



Rabid Zombies

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Chapter 1

Bath Salts

“...and turning to national news, a Miami area man is caught eating the face of another man. Police reported the man acted like an animal growling and threatening them when told to stop. He then went back to eating the other man’s face. Officers on scene shot the man. The alleged perpetrator was described as acting like a fictional zombie by biting and chewing on the victim. Initial word from the police is that the individual appeared high on so called ‘bath salts’, a drug being referred to as the new LSD. The DEA reports bath salts as causing a variety of reactions including a racing heart and delusions. They went on to say it’s a new and upcoming way to get high involving common substances none of which are currently illegal. The victim was transported to Jackson Memorial hospital and is in critical condition. ”

“Ooohh. That gives me the creeps, Jack.”

“I have to agree, Christy. We’ll be right back with the weather and sports...”

Click.

“What the heck is going on this world,” said Jane to her husband Mark as she turned off the TV and headed for the kitchen to start on dinner.

“I don’t know, dear. The steps people will take to get high these days are just plain nuts. What happened to smoking a joint in the locker room back when you were a dumb teen and then growing up and becoming a well adjusted contributing member of society? Now some of these twenty somethings think a fast food job is a career.”

“I’m making pasta rollups for dinner, OK?”

“Sounds good. How long?”

“At least an hour to an hour and a half, why?”

“That should be enough time for me to mow the lawn and get in a quick shower then.”

“Don’t hurry. I can easily keep them warm once they are cooked if you’re not ready.” Jane dropped the lasagna sheets in boiling water and turned to the other ingredients as Mark went out the back door and headed for the shed. She put the gruesome druggie story out of her head as she mixed up the sautéed onions, spinach, cottage cheese, ricotta, nutmeg, and egg. She sprinkled in a bit of mozzarella and set the filling to the side. Making a basic butter and flour roux she added a bit more of finely diced and sautéed onion and garlic and some milk and cooked until it turned into a thick creamy white sauce. While it was cooking she also started heating the contents of a jar of tomato basil pasta sauce.

The noodles were nearly cooked so she took them out of the pot, allowed them to cool a bit and then proceed to put the spinach cheese filling into each and rolled them up. Jane took a generous ladle of the white sauce and spread it in a pan, then added the pasta rolls. She topped them off with alternating rows of the white and red sauce. Finally she sprinkled on more mozzarella and some grated parmesan. Slipping it into the oven she set the timer for 25 minutes and then programmed the oven to drop to the ‘keep warm’ setting when the timer expired. She now had just enough time to get in a bath herself.

Jane went to their tub and started the water running, grabbed a jar of crystals and started pouring them into the water. She had to chuckle at the, incorrect, thought that someone figured out a way to get high off of these. All they did for her was to relax away the stress of the day.

Mark and Jane both finished up about the same time and called Nicole, their nine year old daughter, for dinner.

“Be right there,” she called out from the family room where she was logging off of Facebook. Nicole, Nikki, as she preferred to be called, wanted to have her

own computer in her room but her parents insisted that she had to use the family laptop computer which was positioned in such a way that everyone could see what she was doing. Even for her young age she had already been promoted a year ahead and was still outperforming the older kids at school.

“Senator Whitman?” said John Adams. It wasn’t a question but just a polite way to get the Senator’s attention without simply barging into his office. John Adams, no relation to the former president, either got ribbed over his name or told he should go far. He wasn’t really interested in politics, but this position could open some doors for him leading to a cushy government administration position so he played the game for now.

Looking up the Senator responded, “Yes Johnny?”

Even more than ‘John Adams’ he hated ‘Johnny’ but he wasn’t going to correct the Senator so he gave a slight smile as he entered the office. John was always amazed at the deep plush carpet. A rich royal blue in color, it felt as if you were walking on a cloud. The wood paneled walls just added to the luxurious feeling. He didn’t know his woods but given the dark color he thought maybe they were walnut, but whatever they were they matched the desk and credenza.

“I’ve got the appropriations report here that you asked for.”

“Oh, good. Please drop it here,” said Senator Whitman gesturing at in basket on his desk.

John did so and turned to leave stopping in the doorway. “Will there be anything else?”

“No. Wait. Maybe. What do you know about spreadsheets? I can’t figure out how to make this column of numbers add up. This modern technology is so difficult to use.”

“I can show you, sir,” said John as he turned and went behind the Senator’s desk to see what he was trying to do. He couldn’t help but notice a number of folders on the desk marked ‘Confidential’ but he did his best to avoid openly staring at them, instead keeping his focus on the task at hand. He explained how to do a formula SUMming up a series of cells and the Senator was amazed, yet again, at the fact computers could do math like this.

Shaking his head, after he left the office, John headed down the hall to his own office. It was just a drywall lined room with a tile floor and a metal desk up against the wall. There was barely enough room for a visitor chair and a 4 drawer file cabinet.

His door suddenly burst open, “Hey Johhny boy, lunch? The deli?”

Sighing in resignation he grabbed his ID and keys, “Yeah, sounds good Bruce.”

Bruce was a senior aide and had a better office, better assignments, a better Senator. One who wasn’t so old. Of course Senator Mitchell also was extreme left wing and had some pretty screwed up views, at least in John’s opinion. Mitchell felt that most constitutional rights just didn’t apply anymore as they were written in and for a different time. Senator Mitchell was always working to restrict rights. He was pro TSA, pro drone monitoring, pro Internet censoring and against anything that could be construed as an individual right. Guns, speech, heck even religion. He felt you either didn’t need it or should only have what the government felt was appropriate for you. Of course he also felt that the governments other role was to keep the people well taken care of.

He introduced entitlement program after entitlement program. Nearly everyone thought that some modest unemployment program to help you through a short difficult period and get you back on your feet was good. Senator Mitchell felt that if you lost a job (for any reason including stealing from your employer) that you should still get 90% of your original pay and get it indefinitely. Deadbeats in

his state loved this proposal and kept voting him back in during every re-election. Thankfully most of congress had kept him in check but his viewpoint was ever so slowly spreading.

“Hey Wolf, this guy here says he can beat you with one arm tied behind his back!”

Wolf looked up from the table he was sitting at. He drank alone and while not foolish, he rarely backed down from a challenge. Of course it only took a few times before challengers quickly learned they would lose.

This challenger was like the rest. Some punk ass kid barely out of diapers, probably with a fake ID, and more testosterone than brains. Sometimes it was a physical challenge, usually arm wrestling, sometimes it was a game, in this case pool. Back when he was a fresh recruit in the Marines he was probably just as stupid, but the military helped straighten him out. He excelled at the physical aspects and had the right mindset to deal with the mental side too. They never did break him, it was more of a mutual agreement to do the given task. His independent thinking coupled with his skill set got him assigned to some top secret special ops project.

Wolf and his team members came from all branches of the military and had no idea who they really reported to beyond the General. When something needed doing, usually something messy, his team was given the assignment. All independent thinkers and all highly qualified, the conflicts were many. Never was a mission jeopardized but some would describe managing the team as herding both cats and cobras at the same time. Due to the nature of their work, turnover was high. About half left on their own, the other half left in a coffin, usually an empty coffin as they had no ID and no connection to any group or government. When a body fell it was usually left. This went against their training of leaving no one

behind but these assignments were never something you'd learn in training, besides if one of them fell there rarely was much of a body left to take back anyway.

Upon discharge from a group that didn't exist, Wolf got recruited by an offshoot of one of the agencies. He put in a bit of time as a spook, or at least a pawn of some spook. He didn't know which alphabet agency he was working for and finally one day decided he had enough and simply quit. They made a few attempts to make sure he had permanently quit. He packaged up the fingers from the second attempt and sent them to his former 'boss' with a note that he just wanted to be left alone. If anyone else came after him he'd come at the agency with everything he had. Cooler heads prevailed and they agreed he was no longer worth the risk. As long as he kept his mouth shut they'd ignore him.

Over the past years Wolf freelanced. Hiring on here or there, doing some work on his own, basically taking care of problems. It might sound like a cliché but he always worked for a just cause. Think a one man A-Team. That old TV show where they always fought for the underdog. Of course the work Wolf did wasn't as glamorous and shoot-outs were very rare but he still investigated those he worked for before accepting the commission. Eventually he ended up doing the odd job for the special ops group and pseudo came out of retirement.

"So, Wolf, you gonna play him?"

He mentally shook his head bringing his focus back on the here and now. Slowly he rose up from his seat, the soft leather clothing absorbing nearly all the light and not making a sound as he moved. Rising to his full 6'4" height he usually was by far the tallest in the room and held a commanding presence. If not for his height than for his physique. Well toned, strong as a bison, graceful as a puma and quick as a rattlesnake, those who studied his features could detect a bit of native American in him but few dared to stare at him that long.

"One thousand a game, upfront."

The challenger blanched and was trying to stammer out a reply.

“One thousand or you’re wasting my time.”

He finally squeaked out, “OK.”

No sooner was the word said when Wolf’s hand shot out neatly dropping a pile of one hundred dollar bills on the table. The challenger took much longer to dig out and count his money.

One of the bar flies started racking up the balls while Wolf walked over to the pool cue rack and slowly ran his hand up and down each stick. From all appearances it looked like he was stroking or even fondling the sticks. The regulars new this was most certainly not the case. Wolf’s touch was so sensitive that he could pick up a warp in the stick simply by feel. Once he settled on a stick he removed it from the rack and backed away from everyone. Once he felt there was a clear enough area around him he flexed his neck and then stretched his arms, first one and then the other. Lastly he grasped the cue right in the middle and proceeded to work it slowly around flexing his wrists. The pace increased as he continued to work his fingers and hands until the cue was spinning in what amounted to martial arts defensive and attack movements. The movement was so fast that the stick became a blur. As quick as it began it ended when he grabbed the stick, currently spinning in mid air right in front of him and instantly stopped the spin plunging the rubber end to the ground.

Casually, almost appearing to be an afterthought he reached out and took a blue chalk cube and used it on his cue. Looking over at the challenger who, not surprisingly, had lost all color, he said, “You break.”

The guy tried to select a cue, dropping it in the process. Taking a few deep breaths he finally got his composure together and walked over to the table and chalked his stick too. He lined up and it took almost a full minute before the slight but present trembling in his hands settled down enough for him to take his shot. It was a messy break and no balls dropped.

Wolf stepped up to the table while a few locals called out to ‘teach that boy’ and ‘show em how it’s done’. He slowly walked around the table sizing up the layout, noting the position of the solids and stripes and the eight ball. Finally he came to a stop and slowly bent over looking just above the cue ball. The pool cue was brought into position and he called out his first shot. Not thirty second later he had sunk all seven balls and was lining up on the eight. He called the final shot and sunk the eight ball. Walking away he set the stick on the table, palmed the two thousand sitting there and returned to his seat to finish nursing the beer.

Most nights, at least when not on another job, he hung out at the local bar nursing only a single beer and mostly observing. There were many regulars and the occasional outsider. Some came in by mistake, some intentionally and very rarely, some came to see him. The beer was \$4.50 and he always paid with a twenty and told the girl to keep the change. They never pressured him to drink more or suggested he drink up and move on. Whether it was his size or his tip, or the fact that he, on occasion, acted as the unofficial bouncer, the owner and staff were more than happy to let him sit and drink his one beer as long as he wanted.

“Let’s go, the cab is already here!”

Roy, Anna, Jake and Lucas were taking a European vacation. This was their first time out of the country and would be gone for two weeks. Roy had already turned off the gas and water and had the rest of their Phoenix home locked up. The four of them hauled out their luggage to where the cab driver could put them in the back of the minivan. They all piled in and the driver took off for the airport.

He wouldn’t say anything in front of the driver but Roy was a bit concerned about this trip. As preppers, people who try to be aware of their surroundings, store up food and supplies during times of plenty so they can make it through lean times and believe in being armed for your own protection and to protect your loved ones, Roy was not going to be able to take his gear with him. He obviously couldn’t use

his concealed carry permit to take his Ruger SR40C onto the plane and his wife would be without her Smith and Wesson Bodyguard model pistol. After years of daily carrying he knew he would feel naked without it.

Upon arriving at the airport they checked their luggage and then took their backpacks and their carry on bags and headed for the personal lockers. They rented two larger lockers and each put their GHB in it along with, when no one was nearby or watching, Roy and Anna's handguns. They each knew that their GHB, or Get Home Bag, could mean the difference between life and death or at least a semi pleasant vs. a downright ugly trip home. If some emergency happened they had first aid kits along with food, water and some other equipment and gear that could be useful for spending a night or two outside. In Roy and Anna's bags they also had additional ammunition for their pistols.

They each picked up their carry on and headed for security. None of them were looking forward to a full body scan or worse, a groping, but knew this was the price they would have to pay to travel by air. When, thought Roy, did our country slip so far as to treat their citizens like criminals? When were our rights and even our dignity taken away?

Pushing it from his mind he made an effort to put all of this beneath him and found he really was looking forward to spending a few weeks hopping around Europe. Jake was 17 and this would probably be the last family vacation since he was planning on either going away for college or perhaps entering the military first, he still had not made up his mind. Lucas, at 15, was a good kid, who also, like his older brother, had good grades and was a decent athlete. He'd never be picked first for a team but was far from a last pick too. They both had brown hair and blue eyes, just like their mother.

"Boarding pass, ID"

Roy looked up and realized he'd finally made it to the front of the long security line. He handed the TSA agent his boarding pass and fumbled to get out his passport.

After a few checks, an electronic scan of his passport, visual review and with what looked like a black light shined on it, the agent scribbled a mark on the pass, and the passport and boarding pass were handed back and he was directed towards one of the screening machines with his family following behind after their IDs were checked too. He let Anna and the kids put their shoes, belt, pocket contents and carry on bags into the baskets and then each passed through the machine. While waiting his turn he noticed the mark on Anna's boarding pass was different than his. She stood in the body scan machine and then was flagged on.

Roy stepped up, got scanned and stepped through. As he did the agent asked him which carry on bag was his. When he pointed it out another agent picked up the bag and started to walk off with it.

"Hey!"

The agent cut him off and said, "Please follow the other agent."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing sir, we just randomly check some passengers in order to assure the safety of all of us. Please cooperate or we will need to involve the authorities."

Fuming but not wanting to cause a scene he glanced back on Anna and tried to signal her.

"Sir, please keep facing forward and continue to follow that agent."

"But I want to let my wife know where I'm going."

"Sir, please keep moving or I will call the authorities. This is your final warning."

Hoping that Anna or the kids saw him he complied and followed the agent into a nearby room. In the room they proceeded to dump out the contents of his bag on a table including his netbook bouncing it fairly hard in the process.

“Hey, careful that cost...”

“Sir, stop interfering with our work.”

“I’m not interfering, but you better not break my personal items or I’ll have you reported.”

The agent took the shoulder microphone, pressed a button and said, “Exam room 3, code 4B, repeat code 4B.”

Moments later four more agents burst into the room, with guns drawn and pointed them all at Roy demanding that he sit down and stop interfering. Obviously out gunned he did so.

The agents spent the next 40 minutes with a full pat down including much groping followed by a thorough handling each item from his bag and even insisted he turn on his laptop to prove it works. They then asked for his login password. He refused. They threatened to arrest him if he did not give them the password. Roy had finally reached his breaking point and calmly said, “Go ahead, arrest me. My attorney is going to have a field day with this treatment, no abuse, that I’m being forced to endure.”

One of the other agents made some comment about logging in was no longer necessary and the lead agent closed snapped the notebook closed quite forcefully and literally dropped it back in the bag. Roy could hear the crack as it reached the bottom of the bag and impacted against the table. He hoped that nothing more than the case was broken. They stuffed everything else in the bag, handed it to him and told him to have a nice flight.

Fuming, Roy left the room, and found his family nearby frantically scanning the crowd for him with Anna near tears. Upon hearing of his treatment she

demanded to talk to a supervisor. Eventually one did come by and profusely apologized and offered to fill out a complaint form. She proceeded to document everything that Roy and Anna told her and then assured them the matter would be promptly investigated.

Roy and his family thanked her and turned to hurry to the gate as it was almost boarding time. As they left the supervisor crumpled up the form, threw it in the garbage and lifted up the phone. About a minute later she hung up, turned and walked away with an evil grin on her face.

As they checked in at the gate, they were told that there was a mix up with their tickets but not to worry as they managed to still get them on the flight but they had to assign them new seats. Jake, Lucas and Anna were each sitting 5 rows apart in the center seat of each row. They had to climb over other people to get to their seat. Roy, on the other hand, had a window seat at the very back corner of the plane right next to a rather large individual. Not large as in overweight, more like the upper body of a very fit football player. Later Jake discovered this was the flight's designated air marshal when the flight attendant slipped up and said, "Can I get you any more coffee, marshal?"

Roy had his eyes closed, pretended to be asleep and made sure not to react when he heard that he'd been seated next to the marshal, probably due to his special treatment back at the airport. He swore this would be the last time he ever flew in a plane.

"Darren, what's the ohms on this resistor?"

"Dude, you have to learn to read the color bars, it isn't that hard," he said walking over to take a look at it.

"Yeah, I know but I'm mechanics, not electronics. I leave this for you amp heads."

“It’s 470 ohms.”

“Crap. The schematics here call for a 22,000 ohm resistor.”

“Not even close Rob,” said Darren walking back to his bench as Rob started digging in the parts bin for some other resistors.

“Melvin, hold this arm while I bolt it on,” commanded Darren.

Melvin picked up the metal arm mechanism and Darren slipped in a couple of bolts, followed by lock washers and then spun on the nuts tightening them down with his wrench. The three MIT students were working in the robotics lab on their latest creation. They were supposed to be working on the next generation robotics that would be applied to future planetary explorer robots. Instead they were working on their own personal project, an attack bot for the next robot wars battle royal.

Once it was ready for the next test the three of them took it out to a nearby field and were putting it through its paces when a football slammed into it knocking it over, breaking off a few pieces and bending the aluminum arm beyond repair.

“Hey! Who the...”

“Oh, sorrrriiiiiieee,” said Brad, the quarterback of the MIT football team. Even at an engineering school a jock is still a jock. They all knew his sorry wasn’t sincere and since there was no one even close that he might have been throwing the ball to it was obvious the robot had been the target.

The three guys picked up their robot, collected the pieces and trudged back to the lab in an attempt to repair it.

“You know, he kind of did us a favor. We now know where it’s vulnerable to a impact strike.”

“A favor? That jerk intentionally damaged it.”

“True, but we can add armor and shields and next time...”

“What next time? He’ll probably just run it over with his truck. His kind don’t care, as long as it makes them look cool or lets him bully someone that’s all he wants.”

“My psych professor says that his bullying is just a suppressed urge for comfort and nurturing. “

“Yeah, and how many times has your psych professor gotten a wedgie or a swirly? Sorry, I don’t buy that mind game mumbo jumbo. Brad’s a jerk. Period.”

Marigold, Mari as most of her friends called her, or would if she had friends, was more or less a loaner. Each day she’d get up early, quickly clean up and grab a muffin or piece of fruit on the way out the door to school. The money was not there for a college degree and neither were her grades. She didn’t do bad, it’s just that she didn’t apply herself.

She had found High School boring. They taught you what was in the book, yet for an avid reader like her, who finished the book the first week of school, there wasn’t anything new to learn. She tried reading other books in class but the teacher always yelled at her for not paying attention, even when she could answer all the questions it didn’t matter. She was still being indoctrinated to be like the rest of the class.

Her one escape was her notebook. Under the guise of taking notes she dabbled with a journal, poetry, short stories and even sketching out ideas for various types of machines and systems that she read about. As bad as school was the last thing Mari wanted was to go home.

Mari’s father was abusive. Not sexually, but rather physically abusive. Her mother frequently sported a black eye and when her mom wasn’t around Mari was next in line. She had many times considered just running away but didn’t want to

leave her mom alone with him. Privately she had once tried to talk her mom into leaving and, for reasons unknown to Mari, her mother went off on her screaming that you don't do that and she took a vow for life. Mari chose to never bring it up again.

Instead she just made sure to stay away from home as much as possible. After school she'd go to the library and stay there until closing reading anything she could find that afforded her an opportunity to learn from. On weekends she had a part time job at a local hot dog place. It was enough income to avoid having to ask her father for some money and risk another beating. As long as she got in late enough and was quiet enough he would be passed out in front of the TV and she could slip up to her room. At one time she put a lock on the door but when he found out he kicked the door in and that ended any chance at privacy, or even safety, for her.

If she could pick up either full time hours or find another part time job for the summer she could save enough money for a deposit on an apartment and finally get out there. As much as she didn't want to desert her mother, she had made it clear that her first loyalty was to her abusive husband, Marigold wasn't going to end up the same way.

"Marigold?"

"Right here," said Mari raising her hand and then gathering her papers and rising to follow the woman. She was led to a small conference room and asked to have a seat.

"Mr. Peterson will be with you shortly. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"No thank you. I'm fine."

With that the door was closed and she was left alone with her thoughts. Mari was here to interview for an administrative position. Some simply typing, filing and mail room duties, nothing requiring any high level of skill. She knew her book

knowledge should have gotten her a much better position but without work history she'd have to start at the bottom and try to quickly work her way up. If I even get the job, she thought.

The door opened and disheveled looking forty something guy came in. As much as his hairline was receding his gut was expanding and he had sweat stains under his armpits. "Marigold?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Your parents named you after a flower?"

"I think so. They never explained my name choice to me."

"Must have been a bunch of hippies. Heh. Oh well. So, you're here to interview for the administrative position?"

"Yes sir."

"Good sweetie. You know how address me respectfully. Now what's your background?"

"Well, I'm attending community college and can type fifty words per minute plus I know how to use all the Office applications on the computer."

"You look a bit young to be graduating from college already."

"Oh, no sir. I'm only in my second year. It'll be at least three or four more until I get my degree. I'm taking classes as I can afford them."

"So you don't even have at least an associates degree then?"

"No. I'm sorry I didn't see that listed as a requirement for the position."

"Well, we didn't list it in the ad, but, no offense, I can't have a bunch of snotty nosed kids running around the place. I need someone with maturity to fill this position. So, sweetheart, why don't you walk your cute little butt out of here, go

get some college and then come back and see me in a few years,” he said with a lecherous grin.

“I’m sorry for wasting your time,” said Mari as she got up to leave.

“You know if you want some more money, I could use a maid at my house. My wife works long hours, is rarely home and can’t keep the place clean. If you want you can come work for me personally cleaning up my place. I can’t pay you much but you and your girlfriends would be welcome to use my pool in the afternoons. I frequently work from home so you wouldn’t have to worry about drowning. I’d be there to pull you out and give you mouth to mouth.”

“That’s a generous offer sir, but I really need a full time job with medical benefits. I can see myself out. Thank you for your time.”

Mari almost ran from the room and out of the office building. What a sleaze she thought to herself wondering if any girls were dumb enough to fall for those lines. Mari wished she had somehow recorded the interview. With the obvious sexual innuendo and biased hiring practices she thought a lawyer would have a field day with that place, or at least with the sleazy guy.

She stopped at the library to spend the rest of the day. First off she logged onto the Internet looking for other starting positions in the area.

Chapter 2

The Poor Dog

“Everyone, please take your seats. We’ll be starting in just a few moments,” said a woman dressed in a professional business suit. Turning away from the microphone and addressing a couple of people seated at a table almost covered in computers, “Is the presentation ready?”

“Yes.”

“How about the uplink to the Whitehouse?”

“Yes. We’ve got the Secretary of Health and Human Services linked in. You probably shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

Turning back to the microphone, “Good morning everyone and thank you for attending this emergency meeting on Bath Salts. I’m sorry to have to call you all here on such short notice. We’re going to start immediately. We have the Whitehouse linked in and the security protocol for this meeting is level 7. As a reminder, that means that nothing said today is to be discussed in any setting other than a secure conference room and the conversation is to be recorded and logged. With that I’m going to turn the meeting over to Tom Richardson. Tom?”

