I savored each breath and bounced off each step. All this despite the fact I was at work. I was even reciting my job description in a surprisingly upbeat inner monologue that day. Of course, it had occurred to me that the police might come to my workplace and escort me out of the building. But my act of heroism at the grocery store the night prior was clearly in self-defense. They could understandably make the argument that I was illegally carrying and concealing a deadly weapon. And I could understandably make the argument that if I hadn't been I'd be dead. The way I saw it, the police wouldn't care about the man I'd dismembered anymore than I did. And, likely, the matter wouldn't go any further than stitching the dumb bastards arm back on before he was sent to jail. However, despite my self-assurance of how righteous my vigilantly justice was, a tickle of trepidation lingered in the back of my mind. If they were to bring charges against me and decided to extend their inquisition to the contents of my home, I would be in much deeper trouble than the man who had held me at gunpoint.

Besides the large quantities of explosives I used to manufacture noisemakers, flares, grenades and other varieties of destructive, and primarily distractive devices, I housed an abundance of illegal off-the-grid firearms. My emergency rations, custom-made bicycle, lightweight body armor and stockpile of purified drinking water would raise eyebrows no doubt. But incarceration would only result from the more quote 'deadly' items in my possession. And, the longer I sat at work, pouring over the memory of my subtle and deadly blade work, the more uncertain I became. The single worst place to be in the event of an infection was locked in a cell, forgotten and abandoned by the living solely concerned with their own wellbeing. I could not afford to go to prison under any circumstances. I eyed the entrance anxiously, noticing for the first time in the course of my aloof daydreaming, that the office was surprisingly quiet today.

I had always arrived early for work, deliberately devising my travel schedule to avoid crowds and congestion. And while nearly always the first or second in the building, I had grown accustomed to the steady trickle of my officemates after the fact. I stood up from my desk and glanced around, taking note of the vast majority of vacant seats and missing people. I furrowed my brow and turned in the direction of Tracy,

the woman who shared the cubicle space with me, and, unbeknownst to her, more of my thoughts than I would ever admit. I contemplated voicing my concerns to her, but unaccustomed to sentimental feelings towards other people, decided it best to refrain. I continued my recon of office attendance, stepping outside of my cubicle to do an exact count.

Greg, the office alpha douchebag, and the first person I killed in my post-apocalypse-daydreams, was also, unfortunately, accounted for. A couple of elderly individuals that I had nicknamed ‘ghoul bait’ were sleeping at their desks and the mailroom kid was making his rounds from office to office. However, what was most striking in my mind was the absence of upper management, the absence of the secretarial staff and cleaning people. Perhaps there was some large traffic jam or extenuating circumstance that had slipped my attention. Then, as my gut began to churn and my brain returned from reminiscing about the night prior, I began to speculate that the unexplained disappearances of my colleagues was something more than a coincidence. I quickly made my way to the desk of a secretary I knew to be responsible for keeping tabs on tardiness and attendance. I picked up her phone and checked her messages—56 of which were from this morning alone.

“Hey Fay, this is Morgan Taft calling. I’m not gonna be able to make it into work today, my stomach is killing me,” a sickly sounding individual stated, pausing in between words to swallow and wince. Next message.

“I haven’t called in sick before, so I’m not sure who I’m supposed to talk to, but this is Beatrice from marketing and I’m afraid I’m just not feeling well enough to make it in today. I’ll call again in the afternoon in the event that I’ve started to feel better, thanks.” Next message.

“Fay, it’s J-J. I don’t know if I ate something I shouldn’t have or what, but my stomach feels like it’s digesting itself. No way I’m making it into work. I’ll feel better in time for softball practice this weekend though, guaranteed.”

I stopped listening to the messages, disturbed by the information I had acquired. Three people from the same office were sick immediately after a weekend, and based on the trend of messages, many more were too. Something clearly wasn’t right. But before I went wading through the rest of the voicemail for clues, I remembered the recently installed viewing screen in the center of the office. I placed the receiver down and made my way to the large flat screen television traditionally used for broadcasting financial news or office memos in plain view of everyone. However, as I powered on the TV, the picture slowly illuminated to reveal

a breaking news headline instead of a rolling stock portfolio. The title of ‘Global Riots Turn Violent’ caught my eye, but it was the sight of carnage on the screen that grabbed my attention. A sight I had anticipated for so long that all I could muster upon finally witnessing it was a quivering yelp of giddy-disbelief. I cranked the volume as loud as it would go and breathed deeply, remaining in the moment just long enough for the other people in the office to notice and come to stand by my side—awestruck by the images flashing on the screen.

“Reports from every major city, in almost a hundred countries, are flooding in every minute,” the reporter announced, appearing nauseated and faint. Her expression was pail and she appeared to struggle with not only reading the teleprompter, but the magnitude of the events unfolding before her as well. “It’s not clear what incited the riots... but... martial law has been... martial law has been...” she attempted to say, looking away from the camera in the direction of someone behind the lens. Her eyes were full of fear as she slipped from her seat and fell to the floor—too sick to continue. The picture quickly changed from where she had been sitting to stock footage from webcams and traffic cameras of hundreds if not thousands of people running down blood covered streets while other ‘people’ hobbled with outstretched arms in their direction—tearing the clothes from those they had managed to trap, sinking their teeth in as if they’d just unwrapped a candy bar. My office mates gasped in horror, raising their hands to their mouths as their eyes began to water.

“Oh my god,” Tracy said as I caught her taking hold of Greg’s hand out of the corner of my eye. “What in the world is happening?”

I turned from the screen to make fleeting eye contact with her—broke away from my trance of disbelief, and pulled back to face the profound naivety of those around me—the elderly couple, the mail room kid, Greg and my secret crush, Tracy. None of them had a clue what was going on or what to do about it. And trying to explain it to them would only waste time and put my life at risk. They weren’t a part of the plan. And as my eyes glanced from each of their terrified eyes, my senses came flooding back to me. What the fuck was I standing there for? WHAT THE FUCK WAS I JUST STANDING THERE FOR?!?! The television showed an ambulance flipped on it’s side and the people whose legs were trapped under it were being eaten alive. My eyes blew out of their sockets with awe and adrenaline. This is it—empty eyed cannibals clawing at anything that moved—sucking back chunks of bloody flesh like they’re eating sushi. Mass panic—widespread infection—countless undead and nobody in the entire world but me has a goddamn clue what to do about it! This is it! THIS IS IT! IT’S GO TIME!!!

I pivoted to the nearest window and pulled aside the blinds to get a view of the street—nearly clear of pedestrian traffic. If I was going to try and make my escape from the building, it was clearly the only time I'd stand a chance. I ran back in the direction of my cubicle and ripped out a drawer from my desk, removing the machete that I had taped against the back of it in case of emergency. Then, as my eyes turned upwards towards the exit, I noticed Greg, standing by Tracy with his arm around her. I froze for a fraction of a second, clenching my jaw in anger and disgust. This would be the last time I'd see her and there was no fucking way I'd let that memory be tainted by him. I slid my machete under my belt and yanked my keyboard free of my computer. I snatched a piece of paper off my desk with my free hand, and began crumpling it as I walked in Greg's direction. I picked up speed as I approached him. Then, just steps away, I threw the ball of paper I'd been crumpling into Greg's head and whistled loudly. He turned towards me just in time for me to smash the back of my keyboard into his face. He went down like a two hundred pound pussy and I lifted my eyes to meet Tracy's. She gasped, shocked and bewildered as I stepped closer to her. I leaned forward, wrapped my arm around her, and gently squeezed her ass as I kissed her goodbye. She kissed me back. That was the memory I needed. Now, I was ready to fuck shit up. I let Tracy go and made my way for the exit.

The emergency stairwell was empty. People didn't know to run. They didn't understand the threat. The natural reaction of the average individual to an undead contagion is to presume that ghouls are just sick people who have lost their minds, to overlook the facts that they've stopped breathing and are no longer able to think or reason. The typical response of a populace is to retreat into fear and panic, to cluster together and to try and save the people they love. To cling to the comfort they've taken for granted for so long and ignore the severity of the situation before them. Over time, people have lost their God given brutal nature by playing make believe in their societal roles as docile sheep. And in the paradigm shift of disaster, they are caught bewildered and aghast—unable to make the transition back to a vicious nature, fight for their lives, or kill for their survival. Instead, they foolishly cling to the hope that someone will save them—whether it's the police, the military, God, or it's God. Their ignorance is as much of a threat as the undead themselves. And long ago, I swore to disregard the repugnant stupidity of my fellow man when the infection came. I swore to fend for myself and myself alone. Only the strong survive. Abandon the weak. Forget morality and structure. The undead bring a new world order.

I raced down the stairwell, three steps at a time, machete in hand—ready, waiting and willing to kill. My best time for getting from the

office to my apartment was 56 seconds. It was time for a new record. I pushed open the emergency exit door and burst out into the parking lot. It was bright outside—clear skies and few pedestrians. No screams or gunshots. Only puzzled looks at the machete I held at my waist as I double-checked my surroundings for any sign of the infected. All clear.

My bike was chained to a streetlamp; the key was already in my hand. I breathed normally and kept cool. My movements were quick and precise—just like I practiced. I left my bike lock behind as I sped away from work. The back alleyway that led to my apartment was surprisingly clear. However, in between the heavy breaths I took, moving at full velocity, I could hear screams and commotion coming from the other side of the buildings I rode behind. As I approached a curb that looked out onto the main street in between alleyways, I glanced to the side, catching eye of crashed cars and a mob of approximately twenty people moving in all directions. But I moved past the street too quickly to assess their condition or threat level. I pedaled the full four blocks to my home in 38 seconds and screeched into the front of my apartment building—the key in my hand. I tossed my recreational bicycle aside, clearing the way for my exit from the complex. It was another 12 seconds until I reached my apartment, sprinting up the stairs until I entered the upper hallway that, fortunately, was free of ghouls. My machete was now tucked back into my belt, soon to be exchanged for my body armor and survival gear. But as I slid the key into my apartment lock I noticed that many of my neighbors closed doors were pounding—from the inside trying to get out. Slow, repetitive, forceful thuds—the unmistakable vigor of the undead.

I pushed my door open trying not to linger on how so many people could have been infected when inside of their apartments—now banging on the doors, trying to break free. In all directions I could hear their muffled decrepit moans, filling my head with more and more urgency. I needed to move faster—every second wasted put me that much closer to death. Move, move, MOVE!

I ripped off my clothes and tossed them aside, pulling open my closet and removing my armor—a custom built contraption somewhere in between mountain biking apparel and riot gear. Designed to be resistant to knives, bites and blunt force trauma, it provided me a slim protection from the oncoming onslaught. With built in blades, catheter, compass, water purification system and other small compact necessities that must remain on my person at all times, it was one of my finest achievements. Despite it's weight of nearly twenty five pounds, I had trained in it so often that I had grown accustomed to it's size and feel—to the way the materials breathed and moved. In my armor, I was no longer a man, I was a motherfucking death machine.



Next, I equipped my reinforced, waterproof backpack that could just as easily be locked into my armor as it could be detached from it. Filled with my food and water reserves as well as a small container of ammunition, a first aid kit, map, rope, sleeping bag, blanket, soap, matches and the other basic necessities for surviving on the go, it was of vital importance to my ongoing survival.

I holstered my sidearm before securing both my rifle and my katana to my back via a heat activated catch-and-release magnet system that responded only to the warm touch of those still living. I then fastened my utility belt containing my more delicate armaments: flares, noise makers, cyanide release capsules, flashbangs and my specialty child-safety-grenades that required multiple ignition steps to deploy effectively. After that, I slid on my full-face helmet with its shatterproof polarized lens. I then adjusted the eyepiece that hovered over my left eye, feeding off external solar panels to recharge the lithium battery inside the helmet that powered its infrared and night vision applications. I powered on my HUD and fluttered my eyes to try and adjust to the transparent view that the pinhole camera on the back of the helmet gave me of my surroundings.

Then, last, and most importantly, I prepared my bicycle. Due to its many modifications and its subsequent value, it had not been rational for me to use it recreationally. The core model of the bike matched that of my other, now discarded, bicycle. However, it was the addition of numerous welds and gadgets that differentiated it. A built in momentum converter could be turned on to capture the excess energy from each peddle and movement, using it to recharge batteries for my helmet and other associated electronics. Gaps in the frame allowed me to comfortably grip it both for periods of travel where riding was no longer viable and also, to detach the wheels and use as a weapon if absolutely necessary. The shocks and spokes were both encased by a thin layer of metal to keep debris or extremities from becoming lodged in them. And a system of LED lights were installed throughout the frame, easily triggered by remote if the need for a distraction or a signal to other survivors arose.

I picked up my bike and pushed it forward on its rear wheel, knocking open my front door as I reentered the hall. Only now, many of the ghouls had managed to break through the doors they had been banging on. Shards of broken wood littered the floor as pale arms protruded from all directions. I paused, calculated my trajectory, and mounted my bicycle. Then, after nodding a final farewell to the apartment I'd called home for the last decade of my life, I pedaled ferociously down the hall, ducking under the reach of arms and maneuvering around the emerging ghouls. I reached the stairs and flipped my bike onto its back

wheel again, jumping down from each flight of stairs—using my bike like a pogo-stick to break my fall. But as I descended each level more and more undead appeared—breaking their way out of their rooms and wandering down the halls in the direction of the noise I was making. I breathed heavily as I made the final leap to the ground level, kicking an undead in the chest as I did so. It flew back and knocked over a few stranglers lumbering behind it, giving me the window I needed to make my escape.

I leaned my shoulder into the door and burst out of the apartment complex into the alley. I swung my bike under me and started peddling in the direction of the park—periodically steering my way around lumbering ghouls and panicked civilians. Somehow, the infection had already spread wider and faster than I'd ever imagined in even the worst-case outbreak scenarios. The very fact that the undead were still locked safely in their apartments and had to break out rather than in, defied conventional logic. That there was an incubation period for people to die and rise was clear. But in order for so many people to be simultaneously infected, isolated and transitioned into the walking dead meant that the circumstances of contagion had somehow been drastically expedited. Day one of the outbreak had already reached the severity of day ten. It didn't make any sense. My escape plan wasn't designed for this. I had never considered ubiquitous infection—it seemed too unlikely, too absurd. And as I watched more and more ghouls flood out of buildings and into the streets, swarming around the few helpless civilians that remained, I realized that at this rate I not only could be surrounded and overrun, I would be. How in the fuck was this happening? I felt more angry and frustrated with myself than I had ever been. Because after a lifetime of preparing and pushing myself, when the day finally came and the end of civilization dawned, I was nearly as unprepared and vulnerable as everyone else. Move! MOVE! MOVE!!!

I peeled out of the back alley into a roundabout congested with crashed cars and frantic people. Everyone was either screaming or moaning, and the sound of my heavy breathing was swallowed by the chaos. On the other side of the street was a park that had a scenic trail that led all the way from the outer city to the boarder of a natural park. In every training drill and practice run that I'd done the problem areas that I identified were the highways that, in my mind, should have been congested with civilians trying to flee the infected zones. However, as I looked at the carnage and disarray of the street before me, I realized that people never even had the chance to run for their lives. The entire fucking city seemed to have been eaten alive in an instant. And though I tried to keep myself from becoming awed or frozen by what was happening, my

mind just couldn't comprehend the speed of infection. My momentum slowed as I approached the traffic block, trying to devise a way through or around.

A woman hysterically cried behind the driver's seat of her car as a patch of undead banged continuously against her windows, leaving smears of blood and parts of their leaking entrails across the glass. A police officer with a gash in his neck, spurting blood out of an artery like a sprinkler, fell to the ground, releasing a few final shots into the torso of an un-phased infected. Women, girls, men and boys all screamed and ran—flailing their limbs and arbitrarily striking the undead. And with each failed blow I could see the panic in their eyes boil over. I could see the confusion and shock consume them as they were overrun and devoured, one by one. A motionless corpse suddenly twitched to its feet—no longer human; no longer alive. Just another slave in the soon-to-be billions of ghouls dredging across the world, consuming every last soul. And as I came to nearly a complete stop on the brink of the congestion, I dismounted my bicycle—watching as a dozen or more undead lumbered towards me—their arms stretched and their mouths open.

For a fleeting moment my mind returned to the apartment I had just escaped. I questioned my plan and second-guessed my motivation. Back there, I had food and water enough to last me months and I abandoned it all. I had weapons and munitions. I had a short wave radio and an emergency generator. I had everything, absolutely everything! But it was my excitement in the moment of outbreak that clouded my judgment. The situation called for a fortified response, not the cut and run contingency! I should have seen how bad the infection was rather than simply reacting to the fact that it had finally happened! I should have known better! Why was I so stupid!? After a lifetime of training, pain and sacrifice, when my time finally came, there I stood—like a piece of fucking bait?! One man against hundreds of ghouls, preying and leeching from the living until their hollow empty eyes fell only on me. Until each and every motherfucking one of those god forsaken undead pieces of shit lumbered in my direction! And not only that! There and then, I had the god damn audacity to feel sorry for myself?! To dare to lower myself to everyone else's pathetic sniveling cowardice?! To be afraid?!? NO FUCKING WAY!!! IF THE UNDEAD WANTED ME, THEY COULD COME AND GET ME!!!! BRING IT ON MOTHERFUCKERS!!!!

I pulled my bike up onto my shoulder where a ridged magnet would keep it steady, allowing me free use of my left arm and restricted use of my right. I then ripped my katana off my back with my right hand and yanked my sidearm out of its holster with my left. The ghouls had

now lumbered within a few feet of me, closing in on all directions in a dense circle of undead. Under any other circumstances firing a gunshot would only result in drawing more attention to myself and my location. However, given the fact that every ghoul on the street was coming in my direction for me alone, I really didn't give a fuck. I let out six shots from my pistol, sweeping from one forehead to the next as the hollow point bullets I used blew them into mush. Then, catching outreached arms almost upon me in the camera on the back of my helmet, I swung around, switching the weapons in my hands, and brought the blade across one jugular after another—slicing through throats and severing heads like a gas-powered-guillotine. I backed up in the direction of the fallen, now headless ghouls, stepping over their corpses as I approached the circle of crashed cars. I continued to fire at select ghouls, calculating how each would fall and how the others would fill their places. Then, as a window of space revealed itself, I charged forward—jumping on top of a vehicle and leapfrogging from one car's roof to another. The bulk of the ghouls clumsily bumped up against the wreckage, able to climb but not quickly, trying to follow in pursuit. However, it was the undead, lodged in between cars trying to snatch my legs, that now posed the greatest threat.

I temporarily holstered my sidearm, lifting my right hand to support my shouldered bicycle, while using the other to sever the limbs of the undead before they could reach me. On the boarder of the traffic circle was a patch of road that bridged the short gap between the carnage and the park. Problem was, it was almost entirely filled with ghouls. I lowered my hand from my bike, adjusting my movements to keep it from wobbling too much and throwing off my balance, and pulled two grenades off of my utility belt. I then applied the three-point-pressure necessary to detonate them with a three second delay. An outstretched decrepit arm of a morbidly obese ghoul grazed against my leg, barely missing a grip that could have pulled me down and ended the fight. Fortunately, as the grenades left my hand and entered the crowd of ghouls ahead, another car crashed into the circle—forcing the obese ghoul's arm just inches further away. After a few more quick cuts of my blade, I swung it behind me and slapped it onto it's magnetic sheath. Then, with all the momentum I could build, and the half a second left on the timer before the grenades I'd thrown detonated, I pulled my bike off of my shoulder, held it out in front of me, and jumped from the top of the car over the crowd of ghouls. BOOM!!!

Dust, chips of pavement, dirt and a whole shitload of blood and guts burst into the air, pelting me from beneath an instant before my bike was back under me. Car windows blew out as their alarms and airbags exploded, ringing out in the aftermath of the blast. I hung in mid air for

what seemed like seconds, hoping that whatever body part I landed on was demolished enough to give my tires traction. The area that had been densely packed with the undead now resembled a mortar blast with only remnants of people's bodies twitching on the ground. And as I came crashing down into the blast site, holding my breath for the impact, a grin of elation and adrenaline spread across my face. I landed firmly, able to not only keep my balance but also peddle ferociously through the gap in the crowd before they had time to swarm around me. I exited the traffic circle of doom and approached the park, picking up speed and laughing in between breaths. I just killed at least fifty undead... Bitches.

I quickly peddled into the, relatively, open area of the park and put some distance between myself and the traffic circle. My ears were still ringing from the grenades I'd thrown. I could still taste the pulverized pieces of the road that had been blasted into the air. My adrenaline was running high. I maneuvered around clusters of undead wandering in the park—about as threatening in open areas as vibrating pylons with teeth. But it was when they formed groups that I needed to be careful. And, sure enough, every direction that I turned I saw wave after wave of undead searching for someone to attack. There was no saving the infected, only killing them. But because of the remarkable speed that the infection had spread, I couldn't even slow down to lob off heads or crack a few skulls. I had to keep moving—try to stay ahead of the swarms of ghouls that consumed the area. I cycled quickly, without delay—moving over the grass and across paths. And as I approached each cluster of the undead, I spotted gaps between them and timed my movements with theirs—shooting in between outstretched arms and clamoring hands as I headed at full speed towards the next stretch of my escape.

The park I peddled through consisted of nice patches of green grass running adjacent to a major highway that, at times, ran overhead. I had selected it for my escape because it was a spacious, scenic route that led to seldom used shipping and receiving lots. Those lots in turn connected to open area roads that could easily be peddled on the side of in the event of traffic congestion. These roads then spread out to more secluded routes and then onto safer ground: a natural park filled with overgrown paths and rocky terrain that, by way of connecting to other parks, led almost all the way to Canada. I had made the trip annually during my vacation time every year for the past decade in order to practice. I had never failed to achieve the full distance in less than three weeks time. But this was no practice run.

The maneuvers I had to make to avoid the undead were slowing me more than I'd expected. I constantly had to adjust my peddling speed and burst through packs of ghouls without getting surrounded or knocked

down. Like a game of tag with an entire population. I reminded myself that all I had to do was make it out of the city. But, I had never, ever, ever imagined that the infection would be so bad. The waves of ghouls grew denser, and harder to maneuver through or around; suddenly, I didn't even know if I could reach the end of the park. And, if for any reason I had to stop and completely change direction, it would likely mean I'd never get the chance to start moving again. Undead flooded into the park from all around. I was running out of room—fast. And no matter how hard I tried to cycle or move, I could feel myself slowing down. But then, I heard something bizarre.

My handlebars began to shake as a thunderous noise came from the direction of the highway that crossed overhead of the park. I glanced up to see tips of wings bearing down as the noise turned to a shrill and deafening roar that I now recognized as a descending aircraft—a 747, nose tilted down, going full speed and headed for the area right in front of me. I sat upright on my bicycle and let my neck drift towards the sky just as the plane collided with the overpass. My mouth dropped open in awe, watching chunks of concrete and cars explode in every direction. What remained of the plane shot forward, a roaring ball of flames that tumbled off the highway and spilled out into the park ahead of me. I pulled my head down, hoping that no debris would crush me in the few seconds distance between myself and the crashing plane. The smoldering mess of the remaining aircraft carved through the ground, spinning wildly and breaking into pieces. Charred remains of passengers and seats flipped out of the vessel and I brought my eyes to the ground, trying to determine if there were any route through the scars of dirt and burning wreckage. I couldn't stop—if I did, I'd be overrun and devoured. But I also couldn't see past the smoke of the crash I raced towards. The fields behind me were packed with ghouls. There was no turning back. I had no choice. I peddled harder to build up speed and crouched low on my bicycle, preparing to jump through the smoke.

I flew through the air, leaping over the gap that the crashed plane had gouged into the ground, and landed in a narrow stretch of dirt between a flaming car and a smoldering corpse. I tucked myself neatly through plumes of smoke, hoping with each one that I'd clear it without hitting any debris or undead. Then, as I popped out the other side of the wreckage, my eyes turned to the sky once more as something caught my attention. Numerous other planes either circled overhead or dove sharply towards the ground. Like a flock of birds hit by a flash bang, they wavered and fell—no doubt, full of infected. And, as my eyes lingered on the sight, the full realization of what was really happening dawned on me; the answer to the questions buzzing in my mind finally came. Because if so

many planes had managed to make it into the air with infected on board, all the way past security, and funneled into a vessel that had no business taking flight with wounded passengers on board, it meant not only were its passengers unaware of the infection when they had boarded, it meant that they had to have become infected in a way that they were kept unaware of. That meant the outbreak was planned. And if it was planned, it meant the infection was manufactured. Unfortunately for me, that was not one of the scenarios I'd theorized or planned to survive.

I could see the end of the park about a hundred feet ahead of me. A narrow strip of grass and converging paths, it was in my mind, the final obstacle before a clear stretch out of the city. But as I watched the gaps in between ghouls I could see that the plane crash had pulled every undead in earshot towards my location. Thousands of ghouls now lumbered in my direction, funneling into the very part of the park that I intended to cycle through. The crowd pulsed and swarmed, moving tighter and tighter together—swallowing the open ground like lava. I peddled harder, ducking down low to limit my exposure. Then, with only a narrow fraction of space left between ghouls, I rode my bicycle full speed into the undead hoard.

Hands and arms slapped at my armor trying to get a grip of me as my momentum slowed from their impact. I pushed down heavily on my peddles refusing to come to a stop. The sounds of the moaning undead that surrounded me rang out as loud as the plane overhead had—like the deafening cry of hell, pulling me in and sucking me under. I could smell their rotten breath and taste the festering damp air they regurgitated. My legs came down again and again, feeling fingernails graze my armor. The gap I navigated through narrowed even more but I continued to move forward—only a few feet from an opening. Fingers clutched onto me—finding grips, slowing me down. But I refused to die there. I kept going. Kept moving. And then, just at the moment I was almost pulled to a complete stop, I felt the grip of a ghoul slip and I burst forward, peddling out of the mob and into nearly clear pavement. I made it through. Just barely, I made it through.

## CHAPTER 16: PARADISE LOST

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

Dinner was citrus-misted-lobster with Thai-spiced soy butter, accompanied by puff pastry kebob dumplings stuffed with mixed vegetables and saffron infused honey. I chose to pair my meal with a large glass of sauvignon blanc, delicately holding the stem as the liquid moved gently to my lips. My son Desmond had rushed through his meal, choosing instead to focus on the animated movie he'd selected for the evening. My wife and I sat at a table behind him, facing one another rather than the film. She occasionally glanced to the side, smiling at our son's gleeful laughter and unyielding devotion to the screen. And while she watched him, I pivoted my attention from the picturesque moment our family shared in the theater to the life changing events I had set in motion earlier that day.

I had often pondered what my state of mind would be when the time to renew the world finally came. In the weeks and months prior to this day, while I had become outright despised by my colleagues and those I affiliated with, I had also grown secretly both profoundly excited and anxious by their turn of favor. I had become uncannily emotional and reactive, interpreting every subtle component of my daily life to be some great test of my character and ambitions. If someone asked me about a matter of commonplace business I would grow defensive and short tempered—fearing my plan had been uncovered and ruined. My imminent removal from the company was an inevitable result of such conduct. And, while this decision had been well calculated on my part, the emotions I conveyed and actions I took to achieve that goal were, nevertheless, genuine. I was constantly afraid of something going wrong at the last minute, of someone discovering my plot and annulling the future I'd planned. Nathan, my former friend and confidant, had grown most suspicious of all. He knew me better than anyone and, perhaps, even better than I thought. But even he would not have dreamt of the scope of my life's work. Even he would have considered it madness and beyond the will of a decent man. For while pieces of a puzzle provide clues of what the greater picture may be, those without the courage to consider the truth will never see it.

Alas, when I entered the sequence of commands into my clone console—initiating the infection and finalizing my seemingly impossible task, my mind had remained refreshingly clear. There had been no hesitation or foreboding sense of conscience—no hiccup of childish



morality or sense of wrongdoing. Instead, my heart had beat with visceral pride and elation. My steps had become lighter and my mind was exuberant. As always, I kept some degree of distance between my true emotions and the extent to which I let them show so as not to arouse any degree of suspicion from those living on the island with me. For soon not only would my happiness become inappropriate in the eyes of those I employed and loved, it would become blasphemous. They would conversely, and, understandably, suffer through their perceived decay of the world with fear and dread. They would cry and scream, cower and give up. They would exhibit every manner of emotional devastation, empathy and sorrow, without any regard for the new direction of the future. And, all the while, I would be charged with secrecy in equal proportion to that which I had carried for years on end. Only now, soon to be a figure of hope and promise for rebuilding a better world, my secret would see me regarded as the true hero I was—a model of strength in a time of need—the leader of the new world order.

“I had a chance to speak with Gregory while you were in the lab,” my wife said, dabbing a spot of butter from the corner of her perfectly painted lips. “He said the voyage is going well.”

“Good,” I replied, nodding my head favorably at her mention of my annual ‘coast to coast’ yacht sailing event I held for charity. Many of my friends and closest confidants participated every year and, this year especially, I had strongly urged them to take part. “Has he been able to keep with the pack, or, did he get lost again?”

“Actually, it’s quite funny,” she laughed, removing a dumpling from its skewer. “He said he hired an entirely new crew this year. Then, he had them sail the route in advance under the guise of sightseeing so no one would suspect how embarrassed he’d been after last years fiasco,” she replied, referring to our good friends adventure of being temporarily lost at sea. I grinned and shook my head.

“He should have just plugged in his GPS.”

“You mean he should have just hired someone to plug in his GPS.”

“True. Gregory never was very good at taking care of himself,” I exclaimed as our waiter refilled my glass of wine. I picked up the glass, swirling it gently to aerate the liquid. However, as I did so, I spotted the theater door opening and three of my guards stepped quickly towards our table. My wife turned and glared at them, insulted that they had interrupted our evening, expecting me to discipline them accordingly. However, I already knew why they had barged in. I put my wine down and prepared myself to play dumb.

“I told you not to interrupt us,” I stated, turning my chair to face their concerned expressions. One of the guards came to stand beside me while the others branched out to take posts by my wife and son. He leaned down and whispered in my ear.

“Something’s happening, sir. I think you need to see this,” he explained, his voice clearly disturbed.

“What could be so important that you have to interrupt our dinner?”

“This is,” he replied, handing me a tablet computer displaying a global news broadcast. I took the tablet from his hands and prepared myself for the first glimpse of the chaos I had set in motion.

A camera was mounted on a helicopter, circling above a city. Mobs of thousands littered every corner of the screen, engulfing cars and pressing up against buildings. But it wasn’t the spectacle of chaos that struck me so much as where it was taking place—the White House gates lay broken on the formerly pristine lawn. Billowing clouds of tear gas flowed over the crowd. But with nowhere to run even the most desperate of measures was useless against so many people. Even from the air, blood could be seen smeared across the clothes and faces of almost everyone in attendance—soaked in their hair—forming pools in the grass. Immediately around the building gunshots rang out and a few black suited figures could be seen unloading their weapons into the crowd. It did little to quell the onslaught. The camera cut away a moment later to a ghostly-white-news-anchor, paralyzed with fear. And, as I handed the tablet back to my guard, I did my best to mimic the anchor’s expression. My wife looked on with intense concern. I clenched my jaw and turned my attention back to the guard at my side.

“After I speak to my family I’ll notify everyone on the island that we’ve entered a state of emergency. No one is to be allowed to dock with or enter the island without my consent. Double the watch on all security stations and have boats circle the perimeter constantly,” I explained, immediately utilizing the full force of the security team that I employed on the island. The guard nodded, carefully listening to my every instruction. “Make sure everyone is accounted for and then set up a separate radio channel for them so that they can receive direct updates and report seeing anything bizarre. Also, after I’ve spoken to them, give them whatever phone privileges they want to try and contact their friends and family. But, make it very clear to them that, for their safety, and ours, they cannot leave the island until we have a better idea of what’s happening. Do you understand?” I finished, maintaining just the right tone and speed to convince the guard that I was disturbed by what I’d seen. He nodded and

turned to leave. “One more thing,” I exclaimed, taking his arm and turning towards my son. “I don’t want Desmond to get scared—get that guard away from him... I’ll talk to him in a moment.”

“Ellex, what’s going on?” my wife asked, growing more and more worried with each passing word. The guard left my side and quickly walked away to do my bidding. I drooped my mouth open and shook my head, pretending to be at a loss for words.

“I don’t know... I don’t know.”

## CHAPTER 17: SACRIFICES MUST BE MADE

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 1996*

*The sound of a billowing storm lingered above the distant cries of our names, echoing through the forest in the dead of night. My hand remained pressed over Mathew's mouth, desperately trying to keep him from crying out for help or revealing the location of our secret fort. Sebastian lay unconscious on a ground mat, sleeping his head-wound away until the morning came and we could help him back into town. But for that moment, twitching my eyes in the darkness, trying to decipher the sounds, the only thing on my mind was self-preservation—of keeping the fort secret and finding out who in the hell had made it this far into the forest looking for us. I pulled my hand slowly away from Matthew's mouth and leaned towards his ear to whisper something to him.*

*"Don't make a sound. Do you understand me?"*

*"I'm scared," he responded, keeping his voice low enough that I didn't need to silence him again. He clutched tightly onto my shirt, trying to make himself feel safer.*

*"It's ok, Matt... just relax."*

*"I don't like the dark, Derek. Turn the light back on," he exclaimed, his voice beginning to rise along with his uncertainty and fear. My ears twitched to the distant call of our names once more and I considered what to do. I took Mathew's fearful hands in mine and slid a small flashlight into them.*

*"Here. You can use this. But I need you to promise me something, ok?"*

*"What?"*

*"Do NOT shine it at the entrance to the fort. It could give away our position. Understand?" Matthew ignored my statement, and turned on the flashlight to reveal his petrified expression. I tilted the light down to his lap and away from the entrance. "God dammit, Matthew!" I hissed, moving myself in between the light and the exit. "Keep your shit together! They CANNOT find this place. Do you fucking get me?" I continued, clutching his arm tightly. The kid looked like he was about to piss himself he was so afraid. I lowered my tone and forced myself to be nicer. "Please, just stay calm and don't move, ok? We don't know who's out there. But I'm gonna go look, ok?"*

*"Don't leave me alone, Derek! Please!" he cried, grabbing onto my shirt again and pulling me towards him. I clenched my jaw in frustration, treating this kid's emotions like defusing a bomb.*

*"You're not alone. Your brother's here and I'll be just outside," I explained, taking off my jacket so that it wouldn't rustle as I moved. Matthew began to cry,*

unable to cope with all that had happened and the possibility of more to come. I placed my hands on his shoulders to try and comfort him, bringing his eyes up to meet mine. "Look Matt, there's nothing to be afraid of, you know why?" He shook his head, wiping away tears with his jacket sleeve. "Because you're stronger than you realize; because you're capable of more than you've ever imagined. I believe in you Matt—I wouldn't have brought you here if I didn't. You're my friend now and more importantly than that, you're a part of our team... be strong, Matt—I know you can," I finished, unaccustomed to giving pep talks. Matthew's expression seemed to relax just enough that I was able to lower my hands from his shoulders and trust him to keep from losing his cool. He stopped crying and nodded his head, accepting that he couldn't escape from the situation and that crying about it would only make it worse. I smiled, proud of the kid for manning up when the time came.

"Boys! Derek! Mathew! Sebastian!" the voices cried out, closer than before. I raised a finger in front of my mouth, reminding Matthew to be quiet. He nodded, tightly gripping the flashlight, and I slunk towards the tarp slung over the exit—peeling it aside to reveal the slight trickle of rainfall upon the branches clustered together. I slid my body through the camouflaged fallen trees leading into the fort, making absolutely sure to remain completely silent.

As I emerged from the tangled cluster of trees, poking my head beyond the slope of the hill the fort had been dug into, I spotted dots of light combing through the woods. Flashlights held by unknown figures stepped in all directions, leading me to believe that whoever had come looking for us had gotten lucky wandering this close to the fort. I moved cleanly past a nearby stream, leapfrogging rocks and scurrying up a short hill to get a better view. Our names were called out again and again and as each bellow found its way to my ears I nervously checked the entrance to the fort to see if Matthew would emerge or shine a light, giving away our position. Nothing. Good... Good.

I crouched low to the ground, stepping from tree to tree for cover as I moved closer to the lights. And though the pitch black of the forest kept me from identifying the intruders, I knew my way around the area so well that carving a path to them was as easy as it would have been in broad daylight. The rain picked up and began to fall more heavily from the few leaves remaining on the trees—soaking into those on the ground and removing their crisp sound. My feet moved freely and my eyes peered through the darkness with comfort and confidence. I was a hunter and they were my prey. But as I approached them from their blind sides a quick flick of a flashlight in my direction spread light across the forest and forced me to duck behind a tree. I pressed my back to the bark and held my breath—cursing to myself as the light continued to flood over the area I hid in, but worse still, in the direction of the fort. I slid my cheek along the trunk of the dark side of the tree peering out of the corner of my eye as I finally caught a glimpse of who was looking for us—the police—three of them in total, all of whom I recognized from previous scare tactics and encounters for my alleged 'delinquent' behavior.

*“Boys! Are you out here?!” one of the cops shouted, walking past the tree I stood behind as he moved closer and closer to the entrance of the fort. My heart beat faster, knowing now that unless they found us or had a reason to turn back around, they’d soon be on top of where Sebastian and Matthew were hiding. And while I had complete confidence in how well the entranceway had been concealed, I still didn’t know if I could trust Matthew. I had no choice. It was either act now, or be helpless later. I stepped out from behind the tree, staring at the backs of the police and raised my hands to my mouth—whistling to draw their attention.*

*“Hey!” I shouted, watching as the cops turned sharply around, shining their flashlights on me.*

*I turned, faced away from the fort, and pushed my heels off the muddy ground to make my get away. I could hear the sounds of the police pursuing me. The light from the officer’s flashlights bounced up and down, giving me fleeting glimpses of the forest ahead. I ran hard and fast, weaving in between trees and their bulbous roots with the skill of a deer. And while I knew I’d be able to outrun the cops forever, my plan wasn’t as simple as getting away. I didn’t know how they’d managed to come so close to our fort or what exactly had motivated them. I didn’t know if Sebastian’s parents had sent them because their little angel Matthew had gone missing this time too, or if my parents had sent them to find and lock me away again. But the one thing I did know was that they were trespassing on my territory and I wouldn’t stop running until I’d taken them away from it.*

*“Derek, stop!” one of the officer’s shouted, already out of breath and falling behind.*

*“Why are you chasing me?!” I replied, turning my head around to gauge their distance like fish on the line.*

*“Derek you’re not in trouble! We just need to talk to you!”*

*“Are you kidding?!” I yelled, still breathing well enough to laugh. “Do you even remember the last time we did this?!” I continued, referring to one of my many previous encounters with the local authorities. “You threw me in a cell with no evidence! And then lied to my parents about it!” I finished, getting a repressed flash of one of the worst beatings I’d ever had from my parents. However, as my thought came to an end, I noticed my pursuers footsteps were no longer behind me. I stopped and turned around to see the three officers propping themselves up with their hands against their knees, gasping for breath and shaking their heads. I grinned condescendingly; amused by their fat asses and how unaccustomed they were to moving them. “What do you guys want anyway?”*

*“We don’t give a shit about you Derek—nobody does,” one of them replied, standing upright again and shaking his head. “We’re not out here to play fucking games—we’re looking for the Simmonds kids.”*

*“What for?”*

*"We don't have time for this shit! If you know where they are, we need to know."*

*"What for?" I repeated, about as fond of cops as I was of ghouls. They adjusted their posture, tempted to try and catch me and slap an answer out of me. But, instead, they only shook their heads—knowing that they'd get their chance another time.*

*"Their mother's in the hospital," one of the cops snapped, getting about as angry as he'd been the time I had tried to break into the police station. "She's probably gonna die you little shit, and all she wants is to see her kids again! Now unless you want us to convince your parents to beat your fucking skull in for good this time, why not try being a decent human being for a change and tell us where they are?!"*

*I swallowed hard and clenched my jaw—staring sternly at the officer's face to try and decipher whether or not he was lying. But as I looked at his disgusted and furious expression I realized he was telling the truth. Suddenly, my head jumped from the situation I was in to the protocols Matthew and I had established in case of danger or infection. Because while there were extenuating circumstances put in place to allow for family care and compassion, they did not allow for family to be prioritized above security. And as much as I wanted to accommodate the emergency I couldn't do it without jeopardizing the fort. Because of his head wound Sebastian couldn't move or be moved without help. And because his brother, Matthew, didn't know the protocols yet, he couldn't understand the full severity of the situation—he couldn't be trusted to react rationally, not emotionally. He was a kid after all. We all were. Which is precisely why we had to stop ourselves from behaving like children. There was no decision to make. Sebastian would understand and Matthew wouldn't. It was clear that neither of them could know the decision I was about to make until the next morning—if ever.*

*"They left about an hour ago, before I came out here," I said, accustomed to lying to the police and pretending to be sincere. "They told me they were going home. But, they might have stopped by the arcade first... Matthew was whining about wanting to play videogames all day," I explained, feeling worse than I thought I could—it was the hardest decision I'd ever had to make. It was... real. For the first time the sacrifices we'd have to make for the plan and the security we'd have to enact for the fort were real. The cops stared sternly at me, clearly believing what I said despite the fact it wasn't what they wanted to hear.*

*"All right... which arcade?"*

*"The one on Delancy."*

*"Ok... thanks."*

*"What happened to her?" I asked, needing to know.*

*"She was hit by a car."*

*“And... you’re sure she’s going to die?” I asked, worried about my friend’s mother—she’d always been nice to me; she never asked questions when I slept over without asking, or showed up at their house in the middle of the night.*

*“We don’t know,” he stated, acting like he wasn’t wearing his badge for a change. We all waited for a half a second before anyone spoke again—standing on common ground for the first time. “Look, Derek... it’d help if you came with us. If the boys aren’t where you say they are we might need to ask you some more questions...” one of the officer’s tried to suggest, stepping towards me and abusing the trust I’d given them.*

*“No,” I interrupted, moving away from them with each subtle gesture they made in my direction. “I told you everything I know. But I can’t go home tonight,” I continued, knowing they’d understand the troubled relationship I had with my parents. They stopped moving and let me have my space.*

*“We won’t take you home... you can come to the hospital if you want,” one of the officers suggested, either talking about letting me see Mrs. Simmonds while she was still alive, or just now noticing the gash on my forehead. And while I wanted to go with them and to take back every lie I’d just told them, instead I shook my head and backed away.*

*“Sorry for running before... But don’t chase me this time,” I exclaimed, turning once more to make my escape—disappearing into the woods.*

*This time, I didn’t hear footsteps slopping behind me in the mud or see bursts of light from flashlights in pursuit. This time I was alone and free to run—vanishing into the darkness as I quickly navigated the woods. The cops had already turned back, heading where I’d told them to look, while, unbeknownst to them, I circled around them in the direction of the fort. But as I pumped my arms and legs, running hard and fast, the rain fell heavy on my shoulders and my breaths came short. I slowed my steps, unable to run any longer—coming to realize that it wasn’t just the rain striking my face—I was crying. Tears ran down my cheeks as I released gasps for air. I stopped and leaned against a tree, trying to pull my shit together before I had to face my friends again. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t get the thought of Mrs. Simmonds out of my head—lying in a hospital bed asking for her kids. And there I was, Mr. Fucking Know It All, telling her she couldn’t have her dying wish. I’d never felt worse in my whole life. I just fucking stood there, crying like a baby—reminding myself over and over that these were the kind of sacrifices that had to be made.*

*When I finally returned to the fort, able to keep from crying and pretend like nothing had happened, I was happy to see that there weren’t any lights or abnormalities that would give away our position. Matthew had listened to me—he’d kept his wits about him and his head on his shoulders. Despite the fear he’d felt and the burden of his wounded brother at his side, he’d trusted me enough to stay hidden and had waited patiently for my return. I took a satisfied breath and let some of the stress of the evening*



*unravel. I slid carefully in between branches and peeled aside the protective tarp, hearing the slight rustling of Matthew's jacket as I moved into the darkness.*

*"Matt, how you doing?" I whispered, stepping over the part of the ground that I knew Sebastian lay unconscious on.*

*"Can I turn the light on now?"*

*"Sure, go ahead," I replied, as a beam of light struck me in the face halfway through giving Matt permission to turn his flashlight on. I squinted and lowered myself to the ground to sit beside him. He looked at me with uncertainty— his eyes were still pink from crying, but his cheeks were dry. I mustered a smile, swallowing the guilt tearing me up inside and he smiled back*

*"Who was out there?"*

*"I don't know," I lied, reaching for a towel to dry myself off before I'd try to fall sleep. "But they're gone now... and... everything's gonna be ok."*

## CHAPTER 18: DON'T PANIC

Sebastian Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

After ten failed calls to Anna's cell phone, I shoved the front door open and hobbled down the stairs, rustling my keys around in my hands. I'd left my cane behind, too hopped-up on adrenaline to be distracted by the pain of moving my bad leg. I breathed heavily—quick panicked gasps of disbelief and fear. Not for myself of course, but for my family. My son Archer had run away from home just moments ago. My wife, Anna, and our two twin girls, Sarah and Susie, had driven into the city to visit the farmer's market, while I sat at home crippled and useless as always. And now, after seeing the bloody carnage of the first moments of infection on the news, I couldn't think straight. I couldn't move quickly or smoothly. All I could do was fumble the keys around in my hand, flipping clumsily through them as I came to stand by my truck, parked out front of the barn.

I yanked the door open and dove inside, flinching from the pain shooting up my leg. I slid the key into the ignition and started the truck, hearing the engine roar to life. I glanced out the rearview mirror to see our dog, Elvis, standing on the porch—curious and worried. And despite every bit of my brain yelling at me to move faster and find my family, I froze in that moment—staring at the chained door to the barn. I sucked in a pensive breath as the memories of my childhood forced their way into my head—as the time in the fort and the years of training for this day flooded over what I was thinking. Because despite everything I was feeling, I knew better than to do what I was doing. The growling engine of my truck kicked exhaust against the dirt and rung out across the empty fields—a beacon of noise to every living person and lumbering undead in ear shot. I'd left the lights and TV in the house on; a wind chime on the porch fluttered in the breeze; the smell of Elvis and his marked territory littered the ground and every single damn sight burned my mind and tormented my soul. It was happening. What I'd spent so much time preparing for and praying would never come true was actually happening.

My hands gripped the steering wheel tightly and I rocked back and forth, fighting with myself to make a decision. I didn't know where Archer had disappeared to or where his girlfriend lived. I didn't know how far in or out of town my wife was and whether or not the infection had completely engulfed our area. And as much as I wanted to burst down the road and act like the hero, I knew that, if I did, I'd not only be risking my life, I'd be abandoning the only place our family knew to go in

case of an emergency. If I left home and they came back, they wouldn't know what to do to survive. If I left and found them, there was little chance we'd be able to make it back. And if I went looking every which way like so many other panicked and senseless people would be doing at that very moment, I'd almost certainly be offering all of us up like lambs to the slaughter.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!!!" I screamed, slamming my hands against the steering wheel as a furious tear forced its way down my cheek. I ground my teeth and reached for the gear ten times, stopping just short and running through the situation in my head over and over again. Don't panic—remember, assess the threat and then make your move. Take a deep breath, calm down; don't just react, decide... What should I do?

I turned the truck off and put the keys back in my pocket, staring at the open road leading away from our home. It was too much of a risk to go looking for them. And as much as it ripped my heart out to have to sit idly by and wait, I had no other choice. I opened the door and stepped out of the vehicle, in a daze of conflicted sorrow. I pulled the front seat of the truck back and removed the rifle and box of ammunition that I kept behind it. I closed the door and leaned my back against it, feeding rounds into the rifle and filling my pockets with the rest of the bullets. Elvis ran to my side and tried licking my hand to cheer me up, but I just smacked him away and hobbled past on my way back to the house. He kept his distance but followed behind me all the same, mindful of the fact that I was trying to hold back the tears.

I dropped my slow old ass down onto the front steps, put the rifle by my side and sunk my head into my hands, tormented and alone. All I could do was sit and wait—praying to see them again. Hoping that they were safe, and if they weren't that they'd died a good death before the undead could... Jesus Christ... my heart pounded like someone was punching me in the chest and I looked up to the heavens, begging please—please God, please. Let me see them again. Let them come home safe and sound. I knew this day would come and I understand why you've brought it, but not all men deserve your wrath, not my family. Please God, please.

I sat there for I don't know how long, jumping back and forth from every thought and emotion I had in me. To say that I was overwhelmed didn't do justice to all the shit rushing to the surface. I'd never felt so terrible in all my life. And yet, as time ticked away, I couldn't help but feel a creeping calm in the back of my mind as if God had heard my prayers. Despite all my fears and uncertainties, I felt hope. My eyes

wandered along the horizon—barren fields and rustic beauty, clear blue skies and empty roads. And then as I combed the view for movement I spotted something that brought me to my feet and my heart to a standstill. A tiny dot moved full speed down the road as it appeared over the horizon, heading my direction. I took a few baffled steps forward, squinting to try and pinpoint the make of the car—hoping and praying all the while. And then, when it came within a few hundred yards of the house an elated smile of jubilation and relief spread so wide across my face my eyes practically shut. I released a joyous laugh of celebration at the sight before me—my wife’s car was headed home. I slung my rifle over my shoulder and moved out towards where the road and the driveway met to greet her. But as I nearly reached the pavement I stopped dead in my tracks, spotting something else moving in the fields. Lumbering silhouettes of a handful of people stood out in the middle of the grass where it didn’t make any sense to go. They were still a few hundred yards away from the house, but as the noise from my wife’s car passed them by, I could see them change direction and follow behind her.

By the time Anna’s car got close enough that I could see the expression on her face I knew immediately that she’d seen terrible things. The twins, Sarah and Susie sat in the back seat, pale and frightened. Tears streamed down my wife’s cheeks as she screeched the car to a stop and threw off her safety belt. I hobbled over to her as she popped open the door and stood up, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing me tight. She sobbed hysterically, holding on for dear life. I nestled my head against the side of hers, looking out at the lurking figures approaching us from all directions. But I didn’t have the heart to tear Anna off me just yet. I waved to the girls in the back seat as they emerged, moving slow and cautious as if they were going to be ill from all that they’d seen. They clutched their stomachs and leaned against the car. Anna let me go and I hugged them both, kissing them on their foreheads and pulling them close. And while I thanked God for seeing them home safe, I also counted fifteen figures approaching the house—the closest at about a hundred yards. I turned to look at Anna as she noticed what I was looking at.

“Get the girls inside,” I instructed, pulling the rifle off my shoulder. Anna winced at my demand, afraid of everything that had happened but never a coward. She stepped over to my side and put her hand on the barrel of my rifle, pushing it down towards the ground.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she asked, splitting my attention between her and those approaching us. Anna didn’t know about the infection; it was the only thing I’d never told her.

“You need to trust me,” I replied, taking her hand off the gun.

“Trust you? What are you doing with the gun, Seb?”

“Get the girls inside, lock the doors and start making calls to try and find Archer,” I stated, raising my voice as I noticed a few more people emerge from over a hill.

“Where’s Archer? He didn’t come home this morning?” she exclaimed, straining her voice as panic started to set in.

“He ran away with his girlfriend and...”

“When?”

“About an hour ago. I don’t know exactly, but...”

“We need to go find him!”

“We can’t! Go inside the house and,” I tried to say, fighting to get a word in that would calm Anna down or help her understand what was really happening.

“What the hell is the matter with you?!” she screamed, shocked by my cold disposition and wandering attention—the closest undead were within thirty yards now—their arms outstretched and mouths open. And as I locked eyes with one, seeing into its empty stare and hearing its hollow moan, my adrenaline started pumping and I lost all patience with my wife.

“God dammit, Anna! Listen to me!” I shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders and locking eyes. “You remember the fort I showed you when we were younger?!”

“What the hell does that have to...”

“It was in preparation for today! We knew this was going to happen and now that it is, you can’t waste time asking me questions or we are all going to die! We can’t go looking for Archer, he has to come to us, and you have to get the girls inside and do exactly what I said!” I yelled, as harsh and unyielding as I’d ever been with her. Anna stared at me in horror—not for the tone that I’d used but because she could see that I meant every word that I’d said. And while she didn’t understand that the figures approaching us weren’t people anymore, that they weren’t our friends or neighbors, she could see that there was nothing that could be done to stop me from doing what I was about to do.

“Mommy, I feel sick,” Susie cried, her hands held tight around her sides as she struggled to remain standing. Anna turned around and gasped as Sarah fell to the ground as pale and weak as her sister. She rushed over to them and helped them up, holding their hands as she moved towards the house—giving me a parting glance of quiet

desperation. I tried to look strong for her sake, hearing the sound of ghouls approaching close behind me. I took a deep breath and prepared myself.

“Lock the doors!” I shouted, holding my rifle up and turning to face the undead.

Lance was the name of the first poor bastard I lay eyes on when I swiveled around. He had worked at the convenience store not far from us. He was always friendly and a little quiet; the rumor was he could play quite the piano and even tutored on weekends. My wife and I had once thought about sending our girls to get lessons from him until they decided on a guitar and bass instead. But now that he'd been infected, everything that made him who he was was gone. I reminded myself I was doing him a favor by pointing my rifle at him. I closed one eye, looked down the sights, and blew Lance's head off, turning my attention to his boss Jerry next. I realized I recognized just about everyone the closer they got and with each shot of my rifle, the memories I had of them ran through my mind—memories of better times and a soon to be forgotten world. A world that would change forever and leave just about everyone I knew and loved behind. It broke my heart putting them down. But I knew not to think about it too much until after the shots were fired and the fields were cleared. I lowered my rifle, looking at the fifteen shell casings littering the ground and turned to head back to the house. For the moment, I'd stopped a swarm from forming. However, at the same time, I'd made enough noise to ensure more would come and who knows how many more would follow them.

My heart beat quickly but my mind stayed clear. Strangely, killing came naturally. And while it certainly didn't feel good, it didn't feel so bad that I'd hesitated either. I was proud of myself for that. My family was safe for that. And as I slid my key into the front door, hearing Elvis's bark from the other side of it, my eyes returned to the open road hoping to see Archer headed home before I locked up and began fortifying. Nothing, nobody... God dammit... my son was still out there. I waited a moment, gripping the knob and hoping. But it didn't take long until I forced myself to face the truth. If he was still out there it meant I'd probably never see him again. The last thing any parent ever wants is to outlive one of their children. It's a feeling worse than death itself, and standing there on that porch, I felt the overwhelming hurt of going on without my son. Tears of grief streamed down my broken face. I turned the knob, stepped inside, and locked the door behind me.

## CHAPTER 19: RUN

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

As I turned away from the infested town, intending to head back into the forest and hike as far away from civilization as I could, I noticed I wasn't alone. A car had crept its way towards me and parked in the middle of the road about twenty yards back. I cursed myself for not hearing it coming. But given the chaos of mangled cars and surging undead on the other end of the hill I stood atop, I didn't linger too long on the idea. A man popped open the driver's side door and stood up. He held a shotgun and was smart enough not to point it at me for a split second before deciding I wasn't acting as crazy as everyone else seemed to be. There were a few other people in the car with him and I could see blood on one of the backseat passengers as they clutched the wound, pale and frightened. The sound of his car's engine radiated out into the surrounding forest and down the hill. But, as I quickly turned to check behind me, I was fortunate to find no undead had noticed him yet. I returned my attention to the man as his voice called out loud and foolishly.

"Get in the car!" he shouted, thinking he was doing me some kind of favor. I shook my head, hoping he'd give up quick, get back in the car and drive the fuck away. He didn't. "Come on! Hurry up!"

"Turn your engine off," I cried, trying to keep my voice just loud enough that he could hear and just quiet enough that the undead wouldn't.

"What?! Just get in! We have room!"

"Shut up," I hissed, anxiously glancing around as the number of distant screams from the living grew fewer and fewer. "They're attracted to noise. Now turn your engine off."

"This is your last chance!" he shouted, too panicked and afraid to listen to a word I said. "We need to leave, now!"

Suddenly, the wounded passenger that I'd noticed in the back seat leaned over and sunk their teeth into one of the people in the car. They screamed hysterically—high and shrill—drawing the attention of the man with the shotgun. He cried out 'Jesus Christ' and turned his gun towards the car, firing a round into the side of the infected and blowing off its arm. It continued to bite the other passenger, unaffected by the blast, and the man took aim again. I swallowed a deep breath and swiveled around

to see that now nearly every undead on the hill had taken notice and would soon overrun our location. The man continued to fire his weapon and scream, bewildered and shocked by the actions of those he had tried to save. I shook my head and ground my teeth out of disgust for the horrendous stupidity of my fellow man. I turned towards the woods and began sprinting, trying to distance myself as much as I could from the area, trying to escape the now hundreds of undead that dredged in my direction.

The forest circled the perimeter of the town from what I could remember of the map. And as I moved swiftly in between the trees I made sure to keep a close eye on my proximity to its borders. The sounds of screams and gunshots from behind me stopped after a short while and the distant moans of the undead lumbering slowly in my pursuit faded with them. I breathed heavily, my rifle swiveling back and forth in front of me, ready and waiting for the next threat to show itself. And sure enough, it didn't take long to find me. Stragglers wandered the woods, popping up every few minutes the further I ran. I didn't dare fire a shot to put them down or stop to bust open their heads. I quickly came to realize they had already surrounded me—coming from all directions as soon as the man's shots had rung out in the air. The only thing working to my advantage was the slope of the land as I spotted a steep 45 degree hill that dove down sharply into a ravine. Covered with trees and loose dirt, it was the only way for me to try and escape. I stepped up to the edge of the slope, looked behind me at the approaching undead and stepped forward, using the many trees to brace myself as I descended down it. Undead clumsily stepped over branches and roots, falling flat on their faces and tumbling down the slope behind me—snapping spines and breaking limbs as they crashed into trees. I dove from one sure footing to the next, avoiding the fallen lumps of ghouls, caught against trunks, that used whatever extremities still worked to try and grab hold of me.

As I came crashing into another tree, I leaned down and picked up a thick rock wedged between its exposed roots. I brushed it off to find a secure grip and looked around for the next tree to jump to, spotting a moaning undead lodged where I needed to land. I held the rock, just small enough that I could swing it with one arm and just big enough that I could bash in skulls with it. Then, as I torpedoed down the hillside, I coordinated my lunge with the swing of my arm—cracking the head of the ghoul lodged against the tree. Splatters of blood and goo shot out of its freshly opened brains and I flinched, trying to avoid the spray from its head as much as I did the length of its reach. I paused once more, looking down to the base of the hill to see a group of nearly twenty ghouls beginning to form—looking right at me but unable to climb the hill. I



thrust myself up against another tree for support, stopping my descent abruptly and watching as a few more undead tumbled past my position. I breathed harshly and looked around for another way out—catching eye of a fallen cluster of trees that stretched above the reach of the undead. The only problem was it lay nearly fifty yards away horizontally. Meaning I'd have to move slowly along the steep slope to keep myself from falling—all the while praying that no fallen-undead-boulders would come crashing down and pull my legs out from under me. Their moans grew louder and closer. I could feel their empty eyes upon me; reaching out for their next victim. I took my first steps, swinging my rifle around my shoulder and holding my arms out from my sides to keep my balance.

The tender moss under my feet gave way with each step and I swung my arms to cope. My feet slid down the slope and I pulled the rock in one hand down sharply to stop myself from falling, using it like an anchor to move more easily. I looked up the hill as I heard the sound of branches snapping and leaves rustling to witness another undead who had walked itself over the edge of stable ground. It smashed into the ground, face over ass, building up momentum and coming right at me. I stared at it anxiously, watching it bounce one way then the other. But as it came closer, I judged it would land right on top of me at any moment. I dove forward, dodging its blow, but losing my grip. I slid down the hill and flailed my arms out, grabbing a tree just before I entered a clearing of dirt leading to the patch of ghouls waiting below. I pulled myself up and spit out a mouthful of leaves, hearing more and more undead fall down the slope towards me. The rock I had been using as an anchor was gone, and my bag had nearly fallen as well. The place of downed clustered trees that I needed to reach was still forty or more yards away. I swore at myself and clanked my head onto the trunk of the tree my chest pressed against, watching my rifle swing off my shoulder and dangle by its strap. Then, looking at its finely cleaned barrel a grin spread across my face as I realized what to do. I pulled the rifle into my hands, double checked for falling ghouls, and stabbed it into the dirt, bridging the gap between myself and the next tree I could use to stay standing.

The herd of ghouls below followed me each inch that I moved, crawling along the patch of even ground at the base of the slope. I leapt from trees like a squirrel, praying with each move that the barrel of my gun would hit a firm enough patch of dirt to keep me from falling to my death. Then, as I reached the last tree, before the cluster of branches and trunks that I could use as a bridge over the undead, I looked up once more to see a remarkable sight. Hundreds of undead now walked towards the edge of the hill, seconds away from crashing down it into those bellow—like a heard of buffalo unknowingly running off a cliff to their

deaths. And just as they started piling over and thundering down, I took my final leap for the tangled heap of fallen trees—grabbing hold of one and pulling myself underneath it for cover.

The roaring stampede of falling undead, bouncing off trees and crashing into one another, sent bodies flying in every direction. I hung on for dear life, praying that the trees I dangled from would stay lodged where they were despite the beating they received. Leaves and bugs fell out of the dying wood, covering my face and chest. I shook my head and fluttered my eyes, trying to get a glimpse of what was happening. But before the dust and debris cleared the air, I noticed a growing calm where the rumbling had been. The undead had stopped falling down the slope.

A tangled heap of hundreds of squirming bodies lay only twenty feet below me—broken and mangled parts of moaning ghouls, no longer able to rise to their feet and follow in my footsteps. I hoisted myself up and flung myself onto the top of the fallen trees I had hung under for cover. I dusted myself off and took a seat, banging my rifle against a log to try and clear the dirt out of the chamber. Then, looking out over the sight that I would have never imagined in a million years, I let out a hardy laugh of disbelief. The undead had killed themselves. And those that could still moan and move, lay under, or squished against, so many bodies that they'd likely end up buried by corpses where they were. Of course, I wasn't out of the woods yet, figuratively or literally. Because as much of a thrill and a surprise as it was to have survived the impossible, a few hundred dead ghouls was nothing in a town with a population of nearly fifteen thousand. I let myself laugh, savoring the moment's solace before I'd have to run again.

## CHAPTER 20: DUSK OF THE DEAD

Derek Riggs, Los Angeles, 2018

I was on edge. I peddled quickly, repeatedly reminding myself to slow down and pace the trip. I was ahead of schedule—I was making record time—what I needed to do was settle down and stay alert. But I couldn't. My hands were trembling from the excess adrenaline pumping through my system. Dust and dried sweat lined the creases of my face—residue from explosions and high intensity cardio. I could feel pebbles of pavement wedged into my armor—shrapnel from the grenade blast—and I worried constantly that they'd torn through, punctured my skin, and infected me somehow. I worried that I'd dropped or lost something during my escape. I worried that I was riding towards a hoard of undead the size of a city. And I worried that for all the training I'd done and the plans I'd made, luck was still out of my control. I was fortunate enough to have escaped the city. But until I reached the forest, I stayed on edge.

The sun gleamed down on me as I traveled the empty highway, spotting the occasional crashed car and disoriented ghoul. Birdcalls fluttered from the forest, ringing out over the adjacent highways, reminding me of the moans of the living dead. But despite the severity of the infection that I had run from, away from the city the roads were empty, the air was quiet, the sky was clear, and the world of man was missing. My mind returned to my escape earlier in the day, to the way I had to escape, and the many bizarre things I had witnessed along the way. I had already come to terms with the fact that the infection was deliberate. But what I couldn't grasp was the intent of those who had masterminded it. I couldn't imagine their greater plan or the underlying significance of the chaos that had been set in motion. And, as I thought about it, I realized that I didn't particularly care either. I had never loved people or the foolish and fickle society they'd built. I had never invested my time in their world or played make believe that I could fit in and convince myself, through sheer force of will, that I was happy. Instead, I had made do. Instead, I waited and trained for it to all be over—seeing my fellow man as no more than a brooding enemy of ignorance and inevitable infection. A smile spread across my face as the ideas passed through my head—fondly remembering the lyrics “it's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.”

As the evening approached, I reached where I had decided to spend my first night. Not far from the scenic route I traveled was a clearing at the base of a few rocky hills, crammed full of boulders the size

of cars and buses. It was the kind of terrain that could be moved across slowly by the living and not at all by the living dead. It gave me a spacious view of the surrounding forest, nearby road and distant town. There was a particular boulder that I had grown fond of the previous times that I had made the trip. My bike jittered on my shoulder with each leap, as I entered the center of the rock-filled-clearing, in search of a bed. Then, just as the sun teetered on the horizon, I reached my destination, removed my helmet and took a seat. I breathed deeply and let my shoulders relax. I removed some of my gear and double-checked that I had everything. I ate an energy bar and drank my ration of water. I popped my backpack off and pushed it to the end of the rock, using it as a pillow. Then, as I stared up at the cloudless star-speckled sky, I tried to sleep.

How the fuck did everyone get sick all at once? Solanum, the virus that causes those infected with it to turn into ghouls, was naturally occurring, extremely rare and anything but ubiquitous. It had been documented over history multiple times in infrequent cases of the undead rising. Although the public remained largely unaware of it, and those who tried to report on it were often ignored or mocked, it was, as it always had been, very real and very unpredictable. But the headline on television announcing the disaster had said ‘Global Riots Break out’—Global! Different continents, different governments, environments and people. And yet, everywhere, everyone was sick and dying. Everywhere the disease was spreading. It was unbelievable—it was diabolical—and as I lay on that rock, looking up at the heavens, I pondered whether or not even the most savage and unyielding men would have been able to do this?

Perhaps God was a factor. Perhaps this was the rapture and I was in limbo, hunted by the messengers of hell. An interesting idea I suppose, but it didn’t change anything. I was still alive. And as far as I was concerned, unless four horsemen, a flying carpenter and a brigade of angels showed up to ice the cake, God wasn’t to blame for this, we were. Instead, somewhere out there someone thought of themselves as God and had decided to act accordingly. I wondered if those responsible were already dead, and if not, what precautions they’d taken to survive. Who knows, maybe I’d bump into them someday in the future—maybe as the new world emerged from the ashes of the undead, I’d be able to witness the transition of the species and pinpoint those who’d survived, how they’d done it, and the questionable circumstances of when they’d elect themselves to be our new leaders. Because, after all, if the infection was deliberate, and God wasn’t involved, someone had a plan, an ambition, an agenda, and the means to destroy everything man had accomplished and remake it in their image. I respected that—it made sense to me. And with that thought lingering in my mind, I drifted to sleep.

The sound of a falling rock pulled me from my slumber and I awoke to find my hand already on my rifle. I stared through the darkness of the surrounding area, spotting something moving in between the boulders. I reached for my helmet and slid it on—staying quiet and low to the ground. I powered on my night vision and held my breath as two figures came into focus, climbing in my direction. I toggled the display on my helmet to thermal—seeing deep red and orange body heat signatures—whoever was approaching me was still alive. And, as I returned to night vision, I realized one of them was helping the other walk, while the other dragged their feet and clutched a wound. I paused a moment, considering what to do as they came close enough that I could hear the sound of their exhausted breaths and rattled words.

“I need to lie down,” the man exclaimed, holding his hand tightly to the bloody makeshift tourniquet wrapped around his arm. “I feel like I’m gonna faint.”

“Ok,” the woman beside him replied, helping him to the ground so that he could lean against the boulder I sat upon. I remained silent and attentive, watching like a hawk from my perch above them. “I know you’re hurt, but we can’t stay here long—they might still be following us,” she stated, noticeably distressed, anxiety tainting her tone. Based on what she’d said, I could only assume they were being followed by ghouls, which meant soon, the clearing I’d found refuge in, would no longer be safe. Fuck. I’d only slept a couple of hours.

“I know, I just... I feel like shit, Aggie—my stomach’s killing me, I can’t stop sweating and I can barely even feel my arm anymore.”

“Ok... lemme look at it,” the woman replied, unwrapping the man’s tourniquet. He sucked a breath in between his teeth and flinched. I stared curiously down at his arm until the wound was fully revealed—a deep, mangled, bite mark. The woman, Aggie, gently took his arm and rotated it, using the light from her cell phone to illuminate the area. I glanced up as she did so and peered into the distant night—spotting lumbering figures as they emerged from the trees. “I don’t know... it looks like it’s changing color.”

“Fuck,” the man whispered, too weak to fully voice his evident frustration. “I need to get to a hospital—I could lose my arm.”

“I told you, it’s not safe—I was talking to Karen when she was driving there and before she cut out she sounded really...” Aggie started to say, so disturbed by the events of her day that she struggled to finish her words. “She was terrified ok? She was screaming and... I don’t fucking know, ok? I don’t know what’s going on!”

“I’m sorry. It’s ok, it’s ok,” the man replied, using his good arm to hold and console her. She cried on his shoulder for a moment, squeezing him tight. I glanced at the figures in the distance once more—surging from the trees and headed towards the mounds of rock. I knew that they would be unable to reach me where I was. But if I didn’t leave before they surrounded the area, it would mean I’d starve and die where I sat. I looked down at the two doomed lovers and considered what the humane thing to do was. I shouldn’t have hesitated at all, and I certainly shouldn’t have intervened or stayed to watch, but a visceral part of me had connected to their plight and what I knew was about to happen to them. I couldn’t just leave them like that. I quietly secured my gear and prepared my equipment for the road. I removed my blade from its holder and returned my attention to the couple below me, giving them a final moment together as they noticed the now not so distant moans of the approaching undead.

“Jesus Christ, they’re coming!” Aggie gasped, pushing herself to her feet and staring fearfully into the night. The man stayed where he was—leaning against the boulder, taking long slow breaths. “Come on, we have to go!”

“I can’t move, Aggie,” the man said, his tone frail and afraid. The woman knelt down beside him and quickly retied his tourniquet.

“You have to. Now come on,” she replied, trying to lift him to his feet. Her back buckled as she struggled to pull him up. The man’s limbs were limp and I could see his drooping eyes flutter as he struggled to breathe—he wouldn’t last much longer. “Come on! You have to get up!”

“I can’t,” the man wheezed, a tear descending his cheek just as Aggie lost her grip of him. The man fell to the ground. She tried to move him again and again—refusing to leave him behind. I softly rotated my blade in my fingertips. The ghouls reached the edge of the field of boulders and began to clamor against them and spread out along its boarder. I couldn’t wait any longer. I needed to make a decision. I looked down at the woman as she knelt beside her lover, pleading with him to get up. He took short infrequent gasps and tried to say his last words—desperately holding on to life for her sake. I couldn’t hear what was said, I could only hear her weep. But the moment I saw the man’s eyes close and his body go limp, I stepped to the edge of the boulder I was perched upon and made my decision.

As I left the boulder-field, I considered my actions. There would be more days like these than there would be moments of glory, of battle and blood. In the days to come, I knew I would see towns of families and

their memories swallowed by disease. I'd see desperate degenerates take advantage of their newfound freedoms—of the lawless nature of man. I would see a society transformed from spoiled house pets to wild animals, and witness the rebirth of carnage and what little remained of compassion. The woman, Aggie, was innocent. She was blameless and healthy. Her only sin was living in a society that had raised her to believe in fairytales—that had conditioned her to be afraid and guard her ignorance from the truths of the real world. But she didn't deserve to suffer for that. She didn't deserve to be eaten alive by the undead and locked in their hell of lumbering the world, preying on countless others just like her. No one deserved that. And while I could see that she wanted to live and that she was willing to fight to survive, I could also see that her strengths wouldn't save her. I had made my decision and I had made the right one. I had spared her by ending her life.

## CHAPTER 21: ANNOUNCEMENT

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

I had taken my wife aside to try and calm her down after she received news of the spreading disaster in the outside world. Her first thought was to try and get in contact with everyone she had ever known and loved. Her first reaction was shock and disbelief; fear and sorrow. Like a roadmap of intersecting pathways, her emotions and thoughts convoluted and collided with one another, leaving only remnants of the intelligent sharp-minded woman I had wed. My words to her were both soothing and true—a rare occurrence for me. She listened with splintered attention, staring through space as the magnitude of the situation slowly dawned on her. I reassured her that we were not only safe where we were but we were going to stay that way. Our son was going to grow up and we were going to grow old. I told her that we would message our friends, who were sailing my annual charity event and redirect them to the island. And I told her, above all else, absolutely nothing about my involvement in, or foreknowledge of, the disaster. Eventually, she regained her composure. Then, after our conversation had concluded, we walked to our son Desmond's room, where he waited for us under the supervision of his nanny.

“Thank you, Clara,” I stated, addressing the nanny as she stepped towards the exit of Desmond's room—she seemed worried and afraid. I couldn't help but wonder what she'd seen and what she knew. “I'm going to be making a very important announcement soon. Report back to your quarters and make sure you keep your radio on. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Vussel,” she replied, quickly exiting the room. No doubt my staff had become alarmed by the increased security and instructions to disregard their duties and listen to my upcoming address. But the significance of what I intended to say to them had little to do with their state of mind and everything to do with rebuilding the future. Frankly, I couldn't care less whether or not they felt safe or important. I couldn't care less whether or not they had lost their families and the lives they'd had together. Their only true significance in the new world I would make was to serve me as I endeavored to build it. Of course, they would never understand that. And, so, I intended to coddle their egos and emotions like naïve children. As had been the timeless custom of great leaders before me, I would have my people believe in themselves rather than live in reality.



As my wife took a seat beside our son, I realized I needed to stop reciting my upcoming speech and focus on the moment. My wife, at this time in our son's life, was better able to connect with and understand Desmond. We had decided that she would break the news to him. I would be present as a figure of authority to sooth his confusion and reassure him that everything would be ok. But, unlike my wife, I refused to treat him like a child. Confessions she had made in previous arguments revealed that she interpreted my callous behavior to be a distancing mechanism used to keep myself from experiencing the joys of fatherhood and from becoming vulnerable to my son's affection. And, while I agreed with her assessment, I also refused to change. My responsibility as a father was not simply to love my son, it was to love him only as much as would make him a man. And in the climate of destruction and decay that I had set in motion, it was more important for me to be unyielding than compassionate.

"Did I do something wrong?" Desmond asked, no doubt troubled by the fact that our movie night together had come to an abrupt and unexplained end.

"No sweetie, you didn't do anything wrong," Hannah replied, placing her arm around him and cupping his shoulder. "But something happened today that was very, very bad and your father and I needed to discuss what to do about it."

"What happened?"

"We don't really know, but... all over the world people are fighting with each other and... behaving strangely," my wife explained, being so vague that her explanation would no doubt leave more questions than answers in Desmond's mind. I waited across from them, seated beside one another on the bed, and tightly pressed my hands together, fighting against a sudden compulsion to intervene. "We're safe here, and you don't have to worry about anything. But we can't go home until we know everything's ok. Do you understand?"

"I guess," he muttered, clearly at odds with what my wife had told him. He didn't understand, and from what she'd said and how she'd coddled him, how could he? Suddenly, I realized that it was not in his, hers, or my best interest to regard the situation as anything but what it truly was—I had to tell them the truth. Not about myself of course, but about the threat we faced.

"It's a disease," I stated coldly, interrupting the calm and angelic poise that Hannah had tried to deliver the news to our son with. She turned to look at me, surprised and confused by my words—I had lied to her and said I didn't know what was happening. "It causes people to

become sick, die and then attack, kill, and infect other people. There is no cure, there is no treatment, and, worst of all, those that are infected with the disease, while technically deceased, remain animated and dangerous for as long as their bodies are able to sustain them. If we leave the island, we will risk infection. If anyone, who has been exposed to the disease, attempts to approach the island we will also risk infection,” I explained, watching the confused expressions of my family morph to fear and disbelief. “This place is our home now and, likely, we will not be able to leave it for some time. Your mother’s right, you don’t have anything to worry about and we are safe here, but what’s happening is far worse than people realize and will persist far longer than they are willing to accept,” I finished, a baffled silence following my words. My wife stared at me, unable to fathom how I knew everything that I’d just said. I allowed my stern expression to subside as I pretended to feel remorse, bowing and shaking my head to give her the illusion of guilt.