A distinguished middle aged man approached the podium, set his notes on it and got a remote from the techs sitting at the side table.

“Thank you Linda. As you can see in this first slide, the media has taken to calling these attackers zombies but so far all the authorities are classifying this as degenerates getting high on bath salts. In the last few months there have been a scattering of cases.”

While talking, Tom clicked through a series of photos and screen captures of headlines talking about various so called bath salt zombie attacks around the country and even a few reported overseas.

“Some of you may already be aware, but for those of you who aren’t, this isn’t being caused by bath salts. What the CDC is confidentially reporting is that the simple Rabies virus, part of Rhabdoviridae family of viruses, is responsible. These are RNA viruses. The traditional rabies infection occurs usually via a bite where it is transferred from the saliva into the blood of the victim. From there the incubation period averages about 60 days, although it can be as short as two weeks.”

Additional slides are flashing up on screen repeating the statements and showing generic photos of the virus genetic structure, rabid dogs and other related content.

“For those not informed about rabies, at first the symptoms are vague and include muscle ache fatigue, insomnia, headache, nausea, vomiting and pain in the abdomen. Very common symptoms easily overlooked or attributed to other causes. Another possible indicator is pain and itchiness at the bite location and possible numbness too although these latter symptoms don’t occur in all patients. Sometimes agitation occurs and can include seizures, trashing out and aggressive behavior. Extreme thirst and pharyngeal spasms can develop which helps account for salivating and drooling. At this point the prognosis for recovery is slim with most people only living about another week.”

“Now is where this gets interesting. It seems that a few months back a new strain of rabies, perhaps a gene mutation of an existing one, has come into existence. It is easier to transmit and besides saliva, it can be transferred via most bodily fluids including blood. A shared needle, unprotected sex and many other methods are all possible infection vectors. Of course getting bit or even scratched by someone already infected is a very possible way now to become infected yourself.”

One of the people near the front of the audience raised a hand and called out, “So what you’re saying is that the guy on bath salts actually had a case of this new rabies?” Tom nodded yes and the person continued, “So then the person he was attacking is probably now infected to?”

“Yes. In each case where someone was attacked, we have tested the attacker and the victim. The attacker has tested positive for all the rabies vectors and the victims, within 48 hours, were also testing positive.”

Again the person in the audience called out, “That means that they will both end up dying then?”

Tom looked a bit uncomfortable at the question and looked off stage for a moment, then subtly nodded, before turning back to the audience. “I would like to repeat that everyone here is under security protocol level 7 and what I’m about to say, well, it’s critical that this does not get out to the public. If anyone feels this will be a problem you need to leave the auditorium immediately.”

He waited a moment and when no one moved, Tom turned to tech and asked him to call up presentation file RZ-1. When the presentation appeared, the first slide contained a video which immediately started playing. A highly disheveled man was seen pacing around a sealed room like a caged animal. He lashed out any sound and occasionally at even the walls. There were obvious wounds on his body, some looked to be severe, and none were treated in any way. Saliva drooled from his mouth and his eyes were staring vacantly off with, as it could best be described, no sign of life. His skin was extremely pale and his overall appearance would best be described as dead.

A small panel was opened in the door and a dog was shoved into the room with the panel quickly closed behind it. The man stopped for a moment, sniffed the air a few times and turned toward the mix breed medium sized mutt. He started to advance on it. The dog immediately assumed a defensive crouch, barred its teeth

and started to viscously growl at the man. As he got within reach of the dog it evaded his arms and ran to the other side of the room again growling.

Again the man approached it, this time the dog snapped out, bit his arm and shook back and forth eventually tearing out a chunk of flesh. The man did not react but just kept advancing on the dog who ran back to the other side of the room. At this point the video fast forwarded and Tom said, "Please make note of the time counter in the corner."

The audience could see nearly 6 hours fast forward in just 30 seconds. The entire time the man kept advancing on the dog who kept dogging out of the way. Finally the video reverted back to normal time and they could see the man still going at the same shambling pace while the dog looked like it was about to drop. This time the man did get his hands on the dog who was too tired to dodge away anymore. The man immediately pulled the dog close and started to bite into it tearing chunks away from the dog who yelped in pain. Many gasps were heard from the viewers. In another minute it was over. The man had used his hands and mouth to tear out the dog's throat, killing it, and as the video faded out he was continuing to eat the dog.

"I'm sorry that was so gruesome but there is no other way to illustrate this. First, I'd like to call attention to the wounds on the man and if you noticed, the vacant stare. Second the drool. Third, he never got tired while the dog did although his movements were much slower than a normal person. Forth, did anyone notice that after the dog tore out the chunk from his arm that he didn't really bleed or even react? That should have been a gusher with blood spurting all over. Finally we all saw what happened to the dog."

"Now for the real disturbing part, that man, as you have surmised, is infected with this new rabies. We believe he is patient zero and he was put in that room 6 months before the video was shot."

Tom paused for that information to sink in.

“The media nick name of zombie is much more accurate than anyone outside this group might believe.”

The audience erupted into shouted questions and it took minutes to get everyone settled down again.

Tom continued, “This new rabies variant acts just like the other variants, at least at first. However instead of dying people degenerate into mindless beings who seem intent on attacking any warm blooded creature they can find. They apparently feel no pain any longer and have stamina that is beyond measure. Sleep is no longer necessary, instead they just drop into a catatonic state and seem to be waiting for the right stimulus to instantly react to. We’re not seeing their physical attributes increased in any way, in fact their movements seem halting and what might be described as arthritic although their senses seem to be more attuned now. Finally it is almost impossible to kill them. “

He gestured to the tech and asked him to advance to the next slide. “Before we start the video on this slide I have to warn you, the content makes the previous video look tame. Feel free to turn away if you need to.”

The tech clicked and the video started. It showed the same man in the room, now totally naked. The door was opened and the camera view switched to a hallway view. Shortly the man shuffled out of the room into the hallway. A weighted projectile was fired at his leg clearly breaking the shin bone on impact.

With a shuffling limp and the bone sticking out of the skin the man simply continued to advance down the hall. A shot rang out followed by nearly a dozen more, all impacting the torso and jaw of the man. He continued to advance. A flame leapt from a nozzle along the wall setting the man on fire. He continued to advance with blacked burnt skin, now falling off in sheets. A door was heard to slam closed and a gas filled the room. It extinguished the fire and the man could be seen advancing through the gas clouds.

“As you have seen, broken bones, bullets, fire and even chlorine gas have no effect.”

The video continued by switching to another camera showing a metal security door with a small window in it. You could see gas swirling behind the window. Suddenly the gas all seemed to be sucked up and out of site. Moments later the door opened automatically and the man continued to limp along. Closer and closer he came to the camera. Another shot rang out and you could see the throat of the man explode from the impact of the bullet as his head snapped back. Momentum carried it to the limits and then it rolled around the side and back to the front as the man just collapsed down into a heap and did not move.

“We have determined that a head shot destroying the brain or any shot that severs the spine directly at the base of the skull, or, obviously, decapitation which effective does the same thing will stop them. You now know what we do. Any questions?”

“Yes, I have one,” spoke the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

“Mr. Secretary?”

“Tell me this is contained.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that sir.”

“What do you mean? How can we let this get out?”

“It isn’t our choice. The incubation period on rabies is upwards of 30-60 days. The ‘Bath Salt’ attacks you’ve seen reported? They were carriers for up to 2 months before showing symptoms. During that time we have no idea how many people may have been exposed to these carriers. Possibly dozens, hundreds, even thousands could now be carriers. And if they became carriers they could also have been infecting people. This really is a case of you tell two friends and they tell two and so on. Finally, there are signs that the period from infection to outright

transformation is accelerating. If this continues we may see people become infected and turned in a matter of a few days or weeks instead of a few months.”

“Well then how do we contain the infected people?”

“Until they show symptoms we can’t, at least not without starting a public panic.”

“Can we treat this?”

“Our scientists, biologists and infectious disease specialists are literally devoting all their time to it but any type of vaccination or treatment is a year away at minimum. We just don’t have the volume to start treating the country, let alone the world.”

“So, let me get this straight. We live among future zombies just waiting for their moment in the sun. They’re damn near impossible to kill. We don’t know how many there are or how widespread this is. And finally, we have no way to cure them, slow this down or stop them once they become zombies other than essentially decapitating them.”

“Yes sir, that about sums it up.”

“My God, this could develop into an extinction event. This may be the end of the human race as we know it.”

“My feelings exactly.”

“The president is not going to be happy....”

After this exchange the room erupted into complete pandemonium.

“Today Miami police have reported, in an earlier press conference, that they are forming a task force to deal with the rash of so called bath salt attacks. As

Metro News has been reporting almost daily now, drug abuser after drug abuser is getting high on bath salts and attacking innocent bystanders. Most of the time the attacks involve attempted mutilations to the victim with the attacker using nothing more than their hands and teeth. Chief of police, Mario Rodriguez, said that he expects that task force to go after the distribution channels while also promoting a public campaign on the dangers of bath salts. Live from police headquarters, this is Hector Guterrez. Back to you Jack and Christy.”

“Thanks Hector. In other news today congress is holding a rare closed door session which is being attended by the president and his entire cabinet. The topic of the meeting has not been disclosed. Now, here’s Jack with last night’s winning lottery numbers.”

“I hope you got your ticket, Christy. The pick 6 numbers are 13, 21, 42...”

Ring. Ring. “Senator Mitchell’s office, Bruce speaking.”

“Hey suck up, we doing lunch?”

“Yeah Johnny. With all of them in that closed door meeting it’s totally dead. What do you think they’re talking about?”

“No idea. The rumor down here is that we’re about to declare war on someone.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Mitchell’s on the foreign relations committee and I see most of the paperwork he gets. Nothing out of the ordinary. Usually in the lead up to some military action he gets a noticeable increase in paperwork.”

“I guess we’ll just have to find this one out like everyone else.”

“Yeah. Hey, I need to run by the pharmacy on the way.”

“Why? Your STD results finally in?”

“Hey, at least I’m getting some. I got this itchy spot on my neck that won’t stop and I need some cream or something for it.”

“Another hickey? I’m surprised you haven’t been called out for those.”

“Not for awhile. I haven’t seen Ashley in almost 2 months now..... yeah, she really got into it. I thought she was going to tear my throat out the way she went at it.”

“OK Romeo, I’ll be right over, I just have to drop some paperwork off on the way.”

“OOoohhhhhh!” they both yelled in unison before collapsing on the bed breathing heavily.

“Wow! That was great Monica. Jane always makes me wear a condom.”

“Well, no worries here, I’m on the pill. Now how about a shared shower before we head out?”

Monica and Mark both rinsed off together before getting dressed and leaving the cheap hourly motel a few minutes apart. Mark had to get home to Jane but first crumpled up his workout clothes and stuffed them back in the duffle bag. He’d been telling her for months that he was working out after work. Well, he figured what he was doing with Monica, from the accounting department, could be considered a workout. Jane was just too stuck up and always wanted to ‘do it’ the exact same way while Monica was adventurous. He had no idea what excuse she

was giving her boyfriend... then again she said that he'd been sick for almost two months now but the doctors had no idea what it was.

Now that he thought of it, Mark was feeling a bit off too. He put down the muscle aches to the acrobatic affair he was having with Monica but he wasn't sleeping well at night either. Maybe his conscience was bothering him. Of course if he could just shake this damn headache. He'd had it more or less continually for almost 2 weeks now.

Wolf rose to his feet and slunk over to the wall slowly reaching out and grabbing a pool cue. Slowly he brought it around in front of him, raised his knee and snapped the stick in half across his knee. The sound was lost among all the shouting. He slowly advanced, from behind, on the raving lunatic.

This guy had already put down one person with just his bare hands and was perched on top of him. The other bar patrons tried to advance on him but he flailed out and growled at any who came close. Finally Wolf was within striking distance and put all of his strength into the swing. The larger butt end piece of the cue strung the individual in the back of the head slightly above the neck, whipping the head forward and snapping the spine.

Instantly the man was turned into a quadriplegic yet he was not knocked out. His head continued to twitch and he kept growling and snapping at anyone who approached.

Avoiding the head, Wolf grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him outside dumping him in the dirt as he heard the sirens in the distance. The ambulance arrived first with the paramedics rushing inside to treat the downed bar patron. Following the ambulance in was the sheriff.

"Wolf," the sheriff said with a nod.

"Sheriff," was returned also with a courteous nod.

“This the guy?”

“Yes sir.”

“What’d he do?”

“Came in and just immediately started sniffing the air like a dog. Lucinda went to see if he wanted something to drink when he lashed out at her. Bret stepped in front of her and told the guy to behave. At that point he jumped forward onto Bret clawing and biting. He drove him to the ground and tore out a big chunk of his throat. I doubt the paramedics will be able to do anything for him.”

“And what did you do to him?”

“Pool cue to the back of the head.”

“Knocked out or dead?”

“Neither. Walk over by the head, just don’t get to close.”

The sheriff headed towards the perpetrator and when he got within five feet or so of the head it started growling and snapping again.

Wolf chuckled as the sheriff jumped back in surprise yelling “What the hell!?! I ain’t never seen something like that.”

“Me neither, he’s got to be hopped up on something.”

“I wonder if it’s this new bath salts thing I’ve been hearing about. We got a memo a month ago from DHS on it but I never read it. Out this way most of what they send just doesn’t apply.”

“DHS you said? Not the DEA?”

“Yeah, I clearly remember it saying DHS. Now that you bring it up that does seem a bit strange. I’ll call out another ambulance for this drug head and let them deal with him. You OK?”

“He never laid a finger on me.”

“I’m not surprised,” said the sheriff with a chuckle of his own. He’d known Wolf for awhile and knew just a little a bit of his background. That was enough to know he wasn’t someone to be messed with. He’d also earned the respect of the sheriff when he saved him from getting knifed. The sheriff had responded to yet another bar fight and one of the guys had a hidden knife he had pulled out when the sheriff went to arrest him. Before he could pull his gun or even attempt a block, Wolf seemed to appear from nowhere, caught the guys arm in mid swing and with a few twists had not only disarmed him but had him down on the ground with his arm locked up behind him.

“I’ll write it up as self defense. You take care of yourself.”

“You too sheriff.”

Wolf turned and walked out to the parking lot. He had an older 90's pickup in good condition that he got into. He opened the center console, took out a high tech looking cell phone and saw the flashing message indicator. He punched in a code. Once the code was verified he typed in a memorized number and waited while the phone rang.

“You are communicating over a secure line.”

After the recorded message another voice came on the line. “Yes?”

“The sun doesn’t shine when it’s dark out.”

“The sky doesn’t rain when it’s clear.”

“How you doing Janeen?”

“Not so good Wolf. I assume you’re calling for the message?”

“Yep.”

“Have you heard of bath salts?”

“Yeah. I just put down some guy a little while ago that I think was pumped full of them.”

“No. Oh no!”

“What?”

“Did you get any blood on you? Any spit? Any fluids?”

“No. I hit him from behind with a big stick. He dropped and I dragged him outside by his legs.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes! Why?”

“It isn’t bath salts, that’s just the media cover story. It’s a new form of rabies. It doesn’t kill you, instead it turns you into a zombie. “

“A what?!”

“You heard me. They thought they could keep it under cover. Under control. They were wrong. It’s normally got a 30-60 day incubation period that appears to now be accelerating and we’re expecting a large number of new zombies to appear in the next few days. Did you kill it?”

“No, but I think I paralyzed it. Heck I should have easily knocked it out but the head was still active even though the body was useless.”

“You have to kill it. Don’t let anyone near it. Either shoot the base of the skull severing the spine completely or decapitate it. No matter what don’t let any fluids get on you. It’s nearly 100% transmittable via bodily fluid.”

“Ok, I guess I can figure something out.”

“We’re notifying all current and former Dark Eagle forces along with most of the other special forces in the field and even retired members. Basically we have

one word. Run. Get away from the population. Get to safety. Hole up somewhere. It's going to be really nasty real soon."

"Thanks. You OK over there?"

"Yeah. I'm good. A bit tired lately and I've got this headache that won't go away but with the stress here... well you know how it is."

"OK, take care Janeen. I'll be in contact once I get relocated."

"You too Wolf."

The line went dead.

He got out of his truck and walked back up to the sheriff. Approaching silently from behind he got his arms up and around his neck. Squeezing he held the sheriff until he passed out and then gently lowered body to the ground. He felt the strong steady pulse and knew the sheriff would come to shortly. Wolf walked over to the zombie, grabbed a leg and dragged it over to his truck and muscled it into the bed being sure to avoid the head.

After about a 10 minute drive Wolf stopped by the side of the road and shoved the body out to the ground. Grabbing a trash bag and a large knife he held up the bag as a shield while he severed the snapping and growling head from the body. The expected gush of blood never happened. It's like the blood had either already been drained from the body or just stopped flowing. Wolf had seen a lot and done a lot however this really freaked him out. Bodies are supposed to bleed when you cut them.

Still carefully holding the head even though it now appeared dead he tossed it as far as he could into the woods and then dragged the body a ways off the road into the trees too. Certain it would not be spotted other than via a direct search he carefully wrapped up the knife in the bag and drove home.

The first thing he did was to get a fire going in his wood stove. Once it was nice and hot he put the bag in there which immediately burned up. He then plunged

the blade into the fire and kept it there until it was smoking. He figured that would be enough to sanitize it and took it outside leaving it on a big rock to safely cool. Heading back inside, Wolf started to pack up a few personal items, mostly clothes and toiletries. He then went over to a book case and with his sheer strength he just pulled it away from the wall. In between the studs there were a few compartments holding a ruggedized laptop, various radios, a briefcase with assorted electronics in it, a 3rd generation night vision scope and goggles, and a small arsenal including a pair of stainless steel 1911s, a Benelli M4 semi-auto shotgun, a pair of AR-15 semi auto rifles with EOtech and flashlight and a Springfield Super Match M1A with bipod and Leupold Mark 8 3.5-25x56 scope.

Wolf's ability was such that he really could use his equipment to the full extent of its capabilities and had, on more than one occasion, in the past. As he took the weapons out he put the M1A in a case, the two AR-15s in another case, the 1911's were secured on him, one in an exposed drop leg holster and one in a concealed holster behind his back and the shotgun was emptied and then reloaded with all slug cartridges and placed in a holder on his BOB (Bug Out Bag). His personal items and the miscellaneous electronics were all gathered up and placed in one large duffel bag. He put the duffel over one shoulder, the AR15 case over the other and picked up the M1A case in one hand and the BOB in the other and headed for the door taking a last long look around his place knowing he may never see it again.

From his past, Wolf was used to moving frequently and as such did not develop an attachment to stuff. He knew he could survive even with nothing on him as he was well skilled in primitive skills fashioning and finding what he needed in just about any environment. He remembered back to an old Steven Seagal movie where the line was, that you could drop the hero at the north pole with nothing more than a toothbrush and his underwear and he'd end up at your pool sipping a cocktail the next day. It sounded cool even though most people knew this line was meant as an extreme exaggeration. In the case of Wolf and the small elite operatives trained like him, there was a lot more truth to it then people

might believe. This should not be interpreted as cocky or egotistical on his part, far from it. The ability to improvise along with the element of surprise were more important than bravado. Wolf and his kind did what was needed, when it was needed and usually done very quietly.

With nothing more than a sliver of moonlight, he went to the back of his truck and was depositing the cases in there when he heard a car approaching up the dirt road. He dropped his BOB pulling the shotgun from its place as the pack was still falling to the ground. Taking up a position behind the truck and putting the engine block between him and the approaching vehicle he pointed the Benelli and waited.

The car came around the last bend in the road. He saw it was the Sheriff's cruiser and pointed his gun in a safe direction as the lights of the car swept across him. Had it been an unknown vehicle he would not have allowed the lights to cross him, thus giving away his position. The car came to a stop and the Sheriff got out.

"Ya know, I could arrest you for that stunt."

"Yes."

"Assaulting an officer... they'd put you away for a long time."

"They might. I assume this isn't a social visit and if you were going to arrest me you'd have brought a lot more deputies with you."

The sheriff walked over and held up a piece of paper to Wolf. Using the lights of the cruiser he noticed the DHS logo and read the contents handing it back to the sheriff when done.

"Why is it that you don't seem surprised by this letter Wolf?"

"I've already been briefed on the situation."

"Already briefed? After waking up from your stunt..."

“Sorry about that, but I had to take care of a few things without any questions being asked.”

“... I received this not 20 minutes ago in my car’s laptop. How the hell did you find out already?”

“I was briefed right after the situation at the bar.”

“I assume you had something to do with the missing body then?”

“It has been disposed of.”

“How am I going to write this up? A bar fight, a missing body, I’m mysteriously attacked from behind and now DHS is telling us to be on the lookout for zombies!!! Any idea of the amount of paperwork I’m going to be stuck doing?”

“Honestly? You probably shouldn’t be doing any.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If my sources are correct, and they always are, in the next 24-48 hours you should have no problems finding zombies. In fact, if you’re still around they’ll be finding you. I’m bugging out and strongly suggest you do the same.”

“I can’t just abandon my duties and responsibilities. Besides, the DHS notice says nothing about leaving or any ‘mass uprising’ occurring.”

“Sheriff, it’s going to get real ugly really fast. If you’re not willing to leave yet, at least pack up and be prepared to do so at any moment. Do you really think they’d panic the country with that information? I’m honestly surprised they’ve said this much already.”

“Anyone else told me this and I’d say they’re crazy... coming from you... I just don’t know,” said the sheriff shaking his head as he tried to comprehend something that just seemed too outrageous to be true.

“One last piece of advice, make absolutely sure you don’t get any of their fluids on you. No splash back, no bites, no scratches, zero contact.”

Still shaking his head in disbelief the sheriff turned back to his car, “I really hope you’re wrong.”

“Me too, John, me too.”

Wolf put his BOB in the truck, closed up the tailgate, started it up and drove off leaving the sheriff sitting in his cruiser staring at the confidential alert from Homeland Security.

Two weeks of no computers. No email. No social media. Nothing to do but relax and enjoy the time with his family had Roy feeling well rested. Normally he would try to keep up on the news just in case some war or something broke out but they needed this bit of down time so he pushed all that to the side for the duration of the trip. He knew it would be good to get back home and sleep in his own bed. He’d have hundreds of emails and forum postings to catch up on. Roy frequently visited various survival and prepper forums and felt ready to deal with most natural disasters. Their house was well stocked and had at least a few years worth of food and toiletries put aside along with numerous other supplies and equipment.

The plane was on final approach to Philadelphia and was hitting a bit of turbulence. Anna had a weak stomach for flying and was clutching onto Roy’s hand. She was really digging her nails in and Roy was trying not to pull away. Gritting his teeth he toughed it out figuring if this was the worst he could live with it. The flight out of the US had been a nightmare but all the travels in Europe had gone smoothly. European security checks while thorough, were handled professionally and expediently.

Jake and Lucas were in the seats in front of him and he could just make out the iPod cable snaking up to Jakes ear.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned on the fasten seat belt sign. We’re beginning our final decent into Philadelphia and on behalf of myself and the captain I’d like to welcome you to the United States. If this is not your final destination then you’ll find connecting flight information displays right outside the gate. The captain said that he expects us to be on the ground a little early. Please return your seats to the full upright position and close any tray tables. We’ll be coming around momentarily for a final garbage pickup.”

“Mesdames et Messieurs, le capitaine a tourné...”

Roy tuned out the flight attendant and noticed the flight had smoothed out a bit and Anna was no longer trying to skin his hand with her nails. After about 15 minutes he noticed that they had stopped descending and seemed to be circling the city.