“How do you know that?” Hannah calmly asked, her tone bordering on accusation. Her eyes were intense and unyielding, demanding answers for not only why I hadn’t told her earlier, but, also, why I’d decided to tell her now in front of our son. I paused a moment for dramatic affect and took a deep breath.

“I’ve seen it before, Hannah—it was one of Nathan’s projects at Eden corporation,” I lied, placing the blame for my creation on the shoulders of my former best friend and confidant. “I tried to shut it down, but... I couldn’t. I’m sorry I lied to you... I just refused to believe this was happening and I didn’t have the courage to admit it.”

Hannah swallowed the tears building in her eyes and I could see that my confession had evoked an even more devastating emotional response in her. She looked at me with a broken heart and heavy shoulders but she never took her arm away from our son or allowed him to see how my words had pained her. Desmond seemed to accept my explanation, for better or worse, comforted only by the fact that we sat at his side and had reassured him of our safety. He was too young to know the world well enough to miss it and, instead, appeared concerned only for us. Hannah returned her attention to him and gently rubbed his shoulder.

“Your dad has to go talk to the other people on the island, but he’ll be back before you go to bed, ok?” Hannah said, deciding for me that it was time to leave.

“Is it safe?” Desmond protested, worried by, and not fully understanding, the explanation I had given him.

“I’ll be fine, Desmond. Stay with your mother and I’ll see you soon,” I replied, hesitating a moment before I left, unsure of exactly why Hannah had suddenly turned so cold—I had said the disease was Nathan’s project, not my own—I had even claimed to have tried to stop him. But as Hannah’s hurt and angry eyes looked up from our son and glared at me I decided it was best to address the matter after I had notified my staff of the outbreak. I stood up, nodded goodbye to Desmond, and exited the room.

The personalized radio devices that I had outfitted my staff with served many purposes. First, and foremost, they provided a quick and easy means of communication between those on the island. Second, they allowed me to track the whereabouts of everyone within 1,000 feet of the shoreline. And third, they allowed me to listen in on what everyone else was saying. As I walked to the section of my mansion where I intended to make my announcement, I casually flipped through the chatter of my employees. Some had seen news footage of enormous riots; others had been trying unsuccessfully to reach family for hours. Some had even gone online while the internet still worked and searched through panicked emergency forums looking for answers. But what was clear from everyone’s conversations was the depth of their ignorance, shock, and brooding sense of panic. I adjusted the microphone on my desk and pulled my chair forward, finally able to make the announcement I had waited so long to give.

“This is Ellex Vussel,” I began, sure to keep my tone somber yet firm. “I’m making this announcement to inform you of why you’ve been pulled away from your work and why you were told to report to your quarters,” I continued, trying to think of what they’d want to hear—of what they’d want me to say. “By now you’ve no doubt seen footage on the news of what’s happening and how shocking and unimaginable today has been. We’re all struggling to understand exactly what’s happened and why people are behaving like this. I’m sorry to say, I don’t have the answers yet. I’m sorry to say that my attempts to communicate with the outside world have gone unanswered. And, I’m sorry to say that we’ve found ourselves stranded on this island without a clue whether our not our friends and family are safe. It’s eating me alive thinking about it and I’m sure you’re feeling the same... but, I wanted to take the time to let you know that anything I can offer that will help you contact your loved ones is yours at a moments notice. I’ve instructed my security personnel to give you whatever phone privileges you want, and I’ve already begun emitting an emergency signal in case there are others out there, less fortunate than us, that we might be able to assist... For the moment, we’re safe here. And I will do everything in my power to protect the well-being

of everyone on this island. But, until we know more, it's important that we try to stay strong for one another; it's important that we don't let our concerns get the better of us and lose our sanity to despair. For all we know, things could be back to normal any moment and we'll all be able to go home again... But, until we know, this island will have to be our home and we will have to try and make the best of it," I finished, turning off the microphone and losing my fabricated tone of empathy. And yet, despite my self-assured indifference, I could not help but linger under the weight of the announcement I'd made.

I sat quietly for a moment, looking out my office window at the streetlights surrounding the paved pathways that connected each building and home—my own tiny city built for just this occasion. It was beautiful; it was paradise. In that moment I felt a rush of emotion and visceral gratitude for everything I had done. I felt my tense and hardened disposition give way to relief—finally accepting that those who could discover my plot were dead and those who could stand in my way were gone. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, holding onto that moment for as long as my mind could keep from wandering. But I soon drifted to other worries and potential dilemmas. That I had spontaneously decided to inform my wife of the disease suddenly returned to my mind and I experienced a strange moment of confusion—not fully understanding my own behavior. Perhaps I had told her because I couldn't stand seeing Desmond misled. Maybe it was because I believed she'd be thankful to know the truth about what had happened and would look to me admirably for answers and advice. Or, most likely, and hardest for me to accept, I had told her because I simply couldn't hold it in any longer. Strange. A lifetime of lies and secrecy and on the first day of my new world order, I deviated from my long standing plan, I succumbed to a foolish need to genuinely connect with my family and in doing so embarrassed myself and endangered my lie—what if she told other people on the island that I knew in advance? What if Desmond mentioned it to someone? Semantics and rationalizing mean nothing to the fists of an angry mob, and even family could turn its back in desperate times. Suddenly, I was more tense and concerned than ever, for despite the fact that my rivals were dead and the slate had been wiped clean, I remained the same.

The closed door to my office slowly opened and Hannah stepped inside. Her cheeks were stained with fallen tears and her expression was bare and broken. I stood up from my seat, just as fragile and unwound as she was, and approached her—hoping that she had come to reconcile our bitter exchange in Desmond's room. However, as I came to stand before her, intending to kiss her and hold her tight, her hand shot up from her

side and slapped me hard across the face. I stood stunned, dismayed and confused. She shook her head—hurt not angry.

“You’ve seen it before?” she said, reciting my words from earlier in the evening. I recalled my stern unwavering admission of knowing about the disease before it had spread—just then realizing that Hannah had placed her anger and despair from the days events on my shoulders. I stared at her, quietly hating her for blaming me. Not because she was wrong to do so, but because she wasn’t supposed to. “How could you? How could you?!” she demanded, shoving me in the chest. I took a step back and tried to think of what to say. But as I looked into her eyes, full of betrayal and sadness, I didn’t want to lie to her anymore. All I wanted was to hold my wife and allow myself to share a moment of honesty. But, as always, the lie came first.

“You don’t know the weight I’ve carried,” I exclaimed, unable to keep myself completely buried. “You don’t understand the choices I’ve had to make.”

“No, I don’t. And I don’t care! Look at what’s happened, Ellex! Just look at it!” she cried, as my eyes turned to the open door, double-checking for anyone who might overhear us. “How could you?!” she yelled, her words cutting me in a way I had assumed impossible.

“I did everything I could!” I screamed, referring to the misinformation I had given earlier about Nathan supposedly designing the disease. “I tried to stop him!”

“Then why didn’t you?!” she demanded, shoving me again. I grabbed hold of her and tried to keep her from fighting anymore. But she was too devastated. Tears streamed down her face as I clung tightly to her shaking wrists. “Why didn’t you stop him?!” she asked again, breaking free of my grip. I pulled Hannah close to me and held on to her as she cried. Her hands continued to bang against my back with decreasing force until, eventually, we held each other. We stood together, my head pressed against hers as she wept on my shoulder—sharing a moment of honesty.

## CHAPTER 22: COMING OF AGE

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2002*

*On my first day of high school I walked uncomfortably down the halls, eyeballing everyone and speaking to no one. I clutched my backpack strap tightly, reminding myself of the retractable blade I'd stitched into one of its pockets since I was only able to remain calm if I had a weapon in reach. But on that particular day I was more unsettled and worried than I had been in years, and the knife I kept in my bag did little for my state of mind. Because, for the first time since Sebastian and I had been pulled apart and sent to different schools when we were younger, we were now going to be put back together. The only problem was that Sebastian hadn't showed up at the place where we had agreed to meet that morning; he hadn't even called or emailed to adjust when or where that was supposed to be. And as I stood at my assigned locker, combing the crowds for any sign of him, I remembered that the last time we were supposed to gather supplies for the fort he had been late, that the last time we were supposed to run drills he had cancelled. And despite his constant assurances of commitment to our group and its protocols, in that moment, it dawned on me how many excuses he had recently given and how many easy-way-outs he had taken. He and I needed to have a talk. But most of all, we needed to have the meeting that we had scheduled for earlier that day. Because while I remained confident that I could kill anyone around me, the fact that I was unfamiliar with the terrain, or, how to escape in the event of the infection, made me feel as claustrophobic and frantic as an animal backed into a corner.*

*"Derek!" Sebastian shouted from down the hall. I turned my head sharply to the side, spotted him waving me towards him and relaxed a little bit—able to at least stop imagining that something terrible had happened to him. I pushed my back off the locker I'd been leaning against and walked quickly in his direction. But as I came to stand by his side, intending to get an answer for why he hadn't shown up earlier, I noticed that someone else was with him. Another kid our age stared curiously at me and nodded hello despite my disconcerting frown.*

*"Who's he?" I asked, referring to the mystery kid at Sebastian's side.*

*"Derek, this is my friend Gary, Gary, this is Derek," Sebastian explained, gesturing back and forth between us.*

*"What's up?" Gary exclaimed, modeling Sebastian's cool guy demeanor. I ignored his question and turned my attention back to getting an explanation out of Sebastian.*

*"Where were you?"*

*“Hub?” Sebastian replied, his mouth drooping open for a second after he spoke. Then, as he combed his mind to try and figure out what I was referring to, he let out a gasp. And as I watched his expression change, I realized that he had forgotten about our meeting and had only just now remembered it. I was not happy, to say the least.*

*“Oh shit!” he stated, smacking his hand on the back of his neck and releasing a laugh. “Sorry dude, I totally forgot... Shit.”*

*“Yeah, well, we still need to...” I started to say, stopping as I remembered that Gary was listening in. And, since the last thing I wanted to do was speak candidly about the fort or the established protocols of our survival plan, I needed to devise a code so that Gary wouldn’t figure out what was actually being said. I adjusted my bag in my hand, lowered the tone of my voice and stared intensely at Sebastian, hoping he’d understand what I was about to say. “What I mean is... You know how I don’t like eating cold cookies, and that I only like them when they’re warm? Well, my mom’s bringing them out of the oven right now, so we have to go if we’re going to make it back before school starts,” I explained, watching a flutter of recognition in Sebastian’s expression. He nodded and took a deep breath, thinking of how to respond in the code I’d used.*

*“Yeeeeeah, right,” he sighed, squinting with uncertainty. “I don’t think we have time before class starts. I mean, you know I only like warm cookies too, but I’ll eat them cold if I have to,” he replied, surprising the shit out of me—not only had he missed our designated meeting time, but now he was making excuses for it. I took an aggravated step towards him and scowled.*

*“Since when in the fuck will you eat cold cookies?”*

*“Dude, it’s not like that. I’m just saying, it’s the first day of school, and I don’t wanna miss...”*

*“Miss what?! Something more important than warm cookies?!” I shouted, appalled by Sebastian’s conduct. Gary remained by his friend’s side, bewildered by the argument that we were having, and raised his voice to interject.*

*“Uh, guys? My mom packed me some cookies for lunch. If you want you can just have those and microwave them or something,” Gary suggested, trying to be amicable about something that he didn’t even understand. I turned angrily towards him and pointed a finger at his throat.*

*“Shut the fuck up, Gary! Nobody gives a shit about your cookies!”*

*“Woah, woah,” Sebastian interrupted, taking a step to the side to stand between Gary and me. “Look, Gary, we’re not actually talking about cookies. Thanks for your offer but... can you just give us a second alone please?”*

*“Yeah, sure,” Gary stated, giving me an unimpressed parting glance as he turned to walk down the hall.*

*"Where'd you find that douche bag?"*

*"That douche bag is my friend, Derek. So try not to tell him to shut the fuck up until you know him a little better, ok?"*

*"I have more important things to worry about than his feelings! And, so do you, in case you forgot that too!"*

*"Dude, just calm down for a second," Sebastian exclaimed, as the bell for the first class sounded and the hall full of kids started to flow into classrooms. "I am sorry I forgot the meeting. We can do it after school and sweep the premises then, ok?"*

*"Are you joking?" I gasped, disgusted by the impracticality of his suggestion. "You want us to occupy uncharted territory for six full hours? And, then what, just pray that if the infection happens we'll get lucky and escape?"*

*"For fuck's sake dude, it's not 'uncharted territory,'" Sebastian groaned, pressing his fingertips on the sides of his temples. "We've played sports in the school fields here, we've been to events in the gymnasium and we've even screwed around in the halls when my parents used to volunteer on election days!"*

*"Yeah, like three fucking years ago! Jesus Christ, Sebastian, now you're telling me we're supposed to operate according to outdated intell too?!"*

*"We're not operating, we're going to school! And it's not intell! They're our childhood memories!" he yelled, breaking his calm demeanor. "Jesus Christ yourself, Derek. You can't even just stop and compromise for one second to see how ridiculous this is, can you?—We will do a sweep of the premises after school."*

*"What in the hell's the matter with you?" I stated, no longer just angry, I was hurt. "How can you do this?"*

*"Do what?"*

*"Turn your back on the protocols—on everything we've worked so hard on for so long?"*

*"I told you, I'm not," Sebastian protested, annoyed by the fact that I was calling him on his cowardice.*

*"Bullshit," I snapped, unable to keep the anger I felt from boiling to the surface. I shook my head in disbelief and pointed a stern finger at Sebastian. "If you want out, it's your own fucking funeral—don't think that you can just come crawling back when the infection happens," I finished, turning my back on him and walking down the hall.*

*"Hey!" he exclaimed, following behind me. "It's the first day of school, God dammit! I'm not gonna get myself blackballed again just because you can't wait until later! We're not in elementary anymore Derek, what we do matters now!" he finished, grabbing a hold of my arm and turning me towards him. I pushed his hand off me and took a step back to distance myself from him.*



*“Don’t you tell me what matters,” I snarled, noticing Sebastian’s defensive posturing start to interfere with his nonchalant demeanor—he was growing upset and fast. “I’m not gonna waste my time arguing with a pussy about why he’s turned into a pussy! What I need to worry about is if this kind of bullshit runs in your family!” I screamed, referring to whether or not I’d still be able to trust Sebastian’s brother, Matthew. However, as the words left my mouth and the idea dawned on me that I could lose both my friends and everything I cared for, I noticed how utterly furious what I’d said had made Sebastian. His eyes flared open and his fists clenched. Then, as he made his move in my direction, I let my backpack fall to the ground and raised my hands up to guard my jaw.*

*Sebastian and I had practiced fighting for as long as we’d gotten along. But that had only been the case because we needed to prepare for the oncoming infection. And when it came to fighting each other for real, the only time I could remember squaring off against him was for a fleeting moment years earlier in the forest. But now, his long arms swung furiously past my head as I ducked and weaved in between them. Sebastian had always been bigger and stronger than me and I had always been smaller and faster than him. But when one of his right hooks landed hard against the side of my head only to be followed again and again, I stopped thinking with any degree of rationality, unable to treat this fight as if it was anything like the ones we’d had before—now, I was out for blood.*

*I exploded forward and thrust my forehead into Sebastian’s nose, feeling a splatter of blood spray across my face. Sebastian recoiled for a moment, stunned that I had gotten through, only to look up furiously and come at me even harder than before. He grabbed hold of my shirt and pulled me towards him, locking my head in a chokehold as he repeatedly banded me against a locker. I tried to pull free, squirming and wriggling as best I could, but he was too furious and too strong. So, after being rammed into the locker a few more times, I let my weight sink me down just enough to punch in his knee and buckle his balance. We both came crashing to the ground and a moment’s grapple saw me wind up on top of him. But before he could flip himself over or push me off, I was able to wrap my arms around him, clinging tightly to his back like a baby chimp. I pushed my forearm around his throat to try and choke him unconscious despite his attempts to get me off. But, once I locked him into that position, we both knew that he had only a matter of seconds to either get me off him, or lose the fight. And while, at the time, I had assumed I’d won, to my surprise, Sebastian was strong enough to not only stand up with me clinging to him, but to quickly take the few steps between where we were fighting to a nearby water fountain. Then with the last remaining breath of oxygen that had made it to his brain, he jumped as high as he could and turned his back toward the fountain—smashing my head on the nozzle and causing me to lose my grip. Blood gushed out of the fresh wound on the side of my head, and Sebastian pushed himself along the ground to try and get away from me—gasping for air while clutching his broken bloodied nose. I lay motionless on the ground, twitching my head to the side to try and keep the blood from pooling on my face. Then,*

*after catching my breath, I sat up to lean against the row of lockers opposite the ones that Sebastian was resting on.*

*Our eyes met and then drifted back to the linoleum floor where smears of blood covered nearly every inch between the two of us. The scene looked more reminiscent of someone slaughtering a pig than two friends having a fight. Sebastian had managed to catch his breath again, and I had come to the conclusion that while I was going to have a new scar on my head, it didn't feel like there would be any permanent damage or concussion to have to deal with. And despite both our best efforts to seriously injure one another, fortunately, all we'd managed to do was inflict flesh wounds. I looked back up at Sebastian after observing the carnage of the scene to see him doing the same thing. A smile spread across his face and I nodded, understanding his thought process without saying a word—releasing a chuckle myself.*

*“Good move,” I stated, referring to the acrobatic leap into the air that had knocked me off him.*

*“Thanks... I think you broke my nose again,” he exclaimed, delicately pinching one of his nostrils for a moment to try and slow the bleeding.*

*“Yeah, well, at least you don't need stitches,” I replied, touching the thick flap of skin that dangled off the gash on my head.*

*“You wanna come to the school nurse then?” he asked, pushing himself off the ground with one hand while keeping the other against the lockers behind him for support.*

*“Fuck that, I can use the practice—I'll probably just head over to the fort,” I said, trying to look on the bright side of what had happened.*

*“Seriously?” Sebastian groaned, losing his positive disposition once more. “The last time you stitched yourself up it got infected.”*

*“And I learned a valuable lesson for this time,” I stated, rising to my feet.*

*“You were hospitalized too, remember?”*

*“Yeah, well, there aren't going to be hospitals after the infection hits, so why bother getting used to them?” I asked, unable to appreciate Sebastian's pampered view of medical care. He didn't respond at first and instead gave me a blank stare of indignation.*

*“Derek, seriously, let's just go to the nurse,” he suggested again, trying to pass my words off as if I didn't really mean them. But I did, and I resented his contradiction. I shook my head in response and Sebastian let out an exasperated sigh as he turned to look down the empty hall. And, as I watched the frustration build on his expression, I realized our fight wasn't over—this was bigger than just missing a meeting or screwing up on one of the protocols—Sebastian was different and we were growing apart.*

*“Just say it,” I exclaimed, finally accepting the reality of the situation.*

*“Say what?”*

*“That you want out.”*

*“I told you, I don’t want out. I just want to... fuck, it’s not one or the other, ok? I mean, we have to be able to compromise about some of this stuff or we’re gonna end up prepared for the infection and completely unprepared for everything else.”*

*“Just say it,” I repeated.*

*“No.”*

*“Then I’ll say it for you.”*

*“Fuck you, Derek,” Sebastian exclaimed, refusing to let go even though I knew he wanted to. “That’s not your decision to make.”*

*“You’re right. I’ve already made my decision—it’s up to Matthew now,” I said removing my cell phone from my pocket. “Go to the nurse and then meet us at the fort,” I instructed, scrolling through my contacts for Matthew’s number. Sebastian took an infuriated step towards me and I slowly tilted my head up to look him in the eye—knowing that he was thinking about the same law of our protocols that I was—the fail safe contingency we had come up with so that if anyone ever tried to leave the group, the two people who remained faithful would get to decide their fate.*

*“And exactly what makes you think that we won’t just decide to kick you out?” he snapped, foolishly believing that his brother would only think along the lines of family.*

*“I don’t know what he’ll do,” I admitted, hitting the call button on my phone as I raised it to my ear. “All I know is that after today either you’re gonna come to your senses, or, one of us is gonna die.”*

## CHAPTER 23: HIDE

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

I moved swiftly through the forest clutching my rifle. A heavy wind thrashed through the leaves above me, drowning out the distant moans coming from the mangled heap of undead that had fallen down the hillside in my pursuit. I was fortunate to have survived as long as I had in such close proximity to an infected area. However, judging from the last map I'd gotten a look at, the lay of the land was against me, and descending down that slope would mean I'd have to find a place to crawl back up it. I made sure to stay hidden in the forest as I circled the town, hoping with each step that I wouldn't come across, or, lure more ghouls towards me. But I knew that it was only a matter of time until another group would form, hunting me endlessly until I had nowhere left to run. And, as I came across a thinning tree line that looked out over an industrial plant, I decided it was time to stop running and make up my mind about what I was going to do.

I kept repeating the same number in my head—population 15,000—each and every one of which was now either dead, undead or about to be one or the other. And while one of the cars that I had seen on the road, before the undead swarmed me, appeared as if its passengers were ignorant of what was happening, the other car that had forced me into the forest was already full of infected—maybe even coming from another town. And since I had been isolated from civilization and buried in the forest for days before, I had no way of knowing exactly how long this had been going on, or, for that matter, how far the infection had spread. If I tried to run, I could very easily come against a wave of evacuees or ghouls flowing out of nearby towns, I could very easily wind up in the middle of nowhere without basic supplies or any idea of where I could go next. However, despite all the horrible possibilities of what running might bring me, the idea of staying put was just as damning if not worse. Population 15,000—Jesus fucking Christ.

My moment of reflection stopped sharply when I heard the sounds of guttural moans coming from behind me. I turned and raised my rifle—looking down the scope to see multiple figures lurking in my direction. But, as I swiveled the gun back towards the industrial plant, I noticed what I should have seen when I first arrived, but, foolishly hadn't—a generator, humming mildly behind a gated fence—practically a ghoul magnet. And, not surprisingly, not far from the generator, a large group of undead began to wander out of the trees, looking right at me. I

lowered my rifle and took a deep breath, forcing myself to decide whether or not I wanted to risk running through the clusters of infected, hoping that they wouldn't be able to swarm me, or... the industrial plant—a huge building with smoke stacks still churning and high up walkways overlooking the town—a huge building no doubt filled with stairs, ladders and all kinds of terrain unfit for the living dead. I didn't hesitate any longer—I'd made my decision.

I charged down the hill, running at full speed, and leapt onto the grated fence surrounding the building—climbing it and throwing myself over before the ghouls could get close to me. Just inside the gate were a number of barrels and crates on pallets, stacked atop one another, creating multiple pillars that formed paths leading to the back entrance of the plant. I ran down the center isle, looking from side to side as I moved, but saw no one on the inside of the fence. Then, just before I reached the door, I heard the ghouls that had been following me reach the fence and begin pounding slowly on it, or, stumbling up against it to try and find a way around—it would only be a matter of time until they either found a way in, or broke their way in. I pushed down hard on the door handle, only to clench my jaw in rage—locked. I tried again and again, harder than before, but it wouldn't budge. Ghouls were now pouring out of the forest—densely packing around the flimsy grated fence that surrounded the plant, making it impossible for me to do anything but try and find another way into the building. I paced frantically for a moment, eyeing the walls of the plant for an emergency exit or fire escape that I could use to get in—eventually spotting one around the side of the building, at least fifteen feet above me and completely out of reach.

“Fuck!” I screamed, kicking a crate as the sound of hundreds of moaning ghouls grew damn near deafening. There was no way I could get to the fire escape ladder with it still fastened out of reach. And, while the idea of shooting at it came to mind, I knew that I was more likely to irreparably damage the lever holding it in place than I would be able to knock it lose. I was trapped. God fucking dammit, I was trapped!

I slammed my hands against the wall and forced myself to try and calm down—to think rationally and come up with a solution—there had to be something I could do, something I could use to get up there, but what?! I quickly jogged around the yard, looking in between identical rows of crates and barrels, praying to find anything to climb with. The hoard of ghouls that had surrounded the plant followed me as I moved throughout the yard, pressing hard against the fence and bending it in my direction. But then, just when I felt like I had no chance left at all, I spotted a forklift parked beside a stack of empty pallets. I ran over to it, coming within arms reach of the swollen, undead filled, grated fence, and, checked

to see if the lift was a push start or if it needed a key—releasing a relieved sigh when I found the key was still in the ignition. I sat down, turned it on, and began backing up in the direction of the fire escape. But when I came to a stop and turned my head around to pull forward, I noticed that the place I had moved the forklift from had been right in front of a gate. And, once again like a shortsighted idiot, I had led the ghouls right to the way in—watching in horror as the weight of them pressing against the gate buckled the flimsy latch over and over again. They'd be through any moment, and I would have nowhere to run.

I drove the forklift as quickly as I could, managing to maneuver it under the fire escape. Then, as I swiveled around to stand on top of the two metal spikes protruding out of the lift, I heard the latch break and the gate fling open. I quickly shot my arm forward and hit the switch on the dashboard, causing the forks to slowly rise into the air towards the fire escape just as the swarm of ghouls poured around the corner of the building and surrounded the lift. Their arms reached up for me as they moaned longingly to pull me to my grave, just missing my ankles as I was lifted up. The masses of ghouls bumping into the forklift caused it to wobble and sway—shaking me in mid air and almost knocking me down. I slapped my palm firmly against the cold metal of the fire escape ladder and pulled myself up, climbing quickly until I reached a stretch of walkway. My heart was practically beating out of my chest as I hoisted myself onto sturdy ground again. I rested my back against the wall and closed my eyes, having barely escaped with my life. But, once more, I was marooned in the center of a sea of undead with no safe destination in sight and nothing but the meager supplies that I had left in my bag.

The walkway I was on extended from the fire escape along the side of the building. The door closest to it was locked and clearly hadn't been used for a very long time. I looked down the length of the path and quickly moved towards the other end, hoping to find a way in. I glanced down through the metal grating under my feet as I moved, watching as the swirling mass of undead took each step along with me—waiting for me to fall into their arms. I soon came to the next door along the walkway and stopped to try and pull it open—locked again. I pounded my hand against the door in frustration and screamed for any kind of luck or fortune, but I knew fate wouldn't listen. The only two ways into the building from where I stood were dead ends, and the only way back down was into the arms of the undead. I leaned against the cold metal railing and looked out over the horizon of the town I had intended to call home, on the town that was supposed to give me a fresh start and wipe away everything I'd done. It was a beautiful day—sunlight poured through the cracks in the clouds, illuminating the decimated buildings and streets

before me. Birds flew in the sky, without any concern for what was happening in the world of men, and as I stood there, I finally accepted that I couldn't run anymore—I was trapped and I was going to die.

My rifle dangled on its strap, fastened around my shoulder, and I looked at it wondering how many shots I would fire into the crowd of ghouls before I'd decide to aim it at myself. But I didn't want to die—I wasn't ready yet. I slowly slid down and sat quietly, trying to find some kind of peace before the end. But I couldn't think straight with the noise coming from below me, and every time I tried to decide what my last thought would be, Sebastian and his treacherous wife Anna came to mind. So, instead, I tried to think of the first girl I'd slept with. I tried to think of the ones I'd let get to know me or the ones I actually felt something for. But still, my mind kept coming back to my brother and Anna—to what had happened between us and how, maybe, if we had been better people, we might be together now. I sucked in a breath and stopped myself from thinking anymore—practically on the verge of tears. Then, as I looked out over the nearby town once more, I noticed two things. The first was the sound of crackling noises coming from above me—windows that overlooked the walkway I was on were slowly being smashed open from the inside by the undead who had heard my screams of frustration. But the second thing that I noticed, was a length of rubber-coated-power-cables that ran from underneath the mid section of the walkway I was on to the town not a quarter of a mile away from me. And, whether I liked it or not, those cables were the only shot in hell I had of surviving another day.

Suddenly, shards of glass rained down on my shoulders as the windows above me burst and a few clumsy undead fell down beside me, some crashing onto the walkway while others spilled over the railing, falling on top of those below. I shot to my feet and sprinted down the walkway towards the section above the cables. But as ghouls staggered to their feet both in front of and behind me, lumbering in my direction with outstretched arms and open mouths, I had no choice but to swing both legs over the railing, grab onto the grated floor, and dangle underneath it, trying to find a place where I could let go and fall the six feet to the wire below me—praying it would either hold my weight or snap and swing me clear of the fence. The undead above me leaned down and clawed at my fingers, clutching to the metal grating—lowering their salivating mouths to try and bite them off. But as each one's mouth came within inches of my fingers, I moved my hands forward again and again, eventually swinging myself directly over the wire. I took half a second to stop swaying from side to side, and then, as I felt the cool saliva of a ghoul's mouth touch my fingertips, I let go and fell towards the power line.

My arms wrapped around the cable that, fortunately, sustained my weight when I fell onto it. The force of the fall, however, caused the strap fastening my bag to unbuckle—sending all of my supplies except my rifle, sidearm and knife down into the open arms of the undead. I dangled from the cable and looked over anxiously as the screws and welds that fastened it to the wall adjusted from the burden of my weight. But it wasn't just me that threatened to break the cable loose, it was the undead still trapped on the walkway, who, now that I had fallen, began to lean over the railing and fall towards me, barely missing the cable, time after time. I threw my arms ahead of me one after the other, climbing forward along the cord as quickly as I could toward a tall wooden utility pole on the other side of the grated fence. But just as I crossed over that fence, I felt the cable buckle from the impact of a ghoul falling directly onto it, causing it to break free of the wall and send me swinging forward like Tarzan.

“Fuuuuuuck!” I screamed, looking down to see the still active current of power shoot through the electrical cable I clung to, cause it to thrash around inside the cluster of undead, shocking some while completely igniting others into flames. I was swung hard into the side of the utility pole, barely able to deflect myself with one leg, while simultaneously trying to climb up, hopefully, before the cable I held snapped and sent me to a fiery-electrical-undead-death. But from where I was I could see that the screws on top of the utility pole were also starting to buckle, and the rubber on the outside of the cable was starting to crack, sending sparks shooting out from above me as I climbed. Yet, despite everything that had happened and all the odds against me, I managed to make it to the top without breaking the cable or being electrocuted. I quickly grabbed onto the next stretch of cord and lifted my legs around it, dangling upside down forty feet above the ground along side the treetops. The sounds of moaning ghouls faded as the fire engulfed them, burning holes into their vocal chords as they mindlessly scattered to try and find another way to get at me. And, while I knew that those who stayed in one piece after the fire went out would follow me the entire length of the cable, I climbed on. At the very least, I was out of their reach for now.

Like a monkey I shimmied along each length of wire between utility poles, pausing at each one to look down at the few charred undead still able to walk. With each pause that I took, I noticed more and more fresh bodies appearing beneath me, following me all the way into the center of the town and the belly of the beast. It took me nearly two hours to climb the full distance, until, eventually, I found myself dangling from a stretch of power cables that extended near enough to a store's rooftop that I could swing myself off without getting hurt. Then, with the last



remaining strength in my arms, I flung myself off the cable and landed hard atop the black gravel covering the rooftop. Only, this time, I didn't spring to my feet or worry about where I would go next. This time I lay completely still, breathing furiously, in a daze of disbelief that I had just endured every kind of misfortune and survived.

The sounds around me were haunting—only car alarms and the collective moans of the thousands of undead that filled the streets could be heard. Windows shattered under the constant barrage of ghouls, tearing through what remained of the city in search of survivors. Sweat poured down my face and I managed to swallow a thick mound of saliva that had built up in my mouth, desperate for water and rest. The sun now lay behind a thick patch of clouds, but unfortunately not the kind that would bring rain. And, as much as I wanted to continue to stay still and savor the fact I was alive, my training and the protocols that had been drilled into my brain when I was younger incessantly nagged at me. I couldn't stay still long. After a few more seconds, I forced myself to get up and observe the area for threats and potential supplies.

The rooftop I stood on was only slightly larger than that of the average home but fortunately was completely flat. I leaned over the side to try and get a look at the banner protruding from the front of the building, able to read part of it and come to the conclusion that I stood atop an antique store—not exactly the kind of supplies that I needed. I then looked around me at the other stores within leaping distance from the roof, but all of them were equally useless. Until, about a block away, down a line of buildings, I noticed someone waving their arms, standing on top of another roof with a group of about fifteen other people, nearly all of who soon began to wave themselves—survivors. I uncapped the scope of my rifle and raised it up, staring down the sight and smiling largely when I saw the faces of others who were still alive—and, from the looks of it, suffered no wounds and had no blood on their clothing. I lowered my gun, double checked how well my laces were tied, and then began leaping from rooftop to rooftop until I found myself face to face with the group of survivors.

“Where the fuck did you come from man?” a fat man wearing a baseball cap asked as I made the final leap between buildings and rolled to a stop beside him. I stood up slowly, sore and aching, to look around. As my eyes scanned the crowd of terrified and bewildered people, I spotted a few individuals lying down while others gave them water and wiped sweat off of their brows. I ignored the question the man had asked and pointed to the people on the ground.

“Have they been bitten?” I asked, already reaching for my gun.

“Why? Are you a doctor?”

“Have they been bitten!?” I shouted, moving towards them to inspect further.

“What do you mean, bitten?” a woman in the crowd asked.

“Like what happened to Arnold!” another woman suggested.

“Which one’s Arnold?” I asked, coming to stand by the eight people who were lying flat on their backs—pale and sickly.

“He didn’t make it up in time,” a man stated, stepping in front of me to try and calm me down. But the last thing I was going to do was relax until I knew for certain that each and every one of the people on that roof were clear of infection. “Now, we’re all just as upset as you are, but lets take things one step at a time. Are you a doctor?”

“Yes,” I lied, giving any excuse I could to get close to the sick people lying on the ground. “Now get out of my damn way.” The man stepped aside and stopped trying to be amicable. “Move back, everyone,” I instructed, fortunate enough to have encountered a group of people who were actually willing to listen—everyone on the roof that wasn’t laying down immediately gave me the room that I asked for.

The first person I knelt over was an elderly man who had turned as white as I’d ever seen anybody. Sweat streamed down his forehead and soaked his shirt collar. His eyes rolled around in his head and his hands remained pressed firmly against his stomach. He appeared to be in pain and on the verge of death. However, as I looked over every inch of him for stains of blood or any indication of injury, I couldn’t find anything other than an old surgical scar. I moved onto the next person, and then the next, only to find the same thing over and over. And while I tried to entertain the idea that perhaps they were only in shock or, maybe, a really bad flu was going around—the striking similarities between all their symptoms kept me from being so relieved. Something was wrong here and the feeling I had in my gut wouldn’t let me rest until I knew what.

“How long have you been sick?” I asked the final person on the ground, who seemed the most coherent of them all.

“I don’t know... a few hours.”

“Hours?”

“Yeah... four maybe.”

“Fuck,” I snapped, rising to my feet and walking towards the group of people on the other side of the roof, unable to understand what in the hell was happening. Because once Solanum, the virus responsible

for creating the undead, enters the bloodstream it takes only a matter of minutes or less to reach the brain and stop the heart. But these people all claimed to have been sick for hours and not even one of them had a single injury. It didn't make any sense.

"Are they gonna be ok?" a crying woman asked, clutching a finely knit sweater around her shoulders.

"I don't know," I replied, moving towards the edge of the building to look out over the sea of undead that moaned below us. Other people in the crowd did so also, seemingly as confounded as I was. "What in the hell happened here?"

"They just went crazy," the fat man wearing the baseball cap replied as a woman beside him began yelling to a friend of hers that she recognized in the swarm of ghouls below, hoping for some kind of response or reason for all the madness.

"She can't hear you," I stated, stepping past the fat man towards the increasingly hysterical woman.

"Yes, she can!" the woman screamed, refusing to listen to what I'd said. She continued to yell, too confused and distraught to do anything but panic.

"Doc, what the hell is going on?" someone else asked.

"I don't know."

"Everyone just lost their damn minds! Started trying to grab me, and now they're all just moaning like animals! It doesn't make any sense!"

"It's the rapture you damn fool!" another person chimed in, suggesting the only thing they could think of that would cause people to behave like this. "This is what our sins have brought us."

"It's a disease," I stated, drawing the attention of a few people but for the most part, I was drowned out by the crowds.

"What kind of disease?" the fat man asked.

"The worst kind," I stated, just after which a piercing scream came from the other side of the rooftop. I pushed myself off the short ledge I had leaned against and pivoted my view to see that the pale elderly man was now standing and had snared the woman wearing the finely knit sweater—his eyes empty and his mouth open as he pulled her towards him, sinking his teeth into her hand. The crowd of people released horrified gasps and I rushed forward, slamming the butt of my rifle into the old man's face and knocking him free of the woman. But as I lifted the rifle again and again, trying to crack the freshly formed ghoul's skull

open before he could take another victim, the fat man wearing the hat tackled me and brought me crashing to the ground.

“What the hell are you doing?!” I screamed, squirming to try and break free of the unmovable weight on top of me.

“You were gonna kill him!” the fat man answered, trying to keep me pinned and remove the gun from my hand. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted another one of the sick people start to rise to their feet along side of the bloodied but still animated elderly man.

“We have to kill him! He’s one of them now!” I screamed, pointing to the man as he wandered towards the bewildered and terrified crowd of people. “Look! Look!”