“This is your captain speaking. We’re going to be circling for a bit before we can get clearance to land. Please remain seated with your seat belts fastened.”

First officer Stewart looked over at the captain and when he was certain the microphone was off he said, “I still can’t raise them. It’s like the tower just isn’t there.”

“Try the alternate channel.”

“I did.”

“Emergency channels?”

“Nothing.”

“Could it be failure of our equipment?”

“Everything checks out. If I switch to citizen frequencies I can pick up snippets of transmissions so I know the radio is good.”

“Keep trying. We got enough fuel to circle for another hour, maybe more. After that we’re going to have to land, procedures be damned.”

“Yes captain.”

Brad was pissed. He’d thrown two perfect spirals and both of his receivers had dropped them. What should have been a first down deep in their opponents territory was now third and ten. As they huddled up he yelled, “What the hell?!? My grandmother could have caught that! What’s the problem?”

Both receivers were shaking their heads and looked really out of it. One even had drool leaking out of his mouth. Brad knew that wasn’t good but couldn’t remember either of them taking a hard hit. He was just about to call time out when the drooling receiver jumped forward and started attacking the right guard. His fellow linesmen tried to pull Jesse off but he just kept flailing around and trying to bite the guard, only the face mask prevented him from doing so.

The refs came running over and when the other receiver jumped the head referee clawing and trying to bite, Brad knew something was very wrong. Backing up he, and a few other players, tried to distance themselves from the skirmish. Looking around he saw many people in the stands apparently fighting with each other. What was happening he thought as he started to run.

Cutting across the campus he kept looking back as he ran and eventually tripped and fell over a robot.

“Damn it Brad, why do you keep doing that?”

Getting to his feet and swearing he saw the three guys. “Sorry, I got to run. I’ll pay for it.”

“Pay for it? He never offered that before,” said Darren.

“Why did he have a frightened look on his face?” asked Melvin.

Rob was pointing back towards the stadium where a riot of fighting people was moving towards the three of them, “Maybe that’s got something to do with it?”

“Grab the robot!”

“Run!”

They took off after Brad noticing that he had slid to a halt and was taking off his helmet. Looking past him they could see more fights going on.

“This way!” yelled Rob.

The four dashed into the dorm complex seeing only a few fighting people here and there. One guy popped up right in front of the group with a bloody face and hands, and his victim on the ground beneath him. He let out a wailing yell, like an animal would, and lunged. Melvin cringed and Darren ducked. Before the creature could grasp them Brad slammed his helmet into its face knocking in backwards and down to the ground.

“Move! Now!”

They ran past the creature still stunned but trying to get back to its feet. Ignoring the elevators they took the stairs three at a time right up to their penthouse. Melvin liked to call it that. It was a fifth floor dorm corner room and due to some construction snafu, ended up a foot larger than all the rest of the rooms in the building. Rob fumbled with his keys for a minute before finally getting the door open and the four rushed in slamming the door closed and locking it behind them.

Panting heavily they all collapsed to the floor only to leap to their feet moments later when a heavy weight slammed into the door. Over and over and over something kept hitting it but after a few hours seemed to grow tired and eventually stopped. They didn’t know if it was still out there or had wandered off.

Chapter 3

The Rise

“This is your captain speaking. We’ve been cleared for landing and will be on the ground in just a few minutes. Thank you for flying with us and we hope to see you again.”

“Peter, you know we don’t have clearance.”

“And we have no fuel. What else can I do? You’ve tried for almost 2 hours and have been unable to raise anyone. Look out the window. Have you even seen another plane?”

“Uh, not that I can recall.”

“Exactly. If we don’t land in the next fifteen minutes we’re out of fuel and will end up crashing. I’m taking it down.”

Roy could feel the plane heading down again. Anna grasped his arm a bit tighter but didn’t use her nails this time. Exactly 6 minutes later the pilot performed a near perfect landing. Just the slightest bump as the plane settled onto the runway in the late afternoon sun. They taxied for awhile and finally pulled up outside the terminal but didn’t advance to a gate. Roy figured they were waiting for a gate assignment and would begin moving soon.

After almost 30 minutes had passed Roy, and the rest of the passengers were getting anxious. Eleven hours in the plane was enough to make anyone restless. Staring out the window in the fading light Roy noticed no other planes moving. No service vehicles. No fuel trucks, luggage handlers, nothing. At this time of day the airport should be alive and bustling. The hairs on the back of his neck were all standing at attention. Something was wrong.

He pressed the call button for the flight attendant and when she came over he asked, “Why are we just sitting here?”

“Sir, the captain is waiting for a gate assignment.”

“That’s bull.”

“Excuse me sir?”

“Look out the window. Where are the luggage carts? Refueling trucks? Service vehicles? Heck, just point out another moving plane.”

The attendant leaned over a bit looking out the window and pulled back with a troubled look on her face, turned and walked toward the front of the plane without saying a word.

Knock, knock.

The captain checked the security camera and saw that it was Julie, the head flight attendant. He unlocked the cabin door allowing her to enter.

“Captain, why are we waiting here?”

“We don’t have a gate assignment yet.”

“Um, well, I told that to one of the passengers who questioned our delay. He said that’s bull and pointed out the complete lack of any activity. Not a vehicle is moving. No one appears to be around. Shouldn’t the airport be much busier?”

“Julie, I’m going to level with you. We didn’t even have permission to land. We circled and called on the radio for nearly 2 hours without getting a response. I just finally brought the plane in as we were nearly out of fuel. Seeing a clear runway I declared an emergency and got no response so I brought it in. We had hoped it was just a massive radio failure but upon landing and switching to the ground frequency we still got nothing. Right now I’m just as stumped as you.”

“Well, the passengers, or at least one of them, have figured out that something is wrong. It’s only a matter of time until they demand to be let off the plane.”

“I’m thinking we pull over by the manual stairs and bring that over to the door and let them out. I don’t see how we can get in any more trouble than we’re already in for the violations we’ve committed so far.”

“What about their luggage?”

“If we can’t find someone then I guess we open it up and just let them have at it. What else can we do? I feel like I’m in a Twilight Zone episode.”

“You don’t think maybe there was an evacuation, you know, maybe a chemical spill or something?”

“Procedures would have had us divert or at the very least notified us. Unless it was some type of terrorist attack that instantly killed everyone... You don’t think... ?”

“Can’t be Captain, you’d see the luggage or food guys dead on the ground.”

“OK, well, let’s get the people off the plane. We’re not going to get anywhere just sitting here. Make sure they’re in their seats and I’m going to head over to the remote terminals where they still have some manual stair trucks.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, if you’d please stay in your seats the plane will be moving shortly...”

The Captain took the plane across the tarmac to the remote terminals and pulled as close as he could to the remote stair trucks. Shutting down the engines he left the cockpit in the hands of the first officer instructing him to follow the standard post flight procedures. Coming through the cabin the pilot met Julie at the back of the plane, opened the floor access panel and dropped down into the luggage area. He worked his way to one of the cargo doors, opened it and found a

modest 6 foot drop to the ground. The captain sat on the ledge and slowly pushed off dropping to the ground falling and rolling as he hit.

Getting back to his feet he was happy to find nothing broken or sprained. A quick brush off and adjustment and his uniform looked good as new. He walked over to the stair truck, started the engine and advanced on the plane. Julie, meanwhile had returned to the front of the plane and opened the cabin door. He brought the truck slowly right up to the opening gently bumping the rubber pad against the side of the plane. Putting the truck in park he turned it off and waited on the tarmac for the passengers to disembark.

Ignoring protocol, even though the manuals would consider this an emergency evacuation, Julie allowed people to gather up their belongings and take them with as they exited the plane. The captain met them at the foot of the stairs and had them congregate around. Most of the frequent flyers knew something was wrong, the rest of the passengers, including many of the international ones from France, had no idea what was happening.

Once Julie signaled that all the passengers were off the plane the captain explained the situation. He told them about no radio contact, no ground contact and an apparently deserted airport. He said if they want their luggage it was in the plane and they could go dig for it, otherwise they were now on their own, just like the flight crew, to try to figure out what was going on.

With evening fast approaching and the sun nearly set Roy asked Anna if there was anything they really needed from their luggage.

“All of our clothes and toiletries are in there.”

“But is there anything we really need or can we do without it?”

“Why? What do you mean do without?”

“Something is very wrong here. Can’t you feel it?”

“Well, now that you mention it, yes, I do have a bad feeling, but why should we abandon our luggage?”

“It’ll just slow us down. If only we were home at least there we have our GHBs and guns. I’d rather just start scavenging and trying to put together some survival kits for us and then work from there on figuring out what happened and how we’re going to get home.”

By now a few people had been boosted up into the cargo hold and were tossing out luggage to those on the ground. It wasn’t a riot but it wasn’t very orderly either. Anna noticed movement off towards the main terminal and nudged Roy to get his attention focused on it. It was a person running towards them and waving their arms. Perhaps yelling but they couldn’t hear anything at this distance. Shortly they could make out three or maybe even four people following behind the first person at perhaps one hundred feet further back.

A few of the other passengers had noticed the approaching individual. As he got within shouting distance a few thought they heard him yelling “Run! Save yourselves!” but by now the exhausted individual dropped and the slower pursuers caught up and pounced on the person. What happened next sickened many.

They immediately started clawing, scratching and apparently biting the helpless man. Within moments he was being torn apart. A passenger screamed. The four pursuers looked up, sniffed the air, let out howls and advanced towards the group. The howls triggered other shambling people, now visible way off in the distance to advance toward the plane.

The herd was panicked. People stampeded pushing shoving and even trampling each other in an effort to get away. Roy quickly directed Jake, Lucas and Anna up the stairs and back into the plane. Seeing everyone scattering in all directions away from the plane he went ahead and pulled the door closed.

It was with horrid fascination that they watched from the windows as the people, no, creatures, descended on the helpless people biting and clawing. Some tore away sustaining scratches and wounds but were still able to run off, others seemed to make it safely to the buildings off in the distance but the last group that didn't get away.... Roy, Anna and the kids would have nightmares about the carnage for a long time afterwards.

Well past dark Mari let herself in quietly. The library, this evening, had been particularly deserted. In thinking back she didn't even remember seeing the librarians behind the counter but perhaps they were on break or in the office or something when she left. Even the streets seemed all but empty, then again it wasn't a long walk home and her mind was preoccupied. No one was hiring and after a handful of interviews she still had nothing positive to show for it. Not even a 'we'll let you know'.

She slowly made her way up the stairs to her room. Left, Left, Right, Center, Right, Left... she had long ago memorized the pattern for going both up and down the stairs stepping a certain way so they wouldn't make a sound. The carpet muffled her steps but the wood underneath still creaked if you stepped in the wrong place. Two steps from the top she skipped over one entirely, stepping left and then was off the stairs and onto the second floor.

Passing her parents room she heard a growling like noise. Funny, she can't ever remember her parents being physical with each other, at least physical in the loving sense. He still beat on mom and occasionally on Mari too, but never growled when doing so. Sensing something wasn't right she put her hand on the handle, turned it ever so slowly and gently pushed the door open a fraction of an inch. Just enough to peer through. What she saw made her stomach turn. Her dad, covered in blood was eating, what she could only assume by the clothes, her mother's face off her hopefully dead body. His skin was deathly pale and his eyes, well, they simply looked dead.

Marigold let out an involuntary gasp as her dad stopped and looked around sniffing the air. Mari quickly pulled the door shut as he launched himself towards it. He smashed into it repeatedly and Mari could plainly see the hollow core interior door wasn't going to last much longer.

No longer worried about silence she dashed down the stairs and made a last second decision to dash into the attached garage instead of out the front door. The door splinted off the hinges with a final thump as he burst through and, with a howl, came charging down the stairs in pursuit. He paused, then heard the closing of the door to the garage, and ran towards it. Again he started to throw himself at the door, slobbering, drooling and growling the entire time. Marigold was trapped.

She needed a way out. Something to defend herself with. A weapon. Thump! No, an escape route. No, he'd probably keep chasing her, a weapon would be better. Thump! Frantic her eyes finally settled on the workbench and the old shotgun hanging on the wall over it. Thump! Crack! She ran over and grabbed it. Thump! Pointing it at the door she pulled trigger. Click. Thump! Crack!

"How the hell do you work this?" she screamed. Thump! Crack! Fumbling with it she spotted a lever on the top and pushed it. The gun split in half and the front part folded dropping down on some type of hinge. Thump! She realized there were no bullets in it.

"Where would they be?" Pulling open each drawer she rummaged through them. Thump! On the third one down she saw a box labeled '00 Buck Shot Shells'. Thump! Crack! Splinter! Pulling it out she tore it open spilling them all over the workbench and down on to the floor. Thump! She grabbed at one, stuffed it in the opening and pivoted the front of the gun back into position. Thump! Crack! Crash!

The door gave way spraying chunks of wood and splinters in all directions as he burst through. He paused briefly to look around and quickly spotted Mari. As he advanced she yelled, "Dad, Stop!"

"Stay back or I will shoot you!"

“I’m warning you! I’ll do it you bastard!”

He snarled and jumped towards her.

BANG!

Without even realizing it she had pulled the trigger. Since she had not properly braced the gun, the blast, first, knocked her backwards against the workbench where she lost her balance and went down to the ground. The blast also propelled 9 pellets of lead forward into the torso of her father ripping open his shirt and flesh and knocking him backwards and down too.

Tears streaming down her face, Marigold raised her head and tried to shake off the cobwebs only to see her father getting back to his feet. His shirt was in tatters and his chest was torn open yet no blood came out. She sobbed uncontrollably as he rose up, sniffed the air, let out a howl and started advancing again.

Fighting past tears that she could barely see through, once more fumbling with the gun she hit the lever getting it to open up and felt around on the floor until her hand made contact with a fallen shell. Scooting backwards on the floor to buy some time she tried to shove it in the barrel only to have it not go in. Tearing her tear filled eyes away from the monster she saw the old shell was still in there. Grasping it with two fingers she pulled out not even feeling it burn her flesh. She stuck the fresh shell in and closed the shotgun.

Raising it up she knew this was her last chance. Failure here meant her death, or worse. She tried to point it but was shaking so hard she couldn’t keep it steady enough as he advanced on her. As he leapt forward she swung it up simply to try to ward him off. He came down with the barrel right on his throat and with the impact she subconsciously pulled the trigger.

BANG!

Again the blast was devastating. Between his weight landing on the gun and the recoil the stock was painfully thrown back into her chest. The 9 pellets thrown from the other end of the gun, at point blank range, effectively decapitated him. The head rolled off while the body collapsed down on her.

Mari would have cried but couldn't with the wind knocked out of her and a two hundred pound body collapsed on top of her.

Slam! A heavy weight impacted against John's door. Before he could get up from his desk the door opened and a body dove through slamming it closed behind. Scrambling to his knees the man reached out and locked the door and then collapsed on the floor panting.

John stood up and looked down at Senator Mitchell collapsed in a heap on the office floor.

"Senator? Sir? Are you OK."

Senator Mitchell turned to look at John and with haunted eyes said 'no' and then started to relate his tale. "My God. It was awful. The marine guards, the pages, even a number of the senators. Within minutes they were all biting, clawing and tearing at each other. I've never seen anything like that. A few of us near the exit ducked down and waited for security. They never came. Finally we just ran for it. I've been running ever since. Some of... them... they pursued us. The others with me that couldn't keep up... they were set upon. One by one... we kept losing them. Those things... they're not that fast but they don't seem to get tired either."

"Are they still out there?"

"I'd imagine so. There were only two of us left. Senator Whitman and myself. He had started out well before us but with his age we were easily gaining on him. I had just pulled even with him when one of those things leapt between us

knocking me into your door and him down to the floor. The thing chose to pounce on him, I checked your door to see if it was locked and, well, here I am.”

“We’ve got to help Senator Whitman,” said John vaulting over his desk towards the door.

“NO! Don’t open it!” Senator Mitchell threw himself in front of the door blocking John.

“Get out of my way! Sir.”

“There’s nothing you can do. These things are... I don’t know what but trust me. He’s already dead. “

John collapsed down into the visitor chair, his brain trying to comprehend all of this.

Once Senator Mitchell was sure that John wasn’t going to open the door he went to the desk and picked up the phone and dialed. After putting in a second set of numbers he started talking.

John finally pulled his mind back to the present just in time to see Senator Mitchell’s jaw drop. He fumbled for words and then finally just hung up the phone and collapsed in the desk chair.

“Sir, what is it? If I can ask, that is.”

“It’s supposed to be Level 3 confidential information but I can’t see how telling you is going to make a difference now.”

“Tell me what?”

“Remember the meeting we had last week? The closed door, no topic or itinerary listed meeting?”

“Yes.”

“The scientists and HHS told us there was some new rabies virus out there and it looked like it might be fairly easily passed. They were telling us it could even turn into an epidemic.”

“Um, OK, but I don’t understand.”

“I guess we didn’t either. Or they didn’t give us the whole story. Instead of killing you like rabies usually does, this variant turns you into a mindless killing machine. A zombie, for lack of a better term. There were a few initial cases attributed to bath salts but that was just the cover story while the CDC tried to figure out what was going on. By the time they did it was too late. The incubation period normally ranges from 30 to 60 days. However if you’re close to the final change over, it appears now that stress can greatly speed up the switch. Take a room full of almost but not quite zombies. Left to their own they might each change ranging from a few weeks from the first to the last. However, if one changes and starts rampaging, the stress reaction seems to trigger the rest to go.”

“That’s just unbelievable.”

“It shouldn’t be. Many birds lay eggs over a week or so, yet they all hatch at once, with in maybe an hour or two at most for all of them.”

“No, not that part, the whole thing. The zombies and rabies and... it’s just all so un freaking believable!”

“This uprising is across the country if not the world. They said Mount Weather has been compromised as has the Greenbriar so they’re reconvening the remaining government at Camp David. I’m supposed to somehow get there.”

“It’s not like I can call you a car.”

“No, I guess not. Well you’re just going to have to take me.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You are a senate page. You do work for us in whatever tasks we require assistance in. I’m ordering you to get me safely to Camp David. You do have a car, don’t you?”

“I’ve got a Cherokee in the parking garage.”

“OK, I guess that will do. Accompany me to my office, I need to get some papers and then we can leave. Oh, I almost forgot. They said severing the spine at the base of the skull is the only way to stop them and you don’t want to get any of their fluids on you. Spit, blood, a scratch, anything like that and you too can get infected and eventually turn into one of them.”

John had been raised by good parents. They had taught him to always have some emergency gear with him, always be armed, have backups of everything. Keep and store extra food and water. As he got older and went to college he drifted away as the allure of fast and easy college life was enticing. He still did keep a pack with a few things in his car but not anything help to this situation. He was an avid shooter, or at least had been in his teen years, but being in DC, just having a gun was frowned upon and actually carrying it was illegal.

Unfortunately his parent’s teachings were what to do in case of an environmental disasters or getting mugged by a couple of thugs. They never prepared him for mass zombie invasion. Then again would anyone have expected this? He was trying to wrap his head around what he could do in a situation like this. All his senses were screaming to bug in. Take shelter. Hole up. The Senator was asking different of him.

“Page? Hello?”

John looked realizing his mind had again drifted and the Senator was talking to him.

“My name is John. John Adams.”

“Whatever. We need to get to my office. Open the door, slowly and make sure the hall is clear.”

John took a quick look around his office and decided the umbrella in the corner was the best he could hope for in terms of a weapon. Grabbing it he unlocked the door and ever so slowly turned the handle until he felt the catch clear the jam. Pulling very gently he opened it just a crack and peered through. The hall looked clear. He kept opening it until it was wide open.

With a mumbled prayer, John leaned forward to look down the hall. Clear. He turned to look the other way and saw three bodies including Senator Whitman, not more than 5 feet away, his throat torn open and a pool of blood stained carpet around the upper body. One of his arms looked like someone had bitten or torn chunks of flesh out of it until not much more than bone was left.

Turning his head away John tried to hold down lunch. It didn't work and he ended up spewing all over his desk. Senator Mitchell just barely got out of the way in time. Once his stomach was empty John went back to the doorway and looked out again, avoiding looking at Senator Whitman this time. He gestured to Senator Mitchell to follow him down the hallway. At the third body, a security agent, John reached down and moved the jacket exposing the concealed holster with a handgun still in it. He pulled it out and grabbed the extra magazines from the other side of the body.

“What do you think you're doing?” shrieked Senator Mitchell.

“Shhh. I'm taking his gun.”

“It's illegal for a civilian to carry a hand gun in this building let alone all of DC!” he yelled.

John handed his umbrella to the Senator saying, “If these things are as bad as you say you can hold them off with this. I'll use this,” said John as he held up the gun and worked the action chambering a round.

“How dare you talk to a Senator that way!”

“How dare I? Sir, if, as they say, the shit has hit the fan, then the only thing you need to worry about is surviving. After that phone call you told me this is nationwide and perhaps worldwide. You said that the ‘authorities’ were unable to come save you in the senate and two highly secure locations are compromised that sounds pretty much like every man for themselves.”

“No, every person for themselves. Every man is considered sexist.”

“Whatever.” John turned and continued down the hall not caring if the Senator was following anymore or not.

“Wow! You’re really being aggressive tonight Monica. I didn’t know you liked it this way!”

All Mark received back was a guttural growl.

Monica leaned over and started to chew on his neck.

“Ohh..... Ow! Hey, that was a bit hard.... Hey! Cut that out!.... What the hell you doing you crazy bitch! Ow! Ahhhhhh!!!”

The following morning the cleaning lady found the room door open a fraction of an inch. She pushed it all the way open and discovered Mark’s body on the bed, minus most of the throat and a large part of the abdomen. She screamed.

Jane was driving home from the quick trip to the store. She had left Nicole home alone as, for her age, she was quite mature and responsible. Besides it was just a quick trip out, a good test to make sure Nicole could handle the responsibility. Jane’s thoughts quickly wandered as she thought about why Mark was cheating on her. There was no other explanation she could think of. For months now he claimed to be going out after work, many times a week, to the gym,

yet last week she got a 'please come back' offer in the mail to rejoin the gym. Today at lunch she called the gym stating that her husband already had a membership and they must be mistaken. The woman on the other end of the phone told Jane she was wrong.

After much back and forth, both insisting they were right, Jane finally discovered that the membership had indeed lapsed nearly 3 months ago. So just what was Mark doing? Or should the question be who was Mark doing?

Lost in her thoughts and tears she didn't notice the woman rushing across the intersection. At the last second Jane slammed on the brakes and swerved just barely avoiding the hunched woman who looked a lot like one of Mark's co-workers, Monica. The woman turned and Jane could see she was covered in blood and quickly put the car in park and opened her door.

"Are you OK! Can I call you an ambulance?"

The woman growled and lurched at Jane who just managed to twist away only to step right in the path of an oncoming truck.

Nikki had been home for three days now with no sign of either of her parents. At nine she was responsible and old enough to make cereal, eggs, toast and some other basic meals for herself. Since four she had known how to turn on the TV. Since twenty four hours ago, when she saw the last news cast, she had never been so scared before in her life. She wished her mom, who last said she was only running out to the store for fifteen minutes, would come back.

Chapter 4

Escape

Christy was missing the flawless makeup job, in fact it looked like she hadn't changed clothes or cleaned up in days. Jack's suit jacket was missing and his tie was loose. He had at least two days of stubble on his face.

"I don't know how much longer we can continue to broadcast as we've been told the standby generator is running low on fuel but as long as we can stay on the air we'll continue to bring you what news we can. We're going to go live to Mario Rodriguez in the field. Mario, can you hear me?"

"Yes Christy. It's utter pandemonium out here. Mass attacks, people apparently trying to eat each other, police trying to get things under control and vigilante's shooting anyone that comes near their property, it's really... I mean... I guess there are no words for it."

The camera panned around showing people panicking and running in all directions, a few bodies down on the street and a fire burning about a block away with no emergency vehicles in sight."

"Mario, have the authorities given any indication of what started this?"

"No Jack, in fact all of our attempts to reach them have gone unanswered. We've seen few police out since this all started about 24 hours ago."

The camera panned off to the side where someone was stumbling towards Mario.

"Excuse me, sir, can I ask you a few questions?" said Mario thrusting the microphone towards the man.

The man snarled, lunged and tackled Mario. The last thing viewer saw was Mario's face being torn off in chunks as he tried, in vain, to fight back or resist. The camera swung away and was bobbing up and down wildly, apparently, as the camera man ran for his life. The wireless microphone on Mario was still active and picking up the screams, snarls and growls before the station cut back to the studio.

Christy had tears running down her face as she sobbed uncontrollably and Jack looked white as a ghost just staring at the monitor, his mouth hanging open. Viewers could hear someone in the background calling to them to read from the prompter but they just both sat there in shock. Finally the station cut away to a commercial, ironically, for a fast food chain promoting their products with the slogan 'when you have a hunger that just won't go away'.

John made his way to the elevators and pushed the button waiting for one of the cars to arrive. He could hear noise from down the hall and it sounded like it was getting closer. He was trapped out in the open and if something were to come around the corner... John gripped the gun a little tighter and held it low ready position.

Ding!

He jumped as the elevator arrived, as signified by the unanticipated chime. Taking a quick look behind him he could see the car was empty and started to back towards it keeping the hallway covered.

Senator Mitchell was still a distance away and called out loudly, "Hold that elevator!"

The noises in the other direction stopped and then were quickly replaced with running sounds. Throwing caution to the wind John yelled, "Move your ass or I'll leave you here!"

Turning instantly beet red and fuming, the Senator yelled, “Now see here!” as John raised the gun and fired right at him.

Senator Mitchell fell to the floor again yelling, “You tried to shoot me!”

“No, if I had wanted to shoot you we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” John said gesturing at the bloodied individual on the ground 5 feet from the Senator. The bullet wound between the eyes was obvious, then again so were the bloody hands and face, and that blood was already nearly dried. Strangely enough, the bullet wound, while showing fresh blood, was not actively bleeding. John would have expected the heart to be pumping the blood all over the floor through the now shredded flesh.

The color drained from the Senator’s face as he realized how close he’d been to getting attacked.

“I’m leaving with or without you.” With these words the Senator found his feet, more or less, and scrambled forward into the elevator. John punched the button for the parking garage access tunnel and repeatedly tapped on the door close button. As the doors close John had to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Here he was, armed and shooting people in a government building with rampaging creatures, hell maybe even zombies, running around and he’s stuck in an elevator with a sniveling senator while the elevator music plays an instrumental version of the ‘Girl from Ipanema’. Today just couldn’t get any stranger.

When the elevator car came to a halt and the doors opened, John very cautiously peered out. Seeing no one in sight, he slowly stepped from the car and found the hallway to be deserted. “Let’s go,” John commanded of the Senator while heading off down the hall in the direction of the underground parking garage.

“You do know I’m making note of each of these infractions, and in that last case of your outright murder of that man. When we get to the authorities I expect you to surrender yourself and stand trial.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to do that,” he said in disgust as he stormed off down the hall at an even faster pace.

“Dad, what are we going to do now?” asked Lucas.

“We’re safe for the moment in here. We’ll have to wait and see how long they hang around out there and if anyone comes to help or not. In the mean time we have bathrooms, drinks and probably at least a bit of food in here. It’s nearly dark out so let’s plan on spending the night in here and see what happens in the morning.” Turning to his wife, “Do you have any lipstick in your purse?”

“Yes, why?”

“Can I use some?”

She gave him a really strange look but also handed it over. Roy took the lipstick and writing right to left and backwards, one letter per window, wrote ‘N E E D H E L P’ in the fuselage windows on both sides of the plane and then closed all of the window shades where the letters were written.

“Hopefully if someone sees the plane they’ll realize we’re in here.”

Without the air running the plane was a bit stuffy but the first class sleeper seats more than made up for it. The whole family took advantage of the ‘free’ upgrade while Jake rolled out the cart and acted like a flight attendant serving drinks to everyone.

A few hours later, Roy had to go to the bathroom and knowing that, without power, they wouldn’t be able to flush, he went to use one as far away from first class as possible. He used his small keychain flashlight to get back there and take care of his needs. Upon finishing his business he stopped by the flight attendant station and started poking around looking for something to eat. Since they had just completed the trans Atlantic flight the supplies were nearly gone. He did see a trap

door in the floor and opened it thinking perhaps there was a dumb waiter or some other transfer system with more food below. Alas, all he saw was the cargo hold.

Hoping that perhaps someone had food in their luggage he dropped down and began to look around. Moving around one set of luggage still netted in place he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and dropped down just in time to avoid having his head smashed in by a driver. The assailant immediately reversed the swing but Roy was ready.

Bringing his arms up he grabbed the shaft in mid swing and turned with it throwing his weight into his hip and his hip into the assailant. Continuing the turn and the swing meant that the person either had to drop the club or get stretched out and dropped to the ground. They let go and trying to catch their breath backed away. Transferring his grip he held the golf club in an attack grip while shining his light forward on the attacker. Up against the side of the plane with both hands over her in a defensive posture was Julie, the flight attendant from earlier.

“Miss?”

Slowly she lowered her hands a bit and peeked out.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said as he lowered the club. “At least as long as you stop trying to attack me.”

“yy...yy..y...yyour..... you’re nnn...nnn. ..n....not one of.... of... them?”

“Those creatures? Not that I know of. Are you OK?”

“Ittt..... tt.ttt.th...thh.....ththeyy j..jj.jjjjuust cccame out of nn..nn owhere. Atttaacking and kk.killing. “

“We appear to be safe for the moment. Can you tell me how you got here?”

Finally calming down just a bit, Julie continued, “I ran and ran. Before I knew what was happening someone yelled to get back in the plane. The cargo door

was open and I somehow jumped up, got a hold and climbed in. I thought I'd be safe when one of those things...."

"Take your time."

Taking a few big breaths, "One of those things leapt up and scrambled in right behind me. I grabbed the first thing I could see, a golf club and started swinging. I beat it in the head at least a dozen times. The skull was smashed in at multiple locations and I swear it was dead when it just started moving again and was trying to get up. I must have caught it off balance as when I hit it again with the club it teetered over and fell back outside. I immediately closed the cargo door. I killed them."

"You had no choice. It was you or him."

"No, not the creature, I killed the other passengers."

"What other passengers?"

"The ones who later on were pounding on the cargo door begging me to open it and let them in. I just couldn't risk letting another creature in here so I left it closed. I heard their screams as those things attacked them. It's my fault! I killed them!", she shrieked and she collapsed against Roy, sobbing uncontrollably against his chest.

Timing being everything, Anna chose this moment to open the hatch and look into the cargo hold, searching for Roy, instead finding Roy holding another woman who was sobbing against his chest.

"Roy!"

"Anna! Please come help."

As soon as Anna got down into the hold Roy handed Julie off to her and quickly tried to explain. Trusting him as he had never given her reason not to along with a mangled golf club on the floor and the emotional state of the flight attendant

Anna tried to make the best of the situation. Finally she was able to get Julie to settle down a bit. Seeing her name tag she said, “Julie, is it OK if I call you Julie?”

She nodded like a scared little girl.

“Ok Julie. I’m Anna and I’m going to take you up to the cabin.”

Her eyes got a very frightened look and she tried to pull away.

“No, no. It’s OK. There are no bad people up there. It’s safe. Please trust me.”

Julie, feeling a bond with another woman, finally let herself be led up to the cabin.

Once more on his own Roy let out a big sigh knowing he was still going to have to pay for this. In the mean time he started the process of going through the luggage. It took a few hours to open each bag and check the contents. Anything useful, food, supplies, batteries, drinks even a few pocket knives were placed in one pile. All the used clothes and useless souvenirs were tossed in the far end of the hold. Any clean durable everyday clothes in their approximate sizes he also put to the side. When completed he had enough to fill three sizeable backpacks, which luckily, he also located mixed in with the luggage. Dragging it all to the trap door he passed it up into the cabin and then climbed back up there himself. Other than golf clubs they were woefully short on weapons.

He was able to work on further organizing the gear and packing the bags and then made up some trays with the food he found. A lot of chocolate gift boxes, some cheese, a few bags of crackers and some Champaign would make for a strange dinner but it’s all he could find and brought it up to first class. He handed the boys some and noticed Julie sleeping in one of the chairs. He handed one to Anna, put one aside for Julie and sat down with the last one himself.

“Roy?”

“Oh no, hear it comes,” he thought.

“Don’t you ever let me catch you with another woman in your arms again.”

“So it’s OK as long as you don’t catch me?” he tried joking. The look told him he’d just made mistake number two and he quickly back pedaled, “I’m sorry dear. I went looking for food, got attacked and next thing I know she’s telling me her whole sad story and crying on my chest.”

“We’re all over tired and we can talk about this later. Just promise me you won’t let it happen again.”

Taking her hand in his, he looked her deeply in her eyes and promised.

With that the subject was dropped and everyone settled in for dinner in the dark and another eight hours on the plane.

“That makes a total of six cans of green beans,” Nikki said to no one in particular. Once she realized her parents weren’t coming home and she saw the carnage on TV she vowed to stay locked up inside until help came.

Even at the age of nine she was very organized. Her room was always clean and spotless. In school she excelled in all subjects, even her penmanship class. Had times stayed the same she’d have eventually been labeled anal retentive, a clean freak and other derogatory comments simply because she kept herself to a higher standard and was well organized.

For now Nikki was making an inventory in her notebook of everything she had in the house that was edible but the list was discouraging. Maybe a week or so at most before she’d be out of food. She would have preferred keeping the list on family, no now her, netbook however with power being out she was using a notebook and a pencil.

Wolf stayed on back roads and was able to skirt around the greater Manchester area without directly encountering any zombies. He did see some off in the distance but few reacted to the vehicle and none came close to catching him.

Somehow he felt there was a significance to them ignoring the vehicle. Perhaps it didn't register anymore as containing people. Perhaps they were acting on sight and smell, not just sight. If the opportunity presented itself he'd experiment a bit with them but for now he wanted to get some more miles behind him and continued on a meandering route working his way southwest.

“Uuuuuhhhhggggggg!”

Mari finally managed caught her breath and strained to push her dead father's body off of hers. With a final shove she got one leg free and used that to continue pushing until finally her other leg came free. The realization that her father had just killed her mother and now she had killed him settled on her. She could feel the tears welling up in remembrance of her mother yet looking down at the headless body, the corpse, that used to be her father she felt nothing. Not remorse or guilt. No shame in what she had done. Nothing.

Realizing the shotgun was still in her hand she simply dropped it, turned and went back into the house and up to her parents room to say goodbye to her mother. Mari knelt by the bed and wept for her until her eyes could cry no more and she fell asleep on the floor by the bed.

The following morning Mari woke, cleaned herself up and then called the police, or at least would have had the phone been working. No dial tone. Checking her parent's cell phone and it said 'no signal'. She resigned herself to having to walk down to the station and report on what her father did and then turn herself in for her actions.

She grabbed the house keys and her ID, locked up the house and started the three block walk down to the local police station. Lost in her thoughts she didn't notice the complete lack of people or vehicles. It was almost completely silent out yet she didn't notice. Finally, as she approached the station she did start to 'wake up' and look around. No police cars were in the lot. In fact, no vehicles were anywhere to be seen.

Mari slowed her pace as she started to get a bad feeling. The convenience store across the street from the station had all the windows shattered out. A couple of bodies were laying on the ground. Mari stopped. She noticed the lack of people. The lack of movement. Bodies in the street. She was about to go home when the low growl reached her ears.

Turning she saw the man, no creature, no, she wasn't sure what it was, just that it was staring her down and growling. Slowly, the predator took a step and then another step. Mari wanted to run but was frozen in place from fear. This thing, it was acting just like her father and this time she was unarmed. She didn't hear the car approaching from behind her.

"GET DOWN! NOW!"

Mari dropped to the pavement as a couple of shots rang out just over her head.

"Are you unharmed? Did it bite you? Or scratch you?"

She turned to see her prince charming, a twenty something, well muscled, nicely tanned with a full mane of hair officer standing near her holding a shotgun. Reality was a bit different than what she was seeing as Officer Mike Johnson was late 30's, average build and his hair, well let's just say the majority he still had left wasn't all that long, but to Mari's eyes, her savior was what she wanted to see.

"Um, yes, I think so."

"You think you are unharmed or you think you got bit or scratched?"

“No, I think I’m OK.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“My phone isn’t working and I was coming here to report that my dad went all strange and killed my mom last night and then he turned on me and I shot his head off so I’m turning myself in.”

“You just blew his head off?”

“More like he fell on me as I fumbled with the gun and his throat landed on the end of it. I didn’t even realize I had pulled the trigger.”

“Even if it was a lucky shot or lucky circumstances I’ll still congratulate you on it.”

“Congratulate me? For killing my father? Are you nuts? Aren’t you going to arrest me?”

“I’m sorry, I guess that came out wrong and no I’m not going to arrest you.”

“Can I ask why not?”

“Lady, where have you been?”

“School, studying, trying to find a job, library.”

“There is something going on with lots of people just going crazy. The government is saying it has something to do with rabies but really these people are more like zombies if you ask me. The only way to kill them is to shoot them in head, the neck right below the skull or decapitate them. “

“So you’re saying my dad was one of these?”

“Sounds like it. When you shot his head off you saved yourself from being attacked and either eaten or infected. If you get their fluid on you it can be enough to infect you and eventually turn you into one too although that takes a month or two before it happens”

“Can you take me with you and protect me?”

Sighing he replied, “As much as I’d like to say yes, I can’t. For one thing I, well, let’s just say it wouldn’t be right if I brought you home, but I can’t go into why and two, you have to learn to protect yourself and learn fast.”

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“Haven’t you been listening? Shoot them in the head, throat or neck or chop their head off. That’s it. If one is coming for you, kill it or run. Period. Oh, and they don’t ever seem to tire out so even running isn’t much of an option.”

“What about eating? I’m hungry?”

“If it’s abandoned, then take what you need, just don’t take from others.”

“That’s it? Shoot to kill and go take food?”

“Yeah. It’s going to be a strange new world. Those who can adapt quickly might make it, the rest I guarantee you won’t. By the way, what kinds of guns do you have?”

“Me? None. I just grabbed my dad’s gun, I think it had belonged to his father.”

“Do you know what kind?”

“Well, I moved a level and it opened up and I put a red plastic bullet in it, closed it up and then pulled the trigger.”

“You’re saying you took him out with a break action single shell shotgun?”

“Um, Yes?”

“Wow, you got more guts than I gave you credit for.”

“I did have to shoot him twice.”

“Twice? At what distance?”

“The first was maybe ten feet, the second shot was when he was pretty much falling on top of me.”

“That’s impressive girl.”

“Marigold.”

“Huh?”

“That’s my name. Marigold, although most people call me Mari.”

“Please to meet you Mari, I’m Mike Johnson. You know what, walk with me a bit.”

Mike led her past his cruiser and over to the station. Taking out a set of keys, he unlocked the door and held it for her. She walked in and he followed directing her when and where to turn as they went down the darkened hallways. Finally he had her stop outside of a heavy metal door. Turning on his flashing he shone it on his keys as he fumbled through them. Finding the one he wanted he unlocked the door and swing it open.

He gestured to enter and Mari did so with Mike following her. Mike flipped a switch on the wall and the lights came on.

“How do you still have power?”

“Battery backup for emergencies. It won’t last forever so we have to be quick.” Mike turned and reached over to a rack on the wall.

Mari finally noticed the room was filled with guns. Small ones, big ones, mostly black ones. Mike grabbed two different long ones, then turned and picked up a couple of smaller ones and held out all four to Mari.

She stepped back.

“Here, take these they won’t bite!”

Reluctantly she reached out for them, “Where do I hold them I don’t want to shoot you accidentally.”

“You can’t they’re not loaded. Just take them, quickly now.” Mike went over to cabinet on another wall and opened a couple of drawers pulling out box after box and placing the small boxes on the top of the cabinet. Finally he went to the opposite wall and picked up a nice looking leather bag, similar to a duffle bag but not quite the same. He put the boxes into the bag and turned to leave the room ushering Mari out in front of him and turning the light off before closing the door and making sure it was locked.

The both retraced their steps down the dark hallways back to the entrance. Along the way Mari could see, by the light from some windows, that the rooms they passed were in disarray. One of them even had a body still laying on the floor.

“What happened here?”

“Same as out there. Some turned into zombies and started attacking. It was a free for all and many good officers died or got severely injured.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. I knew some of these guys for almost twenty years.”

“How many of you made it?”

“Not many and most of us won’t survive.”

“What do you mean?”

Mike let out a long sigh. “I wasn’t going to say why I can’t bring you with me but I guess you deserve to know. One of them bit my arm. I’m infected. I figure I got 2, maybe 3 weeks tops before I turn into one too.”

Mari shrank back and almost ran but before she could, Mike continued, “Sorry, I should have told you. But unless I get my fluids on you you’re safe, for now. I keep my oozing bite wound heavily bandaged so there is no risk.”

“Why are you doing this then?”

“Doing what?”

“Shooting them and still doing your job.”

“You. You are the reason.”

“Me?”

“You are the future. You and the rest of uninfected people will have to eliminate this scourge and then rebuild society and the human race.”

The enormity of what he said hit Mari like a brick to the head and she almost went down but finally got her wobbly legs back under control and her mind back on the present.

“I’m going to take as many of these out as I can and hopefully I’ll recognize the final stages and be able to take myself out too. In the mean time I’m trying to find people that are surviving so far and those that are honorable I will arm and help as best I can. No point in all of this equipment either going to waste or ending up in the wrong hands.”

“How do you know I’m honorable?”

“C’mon... you have to ask?”

She gave him a confused look.

“Ten minutes ago you were trying to turn yourself in for murder after shooting one of these things. That isn’t something people with bad intentions would do.”

“I see your point.”

“We don’t have that much time. I’m going to show you how to use each of these, the bag here is filled with ammo. I’d suggest you gather up what you can from your house that is still usable, you know food, water, camping gear, etc and

get out of town. Head for less populated areas. You won't get away from them but there will be less to deal with, at least until you get your skills up to speed."

"Ok. I understand, although we have very little food at the house and no camping gear."

"I'll drop you by the local sporting goods store then. Take what you need from there and then get out of town. Now let's get started."

Mike began by explaining general fire arm handling skills. Knowing the condition of your weapon, pointing it only at something you plan to kill, finger away from the trigger until you're ready to pull it and all the other things someone new to firearms needs to learn. He moved on to explaining how the Remington 870 shotgun with extended magazine worked, how to load it, unload it, fire it and such. He continued with the Bushmaster AR-15 rifle and finally went over the pair of Smith and Wesson M&P .40 caliber handguns.

"Now remember, shooting them in the chest or leg or even the jaw is just a waste of ammo. You have to hit them in the throat or the forehead and pretty much in the center in order to ensure a spine shot. While I'd love to tell you to shoot them as far away as possible, you need to make every shot count. That means most of your shots are going to be at close distances, let's say ten to twenty five feet for now. As you get better you can extended that distance."

Once Mari was comfortable with the safety and operation aspects he got out the ammo and had her actually fire nearly a box of each to get comfortable with the weapons. He put bottles and pop cans on top of some nearby cars and told her if she could hit them from this distance they she should be able to take out the throat of a zombie.

After a few misses she got over the fear of recoil and got each weapon under control and started hitting her targets. The final, unplanned, exam came when a zombie was seen approaching from down the street. It was a woman, bloody mouth, blouse and arms from whatever victim or victims she had last fed on.

“OK, lesson one, situational awareness. There’s a zombie coming up from the left.”

“Where?!” she exclaimed turning quickly with the AR still in her hands.

“Over there, about a half block down.”

“I see it. “

“OK, line up on the throat.”

“But it’s so far away.”

“Get lined up now. Take the shot when it’s close enough that you’re sure you will hit it. Remember they don’t shoot back. You can take your time, just don’t let it get too close.”

Mari lined up and twice tried to pull the trigger but couldn’t. “I don’t feel right shooting another person like this.”

“It’s not a person any longer. If you don’t it will either eat you alive or injure you enough that you’ll eventually become one too. I don’t want to play dirty, but think about your father and what he became.”

Mari brought the gun back up. The zombie had closed to within 50 feet and was now quickly accelerating at them.

“Shoot it!”

“DO IT!”

“NOW!”

Mike had raised up his shotgun and was about to take the shot when he heard the report of the AR going off.

The zombie jerked to a halt with the throat nearly completely blown away. It teetered for a moment, dropped to its knees and then fell over dead.

Mike looked over to Mari who still had the gun raised with tears streaming down her face.

“I hated having to do that. That was, at least at one time, still a person.”

“And that is why I feel you are honorable. You think. You feel. You won’t just blindly shoot. As long as you can still feel each shot then you know you’re OK, it’s when you stop feeling anything that you’re in trouble.”

Once Mari stopped shaking and settled down Mike helped her gather up the weapons and ammo bag and load them in the police cruiser. He drove her home where she picked up just a few small personal mementos and then to the local sporting goods store, Gander Mountain. Once Mike was certain the lot was clear and no zombies were visible he bid her good luck and told her to take whatever she needed from the store and be on her way.

“Is it gone?”

“I don’t see anything.”

“What are we going to do?”

“From what I’m hearing on my ham, this is wide spread. Sounds like the whole country and some of the overseas stuff doesn’t sound any better. The officials are calling it a contained outbreak of rabies but everyone else is calling them zombies.”

“That’s nice but what do a bunch of geeks with radios really know?”

“All I know is what I’m hearing and that whatever those things were they made you run Brad.”

“Yeah well I’m getting out of here.”

“It would be safer if we stuck together.”

“What, you scared to go out there?”

“No, but I figure if we have to fight any of those things we could watch each other’s backs.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense, just don’t you all slow me up or I’ll leave you behind. I don’t have to run faster than them, just faster than any of you.”

“Melvin, anything else on the radio? Any way to stop them?”

“Yeah, either cut their heads off or shoot them in the center of the throat which effectively severs the spine, same as if you had decapitated them. Some reports of head shots working too.”

“Eww... Gross. I ain’t cutting someone’s head off.”

“Yeah, well just stay here then, I’m outta here.”

“Hey, guys... I got an idea. Think industrial weed whacker.”

“Oh yeah!”

“Sweet!”

“Huh? Zombies are invading and you want to cut the grass?”

“No, Brad. A heavy duty weed whacker with a spinning chain, think something like a chainsaw blade, instead of a thin plastic wire. With a shield for the gore you should be able to use one of these to decapitate at a distance.”

“Heh, for a bunch of geeks you can think up some pretty gruesome ways to kill a person, but how could you build one?”

“To the Robotics Lab!” shouted the three of them in unison. Brad followed along shaking his head.

The group of four cautiously opened the door and saw no signs of zombies. Making their way down the hall and down the stairs they took their time peering

around corners and ensuring their route was safe. Once outside there was more of a risk but they stuck to the sides of buildings and made their way almost to the lab complex when the first one spotted them. Throwing caution to the wind they sprinted into the building and barred the door behind them. Soon multiple bodies were heard slamming against the door but for now it looked sturdy enough to hold.