The fat man turned to see what I was pointing at and the crowd tried to shove the old man away, but once again, he was able to take hold of someone and pull them towards him—accompanied now by another ghoul that just moments before was still only ill and incapacitated. The crowd began to panic and I turned to see yet another ghoul rise from the stretch of sickly people. And, just when the fat man began to stand up to let me free, the crowd shifted and knocked him back on top of me—spinning my rifle out of reach. A moments confusion saw a few people’s feet smack me on the head as some of the people in the crowd foolishly tried to beat the undead away—unaware of the fact that not only couldn’t they feel, they weren’t even alive. I could barely see—and, I could no longer tell who was infected or which pair of cluttered legs belonged to whom. I felt a squirt of blood smack me in my face, and I shut my eyes, furiously rubbing it off with my shirtsleeve. But, once I opened my eyes again, I found that the elderly man was standing right in front of me—blood dripping from his open mouth. I knelt down and dove forward, grabbed a hold of my rifle, and decided that I’d outstayed my welcome. And while the direction that I’d come from was now filled with panicked, confused and infected people, the other direction was nothing but a ten story office building made entirely of shimmering reflective glass—keeping me from seeing what was inside, or, what I was going to land on when I tried to jump inside. I shot to my feet and swung my elbows to the sides, knocking someone out of the way as I sprinted towards the ledge of the rooftop—jumping off and firing a single round into one of the reflective windows of the office building before I turned my shoulder towards it and smashed through.

My head landed hard against the side of a desk and I could feel the shards of glass from the window cut into me—opening all kinds of wounds that could be contaminated by the traces of infected blood still on my face. Despite the adrenaline in my system and my determination to

survive, when I finally came to a stop, this time I couldn't get up. A six-inch shard of glass stuck out of my leg and I could feel another piece lodged somewhere inside of my neck. I raised my hand to the wound to see it stained with blood and then pulled it away as my vision began to blur. But just before I passed out, I was able to decipher figures in the room—people—who were infected or not—but there was no way to tell and nothing I could do about it. My head dropped and I passed out.

## CHAPTER 24: BLOOD

Sebastian Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

I don't know how to explain what I was feeling in any other way than to say that my heart hurt and my soul ached. Even after I stepped inside our home and locked the door behind me, leaving my son, Archer, God knows where in the middle of hell breaking loose, I continued to hold the doorknob, second-guessing whether or not I could abandon him out there. But as my wife, Anna, moved quickly around the living room to try and care for our twin girls, Sarah and Susie, I quickly forced myself to pull my attention away from the door and to try and focus on what had to be done here and now. Anna had already managed to lie Sarah down after she had collapsed by the car, feeling so ill and looking so pale that I barely recognized her. And while her sister Susie sat by her side, clutching her stomach and moaning in agony, at least she'd been able to stay standing long enough to make it back into the house before I cleared the surrounding fields of the wandering undead. Only, now that I was back inside, and the sounds of gunfire had faded from the air, I could see that my wife and my two girls, weren't just traumatized by what they'd seen driving into the city earlier that day, they were afraid of the way I had been acting since the moment they got back.

My eyes met Anna's as she looked up from our daughter, pulling her hand away from Susie's hot and sweaty forehead and clenching her jaw in frustration. I had never lied to my wife and I had never kept anything from her, or, at least, almost never—both the existence of the virus and my paranoia surrounding it being the only exceptions. But those were parts of myself that I had always kept hidden and secret, parts of me that had been buried even deeper after my relationship with my brother and former best friend, Derek, came to an abrupt end. Of course, I had tried telling myself that the infection wouldn't happen—that we had been stupid kids for believing in it for as long as we did. And now, it seemed like a lifetime ago. Nevertheless, looking into the furious and fearful eyes of my wife, I couldn't help but feel guilty for keeping the truth from her. Anna stepped away from the side of the couch and stomped over to me—momentarily leaving Sarah and Susie to confront me and what I'd done.

“Now you listen to me,” she snarled, snatching the rifle off of my shoulder before I could even react to try and stop her. “What the girls and I just saw, what we just went through, is going to haunt us for the rest of our lives. But, what I can't have is them thinking that their father is no

different than everyone else out there who lost their minds today. What I can't have is you acting like you've lost your damn mind, barking orders like some kind of nazi out of hell when we're lucky to even have made it back home in the first place," she raged, keeping her voice just low enough that the girls couldn't hear her and just threatening enough so that I'd understand she meant business. "Shame on you for everything you just said and did out there. And may God have mercy on your soul, because I won't," she finished, throwing my rifle across the room and storming back to the agonizing call of Susie, writhing in pain on the couch as her sister sat beside her, barely looking any better. I stood stunned for a moment, knowing full well how strong my wife was, but having never experienced the full brunt of how furious she could get. Even Elvis, our old hound dog, had moved to the other side of the house—afraid of Anna's tone. Unfortunately, I didn't have the option of backing down and admitting that in some ways she was right. Only I knew what was really happening and only I knew what had to be done to try and save our family from it.

"The people out there haven't lost their minds, Anna—they've been infected," I stated, following behind my wife as she returned to our daughter's side while doing her best to try and ignore me. "It's a disease that gets into the bloodstream then makes its way to the brain, and, when it does, it kills the person that's been infected and reanimates their corpse," I tried to explain, eventually able to get my wife to turn and look at me again—even more disgusted and confused than she had been before.

"What in the hell are you talking about?!"

"It's a disease, Anna, and what's happening now is an outbreak," I continued, watching in frustration as she shook her head in denial and turned her back on me once more. "You have to listen to me! This isn't as simple as how you're feeling or what you saw, and it's not over with either! Those things will come here, for us, and, when they do, we all need to be ready for them!"

"Shut up!" Anna screamed, turning around and shoving me hard in the chest—distraught panicked tears streamed down her cheeks. "Not only are the girls ill, they're on the verge of going into shock! And the last thing they need to hear right now is their father's horror story delusions!"

"They're not delusions!" I shouted, momentarily making eye contact with Susie, who still sat hunched over in a nearby chair, clenching her stomach and listening fearfully to our dispute. "And I'm sorry but there isn't enough time to sugar coat this for you or the girls. The infected will be coming for us, and I need to know that when they do, you'll listen

to me!” I exclaimed, taking a step closer to Anna to try and plead with her. She shook her head and raised her hands in defense of my attempts to reach out for her—unable to grasp or accept what was happening.

“No, no!” she shouted, slapping my hands away. “Listen to yourself! If those people were sick, then you should have tried to try to help them—you were supposed to do everything you could for them! But you weren’t supposed to... you shouldn’t have...” she tried to say, beginning to weep as she thought about what I had done—what I had to do—firing a round into the brains of every undead within walking distance of our home. “How could you, Seb? What you’re saying isn’t possible! Don’t you understand that!?”

“Anna, nothing seems possible until it happens. But it is happening, right now,” I stated, lowering my voice and managing to step closer to her without being pushed away. “Please listen to me, Anna—you have to listen to me,” I pleaded, placing my hand softly on the sides of her shoulders and praying that she would be able to accept something that she couldn’t believe.

Suddenly, Susie released a piercing shriek that pulled Anna and I away from our dispute, rearing our heads to the side to see Sarah, who had been lying ill on the couch, now sitting upright—her head drooping forward and her long hair covering her face. But, from where Susie was sitting, she could see something about her sister’s expression that we couldn’t and it terrified her. She released another scream, just as shrill and deafening as the last, only to lure Elvis from across the room towards her. But once he arrived, crawling forward with the hairs on his back standing on end, he began growling and barking viciously at Sarah—as if she were a burglar or mailman. And, then, before Anna could reach our daughter’s side to investigate what was the matter, I heard the familiar sound of a guttural moan come from Sarah’s mouth. My jaw dropped and my world collapsed—hearing the same moan that I had heard from the ghouls I’d shot dead just moments before—hearing the same God damn plague enter my home and take my little girl away. I stood stunned and devastated for that moment as Elvis barked and Susie screamed—watching Anna touch our daughter’s shoulder only to have her hand latched onto and pulled down toward Sarah’s mouth.

“Don’t!” I screamed, running forward to try and stop what was happening—but I couldn’t move fast enough. Sarah had managed to pull Anna down towards her, opening her mouth wider and leaning in for the jugular. But, fortunately, due to Sarah’s small stature, Anna was able to pull back and break free, falling to the floor and allowing me the window of opportunity I needed to snatch my daughter and take her into the other room.



“What are you doing?!” Anna screamed, pushing herself off the ground as I barreled across the house towards the downstairs guest bedroom—carrying Sarah in my arms—just able to make it inside the door before Anna could reach us. I slammed the door behind me, dropped Sarah onto the bed, and quickly pulled a chair from the other side of the room over to keep Anna from breaking in. “Sebastian! Sebastian!!!” Anna screamed hysterically, pounding with all her might on the other side of the now barricaded door as I watched my sweet little girl slowly pull herself up off the bed and set her lifeless sights on me. I sucked in a tearful, heartbroken breath and, without even thinking about it, began looking around the room for something to use as a club.

Her eyes were empty and her tiny mouth drooped open, drooling onto the floor and moaning for flesh as her arms extended towards me. But, even still, all I could see was my little girl—all I could do was pray that there was some way to bring her back, that I was sleeping and that this was all a nightmare. But with each slow step she took toward me, the pain boiling inside me grew more and more unbearable. My hand fell down onto a music box resting on the chest of drawers beside me. But when the thought forced its way into my head to use it to bludgeon Sarah, I couldn’t even bring myself to pick it up. She stepped closer and closer to me, until, just as she came within reach, all I could do was collapse to my knees and hug her—pulling her tightly towards me with both arms, and digging one hand into her hair—squeezing tightly to keep her head still and stop her from sinking her teeth into my neck. I wept on her shoulder, sucking in devastated breaths that smelled of the tropical shampoo she had used. The touch of her cooling skin pressed against mine and her chest remained still—neither rising or falling from breaths of air, or, beating from the sound of her heart. She was dead. And, not only that, she was infected. But as Anna’s attempts to break into the room grew louder and more severe, I allowed myself to cherish the final moments with my daughter before I would have no choice but to set her free—I reached for the music box and raised it high above my head.

A gunshot blew out the doorknob beside me, but fortunately was aimed towards the wall rather than into the room. Then, immediately afterwards, my wife, thrust her shoulder into the now broken door and smashed it open, sliding the chair that I had barricaded it with away and pointing the rifle, that she had snatched off my shoulder earlier, directly at me. I froze—still clutching Sarah’s hair with one hand, while the other remained over my head ready to bring the music box down onto our daughter’s head. But, as I looked at the intensity and determination in Anna’s eyes, I had no doubt that if I so much as moved a muscle, she wouldn’t hesitate to kill me.

“Let her go!” Anna screamed, staring down the sights of the rifle at me—her hands shaking.

“She’s infected, Anna,” I replied, as Sarah continued to moan and gnaw in the direction of my jugular. “Please listen to me!”

“Let her go!!!” Anna repeated, taking a step towards me and placing the barrel of the gun against the side of my head—deaf to any reason or rationale I might have for acting the way I was—for threatening our daughter.

“I can’t,” I replied, trying to come up with any way that I could avoid being shot and keep my family from becoming infected. Because if I tried to subdue Sarah, Anna would shoot me, and, almost certainly become infected trying to care for our now undead daughter. While, on the other hand, if I let Sarah go, she would most likely be able to bite me, infect me, and keep me from protecting my family from the coming onslaught. Unfortunately, those were my only options. Anna wouldn’t listen to reason—though our daughter was pale and behaving erratically, my wife would never be able to believe what was really happening without witnessing it for herself. I made up my mind and accepted the only chance that any of them would have to survive, recognizing the tremendous strength within my wife that I had fallen in love with years ago. I turned slowly and locked eyes with Anna, ready to say goodbye. “I won’t let her infect you or Susie,” I stated, tightening my grip on the music box. “And as much as I love all of you, if you won’t believe me, I don’t have any choice but to make you believe me... I’m sorry, Anna... I should have told you years ago,” I finished, choosing to release my grip of Sarah rather than bludgeon her with the music box, giving my daughter the freedom of movement she needed to lean forward, demonstrating once and for all to Anna that our little girl was gone by letting her sink her teeth into my neck.

“Sarah! Stop it!” Anna screamed, lowering the gun and lunging forward to try and pull her off me, utterly shocked and horrified by what was happening. But no matter how hard she pulled, Sarah wouldn’t let go—gnawing deeper and deeper into my neck—infesting me as well. I clenched my teeth together and brought the music box I had been holding down onto the back of Sarah’s head, over and over again—eventually knocking her free as her body collapsed onto the floor—motionless, dead and free. Anna’s hand covered her mouth, barely able to breath as she leaned against the wall behind her, sliding to the floor in unspeakable disarray. The gun in her hand fell to the side of our daughter’s body and she stared in terror at the trickle of blood flowing down my shirt. I pressed my hand against the wound in my neck, trying to slow the bleeding long enough to speak to my wife, knowing full well that I didn’t

have much time to give her the instructions that she would need to survive.

“Anna,” I sputtered, blood pooling in my mouth as I spoke. “You have to listen to me,” I continued, sliding my other hand into my pant pocket and removing my set of keys. “You need to get to the barn before the undead swarm the house,” I continued, holding up a key wrapped in a black-plastic-tag—the key to the barn, and, the biggest secret I had ever kept from my family. “Under the tractor, you’ll find a door,” I explained, feeling a cold chill run through my blood—pooling in my brain and making it hard to think. “Open the door, lock it behind you, and don’t open it again—don’t ever open it again,” I wheezed, each breath growing more and more difficult to take as I extended my good leg outward, trying to pull the rifle towards me with it. Anna stared through me—in complete shock. But I couldn’t leave this world until I knew for certain that she had heard my words and understood what to do. I tossed her the set of keys in my hand and pulled the rifle off the ground, double-checking to see if there was any ammunition left in it. “Anna,” I stated once more, feeling the virus start to take hold. “Anna, look at me, please” I begged, managing to draw her trembling stare away from Sarah’s body to meet my eyes. “Did you hear what I said?” I asked, placing my finger on the trigger. She hesitated a moment before nodding in response—sliding away from the wall to try and come towards me. But when I raised my bloodstained hand, urging her not to come any closer, she stopped moving. “I’m infected, Anna... don’t, please don’t,” I gasped, taking quick panicked breaths.

“Seb,” Anna sobbed, looking down at Sarah once more. “Please,” she continued, glancing at the gun in my hand.

“I’m sorry, Anna... I love you,” I choked, no longer able to breathe. “I love you so much,” I finished, realizing that if I didn’t act now, I might not be able to stop myself from turning into a ghoul. I swiveling the rifle in my hands around, closed my eyes, placed the barrel against the bottom of my chin and pulled the trigger.

## CHAPTER 25: THE BARN

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.  
Wake up. Please God, make me wake up. It's a dream. It's a nightmare.  
Wake up. Wake up. God please. Please God. Please God. Please God.  
Please God. It can't be happening. It's not real. Jesus Christ, it can't be  
real. I want to wake up. God, please. Make it stop. Make the pain stop.  
Please God, please. Make the pain stop! It's a dream! It has to be a dream!  
Help me!!! Make it stop!!! PLEASE GOD!!! PLEASE!!! HELP!!! HELP  
US!!! IT HURTS TOO MUCH!!!! PLEASE, HELP!!!  
"AHHH!!!!"

"Mommy?" my daughter, Susie, cried—my daughter—my  
daughter was gone—Sarah. She lay on the floor, bleeding from the head.  
But Susie was... she was sick. And... she was... alone. In the other room,  
I had left her alone. But I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. God why  
can't I breathe? What is happening?! Make me wake up, please! WHY  
CAN'T I BREATHE!

"AHHHHHH!!!!"

"Mommy!" Susie shouted, frightened and alone—the sound of  
footsteps approached from beside me as a shadow appeared on my leg by  
the open doorway. I looked to Sebastian, at the gun in his hands—still in  
his hands even after he had... he was gone, and now... I can't breathe.  
Why can't I breathe?

"AHHHHHH!!!!"

"Mommy!" Susie gasped, standing in the doorway. I turned  
towards her, snapping out of my delirium to realize that the reason I  
couldn't breathe was because I had been screaming. I sucked in panicked  
tearful gasps. The shock and sorrow of what had happened struck my  
little girl and her face went blank—tears streaming down her cheeks. But  
as I tried to think of something I could say to her; as I tried to keep  
myself from succumbing to the unbearable pain, Susie fainted and  
collapsed to the floor.

I slid along the ground towards her and placed my hands on her  
arms—covered in cold sweat from her sudden illness. I had tried to take  
her to the hospital—her and her sister, Sarah—but... the roads were  
covered with people—crazy people who were attacking each other—who  
were attacking the car. I panicked. I panicked and came home instead.

Maybe if I had tried to stay I could have gotten to a doctor. Maybe if I had stayed away from home my husband wouldn't have gone crazy too. But... he was right—he was right! And he tried to tell me but I was too afraid to listen! Sarah had bitten him because I wouldn't listen and now... oh God no. Please God, make me wake up. Please God, please.

“Please God,” I sobbed, shaking Susie's arms to try and wake her up—praying as hard as I could that when she did, she'd still be my little girl. “Please!!!” I begged, watching as her eyes fluttered open and she looked up to me—confused and distraught. Her head tilted off the ground and she looked forward at her sister's body—motionless on the floor beside her father's. Her lip quivered and the memory of what she had seen flooded back to her.

“Sarah?” she whimpered, barely able to believe what was in front of her. But before she could move any further or observe any more of what had happened, I leaned forward and pulled her towards me, hugging her as tight as I ever had—keeping her head to the side so that she couldn't look—so that she wouldn't have anything else burned into her memory that she could never get rid of. She hugged me back just as tight, and we cried holding each other.

The sound of growling echoed down the hall and into the room—Elvis, our old hound dog, was perched by the window at the front of the house, overlooking the fields that surrounding us. At first, I ignored him, trying to focus only on my daughter so that I wouldn't drown in grief. But Elvis's growl slowly grew louder and louder until eventually, he began to bark. I looked out of the corner of my eye to see him move from where he had been towards the door—clawing at the mat in front of it to try and get at whatever was on the other side. I glanced back over to the rifle in Sebastian's limp hands, but couldn't bring myself to approach his body or take anything from it. So, instead, I slowly pulled myself off the floor—clutching Susie tightly to my breast—and walked towards the window to investigate what was happening. But, just as I got within arms reach of it, a sudden blow stuck the door, making a loud banging sound that startled Susie. She clutched tightly to me and tried to hold me back even though she was still ill and could barely walk. I placed my hands on her shoulders and knelt down as another hard thud landed against the door while Elvis barked viciously at whatever was causing it.

“Stay here sweetie,” I instructed, looking into her frightened and distraught eyes in order to remind myself that she needed me to be strong—that she needed me now more than ever, just as I needed her.

“I'm scared,” she cried, refusing to let go of my sleeve.

“Me too,” I admitted, forcing a slight smile to try and reassure her that despite the pain I felt, everything was going to be all right. “But it’s going to be ok,” I finished, feeling her grip loosen, letting me turn around and approach the banging at the door—pushing Elvis aside as I leaned in and looked through the peephole.

Another thud landed hard against the door—cracking the wood just as my eyes were able to make out the empty eyed stares of what my husband had assured me were infected people—two of which were now standing just outside the door, trying to break in. I took a startled step back and watched as pressure was applied to the crack, slowly spreading it along the door as the sound of hollow moans echoed from outside. I stood stunned for a moment until I felt Susie’s hand grab onto mine and tug at me frantically. I turned around to see her panicked terrified expression accompanied by a desperate whine urging me to run away. But before we could—I remembered the keys that Sebastian had thrown me—still lying on the ground in the other room beside Sarah’s body.

A section of the broken front door burst inward, revealing the piercing stare of an empty eye—looking right at me. I didn’t hesitate any longer. I couldn’t allow myself to be paralyzed with fear. Elvis began backing away from the door, growling angrily at the intruders on the other side as I turned and rushed towards the guest room. But, as I reached the entrance I had no choice but to stop, looking once more at the motionless bodies of my husband and daughter. And, despite the sense of urgency I felt, I couldn’t bring myself to walk in—even a single solitary step. The image of them where they were hurt me so much that once again it was hard to breathe. The sounds of moans and thuds grumbled behind me as Susie stood, anxiously behind me, chattering her teeth—we didn’t have much time. I looked down at the keys on the floor, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes—stretching my hand out blindly as I slid along the hardwood until I felt the cold metal of the keys, still wet with my daughter’s blood. My stomach churned and I almost threw up—just able to stand and leave the room without losing myself to grief. I wiped the keys dry on my pant leg, able to breathe normally again until I spotted the outstretched arm of one of the infected, reaching through the broken door for me and my daughter.

“Susie, follow me,” I instructed urgently, taking her hand and rushing to the back door of the house—ripping open the lock and pulling the door in—gasping loudly as my eyes looked out over the fields that surrounded the house—each and every one of which was now covered with looming figures—dozens of those things, all of which were headed in our direction. My heart sank and my daughter screamed—clutching tightly to my side with one arm while keeping the other pressed against

her swollen stomach. “Hurry!” I yelled, breaking my eyes away from the hills and turning towards the barn. I held Susie’s hand, moving faster than she could, and tugging her along. But as we rounded the side of the house on the way to the barn, the infected that had been banging on the front door now stood waiting for us—ten or more at least—each one spread out just enough so that we couldn’t make it to the barn without running into them—we were trapped.

I sucked in a tearful panicked breath and stumbled back, scanning the hills for any way that we could escape. But there were just too many people—and there was nowhere to run. Susie cowered behind me, crying desperately—even more afraid than I was. But, as we moved back, the infected began to swarm together, closing the gaps between each other and us—closer and closer. Then, after swiveling my head around to see another pack of people drudging towards us from the other direction, I knelt down, hoisted Susie up into my arms, and began walking towards the infected in between the house and the barn. Their mouths drooped open and horrifying moans echoed across the land. Susie wrapped her arms around my neck and closed her eyes, pressing her trembling cheek against mine. But then, just as I stepped within four feet of the mob of people, I quickly ran to the side—taking advantage of the space that had been cleared as they lumbered slowly towards me—too slow to turn and grab me in time. I held my daughter tightly, just able to squeeze between the reach of their cold dead hands.

I dropped Susie who landed uncertainly on her feet and pulled the keys Sebastian had given me out of my pocket—frantically flipping through them for the one that would open the padlock to the barn. Susie pulled hysterically at my shirt, pressing her back against the barn door as the group of infected people that I had run around approached us—not fifteen feet away. I tried a key—nothing. I tried another—wrong one. God please. Please, God, Please. I squeezed my jaw tightly and concentrated with every fiber of my being, unable to turn around to see how close the infected had come.

“Mommy!” Susie screamed, breathing so deep and fast that she looked as if she were going to faint. But just as I heard the cold moans of the people behind me come so close I was sure they’d snatch us up, the key turned in the lock and I pulled it free—showing Susie inside, and swinging myself around—staring in horror at the crowd of people, not five feet away. I shoved my shoulder against the barn door and screamed—pushing with all my might to try and close it before they could reach us. But, just as it came within inches of shutting, the fingers of one of the people grabbed hold of it—barely keeping it from closing. I planted my feet and pushed as hard as I could, but soon more fingers filled the

gap—pushing against me with the force and weight of ten people. My legs buckled and slid against the dirt. But I refused to move. I refused to die. Susie tried to put her weight against the door too, but, as I looked over to her, I knew I might have no choice but to make the same sacrifice that Sebastian had. I pulled the keys in my hand up and placed them in Susie’s confused care.

“Under the tractor there’s a door!” I screamed, my feet sliding forward another inch from the weight pushing behind me. “Use the black key and open it!” I demanded, using a free hand to push Susie in the direction of the old tractor parked inside of the barn. She hesitated a moment, scared to leave me alone for even a second. “Do it!!! Open it!!!” I cried, sliding forward another inch and then another—any moment now they’d be able to fit through the growing gap in the door. Susie ran towards the tractor and knelt down, thrashing her hands around on the ground until she had cleared enough hay to reveal a dark metal door that looked like the kind of entrance that would lead to a tornado or bomb shelter. Sebastian had never mentioned it—not in the entire time we’d known each other. And now, whatever it was, it was the only hope we had of escaping with our lives.

Susie turned the key in the lock and looked back to me just as the door was pushed open enough for the infected hoard of people on the other side to begin funneling in. I landed on my stomach and sucked in a breath full of dirt, watching as my daughter struggled to pull the metal door up off the ground—using all her strength to try and hoist it up before we were surrounded. I pushed myself forward with my legs and clawed at the ground with my hands, scurrying forward on all fours as I felt the cold touch of hands graze against my clothes—barely escaping their grip. Then, just as Susie managed to pull the door open enough for us to climb inside, I grabbed hold of her with one hand, placed the other on the side of the door, and lunged into God knows what awaiting us below—crashing down a pitch black staircase as the faint glimmer of light from the outside world disappeared when the metal door slammed shut, locking the infected out and us in.



## CHAPTER 26: 7 Days Later

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

If, in fact, there ever were some manner of God or maker, and, if, in fact, that being happened to abide the dogma of Christian scripture and created the world in six glorious days only to rest upon the seventh, then I was proud to have been able to destroy that God's world in a similar length of time. Rebuilding it, however, would not be a matter of days, weeks, months, or even years—but decades—lifetimes—centuries and beyond. For as profound a movement of 'survivors' as I would lead to remake mankind and define the future generations of this world to be, the magnitude of the footprint of the dead-world we had once inhabited would not simply vanish in the tide of our return. Instead, it would haunt the minds of those who lived, equally as much as the undead would roam the city-sized-graveyards and decaying infrastructure of this doomed and rotting world. And, as I sat in the comfort of my secluded office, gazing in wonder at the satellite footage I alone was privy to, I could not help but smile in elation from the sights of carnage that I had not only endeavored to create, but had boldly foreseen decades before, exactly as they were today.

New York City, from the vantage of directly overhead, appeared more like an ant farm or an hourglass full of quivering sand than it did a bustling metropolis. For now, after every living soul had been infected, the undead packed every single inch of every single street—eventually flowing out onto bridges and spilling over into the bodies of water surrounding them. Tokyo was pitch black for the first time in decades, no longer a burning neon bulb of overpopulated sheep, but, rather, a festering pit of death and destruction. Russia, despite its monumental size and iron populace had fallen just as easily as had the rest of the world. Though, to their panicked and stubborn credit, they at least were able to launch a nuclear weapon at themselves before succumbing to the disease—effectively erasing millions of undead on a landmass I had no intention of paying any mind to for decades or perhaps even longer. And as I zoomed in on the smoldering crater that was left behind from the blast, I grinned widely—recalling the many nights I had spent alone planning for this day and the countless hours of careful deliberation it had required.

If not for the gradual decommissioning of nuclear power plants across the globe over the course of the past decade, radiation from abandoned and potentially compromised plants after the infection struck

would have posed a far greater threat to remaking the world than even the undead themselves. However, thankfully, I had had the foresight to use my substantial position of power while at Eden Corporation to ensure that by the time I made the decision to provoke my removal from the company and, subsequently, retire to my private island, all the pieces of the puzzle would be in place. Electrical grids, including those that were recalibrated into smart grids, were sure to fail within 6-12 hours after the infection. They did, leaving only the few solar and wind-based power sources that I needed at various locations across the globe to allow for my continued omniscient presence. For during my time at Eden corporation, I had placed an extra emphasis on the development of unmanned drone programs originally utilized by the American military to bomb any country it didn't feel inclined to officially declare war on. In my opinion, though, these automated drone programs were far better suited for private interests such as my own. And now, with air bases available to me within striking distance of every country, powered and serviced without the aid, or, liability of human workers, the decrepit infested world, and it's destruction, was literally at my fingertips. However, as painstaking the task of all that I had endeavored to do, I would have to wait until those around me were prepared to take the next step before I could lead them to it.

In the seven days since the infection struck the full magnitude of what had happened and the loss of everything and everyone in the outside world had taken its toll on those around me. My servants and security detail were dismayed to say the least. Despite their functionality when it came to things like feeding me or catering to my every demand, they remained, ultimately, of no significance whatsoever. Instead, the future of the world I would build rested upon the shoulders of my immediate family who, despite my best efforts to cheer up and reach out to, remained as dreary and melancholy as everyone else. While I did worry about them, I remained, nevertheless, confident that in time they would not only come to forget the wretched world as it had been but to appreciate the opportunity to make it anew. To be completely honest, though, while I did genuinely love my son and had convinced myself I loved my wife, even their immediate emotional plight was not what burdened my thoughts or occupied my attention most. Instead, as I stared at the satellite footage of large vessels approaching the visible perimeter of my island, it was the thoughts and well being of those that I had instructed to come here that I apprehensively pondered.

Every year I hosted an annual charity event that entailed sailing across the Pacific Ocean at precisely this time of year. And every year I encouraged, and in this case demanded, that very particular friends of mine participate in the affair. Together, the 18 yachts of size that varied

from a casual sailing retreat to luxury cruise liners, had not only set out across the ocean together, free of the disease I would later release, but, were now approaching the doorstep of sanctuary that I had prepared for them despite their firm beliefs that it was fortune alone that had brought them here. In fact, a great many were nearly as rich, powerful and influential as I—though, not a single one had been worthy of my full trust or confidence. I had kept, even from them, the extent and magnitude of my plans. I had humored their ambitions of global power by attending their petty Bilderberg meetings, which they were convinced would determine the fate of the world, and visiting their parties in their frivolous Bohemian Grove, celebrating their own elitist self-assured-omnipotence while, ultimately, I knew all along that their plans, their bloodlines and their egos would be sacrificed at the dawning of the new age. However, since they had proven formidable in their influence and remarkable in their wealth, their friendship was something I had acquired solely to secretly betray and then seemingly repay by inviting them to my island—where, once here, they and what remained of their power, would become my pawns.

I pushed my chair away from my desk and dimmed the lights of the multiple screens that I had been watching, turning my sights for the exit where, just as I had expected, a firm knocking tapped against the door. I stood up, walked to the exit, opened the door and pretended to be annoyed that someone had disturbed me—knowing very well that it would be a guard reporting the sighting of ships on the horizon.

“Sir, my apologies for disturbing you but we’ve spotted a fleet of ships off the east side of the island, approaching the port,” a guard informed me, apprehensive in his tone but subordinate nevertheless.

“Have you established radio contact?”

“We’ve been trying sir. But, they haven’t been responding.”

“All right, let’s go,” I stated, stepping out of my private control room and closing the door behind me. The guard walked briskly down the halls of my mansion, no doubt of the impression that what was happening would either mean the death of us all by infected vessels or many more people who would soon be joining us on the island. For while I had shared with my family the details of the ships that would be arriving, I did not feel it was necessary to share the full extent of my foreknowledge with anyone else, choosing instead to keep them on edge at all times and, by doing so, use their fear at my disposal.

The port of Eden Island was capable of docking every vessel that was approaching. However, despite my confidence that some semblance of order would be maintained if I allowed them to dock, I had decided it

best to keep the ships anchored at sea and only allow daily passage to and from the island with a strict curfew—effectively choking the freedoms and liberties of those who would soon be my guests. And though the rich and powerful are capable of many things, they are rarely able to accept the loss of their influence or any restrictions that are placed upon them. No doubt, they would deeply resent their segregation from those on dry land. However, due to the private security companies, hoards of anonymous servants and unchecked party guests that had accompanied them through their trip, the safety of not only those who lived on this island, but my continued control over them, depended on keeping external influences to a minimum. No one would be allowed to bring armaments from their ships onto dry land, that would remain the territory of myself and the security forces that I employed. No one would be allowed to build or develop anything on dry land without my consent. Or, for that matter, come to think of it as if it were their home—as their unfettered property to do as they pleased with. This was still my island. And, though I intended to be gracious in every way, I expected everyone to remain afraid of the possibility of infection and abide every demand that I made under the timeless guise of doing so for their ‘own safety.’

Anxious guards stared down telescopic binoculars, able to clearly see the decks of the approaching ships despite their significant distance from us. However, as I entered the spacious port complex they were currently occupying as a central command for security on the island, their attention was unanimously pulled from what they had been doing—waiting for their orders and my say so. The commander of my guards, whom I neither liked nor made a point of seeing often, stood at attention, waiting to brief me on the situation. His name was Nahuel—a beast of a man both in body and spirit—standing six foot six, weighing nearly three hundred pounds of muscle and covered in scars and tattoos. It was not his looks nor his demeanor, however, that had persuaded me to employ him for the many years but, rather, it was the depths of, not only his brutality but also his loyalty. Nahuel had personally killed and tortured on behalf of many good friends of mine. And though I had yet to make similar requests of him, I knew well where his allegiance stood just as he knew well that if ever he faltered in them, he would pay not only with his life but that of his family—serendipitously present on the island, alive and well.

“Sir,” Nahuel grunted, saluting me as he had grown accustomed to doing with the generals and tyrants he once worked for. “17 ships in total. All of them privately owned. Each registered to the manifest of vessels that sailed in your charity event,” he explained, seemingly annoyed that he would not have the opportunity to kill any of their passengers.

“There were 18 ships registered on the manifest,” I replied, making sure to appear slightly surprised by the events of the day, while in fact I was actually surprised that one ship was unaccounted for.

“Yes, and there are only 17 on the horizon,” he stated, his tone cold and detached as always. “Strange that they would find us, no?”

“Had I not sent them our coordinates, it certainly would be,” I answered, clicking through the manifest of ships displayed on a monitor to try and locate the missing one—eventually pulling the cursor to the vacant slot of the “Truth’s Blessing”—a large ship owned by an extroverted oilman and inflammatory billionaire that, among those sailing the seas, was of the least liked and respected. I released a muffled breath of relief—glad that no one of significance was unaccounted for. “I never heard back from them... If I had, you would have been informed immediately,” I continued, giving Nahuel an excuse that he could believe.

“Will they be permitted to dock?” he asked, clearly of the opinion that doing so would be a grave mistake. I did my best to hide my desire to grin, appreciating the value of his concern. For in the week since the infection struck, not only had the depth of anarchy that had consumed the world burned in the minds of those around me but, so too did the paranoia that a similar fate may befall us as well. For it was now, apart from those with religious superstitions, widely assumed that a disease had heralded the apocalypse. And with a few careful words and choice facts, I was able to engrain this in the minds of everyone on the island—effectively making them as afraid of outsiders as they were of the undead themselves.

“No, Nahuel—they will not be permitted to dock,” I stated, glancing at the unnerved expressions of the other men in the room, guns in hand and ready to move. “Have them anchor their vessels half a mile from the dock and send every ship we have out to blockade them immediately,” I instructed, stepping to the side of a telescope to look out to sea, recognizing the distraught expressions of the approaching ships’ passengers. “Do not treat them as if they are a threat or be anything but gracious towards them. However, for our safety, and theirs, it is best that they remain under strict watch at all times and are only permitted to come to the island in limited numbers with my consent.”

“Teams of four!” Nahuel shouted, startling the men around us who immediately rushed out of the building to reach their boats. I waited a moment until the room was cleared before continuing my address to Nahuel.

“Also, there’s one passenger in particular that I’d like to speak with and have brought onto the island as soon as possible,” I explained,

walking back to the computer console to pull up the passenger lists from the approaching ships—scrolling down until I found the picture of an old friend of mine.

“Of course,” Nahuel replied, seemingly pleased that I had made the unyielding and unaccommodating decisions that I had.

“His name is Gregory Voustin,” I continued, putting in motion the next play of my pawns. “And between you and me, all our lives may depend on him.”