Heading into the lab they began by pulling aluminum and iron pipes and sheets of assorted metals from various racks. Rob got the welding equipment ready while Darren picked through the motors, electronic controls, wires and batteries. They worked nearly 14 hours straight letting their engineering abilities free from the normal societal constraints. At the end they had constructed some interesting, and hopefully lethal devices.

First up were the zombie whackers as they named them. A battery in a backpack with a small solar panel for recharging it. This fed to a seven foot aluminum pole with a high speed electric motor mounted on the end of it. The motor had two quarter inch steel wires that, when spinning at speed would go right through an inch thick board, more than enough they felt, to make it through flesh and neck bones. Finally, set back a few feet from the motor was a plexi-glass shield to keep the spinning wires from flinging gore back at the operator. Unfortunately there were only two high-speed, low draw motors so they only were able to construct two zombie whackers.

The second creation, inspired by their dungeon and dragon role playing days was a ten foot pole with a sharpened blade welded to the last three feet of the pole. They had one of these.

The last creation, made from left over shop tools was a six foot pole with a cordless reciprocating saw mounted to each end. In each saw was a multipurpose twelve inch blade. The safeties were removed and the triggers rewired to a couple of centrally mounted push buttons. As long as the cordless batteries held out they could keep going with it and they adapted the charger to pull power from any 12

volt source and also to accept a trickle charge, again, from a small portable solar panel.

Fully armed, they loaded a cart with as many parts, tools, meters, gauges and scopes as they could fit and headed for the far exit planning to slip out, work their way to the cafeteria, get some food and water and make a run for Brad's truck and drive away to safety. Brad took the pole with the blade, Melvin had the dual saw pole and Rob and Darren took the zombie whackers. On the way to the cafeteria they got to test all three of the creations and each performed more than adequately.

The Senator and John emerged from tunnel into the underground parking garage. John could see his car and a zombie in the way.

"Follow me."

The Senator scrambled to keep up as John advanced on the Zombie. When he was within 10 feet he raised the gun and fired hitting it in the cheek, momentary pushing the head back. It quickly recovered and came at John who aimed better and this time caught it right in the throat dropping it to a heap on the ground.

John unlocked his car and was getting in when he noticed the Senator looking at the zombie and writing in a notebook.

"What are you doing?"

"I told you, I'm holding you accountable for everyone you're killing. You will stand trial when the authorities catch up with us. This here was Susan Watson, according to her ID she worked in archives."

"I'm leaving in ten seconds with or without you. Either get in the car or get out of my way."

Just then a group of zombies came shuffling into view, drawn by the noise of the gun. The Senator quickly scampered over to the car and got in. John floored

it before he even had the door shut receiving yet another dour look. The newest group of zombies were coming right up the pavement between the parked cars on both sides.

John stepped harder on the gas, Senator Mitchell grabbed at the door handle and dash while trying desperately to push on a nonexistent brake pedal. The older model Jeep sped up and impacted the zombies doing nearly forty. It wasn't quite bowling yet the bodies flew away in all directions as if they had been pins struck by a ball. As luck would have it, one of the bodies ended up under the car, got caught up around the tire, started slowing the car and jammed up the steering causing John to veer into the parked cars.

The impact was not too bad and both John and the Senator were spared any serious injuries, just a few bumps and eventual bruises.

“Senator, is your car here?”

“I'm parked on the privileged level.”

“I'm sure you are.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, let's go before any more show up. Avoid the ones on the ground as they still look dangerous even if they can't walk anymore.”

The senator made some more notes in his notebook before getting out of the car. John had not noticed as he was busy retrieving a backpack from the back. John led the way to the staircase up to the level where the Senators had their cars. Most took limos everywhere so the cars were more to show off to each other than to actually drive although on occasional one would take a Sunday afternoon drive in one of them. Being mostly old white guys there were a lot of Cadillacs and Lincolns. A few exotics and a few antiques. Rarely anything foreign as their election year opponents would use that against them.

Senator Mitchell was no exception, he had a Cadillac, but fortunately it was an Escalade and at least somewhat suited for the task at hand.

“Give me the keys, I’m driving.”

“They’re already in there. No one would think of stealing a senator’s vehicle.”

“Sure. Get in.”

“I’m holding you personally responsible for this vehicle. Any scratch or dent will be coming out of your page salary until my Cadillac has been restored to my satisfaction.”

“Agreed,” said John knowing full well the Senator was still delusional if he thought in any way that he’d be able to collect or if the government and/or country would even survive this enough to actually pay anyone.

John took a moment to adjust the seat and steering wheel before firing up the engine, putting it in reverse and stepping on the gas chirping the tires in the process.

“Whoa!” he said to himself. “This thing has got some power compared to my old beater. I’ll have to take it easy until I get used to it.”

He shifted into drive and pressed the gas a bit more gently this time heading for the exit.

The girl unlocked the door and cracked it open just a bit. Peering out she saw no one. Nearly daily she’d seen zombies stumbling past going one way or the other but at least for now the coast was clear. Finally Nikki got up her courage and stepped outside for the first time in nearly two weeks. Quickly she went next door to the Stevinski’s house. They were a nice older couple, almost like grandparents to

her. She knew that Mrs. Stevinski liked to cook and bake and to put food in jars that she kept in the basement.

Best case, they'd be home and give her some food. Worst case they weren't and she'd have to break in to get to it. The hunger pains from not eating the last few days were forcing Nikki to think in ways she had never considered before.

Ringling the doorbell proved fruitless as without power it made no noise. She tried knocking but got no answer. The front door was locked so Nikki went around to the back. Most of the time they did not lock their back door when they were home. Sure enough this was no exception and the handle easily turned. Nikki pushed the door open and entered the back porch and proceeded into the kitchen.

An overwhelming smell hit her. Rotten food coupled with something she couldn't quite place. All thoughts of food quickly fled her mind when Mrs. Stevinski shuffled into view from the parlor and turned towards Nikki. She turned to run and spotted Mr. Stevinski near the back door blocking her exit. Both of them looked like those horrible creatures on TV. As they approached her she screamed.

Wolf was not happy. His GPS was showing him a bit west of Hartford and his truck was dead. For the moment he was well enough supplied and didn't seem to be in any danger. The country roads he was sticking to kept him relatively away from the zombies. A few had appeared on the road but it was easy enough to drive around them. The more concerning event involved the locals who tried to stop him at a roadblock.

He had suspicions as he drove up and when the guns came up and he was ordered out of his truck he was prepared and came out shooting. The two guys right outside his door went down before they could react. The other two behind the roadblock opened fire but Wolf had already moved and sought cover behind his truck. Holstering his pistol he grabbed one of the AR-15 rifles from the back of the truck and dropped to the ground. His truck sat high enough that he could crawl

forward underneath it yet still remain unseen for now. The guys had effectively blocked the road with some old beater cars and were ducked down behind them. Wolf lined up on their ankles and fired a round in to each.

Both of the guys went down with shattered ankles and would not be able to stand, let alone walk anytime soon. Wolf rolled out from under the truck and cautiously approached. One was writhing in pain, the other had passed out. Keeping his weapon trained on them the entire time, he worked his way closer until he could retrieve their dropped weapons. For his efforts he picked up a couple of 30-06 rifles, a pump action shotgun, a 22lr rifle and a couple of revolvers.

Upon seeing him take the weapons the remaining conscious injured guy managed to get out, "Man, don't take our guns. The zombies will get us."

"You should have thought of that before ambushing me."

"We thought you were a zombie."

"Driving a truck? Yeah, right. Now I'm going to be coming through here in just a minute or two. I'd suggest you hobble out of the area unless you want to get rolled over too." Wolf turned and walked away as the guy tried to sputter out a reply of some type.

He put the newly acquired rifles in the back and kept the revolvers with him. Getting in the cab he started the truck up, drove up to the rear wheel of one of the blocking cars. Easing up to it he put the truck in four wheel drive and slowly pressed the gas pedal. His tires slipped a few times and then finally caught and the truck was slowly pushing the car out of the way. Once it was clear he drove about 20 feet further down the road and called back to the guy, who had drug himself and his partner to the side of the road.

"I'll leave you these."

Wolf opened the revolvers and dumped all the rounds on the ground and then tossed the guns off to the side of the road. By the time the guy got over there

and retrieved the gun and even a single cartridge Wolf would be long out of range if not out of sight.

Continuing on he drove until evening, stopped and ate some of his food and then spent a restless night sleeping in the truck. In the morning he woke to find a number of zombies milling about the truck. It's like they could smell him but didn't realize he was in the truck. He slowly sat up, started the truck and eased it into gear. Driving forward, pretty much on idle he avoided the zombies, who continued milling about, until he was clear and then drove off. Hours later the truck just stopped and he guided it off to the side of the road to try to figure out a plan.

Chapter 5

Transportation

Marigold wanted to cry. A handsome stranger armed her, taught her how to use the weapons and explained the new frightening world to her, then just dropped her here and drove off. Looking up at the store sign, Gander Mountain, she figured now was as good a time as any. Entering the unlocked store was easy and she grabbed a shopping cart, dropped her weapons in it and proceeded to shop.

Hours later, and five overflowing shopping carts, Mari knew she had a problem. Anything that looked useful or edible or interesting or... well, she had way too much to carry. Perhaps she could pare it down a bit. Sorting through the piles she realized that there were no medical supplies, nor did she even make it to the gun counter yet.

“Well now what Mari? You think you need all of this but you got no way to carry it and now you’re going back for more. Not so smart girl,” she said out loud.

Finishing up with two more carts of medical gear, some more guns, ammo and even a few bows and crossbows she now had to figure out how to take it all with her. Looking over the bicycle trailers she thought perhaps that would work but realized an entire trailer would hold maybe one shopping cart at best. Back to the front of the store and her pile she went and stopped by the glass windows to lightly bang her head in frustration. She looked around and didn’t see any zombies about, in fact she saw no signs of life, but she did get a smile on her face.

Grabbing the AR and a couple of extra magazines with ammo in them, just in case, she walked across the parking lot, across the street and onto the lot of the town’s Jeep dealership. Fairly quickly a red one caught her eye. Scanning the label it read, 2012 Grand Cherokee SRT8, and had a laundry list of options including

4x4 and run flat tires. That sounded pretty useful to her as she scanned further down the label, her eye's bugging out at the \$65,000 sticker price.

"Well Mike did say to take what I needed..." she said with a mischievous grin as she headed for the offices. She did have a few pangs of guilt as she ransacked the offices trying to find the keys but realizing that right now there should be a dealership full of people and a busy street out there and there were neither. Instead it was fight for your life or die, or worse. Finally she did locate the box with all the keys and sorting through the labels, which listed the color and a number, she narrowed it down to a dozen possible sets. Back outside she was on the fourth set when a noise seemed out of place.

Looking up she spotted the two approaching zombies. One shuffled with a bad limp, the other walking quite fine and actually starting a slow lumbering run towards her. She raised the rifle and tried to calm the rising panic within her. By the third shot she had settled enough and shot out the throat of the runner. One more shot later and the limper was also down. She scanned around, looking for any more threats and seeing none leaned back against the truck and tried to will herself into not crying. Instead she vomited all over the silver Patriot parked next to her new red Grand Cherokee.

Once she was empty and finished trembling she went back to the keys, and started working on them. It took four more sets before she found the right ones. Mari started up the HEMI 6.4 liter V8 and had a feeling this was going to be fun. In her few years of driving she'd occasionally driven her mom's car or a friend's car but really didn't have all that much experience and never had driven anything new. She squealed the tires backing out and then again when she put it in drive and stepping on the gas elicited a squeal from her too.

Mari was smart and quickly realized that making excessive noise and drawing attention to herself would not be good for staying alive and quickly settled down and drove more sedately back over to Gander Mountain. She backed right up to the doors, opened them up and proceeded to stuff the back of the SUV with her

shopping carts of goods. At least half were food and water so she knew she'd be OK for at least a month or two before needing to locate more. By then she hoped to have long since found somewhere safe to live.

She finished loading the Jeep, got in and had not even made it out of the lot when the low gas indicator came on. It took five gas stations until she was able to get gas. The first had no power and while the attached convenience store had some gas cans, there was no way for her to fill them. The last station, which had a service shop, contained a siphon kit and she used that to slowly pump gas from other cars into her can and then pour her can in the Jeep until it was full.

Finally set she grabbed a few of the complimentary maps the station offered and headed west towards Buffalo. Why that way, she couldn't say, just that she had a feeling.

“Roy, wake up.”

Roy groggily tried to push the sleep away and bring his head out of the fog. Why was he so sore? Slowly the last 12 hours came back to him. The emergency landing, the deserted airport, the strange attack by those creatures and finally the woman in the cargo hold. Shaking the last of the cobwebs away he got up and took the can of apple juice that Anna handed him. She went to get the kids up and then moved forward to wake up the flight attendant.

Once they all had some juice and the last of the food on the plane the kids went off to use the bathroom. Julie moved closer to Roy and Anna.

“I wanted to apologize, to both of you, for my behavior yesterday. I didn't mean to attack you.”

“Yes you did, you thought I was one of those things.”

“Well, yes, but then when I saw you weren't I just lost it. They train us to not fall apart but today was just too much. Seeing another human was just too

much for me. I needed to know you were real. I should have handled the situation professionally instead of crying on your shoulder.”

“Well, er, um....”

“What my husband,” emphasizing the word husband, “is trying to say is that we’re all in this together and if, as you say, we each act responsibly from this point on I think we’ll be OK. Agreed?”

Everyone responded with a “yes.”

“Good. Now enough with the awkwardness, let’s see what we have to work with and figure out how we’re going to get out of here.”

The kids returned and the three adults took turns using the facilities. Once everyone was back together they reviewed the meager amount of supplies and discussed options. Julie was single, had no family and nowhere to really go so Anna, to the surprise of Roy, invited her to stay with them as long as she wanted to. With that settled the plan was to open the door, make sure none of those creatures were around and then drive off in the stair truck. Until they got away from the airport they weren’t sure what the next steps should be.

Julie opened the door and Jake and Lucas poked their heads out looking in all directions.

“All clear. No zombies in view.”

“Zombies?”

“What else do you want to call them?”

“Ok, I guess zombie is fine for now.”

They high fived each other over this minor victory and headed down the stairs with the others right behind them. On reaching the ground they quickly went around the truck and climbed in the cab and on top of the roof. Roy started up the truck and was steering around the bodies when Anna yelled for him to stop.

“Hey! What gives? We almost fell off!”

“Hang on, your mother saw something.”

“What is it dear?”

“Wait a second,” she said jumping from the cab and running towards a body. After appearing to feel up the body she came walking back with a big smile holding up a gun and a couple of magazines.

“Where’d you find that?”

“The guy over there. Probably the air marshal. I saw the gun under his hand and dug around for the extra magazines.”

Julie leaned her head down and called into the window, “There were two marshals on this flight.”

“Do you know who?”

“Nope. We’re just told how many there are. Captain might know but, well, that’s what’s left of him over there,” she said gesturing to a bloody mangled mess in what was left of a uniform.

While Roy kept a watch, Anna checked all the other bodies but never did find the other Marshal. “At least we got one gun.”

Roy drove the truck to the end of the runway, bumped and lurched across the field and then right through the fence and onto the nearby road. They saw no other movement and Roy just kept driving, heading roughly south for now. The truck wasn’t fast but it sure beat walking. Once the tank ran low Roy and Anna started looking for a vehicle upgrade. The best they found was a 90’s Chevy Silverado, crew cab. The biggest selling point was the keys still in it and a nearly full tank of gas. They quickly transferred the few possessions they had to the truck bed and this time everyone got in the cab.

Roy continued heading south with an occasional zombie sighting but nothing close enough to pose a threat.

Chapter 6

The Coalescence

“Page, is that another vehicle coming towards us?”

“Looks like it.”

“Pull over and flag them down.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes, just do it.”

John pulled the Escalade over and got out waving towards the other vehicle, a pickup truck, approaching at a rapid rate. As it neared it finally slowed and came to a stop a somewhat safe distance back.

The Senator didn't wait and just started stumbling towards the truck only to be brought up short when Anna sat up in the window and pointed the pistol at him.

“That's far enough.”

“How dare you! Do you know who I am?”

“No, and at the moment I don't care about anything other than what you got.”

“What I got?”

“Yeah, what you got as in are you one infected? Are you of those things?”

“You mean the zombies?”

“See Dad, we told you they were zombies!” two voices from within the truck yelled out.

Anna ignored them and continued, “Yes, are you a zombie?”

“I should say not!”

“How about him?” she said gesturing towards John.

“He’s been shooting them and running them over, but no he isn’t one of them.”

“Good for you!” she yelled out

“Good for!? But he’s killing people, citizens.”

“You said yourself they’re zombies.”

“That’s just the name used in the report. I would think if someone would just calmly reason with them we could see what is bothering them and how to cure it.”

“Well, he’s your chance,” Anna said gesturing to a couple of zombies approaching the road, yet, still a distance off.

The Senator blanched a bit but then seemed to gather up his resolve as he turned and marched right up to them.

“Excuse me! Excuse me! You over there,” said Senator Mitchell waving towards and approaching the zombies.

They both stopped in front of him as he was gesturing and trying to tell them something that the rest couldn’t hear. After about a minute of just staring at him they both lunged forward clawing and biting. The Senator fell over his own feet trying to run away. It probably saved his life as the abrupt drop to the ground caused the zombies to miss him.

Anna jumped out of the truck running towards them while John produced a pistol and also headed that way.

Anna fired first with two shots to the chest. She was certain the first two shots hit yet the zombie just turned to look at her before turning back to the senator.

“You gotta sever the spine right below the skull!” yelled John lining up on the other zombie. One shot and it dropped, the throat blown out.

Lining up her gun on the throat she fired and sure enough the second one dropped too with its head dangling backwards from a missing throat. John did a 180 sweep of his side while Anna did a similar sweep.

Finally they focused on the Senator, cowering on the ground in heap.

“Who’s the dumb ass?” asked Roy who walked over to join them, pointing at the Senator.

“Senator Mitchell, Democrat out of Jersey.”

“Really?”

“Sorry to say, yes.”

“I take it you’re not related?”

“Nope. I’m a, well make that ‘was a’, page in the congressional building. Normally I worked for Senator Whitman but when this happened it was pretty much every man for themselves.”

“We can see. I’m Anna, and this is my husband Roy.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m John.”

“Those are our kids, Jake and Lucas and a former flight attendant, Julie.”

“Flight attendant?”

“Long story.”

“I got nowhere to be,” John said with a smile.

Julie and the kids came to join them and the six of them shared their tales. Eventually the Senator crawled out from the whimpering fetal position and kind of joined them if you can call standing aloof to the side 'joining'. None had any supplies and other than a couple of scavenged handguns and a few remaining rounds, they were woefully unarmed. When Roy had a moment to talk privately to Anna he asked her what next?

"What do you mean?"

"What are we going to do now?"

"Head home. Or at least try. What else can we do?"

"What about them?" he said gesturing to John and Julie who seemed, to Roy's relief, to be hitting it off and the Senator still trying to do an impression of royalty.

"Safety in numbers. As long as we're heading the same way I say we stick together."

"Agreed. First priority should be to locate sufficient food and water and then fuel for the vehicles."

"I'd go water, weapons, food and then fuel if you ask me."

"Yeah, it would be nice to have some type of defensive capability other than hiding or running. John's obviously competent, what about Julie? Think she could handle a gun?"

"She'll either learn fast or end up like the others. The Senator?"

"Future zombie food," joked Roy.

Mari made it to the outskirts of Buffalo planning to turn to the south in order to avoid the main part of the city. She felt the edges of the suburbs, while risky,

offered rewards in terms of food, water and other supplies that could one day start to get very difficult to find. At random she'd head down one street or another stopping at any store that looked promising and was zombie free. She'd had to put a few more zombies down, still felt sick to her stomach but had avoided vomiting after each killing for awhile now. It really concerned her that she was becoming used to the killing.

Avoiding an abandoned accident scene had Mari turning down a side street to go around it. Through the partially open window she heard a scream and stepped on the brake.

“AAAaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!”

There it was, again, seeming to come from the house. She grabbed the shotgun as Mike told her it would be more effective indoors and ran up to the front door, pounded on it and called, “Anyone in there?”

“Help me!” screamed a frightened voice.

Mari tried the handle but it was locked. Taking a step to the side she pointed the gun down towards the door handle so that the shot would go down into the floor, and not fly through the house possibly hitting innocent bystanders, again another tip from Mike. Mari realized that she was remembering what Mike had said and was thinking clearly even though she felt the stress and urgency of the situation.

“BANG!”

The handle, lock and wood around it pretty much disintegrated as she threw her shoulder into the door knocking it open. Rushing in she found an open room and called out again, “Where are you?”

“Kitchen, back of the house! Hurry!”

Mari took the first doorway and ended up in a study or home office. A quick backtrack and she took the second opening leading into a dining room. Now

hearing sounds ahead she continued through the room and ended up in a kitchen. Under the smaller kitchen table was a girl scrambling to stay out of the grasp of two old people, no, old zombies.

Cha-Chunk, “BANG!”

Cha-Chunk, “BANG!”

Cha-Chunk

“It’s OK, they’re not going to be chasing anyone ever again. Are you OK?”

A disheveled girl peeked her head out and Mari could see her tear stained cheeks and the fear in her eyes.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” She propped the gun against the cabinet next to her and squatted down. The girl scrambled out from under the table and ran into Mari’s arms clutching her in a hug.

Listening carefully Mari could just make out her whispering, “I knew you’d come. I knew you’d come. I knew you’d come,” over and over.

“Brad, look, there’s someone up there waving.”

“Quick! Get the zombie whackers ready.”

Rob and Darren slipped on the battery back packs and got ready to jump out. Brad pulled the truck to a stop about 50 yards short of the other vehicle. All four jumped out running to the back and grabbing their weapons. Melvin got his dual reciprocating saw staff and gave the button a few quick presses to make sure both saws were activating. Rob and Darren plugged the power feed from their packs into the zombie whacker poles while Brad grabbed what amounted to a halberd with a three foot blade. They spread out across the road as the rather large individual stopped waving.

“Damn, he’s a big one,” said Melvin.

“C’mon guys, we can take him,” encouraged Melvin.

“Yeah, let’s do this!” chimed in Brad as they started advancing.

Melvin took the lead charging and activating the saws. He closed and swung for the neck which, with the attached head, dropped down below the blade. On his return swing he went with the other saw aiming for the ankles yet they weren’t there either as the saw passed cleanly beneath the feet, now in the air. Pivoting around he used the momentum to bring the first saw back into position aiming to slice open the abdomen but missed again as the large one stepped inside the swing and carried the pole around with him wrenching it from Melvin’s hands and knocking him in the head with the pipe dropping him unconscious to the ground.

Rob and Darren both charged in with their zombie whackers planning to finish it off and avenge Melvin. They spun up their wires and alternated in their feints and attacks. Using the saw staff to deflect each and every attack it was a clear stalemate with two against one. Finally Brad advanced to join in thinking to outflank and surround him.

They watched as he flipped the saw staff up in the air and seeing their chance both plunged in for the kill but he ducked under both coming up inside of the gore shield and neatly catching his saw staff. With one fluid motion he stepped forward pressing both blades up against their throats.

Everyone froze.

“Now, do you want to tell me why you attacked me or shall I just push the buttons on here and take off your heads?”

Rob and Darren looked at each other, sweat dripping from their brows.

“I’ll wait while you make up your mind. But don’t wait too long as I don’t plan on letting your buddy trying to sneak up behind me succeed.

Finally Rob blinked first. “Please don’t kill us! We thought you were a zombie!”

Wolf pulled the saw staff back and walked between them putting some distance between him and the students while looking over the construction and operation of the staff. “You know these are actually pretty ingenious, too bad you don’t have the skill to effectively use them.”

Brad, along with the others, were just standing their dumbfounded. This guy had defeated the four of them without even breaking a sweat. But he killed Melvin. For that he had to pay. “You killed Melvin!” he yelled and charged.

Seeming to materialize out of thin air Brad saw Wolf produce a rather large looking handgun and pointed it right at him. Trying to stop and backpedal at the same time resulted in Brad tripping over himself and ending up in a heap on the ground.

“If I wanted him or any of you dead we wouldn’t be having this conversation. He’ll wake up with a nasty headache but no permanent damage.” As fast as the gun had appeared it disappeared. Wolf set the saw staff on the hood of Brad’s truck and turned to walk back to his.

Rob shrugged out of his battery pack and set it down along with the whacker pole and went over to Melvin who was just starting to come around. Seeing that he really was OK he followed Wolf and asked, “Who are you?”

“Wolf.”

“Wolf? That’s it?”

“It’s all you need to know.”

“Why are you out here all alone? How are you able to survive?”

Wolf gave him a ‘are you serious look’ at which point Rob realized the stupidity of that question and tried to rephrase it. “I mean, how are you finding food and water? How are you avoiding the zombies? Where are you going?”

He seemed to think about his answer for a moment and then shrugged and replied, “I’ve got supplies, I’ve got skills and at the moment I’m not headed anywhere. Truck died.”

“Died?”

“Dead. No power.”

“I’ve got some tools. Can I take a look?”

“Knock yourself out.”

Rob went back to Brad’s truck and came back with a couple of bags while Darren and Brad were comforting Melvin and trying to explain to him what had just happened. Pulling out a meter he had Wolf pop the hood.

“You’re battery is fine, let’s check the fuses.” Crawling under the dash he ran through each fuse and all were OK. “No problems here. Might be your computer.” He got out a couple of screwdrivers and five minutes later had a section of trim removed and a circuit board in his hands. He carefully laid out a portable antistatic mat on the hood, laid the board on it and proceeded to check various components.

“Incoming zombies!” came the yell from Brad. They looked up and a quarter mile or so down the road could be seen a half dozen approaching. They had a stumbling walk and this time it was obvious they were zombies.

The guys went to get their gear when Wolf said, “Don’t bother, I got this.” Opening the back of his truck he took out a case and set it on the tailgate and unlatched it. Working steadily but not in a rush he pulled out a rifle with scope and a bipod. Wolf laid down on the ground positioning the rifle in front of him, looking

around at the trees and grass he made a few slight adjustments and then focused carefully through the scope on the zombies.

They were about a thousand feet out yet. Wolf pulled the trigger six times. After each pull a head disintegrated and a zombie collapsed. When they were all down he stood up, grabbed a pair of binoculars, did a full 360 scan and then carefully put the rifle back in the case and stowed it back in the truck.

The four students could have been knocked over with a feather.

Wolf went over to where Rob was working on the circuit board and that snapped him out of wherever his mind was and back to the task at hand. Minutes later he found a bad capacitor, de-soldered it and pulled a spare from his bag of parts to replace it with. It took just a few moments to get it installed. He replaced the board back in the truck, reconnected the various wiring looms and suggested Wolf try it now. He put in the key, turned it and the truck fired right up. He left it running as he got out and went over to Rob to shake his hand, thank him and ask if there is anything he could offer in return.

Rob glanced towards the gun in the case but then thought better and instead said, "Take us with you."

Wolf seemed taken aback by the request but finally got out, "Why?"

"To be blunt, you know what the hell you're doing. We've just been lucky so far. Take us with. Teach us what you know so we can survive and not become the next zombie meal!"

He thought about it for a few minutes studying each one in turn.

"I ride alone."

Three of them seemed to simultaneously deflate. Only Brad didn't seem to mind.

"But I won't stop you from following me."

As the realization of what he said sank in the same three immensely brightened up and a chorus of 'Thanks' and 'You won't be sorry' and such were heard as they quickly gathered their weapons and tossed them in the back of Brad's truck and all piled into the crew cab. Brad is the only one that still had a scowl on his face and this didn't escape Wolf's watchful eye. Wolf continued more or less on an east to southeast route with the students following.

Mari found out the girl's house was actually next door, took her back there and got her settled. She pulled her Jeep into the driveway and got out a few days worth of food and supplies, locked it up and went inside herself.

Over the next few hours she slowly dragged out of the frightened girl that she was basically starving and had probably lost both parents. She made some food which the girl scarfed down and asked for more. Finally, three servings later she said she had enough. Mari sat down on the sofa and the girl scrambled up next to her and snuggled close feeling secure with another human around, especially one who was able to save her.

Eventually she fell asleep and Mari carried the girl up to her room, tucked her into her bed and went into the parent's bedroom to sleep herself. She woke sometime later to find the kid snuggled up against her again.

The next morning she realized that she had never asked the kid her name, "What's your name?"

"Nicole but people call me Nikki."

"Nicole is a pretty name too."

The girl thought for a moment and then said, "Then you should call me Nicole. What's your name?"

"Marigold but people call me Mari."

The girl giggled, “That’s the name of a flower.”

“Yep,” responded Mari with a smile.

Over the course of the day they had a few meals and talked about what had happened to Nicole. Finally Mari got out of her that her grandparents were in Utah. Towards the end of the day Mari told Nicole that she couldn’t stay much longer which brought on nearly instant tears.

“What’s wrong Nicole?”

“All the adults leave and then I’m all alone. And now you’re leaving too.”

“Yes, I have too, there isn’t enough food here to stay, but you don’t have to be alone.”

“Sniffle. I don’t?”

“No, I was hoping you’d come with me.”

Nicole launched herself across the room and gave Mari the biggest hug she could ever remember receiving.

“I’ll take that as a yes then?”

“Yes. What can I bring?”

“How about we work on that tomorrow morning and then head out tomorrow afternoon. OK?”

“OK Mari. Thank you for coming.”

“Your welcome. But I have to ask. I heard you say that when I first found you too. How did you know I would come?”

“I didn’t know who would, just that someone would come save me. Sometimes I get these feelings or thoughts. I don’t always understand them at the time and they’re not really specific. I don’t know how to describe them. When I

realized I was all alone I just had this feeling that someone would show up. Someone who could protect me and take care of me.”

“Wow. Can you promise me one thing?”

“What?”

“Next time you have a feeling or thought about something, please let me know. It just might be important.”

“Deal!”

Brad drove his truck with the three engineers following Wolf’s truck west across New York. Sticking to highways and back roads they managed to mostly avoid any zombies and the few they ran into were easily dispatched or when possible they simply drove away from them. Heading west on the Southern Tier Expressway just outside of Jamestown NY Wolf unexpectedly came to a stop.

Swerving to avoid hitting Wolf’s truck, Brad screeched to a stop and got out yelling at him.

“Shut up!”

“No, don’t tell me to shut up. You could have...”

BANG!

Still ignoring Brad’s tirade Wolf grabbed a pair of binoculars and started scanning looking for the source of the gunshot.

BANG!

With a second shot he was able to quickly pinpoint the area it came from and turned his binoculars in that direction. Finally, not able to see anything he got back in his truck, carefully drove down past the guardrail and cut across the grassy

median to the empty pavement. He continued across the lanes and onto the exit ramp heading down to the road which passed by a Bob Evans restaurant.

Brad was furious that he just drove off without saying a word and got back in his truck recklessly driving the same route that Wolf had just cautiously gone. He screeched to a halt in the Bob Evans parking lot where Wolf was now parked and sitting in his truck watching a young woman dropping zombie after zombie with her AR-15. Nearly a dozen were on the ground already and just two more were left, one barely walking with a severe limp towards her and one still in good shape and rapidly approaching her from behind.

Thinking he had to rescue her Brad jumped out of his truck and ran past Wolf's truck just as Wolf opened his door. Brad collided with it and dropped to the ground in a heap. Without taking his eyes off the girl, Wolf closed his door and ignored Brad still writhing on the ground.

She turned, lined up and shot the one coming up behind her. Dropping her magazine she slammed a fresh one home, charged the rifle and lined up on the limper taking her time as it was still a distance off. Finally she pulled the trigger and the throat of the zombie just disintegrated as it fell over dead.

Immediately she scanned in all directions pausing briefly as she picked up the two trucks but still making sure she was momentarily secure. Once satisfied she backed up to the restaurant entrance and opened the door and backed in closing the door.

“Nicole, are you OK?”

“Yes Mari. Who are those men?”

“I don't know and I'm not sure I want to find out.”

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“You wanted me to tell you when I had a feeling again?”

“Yes. Please! Don’t be shy. What is it?”

“One of those men is going to somehow save you.”

“Save me?”

“Yes. I don’t know which one, or when, just that one of them is going to save you from getting hurt.”

“I guess we should go say ‘Hi’ then.”

Brad got to his feet, still a bit shaky, and was about to give Wolf another piece of his mind when the restaurant door opened and a vision of beauty emerged. Brad was instantly infatuated with the woman coming out of the restaurant, so much so that he didn’t even notice the girl following behind her.

While Brad was still staring Wolf got out, shouldered a shotgun and walked over.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

“How long were you sitting there?”

“Long enough.”

“Why didn’t you help me?”

“You didn’t need it.”

“Well yeah, but...”

“You can call me Wolf.”

“Wolf?”

“Yes.”

“OK. I’m Mari and this is Nicole.”

Mari felt Wolf, as large and imposing as he was, could be a threat. His appearance just kind of said trouble but she wasn’t sure who the trouble was meant for yet. He carried himself with an alert but calm presence and looked like he knew how to use his gun. She turned her head to look at four other guys approaching, all just a little bit older than her.

“Hey babe, I’m Brad,” he introduced himself putting forth his hand to shake hers. When she extended her arm he grabbed her hand in a crushing grip making her wince.

“Who are they?”

“Oh they’re some geeks from MIT hanging around with me. I’m kind of their protector you know. Did I mention I was quarterback for our football team?”

Was this guy serious? We’re fighting for our lives against a substantial portion of the population turned into zombies and he’s telling me about his jock status and trying to hit on me? Mari inwardly just shook her head at the cluelessness.

Wolf spoke up, “Mind if we camp out in the building tonight? It would be nice to sleep on something other than a truck seat.”

She looked at Nicole and then turned back to them, “Fine with me. But I got dibs on the food.”

“Agreed,” said Wolf.

“Hey wait a minute. If there’s food in there it should be shared!” complained Brad.

Giving him the eye, Wolf repeated, “Agreed. The food has already been claimed by you. We have our own food.” He turned and started rummaging in the back of his truck retrieving a few bags and then walking towards the door.

The four guys followed along with Brad not looking very happy.

Mari looked at Nicole who just shrugged and they turned, following the others into the restaurant.

Chapter 7

FEMA Camps

A distance outside Hagerstown in Maryland Roy quickly stopped when the military men pointed the weapons at his vehicle.

“Occupants of the vehicle, step out, set any weapons on the roof of the car and then move away.”

Anna got out, set the handgun on the roof and moved away with Roy and the kids joining her. The other vehicle had John doing the same and Julie going to stand by him while Senator Mitchell rushed towards the troops yelling “Arrest him! Arrest them!”

Two of the guys dressed in BDUs stepped forward, grabbed the Senator and threw him to the ground quickly cuffing him with flexi zip-tie cuffs as he sputtered in rage. Yanking him to his feet they dragged him over to a military truck and dumped him on the ground where another soldier covered him with his M16 with, of all things, a bayonet affixed to the end of it.

The one who appeared to be in charge walked over to Roy’s group.

“Name?”

“Roy, my wife Anna and our kids Jake and Lucas.”

“Story?”

“Excuse me?”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Oh. How much time you got?”

“Try the short version.”

“Certainly, um, “ Roy said scanning his chest, “Lieutenant?”

“Sergeant.”

“Sorry, Sergeant Alvarez. I’ll try to be brief.”

“Landed in Philly about, what 2 weeks ago?”

Anna nodded.

“Yeah, about two weeks ago. Strange landing, airport was deserted. We got off the plane in the middle of the tarmac and got attacked by these creatures. We’re not sure what they are.”

Lucas spoke up, “They’re zombies!”

“Lucas! Your father is speaking.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Anyway they attacked us and...”

“Was anyone scratched or bit?”

“No, we escaped back into the plane before any even came close. Unfortunately the others ran or fought and they died. Anyway, we found Julie,” point across the way to her, “also hiding in the hold. We ran into John over there and the Senator a few days back and have been traveling together ever since. We’re trying to get back home to Phoenix but the Senator insisted we escort him to Camp David first.”

“He’s really a senator?”

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t recognize him but John said he’s a page that used to work for another senator and kind of got pressed into escort service.”

“Why was he screaming about having you arrested?”

“We’ve had to shoot some of those things.”

“Zombies.”

“Really, that’s what they’re officially being called?”

“See dad, I told you!”

“Lucas!”

“Sorry mom.”

“Yes, the official name is now zombies. Something about a mutated rabies infection. Don’t mean jack to me, all I know is if they get you you’re either eaten alive or if they harm you but you get away you eventually turn into one.”

“No worries there. We’ve had zero direct exposure to them.”

“Good to hear. We’re still going to have to test you just to make sure.”

“So you’re fine with us shooting them?”

“Fine? Hell, yeah. Last thing I want is to have to fight even more of them.”

“What about this test?”

“Simple blood draw, if you check out OK, you’re free to go, just not this way.”

“And if we don’t check out?”

“Forced quarantine for both your and my protection.”

“FEMA camps?”

“Essentially yeah. Ain’t pretty. Everyone in there is just waiting to die. Once they’re infected there’s nothing we can do other than let them live their last few weeks in peace and then at the end restrain them and end it quickly...” he choked up getting out the last part.

“Let’s hope we pass.”

“Yes, it would be best for everyone.”

“I’m surprised your told us what’s going on in the camps.”

“There really is no reason to hide it. Those of us left know the stakes or are too clueless to care. The media’s gone and the government is just about wiped out too.”

“Wiped out?”

“Yes. Washington DC is a seething mass of well over a million zombies. It’s a good thing your buddy over there got himself and the senator out when he did.”

“For now I’d call them temporary traveling companions at best. So who’s in charge?”

“A few did make it out, mostly the ones that understand the situation and knew when to run. Just about all the career politicians were too stupid to realize what was happening or somehow thought ‘the authorities’ would swoop in to rescue them. Given the situation they turned over all authority to the military. They’re running what’s left of the country out of Norad.”

“Wow, I guess it really has fallen that far then.”

“Yes sir. Ah here’s our medic, she’ll take your blood samples.”

“How long does the test take?”

“We’ll know in a few minutes.”

“Hi. I’m Corporal Pawltry, but you can call me Marian. I’ll need each of you to roll up your sleeves and line up here.”

She proceeded to swab each arm, insert the needle and take a small vial of blood from each. Once all were collected she took a needle and injected a clear liquid into the vials of blood. For the next minute she shook them by hand, waited

about fifteen minutes while making small talk and then held each one up and studied them.

Not able to take it any longer, Anna finally asked, “So, did we pass.”

With a smile she said, “Yes. You’re all clean.”

“What would have happened if we’d been infected?”

“These would have clumped together and gotten very dark, almost black. Your samples stayed a nice bright red without clumping so you’re good.”

Signs of relief were heard all around.

“Thanks for cooperating, I have to go test the others.” She went off towards John and Julie while another soldier who was talking with them left to confer with Sergeant Alvarez. After a few minutes Corporal Pawltry went over to take a sample from the Senator. He put up a fuss until the guard standing next to him nudged him in the head with the barrel of his M16. Quietly he finally complied and let his sample get drawn. Once finished there she went over to Alvarez, said a few words, nodded and then walked away.

The sergeant walked over and waved Julie and John to come join them, “Well, you’re all clean so you’re free to go. Is there anything we can do to help you?”

“Food? Water? Weapons? Supplies?”

“MREs?”

“Pass.”

“Here’s a flat of water and you’re welcome to any of the confiscated firearms we have over there.”

“Confiscated?”

“Those who failed the blood test. They don’t need guns in the camps so we’ve been, ahem, shall we say ‘holding on to them’ for now. Since they won’t need them again we’d rather help those who are still human, and decent citizens, to stay that way.”

“I guess that makes sense. On one hand you’re doing what we feared, disarming the population... then again on the other hand you’re passing them right back out so I guess it’s the best you can do given the circumstances.”

They followed the soldier over to the back of a HMMWV where he pulled back a tarp on whole variety of guns. “If you’re familiar with something, go with that, but keep in mind that accuracy is more important than stopping power. A couple of 22’s to the neck work a heck of a lot better than a half dozen .45’s to the chest.”

Anna picked out an AR-15 for herself while Roy selected a bolt action rifle and a pump action shotgun. For the kids they grabbed a couple of 10/22’s with .22lr handguns to go with them. Roy asked if he could also take a handgun and was told take all you can reasonably carry. He didn’t need to hear any more and grabbed himself a pair of Glocks in .40 caliber and took nice stainless steel AK47 too. “For the truck,” he said smiling.

John went for a pair of 9mm pistols and a SU 2000, also in 9mm. Julie surprised them all by stepping right up, grabbing a Browning A-bolt rifle setup for sniping and worked the action like she’d been doing it all her life.

As they all stared at her she finally noticed and said, “I might not be that old but I grew up in the country on a farm shooting guns since I was 8.” Blushing a bit she turned back and added a 1911 sidearm and then reached way back in the pile and pulled out a 20” machete with sheath. “How affective are these against... them?”

Alvarez answered, “Very. A severed head is just as good as a spine shot. Just remember if you’re using that they’re already too close. Oh, and make sure you don’t get any fluids on you.”

She smiled and strapped the sheath to her leg. By now the Senator had been released and was fuming about being held captive. He tried to order the troops around but they ignored him. Next he went around recording everyone’s name and number telling them he’d be personally leading the court martial against him. The final straw was discovering that they were actually giving out guns to the civilians instead of arresting them. He just about had a heart attack over it.

“Don’t forget some ammo,” said the Sergeant gesturing to another truck full of ammo cans in the back. He helped locate each of the calibers they needed and made sure they too at least a full ammo can each and in some cases two filled cans.

As they mounted up, the Senator realized he would get nothing from the troops and demanded that he be escorted to Camp David. The soldier informed him that the camp was abandoned and the only functioning government was at Norad. He then immediately demanded the civilians escort him across country to Norad.

“You folks take care and I’d suggest heading north east well into Ohio before trying to swing towards home, the areas south of here are pretty well infested. Oh, Chicago is too so stay out of the city.”

“Thanks. You all take care and stay safe.”

Patting his M16 he answered, “We intend to.”

The all gathered around one of the larger tables in the Bob Evans and settled down for a fairly simple meal. While the restaurant was still fairly well stocked, many of the items required cooking and without power it was difficult so simple fare made up the meal. Bottles of water along with mac and cheese and some canned vegetables, all items that could be made over a simple fire with boiling

water. Wolf made sure all the doors were well secured and setup some noise traps on each just in case someone did try to get in. They made small talk, mostly about zombies and a little about themselves before breaking up for the evening.

Nicole and Mari had setup their stuff in the manager's office where there was a couch and the guys 'camped out' in the main dining room. Hours later Nicole was fast asleep on the couch and Mari was dozing off on the floor dreaming of being trapped under water. A great weight was pressing down on her and she couldn't breathe. Finally she managed to drag herself back to conscious to find Brad on top of her with a strong hand clamped over her mouth.

She tried to scream but he held up a knife and told her to keep quiet or he slit her throat and use the girl instead. Her eyes pleaded with him to stop but he reached down with his free hand and began tearing her clothes off. He used her torn shirt to tie her wrists together and stuffed the shorts she was wearing to bed into her mouth to keep her quiet. Sliding the knife down her torso, just enough for her to feel the blade but not actually slicing the flesh, he got down to her panties. Grabbing the elastic band he pulled them away from her skin and slid the knife under them.

With a quick motion he cut right through them but surprisingly she saw his arm fly up much higher than she would have expected. His expression proved his surprise too as he found himself dangling in mid air with Wolf's hand holding him up by his throat. No small feat as Brad was 240 and 6'1" himself. He slashed with the knife at Wolf who, with his free hand caught the wrist, gave a twist and caused the knife to drop to the floor. He released Brad's neck with his other arm dropping his feet to the floor, while still holding the wrist he brought his now free arm up and around in an open handed punch to the back of the elbow eliciting a distinct crack and a bend in the joint that the human anatomy was never designed to have.

Screaming Brad dropped to the floor. Wolf turned to Mari who looked at him and then flicked her eyes to some movement behind him. He turned back just in time as Brad had found the fallen knife and, with his good arm, was plunging it

straight for Wolf's stomach. He side stepped the thrust, grabbed the arm and with his other hand slammed into the inside of the elbow on this arm. Brad's arm buckled and folded in on itself neatly plunging the knife, still held in his own hand, right into his chest.

By now Nicole had woken up from the commotion and was screaming quite loudly. Wolf stepped over Mari, grabbed her bound wrists and with a flick of his own arm, produced a blade from out of seemingly thin air, sliced the torn up shirt binding her arms and said he'd be right back. He took Mari's keys from the counter, grabbed the still form of Brad by the hair and dragged the body from the room with the knife still in the chest.

The other three guys had come running but Wolf stopped them at the door and told them to go back to bed, leave Mari and Nicole to their privacy and then point blank asked if any had a problem with Brad's condition. After a quick glance at the body and each other, the only question they had was who gets his truck.

Wolf dragged the body outside, dumped it in the street and walking back through the lot he opened up her Jeep and found a bag with clothes in it. Back inside the restaurant he re-secured the doors, re-set his noise traps and went to the office. Without looking in he tossed the bag of clothes gently through the door and said, "The keys are in the bag. I locked your Jeep back up."

A quiet voice from the room replied, "Thank you," as he walked away to go explain things to the other three.

The following morning Wolf told the three guys to go find something to do in the kitchen and brought a couple bowls of oatmeal to Mari and Nicole. Nicole started eating right away while Mari just sat in her bedroll holding the bowl with one hand.

"Go ahead and eat, I'm not going to hurt you so you can put your gun down pick up the spoon instead."

Pulling her other arm out from under the blanket she set the pistol down right next to her and said, “How’d you know?”

“Logical assumption after last night. Are you OK? I thought I stopped him in time but I, um... wasn’t...” Wolf was turning bright red.

“No, I am unharmed thanks to you. And yes, you did stop him before he could do anything bad.”

Nicole looked at Wolf and smiled, “Thanks for the oatmeal.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Why is your name Wolf?”

“It’s actually my last name, but I’m used to going by it.”

“What’s your first name?”

“Harold.”

Pffftttt... ! Wolf turned to look at Mari who had just spit her oatmeal back in the bowl.

“Harold? Really?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t suppose you ever went by Har...,” she began with a grin.

“Don’t go there...”

Nicole looked back and forth at the two of them before she finally got it and just blurted out, “Harry Wolf!” and then fell into a fit of laughter. Finally Mari couldn’t hold out any longer and started laughing too. Eventually even Wolf finally broke and let loose with a smile and a few chuckles too.

Once everyone got themselves under control Mari looked up at him and said, “My full name is Marigold Flowers so I guess we’re even WOLF,” she said emphasizing his preferred name,

“I guess we are, MARI,” he returned.

“Nicole, even though we know his full name, from now on, please...”

“I know, call him Wolf. I promise I will Mr. Wolf,” she added turning to him. “You saved my friend Mari last night from that bad man. I had a feeling you would.”

“Do you still have that feeling?”

“No. Just like it went away when you came to my house, this one went away when Mr. Wolf took the bad man away.”

Wolf looked questioningly at Mari who responded, “I’ll explain later.”

With a shrug he turned to go, paused and then asked, “How about we all get together in 30 minutes and discuss our future?”