## CHAPTER 27: GROWING APART

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2002*

*By the time I reached the fort, Matthew's bicycle was already parked outside the entrance, tucked behind one of the camouflaged tarps we had covered in leaves and twigs. But as I glanced behind it, I noticed that there was only one bike, which meant Sebastian had yet to arrive. I clenched my jaw in frustration and took one last glance around the forest for any sign of him or anyone else who might be around. Then I quickly squeezed through the cluttered mess of fallen trees and logs that we used to obscure the entranceway to the fort. Then, as I emerged inside, pushing away one of the interior tarps, I made eye contact with Matthew, staring down the length of the shotgun he was pointing at my head.*

*"Hey," I stated, nodding hello and moving past him as he lowered the gun—no longer concerned that I might be an intruder.*

*"Where's Seb?" he asked, his voice spiking in the middle of his question—still changing from the mid-pubescent hormones pumping through his body. His face had a few big zits on it and his hair was unkempt as usual. What I noticed most, however, was the determined, stern expression on his face—expecting answers to everything I'd suggested to him over the brief conversation we'd had on the phone.*

*"Sebastian did this to me," I replied, unwrapping a bloody bandana from my head to reveal the gash Sebastian had ripped open across my head when he'd slammed me against the nozzle of one of the school's water fountains. "So, I broke his nose. Then he went to the school nurse and I told him to meet us out here after he was done."*

*"The nurse?" Matthew scoffed, embarrassed to hear what a pussy his brother had been.*

*"Yeah, I know," I grunted, popping open a Tupperware container of medical supplies and digging out some cotton balls, sterile water, numbing gel, and a needle and thread. "Your brother's got a serious mommy complex," I continued, swiveling around to take a seat in front of a tiny mirror mounted on the wall.*

*"What happened?" Matthew demanded, still uninformed of exactly what had caused the fight and what we were fighting about. I took a moment to rub some gel on my forehead after washing the wound—trying to decide if I would wait for Sebastian to arrive before his trial began. "What happened?!" Matthew repeated, louder and more frantic than before. I glanced in the mirror at his expression and shook my head.*

*"Your brother missed a meeting we arranged to comb the premises of the school before classes started. And when I tried to confront him about it and insisted that we skip our first class so that we'd be able to get the lay of the land, he declined," I*

*explained, sliding the needle into a thick chunk of flesh hanging off my forehead and slowly sewing it back on—not even flinching as I did so.*

*“What do you mean by declined?”*

*“Something along the lines of not wanting to bother until after school. And, when I got in his face about it, he said some shit like ‘how I needed to learn to compromise.’”*

*“Compromise?” Matthew asked, his tone subdued and concerned by what I had told him.*

*“Yeah. Compromise.”*

*“Is that why you broke his nose?”*

*“No,” I replied, finishing the first third of what I assumed would be twelve stitches stretching from the front to the side of my head. “I broke his nose because when I mentioned how much of an asshole he was for turning his back on the protocols he snapped and attacked me.”*

*“That doesn’t make any sense,” Matthew eventually said, fighting against the truth of what I’d just told him. “Seb wouldn’t do that.”*

*“That’s what I thought too,” I confessed, feeling a sudden pulse of hurt and rage shoot to the surface—that backstabbing son of a bitch. “But we can’t waste time with what we want to believe. He’s made up his mind and I’ve made up mine—it’s up to you now.”*

*“What are you talking about?”*

*“The fail safe, Matt,” I sighed, disgusted that our friendship had come to this. “Remember? For if anyone ever decided to try and leave the group?”*

*“No fucking way,” Matt growled, tightly clenching the shotgun in his hands that he made a point of aiming at the dirt wall. “It can’t be that bad! Seb was probably just nervous about his first day!”*

*“Nervous?! Does this look like something that someone who’s fucking nervous does?!” I yelled, standing up and showing off the gash in my head. “It is that bad! And when he not only decided to try and ‘compromise’ on the protocols but actually has the audacity to come up with excuses for why ‘we should too,’ then I’m sorry, Matt, but your brother’s made up his fucking mind about turning his back on us!”*

*Matthew took a deep breath and held it, no doubt trying to come to any understanding he could that would account for his brother’s betrayal. But, as I looked at him struggle with the decision before us, I couldn’t help but recognize a similar expression as the one he’d made the last few times Sebastian had failed to show up for drills on time or had canceled supply checks or scouting missions. The truth was that this decision was a long time coming and both Matthew and myself just didn’t want to*



*believe that it could happen—that my best friend and his older brother would risk everything we had for his own stupid selfish reasons. Matthew clenched his jaw in pensive conflict, and I turned to sit down and finish my stitches—not saying another word to each other for the full ten minutes until we heard the sound of a bicycle approaching the entrance of the fort.*

*“I’m not gonna kill my own brother, Derek,” Matt stated, keeping his voice low so that Sebastian wouldn’t hear him. I glared at Matthew for a moment, listening to Sebastian tuck his bike behind the tarp out front. “We’re just gonna talk about this.”*

*“Remember the protocols, Matthew? Remember why they’re there?”*

*“I know. But the infection hasn’t happened yet.”*

*“No, it hasn’t. But when it does, if we’re not ready, if we’re not ready in every single way and the protocols weren’t maintained, then we’re all dead—and I’ll have no one but you and your fucking brother to thank for that,” I exclaimed, turning my freshly stitched head to the side to see Sebastian enter the fort—his broken nose now bandaged and plugged.*

*“Hey,” Sebastian muttered, glancing at me and quickly looking to greet his brother as well.*

*“Why did you go to the nurse?” Matthew asked, shaking his head at the bandages on his brother’s nose.*

*“So I could get them to write me a note excusing me from class,” he replied, stepping between us to find a seat on the other side of the fort. “And what do you care? I’ve already plugged myself up enough times to know what to do when it happens to me or you guys anyway.”*

*“Tell him your side of the story,” I interrupted, cutting through their little chat to try and get the trial underway—glaring angrily at Sebastian’s nonchalant demeanor.*

*“My side of the story?”*

*“Yeah, you asshole—like why you attacked me, why you turned your back on the protocols, and, why you should be the one who stays in the group rather than me!”*

*“Motherfucker, I will rip those God damn stitches out of your head,” Sebastian stated coldly.*

*“Hey! Just tell your side of the story!” Matt interrupted, shotgun still in hand.*

*“All right, sure,” Sebastian huffed, adjusting himself in his seat and pointing a finger at me. “I told Derek I wasn’t going to do a sweep of the premises like we’d planned because we already knew the layout of the school. I mean we played there when*

*we were younger, we went with our parents on election days, not to mention all the other times we'd already walked around it. But all he heard was that I didn't want to run around pretending to be fucking recon-ninjas when we were supposed to be in class!"*

*"Why'd you attack him then?" Matthew asked, doing his best to try and remain impartial despite the magnitude of the decision before him.*

*"Because he said that he needed to worry about whether or not being a pussy ran in our family," he explained, watching as Matthew turned to look disapprovingly at me.*

*"Yeah, and I'm still worried about it," I replied, meeting Matthew's stare with cold determination, still unsure whether or not he'd have the balls to pull the trigger.*

*"Fuck you," Sebastian snapped.*

*"Shut up," Matthew insisted, rubbing his brow and shaking his head. "Seb, if all you had was outdated intelligence about the school, then Derek's right, you needed to do a sweep before going to class—the protocols don't allow for exceptions, even if you have other obligations."*

*"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Sebastian yelled, rolling his eyes and curling his hands into fists. "Did he tell you to say that?!" he continued, staring furiously at me.*

*"No, it's the protocols! We both told him that, practically every day of his life!" I screamed, enraged that Sebastian could even pretend not to understand the situation, that he had allowed himself to become such a pathetic sniveling pussy, and, that Matthew and I had put up with it for as long as we had. "The same protocols you swore to uphold, just like your brother and I are doing!"*

*"He didn't tell me to say anything, Seb—now calm down."*

*"You two have got to be joking?" Sebastian groaned, pulling his hand down his face and shaking his head. "Are you seriously making this big of a deal out of this? Fucking seriously?!"*

*"It's not just this," Matthew exclaimed, saying what I was going to before I had the chance. I watched him, letting him speak and hoping that he'd make the right decision. "You've been fucking up for months now, Seb. We just didn't want to believe it and maybe you didn't either, but..."*

*"But what?!" Sebastian shouted, no longer upset with me—this was between him and his brother now.*

*"I don't know if it's cause dad's been treating you worse than the dog since mom died, or... You've just changed. Everything about you is changing."*

*"It's called growing up. And when you grow up, you'll understand."*

*“No... I’ll never be able to make excuses the way you do. I don’t lie to myself... ever. This isn’t a fucking game to us and we’re not playing around,”* Matthew continued, *measuring up to the hopes I’d had for him, a true soldier and a devoted friend. Sebastian’s face went blank, his mouth dropping open out of shock that his younger brother would speak to him the way he was. “As far as I’m concerned, unless you pull your shit together right now, apologize for attacking Derek and never, ever make excuses for getting out of the protocols again, well... then there’s the door.”*

*Sebastian didn’t respond at first even though I knew what his answer would be. And while the contingency protocol that we had come up with to prevent anyone from leaving the group without a bullet in his head likely wasn’t going to be upheld, to be honest, I was relieved to just sit back and watch—finally able to calm down enough to see that even I couldn’t bring myself to hurt Sebastian, despite all the grumbling I’d done about how it had to happen. Instead, what Matthew had said and the determination he’d shown was everything I needed, everything the group needed to stay together. And while Sebastian would, unfortunately, no longer be a part of that, at least I still had something. Matthew would stand by me until the end.*

*“Matthew... think about what you’re saying. Don’t just do what Derek wants you to.”*

*“I’m not. This is my decision. And despite what you think, I’ve been making my own decisions for a while now. I’m not a little kid anymore.”*

*“If you do this...” Sebastian finally stated, cold, hurt, and so angry screaming wouldn’t do him justice. “If you seriously fucking do this, I will never speak to you again—both of you.”*

*“I know,” his brother admitted, clearly at odds with the decision he’d made.*

*“That works both ways,” I added, reassuring Sebastian that not only was his friendship with us over, but as far as we were concerned, for what he’d done, he was dead. And nothing, not even the infection itself, would change that.*

## CHAPTER 28: UNDEAD RAPIDS

Derek Riggs, California, 2018

The morning sun gleamed through crevices in the canopy overhead and I stepped carefully through the forest, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of the undead. Every twig and fallen leaf were threats to the quiet I tried to keep while moving. Though, in the full week since the infection had struck I had somehow, miraculously, managed to move largely unnoticed by the undead I observed along the way, I remained forever weary of their presence, forever paranoid that they might be lurking around every tree and corner, waiting to reach out and grab me. In the seven days since the infection struck my nerves had been put to the test—never able to sleep more than ten or fifteen minutes without waking up to check the surrounding area, or dreaming that I had heard an approaching ghoul. But at the very least, in the seven days since the infection, I had covered the distance I expected to and had entered the depths of the forest—moving swiftly and quietly through the woods until, eventually, I would reach the border of Canada. There was, however, another reason besides staying hidden for why I had chosen the path I was currently on. And as I approached a familiar dip in the landscape that climbed to a tight cluster of trees, I sighed in fleeting relief, I had returned to the spot in the forest I was looking for and, as far as I could tell, the area was clear.

I removed my bicycle from my shoulder and quickened my pace for the short distance that remained between myself and what I had buried. The trip north I made every year was only possible to complete in a timely and reasonable fashion because of the precautions I had taken to ensure I had ample supplies and sufficient foreknowledge of the terrain. Thus, every two years along the way, I would stop at one of my designated re-supply caches that I had buried in the forest to replenish and renew the goods I would carry along the way. And each and every time I had done so, what I had buried years before was there years later, deep enough and remote enough that no man or animal would reasonably be able to find it. But as I came to the top of the hill where a cluster of trees that I had buried a stockpile of supplies in between had been, I stopped cold and my heart skipped a beat—below me a stretch of fallen trees and scattered earth had slid down the length of the hill—a landslide that had spilled the guts of the forest out over a hundred meters, including the supply crate I had buried—that would now, undoubtedly, take longer than the two minutes I typically allowed myself in order to

find and exhume it. I anxiously scanned the trees and hills surrounding me—clenching my jaw in frustration at the compromised position I would be placing myself in by making noise and staying in one place for too long. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to do just that.

I rested my bicycle against a nearby tree and detached my backpack, swinging it around and rummaging through its contents to find a flashlight. Then, after removing the charged lithium battery from my bike, I slid it into the side of my helmet and powered up my heads up display—navigating through the menu to find the homing beacon that I had left inside the missing crate was still active about twenty five meters away. I picked up my bicycle and refastened my backpack, quickly descending through the unstable dirt and frayed roots that covered the hill. But as my feet slopped through the still wet and unstable earth in between roots, I stopped sharply—hearing the lumbering moans of not one, not a few, but what sounded like a few hundred approaching ghouls. And though I was bewildered that I hadn't noticed such a mob or even heard them moments before, nevertheless, I lifted my head and stared behind me—spotting movement along the tree line in the distance—stretching as wide as I could see. I wouldn't have much time, but fortunately since the ghouls were still nearly 100 meters away, I would hopefully be able to retrieve the missing crate. I pulled a folding spade off my bike and began digging over the spot where the tracking signal had led me to—a mangled heap of dirt and fallen trees. But just as I cleared enough dirt away to see where it was, my hopes of ever retrieving it disappeared. The crate was firmly squished under part of a tree—anchored in place by another, and another. It would take me hours to excavate it, and, as I listened to the sounds of the approaching hoard, I realized I would have no choice but to go on without it.

Suddenly, over the growing drone of moans, I heard the shrill sound of a whistle blowing. I cranked my neck back to the movement in the tree line and looked for where the sound was coming from—pulsing high pitch whistles, three at a time, over and over again. I frowned, and toggled the display in my helmet to infrared, noticing a spot of body heat moving quickly through the forest. I then lifted my hand to the side of my visor and zoomed in, revealing a small figure running full speed across the uneven landscape. Then, as I powered down the infrared display and returned to my normal vision, the hundreds of undead were revealed once more, following behind the small figure that had been emitting the heat signature, that of a still living, still breathing person. My mouth drooped open as I stared down the fifty odd meters between myself, the person running, and the hoard of undead following behind him. What surprised me most as I zoomed in again, however, was that not only was the person

being chased a young boy no more than ten years old, he was purposefully blowing the whistle, leading the undead where he wanted them to go like a shepherd and his sheep.

I pulled my bicycle up onto my shoulder and stared curiously at the sight before me just as the boy that I had been watching, who kept a good thirty meter lead on the undead following behind him, noticed me standing where I was. Suddenly, he came to a complete stop—stunned as I was to see anyone else this deep in the forest, let alone anyone else who was still alive. His face was dirty and his blond hair was matted down from sweat and grease. His open mouth sucked in deep breaths and his big eyes were spread wide from curiosity, apprehension and surprise—momentarily ignoring the massive swarm of ghouls still slowly clamoring behind him. A rifle was slung across his back and a machete was tucked into a sheath on his waist. The whistle in his mouth dropped, catching on the string around his neck, and the two of us stood bewildered by one another for a few more seconds. Then, just as I raised my hand in the air and slowly waved to him, the moans of the undead in his pursuit drew our attention back to reality. The boy took a few bold steps forward, coming within ten meters of me, and sucked in a deep breath.

“Run,” he instructed loudly, pulling the whistle back up to his mouth and beginning to blow it again. I frowned sternly, still amazed at the fact the this little kid was deliberately trying to provoke the undead—that he was actually taunting them to follow behind him. But as I opened my mouth to ask him a question, he ran past me, leaping down the hillside with the grace and sure footing of a mountain goat. ‘Who the fuck is this kid?’ I thought to myself, momentarily watching him run, before I turned back around to see the hoard of undead were now only twenty or so meters away. I turned one more time to see the boy running quickly through the forest and decided to catch up to him.

I jogged quickly after the boy, who, despite his short stature, was surprisingly quick and nimble—continuing to blow his whistle as he ran. My bike jostled on my shoulder and the bushes and twigs of the forest clanged and scraped against my armor. But, just as I came within ten meters of the kid, the forest began to clear and I suddenly recognized where he was leading me—the river. My feet landed against the unsteady rocks and chunky sand that stretched along the side of the riverbed and my eyes gazed in wonder at its uncannily dark red waters—so dark and red in fact that it might as well have been a river of blood. I stopped cold in my tracks, staring at the obstacle before us, and listening to that damn kid continue to blow his whistle and continue to approach the river, regardless of the hundreds upon hundreds of floating bodies that bobbed on top of the current—caught in the water, being dragged out to sea.

And, despite the raging bloody river before us, I knew that the far greater threat were the bodies of the undead trapped in the current. Those that didn't have to breathe, those that couldn't swim and had no choice but to ride the length of the river. And, without a doubt, the massive numbers of corpses floating on top of the water were almost all certainly the undead, waiting for the opportunity to grab hold of anyone dumb enough to stumble within their reach. And, once again, to my surprise, that's exactly where the boy was headed.

"Come on!" he shouted, sprinting up a short hill covered in long grass, pausing momentarily to address me—as if he were doing me some kind of favor by telling me what to do. And while I didn't have time to argue with him, or let him know that I was the worlds foremost ghoul expert and killing machine, the kid happened to be taking the right path and doing something so smart that it had only just moments before occurred to me—he was leading the undead into the river—letting the current sweep them away hundreds at a time in the filthy bloodied waters. I smiled adoringly, impressed to say the least.

I followed after him, reaching the top of the short hill and thrashing aside the tall grass to clear my view—able to see the kid now standing on a flimsy raft connected to a rope, strung across the river. But, as I moved quickly down the hill, he pushed the raft off of the shore with a stick that had been resting on top of it—separating himself from me, and leaving me no choice but to either stay where I was and be eaten alive, or, swim in the river of blood and risk being pulled under by the undead trapped in the current. I stopped smiling.

"The raft can't hold us both!" the kid shouted, somehow understanding every concern that was going through my head before I bothered to yell at him or ask questions. And, from what I could tell, he was actually expecting me to shimmy along one of the ropes stretched taught just about a foot above the length of the river. The only problem was that the armor I was wearing seriously limited my ability to swim. But once again, I had no choice. The crowd of ghouls that the boy had gathered was so large and so dense that I knew I wouldn't be able to ride around them without running the risk of being swallowed up. And so I quickly waded into the bloody water, pulling a release cord on a section above each of my bicycle's tires—which quickly inflated and floated my bike to the surface of the river. Then, with a strap from my backpack, I tethered the bike to me—allowing me to use one hand to hold the rope and the other to hold a knife.

By the time I was knee deep in the water, the undead behind me were already at the top of the short hill, stumbling down towards the shore. I reached behind me, dug my fingers into one of the pouches

stitched onto the side of my backpack and pulled another release cord—deploying an air pouch out of my bag designed to assist me if I needed to swim. Unfortunately, even with the assistance the inflated sack would give me, I knew it would be difficult to keep my head above water, holding onto a flimsy rope, hoping I'd be able to dodge the bodies barreling towards me without getting knocked off or snared along the way. Not exactly the ideal situation, and, to my surprise, one that I had never even considered before. Yet, despite that fact, this time, strangely, I genuinely wanted to meet this fellow survivor, to catch up to the boy that reminded me so of myself when I was his age.

I rushed forward, reached the edge of solid ground beneath my feet, and stepped off—holding onto the rope with one hand and a hunting knife with the other. My bike dangled on the strap tethering it to me, dragging heavily in the water like a ball and chain. Though it pulled me in the direction of the current, I kept a firm enough grip on the rope that I was able to steadily crawl across it. Bodies of slow moving ghouls rushed past me, their fingers just grazing my armor or bouncing off of my bicycle. The boy continued to pull himself on the raft, using the same safety line that I was in order to reach the other side. The crowd of ghouls that had followed us slowly wandered into the water, only to be scooped up by the current and rushed away with the others that had unknowingly found their way into the river. But just as I reached the halfway point, I felt a sudden tug on the strap that tied me to my bicycle, almost pulling my grip free. I looked down, my arms pulled at length as if caught in some kind of medieval torture device, to see an undead wedged in the handlebars of my bike—slowly raising its rotting water soaked flesh to look me in the eyes, reach in my direction, and moan.

Its fingers came within inches of me, adjusting itself to try and get closer and closer. But as my attention shifted to the ghoul caught on my bike, I was no longer looking upstream from the river. Suddenly, a corpse slammed against my back and tumbled to my side, knocking one of my hands free of the rope and barreling into the other ghoul still reaching out for me. I bore my teeth and grunted in pain, feeling as if my shoulder were about to dislocate from the pressure. Then, just as the hand that had been knocked free of the rope rose up to cut my bicycle loose and free me of the anchor pulling me to a watery grave, the two mangled ghouls were pulled free of the handlebars and rushed down the river—still reaching out for me. I released my knife, which dangled on a wire around my wrist, and grabbed hold of the rope with both hands, fortunately able to pull myself along the length of the river without another near-death experience.



As I approached the shore, I noticed that the boy had dismounted from his raft. This time he had not taken to running ahead of me. Instead, he waited—taking the liberty of using his machete on the heads of any ghoul that crawled out of the water and onto the shore. Then, when I felt the relieving touch of solid ground beneath my feet, I too removed my blade from my back and chopped the heads off of the few ghouls that could escape the pull of the water and follow us. Then, standing on the shore of the raging bloodied waters, I turned my attention to the boy, who, to my surprise, had lowered his blade and raised his rifle—pointing it right at me.

“Have you been bitten?!” the boy asked, raising his voice as high as he could to be heard over the sound of the nearby waters. I didn’t respond at first and stood stunned by his sudden shift in behavior. His eyes were wide open and there was visible fear on his face. A tear built up inside his eye and he swallowed a breath before he opened his mouth to speak again. “Did they bite you?!”

I shook my head, and raised my hands to my side to try and let him know that I wasn’t a threat. The boy stared at me, paranoid as he should be. The dark reflective surface of my visor kept him from seeing my eyes and, no doubt, he was both curious about and intimidated by the nature of my armor and gear. The rifle he held shook in his hands as he slowly lowered it—deciding to believe that I wasn’t infected. Then, adding to a long list of surprises, the boy took a few tearful steps forward and threw his arms around me, hugging me tightly to him and sobbing for whatever comfort my presence had brought. I stood stunned, for the first time since the infection struck, not knowing what to do. But then logically assessing the nature of the boys state, I concluded it would be best to reciprocate, despite the fact it would mean temporarily lowering my guard and taking my hands away from a weapon. I placed my arms around the kid’s quivering body and hugged him gently, unfamiliar with the gesture and, yet, somehow warmed by the sensation, looking out on the crimson rapids of the undead river.

## CHAPTER 29: RUDE AWAKENING

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

My dreams were filled with blurry figures looming over me, grabbing hold of me and saying things I couldn't understand. My dreams were bright and blinding, as if I had escaped the grasp of hell and stumbled upon the pearly white gates of heaven. But most of all, my dreams were a daze somewhere in between memories and nightmares. Every time I tried to open my eyes, every time I tried to move my weak and powerless body, I had the same fucking dream. Over and over again. And even though, each time, I convinced myself that the ghouls around me were reaching down, grabbing hold and sinking their festering teeth into my flesh, I never actually felt their bites. Instead, I'd black out screaming and trying to get free, only to wake up inside the same damn dream. That is, until I opened my eyes to see her sitting beside me, maybe an angel, or, maybe a mirage, but twice as beautiful as both of them together. Her long dark hair rested on her shoulders and a pair of reading glasses sat on the tip of her nose. She wore a white coat—a lab coat, like doctors wear—and held a book in her hands. She was in her early thirties but looked like she had just grown into the woman she was meant to be—wise and humble, quiet and considerate. The kind of person that when you first see them, you can't picture anything but what you want to see. And just then as my eyes started to clear and the blur of my dreams began to fade, she looked up from her book to meet eyes with me.

My lips slowly peeled apart, almost like they'd been glued together, and I tried to make a sound, letting out a wheezing breath and a dry cough. The woman stood up, dropped her book on the chair and poked her head out a nearby door—saying something I couldn't quite make out to another person somewhere in the hall. Then, just a few moments later as my vision fully returned to reveal the white walls around me and hospital style bed I lay on, four other people crowded into the room—one of which was holding my rifle. 'Where the hell am I?' I thought, trying to remember the last thing I'd seen or done before the dreams—before the blinding white surrounded me. Running—I remembered running; climbing on a wire to avoid the infected and barely escaping with my life. I remembered getting mixed up in a crowd of survivors—scared confused and sick people who, soon enough, turned on each other. And, then, when that happened, I had no choice but to run, jump, and... that was it. That was the last thing I remember. But, from the

stern and concerned expressions of the people wearing lab coats, I suspected the story didn't end there.

"Where am I?" I asked, finding it difficult to swallow normally. I tried to raise a hand to my neck to feel what was the matter, but something tugged against my wrist and kept me still—a strap, one on each of my ankles and wrists—tying me to the bed. "Why am I strapped down?"

"Because the last few times you woke up, you became violent," the man holding my rifle said, making sure not to point it at anyone, but imposing the fact he had it upon me by the way he was standing.

"Woke up?"

"Yes, woke up," the man continued. "You've been here for over a week now and your wounds are healing well. The reason you're strapped down is so that you won't be a continued danger to yourself and others."

"I don't... know what you're talking about," I admitted, rethinking whether or not the dreams I had been having might have been glimpses of reality instead.

"That doesn't surprise me," the man stated, pulling his free hand up to scratch his unshaven face. "You've been sedated and drugged over the course of the past week—we felt it was the best decision given the severity of your wounds."

"My wounds?" I exclaimed, struggling to swallow once more, only to feel the tape of a bandage on my neck adjust. Then, as I tried to move myself in the bed, momentarily struggling against the straps, the woman with the long dark hair stepped forward and placed her hand gently on mine to try and calm me down.

"Please try to stay still," she advised, smiling tenderly and chasing the fear right out of me. "The glass you broke when you jumped through the window lodged itself into your neck, hands, arms and legs. I've managed to remove it, but you're still depending on stitches to keep those wounds shut."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes," the woman answered, squeezing my hand gently before releasing it and taking a step back from the bed. "My name is Dr. Leanne Callin and, luckily for you, I used to be a surgeon."

"Used to be? So... this isn't a hospital?"

"No, it's not," the man interrupted, pulling my eyes away from Leanne.

“Then where are we?”

“I’ll tell you that as soon as you answer a few of our questions,” the man replied, speaking for the rest of white-coated people standing around him in the room. But, despite that, my eyes kept drifting back to look at Leanne. “What’s your name?”

“Matthew Simmonds.”

“Lieutenant Mathew Simmonds, you mean,” the man stated, adding something to my introduction that he shouldn’t have known. I frowned, unsure of how he could’ve become aware my rank, let alone that I had been in the military. “What were your orders?”

“What?” I asked, even more confused.

“What were your orders?” the man repeated, curt but not impolite. “We checked your wallet and ran your ID through our database—you’re active military. Now, since the world is over, I don’t think you’d be breaching protocol by telling us what your standing orders were when the infection struck,” the man explained, making assumptions that he could only hope were true—because if, in fact, I hadn’t defected and if, in fact, I hadn’t left at exactly the time I did, he would have been right—I would have had standing orders, a sense of what the response to the infection was and, possibly, knowledge of who to contact and where. But, as only I knew, none of that was the case, and all I had left was the rifle he held in his hands. The other people in the room waited with wide eyes and concerned expressions—praying that I knew something they didn’t that would give them something more to hope for. However, as I thought about what the man had asked and what he expected to learn from me, I realized he already knew more than anyone else I had encountered—he had mentioned the infection.

“How did you know it was an infection?”

“That’s a little above your clearance level, lieutenant.”

“Well... since the world is over, I don’t think you’d be breaching protocol by telling me,” I replied, using his own words against him. The man squinted slightly and began to frown, losing his patience and ignoring my question.

“Were you one of the soldiers dispatched to this facility?”

“No, I was off duty.”

“Where were you stationed and when was the last time you received communication?”

“I wasn’t stationed anywhere, I was off duty.”

“Then what were you doing here?”

“Vacationing, what does it look like?” I grumbled, rotating my wrists to try and find a weak spot in the straps.

“Jesus Christ,” the man snapped, shaking his head in frustration. “He’s not part of the rescue team. This guy doesn’t know anything.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I exclaimed, pulling the man’s attention back to me just as he prepared to storm out of the door. “I don’t know what you folks are calling the disease, but, where I’m from it goes by the name Solanum. It gets into your blood stream, makes its way to the brain, kills you, reanimates your body and forces your corpse to attack and infect the living,” I explained, watching as the faces of the white coated people changed from concerned to surprised. “There is no cure, there is no vaccine and if the only hope in hell you think you’ve got is some kind of rescue party, then I’ve got news for you: I’m the closest thing you’re ever gonna get. So why don’t you do us all a favor and untie me and start answering my fucking questions.”

The man stood at humbled attention, bewildered by what I had just said. And if I had so much as uttered any of those words in any situation other than this outbreak, I knew he almost certainly would have ignored each and every one of them—playing dumb as he was no doubt trained to do. But something about his expression and the way he was carrying himself led me to believe that he knew far more about what was happening than even I did. And the fact that a full week after the infection I had found myself lying in a clean hospital bed, in a building full of white coated scientists with the lights still on and the air conditioning still running, made me more hungry for answers than I’d ever been in my whole life. I looked back at Leanne whose mouth now drooped open from surprise and nodded in her direction to try and get her to untie me.

“Well?”

“You can untie him,” the man finally said, clearly the one in charge. “And then everyone get back to work and close the door—this is now a private conversation.”

Leanne untied me and gave a few quick instructions about not moving too much and being mindful about my bandages. The other white coats shuffled out of the room like scared sheep. I stretched and rotated my neck and joints, sitting up on the bed and sipping from a cup of water. The man in charge sat in a chair on the opposite side of the room and both of us waited until everyone else had left before saying another word to one another.

“What’s your name?” I asked, a few moments after the door closed and the hallway cleared.

“Call me Roger,” he replied, his disposition suddenly more calm but also more guarded. “What’s your real rank, sir?”

“Excuse me?”

“I need to know what your clearance level is, sir.”

“No, you don’t,” I replied, playing along with the assumption Roger had made that in order to know what I just said, I had to have been more than what he had seen when he ran my name through their database. “All you need to know is that we’re going to start being honest with each other. Now, tell me where we are.”

“That’s not good enough,” Roger replied, returning to his previous tone. “If you were supposed to be here, you’d know where we are, and this entire conversation would have been preceded by codeword clearance. Now, I don’t know if you overheard someone saying what you just said to me or if you just managed to piece it all together on your own, but this conversation is not a candid exchange between survivors. It is a classified measure of national security and incursion upon that is treason at the least,” Roger exclaimed, raising his voice and laying down the law. But, as I watched him bark at me with his practiced intellect, still holding my rifle like it was a toy rather than like a man who meant to use it, I decided I’d had enough of playing nice. I nodded my head and looked away, pretending to be thinking about what he was saying, while I placed my feet on the ground and stood up. As I did so, I made it appear as if my legs were too weak to support me and fell in the direction of the bandage on my left leg. Roger didn’t react to help me up, but he also didn’t react to point the gun at me now that I had closed half of the distance between us. Then, as I moved slowly at first to get back to my feet, I pushed myself forward with my right leg and rolled towards Roger. Suddenly, he tried to snap the rifle back up to his shoulder but wasn’t able to do so before my hand landed on the side of the barrel and ripped it out of his reach—pointing it in between his eyes as I stood above him.

“How’s this for clearance level you stupid fuck?” I stated, watching Roger dip his eyes back and forth between my sights and the finger I kept firm against the trigger. “Now, I want to make a few things clear. The first is that there is no such thing as national security after an outbreak occurs—there are only survivors and the undead. The second is that those who decide to fuck with the well being of the living and their chances of survival will rightfully be murdered or left for dead. And, third, is that you’re not in charge anymore, and, unless you give me a good God damn reason not to kill you right now, then this conversation is over.”

“A good reason?” Roger chuckled, clearly of the opinion that I had made a profoundly stupid mistake by pointing my weapon at him. “Ok, cowboy, you got it. How about the fact that I’m an undercover NSA agent who infiltrated this lab over a year ago? How about the fact that just prior to the infection, I came to acquire foreknowledge of its occurrence and the scope of its **deliberate** release?” he continued, either lying very well or telling only the bare minimum of truth that would keep him alive. “Or, how about the fact that I am responsible for discovering the name of the person who is responsible for all of this?”

“Ok... not bad,” I muttered, deciding that he wasn’t lying. “But you left one thing out—where the fuck are we?” I asked again, shaken enough by his words to reconsider blowing his head off but keeping the rifle pointed at him all the same.

“We are currently inside of an Eden Corporation laboratory responsible for the weaponized manufacture of what, ‘where you’re from’, is called Solanum.”

## CHAPTER 30: BURIED ALIVE

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

The moaning never stopped. Never. It was there all day and all night—following us through every nook and cranny as if the infected lingering above us inside the barn could see through the ground and watch us as we moved. Fortunately for my daughter Susie and me, the ‘home base’ as my husband called it, the ‘impenetrable fortress’ that he had kept hidden from me throughout our entire marriage, buried under the barn and locked out of sight, was completely out of reach of the undead. Unfortunately, for Susie and me, that same fact meant that we were kept locked underground without any way to escape; we were kept locked away without daylight, unfiltered fresh air, or hope, short of every ghoul above us wandering off to try and find new prey to track. And in the week’s time since we stumbled down the stairs, locking the door behind us, I had spent my time doing two things and two things only—the first was crying for the loss of my beloved husband, Sebastian, for my sweet little girl, Sarah, and the constant fear that my son, Archer, might not have been able to find safety—that he too might be dead. And the second thing I tried to do when I felt able to, when I forced myself to try and be productive and come up with a plan other than waiting my life away, was read the stocked shelf full of journals and notes that were left behind by my husband in the event that the infection actually happened.

“Mommy?” Susie asked, raising her voice so that I could hear her above the endless moans of the undead. “Can I have some more cereal?”

“As long as it’s the bran kind, none of that sugary junk,” I replied, flipping past a page that detailed the ‘protocols’ my husband had sworn an oath to uphold even before he had met me. I sat at a small desk with a reading lamp on it, hunched over one of the many journals I had scanned through that day.

“What if I mix them?” Susie inquired, giving a crooked eye to the bran cereal on the table. “The bran stuff is gross.”

“Fine,” I sighed, just happy that she had managed to overcome her bout of sudden unexplained illness and had regained her appetite. She ducked back into the kitchen to prepare her meal, pleased by my new-found ability to compromise, and I returned my attention to one of Sebastian’s journals, flipping past a few more pages until I came across what looked like the schematics for the bunker we were in—and, what I had been searching for ever since we found ourselves in it.



The bunker stretched the full length of the barn and even a bit past the outside wall. It contained two bedrooms, one of which had a set of bunk beds as well as a single bed, no doubt designed for our twins and son, Archer, while the other, had a queen sized bed in it, where, my husband and I were meant to sleep. The bunker also contained a working bathroom with running water pulled from some kind of system my husband had set up to tap into the nearby wells, a living area complete with hundreds of books on everything that could possibly be conceived of as important in times of survival, an old TV with a collection of classic movies, a couple of exercise bikes that doubled for power generators and a collection of guns large enough to equip a small army. The kitchen was small and limited in space and functionality, but it gave us more comforts than likely most had in these hard times. And then, in addition to all that, there was the storage room—full to the brim of supplies of every variety from batteries, to food, ammunition and more—enough to last five people years and years without ever stepping foot outside.

From what I could tell, the power and air circulation were dependent on solar panels that my husband had arranged to outfit the barn with years ago. And while, at the time, I had complained about how inefficient the darn things were, I now understood that they were intended to be used primarily for this place, not our home. Yet, despite all the luxuries we had, all I wanted was what we had lost. I tried my best to stay positive when Susie was awake or nearby, and, she tried her best to do the same for me. But sometimes after the lights went out I could hear her muffled sobs over the sounds of moaning from above us. And I could see that while she had always been a cheerful and happy young girl, that part of her was gone now—for how long, no one could say. Often I would wake to find her lying next to me—clutching tightly to my clothes, her cheeks still stained with the tears she had cried herself to sleep with. I held her back tightly against my breast, praying to God that if this in fact were the rapture that he wouldn't make us suffer through it, that he would either send us help and hope or release us from our prison into his hands. I prayed often. But it was hard for me to decide what to pray for.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Susie asked, holding her bowl of cereal as she came to stand next to me at the desk. I looked up from what I had been reading and forced a smile for her.

“Sure, put on whatever you like,” I replied, rubbing my hand against her shoulder while keeping the other pressed against the journal I was reading. Susie walked over to the television set that until that point, neither of us had bothered to pay any mind to. Then, as she sat down and began flipping through the selection of movies, I returned my focus to the

schematics in front of me, looking for any way out other than the way we had come in.

“Mommy?”

“Yes?”

“What’s this?” Susie exclaimed, holding out a disk to me that had been in the player when she opened it—labeled ‘For my family: in case of emergency’. I pulled my hand away from the journal I had been reading and dropped my jaw—recognizing Sebastian’s handwriting on the disk.

“Put that in and press play,” I instructed, moving to the couch to sit beside my daughter. I reached down and took her hand, squeezing it gently as the image of my husband and her father came onto the screen—staring into the camera to speak to us from the grave.

“Hello everyone,” Sebastian said in his usual upbeat disposition. “Hope things are fine and that it was only some kind of false alarm that put you down here, or, maybe just some kind of riot, or, who knows what. But, hopefully, it’s not what this place was built for. I’d like to think that I just happened to be away from the house and was able to get a hold of someone and tell them what to do before it was too late. But that said, if you’re watching this, it means one of two things: either you stumbled upon it by accident while you were down here for I don’t know how long and I don’t know for what reason, or, more likely, I didn’t make it but thankfully, you did,” Sebastian continued, smiling tenderly into the camera—knowing that if anyone ever watched this recording it would be at a time like this. Tears streamed down my face and my heart broke, holding Susie close to me as we watched him speak.

“I pray that you all made it down here safe and sound and that, if you are down here, you’ve managed to keep our usual family squabbles to a minimum—kids, you listen to your mother. Not just because she’s your mother but because she genuinely does know what’s best. Archer, you’re the man of the house now, and while I know we never got as close as I felt we should, you should know that you meant more to me than I ever had the balls to tell you face to face. Girls, I know you like to play around and talk back, but times are different now and, no doubt you’ve either seen some disturbing or down-right terrifying things. I’m so very sorry for that and, also, that you had to find out about this place in the last minute, but... well... let’s just say your mother never would have forgiven me if she had known what I was doing down here, and, for good reason. And, while we’re on the subject of your mother, I’m sorry sweetheart, I know I made a promise to you all those years ago but... this was a part of myself I just couldn’t let go, no matter what my brother did to us all those years ago because of it. You need to understand that if you had made me

choose between this place and a life with you, I would have picked you every single time, but... for the same reason, that's why I didn't tell you. I love you so much, and I can only hope that you'll be able to forgive me—especially if I'm still alive,” he joked, bringing a broken smile to my face and more tears to my cheeks.

“Now, since I've said all that, I'll mention one more thing so that this place won't seem quite so hopeless or eerie. Because while I did a pretty darn good job of keeping it buried, don't think that you're trapped down here or that there isn't a way out—behind the bookcase is another door that leads to a stairwell. In the event that you've found yourselves trapped in here without me and supplies are running out, you can use that stairwell for two things: the first, is to leave if the need arises and supplies dwindle. And, the second, is to try and find help. At the top of the stairs is a lookout point that can be revealed by breaking down the boarding around it that were put there to conceal it from view from the outside. There's also a rope ladder there that can be climbed down in order to leave or fetch something if you need it, but... I want to be very clear about something. In the event that you do decide to use that exit, I insist that you read each and every word from the journals I have left behind before you do. Because if, in fact, what this place was built for has occurred, and, if in fact I'm not with you, then those journals are your only way to come to terms with what's out there and how dangerous the world now is. I'm sorry if my saying that scares you, but... it's best you be scared and safe than foolish and dead. Now, since I need to head back up top and go inside before your mother gets suspicious that I'm out here sneaking a drink or puffing a joint... just joking kids... I think that's gonna be just about it. Remember that I love you all so very, very much and that I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you to try and lead you through these hard times... but... God is with you and, if I'm not too, then rest assured I'm watching down from his side, helping you every step of the way. So, don't forget to wave hello every once in a while,” he finished, turning off the recording device and leaving a black screen for Susie and I to cry to.