“Sounds good.”

Mari and Nicole finished up the oatmeal, cleaned up a bit with some wet wipes, got dressed, Mari with her hand gun tucked away under her shirt, and went out to join the others.

Without preamble, Wolf started, “As we all know Brad will not be traveling with us any longer.”

Melvin, Rob and Darren all said they were quite fine with the situation as Brad had always been a bully to them and they were only with him as he had a working vehicle and a way for them to originally flee the overrun school and surrounding city.

With that settled, he continued, “Mari and Nicole are under my protection as are...”

“I can take care of myself!”

“I know you can, Mari, as you so aptly demonstrated yesterday with the zombies. But it doesn’t hurt to have someone watching your back once in a while either. Now, as I was saying, Mari and Nicole are under my protection as are the three of you for as long as we are traveling together. Regardless of the collapse of society, I will not accept any lawless actions. Now, more than ever we need to pull together, take care of each other and work together. Please don’t misunderstand, I’m not trying to be a dictator or tell you it’s my way or the highway, but if we each have our own agendas and are not working toward a common goal then divided we will all eventually fall.”

Apprehension at his soliloquy turned to nods of agreement as he finished it and fixed each of them with a brief stare.

Mari spoke up, “I have nothing, my parents are dead and I have no relatives that I know of but Nicole here has relatives in Utah. I told her I’d try to get her to them.”

“Utah? Well that’s on the way to California and our homes are there. I guess we could follow along with you,” quickly looking to Wolf and adding, “if it’s OK that is.”

“I told you, this is not a dictatorship. You’re free to go where you want. For now I don’t have a specific destination in mind so it sounds like west it is for all of us.”

The group, with a new found upbeat attitude started packing their stuff and stripping the restaurant of everything they could find of use. By late morning they had filled Brad’s truck with food, toiletries mostly consisting of a number of cases of toilet paper, and some cookware. The guys decided to share the driving of the

truck, Wolf would take his own and Mari and Nicole would stay with their Jeep. The engineering students all took turns drooling over the HEMI in it and each had ideas on how to make it even more powerful along with adding armor and all sorts of other modifications. Mari looked a bit skeptically at them and they agreed, for now, to leave her SUV alone.

“Can you believe the nerve of that senator?”

“First he wants to disarm us, then have us arrested and then expects us to help him!”

“You’re not actually thinking of taking him to Norad?”

“We’re headed home, dear. When we pass a road that heads that way it’ll be up to John to either take him or open the car door and point the way.”

“Good. What route do you want me to mark down?”

“Let’s do as he suggested, head north for 80 and then we can take it west almost across the entire country. Only around major population centers will we need to possibly take alternate routes. According to this map the stretch between Youngstown and just west of Cleveland could be rough, lots of urban areas.”

“We’ll just have to take it easy and see how the situation goes. Hopefully we can drive or shoot our way past or out of any problems.”

“What about gas? And food?”

“Keep your eyes open for remote stations, restaurants, and such. Maybe truck stops right off the interstate. Hopefully most would have taken off before everything broke loose and they’ll be deserted.”

The two vehicles pulled into a truck stop and everyone got out to stretch.

“OK, we need to check the fast food joint over there and figure out how we’re going to get gas out of the ground and into our vehicles.”

“Julie and I will stay with the vehicles, the five of you go check for food and gas.”

“You sure Anna?”

“Yeah, with these the odds have gotten much better,” she said checking the AR and loading a round into the chamber, drawing a scowl from the Senator.

The five guys headed off for the fast food restaurant and found the door locked. John walked over to the generic landscaping, picked up a decorative rock about the size of a football and flung it at the door. The glass shattered and the Senator took out his notepad and made another note. John used the end of the shotgun to clear out the broken edges and then entered.

“Boys, I want you to stand guard here it would not be good to have one of them come sneaking in behind us. If you see any, find us but don’t shoot unless they’re close enough to threaten you.”

“OK Dad.”

The three kept going, John and Roy hopped the counter and Roy turned on his flashlight. Any refrigerated food was spoiled and useless however buns full of preservers and the large containers of dehydrated food could last for quite awhile. They gathered all there was including thousands of condiment packets and a box full of disposable forks and spoons. The janitor closet provided a tool box with assorted hand tools, a flashlight, a few cases of toilet paper and another case of hand towels. In the manager’s office, once they forced open the locked door, they found a first aid kit mounted on the wall and another flashlight. Under the serving counter they found a charger, a receiver/repeater and a dozen headset radios. Roy commented that these would be very useful if they could find some way to charge them.

Everything had been piled on the counter and they were bagging up as much as they could when the Senator asked them how they were planning to pay for it. You could have knocked John and Roy over with a feather they were so stunned at the comment.

Of course the Senator wrote everything down in his notebook while they started hauling it out to the vehicles.

“Quiet out here?”

“Yep. Haven’t seen a single one.”

“That’s good. We’re almost done here. You can either help carry or stay here on watch.”

They looked at each other and the bags and said in unison, “We’ll keep watching.”

Fifteen minutes later they were done and headed over to the gas station/convenience store. Inside was a treasure trove of unclaimed and unspoiled food and drink. Things that spoiled, like milk, they ignored but many of the cold drinks are only cold for convenience, not for necessity so they opened the refrigerators and pulled out row after row of soda and sports drinks. The shelves yielded lots of snack food and candy. Not the healthiest, thought Roy, but still better than starving. At the checkout counter they grabbed lighters, more key chain flashlights, all the various sized batteries and all of the pocket knives.

“Those look cheap,” said John.

“Yeah, I don’t expect them to last but we’ve got enough spares now it shouldn’t matter for awhile. Hey, don’t forget to grab all the meds over there. They’ll be in high demand if we get a headache or something. I also found these,” he held up a couple of two and a half gallon plastic gas cans. “They were in the back room. Probably to loan out to people who ran out of gas.”

“DAD!”

“Yeah Jake?”

“Incoming...”

John and Roy brought their weapons to bear and headed to the doors to see a small handful of zombies milling around by the gas pumps. “I count four, that’s one for each of us. I’ll take the big one.”

“I got red jacket.”

“Baseball cap guy.”

“Thanks guys, that leaves me to shoot the woman.”

“Everyone line up on the necks. Remember it has to be a spine shot. On the count of three.”

“One.... Two....”

BANG! BANG!

“Who shot?”

All said, “Not me.”

Lucas continued with , “Look! There’s mom and Julie advancing on them! They must have shot the other two.”

“You two stay here. John, lets head out and get the other two.”

They went outside lined up their shots and dropped the third one while Julie dropped the fourth one.

“You OK?”

“Yes dear. Didn’t know if you saw them or not so we figured we’d take them out for you.”

“I’ve got the boys on lookout and we were about to shoot when you did.”

“Well, just hurry up in there.”

They turned back, finished grabbing what they wanted and hauled it out to load in the vehicles.

Anna and Julie headed towards the store saying they were going to look around real quick.

“But we got everything.”

“I’m sure you did,” she said but continued walking anyway.

Just a few minutes later they came back with a couple of filled shopping bags each.

“What did you find that we didn’t?” asked Roy looking in one of Anna’s bags. “Oh yeah that stuff,” he said quickly turning away and looking for something else to do.

Julie and Anna laughed at the reaction as they had already figured the guys wouldn’t think of grabbing tampons and other feminine products.

Without power the pumps were obviously not working. John and Roy looked, in vain, for something to get the gas out of the tanks and into their cans or vehicles. It was Jake who stated the obvious. “Why can’t we just take it from that truck over there?”

“What truck?”

“The big gas delivery truck right there,” he said pointing, “assuming it isn’t empty. It is parked in the rest area so maybe the driver just stopped to eat and not deliver gas.”

John jumped up on the saddle tank and grabbed the door handle before letting out a yell and jumping back.

“What?!”

“There’s one in there.”

Looking at the window they could all see it scratching at the glass to get out but effectively trapped for now... unless it learned how to open the handle.

“Why do you need to go in there?”

“I don’t. Just thought maybe his delivery logs were there and it would tell us what he was carrying.”

“That was a good idea.”

“Yeah was. I guess we just have to smell it and hope we get the right stuff.”

They turned the valves and smelled what came out of each tank compartment. It all smelled the same.

“I dunno. Smells like gas to me.”

“Me too. Probably just different grades. Turn that valve just a tiny bit. If we can get the gas to trickle out it shouldn’t be too hard to fill these cans. Boys, go tell the ladies to bring the vehicles over there. I don’t plan on lugging this stuff back and forth.”

They ran off and returned in a few minutes as the vehicles pulled up. The cans were filling reasonably quick and in about a half hour they had filled both cars and topped off the cans, securing them in the back of the truck.

“Everyone took a bathroom break I hope? We should be good through to Illinois with the food and gas.”

Chapter 8

Two Losers and a Bridge

Wolf pulled his truck off on to the shoulder with the other vehicles following suit. He walked back to both other vehicles telling them to stay put for now and then got back in his truck and drove slowly ahead. Way off down the road he could see a small group of people crouched down behind a couple of trucks but they were crouched on his side, not the other side as you'd expect with an ambush. Something here wasn't right. He checked the shotgun and then continued driving.

When the first shot hit his hood he quickly turned the truck crosswise, got out and took cover behind the front wheel and engine block.

“Why are you shooting at me?”

A woman's voice called out, “We aren't, someone's on the overpass up ahead. They shot out our side mirror and we've been pinned down here for almost an hour now.”

“Don't you have guns to shoot back with?”

“Yes, but most aren't really designed for the distance involved. I'm sure whoever's up there has a sniper setup,” a different female voice called out.

He risked a quick glance round the truck and indeed the overpass was a good 600 yards away, too far for most shooters. Risking getting shot at, he slipped back in his truck, staying low and sped back the way he came. At almost mile away from the bridge, back with the others, he got out, went to the back and got his sniper rifle out of the case and set it across the seat and then got out a spotting scope. At this distance any shot would be wasted so he used the scope for simple reconnaissance.

Wolf could just make out two figures on the distant overpass. Both looked to have rifles with scopes but at this distance he couldn't make any other determination. Scanning the exit and road signs along with the surrounding terrain he was finally satisfied and took his M1A and put it back in the case, taking the semi auto shotgun and AR15 instead. Reaching into his accessory bag he produced a silencer for the AR, screwed it into place and told the others to keep a lookout but stay put, this was going to take a few hours, at least. He walked further back the way they had come and then when nearly out of sight he turned and went off the road and into a tree line.

Moving through cover, Wolf rapidly ate up ground heading a good distance perpendicular to the highway before turning and paralleling the highway. As luck would have it he crossed a railroad right of way and used that to head west. He avoided the few farms and structures around. Eventually he crossed over county highway 13 and came down from the tracks walking a short distance to River road. The road led on a meandering curve back to the interstate almost a mile away. Well before becoming visible he slipped back into the forested area on the west side of the road and moved amongst the trees heading steadily south.

Just before emerging from the trees he stopped and used his AR scope to survey the bridge. The good news was that they couldn't see him from their firing positions. The bad news, he couldn't see them either, couldn't confirm if it was just two or if there were more. Wolf would have to do this the hard way. Moving from tree to tree, slowly and silently he was able to approach to within 200 feet before running out of cover.

Getting down on the ground he ever so slowly moved his head out from the trees just a few inches above the earth. From his ant's eye view he could just make out the two shooters on the bridge, both positioned such that their backs were effectively to him.

"Earl, I'm gettin tired of sitting here shootin at dem."

“Well, then start hittin dem. You saw dem those trucks, they got foods and stuff.”

“I know, and I saw some womans too, makes sure you dun’t shoot them. I’m gonna have me sum fun with dem.”

“Just shoot the guys and we can take what we want then. You saw that uther truck, one shot to the hood and he just up and ranned off. These dumb ones sure be scarred cats.”

Wolf heard enough to know this group was part of the problem. He didn’t know about the other ones yet but these had to go. He backed up, stood and slowly moved out to the pavement. One step at a time, slow, steady and silent he advanced on them. It was too easy.

“Earl, want a nudder beer?”

Wolf noticed the cooler about fifteen feet back from them.

“Yeah.”

He was within fifty feet, his AR in the full ready position, still advancing silent step over silent step.

The guy set his gun down and mopped his brow.

Forty feet.

He turned for the cooler and saw Wolf.

Shink.

The relatively quiet metallic sound of the suppressed AR barely registered to Earl. He figured it was some noise Billy had made. He was wrong as he discovered when Billy’s body fell over onto his with a bullet hole right between the eyes.

“Why you sons’ a bitches!” Earl yelled as he got to his feet and pointed his rifle down the road assuming someone there had shot him.

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“What the?” as he turned his head to see Wolf standing there. A moment’s hesitation before he started swinging his rifle around.

Shink.

Earl stopped, dropped the rifle and then in slow motion teetered towards the edge finally falling over nearly twenty five feet to the pavement below. He was dead before he even hit the ground.

Wolf steadied the surrounding landscape for a moment, turned and walked back down River road. When he reached the tree line on the east side he turned into it and worked his way, following the trees, back to the highway. Finally he stepped out of the woods, right near the group of seven pinned down behind their cars and spoke up, “You can get up now, both of them are dead.”

As he was not expected, everyone jumped at the sudden appearance and voice and many swung weapons around to point his way.

His rifle still shouldered and the shotgun held pointing towards the ground he simply ignored their actions as he added, “I’m going to get my companions and we’ll be coming this way shortly. You’re welcome to wait around and we can all have a conversation or you can clear on out if you’re not interested.” Turning he walked off down the road while the people all looked at each other with puzzled expressions.

Rejoining his group Wolf quickly filled them in on what transpired before they mounted up and continued down the road. Approaching the other group they all saw them still holding their weapons but, as Wolf noticed, no longer in a threatening manner. A quick head count confirmed there were still seven. One older guy, a couple and a family, apparently, by the way they subconsciously clustered together.

He stopped the truck about a hundred feet back and the rest followed suit, pulling to either side of the truck as they stopped. Once they all got out they too kept their weapons handy but were not threatening. They spread out across the road to avoid presenting a single target and walked up to within twenty feet of the others.

“Thanks for taking them out.”

“No problem but I did it as much for us as for you. I was planning on taking their guns and ammo but you’re welcome to anything else you can find up there.”

“Hey, now just wait a minute. You freely admit you murdered two people and now you’re advocating stealing from the bodies? What’s your name?” said the man pulling out a notepad.

“You’re kidding?”

“No, I will be reporting you, all of you,” his arm sweep encompassing his group along with Wolf’s group, “to the authorities for these crimes you’re committing.”

“And just who the hell died and made you judge?”

“I’m what’s left of the government and what I say goes.”

“Government? You?”

Another guy spoke up in a sheepish voice almost as if he didn’t want to, “That’s Senator Mitchell. The military said most of the government is gone, Washington is a seething mass of a million zombies or more and most of the fall back locations for the government have also been compromised. They said what’s left is based out of Norad and it’s the military running the country right now.”

“Did you say Senator Mitchell?”

“Yes.”

“The same Senator Mitchell who convinced the entire defense subcommittee to defund project Dark Eagle?”

“That was a waste of tax payer money. All they did was spend millions and millions on training and never had anything to show for it. Not one successful mission was ever attempted.”

“Hundreds of missions were successfully completed, none were ever documented so all of you pompous asses could sit in your cushy chairs and have plausible deny-ability to your constituents about what was actually done to keep this country safe and secure.”

“Well we can’t have a bunch of whacked out Rambo’s just doing secret stuff. I voted to defund it and am proud of my vote.”

“Your vote along with the immediate seizure of the accounts associated with Dark Eagle effectively terminated the support staff and left a half dozen teams stranded deep in enemy territory. Most of those solders never made it back alive.”

“Who are you? How do you know what you're talking about?”

“I know because your actions directly resulted in the death of most of my team. Their blood is on your hands,” Wolf said as he steadily and with purpose strode up to Senator Mitchell. He grabbed him by the throat, lifted him up and slammed him back against the car never losing his grip. His other hand brought up his sidearm which he put right against the senator’s forehead. Wolf struggled internally, his face red with fury his hand holding the gun shaking almost uncontrollably while his other hand continued squeezing on the neck. Finally he got control of his emotions, dropped the Senator to the ground and walked away saying, “I won’t waste a bullet on a weasel like you.”

Mari had prepared to open fire on the others, expecting them to come to the Senator’s aid but was surprised when none even spoke up in defense of him and

she distinctly noticed a couple shaking their heads apparently in agreement with Wolf's assault of him.

The guy with the family finally spoke up, "Just for the record, he's with us but I certainly don't consider him one of us. He's recorded our actions in that book many times and also keeps threatening us with the authorities. Of course he's been expecting us to help him too. He refuses to touch a firearm and thinks we should get rid of ours too. By the way, my name is Roy."

"I'm Wolf." Gesturing to the others, "Mari, Nicole, Milton, Rob and Darren. Sorry for the outburst."

"My wife Anna, those two are Jake and Lucas and that's John and Julie and you've already met the, what was your term, pompous ass I think, over there. I don't think I would have shown the restraint you did."

The Senator had finally gotten to his feet and was nearly frothing at the mouth he was so worked up. "How dare you assault me! How dare all of you turn against me! YOU ARE WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS COUNTRY! I WILL SEE ALL OF YOU LOCKED UP IN GUANTANAMO AS TERRORISTS!! I DON'T NEED ANY OF YOU! John, give me the keys to my Cadillac."

"No."

"WHAT?! I SAID..."

"I heard you. And my answer is no. It's mine and Julie's now. You don't like it file a complaint, or better yet, go call the authorities. Here, I'll even give you my cell phone." John tossed the phone to the Senator .

Fumbling with it he got it open only to have his scowl grow even bigger. "There are NO BARS OF SERVICE!"

Wolf pointed down the road, "Go."

John and Julie pointed, "Go."

Roy and Anna pointed, “Go.”

“I’ll get you! I’LL GET EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU! I’M A SENATOR I RULE OVER YOU! YOU ARE HERE TO SERVE ME!”

The shouts and threats continued as he stormed off eventually fading away as he got far enough down the road.

Mari finally broke the awkward silence, “So, who wants to tell their story first?”

Hours later everyone was caught up with each other’s stories, Wolf and Roy had walked down to the overpass and scavenged what they could. Upon their return they decided to spend the night right there and circled the vehicles to create a modest barrier.

The following morning, after breakfast the discussion turned to the future. Mari stated their goal of Utah and Anna shared their destination of Phoenix. Quickly they all realized the safety in numbers advantage of traveling together and agreed taking interstate 80 to Salt Lake would be the best route for everyone at this time. They spent the rest of the morning reviewing supplies and ammunition, mostly to determine what they needed to focus on for scavenging.

Melvin, the radio expert jumped all over the headset radios that Roy had grabbed at the fast food store. He explained to the other engineers what to do and in less than 30 minutes they had the base station wired into their truck and soon after rigged up the chargers to run off the cigarette lighter sockets. A bit of tinkering with the transmitting power and by evening he had most of the headsets tested and working with an effective range of nearly a quarter mile.

After spending another night on the side of the road they all felt it was time to get moving again. Mari noticed Nicole was quieter than usual as they were getting going.

“What’s wrong? Are the new people bothering you?”

“No. Well not really. I had another one of my feelings.”

“Tell me. Don’t leave anything out.”

“There is not much to tell. Just a feeling that the shouting man from the other day is coming back.”

“Coming back? I don’t understand.”

“We’re going to see him again.”

“Well he did walk off the way we’re going. We very well might.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Nicole soon drifted off to sleep and Mari keyed her headset, “Wolf?”

“Yeah”

“Keep on the lookout for the Senator.”

“Why?”

“Just keep your eyes open, it might not be anything. I can explain later.”

“OK.”

Wolf was in the lead of the caravan and already paying attention. Not ten minutes later he could see someone running down the highway towards him, no make that people coming down the highway. The distance closed and he could see it indeed was the Senator and about a dozen zombies in a loping shambling pursuit. Quickly keying his radio, “Quick, everyone, cut across the grassy median into the oncoming lanes and keep going. I’ll take care of this. Don’t stop to wait, I’ll catch up.”

The rest did as instructed and Wolf slowed his truck to a halt as the Senator closed the distance.

“Help me! They’re after me! I can’t run much more! Let me in.”

Wolf sat there, the doors locked.

The Senator reached the truck and pounded on the window demanding to be let in.

As the zombies closed in Wolf put the truck in reverse and backed up a hundred yards and stopped. The Senator was running for the truck again, zombies still following. Wolf got out, brought up his AR to bear and pointed it.

BANG!

With a knee totally blown away the Senator collapsed to the ground screaming in pain. Wolf got back in the truck, drove up to him and said, that's my payback for Jason. The zombies will be paying you back for the rest of my team that you killed.

Wolf drove away as the Senator screamed profanities at him and then shortly at the zombies as they reached him and began the feast of the living flesh. Rending and tearing the flesh and muscle from his very bones they ate heartily. The last sight the Senator saw was his very own bowels being pulled from his torso and stuffed into a zombie's mouth.

Continuing west on interstate 80 the caravan progressed slowly stopping regularly at tanker trucks and any place with potential food supplies. Nicole took up her former organizational tendencies and began keeping notebooks with various bits of information in each. One was dedicated to zombie sightings and how they acted. Another to places they found useful supplies at. A third notebook was simply a compilation of lists. Whenever one of the group suggested 'We should look for...' she'd add it to the notebook.

A week later, after passing Toledo, Southbend, Gary and the far southern suburbs of Chicago, they stopped about half way across Illinois at yet another tanker truck to top off their vehicles and ever increasing supply of gas cans. Roy

suggested finding some siphon hoses and then they could utilize the gas station tanks. Wolf noticed Nicole pulling out her notebook and writing in it. He came over and asked, "I've seen you do that before, what are you writing?"

"Making a list."

"Can I see?"

"Sure Mr Wolf."

She handed it to him and he flipped through the first few pages seeing neat and orderly lists on food, beverages, supplies and more that people had mentioned looking for.

"This is very good. How long have you been doing this?"

"About a week now. When we got stuff from that grocery store awhile back I found the notebooks and pens in the supply aisle and took them. I hope that was OK."

"It was more than OK. Your documentation and records can be very helpful to us. How would you like to be our official record keeper?"

"Really? I could do that?"

"Yes."

"Well, here are my other notebook. See if they are good too." Nicole passed the other ones to Wolf who flipped through each and again complimented her. That evening when they gathered for dinner he told the others about her newly assigned duties and that they were to always tell her anything that need to be recorded instead of just making comments that may or not be remembered.

He also assigned her the task of inventorying all of their vehicles and everything in them and then keeping track of what gets used. Nicole, finally feeling like more than a kid tagging along took her new found duties very seriously and could tell anyone in the group, with just a quick glance, what their situation was.

Whenever they approached a new salvaging opportunity the group consulted with Nicole. Of course, food, water and gas were always needed however she'd let them know what else they were running low on or what special items were in demand. She also wrote up lists for each person on the scavenging team. The majority of the group pulled guard duty and would patrol the area, after clearing the building, before the scavengers went in.

During quiet time in the evenings, Nicole approached Melvin and asked if he could teach her about the radios too. He readily agreed and under his tutelage she quickly learned to use them and eventually moved into the more technical aspects of how they actually worked and what she could do in the field to repair them.

One afternoon the radio crackled to life as Melvin's voice came across asking the convoy to pull off the highway and head down to a building he just saw. Wolf took the next exit and worked his way back to the sizable metal building.

“What do we need with a metal fabricating business? No food or water and I doubt we'll find anything else on our list,” said Mari.

Wolf asked, “Melvin, what's your thinking here?”