## CHAPTER 31: DESPERATE TIMES

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

My intended schedule would have me begin aerial bombardments in order to cleanse the world of the undead that I unleashed upon it in less than one week's time. By way of my automated drone bases, located far from major populations, or the threat of being overrun by the infected, I would deliberately target large cities and clusters of the undead. I would spare no one, assume there were no survivors, willingly kill any survivors that may have miraculously avoided infection, and decimate every remnant of the world that men before me had made—a corrupt and evil world without hope of recovery or absolution. And then, after the smoke had cleared and the sounds and sights of bombs had faded from the satellites that along with myself would bear witness to the end, we could begin to rebuild. Our people, this fledgling society of only those I saw fit to spare and bring to my island, would be worthy of starting anew—of leading the few to build a world that the many never could. But before that could happen, there was one more piece of the puzzle that had to be put in place. And as I sat on a beach chair, staring out to sea at the approaching security ship carrying the single man I had requested from the many vessels and passengers that had arrived at my island earlier that day, I felt a soothing rush of accomplishment and pride—the feeling of coming one step closer to erasing the past.

Gregory Voustin was as much an old friend as he was, at least in my mind, if not his own, a lifelong enemy. For the sake of appearances and mutual corporate gain, however, we had made every attempt to include one another in each other's lives and business ventures. He never admitted to being jealous of my genius and I never admitted to being jealous of how he was regarded by the public as if he too were a genius. For while my empire had been built in secrecy through meticulous planning, his had been forged out of selflessly throwing away his inheritance, hopeless philanthropic ventures and public relations stunts—three things the general public held in great favor, and, thus, had come to regard the man behind them equally favorably. And while I despised his good spirits and boundless determination to try and prove himself 'an every man' though he remained one of the elite, it was a deep hypocrisy I was willing to overlook for the sake of appearing as if I were his friend. For now, as I found myself a comfortable dictator in the lap of luxury that was my private island, it would ultimately suit the interests of everyone else under my care to believe that, not only was I kind and compassionate

but also, that it had been their decision to elect me leader rather than Gregory Voustin or any of the other powerful elites I had spared by inviting them to my island. For as sure as it was my island, those who in their previous lives had grown accustomed to power, would almost certainly endeavor to regain what they had lost and fight amongst themselves for the scraps I would spare. For now, however, at least my dictatorship was unquestioned. And while I would not hesitate to use the full force of my security team to remind other people of my position above them, I would instead prefer to move them as pawns and sacrifice them as I wished.

Gregory was clean-shaven and casually dressed as always, wearing an un-tucked navy blue dress shirt, without a tie or top button fastened, along side cargo kaki pants and sandals. However, his expression did not match the free spirited nature of his attire. And, as I came to think about it, looking at his solemn and broken face, I realized I had never seen him so defeated or lost. He approached me at the side of Nahuel, the towering commander of my guards, and appeared as if he were about to cry. Then, as I held out my hand to formally shake his, as we had always done upon seeing one another, he took a few staggered steps forward and wrapped his hands around me—hugging me tightly as if we were far better friends than we actually were. I stood uneasily, gesturing to Nahuel that it was all right for him to leave and that I was not worried about Gregory being infected or infecting me. I pretended to hug him back and waited eagerly for him to let me go so we could speak.

“Jesus Christ Ellex, I don’t believe in God but I feel inclined to thank him” Gregory exclaimed, wiping away a tear fallen somewhere in between joy and sorrow.

“You’re welcome.” I replied, patting a hand on his shoulder and gesturing towards a nearby beach table and chairs so that we could sit and talk. “I’m just relieved that so many people I know and care for were out of harm’s way when this horror happened.”

“I suppose, but... I still just can’t believe it—that it’s all gone,” he confessed, slumping forward in his seat.

“Yes... but it is. From what you can tell, how is everyone else fairing?”

“The ships are a mess, Ellex—people are terrified of falling ill and some are either just too depressed or frightened to even bother getting out of bed anymore. And ever since we left Bob’s ship behind, it’s almost like everyone’s been on a witch hunt for the next person who they suspect has fallen ill,” he continued, mentioning the missing vessel from

the fleet—the only ship unaccounted for of all those I had arranged to come to Eden island.

“What do you mean the next person to fall ill? What happened with his ship?”

“You don’t know, do you?” Gregory asked, once more on the verge of tears. “Didn’t you get any of the communications we sent you?”

“Some but... nothing about this,” I admitted, having only paid fleeting attention to the many messages I had received from their ships—knowing full well that they were safe from infection and, annoyed by the fact that they felt the constant need to pester me with their paranoia.

“I didn’t see for myself, but, word was that one of his passengers was sick—infected like you’d mentioned in the message you’d sent us... like everyone else back on the mainland. He tried to beg and reason with us but, too many people wouldn’t hear it—they decided to force him to keep a distance from the rest of the ships and then, eventually, we lost sight of him all together—lost communication too, and we haven’t heard from him since. Their whole damn ship is probably overrun by now.”

“Gregory...” I muttered, concerned by what he had told me not because I believed he was correct but because I knew he was mistaken. “It’s not possible that anyone on his ship had become infected. I’m sorry to say that whatever someone thought they saw to motivate that decision was either fabricated or misinformed.”

“I don’t... Like I said, I didn’t see, but... how can you be so sure? How can you know that?”

“I need to tell you some things that, for now at least, I think it’s best you keep to yourself,” I explained, leaning forward and placing my elbows on the edge of the table. “In the days since the outbreak occurred I’ve spent a great deal of time combing over the records and inner workings of Eden Corporation. And the reason I’ve done this is because the infection that has taken place would not have been possible without the aid of certain individuals.”

“What?! You’re saying someone did this?”

“I believe so,” I admitted, starting the myth that would clear my name of any future accusations or inquiry. “Now, the reason I’ve been going through Eden corporations files specifically are because since I was relieved of my duties, my access to confidential materials has been limited to say the least. However, after the infection occurred, I was able to bypass the security systems and investigate what was happening inside the company just prior to the outbreak. And... the reason I knew to do all of this, is because Nathan, my former best friend and business partner, was

responsible for creating the disease that I believe has since infected nearly everyone on this earth. I knew about it years ago and tried to shut down any future production of it, but... I was unsuccessful. Anyway, that said, Nathan not only invented the weaponized version of this virus, but in recent months, after my removal from the company, began exploring the possibility of making it temporarily water soluble for the purposes of biological warfare,” I continued, enjoying the admission of my actions under the guise of Nathan’s name. “That’s how the disease spread so quickly and so widely—it was in the water, processed through almost every single treatment plant on this planet and completely undetectable to not only people working there but to people who either drank or washed themselves with it. This was planned—it was deliberate—and Nathan, was responsible for it,” I finished, staring at Gregory’s disgusted and horrified expression. He swallowed a lump growing in his throat and blinked in disbelief a few times, trying to find words to comprehend let alone respond to what I had just told him.

“Why? Why in God’s name would anybody do that for any reason?”

“I have no idea... I can’t, for the life of me, fathom any reason why he would do this. But, from the records of Eden corporation and the massive production of the virus responsible for what’s happened in the months prior to the outbreak, there is no doubt in my mind that this was not only deliberately done, but deliberately done by him.”

“I don’t... I can’t believe... it’s just...”

“I know... I know... but... in the last week, two people on this island have taken their own lives, my wife hasn’t spoken to me in days, my son doesn’t smile anymore and it’s as if this place has somehow been afflicted just as deeply by what’s happened as the infected themselves. From what I’ve gathered by your description of those on board the other vessels, it seems as though it’s the case there as well,” I explained, carefully gauging how much information he could handle and how much information I had to give him to be able to use him as I pleased. “In any regard, I believe that much of what people are experiencing is a loss of hope, a loss of purpose, safety, and even faith. I believe that many people don’t see the point of living in a world as terrible as the one we find ourselves on. And, while part of me understands that, nevertheless, I cannot bring myself to forgive it. Because on this island, we are safe—on this island we have each other; and, on this island, unbeknownst to everyone but me, and now you as well, I have the tools at my disposal to do something about this—to save us all.”

“What?”

“At the time the infection struck, Eden corporations laboratories had been splintered into several factions determined by both security clearance and what they were responsible for either manufacturing or researching. Now, while the laboratories that were responsible for manufacturing the disease that has caused the infection were outfitted with secure water sources, their own generators, security systems and satellite access, they nevertheless remained above ground—and, thus, were more vulnerable to outside conditions and exposure. However, there are other, alternative and far more secure laboratories located all over North America which, quite possibly, have not been exposed to either the infection, the infected or the disease in any way, shape or form. Instead, due to the nature of what they were working on and the conditions in which they had to work on it, I believe that many of Eden corporation’s underground laboratories are now functioning as bunkers, shelters for those people trapped inside, outfitted with enough supplies and resources to last for years, possibly even decades.”

“Have you been able to contact them?”

“No,” I lied, knowing well that at any time I wished I would be able to, but, instead, had to make it appear as if I could not. “The communications on this island are limited; however, I do have certain powers that I have been able to obtain in the week since the infection.”

“Powers?”

“Yes... confiscated powers from the company I used to control,” I explained, steadily guiding my pawn. “What do you know about the unmanned drone programs?”

“I know that they’re reprehensible.”

“In times of peace, no doubt. But, these are not peaceful times,” I replied, mildly aggravated by Gregory’s continued self-righteous and peaceful nature even after the destruction of all that he had loved and cared for. “In any regard, I have been able to procure, using only the network of computers and satellite access available to me from this island, access to and the full usage of many of those drone facilities.”

“What in God’s name are you saying, Ellex?”

“I’m saying that right now there are thousands of people who are still alive in underground bunkers that keep them safe from infection all across North America. I’m saying that they will be able to sustain themselves in the short term, but not indefinitely; I’m saying that on this island, I have an unprecedented amount of control over the former infrastructure of the outside world, which since the infection struck, has been completely overrun by the infected. And, most of all, what I’m



saying is that there's still hope—we are the hope of those people and I am trying to get you to snap out of your melancholy delirium and realize that fact, ok? There is too much at stake here to allow ourselves, or to allow each other, to give up. Because, like I said, there are survivors and we have the power to help them by clearing the surface of the infected.”

“You want to bomb the surface?” Nathan grumbled, clearly at odds with the magnitude of processing what would definitively erase all remnants of the world we had once called home. “You want to assume that everyone is infected, that there are no survivors other than the ones you believe are safe underground, and, then, bomb the entire fucking continent to try and make it ‘safe’ for them to come out? Is that what you’re saying Ellex?”

“Yes, Gregory, it is,” I stated coldly, resenting his resistance, even though I knew him well enough to expect little more than what he had demonstrated thus far. “And not only that, but the reason that I’ve asked you here to speak with me is because I know you’re the only person held in high enough regard by the other people on those ships to be able to explain to them that what I’ve just told you needs to happen. So now I want you to go back and convince everyone else that this is not only the best option we have to rebuild this world, it’s the only option.”

## CHAPTER 32: LAST STRAW

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2004*

*“What about when we get to Canada?” Matthew asked, trudging along side of me while we walked through the forest—our feet crunching against fallen leaves and twigs as we made our way to the fort.*

*The sky was overcast and bleak and the sun would be going down soon. And while we had fooled our parents into believing that we were going for a weeklong trip for school, the truth was, we had far bigger plans in mind. Since the removal of Sebastian from our group two years ago, the fundamental dynamic of how we intended to survive the infection had changed. Now, rather than trying to band together and reside over a set area of terrain, fighting the undead as much as we did avoid them and herd them, Matthew and I had decided it was best to come up with a new plan, a plan that involved making our way across the border all the way to the upper east side of Lake Laberge near Whitehorse in the Yukon, a place that had both a small population, an abundance of fresh water and wildlife, and, most importantly, a season that would completely freeze any undead that might be around, only to thaw them out a year later in a weakened and likely crippled state. It was perfect. However, finding the time to make the practice trips we would need was complicated by the fact that we were still in school and that we were still living with our parents. Consequently, we were becoming very good at lying to them.*

*“What do you mean? What about when we get to Canada?” I replied, scanning the trees for any sign of movement.*

*“Well, lets say America has been quarantined—the infection has broken out here but hasn’t reached other places as badly, and they’re willing to shoot just about everybody on sight—no questions asked,” he explained, hoisting the heavy hiking backpack he carried full of supplies from one shoulder onto the other. “Anyway, if that’s the case, then the route we chose would have to be adjusted because going through known paths will likely put us right under the sights of people on the look out for anyone trying to sneak in.”*

*“Ok, I understand what you mean, but it’s not gonna come to that,” I replied, confident enough that there was no one around to be able to use my normal tone of voice. “The border’s too big to even think about quarantining it, and, even if they tried, they’d fail.”*

*“Well... I’m just saying, it’s something we might need to consider.”*

*“Yeah, sure,” I replied, climbing up a short hill and only just then realizing that Matthew had grown to be the same height as I was. “But I’d say that’s not the worst of our concerns or the most likely of extenuating circumstances,” I continued,*

*insinuating something that I hoped Matthew would take the initiative to talk about rather than forcing me to press him for it. Because, while, since his brother had been removed from the group, I had found myself tremendously proud of Matthew's loyalty to our cause and strict adherence to the protocols, it was a romantic relationship of his that now stood poised to interrupt the delicate balance we had established between our open lives and the part we kept secret in the forest. His girlfriend of nearly half a year, was a peppy cheerleader, who, despite the fact that I thought she was an 'all right girl', was still an outsider who I didn't consider either trustworthy or worthy of entering into our group. However, seeing young love put the bounce in Matthew's step and give him something to ramble on about over and over was enough to make me start thinking ahead to the days when, if they stayed together, or if he and any girl stayed together, our friendship and the commitments we'd made might be drawn into question.*

*"Ok, then what are the most likely extenuating circumstances in your mind?" Mathew asked, confused by my vague assessment of his concerns.*

*"That, when the time comes to leave, you might not want to go."*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"Ok... lets say the infection hits tomorrow, with no warning. Lets say it all hits at once, in a huge and consuming wave that we have no choice but to immediately run from and never look back, ok? Now, if that happens, the extenuating circumstances that I'm worried about aren't at the border or along the way, they're here right now. So, I guess what I'm saying is, do you have what it takes to turn your back not just on your family, but on your girl too?"*

*"My girlfriend? This is about my girlfriend?"*

*"No, it's not about her. It's about you and her, and it's also about time we talked about it."*

*"What you don't like her?"*

*"Actually, I'm surprised by how much I don't mind when she's around. But I'm not talking about her personality, I'm talking about the changes I've seen in your personality since you started dating her."*

*"Just say what you're trying to say, Derek."*

*"All right. She's not in the group, she doesn't know the protocols, and if the infection hits now or in the foreseeable future, she would be a liability to our plan both logistically and, for you at least, emotionally. What I'm trying to say, or, figure out, is whether or not you you'd be able to choose between her and the protocols?" I asked, carefully watching Matthew's blank expression for some kind of indication of how he had taken what I'd just said. He remained silent a moment, staring through me, and, then, slowly peeled his lips apart to respond.*

*"Have you spoken to my brother recently?"*

*"You know I haven't," I stated, frowning at the very mention of Sebastian's name.*

*"Well... Sebastian actually suggested the exact same thing to me back when I first started dating her, only I assumed he'd done so cause I knew he had had a crush on her too. I even accused him of it, as if we already didn't hate each other enough without fighting over a girl. But, uh... since I don't suspect you've got any sort of feeling for her, I'll let you know plain and simple that if it came to it, yeah, I'd be able to leave her same as I'd be able to leave you... if I had to. But because I know that's not good enough for you and it's not the point you're really trying to get at, I'll put it this way: If she and I stay together, at some point I'd like to think that maybe we could both trust her enough to consider letting her into the group," Matthew finished, proposing the very thing I had feared most, a new untrained member to our group. I stopped dead in my tracks, just a few meters away from the entranceway to the fort and slowly turned to face Matthew.*

*"Are you serious?" I asked, already knowing the answer. "And then what if you two broke up, huh? You expect her to just keep her mouth shut about everything and trust that the adjustments we would have to make because of her would just go away if she left?"*

*"Look, Derek," Matthew exclaimed, sounding too close to the way his brother once did. "You are not the leader of this group—you are a part of it, just like me. And in the same way that I'd have the courtesy to trust in your decisions about a girl, I expect you to respect mine. And if I want to tell Anna about the protocols and what we've been preparing for, then that's just the way it is, and you're just gonna have to deal with having to learn to trust another person."*

*"Or the two of you could stop being such fucking psychos," Sebastian exclaimed, poking his head out of the entranceway to the fort and surprising the shit out of Matthew and me. We stared at him, appalled that he had had the nerve to not only interrupt what we were saying but that he had been inside the fort—he had trespassed and returned to the very place we had banished him from and, for whatever reason, had chosen to do so a full two years after we had expelled him from the group. I looked over to Matthew whose fists were already clenched and trembling with rage.*

*"What the fuck are you doing here?!"*

*"I came to get Matthew," Sebastian responded, not even able to look me in the eye at first.*

*"Why?"*

*"Family business, all right?" he snapped, taking a step towards me to try and impose the extra six inches of height he had on me. I stood my ground and glared back at him.*

*"What's wrong?" Matthew asked, willing to overlook the circumstances only if Sebastian was there because of an emergency.*

*“There’s something I need to show you a few hills over,” Sebastian replied, walking past me and tucking his shirt into his pants, covered with traces of dirt on the backside.*

*“Sebastian, tell me why you’re here right now,” Matthew demanded, quickly losing patience with his brother’s nonchalant demeanor. But as I watched the tension between the two brothers build, my mind began to drift to our surroundings. The tarp where we typically stashed bicycles was bulging outward—larger than would be the case if only one bike were hidden behind it, and as Sebastian spoke to his brother, he subtly pulled up his undone zipper and adjusted his oddly wrinkled and dirty clothing. I crept closer to the tarp and peeled it back—revealing not only Sebastian’s bicycle but another unidentified one as well—he wasn’t alone.*

*“I’m here to show you something,” he repeated, behaving as if he were nervous and trying to hide it—when really, he was trying to divert our attention—to lure us away from the fort before we could discover what he was hiding. “Now come on, follow me.”*

*“Whose bike is this?” I asked, peeling the tarp aside so that Matthew could see as well. However, as I did so, his face morphed from angry to shocked—as if he recognized the bicycle.*

*“Ah, fuck,” Sebastian muttered, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck—genuinely dismayed.*

*“You... you thought we were really away didn’t you?” Matthew asked his brother, his tone fragile and betrayed. “So you...” he tried to say, so surprised that he was barely able to speak. I furrowed my brow and looked back at the bicycle I had unveiled—trying to figure out what was happening. Then, as I noticed one of the stickers on the frame of the bicycle that read ‘Adam’s High Cheerleading’ I understood what was happening—Anna—it was Anna’s bike. Matthew had said he knew that Sebastian had a crush on his girlfriend, Anna. He said that he had confronted his brother about it months ago but he never said anything about whether or not it had been resolved. And, as what was happening continued to dawn on me, I turned towards the entranceway to the fort and reached my hand between the fallen trees to pull one of the covering tarps aside, revealing a hiding, tearful and terrified teenage girl.*

*“Anna?” Matthew whimpered, looking in bewildered dismay at his girlfriend, who had come out to the middle of the woods with his brother. My mouth dropped and I leaned against a tree branch—the fort had been discovered—she had seen everything—and, Sebastian, that God forsaken piece of shit, had brought her here to fool around while he thought we were away on a trip. I turned my attention back to Matthew who was now stewing in rage—boiling more and more as his brother tried to explain.*

*“Yeah... I thought you two were away,” Sebastian confessed. “And I couldn’t bring her by the house, and she said the two of you were having relationship troubles so I asked her if...”*

*“Relationship troubles?” Matthew scoffed, clearly of the opinion that they weren’t. His eyes met Anna’s who looked away uncomfortably—guilty about the pain she had caused him. “Yeah... I’d say I have a pretty big fucking relationship problem,” Matthew exclaimed, dropping the bag of supplies from his shoulder and popping it open. But, before I could think of what he was doing, he removed a pistol from the bag and aimed it at Sebastian’s knee. Anna screamed as Matthew pulled the trigger.*

*“Ah!” Sebastian shouted, clutching his now mangled knee as he collapsed to the ground, staring at Matthew who kept the gun pointed on him. I stayed still, stunned and unsure of what to do. Anna had discovered the fort and Sebastian had rightfully earned his brothers revenge, but, nevertheless, for some reason, what he was doing to Sebastian seemed wrong—and it likely wasn’t going to stop there.*

*“Leave him alone!” Anna screamed, trying to exit the fort and wedge herself through the fallen trees. But when Matthew tilted the gun up and pointed it at her, she froze in her place. A tear fell down his cheek and his usual rosy complexion was on the verge of turning red—I had never seen him so upset. I had no idea what he was capable of.*

*“Shut up! Shut up!!!” he screamed, silencing Anna and then turning his attention back to his brother. “You stupid fuck! What did you think would happen when I found out?!” he shouted, firing another round into his brothers right bicep. I remained still, deliberating the situation as Anna continued to scream behind me. I watched Matthew kick his brother who helplessly tried to fend him off with his one good arm in between applying pressure to the wound on his leg. Then, as Matthew raised the gun again to fire another shot, I decided I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing—this wasn’t a game—it wasn’t the infection and what he was doing wasn’t ok. I stepped away from the branch I had been leaning on and approached Matthew.*

*“Matt, stop it,” I said, halting as he turned the gun up towards my head.*

*“Stay out of it, Derek!”*

*“I can’t, I’m here, and... don’t do this,” I continued, watching his tearful and broken eyes dart from me to those of his horrified weeping girlfriend.*

*“Get away from the entrance,” he demanded, gesturing for me to step aside with the pistol in his hand.*

*“No.”*

*“I said fucking move!” he insisted, tightening his grip of the gun and taking a bold step towards me—just out of arms reach. Sebastian squirmed on the ground, clutching both of his wounds to try and slow the blood loss. And, as I looked down at*

*him, I realized his brother would kill him—he might even kill Anna, and, if I got in his way, he'd kill me too. I had no choice—I had to stop him.*

*“Ok... ok, do what you have to do,” I replied, stepping away just enough for him to move past me—assuming that I knew better than to fuck with him. But, just as his eyes left me and turned to meet Anna’s, who was still trapped inside the fort, I lunged forward and grabbed hold of his arm. A single shot fired off, barely missing Anna’s head, and Matthew was pressed up against the mound of fallen trees. He pushed back against me, trying to tilt the gun inwards towards my chest. But, just as he managed to rotate it enough to squeeze a shot off, I brought a knee up into the side of his thigh and knocked him off balance. We fell to the ground and the bullet grazed the side of my chest—burning a superficial flesh wound under my arm. Matthew screamed with rage, furious that I had stood up against him too—that I had added insult to injury by trying to stop him from getting revenge. His fingers dug into my skin like claws and the utter hatred he had for everything and everyone in that moment was too much for me to be able to overcome. I failed. And, after a short grapple on the ground, he was on top of me—beating his fists against my skull over and over again. Soon, I couldn’t even bring myself to lift my arms up in defense anymore. And the last thing I remember seeing before my own blood filled my eyes and I was knocked unconscious was the horrified expression on Sebastian’s white face as Matthew pushed himself off me and headed towards Anna—gun in hand.*

## CHAPTER 33: DETOUR

Derek Riggs, California, 2018

I sat crossed legged on an old carpet spread over the floor of a multi tier tree fort located half a mile away from the river. It was perched in between two especially large trees that overlooked a rugged cliff alongside an abandoned log cabin which the boy, who sat across from me, once called home. A contained fire burned in a large stockpot, with a couple of hot dogs roasting overtop it. The boy soon pulled the dogs off the fire, put them in buns and handed one to me—smiling graciously. I took it and nodded, forcing myself to smile as well. Then, with the picturesque view of the setting sun across the dense tree line, we enjoyed our dinner, free, for the first time since the infection had struck, of both the sense of loneliness and the relentless presence of the undead.

“Sorry there’s no ketchup. I forgot to get it the last time I did a supply run,” the boy said in between bites of his hot dog. “Do you like ketchup?”

I nodded and took another bite, smiling again so he wouldn’t think I wasn’t grateful. I had anchored my bike on a rope dangling from the side of the tree fort and used my backpack to prop me up where I sat. My guns were beside that and my katana was beside them. The boy’s weapons were in similar places besides him. And, as I watched him finish his meal and wipe his hands clean on his dirty pants, I couldn’t help but smile genuinely—impressed and amazed at what this kid had been able to accomplish.

“I’m Derek by the way,” I stated, holding out my hand to shake his. He reached out and grabbed hold of mine, squeezing as hard as he could to form a good firm shake. “Thanks for the meal.”

“It’s very nice to meet you Derek, and you’re very welcome for dinner, it’s been a pleasure having some company for a change,” the kid replied, both the tone of his voice and his impeccable manners a refreshing change. “My name’s Cory.”

“Nice to meet you too, Cory... Dinner was delicious.”

“Is there anything else I can get you? I can make smores if you like?”

“No, thank you... it’s probably best to ration the supplies that you’ve got.”



“Yeah, but I’ve got plenty. And, this is a special occasion. I haven’t seen anybody else who’s still normal since that first day... Have you found anyone else?”

“Not really.”

“You haven’t?” Cory exclaimed, stunned by what I had just told him. “But... there are a bunch of cabins not far from the forest where I saw you. You didn’t see those then, did you?”

“No.”

“Ok good,” Cory sighed, relieved. “Then they could still be ok.”

“I don’t know... who might still be ok?”

“The people who live there. That’s what I was doing out in the woods today, I was trying to go and find them. But... too many people started following me and I had to turn back. I’ll try again tomorrow I guess... you’re welcome to come along if you like?”

“Cory,” I muttered, starting to second-guess the confidence that I had had in this kid’s judgment. “Why are you trying to get to the cabins? You know that it’s not safe.”

“I know. But it’s because that’s where Dr. Sinclair lives.”

“Why do you need him?”

“So he can make my parents feel better.”

“Your parents? I asked, glancing around the confined space of the tree fort for any sign of anybody else.

“Yeah... they’re not up here though,” Cory explained, folding his arms over his knees and inching towards the fire. “I locked them down in the kennel.”

“You locked them in a kennel?” I asked, suspecting I knew why the boy wanted to find a doctor. “Why would you do that?”

“Because they’re sick and they have wounds that need to be treated.”

“What kind of wounds?”

“They were bitten,” Cory admitted, staring through space. “My mother was attacked by a camper last week and then my father was... she bit him when he was trying to take care of her. And now... all they do is moan and try and grab me when I go near them. So, that’s why I need the doctor.”

“Cory,” I sighed, after a moment’s silence. “What do you think happened to your parents, to all the people you’ve seen acting strangely lately?”

“I don’t really know... but I saw on the news while the TV was still working that it’s some kind of sickness. That a lot of people were getting sick to their stomachs.”

“That’s right... it’s a disease. A very very bad one.”

“Is there... uh... how long does it last?” Cory asked, clearly distraught and looking for something to hope for. I sat silently a moment, debating with myself how close I was willing to get to this kid and how much I wanted to interfere with his life. While I didn’t want him getting killed trying to find other survivors or taking care of his infected parents, I also didn’t want him to get the impression that I would be taking their place. Of course he had a nice set up and all, but at the same time, if the undead swarmed him, he could easily be trapped in his fort. If his supplies ran out, he’d need to go further and further from where he was to be able to find more and the only reliable fresh water source nearby was full of blood. And while, for a brief moment I had entertained the idea of staying with him for even a couple of days, I had quickly dismissed any possibility of that happening. I had made the mistake of trusting other people once before and I knew better now. I would only stay until morning. At the very least, in the time that I was there, I owed Cory the truth—the reality of the situation he had found himself in and what his chances were now that he was in it.

“Cory, your parents are dead,” I stated coldly—ill accustomed to sugar coating things for people. “If they were bitten like you said, then they’ve contracted the disease, which means it’s since killed them and reanimated their corpses, and that’s why they’re behaving the way they are.”

“What?” Cory gasped, tears flooding his eyes.

“The disease kills people, Cory. And then, after they’re dead, that same disease takes control of their bodies and forces them to attack the living. A doctor won’t be able to do anything about that, and if you’re keeping your parents locked in a kennel nearby, I’m sorry to have to tell you that you’re either going to have to lead them into the river to get rid of them or destroy their brains so that they’ll stop moaning and attracting more ghouls,” I finished, watching Cory’s expression break into absolute sorrow. He cried for a moment—crushed by what I had just told him. And then, sure enough, a moment later, he managed to pull himself out of his misery long enough to try and deny what I had just told him.

“They can’t be dead... they’re still... they,” he tried to say, grappling with the truth and clinging to denial. I rolled my eyes and decided I wasn’t in the mood for coddling survivors.

“Cory, listen to me... if you’re going to stay alive, if you decide you want to stay alive, it’s important that you understand that your parents are dead and that there’s nothing you or anybody else can do that will bring them back. It’s important that you understand that the two people you have locked in that kennel are not your parents anymore—they are the infected—they are the same as all those people you lured into the water this morning and killing them should feel no different because they’re already dead. Now, you may not like to hear that and you may not want to listen, but that’s the truth and that’s what it’s going to take for you to survive. Do you understand?”

Cory stared at me a moment. Speechless. He then nodded as new tears descended his cheeks. And while I did my best to try and feel nothing for him, I couldn’t help but empathize. Not only had this kid lost everything, now he had to hear about it from the likes of me. He continued to cry and after a few minutes of my sitting silently, I decided I needed to try and be of some comfort to him no matter how uncomfortable doing so would make me.

“I grew up in Massachusetts you know?” I explained, talking for the sake of talking with the hope that it would calm him down. “Then, uh, when I was older, I moved to L.A. But, if you’d gone back in time and told me I was gonna live there when I was younger, I don’t think I would have believed it—in fact, I probably would have been pretty upset about it. Cause, when I was about your age, I had already made up my mind about what my life was gonna be even before I ever got around to actually living it ... I guess, in a way, I needed to do that—made me feel safe—made me feel like I was in control,” I continued, hoping Cory might understand some of what I was trying to share with him. “But, the truth is, the more you try and control things the more out of control things get—just part of life. So, anyway, you kind of just have to... accept that some things are gonna happen whether you want them to or not and then do your best to prepare yourself so that when the day comes when you’re not prepared, you’ll still be ok... do you know what I mean?”

Cory shook his head and I realized how much I sucked at trying to cheer people up.

“Well... anyway... I guess you’re, uh...” I tried to say, stumbling on one bad idea after another. Then, as Cory began to cry louder, I remembered what had happened earlier in the day by the river. I stood up and moved over to his side, awkwardly placing my arm around him and

pulling him towards me—hugging him the same way he had hugged me before. He unclenched his arms from his knees and reached them around me—pulling himself close and continuing to cry. And then, as he wept on my armor, I realized what he needed to hear, regardless of whether or not it was true. “It’s gonna be ok, Cory—everything’s gonna be ok.”

## CHAPTER 34: TIME BOMB

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

“Tell me again,” I stated, now sitting at a round table with Roger and a handful of other white coats—the beautiful brunette woman, Leanne, included. I held my rifle at my side, making sure not to point it at anyone as Roger filled me in on the details of what he had previously hesitated to share with me. However, given the fact that I had the gun, and what he knew needed to get out, Roger was smart enough to recognize the fact that the information he had was only important if it reached its intended destination, no matter how classified it was or who ended up knowing it. The rest of the white coats had already heard his story. But for me it was the explanation for the infection I had been waiting for.

“What part didn’t you understand?”

“I understand. I just need to hear it again, so I can repeat it for others if I have to.”

“Everyone here already knows this and I don’t think you’re going to get the chance to...”

“Please, just tell me again.”

“Ok, sure... the high security systems, the really really top-level-security computer mainframes at Eden corporation, are kept completely separate from external connections and networks—any kind of connection whatsoever whether it’s to the internet, to phones, really, anything other than the internal network that these systems share with one another from facility to facility. And because of that, they’re essentially quarantined just as well as the Eden Corp facilities themselves that manufacture either volatile chemicals or biological weapons. Over the course of the past few months, however, a very high ranking informant that we’ve had operating within Eden Corporation managed to effectively plug into a number of these consoles and the network that connects them to one another in order to try and understand some of the information that wasn’t open to the public, or, for that matter, most of Eden’s employees, shareholders or board members—which, consequently, left only a handful of people who could be associated with those mainframes and what they were instructed to do. And this is the part that’s important to understand, what our informant found was that, at times, these consoles would deviate from their controllers—anomalies would occur and they would suddenly do things that they hadn’t been programmed to

do. And while at first we thought maybe it was just a bug or a programming error, we quickly realized that wasn't the case. Every time the mainframes at high security Eden corporation facilities deviated from their protocols, within a matter of seconds, the deviation was either erased from the record stored on these machines or was presented in a way that would make it appear to someone looking at the recorded sequence of events after the fact as if no deviation had occurred. This went on for months leading up to the infection and, as it continued, we were able to slowly refine not only the effects of these deviations but, also, the cause," Roger explained, pausing in case I needed to hear it again.

"Anyway," Roger continued, after scanning the focused and concerned faces of those around him. "What we found was what appeared to be a clone console mainframe—something outside of the established network of computers in these Eden Corporation facilities. Something that, basically, nobody, not even the people who built the damn things, knew existed and according to the intended design of these machines, something that sure as hell wasn't supposed to exist. At about that same time we realized, what we in retrospect know to be the infection date, was only three days away and we knew that something was going to happen that day because the anomalies the system kept experiencing were expediting sequentially and, according to that trend, all coincided and culminated on that date. Unfortunately, it wasn't until the final system anomalies occurred that we were able to figure out what that particular sequence of events was building to. On that day, the clone console completely took over, for a period of about one hour, disguised from programmers as if it were some kind of short circuit, the clone console and whoever was operating it, effectively rerouted systems in every associated facility, locked down the subterranean Eden laboratories, and released the disease into water treatment plants on a global level—that's how the infection happened."

"How much warning did you have between when you realized exactly what was happening and when it started happening?" I asked, trying to understand the details not only for my own piece of mind but also in the event that I needed to recite them to other survivors.

"One hour."

"One hour?... What was the response?"

"Panic and confusion," Roger replied sternly—still haunted by the fact that the sequence of events had led to the world as it was. "I don't know how much of what we discovered, if anything, ever reached the military, or, which officials were informed. I don't know if Air Force One was able to get off the ground, if the president was taken underground, or,

for that matter, if this information was shared outside the United States intelligence apparatus. If I had to guess, I'd say it wasn't. All I know is that my standing orders when the infection struck were to secure this building and the files we had acquired to prove who was responsible. I was assured a military escort would be deployed to evacuate us and that our safety would be of the utmost importance."

"And that was over a week ago, right?"

"Yeah... it was."

"Have you been able to regain contact with anyone since then?"

"No. Communications are crippled to say the least and everything on the other end of the line is static—even automated response networks have been disabled. Every channel I've tried and every kind of communication I can think of only comes up with static."

"So then... who exactly is it that you're trying to get this information to?"

"Whoever's left."

"Why?"

"Why?" Roger scoffed, appalled that I had even asked the question. "Because this was planned! This whole fucking thing was planned! The murder of **billions** of people, the destruction of civilization as we know it and the loss of everything humanity had accomplished was fucking planned! That's why!"

"Yeah, I get that," I stated, keeping my cool despite how fired up Roger was about the issue—after all, I had been expecting this to happen someday, one way or another. "But here's the thing, Roger. Whoever it is that's still out there, that you want to get this information to, is, likely, responsible for making this happen in the first place and, probably, won't want to hear about it from someone who intends to do them harm."

"The person responsible for this is Ellex Vussel," Roger exclaimed, tensing up as he mentioned the name. "Do you know who that is?"

"Can't say I do."

"Ellex Vussel is the founder of Eden Corporation. He is a notoriously secretive trillionaire with a network of other rich and powerful subordinates that include just about every innovator, politician and tycoon on this planet. But more than that, he is one evil motherfucker who does not play well with others. Ellex Vussel is almost universally recognized as being one of the least likeable people alive, who, in addition to that, was

recently kicked out of his own damn company. If that's not good enough for you, I'll put it this way: the coordinates of the clone console—of the signals and instructions being fed into the Eden corporation mainframe came from a private island in between Taiwan and the Philippines owned by none other than, Ellex Vussel, who, conveniently, happened to be on the island with his family for the months leading up to the infection."

"You're missing my point, Roger."

"No, I don't think I am!" Roger shouted, standing up from his chair and pointing a damning finger at me. "This world is not fucking over! There are still survivors out there! And people deserve to know the truth about what is happening to them and why! They deserve justice! They deserve better!"

"Yes, they do," I replied, staying in my seat. "But nobody cares about justice when they're fighting to survive."

"They aren't going to survive," Leanne interrupted, breaking the long silence between the other white coats sitting around the table. I turned to look at her waiting for an explanation and Roger paced by the side of the table—too worked up and furious to return to his seat.

"What do you mean?"

"They're... Ellex won't let them. Even if they've managed to survive up until now, they won't be able to survive the bombardments."

"I'm sorry, the what?"

"The drones," Roger exclaimed, bringing my attention back to him—his hand pressed against the side of his head, looking as though he were about to cry. "After the infection date Eden Corporation's mainframe consoles have remained online and so has my ability to monitor their activity. No communications have been attempted between the island and the still operational subterranean facilities or even those above ground like this one. However, what has been active is the unmanned drone fighter program. More specifically, their targeting systems."

"So the bombardments are, what? Where?"

"You want the big picture or just the near future?"

"Just answer the fucking question," I snapped.

"Ok... us. Here. Over there, and over there, and over there. And, then, next to that too. Everywhere—he's going to use them to bomb fucking everywhere! But, in the short term at least, he's chosen a few select and familiar targets—Eden Corporation facilities, or, at least, those



that are above ground—those that helped manufacture the disease. He’s destroying the evidence and wiping away any trace of what he’s done and then he’s going to destroy everything else,” Roger growled, tossing a chair down a nearby hallway and then pacing back to the table—glaring at me for the questions I had asked and the place we had found ourselves in. “And, in case you want to hear that again, too fucking bad—because, as best as I can tell, we have a little less than a week until this building and everything else around it is blown to hell!”

## CHAPTER 35: DAYLIGHT

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

As I moved over to the bookshelf I could hear the dragging feet of the, still moaning, still lurking, undead above the shelter—following me everywhere. Susie stayed on the couch, twiddling her thumbs anxiously as I began to move the bookshelf—the bookshelf that my husband had assured me in the recording he had left, concealed a way out. And while the presence of the ghouls above us, and in the surrounding area as well, meant that we wouldn't be able to leave just yet or make a run for it, nevertheless, I wanted to see for myself—I wanted to feel daylight and be able to keep a look out for any sign of life or for my still missing son, Archer. The bookshelf moved easily enough and, just like Sebastian had said, a cold, dusty metal door sat just behind it. I reached down and grasped the knob, slowly twisting it and using my shoulder to force the stiff old door open. It drifted back a few feet and darkness was all I could see behind it. I turned around and picked up a flashlight from the desk and turned it on, pointing it into the doorway to reveal the bottom of a winding staircase, which Sebastian had said would lead to the top of the barn.

“Wait here sweetie, I'll be right back,” I told Susie, smiling gently to try and ease her burdened mind. She had already lost everything and the thought of me so much as setting foot away from her for even a single moment scared her deeply. But there was no way I was going to risk taking her up top of that staircase without first making sure that it was safe.

Cobwebs and dust lingered on every step as I ascended the stairs, climbing nearly four flights before I reached the end to see a tiny boarded up room not unlike the top of a lighthouse tower. I shone the flashlight around me, spotting a tiny crack of daylight shining in. I walked towards it and stopped sharply, jumping with fear at the clanging ring of a crowbar falling over, knocked aside by my unsuspecting steps. I reached down and picked it up—sliding the flat end into the crack of daylight and prying against the nails and wooden planks that had been used to conceal this section of the barn from the house. Then, after a moment's struggle, I managed to pry a plank loose—feeling the cool rush of fresh air against my skin. A slight smile spread across my face from the sensation, and I longed to feel more. I pulled the crowbar up and slammed it hard against the plank of wood until, eventually, it was knocked free, falling down the side of the barn. A sudden flood of light burst into the room and I raised

my hand to cover my ill-prepared eyes. Then, as they adjusted, I breathed sweet fresh air for the first time in over a week.

The fields surrounding the house were clear and empty as were the roads and the horizon too. However, just below me was the base of the barn under which the shelter had been dug. And as I looked down, I could see a steady stream of about fifteen or twenty ghouls flowing out of the barn and turning their festering eyes up to look at me. Their flesh had begun to decay and the color of their skin had turned a kind of bluish green. Some of them had old wounds and bite marks that had turned dark and now festered with rot. Even from where I stood, on the top of the barn, I could smell them—repugnant creatures, like rotten eggs fermenting in a dumpster over the summertime. I lifted my arm to my nose and tried to cover it to escape the smell, returning my eyes to the beautiful skyline and the distant sight of the neighboring town—without any lights, any sounds, or any sign that anyone else was still alive.

“Mommy?!” Susie cried, concerned and afraid.

“It’s all right sweetie! I’ll be right down!” I replied, placing the crowbar back on the ground and turned the flashlight off. I then quickly descended the steps to find Susie waiting for me at the bottom.

“The moaning stopped,” Susie exclaimed, pointing up to the now empty barn above us.

“They walked outside when I went upstairs,” I said, deciding that I didn’t want Susie to have to look at the ghouls just outside the barn. Instead, I would have to remove them the only way I knew how. I walked past Susie after rubbing her arm gently to reassure her that everything was all right—reaching the rack of guns to select a scoped rifle. However, as I did so, I could hear the undead return into the barn—following me wherever I went.

“They’re back,” Susie groaned, covering her ears to block out their damned incessant moaning that had driven us both crazy for the past week. “Why don’t they ever shut up?”

“Your father’s journal said it’s because their moans attract other ghouls so that larger groups can form,” I replied, sliding a box of ammunition into my finely knit sweater’s pocket. “Which is exactly why I think it’s best that they stop moaning as soon as possible.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“What your father told me to,” I replied, slinging the rifle over my shoulder and kissing Susie on the forehead. “I’ll be just a moment, ok?”

“Ok.”

I climbed back up to the top of the stairs and waited a moment for the ghouls to funnel back out of the barn—holding the rifle tightly against my shoulder as I stared down the sights—focusing on the bloodied scalp of a woman I recognized as one of our neighbors from a few houses over. I took a deep breath and shook my head, remembering the time that her dog had run away only to be found lying next to Elvis, our old hound dog who, since we locked ourselves in the barn, had run away himself. Of course, at the time, the woman was furious to find her sweet little dog impregnated by ours, but when the puppies were born, she stopped being so upset. Other than that one time, she had been a sweet old woman and I hated to see her end up the way she was. I hated to see us end up where we were. And although I reminded myself over and over again that it wasn't her I was looking at, it still felt like it was. So, when it came time to pull the trigger, I told myself that I was doing her a favor. I was setting her free from the hell here on earth so that she could find peace in the afterlife and finally, finally stop moaning. I pulled the trigger—a deafening bang ringing inside of the tiny room at the top of the barn—much much louder than I had anticipated. The woman fell to the ground—her head blown to mush. And I realized that I had forgotten the ear protectors lying next to the ammunition. I set the rifle aside and walked back down the stairs.

“What’s wrong?” Susie asked, sitting on the couch, watching a movie.

“Nothing sweetie, I just forgot something,” I replied, hearing the ghouls funnel back into the barn—following me as usual. I picked up the ear protectors and slung them around my neck, patting Susie on the head and making my way back up to the top of the barn.

Sebastian and I used to go shooting, which, to some people, might have seemed like an odd thing to do on a date or, for that matter, most weekends when we were younger. But after his brother decided to ruin his leg and cripple him for the rest of his life, going to the shooting range was about the only thing he looked forward to getting out of the house for. Then, as I got him up and about doing that, he slowly gained his lust for life back and became himself again. He never did see Matthew after that God awful day, and as far as I knew, with the exception of a couple of phone calls, they'd never spoken either. And as I aimed down the barrel of the rifle, I found that thinking about Matthew made it a heck of a lot easier to shoot people. Hopefully, he'd gotten what was coming to him in these hard times.

“Mommy!” Susie cried, standing at the bottom of the stairs and hollering up for me—just like old times in the house.

“Yes?”

“The TV stopped working!”

“It’s overcast today sweetie, try using the exercise bike!”

“What?!”

“Ugh... Hold on, I’ll be right down!” I shouted, placing the rifle aside once more and climbing back down the stairs.

“What do you mean use the exercise bike?” Susie asked as I poked my head back into the shelter to see her fiddling with the TV.

“The solar panels probably just haven’t gotten much juice lately, but you can always use the bikes to generate power,” I explained, quickly sitting on the bicycle and peddling only to see the television flicker back to life. “You see?”

“Really? But that’s so much work,” she whined, moving over to the bicycle to take my place.

“Well, it’ll do you some good to keep moving and get some exercise,” I replied, hearing the dragging feet of the still remaining undead drudge back into the barn, moaning loudly as always.

“How many of them are left?” Susie grumbled, rolling her eyes at the sounds coming from above us. “And how come they only follow you?”

“What?”

“They only follow you,” she repeated, saying something completely obvious and, yet, it had never occurred to me. “Haven’t you noticed that?” I shook my head and frowned, trying to think of why that might be. “Here, look, I’ll show you,” Susie exclaimed, quickly jogging to the opposite side of the shelter. “They’re above you right now, right?” she asked. I nodded. “Ok, now, come over here,” Susie instructed, gesturing for me to come towards her with her hands. I slowly strode across the shelter and listened carefully as the undead above us followed my every step, lurking only after me.

“Well... maybe I just make more noise,” I suggested, trying to think of any reason they might have their attention focused only on me.

“Mom, we both know that’s not true,” Susie stated, smiling for one of the first times since we had found ourselves locked away. “Here, I’ll show you,” she continued, moving to the opposite side of the shelter

again and snatching up a broomstick. She extended it upwards and began banging on the ceiling with it while shouting at the top of her lungs. “Hey! I’m over here you jerks! Come and get me!”

“Susie! Stop that!” I yelled, rushing over to her side to snatch the broom out of her hands, only to hear the dragging feet of the undead follow me once more.

“See, I told you.”

“All right, well... so what? Isn’t that a good thing? At least they aren’t thinking about eating you.”

“No... That’s not a good thing mom,” Susie replied, suddenly losing her smile to a solemn expression and a brooding concern. “If they’re not following me, it’s for a reason. But... the more I think about it, I... Why aren’t they following me too?” Susie asked, now clearly upset by what she was saying. I knelt down and rubbed my hands on her shoulders.

“It’s all right—they’re not gonna get us—we’re safe down here.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Then what is it?”

“Sarah turned into one of them,” Susie whispered, tears building up in her eyes as she mentioned her late sister and my other sweet little girl. I shuddered at the mention of her name and had to bite my lips to keep from crying myself. “She turned into one of them and she wasn’t bitten—she was just sick. And I was sick too, remember? We were **both** sick.”

“You’re not sick anymore.”

“Maybe I am, mom,” Susie sobbed, so scared now she was shaking. “What if I’m sick the way Sarah was? What if that’s the reason they don’t follow me? What if I’m infected too?”

## CHAPTER 36: BAD BLOOD

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

I met my second wife many years after the death of my first. In the long interim between marriages I had remained, save for the occasional fling or hired entertainment, very much alone and isolated from any semblance of compassion or genuine intimacy with another woman. The pain that the sudden and unforeseen death of my first wife, Eden, had caused me emanated through my every thought and action—slowly turning me more and more bitter and jaded even as I concurrently laid the groundwork for my plan to remake the world. That plan had become my new life and it had filled the void inside of me that Eden had left behind. Then, years later, when I had first met eyes with Hannah at a lavish gala, I presumed, and no doubt, correctly so, that my soon to be second wife was already well aware of not only who I was but the vast expanse of my fortune and power. Despite that fact, she somehow managed to remain, not only calm and confident around me, but woefully seductive, witty, agreeable, vivacious and level headed. It was because of these characteristics, if not the person she was deep down, that I had decided to open myself up enough to her to allow her to intrude upon the memories of my first wife by making her my second. And though the decision to wed had been far more rational than emotional, nevertheless, a part of me did genuinely care for her, if not so much for the woman herself as the companionship she gave and the son we now shared.

I had found myself thinking of those early days often since I had released the infection upon the world. I had found that rather than looking to the future as I had often done earlier in life, I now looked to the past in the uncertainty of the times and the melancholy ambiance of all those who I had so graciously decided to invite to my island and spare from the disease. Though I felt they should be grateful and hopeful, instead, they were solemn and detached. I felt they should be appreciative and resolute, instead they were disheartened and lethargic. And though I had never paid much mind to the temperament of those I would keep company in the early days of the new world order, nevertheless, in those moments, it was far more of a distraction than I could bare to burden. Even my second wife, Hannah, had fallen ill to the sickness of what I could only deem ‘deep depression.’ And as I sat across from her, at a lengthy glass-table in a secluded dining room in my mansion, I realized that that was what lingered in my conscience most, withholding my ability

to enjoy myself. I missed the way Hannah used to pretend she loved me just as I used to pretend I loved her back.

“Are you feeling all right?” I asked, slowly sliding my knife through the cut of lamb on my plate as I concurrently dissected my wife’s demeanor. We sat alone for dinner for the first time in a long while, without our son Desmond, who for the evening had been sent for a sleep over with one of the only other children on the island. However, despite my best efforts to provide some alone time for Hannah and myself, the fact that she was far less interested in the occasion than I was was quickly wearing my patience. I wanted her to be herself again. Or, failing that, to at least act like it.

“Yes... I’m feeling fine,” Hannah replied, lazily turning her fork in her hands—staring through the food before her.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Ellex, I’m sure.”

“Well...” I sighed, momentarily placing my knife down and dabbing my mouth clean with a napkin. “If you’re not feeling ill, then something else must be the matter.”

“No... Nothing,” she answered, barely able to stomach the brief moment she pulled her eyes up to look at me. I glared at her as she returned her aloof sights to the meal we were lucky enough to have—ungrateful and dismayed, just like everyone else since the infection had struck. I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath—unable to tolerate the manner in which she had been conducting herself with me—barely speaking to, or looking at me, for weeks.

“You haven’t seemed yourself lately,” I exclaimed bluntly, hoping that my statement would jar her out of her misery and persuade her to speak with me. Her eyes slowly pulled up from looking at her plate and she shook her head.

“Nobody’s been themselves lately.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Yes, Ellex, it is,” she stated, tilting her chin up from her slumped over shoulders and pitiful melancholy posturing, holding her eyes to mine with simmering contempt of all things. The audacity.

“You have no reason to feel sorry for yourself,” I exclaimed, plucking my glass of wine from the long table we sat at. “We are lucky to be here.”



She placed her fork down and sat upright, taking many deep breaths as if she wished to speak but never opened her mouth. Her eyes flared and she clenched her jaw. We sat staring at each other for a moment until I picked my fork up again and returned to my meal, deciding for the both of us that there was no point in bickering any further if she wasn't willing to admit that she was wrong.

"I've arranged for a party in the next couple of days—perhaps that will help boost your spirits," I informed her. A moment of silence followed my words. I ate my meal, agitated by the absence of any sound coming from her end of the table, and eventually looked up from my food once more to see Hannah's bewildered and appalled expression. I tossed my napkin onto my plate and took a slow, brooding breath. I had had enough. "What is it!?" I shouted, pushed to my limits by her cold shoulder and clear dismay. "You have been moping around barely speaking to me for weeks now! You smile for Desmond, you say please and thank you to the help but you don't so much as look at me! So what is it!?"

The slender part in her lips slowly closed until all that remained was a faint and condescending look of disbelief. She stared at me now, no doubt content to have broken my spirits and I glared at her, expecting an explanation. She placed her forearms on the table and clasped her hands tightly—pressing them together as if it took every ounce of strength she had to keep herself calm and collected. Then after another tedious moment, she broke her silence.

"Was it just luck that we were on the island when the infection spread?" she asked, her tone falling halfway between curiosity and accusation. I held my breath for a moment, contemplating how to respond. She had never questioned what I'd told her on the day of the infection—that it had been Nathan's project at Eden Corporation, not my own; that I had tried to stop him and that there was nothing that could be done. And while she, not unlike everyone else, had struggled greatly with the burden of reality, I had convinced them of the lie, and they, and she, had not dared questioned it. Until now.

"Of course it was luck... but if that's not a good enough rationale for you then call it fate," I replied, attempting to brush off her question without addressing the implications of her asking it. Her expression soured as I spoke and she began to shake her head.

"It was just luck that, in the month building up to the infection, you ensured we had a full staff and additional security personnel here on the island? It was just luck that we have enough food and supplies here to last everyone five to ten years? It was just luck that all of your closest friends and business associates happened to be at sea when the disease

spread? And it's just luck that, you now have access to an unmanned drone base that you intend to use to wipe the world clean of a disease you knew about in advance and yet, supposedly, did none of the things I've mentioned to protect yourself against?" she exclaimed, her tone slowly raising in volume and spite as she spoke. I swallowed an uncomfortable lump in my throat and did my best to refrain from showing how furious her words had made me. I had somehow forgotten that she wasn't just a simple trophy wife—I had wanted our son to be a genius, which, unfortunately, meant his mother would have to be one as well. Despite that fact, she had somehow mustered the courage and lost her senses enough to not only question me but to accuse me. I leaned forward to give my rebuttal.

"Yes, Hannah," I stated coldly, locking my damning eyes with hers. "It was very, very lucky. And if for some reason you feel the need to continue to malign that luck based on nothing but pessimistic slander and disbelief, then I feel the need to remind you once more of just how lucky you have been," I finished making it clear just how upset she had made me by inferring the potential repercussions of doing so. She clenched her jaw once more and took a furious breath—leaning forward to give her rebuttal.

"Nathan called me a few days before all this happened. Did you know that?" she asked, studying my reaction. I held my breath and froze—barely able to believe what she had just told me. Despite my best efforts to remain unaffected, I knew that she would be able to detect my complete and utter shock from her words either through a twitch of my brow or a festering contempt in my eyes—In truth, I had had no idea that Nathan, my former best friend and confidant at Eden corporation, had called her. Or for that matter, what he could possibly have told her. I shook my head in response and waited to hear more, tensely clenching my pant-leg under the table. "You didn't know that?"

I rigidly shook my head again, staring coldly at her, so surprised I was momentarily unable to keep my true emotions, and motivations for them, bottled up.

"He didn't think you'd suspect he might reach out to me—since he and I had never really gotten along. But, then again, you never were any good at reading people, were you, Ellex?"

"What did he say to you?" I asked, doing my best to try and keep my voice monotone, not panicked.

"Care to guess?"

“Why would I care to guess? Why don’t you just tell me?” I growled, threatened and backed into a corner—he could have said anything; he could have ruined everything. And, if this was the reason she had been so spiteful towards me of late, then our relationship now suffered from a severe case of irreconcilable differences. I had to know. She would give me the answers I wanted, or so help me, I would force them from her. I clenched my jaw and took a slow breath—silent and frantic, running the same question in my head over and over again. “What did he say to you?”

“He told me the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“About you.”

“What is that supposed to mean, Hannah? Stop being so cryptic and just tell me already,” I insisted, doing my best to refrain from raising my voice again or saying anything she might not already know or suspect. But as I stared into her miserable expression, the feeling in my gut began to impede upon my ability to reason. She knew. I could see it in her eyes, and her refusal to just come right out and say it tormented me. She took a moment’s pause in the conversation to delve into her thoughts and ponder them over a held breath.

“Do you know why I married you?” she asked, finally breaking her silence. I frowned, failing to see the importance of the question.

“I don’t see how that’s particularly relevant right now. What did he say to you?” I demanded once more, anxious and panicked thoughts flooding my mind—what if Nathan suspected I was up to something? What if he had been looking more closely into my actions at Eden Corporation than I knew? He had mentioned, the last time I saw him, on the day I was removed from Eden corporation, that he was worried about me—he had mentioned that the things I was doing made no sense, but... I was too confident in the secret I had kept and how diligently I had kept it, to think anything of him. I was too sure of his trust and too heartless with the tender remains of our longstanding friendship. Dear God, what did he say to her!? What did she know?! What did he know!?

“You don’t care to know the truth about why I married you?” Hannah asked, neither offended nor surprised by my hurried and callous words to answer her question. “I married you for your money, Ellex. That’s usually the case when a beautiful woman decides to wed a much older and richer man.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Just tell me, what he said to you,” I exclaimed, my frustration and insecurity bleeding into my

tone of voice. I cleared my throat to try and force myself to calm down, to maintain the cool demeanor that I rarely broke, in no mood for her petty insults or insights. My hand began to shake and I felt a cold sweat begin to form on my brow. I had never felt this way before—I was losing control.

“And you married me so that you could fuck me and so that I could have your children. So that you could have Desmond and a nice, pretty trophy wife to look over him while you tended to other, more important matters. Isn’t that right?”

“I’m not in the mood for this,” I growled, contemplating my options, trying to decide what I could do and who, if anyone, she might have already spoken to about this very matter. I remained seated—unaccustomed to surprises and nauseated by uncertainty. I was afraid—for the first time since the death of my first wife, I was afraid.

“I still remember the looks on my friends faces when I told them I was with you—and then, when I told them I was going to marry you. Of course, they’re not my friends anymore. No one is. Because this place, this island is all that’s left of the world... it’s all you left of the world. But, it wasn’t until you locked us all here with you that I realized how much our life together is like a prison,” she confessed, her eyes now sorrowful—brooding tears forcing their way to the surface as she poured the irrelevant depths of her heart out to me. I remained silent—waiting for her to finish with the hope that by doing so, she might tell me the only thing I cared to hear. “And I deserve it. I deserve to feel as miserable as I do for being with you. So that’s what it is Ellex. That’s what’s been bothering me. I married a monster. He destroyed the world. And now I’m in prison with him.”

Her head dropped from my line of sight for the first time since she began her tirade—looking away in solemn disbelief of the situation she had found herself in. And for that moment I allowed my expression to crumble, revealing everything that I was attempting to hide from her—convinced that I had been caught and my plans had been spoiled. However, as I struggled with the overwhelming and unfamiliar surge of emotions, the cold rational contempt I had for all those who would dare to question or oppose me formed a clear resolution in my mind. A sudden and relieving thought that quelled my uncertainty and allowed me to relax. For though I didn’t know what Nathan had said to her or what he might have truly known about me, nevertheless, here I sat. And so long as I was on my island, I would control everyone and everything else on it as well.

“Hannah,” I sighed, pushing my chair back from the table. “I don’t know what exactly Nathan said to you that’s made you so upset. But

given his and my long history together, it could be an infinite number of things. So if you would be so kind, please, pretty please, just tell me what it is that he said to you so that I, not he, can be the one to tell you the truth,” I asked one more time, staring with trembling anticipation as she thought over my request and slowly parted her lips to respond.

“The truth?” she gasped, nearly laughing at my words before returning once more to her melancholy scowl. “He said that you would try to blame him.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me.”

“Blame him for what exactly?”

“For what happened... for whatever it was you were up to... the infection,” she confessed, finally giving me some sense of what she knew and whether or not it could jeopardize all that I had planned. I leaned back in my chair, trying to think of a lie that could crush her sense of reason as she continued speaking. “I didn’t understand what the hell he was talking about and I told him not to bother me anymore. But then, after it happened, you told me that you had seen the virus before—you told me that it was Nathan’s project at Eden Corporation not yours and that the infection was his fault—blaming him, just like he said you would.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, Hannah” I stated, feeling the complexion drain from my face as a cool shiver worked its way along the length of my spine. “What else did he say?”

“Why doesn’t that mean anything?”

“Because the way he and I left things, Nathan would have said anything to try and ruin me—he would have told you anything to try and defer the blame.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t!” Hannah shouted, refusing to let me pave her concerns over with more lies—a dangerous decision. “Don’t bullshit me, Ellex! I know! I know what you did! I know that you’ll never admit it and that you’ll either exile me for speaking about it or try to put me in a grave! But I will not sit here by your side and pretend that we were just **lucky!** I know what you did!”

I didn't move. I didn't speak. I didn't blink or breathe or swallow or so much as allow myself to reason. Instead, I fluttered my eyes as my thoughts returned to bloody murder.

"He had people watching you, Ellex—people in the government, in the intelligence apparatus watching what you were doing."

"Excuse me?" I gasped.

"Spies, Ellex."

"Spies," I whispered, repeating her words—my fear building as all the possibilities of what I didn't know flooded to mind. I took a moment to think to myself, struggling to keep my composure as my wife's eyes burned through me—expecting answers—expecting a confession.

"They knew, Ellex—and Nathan tried to warn me."

"Then... why didn't they stop me?" I asked, posing the question both to her and myself. "If they 'knew' what I was supposedly up to; if they 'suspected' I was the culprit, then why didn't they stop me?"

Hannah sat silently—pensively—unable to provide an answer for my question that would reinforce her opinion of my guilt. Or, at least, so I assumed. Suddenly, the door to the dining room burst open and Nahuel, the gigantic and foreboding commander of my guards, marched quickly towards me. I turned and frowned at him, genuinely surprised by whatever it was he had come to tell me. Then, to my complete and utter shock, he had the audacity to, not only place his hands upon me, but to lift me into the air and slam me on top of the long glass table where my wife and I had been eating dinner just moments before. I felt the glass crack beneath my weight as one of Nahuel's hands clasped around my throat and the other removed a foot-long hunting knife—gliding its way under my jugular. My wife slowly approached from his side, holding her personal two-way-radio that I insisted everyone on the island keep with them at all times—with the intention of being able to spy on them. As I looked at my wife, however, I realized, that she had kept her radio on for Nahuel to eavesdrop—that she had no doubt spoken to Nahuel beforehand, and that his presence was either to safeguard herself from me or to put an end to my life. Apparently, he had heard enough lies. And now, they intended to make me talk.

## CHAPTER 37: SEPARATE WAYS

*Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2004*

*When I finally regained consciousness, one of my eyes wouldn't open and the other was blurred by a trickle of blood coming out of my head. I lay face down in the dirt, muddied leaves sucking up against my lips as I struggled to breathe. Then, as my restricted vision slowly returned to me, I noticed a pair of feet trudge past—a hand holding a pistol, the hilt of which was covered in blood, and Matthew's brokenhearted and tearful expression. I remembered now. I remembered what he had done—what his brother had done with Matthew's girlfriend, Anna. And what I had done to try and stop him. I listened to his whining sobs as he pulled his brother's bike from behind the tarp and tossed a knapsack of supplies over his shoulder. I glanced to the side, to where his brother had been shot, only to see that there was no longer anyone there—Sebastian was gone, or, he had been moved. However, as I watched Matthew tuck the bloodied pistol into the knapsack, I didn't dare move—I didn't dare try to speak to him or ask for help. My friend was gone. Our friendship was dead. And if I survived my injuries, at least I had finally learned a lesson so cruel that I had foolishly ignored it the first time I should have realized the truth—never trust anyone.*

*Matthew pulled the tires of the bike along the ground and then took a moment to wipe away his tears, but he never stopped sobbing. I twitched my head to the side to try and see more of my surroundings—looking for any sign of his brother—but still saw nothing. Where had he gone? What had Matthew done with him? Why couldn't I hear Anna crying anymore? Was she still alive? Were either of them still alive? Or did Matthew, in his sick fit of rage, simply drag them into the woods and execute them? I had no way of knowing, and until he left, I didn't dare try to get up and look. I turned my attention back to him sitting on the bike, only to see that he had noticed my one eye was barely open. He stared at me, without rage or hurt in his eyes—without the unbridled hatred that he had just moments before unleashed upon all of us. Instead, all I could see was sorrow—deep unrelenting sorrow. His lip quivered as he cried, sucking in a trembling breath to say his last words to me.*

*"I'm sorry, Derek... I'm sorry," he said, lowering his head in shame and riding his bicycle into the forest—disappearing from view, running from what he'd done, and, for all he cared, leaving me to die.*

*I stayed on the ground for a moment after he disappeared—halfway between disbelief and sadness to see him go. I knew he would never come back and likely would never be heard from again. The only thing I didn't know, was whether or not I would have to take the precaution of hiding the bodies of his brother and former girlfriend no doubt located somewhere near the fort. I spread a bloodied hand into the mud under me and slowly pushed myself up—feeling a shooting pain in my ribs accompany the*

*throbbing pound of my still bleeding head. I hobbled over to the branches concealing the entranceway to the fort. The tarp had been torn down and I could identify two motionless figures lying on the ground inside. Then, with great pain, I crouched down and slid my way inside.*

*Sebastian lay on his back. His knee and bicep were mangled from the two shots Matthew had fired into him. But, since I had last been conscious, his wounds had multiplied. Matthew hadn't executed him as I'd suspected he might. Instead, he'd beaten him mercilessly and then left him to bleed to death. His face was so swollen and bruised that he was barely recognizable—his cheek bones were pulverized, his eyes were sealed shut, shards of his broken teeth scattered the ground around him and if it weren't for the faintest of breaths causing his blood-soaked torso to rise and fall, I would have been sure he was dead. Jesus fucking Christ.*

*Anna lay beside him in a similar condition—although, at least, he had shown her some small semblance of mercy. Her once delicate and beautiful features were now bruised—her nose bent to the side like a cinder block had fallen on it. A deep cut ran the length of her hair and a small knife lay beside her hand—one of the knives we had kept inside of the fort. She had no doubt attempted to fight back, leaving Matthew no choice but to knock her unconscious. And as I stood, staring in shock and disgust at the two of them, I couldn't help but sputter nauseated breaths in between horrified tears. I had to do something. Sebastian was going to die if I left him this way. And while, if he had already been killed, I might have considered hiding his body to safeguard the fort, as it was, I couldn't help but feel that part of my life was over. The only thing that I had ever cared about was gone now. And the people I had been foolish enough to trust with its care had been the ones who'd taken it from me.*

*I hobbled over to Sebastian and grabbed hold of his shoulders—taking a few deep breaths to prepare myself before I endured the strain and struggle of dragging him to safety. I then pushed Anna onto her side to make room to move Sebastian and, also, to try and wake her. However, despite my best efforts to snap her back to reality, she remained unconscious, leaving me no choice but to haul them both outside. As soon as I had cleared them from the fort, I would make an emergency call using Sebastian's cell phone. I would tell them where we were. I would lead them to the fort. However, what I wouldn't do, was leave any trace that anything had ever been there. Once I had cleared Sebastian and Anna from the fort, I would use the very supplies I had previously coveted to destroy it, and everything inside of it, once and for all.*

*I had at least two cracked ribs. And dragging Sebastian's nearly 200 pound frame out of the convoluted mess of branches blocking the entranceway to the fort forced me to stop from time to time—vomit, wipe away the sweat, and press forward. Anna was far easier—lighter and smaller. And while I held her in my arms, feeling her faint breaths against my chest and drying blood stick against my shirt, I made sure to treat her with the same care and consideration that I did Sebastian. Because even though I would have thought I might have had it in me to kill both of them for what they'd done, in that moment, in that wretched fucking moment, all I felt was sorrow and regret. I*



*pulled their bodies away from the entranceway until they were clear of the blast radius. Then, after digging through Sebastian's pockets, I removed his phone, dialed 911, and gave the operator specific instructions of where to send help and how to find us—ensuring whoever came looking wouldn't get lost by readying a flair gun and multiple colored smoke grenades.*

*When I re-entered the fort, I felt the full force of what had happened weigh on my conscience. I hated them for what they'd done. I hated all of them. I hated that it was my obligation to save them, that it was my burden to uphold the lie of what had happened to us, and most of all, I hated that in that moment I was completely vulnerable. I had nothing. I was nothing. They had taken it all away. And to add insult to injury, now I would be the one who had to destroy the evidence. I removed the lid from the crate of our manufactured explosive ordinance—sliding each and every piece of explosives we had under the support columns of the cave. Grenades, dynamite and pitiful triple-layer-water-balloons full of viscous plastic explosive and electric kitchen timers were crammed into every nook of the fort—in between the crates of food and ammunition; in between the books on how to survive, the weapon cache, the medical supplies—everywhere. Then, once I had rigged it to explode, I lay a long fuse leading to the sticks of dynamite out front of the entranceway. However, when it came time to finally leave—to turn my back on everything I loved and to watch it burn—a part of me wished I could stay. A part of me wished I could make sure Sebastian and Anna would be ok without sitting by their sides and ensuring they got the help they needed. I wanted to die. I wanted to blow myself to hell with everything else that mattered to me and leave this fucked up world before the masses of brainless ghouls flooded the streets of our cities, before the mindless, wretched filth of this planet spread the disease and wiped hardworking, iron strong, decent people like me from the planet, all because they were too fucking cowardly and stupid to prepare for what they should have seen right in front of them—instead, leaving me on my own again and again and again. Fuck them. Fuck all of them. I would never trust anybody ever again, so help me you fucking cunt God. I'd learned my lesson. I was alone and I would never be anything but alone. And then, as I lit the fuse leading to the dynamite and took a seat by Sebastian and Anna's sides, I watched with my one bitter and heartbroken eye as the explosion collapsed the fort—sending millions of chunks of dirt flying across everything around it—sending out a shockwave as big as if a building had just collapsed in on itself. My past was gone—nothing but rubble now—and, as I sat there, watching the smoke and dust clear, I pondered what my new, solo plan for survival in this cruel world might be.*

## CHAPTER 38: REVELATION

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

I couldn't get used to not having sunlight to wake me up. Every morning since I was a little girl, my eyes had popped open like clockwork to that warm and welcoming glow of light. But now, locked away in the shelter, the only glimpse of sunlight I ever got was when I'd walk up that ladder, pick up the rifle, and end the torment of every ghoul that had come wondering round since hearing the last shots I'd fired. All I wanted was a little bit of peace and quiet—to be able to forget that they were out there for a single solitary minute. But I had no such luck. At least my husband had had the sense to keep plenty of earplugs and ear protection down in the shelter—keeping those darn undead from interfering with the dreams when I was able to see Sebastian again. I lazily sat up and rubbed my face with one hand while I brought the other up to pull the ear plugs out. But, to my surprise, when I did so, I didn't hear a single solitary moan. Instead, to my shock and bewilderment, I heard the clear and distinct sound of music pounding from a distance outside of the shelter. I stood up sharply and dressed myself as quickly as I could, then turning my attention towards where Susie had slept to see that she was gone. I froze for a moment—surprised to see that she had gotten up before me for the first time ever. But then, as I combed the main living area in the shelter, expecting to see her eating breakfast or watching TV, my surprise quickly turned to fear. She wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere.

“Susie?!” I cried, stepping through every inch of the shelter to try and find her—eventually coming to the entranceway to the stairwell. I opened the door and quickly climbed the spiraling staircase, my eyes adjusting from the relative darkness to the sharp sting of daylight poking through a thick cover of clouds overhead. As I climbed the stairs the music grew more and more clear—a familiar song from one of Sebastian's old party mixes. Was I dreaming? Was this just some kind of joke my mind was playing on me to keep me from sleeping too sound or feeling too safe?

“Susie!?” I shouted again, reaching the top of the stairwell only to see an empty birds nest overlooking our farmhouse and the surrounding fields. But when my eyes came to rest upon the sight of the rope ladder—dangling over the side of the nest and out into the world—that I realized Susie wasn't there. My heart skipped a beat and my world collapsed as I rushed forward and pressed my waist against the edge—peering out to try and catch any glimpse of her. Perhaps she had heard the

music and thought it was a sign that everything was ok? Perhaps she had gotten fed up with being cooped up indoors and foolishly tried to climb out onto the top of the barn? Or maybe, and I prayed to God it wasn't the case, but maybe someone had broken into the shelter and taken her from me. I looked out over the fields, spotting the source of the music about a hundred yards away and dropped my jaw at the sight.

Our old truck was parked in the middle of a field with about fifteen or twenty odd ghouls circling around it—banging their hands on the sides to try and get at the radio playing. I squinted to try and get a look at whether or not anyone was inside it—eventually picking up a pair of binoculars that I had left in the bird's nest—peering down their sights to see that, in fact, nobody was inside the vehicle. Instead, the ghouls were just attracted to the booming sound of music, not people. Then, as I lowered the binoculars, still panicked that I hadn't seen any sign of my little girl, out of the corner of my eye I caught the motion of our farmhouse's front door opening. Susie appeared, holding a handful of things and walking casually as if she didn't have a care in the world. I stuttered from shock and hysteria before eventually shouting out to get her attention.

“Susie!!!” I screamed, tossing the binoculars aside and flinging my leg over the side of the bird's nest to climb down the rope ladder and rescue my little girl. But, just as I started to do so, Susie looked up at me, put down the things she was carrying, and began waving her arms to get me to stop.

“Mom! Don't!” she cried, her tone and expression as worried for me as I was for her.

“Get up here right now!” I continued, climbing down the ladder—closer and closer to the roof of the barn so that I could take another ladder down from there to save her.

“Mom! Listen to me!” she screamed, rushing towards the barn to where the rope ladder led. But then, just as she came toward the barn, a ghoul lingered out of the door—following me the way they always did anytime I showed up outside. It must have stayed behind despite the music in the field coming from the truck that I assumed was Susie's doing. Its arms were stretched out and its sights were set square on me. But all I could do was worry for my little girl's safety. I descended the ladder even faster than before—I had to save her—I had to do something. I couldn't lose her, I just couldn't!

“I'm coming! Keep your distance from it!” I instructed, realizing that I didn't have a weapon with me but refused to turn back and waste time getting one all the same. I planted my feet on the roof of the barn

and swiveled around to see Susie, standing right beside the ghoul as if nothing were the matter—smacking it hard in the side of the ribs with a wooden board while looking up at me. I stood stunned for a moment, in utter disbelief that she could be so stupid. I had to be dreaming. I just had to be dreaming. “What the hell are you doing!?” I shouted, so upset and confused that I felt my blood boil and traumatized tears fill my eyes. What in God’s name was she thinking?! How could she be so brazen and reckless?!

“Mom!!! They don’t see me!” she replied, continuously swinging the board into the side of the ghoul until, after a few more solid whacks, its spine snapped out of its side and its intestines poured out like a bag of worms. The smell rushed up to me and I gagged, covering my mouth to keep from throwing up. Susie stepped away from it, holding her shirt over her face, and dropping the board. The ghoul continued to moan and reach up for me—completely ignoring Susie, just like she’d said.

“Ohhhh, gross!!!” Susie exclaimed, jumping back sharply and wiping some goo off the side of her shoe.

“Please get up here, Susie, please!” I begged, not giving a damn whether or not she thought she was safe—I was terrified. She rolled her eyes and walked over to the ladder, pulling herself up one step at a time until she was within arms reach of me. I snatched her up and pulled her close—squeezing her so tight she made a sound like I had just crushed the air out of her. I wept on her shoulder, so grateful that she was all right, and, yet, so darn mad that I could barely think about anything other than yelling and screaming my head off.

“Mom, I’m fine!”

“No, you’re not,” I replied, finally releasing her from my vise of a hug. “You’re not all right if you think it’s ok to scare me like that! If you think it’s ok to put your life at risk as if all of this is just some kind of game!”

“Mom, calm down, it’s ok.”

“How could you do that, Susie? How could you be so reckless?”

“I’m sorry I scared you. But... you never would have let me try leaving the shelter in a million years and you know it!”

“Because I’m not willing to put your life at risk for an armful of stuff from the house!”

“I wasn’t at risk!” Susie exclaimed, reaching out and shaking my shoulders to try and get me to snap out of my hysteria and listen to her. “I got the infection somehow, mom, just like Sarah did! Don’t you get that?!”

But it didn't affect me! I must be immune to it or something! That's why they don't follow me! That's why they don't even pay any attention to me at all!"

"I don't care if... It's still a risk! Don't **you** get that?!"

"It was worth it."

"For what?!"

"For Archer!" Susie screamed, her expression suddenly changing from determined to hurt—Archer—her older brother, my only son, and a pain left in my heart so great that I could barely hear his name without coming to tears. I shut up for a moment and let Susie talk, finally starting to understand some of what she was thinking. "He's still out there, mom. He might still be ok. And, if he is, then I can't just sit here and do nothing," she continued, wiping a tear off my dusty cheek. "I was getting his computer from the house—that's why I put the truck out in the field and distracted the ghouls, so that they wouldn't get in my way and you wouldn't freak out too bad... or, at least... I thought you wouldn't."

"Why would you want his computer?"

"Because if there's anything on his hard drive about his girlfriend, Brianna, then I might be able to find them. They were probably together when this all happened, and... he might still be ok... ok?"

"O... ok," I whimpered, after a long silence looking into my brave little girl's determined and precocious eyes. Bless her heart. She was right. And no matter how much it scared me, now that she knew that for whatever reason the ghouls didn't pay any attention to her, I knew there would be no stopping her from doing what she felt was right. "Go and... go and get his computer... then we'll talk about what's to be done next. Just... let me go get the rifle so that I can cover you, ok?"

"Mom, I'll be fine," she replied, giving me a reassuring hug before returning to the ladder and going back for Archer's computer that she'd left lying next to our old house's front door. I watched her anxiously, double-checking the focus of the crippled ghoul still moaning by the side of the barn. But sure enough, it never so much as glanced at her—she was right—she was actually right. Thank you God. Thank you God. Thank you God! My little girl was going to be all right—she was immune. And in the days to come, I knew—I knew in my heart; I knew in my soul, and I knew with every fiber of my being that we would find Archer and that he would be all right too.

## CHAPTER 39: NEW WORLD ORDER

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

Nahuel's giant ape hand squeezed my throat like he was crushing a walnut as my wife looked on in contemptuous silence. My eyes bulged out of my head and I squirmed under his weight, smacking at his arm even with the knife he held to me—leaning down so I could see nothing but the boiling rage in his eyes. I tried to speak but I couldn't. I tried to think but I couldn't. Because as sure as I had been every single day of my life, somehow I had suddenly lost control and been taken by surprise. Somehow, on my own island, my own wife and my own security commander had seen fit to stage their own little mutiny and punish me for what I'd done to the world. Fools. Idiots. Ignorant fucking children. Their naivety and hypocrisy was not without amusement. And, but for the slender trickle of oxygen making its way to my brain, surely I would have laughed.

"If you confess, I will only torture you for one month," Nahuel growled, adjusting his grip of my neck to pinch my adam's apple between his fingertips. I whispered something inaudibly and Nahuel leaned down even further to be able to hear me.

"The island," I gasped, appreciating even in my moment of suffering the expertise with which Nahuel restricted my airflow while still leaving just enough for me to be able to speak. Of course, I expected no less from a trained torturer and lifelong murderer. He had been a good acquisition. Unfortunate, or course, that now he and his family would have to die for his betrayal. "Will become," I continued, feeling a sharp pinch on my collarbone as the knife in Nahuel's hand cut the tiniest of incisions before he twisted the blade. "Infected!" I hissed, putting every ounce of energy and contempt I had in me into the final word—revealing the failsafe contingency that I had put in place in the event that anyone ever dared to rise up against me on my own island. Nahuel released my throat but kept the tip of his knife just inside of my chest to shave my bones as I spoke. I cried out in pain and he smiled.

"What did he say?" Hannah asked, keeping her hand over her eyes—too cowardly and pathetic to look at the very torture she had set in motion.

"What did you say?" Nahuel demanded, sliding the knife in another inch. I groaned in agony and then screamed in rage—coughing and gasping until after another moment I was finally able to breathe semi-

normally again. I looked at my wife and shook my head—amazed that they could be dumb enough to think that they'd thought of something I hadn't.

“My vital signs... are synchronized... with... a biological detonator,” I explained, taking deep, painful breaths as the expression on Nahuel's face morphed from one of sick and intense pleasure to a confused and outraged sneer. “In the event that I die... or... if I do not enter into a secure console on a daily basis... a retinal, verbal, and key code verification... an airborne pathogen... that will infect everyone on the island... will be released,” I finished, revealing yet another secret that I had kept from them. Nahuel stood stunned for a moment, using his expertise as a torturer to dissect the subtleties of my expression and tone. He had brought thousands of men to their knees, turning them into sniveling messes who would say and do anything to end their pain—he would know if I was lying. And I could see in his eyes that he knew I wasn't. I could see he knew that for all the pain he could cause me and all the horror he could inflict, he would not be able to break me in the day's time it would take for me to wait for the infection to spread. He could not keep me alive with the hope that I would become his servant, surviving only to keep the disease from being released. Instead, what he recognized in me was the familiar conviction of a man ready and willing to die for a cause. His grip on me slowly softened, even as the rage in his eyes boiled furiously, turning them as blood red as the wound he had cut into my chest.

“He's lying!” Hannah insisted, unable to believe that I would put her, myself, everyone else, and even my own son at risk of infection. How little she knew me.

“No... he is not,” Nahuel replied, releasing me and pulling the knife away from my shaven collarbone.

“Now... I don't blame you Nahuel. You always were a mindless bloodthirsty ape... that's why I hired you after all,” I exclaimed, sitting up and clutching my chest to the horror and dismay of my wife—she couldn't believe this was happening—she'd had me, she'd found me out and she was on the verge of punishing me for everything I'd done. Or, so she'd thought. “But, my wife on the other hand... well... I blame her very much. So... unless you want you and your family to die today, you're going to break my wife's nose and then hold her down while we have a little chat,” I finished, giving a contemptuous and hateful grin to my pitiful wife. Nahuel hesitated only a moment before slamming his elbow into Hannah's nose, knocking her to the ground—spraying blood all over her evening gown and the shimmering marble floor. I stood up from the cracked glass dining table and took a seat in a chair, still clutching my

chest with one hand while pressing the other against my knee for support. Nahuel, walked around behind Hannah and lifted her up by her hair—turned her around, and wrapped his arm around her neck so that she couldn't so much as look away if she wanted to. Then as the blood rushed out of her nose and the tears ran down her cheeks, for the first time in our marriage, I prepared to have an honest conversation.

“You monster,” Hannah sputtered, just as familiar now as I was with Nahuel's brutal and unrelenting tactics. He was a good dog and easy enough to control so long as he was given blood to spill and the occasional reminder of who his master was.

“Monster?” I said, shaking my head and rolling my eyes at her childish and simple-minded assessment. “No, you naïve, self-righteous bitch. I'm no monster. I'm a hero and a visionary the likes of which this world has never seen. What I've accomplished here is a feat that has been tried time and time again by men of power and privilege—by failures too short sighted, weak, or greedy to execute their own ambitions. You call me a monster as you would no doubt have believed similar men to be simply because you're too small and self-absorbed to appreciate that the world we lived in was critically ill long before I put an end to it. You call me a monster because your conscience and fairy-tale conception of the world have convinced you that people are not animals—that they have a right to live and that they **deserve** to live simply because they are alive—but they don't. They don't, Hannah. And now, neither do you,” I exclaimed, standing up from my chair and stepping towards her—looking at Nahuel's stern and intense expression, watching my every move. “Give me the knife,” I instructed, holding my hand out to him. He hesitated a moment, his eyes twitching in a conflicted rage. Then, despite my clear and immediate command, he defied me again—releasing Hannah from his grip and standing up to face me.

“You're not going to kill her this night,” he stated, his thick Chilean accent insulting my ears as much as the wretched words he spoke. “There is no need for it.”

“I disagree. And I think your family would too if they knew the consequences of your decision.”

“No... you will not kill them either.”

“Give me the knife,” I demanded, holding out my hand for the last time that I would tolerate his disobedience. He shook his head and grinned—of the impression that he was the one in control. However, he knew as well as I did, that the only two things in this world that he loved more than himself were murder and his family. And he would not rightly risk their lives to save that of my wife.



“When I look at you, I see a man who will die for what he believes. But also, I see a man who would rather live. Not a hero, not a monster, just a man. No different than many men I have known who have thought that they too were special,” he explained, using the final moments I would allow him to live to blather about his foolish insights of the dictators he had worked for. “You will not kill her. You will not kill me or my family, because like the men I have known, alone you are nothing.”

“I don’t care about whatever fucking fortune cookie you read or the ‘men that you’ve known.’ I care that my spoiled, cowardly wife is still **breathing** and that my employed professional murderer now seems to have had some kind of change of heart!”

“My father taught me that a dictator without his men is like a king without his pawns,” he replied, gesturing forebodingly by sliding the knife in front of his throat. “If you kill her, people will ask, why did you do this? Why did this happen?”

“I wasn’t planning on being the one held responsible,” I snapped, looking down at Hannah who was now too afraid to be a part of the conversation—clutching her broken nose as a river of blood crept through the cracks of her fingers.

“Yes, you intend to blame me, I know. You would like to make it seem that I killed her in cold blood... But then my family would ask, why you did this? Why did this happen? They would ask, just as my men would ask. The same men that you rely on for security, the same men that you depend on to protect you from all of the other people on ships that you have brought to this island. They would ask questions without answers, and then they would go looking for the answers. Do you see?”

“You think that people would second guess why a lifelong torturer would kill my wife? You think people wouldn’t believe whatever I told them? You fucking idiot! Don’t you see what sheep they are?! What cowardly, brainless, gullible God damn sheep they are?!”

“Yes... I do... but a shepherd cannot herd confused sheep, only scared sheep.”

I furrowed my brow and stopped myself just short of the condemning response I had anticipated I would give him. Nahuel was calm, rational—no more affected by the sight or taste of blood than he was by a gentle breeze. I, on the other hand, had always executed my enemies and orders from afar—free of the intensity and torment of those final agonizing moments of their lives. And because of that, because of Nahuel’s extensive experience with these very matters of controlling

people with fear and blood, I allowed my ego to temporarily crack to the reasoning he had argued. He was right. I could not kill either of them in that moment without creating a chain reaction of unforeseen circumstances. I could not murder the two people who had discovered my plan without putting that very plan in jeopardy. And while I also could not and would not allow them to live, their deaths, nevertheless, would have to wait for a more suitable time and less suspicious circumstances. I took a moment to contemplate what to do—glaring at my wife, still cowering on the ground.

“Very well,” I stated, kneeling down and grabbing the side of my wife’s head so that she could not turn away from me—staring into her fearful and heartbroken eyes to make very clear to her the repercussions of her actions. “Consider yourself lucky, Hannah. You’re not going to die today. Instead, every single day, I’m going to make you wish you were dead. I’m going to make you suffer and torment for betraying me. And then, one day when the time is right, I’m going to kill you. And if for some reason you feel the need to talk about this to anyone. If you feel the need to spread this little rumor around the island, then I will punish Desmond to hurt you all the more. Do you understand me? Is this enough of a prison for you?!” I asked, violently shaking her head so that she would look at me again. She nodded and sobbed, collapsing to the floor after I let her go. I stood up and looked to Nahuel, unfazed by my promise to murder my own wife—knowing well that he too would understand the repercussions of his actions. For while I would not yet attempt to take his life, or those of his family, I would instead bide my time and plan an unfortunate accident that would remove him once and for all. We looked at each other, understanding one another as best as two enemies can. “That will be all Nahuel, thank you.”

“My pleasure, sir. Sorry for interrupting,” he replied, nodding quickly before turning and exiting the room.

I snatched a napkin off of my dinner plate and tossed it onto Hannah’s face—something to use to soak up the blood. Then, remembering her words of how Nathan had been spying on me, of how the government and the intelligence apparatus had been spying on me, I immediately turned my focus from the contempt I had for her to the concern I had for those still living in the outside world that might also know of what I had done. It was my plan to destroy all above ground Eden Corporation facilities via unmanned drone strikes beginning in one day’s time. However, given the circumstances, I felt I needed to expedite their bombardment so as to kill all those individuals inside who had managed to avoid infection and might possibly know the truth. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath, returning to my usual calm.

“Tell the help that you were drunk and dancing on the table. You slipped and hit your nose and I cut myself on a piece of the broken glass,” I instructed speaking loudly over the sound of her sobs. “Do you understand?” She nodded, like a good obedient wife should. “Good... now if you’ll excuse me, I have business to attend to.”

I exited the room and closed the door behind me, leaving her to her misery. Then without regard for the still bleeding wound on my chest, I hurried to my control center. Yet, while I tried to keep my mind clear and think only of the plan, nonetheless, I was stunned by the encounter I had just had. Perhaps it was a chemical reaction as a result of the pain I had endured or perhaps it was the surprise of taking guidance from Nahuel. Though far more likely, it was the fact that I had now set myself on an uncertain course in which, for the first time in my life, a select few knew the truth about me and what I had planned. That my wife had betrayed me was an infuriating insult, and had I genuinely loved her, one that would have no doubt devastated me. However, to my surprise, rage was all I felt for her. Not hurt, or loss, or sadness. In my eyes she was now as much of a threat to this world as the countless lives I had taken to cleanse it when I’d spread the infection. And then, as the depths of my indifference to what had occurred between us dawned on me, illuminating my almost inhuman response to the brutal and unforeseen attack on my life and life’s work, I came to see that I was in denial—I was in shock—only able to function for the soul sake of protecting my plan. I could not imagine what I would feel come the morning or the next day or the next. I was, however, sure, that no matter what it was, revenge was the answer.

I sat down at my console and initiated the remote drone control system—the next step in my plan to erase all evidence of what I had done from the outside world under the guise of destroying the last pockets of the Solanum virus that were contained in those very same facilities. Quite likely, due to the restricted nature of the facilities and their life support systems, many people were still trapped and alive inside them. And it was those same people that I now endeavored to rid the world of before they could escape with whatever they had learned—whatever they had spied on me to learn. My plan was unaffected; the cause was safe. And the world I would rebuild was still on course to realizing itself in the aftermath of the apocalypse. For as sure as times of enlightenment are followed by collapse and despair, those in despair await and yearn for enlightenment. I would save them. I would give them a new world, a better world, free of the history and strife of what humanity had been, united under one nationalism, one patriotism to the species, to the future and to the new world order that would rise from the ashes of the past.

## CHAPTER 40: EVACUATION

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

For the past few days I had barely slept. My wounds were healing well, and I had managed to stave off infection thanks to the medical care of Leanne and the other white coats. I was even walking semi-normally again. And while I, and the other people in the Eden Corporation laboratory had gotten off on the wrong foot when I'd briefly taken Roger hostage for information, stolen my gun from him and then refused to give it back, we'd all come to appreciate that, like it or not, we were in this together. Roger, of course, still seemed to think that what he knew about Ellex Vussel and his deliberate spread of the infection was the most important thing in the world and that we all owed it to mankind to make sure that the truth, above all else, survived the oncoming aerial bombardment and made its way into the outside world. I, of course, knew better. Because while people can put every ounce of themselves into seeking justice or into exacting revenge, in the end, it doesn't mean a damn thing and it doesn't change a damn thing. I'd learned that lesson long ago. But that wasn't what was keeping me from sleeping.

We had less than two days now until a remote drone program bombed the laboratory we were in and incinerated both the hoards of undead surrounding it and us inside. We had less than two days to find a way out that wouldn't lead us into the arms of the undead, that wouldn't force us to jump from the roof onto those of nearby buildings, or try some kind of insane zip line like some shit you'd see in a movie. Instead, we had only practical options and real people. And since I was the resident ghoul expert, trained military personnel, and the only one with a gun, it had fallen on my shoulders to try and come up with an idea or plan that could see not just me or Roger to safety, but everyone else as well. The mood was grim. And with each passing day it only got worse. At first, I think people allowed themselves to believe that I'd be able to get them to safety. At first, I believed it too. But now as the days wound down and we approached the time when we would have no choice but to leave, my preparations for our escape, while plentiful and impressive, remained fundamentally flawed and entirely dependent on luck.

Ghouls are wretched and horrific creatures that fortunately have very important flaws and weaknesses. Due to the natural decomposition of their rotting bodies, their senses slowly deteriorate over time. The first to fade is their sense of sight as the eyes turn milky and clouded. Rigor mortis quickly sets in, causing them to move slowly and rigidly. They

moan constantly to attract other ghouls and create large, dense hoards that relentlessly pursue their prey—primarily navigating by smell, sound and vibrations. Alone they are feeble and easily avoided. But in a town that had a population of 15,000 people, damn near all of which had since become infected and surrounded the buildings around the one we were trapped in, our chances of so much as making it out of the building, let alone out of town, were slim to say the least. Fortunately, because the laboratory we were staying in was on such a high floor of the building, the ghouls hadn't all pressed up against the Eden Corp facility—pursuing us alone. Instead, from my frequent trips to the roof to look out over the surrounding structures and pockets of undead, I realized that there were a few other buildings that had lured their attention—no doubt containing more people who had managed to survive somehow. This was our best chance and our only hope of escape—scattering the mobs of infected with distractions and trickery, while we made a run for it.

It was the middle of the night when the storm that had been building finally struck—lighting and thunder announcing its arrival. I could tell from the way the clouds looked before the sun set that it was going to be a bad one, temporarily dulling the noise of moaning ghouls with the hammering of water, a little bit of peace that we could all use. But, it wasn't the storm that pulled me out of the few minutes of sleep I had managed to catch. Instead, it was a flashing red monitor and a repeating beeping sound like something you'd hear from a cell phone. Nobody else seemed to notice—lying deep asleep on their makeshift beds, stretching from one end of the laboratory to the other. I pushed myself off the floor and picked up my weapon, never without it by my side, and made my way to the computer, the console that we left on at all times to keep track of the targeting systems of the drone base. Then, as I came to stand before it, reading the now drastically different estimated time of bombardment, my heart stopped and my mind began to race. The drones were on their way. The bombardment was ahead of schedule. And we had a little less than two hours until each and every one of us were blown to hell.

I took a seat at the computer console and briefly contemplated our options—looking out over the few handfuls of people that I had come to know, wondering whether or not I should bother to wake them up at all. Wondering whether or not they'd rather I say nothing and leave them to a peaceful, unsuspecting death or startle them awake and rush them out of the building to be eaten alive. For although I had made many of the necessary preparations to escape, I knew most of us likely wouldn't make it alive—most of them would be too weak, or fearful or confused to do exactly as I said. But it wasn't until my eyes came to rest on Leanne,

the beautiful brunette who I had practically fallen in love with the first time I saw her, that I realized I wasn't willing to give up my chance at life or sacrifice anyone else's without their consent. We had to try. And we had to do it now. I stood up, popped open the bottle of painkillers that I had been taking to deal with my leg, swallowed ten of them, and then hit the lights.

"Everybody up now!!!" I screamed, hobbling down the length of the room as groggy and disoriented white coats raised their heads from their pillows. Roger was one of the first to his feet and quickly rushed over to the computer console—realizing immediately what had happened and what I was doing. It was go time.

The window I had burst through when I'd first entered the Eden Corp building overlooked a gridlocked intersection of cars and ghouls—directly adjacent to another building that I could only assume still had survivors in it. There, above all other places nearby, was where the undead had chosen to rally, slamming their rotting hands against the doors as they tried to break in. However, since then, that room had become dedicated to building makeshift explosives and rockets. Tanks of flammable gas and chemicals had been rigged to detonate over the period of a few minutes, giving everyone just enough time to exit out the opposite side of the building by descending down a few rope ladders that we had built. Roger soon arrived after getting everyone in their positions and helped me push the tanks of gas around the room, teetering them near the edge of the broken window, out over the festering pool of ghouls and quickly rising water—only visible to us every few seconds as flashes of lighting illuminated the bowels of hell.

"The sewage system's backed up," Roger exclaimed, pointing to the number of bodies that lined the streets—clogging drains and creating a lake of corpses, feces, cars and rainwater. I nodded in return, smacking my leg to numb it until the painkillers kicked in. Then, as I stared out over the carnage of what awaited us below, I realized a blessing in disguise that might just see us through this—the storm. Ghouls could barely see as it was, and the blotted out moon and occasional lighting flashes would only serve to throw them off guard even more. The pouring rain that was mixing with the sewage would make everything smell like the same putrid mix of shit and even minimize the vibrations that could be felt from our moving. Jesus fucking Christ. We might just have a chance. But then again, it would slow our movements just as much as it would throw the ghouls off our trail. I didn't let myself get my hopes up anymore. Fate fucks both ways.

"Everybody's in position, right?" I asked Roger, sliding the first anchor-tank that would subsequently pull others down along with it, to

the very edge of the window—held back only by Roger and me. He nodded apprehensively, knowing there was no turning back now. I took a deep breath and let go—watching as the tank fell the few short stories down onto the street, crashing on to a car before slamming into a ghoul and sinking under water.

Roger and I turned and ran—only one minute until the timer detonated and the fireworks began. Everyone else was by the exit window that we had smashed out earlier, holding onto the rope ladders, waiting for my command to lower them just like they were supposed to. Lighting flashed a few times, giving us a good view of the few lingering ghouls that we would have to wait to wander away before we could throw the rope ladders down and start evacuating everyone. The room breathed heavily—fearfully—as people tried to prepare themselves for what was ahead. I stepped to the edge of the window and took the rope ladder from one of the white coats, all of whom, since the evacuation order had been made, had removed any bright clothing that could give them away in the dead of night and replaced it with plain clothes. I placed my hand on the man’s shoulder reassuringly, and turned to make my final address to the crowd.

“All right everyone, remember what I told you and do nothing else. Any sudden movement will not only get you surrounded but everyone else here as well. Follow my lead, keep your hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you, do not look back, and no matter what happens, do not scream—whether it’s to help someone or not, do not scream, all right?” I exclaimed, looking down at my watch as the five-second countdown began. Everybody nodded; nobody said a word. Show time.

A sudden explosion that sounded and felt like a truck hitting the side of the building sent vibrations out across the town, rippling the surface of the rising sewage water and pulling the attention of every ghoul in its direction. Lighting flashed a few more times, allowing us to see momentary glimpses of the ghouls below us as they turned and lumbered in the direction of the blast. A warm fiery-chemical glow emanated from where we had set the charges and a moment later I dropped the first ladder and began climbing down.

I lowered my feet into the freezing, rotting water that smelled like death soaked in shit—eventually feeling it strike the firm grip of the asphalt below. The others followed quickly behind me, knowing that we only had approximately five minutes of periodic explosions and the subsequent fires that would burn afterwards to give us the cover we needed to flee. I waited until the person behind me had caught up until I began moving forward, practically blind in the pitch black, moonless

night. The rain poured down heavily, making it seem like everything around us was moving. But that wasn't the worst part. The water was literally filled with corpses—either those of people who had died without contracting the disease, or, of the infected, trapped underwater, waiting to spring to the surface and pull us under. I breathed slowly, terrified but forcing myself to stay calm. I moved gracefully—feeling the tight grasp of the person behind me dig into my shoulder muscles. I had mounted a flashlight onto the top of my gun in case of emergency. The group knew that if they saw that light go on, the only thing they could do was run. But, until then, no shots could be fired and we had no choice but to rely on the occasional lightning flash to see where we were going and hope we would make it out alive.

Another explosion flashed a faint glimmer of light across our path and I could feel the shudder pass along everyone in the human chain we formed. Within a few meters of us some ghouls could be seen, drudging in our direction, their hands stretched outwards and their mouths wide open. I stopped dead in my tracks, and the chain of people behind me did too, just as they were trained to do—nobody moved. The ghouls moans swam through the sounds of pounding rain and I could feel the trembling hand of the man behind me lightly shoving me—either from his own fear, or because of that of those behind him. However, I didn't dare draw attention to ourselves. And it wasn't until the next flash of lighting struck that I could see that the ghouls had moved past us toward the still burning chemical fire we had left behind. The distraction was working, it was actually working. I thanked God for the storm to cover our tracks and swallow us in the night, sliding my feet slowly forward, despite the frequent bumps against cold, moving flesh buried in the now waist high water.

We moved slowly. Painfully slowly. The lightning shocked our hearts every time it struck and the occasional explosions from the building we had just evacuated added another startling itch to our nerves. My free hand was stretched outwards—bumping against car doors and broken glass. I wore a thick glove on it to keep from hurting myself, but that same glove kept me from knowing exactly what it was I was touching. Then after a few more moments of pitch black, without the guiding help of lighting, my hand jabbed into something fleshy, standing right in front of me. I froze once more and held my breath, hearing the sound of a ghouls moan emerge as water rushed out of its mouth and splashed down onto my chest. It had just stood up—it had just surfaced—and I had just bumped into the mother fucking thing. I didn't move. I didn't breathe. I waited, panicking in that moment, until I felt its cold hands stretch out and graze against my shirt collar—searching for whatever it had just



encountered. Then, as it's hands moved towards my throat, I decided I had no choice but to react—I quickly thrust my hand out and shoved it aside, knocking it off balance and sending it back into the depths of the water with the hope that by the time it surfaced we would be gone. I started moving forward again—trembling with fear.

A few moments later, after another strike of lighting to see where we would have to move and turn next, I felt a sudden jolt in the line of hands connecting one person to another. The hand on my shoulder swayed from the force of something pulling on it from behind—either from a ghoul or another one of the white coats. Only, I had no way of knowing. I tried to move forward again, but then felt the hand pull me back, holding me where I was. Then, seconds later, I heard a muffled scream—as if someone had a hand placed over their mouth. It quickly disappeared into the water. I turned around, doing exactly what I had instructed everyone else not to and hoped—I hoped and prayed that I would have a moment of lighting that would tell me what I needed to know. I hoped and prayed that we hadn't been surrounded and that the ghoul I had pushed aside hadn't found its way back to the end of the line. And then, just as I ran the thought through my head once more, I got what I had been praying for. The lighting illuminated the sky just as another explosion burst out from the Eden Corporation laboratory—a giant, colorful, blue and purple blast that would indicate to everyone that there would be no more after it. However, it wasn't the fire that caught my attention most—it was the fifteen or twenty ghouls that had somehow managed to find themselves on all sides of us—particularly in front of us, headed right for me. The line remained intact, but the people standing in it had never looked more terrified. The fading glow of the explosion illuminated the area just enough for me to see a line of cars, the roofs of which protruded out of the water. And as I looked around, to try and see a clear way to move, or any way out, I realized we would have no choice but to either get out of the way of the oncoming swarm or fall victim to it. I slowly turned around and leaned into the ear of the man holding my shoulder, whispering an instruction for him to pass down the line.

“Tell everyone to get on top of the cars, and then don't move,” I instructed, immediately after which, another bolt of lighting struck which showed the approaching pack of ghouls were walking faster than I'd hoped. I had to move now. We had to move now. I felt the man behind me turn to pass my message along, but I knew it could never reach everyone in time. I knew that either they would be lost and alone or we would all be dead and infected. I didn't hesitate. God damn me, I didn't hesitate.

I moved quickly forward and climbed up onto the roof of a car—feeling the man’s hand pry off of my shoulder. I lay flat and held my breath—hearing the sound of moans pass along every side of me—walking around the car I had just moved on top of. But, without lighting, without light, I had no way of knowing what had happened to the group behind me. My eyes searched desperately through the darkness for any sign of them—for any sound of them, but found nothing. A few more moments passed of sickening silence and darkness until yet another lighting flash struck and I could see that a handful of people had managed to make it onto the tops of cars—the others, standing motionless, fortunate enough to be ignored or unnoticed, had no choice but to listen helplessly as a few of their friends were surrounded and dragged under the water.

I swiveled my head around to look in the direction we had been heading—only a couple more blocks now until we reached the outer border of town where the steep hills that surrounded it climbed upwards and outwards into the forest. I had descended those hills and found myself trapped here weeks ago, and now that I was so close to them again, I felt my body yearning to run—pushing me to leave everyone behind and use all the strength I had to escape. But I didn’t. I stayed put. And everyone who had managed to receive my message and get on top of, or inside of, a car had no choice but to listen and watch as the others were attacked and eaten—their faint and muffled screams quickly disappearing into the water. I don’t know how long we waited there—hearing the subtle nuances of a woman’s throat opening just as her last breath of air escaped her lungs into the murky water. The horrifying slop of wet undead hands against trembling tender meat—torn limb from limb. It was hell. We were in hell. And we had no choice but to wait and pray for it to end.

A few more flashes of lighting and soon the ghouls had moved on—continuing towards the burning side of the building that we had left for them. I peered ahead, seeing nothing, and no one. And then, after getting the attention of those still around who could follow me, I slid off the car and back into the water—grabbing hands with the person behind me, and reforming the chain. A few more steps and the terrain began to change. It was getting muddier, less stable—no doubt, a result of the eroding hills slopping up and gathering mud from the severity of the rain. A few more steps after that and I could feel the water level start to lower—we were walking out of it—we were rising out of it. I held tightly onto the person behind me with one hand and onto my gun with the other. Soon, however many of us were left had made it out of the water. And, from another sudden flash of lighting, I could see that the coast

seemed to be clear. I waited a moment and managed to gather everyone together in a circle, so that we could whisper what had happened and come to understand what would happen next.

“Ok... ok... all we have to do now is walk up this hill and then head into the woods,” I instructed, feeling everyone tremble from the cold of the rain and the devastating fear in their hearts. I had no idea who I was talking to. But I knew they needed me. “After that, we can rest—huddle together for warmth and stay alert.”

“Roger isn’t here,” I heard Leanne whimper—thanking God that she was one of the few people who had made it through. “He... what happened to him? Why did everyone move so suddenly?”

“I tried to send a message back to everyone but there was no time... the ghouls surrounded us and,” I tried to explain, only to be cut off by a man’s voice.

“We cannot stay here... we need to move.”

“What about the others?” another man asked.

“We need to move now,” a hiss responded.

“Look... everyone just follow me... we can’t go back. I told you before. I warned you before—we can’t go back.”

The crowd silently admitted that I was right and accepted that if we didn’t start moving while the ghouls in the town were distracted, we too would never get the chance to leave. I turned back towards the road and began our ascent into the woods—into the rocky, uneven terrain that the undead could only stumble briefly upon without tripping over or falling on a tree root. If we made it until daylight, we knew the road we had to take to reach the military base Roger had told us about—the place where he was supposed to report after his rescue squad had arrived. What I knew, however, that I didn’t dare crush everyone else’s hopes with, was that likely that very base was overrun with ghouls as well. Our best chances of survival would be to continue to lose people until only a few remained—the strong ones—the fighters. And then, if we had any luck at all, we’d start running for as long as our feet could carry us until either we were eaten alive or the bullets I had left in my rifle spared us from that fate.

I thought of my brother in that moment. I wished I could have seen him again. I wished I could have had the sense to forgive myself for what I’d done to him enough to be able to face him again—to look him in the eye and spit on my own foolish pride. And, in that moment, I promised myself that if I got out of this; if I led this group of people out of this, then I would do everything in my power to get back home. I

would see him again. I would make things right. And together, we could face hell. But then again, that was just wishful thinking. I knew I was going to die. I just knew it. And the only reason I thought of him and promised myself those things was because it was the greatest regret I had in my life and the only thing I wished I'd never done and would give anything to make right again. And then, despite the feeling in my gut pulling at my soul, reassuring me that I was a hair's breath away from death—we reached the top of the hill and entered the forest.

## CHAPTER 41: CHANGE OF PLANS

Derek Riggs, California, 2018

Being up in Cory's tree fort was the first solid night's sleep I'd had since the infection spread. It reminded me of the countless nights I'd spent sleeping in the fort I'd made when I was younger—either because I felt the need to slip away from home or prepare for the end of the world with my friends Sebastian and Matthew—staking out the area and hiding away from everything else. It was like our own world. We made the rules and we felt like we were in control—scouting the forest for any sign of anything, living off the land and the supplies we'd stolen, practicing fighting, shooting, and, all around, living the life we wanted to without the imposing judgment of our parents or anybody else. I missed those days. I was happy then. Though if you'd asked someone who knew me back then, they'd likely have said I'd never been happy a single day in my life. But that's because most people like to only see things for what's clear as day on the outside and for what's buried deep inside of themselves. I didn't care if they understood then and I certainly didn't care now. Still, it felt good to have some company again—just like the days before I lost my friends.

When I opened my eyes in the morning my hand was already on my rifle—instinct, not reaction. But what surprised me about the slit of daylight peeking through the boards of the fort wasn't just that I hadn't gotten up before the sun did, it was that Cory was no longer lying next to me the way he'd fallen asleep and had remained for the few moments I'd woken up throughout the night to double check for the sound of moans or sight of ghouls. Instead, the fort was empty—the coast was clear—and he had somehow managed to creep away from my side without stirring me awake. I didn't know whether to be impressed or concerned. I sat up and slid my helmet on as I craned my neck around the fort to double check that there weren't any nooks or crannies he might be hiding in. Nothing. He was gone. And it wasn't until I spotted the rope ladder, still hanging down from the top of the tree fort, that I saw there was a clear trail I would be able to follow to find him.

My feet touched down on the still damp dirt from the morning mist. The birds were singing, the bugs were buzzing, and, just in the distance, over by the cabin that Cory had called home before he had to move into the tree fort to sleep at night, the clang of a metal fence opening rang out through the air. I furrowed my brow at the site—watching as the pen Cory was keeping his infected parents in was opened

for them to go ahead and walk right out—walk right towards him. I moved quickly forward, clutching my rifle at my side—knowing that I wouldn't be able to pull my gun on them without him pulling his on me. But I had no choice. I'd told him what had happened to them—I'd told him that they were undead and that there was nothing that could be done about it. But he hadn't listened. He'd gone to visit them—he'd let them out of their pen—and he'd endangered both of our lives by doing so. I pulled my rifle up and took aim.

Two quick shots rang out across the forest and the singing birds quickly shut up and scattered. I stopped dead in my tracks, barely believing what had just happened. Cory held his own rifle in his trembling hands. His parents lay motionless on the ground—one shot fired into each of their skulls, finally freed from the hell of being ghouls. But it wasn't me who had fired at them, it was him. He had done what was necessary. He had killed the two most important people in his life. And he had done it without crying to me about how he wanted to believe I was wrong—he had done it without asking me to help him or expecting that I would take care of him. He had done it because it needed to be done. Cory bent down and picked up a knapsack by his feet, turning around and wiping away a tear—startled to see me standing only a few meters behind him with my gun in hand. We stood there for a moment, without saying a word. Each of us understanding that because the shots had been fired, it would only be a matter of time until more ghouls came wandering around, looking for whatever had caused the noise. Cory eventually took a few steps forward and held out the knapsack for me to take.

“Here,” he said, moving towards me—his tone and expression somber but not defeated. “You said you weren't able to get to your crate of supplies... so I gathered some stuff together for you,” he finished still holding the knapsack out for me. I stood stunned—completely taken off guard by this kid. Eventually I reached out and accepted his offer, staring down at the sack full of canned food and dried fruit bars.

“Thank you,” I replied, fastening the bag shut and slinging it over my shoulder. Cory smiled gently, clearly doing his best to keep from crying too hard or feeling too bad. I felt for the kid. “That was... smart of... I mean... it was brave for you to do what you just did.”

“Why?”

“Because... most people wouldn't have,” I replied, my mind already starting to wander—growing anxious from the inevitable approach of the undead towards where the shots had been fired.

“Would you have?”

“Yeah... you did the right thing.”

“It doesn’t feel right.”

“More often than not, that’s the case,” I exclaimed, fastening my rifle across my shoulder as I prepared my gear for the ride ahead—I’d have to leave soon to reach my destination by sundown. But something about leaving that kid without a proper goodbye nagged at my conscience.

“I’ve never shot a person before... just deer and rabbits.”

“Not much difference when you think about it... but... then again, it’s probably best not to think about it too much.”

“Probably,” Cory muttered, losing focus of what we were saying to each other—his mind no doubt drifting back to what he’d just done. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Are things ever going to get better?” he said, forcing me to chose between being honest with him at the worst time or lying to him cause of the pity I felt. I didn’t know which to choose and before I could respond, I heard the distant moan of an approaching ghoul, stumbling through the forest. Cory turned his head in its direction and forgot the question he’d just asked me—but I didn’t. “You better get going... they’ll form a group soon, and then I’ll have to herd them into the river or over the cliff side.”

“Yeah... you’re right,” I replied, walking with him to my bicycle, strung up by the tree his fort was built on. I saddled up my gear and fastened everything tight—preparing for another long ride on my way to the cabin up north waiting for me. “Thanks again for your hospitality,” I stated, nodding goodbye to him as I slid the visor on my helmet down.

“Hey Derek,” Cory exclaimed, stopping me for one more moment before I left.

“Yeah?”

“If you get the chance... come back and visit sometime, ok?”

“Y-yeah... sure thing,” I replied, knowing well that when I left, I’d never look back—knowing well that the protocols wouldn’t allow a frivolous trip to visit a kid I’d only known for a day. I’d never see him again. I’d never know if he was safe or if everyday when he set out to clear the area of ghouls if he would fall when he wasn’t supposed to or be caught off guard by something a kid his age just couldn’t see coming. I knew that his life was likely going to end just as he was living in that moment and that mine would continue on just as I’d lived it for all the

years I'd forced myself to be alone—to stay alone no matter what, so that when the time came—when this time came—I'd be strong enough to survive. I'd be hard enough to endure. And I wouldn't need anyone or anything but myself and the plans I'd made. I knew all of that, looking at his dirty solemn face. But what I didn't know was how much it would hurt making that choice over and over again. That was something I could never have prepared for. And in that moment, it finally got to me—the loneliness, the solitude, the pain and the desolation that I had endured to make myself the man I was and turn my back on everyone else. I stared at him, stunned and speechless. And then, just as the group of ghouls began to appear through the rustling trees around us, I decided to do something I never would have imagined I'd do. I changed the plan; I broke the protocols; and I told Cory to hurry up and get the few things he'd need to leave this place and never look back—he was coming with me.

To be continued in *Risen*...



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