“Well, we've taken out, or at least disabled, a few zombies simply by hitting them and rolling them over but sooner or later it's going to cause major damage to one of our trucks. If this place has the supplies, and I don't doubt they do, we could rig up some armor plating and brush, or in this case zombie, guards on the vehicles. It would allow us to do major damage to them and not risk the trucks. With the armor plating we'd be able to survive an encounter like the one we had with the guys on the bridge when we first all met.”

“I like where you're going with this. Everyone, you know the drill. Patrols, clear the area, then the building and then Melvin can take a look at what we have to work with.”

Roy and Anna checked over their weapons and headed north. The boys did likewise heading east. Mari and Wolf went south while John and Julie took west. Melvin, Rob, Darren and Nicole stayed with the vehicles. From the earlier scavenging the three guys were able to retire their zombie whackers and replace them with shotguns and even Nicole was given a Ruger 10/22 for defense although, thankfully, she had not yet needed to use it. Both Mari and Wolf were concerned on how she would handle having to shoot someone, even if it was no longer human. Wolf had instructed her and the rest of them that were new to firearms and they were all at least competent enough to handle them safely.

Three of the teams checked back in all clear. A few shots were heard and shortly Jake and Lucas also returned with an all clear. This wasn't the first time the boys had to take a life, perhaps an already 'dead' life, but still they were shooting a person with a face. The first time for each was difficult but with private discussions with each other and later with their parents and the group they came to an acceptance of how things now are and that they would sometimes have to do difficult things to keep themselves and the others safe.

With all the groups back they switched to two groups of four as they approached the building and saw some dried blood on both the door and the handle.

The first team pulled out disposable gloves and donned them. Grabbing the handle they tested the door. The metal door was unlocked and opened with the sounds of rusty hinges protesting a lack of use. Turning on flashlights they entered one by one, each taking up a defensive position and covering a specific direction.

In the short time the group had been together Wolf had them practice and drill and their experience increased building by building. They certainly were not any type of special ops group but even in the short time they had learned to work together, as a group, and to trust in each other.

Once inside, each team went in a different direction clearing the space room by room. The offices up front were vacant however in the large combination work shop and parts warehouse they encountered a couple more zombies. John and Julie each took the kill shot quickly putting them down. Once clear, those with disposable gloves dragged the bodies outside before discarding their gloves and giving the engineers the all clear.

The group returned to the outside while the three guys went in and reviewed the inventory. It took almost two hours to go through the various sheets, bars and rods of metal and verify the tools were still in usable condition. After conferring with the group it was agreed they'd camp out here for awhile while they worked on their truck.

Wolf had two roving patrols at a half mile out watching for zombies or other intruders but so far no others had been seen. The guys pulled in their truck and got to work. Working with metal is not exactly quiet and Wolf was concerned about attracting either zombies or worse so he added a third patrol and moved them all out to about a mile.

As expected the noise did attract a few additional zombies, but these were easily dispatched by the patrols. Over the weeks they had discovered that singly or in small numbers the zombies were easy to deal with. Only when they came in large groups were they difficult to deal with.

During the down time Wolf continued to drill with those not on patrol and worked with Nicole on her .22lr rifle to learn the basics. Once she demonstrated proficiency he told her to keep the rifle with her at all times.

After two days the truck that rolled out of the shop looked nothing like what went in. The sides had armor and spiked bars preventing someone from running up and grabbing on while the front had a split plow, similar to the old steam locomotives. Bars were welded in place across the window openings and they rigged up a simple electronic toggle switch that, when thrown, would retract a bar

and release a dozen caltrops, roughly pyramid shaped spiked devices intended to cause a flat in a pursuing vehicle.

The work was done quite well and Wolf, impressed with their designs, had them put the plows on the other vehicles along with the armor sheets on the sides. Mari was apprehensive about seeing her still new Jeep hacked up but acquiesced and gave in due to the added security it would provide for her and Nicole. Wolf asked them to avoid the whole Mad Max look but the engineers ended up creating some pretty obvious post apocalypse looking vehicles. Mari's jeep wasn't designed for a heavy angled plow to hang off the front so they added a couple of bars sticking forward from each fender with a third part held between them. This bar was sharpened to a razor edge and created a very effective blade, the width of the vehicle and sticking forward just far enough so any zombies would either have their legs knocked out from under them or literally cut off at the knees. It also, like the other vehicles received armor plating.

Their ultimate creation was a mounted turret based magnetic gun that shot 8 inch metal disks. They cut out nearly 3 dozen disks from the scrap metal and in their test the disk went right through a 6 inch thick tree trunk and kept going. Once the system was working they mounted it on their truck.

All in all they spent nearly a week at the metal shop before finally packing up and moving on. Concerned about in the field repairs and modifications, the three guys threw a bunch of scrap metal and the tools for cutting and welding in their truck along with all the necessary gas canisters. The next major urban area concerning Wolf would be the Quad Cities on the border of Illinois and Iowa.

Chapter 9

Another Bridge

When everyone was packed up and ready the caravan pulled out again and drove for about a half hour until Wolf, once again, pulled off the highway and into a gas station. This was a fairly normal occurrence as they took advantage of most gas and food opportunities to at least replenish if not increase their supplies. This station looked like any other highway stop with a number of cars and trucks, an attached fast food chain restaurant and a small convenience store. What had caught Wolf's eye was the intact windows. Most places that had already been raided usually, for some unknown reason, had the windows busted out. They all found that to be strange since the doors were almost always still unlocked.

Wolf started with the usual patrols. They scouted the immediate area, dispatching a few zombies before they could get too close. Moving into the store and the restaurant they cleared both before returning to the group. At this point Wolf, per their current routine, would turn over the group to Nicole. Nine adults and two teenagers gathered around a nine year old girl to get their work orders. The first couple of times she felt overwhelmed at the attention and the fact that adults were looking to her to tell them what to do but everyone was quite supportive and their treating her as an equal and not just a kid to be pushed to the side really helped. Her parents, her teachers, everyone she encountered, regardless of her advanced classes, had always treated her like a dumb kid.

Scanning down her list she looked at Roy and Anna and started, "The usual, any food that isn't spoiled and will keep. Same goes for drinks." To the teens, "Batteries for a start plus I could use more notebooks, notepads, pens and other misc office type supplies. More flashlights, preferably the LED ones would be useful too. Oh, and any medical supplies like band aids and headache pills." Turning to John and Julie, "Gas cans, oil, window washer fluid, and anything else

for maintaining the vehicles that looks useful. Check for tools as we're still missing some wrench sizes." Finally to the engineering students and Wolf she said, "Check all the cars and trucks for anything useful including weapons and ammo. Same as the others, grab food, drink and tools too if you find them."

She wrapped up with, "One last thing, we're running out of room in the trucks so try not to bring back anything that isn't necessary."

"Can't we just get more trucks?" asked Rob.

"It would let us carry more but then we also need more fuel too," replied Wolf.

"Too bad we can't just take a gas truck," said Nicole.

Everyone looked at each other with dumbfounded expressions before Darren said what they were all thinking, "What's stopping us from taking one?"

All the heads turned to the truck parking area in unison.

"Rob, you're with me, you two go see if we can get a gas truck."

"You know, Mr Wolf, if we could get one of those big trailer trucks we could take a lot more stuff too."

"When you guys are done with the gas trucks, check out the other semi trailers. See if any tractors are still running."

"Um, we don't really know anything about semis."

"Put those high IQ brains of yours to work, figure it out and consider this on the job training. Just make sure you work safely. We can't call the paramedics if you get hurt."

Everyone scattered to their assigned tasks while Nicole made some more notes in one of her books before assuming lookout for any wandering zombies.

Darren and Melvin approached the tanker truck. At first glance it appeared in good condition. No puddles under it, tires all inflated and no signs of tampering or looting. They found the cab unlocked, opened the door and climbed up in the truck. Darren popped the hood and took his electronic meter out of his shoulder bag and went to check the battery while Melvin dug through the paperwork looking for information on the load.

John and Julie went through the convenience store grabbing everything auto related and also checked the back room as many times the stations kept a few spare loner cans back there for stranded motorists to borrow. Roy and Anna quickly cleaned out the fast food restaurant. Given the just in time inventory methods along with the need for constant refrigeration they found very little in the way of food. Many condiment packets, some cooking utensils, napkins and TP from the janitor closet completed their haul. The convenience store yielded a lot in the beverage department but not so much in terms of food, or at least quality food. John still took all the chips, dips and candy bars. If food ever got that scarce these would at least keep you alive for awhile and perhaps they could trade them for something better.

Jake and Lucas cleaned out all the batteries. It didn't matter what size as the engineers could rig up nearly anything. The office supply section of the shelf didn't have much but they took it all for Nicole along with everything in the medical and hygiene sections too including things like soap and tampons. The boys had to quickly grow up and realize that everyone on the team had different needs and it was up to them to do their part in gathering the necessary supplies.

Lucas suggested the manager's office and when they finally got through the door with a crowbar they found the building's first aid kit along with more office supplies. Jake said the restaurant next door probably had a manager office too. In a flash they both ran over there, broke down that door and found even more supplies. In the restaurant the medical kit was out in the kitchen area and a few whacks with the crowbar knocked it off the wall and they added it to their haul.

Wolf and Rob checked each vehicle using another pry bar to open trunks or break windows as necessary. As expected they found a few bottles of water and the occasional emergency kit in the trunk. These consisted mostly of flares and band aids but they still took them. In a few glove boxes they found revolvers and in one pickup there was a beat up 30-06 rifle on the floor behind the seats.

The battery checked out but they had no keys so they left the gas truck for now. Moving on to the next one, it was a double trailer FedEx truck. Dead battery and no keys. The final truck looked to be a long haul truck as it was setup with a sleeper cab. Melvin jumped up and opened the door. He was half in the seat when Darren heard him scream and looked up. The others all turned and came running just in time to see Melvin fall out to the ground with a zombie on top of him. Everyone brought up their guns but Melvin and the zombie continued to roll and thrash around on the ground making a shot almost impossible. Julie rushed forward, drew her machete and with one swing sent the head flying.

Darren reached for the body when Nicole yelled out, “No!”

He turned to look at her and saw her holding up gloves. Quickly donning the disposables he grabbed the zombie and dragged it off Melvin. They all gathered around as Melvin pulled himself to a sitting position. He had been scratched numerous times but not bitten.

“Uh oh,” said Jake.

It took Melvin a few moments to realize why Jake had said what he did as the realization that he might be infected and end up turning into one of those things. He dropped his head and began to sob.

Anna stepped forward and said, “We’re not giving up on you Melvin. Jake, Lucas, antibiotic ointment, iodine or anything that will cleanse the wounds! Go! Now!”

She took out a pair of gloves and put them on while they ran off to get the items and Wolf went back to the convenience store going behind the counter. Besides finding a shotgun under the counter he grabbed a couple of bottles from the shelf behind the counter. The boys returned with tubes of antibiotic cream and a wound cleaning solution. She poured it all over each one and rubbed it in but there wasn't enough and the boys said that's all they found.

Wolf held out the bottles and said here, try this. She took one, looked at Melvin and said, "This is going to hurt." and then proceeded to pour the vodka all over each wound, again rubbing it in. The searing pain of alcohol in an open wound necessitated the guys all donning gloves and holding him down while Anna worked on him. She finally finished and then proceeded to use nearly all of the antibiotic cream on the wounds finally covering them with some gauze and tape.

When he was finished up Wolf gave him a hand up, pulled him close and said, quietly so the others couldn't hear, "If this doesn't work I'll make it quick and painless for you."

Melvin didn't know if he should cry, thank him or slug him. He finally settled on a nod and then turned and walked away.

Wolf lead with his shotgun as he climbed up in the truck. It and the sleeper part were both empty. He gave the cab a once over but found nothing of use. He had Rob grab the cutting torch and open the lock on all the trailers. They spent the rest of the day going through each and every FedEx box. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in electronics, computers and such were in the boxes. Mostly useless now although the engineers did take all the batteries and a few laptops too for future experimentation. A lot of business documents, some designer clothes and all sorts of, now, useless stuff comprised the majority of the load. They did find some food and a box labeled with the address of a gun store and a return address of a gun manufacturer. They opened it and found almost 2 dozen assorted brand new Smith and Wesson handguns from the M&P line in various calibers. Nicole was given her

second firearm, a .22lr semi auto pistol, from the new found assortment and a promise of training as soon as possible.

The trailer on the sleeper cab had many large boxes, all containing office furniture.

“Any luck with the other trucks?”

“Good battery on the first one, no keys on either.”

Stepping up and leaning into the cab he called down, “This one has keys.”

“See if it starts.”

Nothing happened.

“Looks like this one is dead too.”

“Let’s pop the hood. I can check and we can probably swap batteries.”

Sure enough the battery was dead so they disconnected it, brought over the good one and connected it. The truck fired right up and soon settled into a steady idle.

“How about the fuel tank?”

“Two tanks. One diesel, one premium, both nearly full.”

“But only one working cab.”

John spoke up, “Can’t we rig up a double trailer like the FedEx truck?”

“We could if all the cabs worked.”

“Just disconnect the trailer and push the cabs out of the way. There are enough of us or we could just use the working cab to push them. If we could connect up the tanker and then a trailer behind that we’d have more than enough gas and storage for a long time.”

They all looked at each other and Roy finally said, “It’s going to take a while but I’m up for it.”

“Anyone know how to drive a truck?”

Blank stares.

“OK, more on the job training.”

With that settled they got to work disconnecting all the trailers and pushing the useless cabs out of the way with the good truck. They managed to figure out how to drive it without too much difficulty or gear grinding but when they hooked up to the first trailer and tried to back it and the bogey into position for the tanker there was much cursing and hollering until they finally got it in right. They dropped the tanker in place and then started loading the trailer with their new found equipment working until dark.

Morning saw a caravan of two pickups followed by an SUV, a double semi and bringing up the rear one final SUV. Wolf led them back to the expressway and took the west bound lanes. Within an hour they were on the bridge over the Mississippi. Seconds later they were slamming on their brakes. Cars and pickup trucks were being pulled across the lanes at the far end of the bridge. Wolf thought about backing up but John called him on the radio and said he could see them being boxed in from behind too.

“Everyone get ready to fight I don’t think they here to discuss the water levels in the river this time of year. Let’s move the vehicles into a more defensible position.”

“Um, Wolf, isn’t that big tank of gas a really big bomb?”, asked Mari.

“Yeah, and it’s also what just might save us.”

“How do you figure”

“If they shoot it there is a reasonable chance of blowing up the bridge and even if the bridge doesn’t go they lose the contents. That tank is probably what prompted this ambush. I don’t think they’re going to shoot unless we do so first.”

Trusting to Wolf’s analysis they positioned two vehicles across the road in front of and behind the tanker and then got out their longer range rifles and took up defensive positions behind the vehicles. At a moment when Wolf and Mari were briefly alone he grabbed her arm, pulled her close and whispered into her ear, “If we get overrun do you want me to take out Nicole or will you?”

Mari pulled free and started to back away with an expression of horror at what he just said.

Stepping close again he said in hushed tones, “Let your imagination run wild about what they might do to her. Anything you or I do will be much kinder. Trust me, it would only be if we’re being overrun and have no other option.”

She still had a look of horror on her face but it wasn’t directed towards Wolf any longer as she glanced towards the Iowa side roadblock. “I don’t know if I could.”

“Then, if the need arises, I will take care of it.”

“I’m not sure ‘thank you’ is the right thing to say here.”

“Instead of thank you, pray that it doesn’t come down to that.”

They split up taking positions behind the barricades. With the rifle scopes and Wolf’s binoculars they got a good handle on the ambushers. At least a dozen men both in front and back mostly armed with shotguns and AR style weapons. Wolf only saw one rifle capable of accurately hitting them at the current distance. The rest of the guys would have to close about half way before they’d be able to engage the group with any chance of hitting someone reliably

“Why haven’t they charged yet?”

“No need. They can wait us out. We’re stranded out here with limited supplies.”

“What’s the plan then?”

“For now, we wait. See if they blink first.”

The mid August day, under the summer sun wore on everyone. Exposed on the bridge with no real shade and with the sun beating down was certainly taking its toll. Tempers flared a few times as some advocated for just plowing right through the roadblock. They all sat, knelt and laid there occasionally checking through their scopes yet the ambushers had not moved. They were still in the same positions and showed no signs of leaving.

“Hell, why would they,” thought Wolf. “They think we’re trapped here, soon to become desperate and expecting us to do something stupid.”

Mercifully the sun dropped below the horizon and twilight was leading the way to nightfall. The first few stars began to peak through as the last signs of light to the west disappeared. As night completely fell Wolf dug in his bag of tricks and pulled out a few things. First was some type of plastic bag. In this bag he placed his AR, a knife, one of the radios, a vest, some dark clothes, a flare, extra loaded magazines and his silencer. Second he took a rope, tied it to the bag and lowered it down to the concrete ledge, a few feet above the river, that surrounded the bridge support. Third he handed his night vision scope to Julie and told her to keep watch on both sides for anyone trying to sneak up. Be especially cautious if one side starts making lots of light or noise as it may be a distraction.

Finally, he produced another rope and told John and Roy they were going to lower him down to the same concrete pier.

“Why? There isn’t a boat or anything to float in.”

“I don’t need a boat, I can swim.”

“But that’s the Mississippi. It’s too wide!”

“We’re already half way across and this isn’t open to discussion. Either lower me or I’ll have to dive, I’m just worried the splash will alert them.”

“Let us go with you.”

“Absolutely not. You’re not trained for this. I am.”

They tried to dissuade him but when he just walked away and started climbing up on the barrier they gave in and looked for how they could brace themselves and the rope. Wolf stripped down to just his underwear and even in the minimal light from the moon more than one person saw the scars on his torso, arms and legs. He quickly reached the ledge below, undid the rope from the water proof bag and tugged as the signal for them to pull both ropes back up. He tied the sealed weapon bag to his back and slipped down into the water.

The cool sixty five degree water started to sap the heat from Wolf nearly immediately. With the minimal moonlight the inky black of the water and the lack of lights from habitation along the shores he had very little to orient himself too. Once he let go of the pier and let the current take him he’d be swimming nearly blind. He fixated on two constellations to give him north and south bearings and then pushed off swimming to the north west. The river, at this point actually ran nearly east west for a short distance before swinging a bit south and then again west and finally fully south but he knew if he wasn’t out of the water by the time it went west again he’d be too far away to do anything. His muscled arms pulled through the water for all he was worth while his legs kicked away. Every fifty strokes he paused, reoriented and started swimming again.

All of the physical exertion helped to counter act the temperature of the water although the weight on his back didn’t help. Finally after forty five minutes he sensed the near shore but also something in front of him. The sound told him he was approaching a dam and he pulled even harder until a wall materialized right in front of him. Feeling along the wall he reached a concrete peninsula that he was able to pull himself out of the water and on to.

Wolf collapsed to the ground and lay there for nearly fifteen minutes recovering from the swim. He tried to see the bridge or any other features back up river but had nothing to work with in the darkness. The crescent moon both helped to hide him but also left him nearly blind to anything more than fifty to a hundred feet away. He'd have to rely on his other senses as he'd done many times before.

Pushing to his feet he walked further along the concrete until he came to a pair of lock doors. Thankfully they weren't open to let a ship pass through. Skirting along the walkway on top of the doors he made it to the shore. Wolf broke the seal on his bag, took out a pair of black form fitting pants and a similar long sleeve shirt. He smeared some black coloring on his face and hands and then slipped on what appeared to be a pair of black slippers. Other than the tough rubber sole, they could have been slippers. He checked over the action on his weapons and attached the silencer to the AR. Finally he donned the vest and placed all the spare magazines into various pockets. He turned and began walking down the access road through a parking lot and up to the main road where he then headed back towards the bridge.

Walking for the first few minutes Wolf loosened up and moved up to a faster ground eating loping pace. He was moving for almost an hour when he heard rather than saw the ambush. Listening carefully they still sounded quite a ways off but the laughter of one of them let him know he was getting close. The next five hundred feet took Wolf a good half hour to cover as he advanced only a few feet at a time. He finally made it to the highway which was at least twenty five feet over his head.

He stayed in position listening to their conversations for awhile. Their jokes and boasts of previous conquests were crude at best. His thinking about what they'd do to Nicole and the other women had, unfortunately, been spot on. He knew these men must die. Slipping even deeper into the hunter, all of his elite training automatically kicking in, he advanced.

The men were just a hundred feet or so further up the road. Wolf moved away from the bridge and up the embankment to take cover behind a tree. He estimated his distance at about eighty feet as he lay prone, mostly covered by the tree with only a bit of his head and his weapon sticking out. Two of the men were smoking. They would die first. The lit ends an easy target.

Shink.

Shink.

Two bodies dropped dead.

“What the?!”

“Mike, where’d you go?”

A flashlight came on.

Shink.

It felt to the ground lazily spinning in a circle around and around on the pavement. It came to a halt pointing almost directly at Wolf.

Shink.

No more light.

“Someone’s shooting at us!”

“Where? From the bridge?”

“No, over there by the trees I think. Go check it out.”

After having shot out the light Wolf was already moving. By the time the bad guys were assembling to move towards his position he was already one hundred feet further down the road and ninety degrees to their movement. He pulled out the flare, lit it and flung it towards his last position. It had not yet reached the apogee of the flight when he was already across the road and moving

off toward another tree and more cover. A couple of guys shot at the flare, more shot back down the road where it had appeared to be thrown from.

Upon landing in the grass it created a nice silhouetted back light effect.

Shink.

Shink.

Shink.

Shink.

Over half were down now. Wolf moved again heading towards the roadblock but staying low behind the concrete road side barrier staying out of their sight. The remaining guys were quite jumpy now just firing in random directions.

The flare, burning in the dry august grass quickly started a fire which began to spread.

“Where is the bastard?!”

“Find him!”

“Shoot him!”

Wolf popped up over the wall to see the four of them standing in a group, back to back pointing their guns in all directions.

Shink.

Shink.

Shink.

BANG!

Shink.

Wolf dropped to the ground. Damn. Getting shot still stings like hell. He checked and it appeared to be a clean through wound on his thigh. He stripped off his shirt, tied up his leg to staunch the flow of blood. If he dies it'll be his own fault for not bringing a small trauma kit although the wound didn't seem to be life threatening.

"Mari, Roy, anyone?"

"Yeah, Wolf. We're here. Are you causing that commotion?"

"I was. Ambushers are all dead but I've been hit and don't think I can make it back on my own power. If you want to mount up I'll try to move a few cars out of the way."

"We're on the way! Hold on!"

They got everyone in the vehicles and moving in just a few minutes. Rob, Melvin and Darren took the rear. They barely started moving when the rear roadblock figured out what had happened and morphed into a pursuing force. The big double semi did not accelerate quickly so it was still lumbering up to speed while Mari and Nicole, in their Jeep with the big HEMI engine had already reached Wolf. He, meanwhile had put a couple of cars in neutral and mostly let them roll out of the way enough to open a lane to get through although some pushing was required. This further damaged his wounded leg resulting in more blood loss.

Mari screeched to a halt and Wolf dragged himself into the Jeep yelling to get moving. The Escalade and Julie in Wolf's truck came through next followed, eventually by the semi now more or less up to speed. The three guys were the last through. Just before coming through they hit the release dropping the caltrops a bit short of the opening.

The first pursuing vehicle somehow missed all of them and continued its pursuit. The second was not so lucky. The front tire picked up two and exploded into flying bits of rubber. The driver caught totally off guard tried to compensate

but ended up missing the opening and smashed into one of the other blockade vehicles. The remaining three pursuing vehicles, without time to stop plunged into the blockade and each other.

Racing down the highway the group continued while the lone vehicle advanced on them. As it got close enough they started shooting out the window. Rob told Darren to keep it steady as he was going to climb out and try their disk shooter. Melvin leaned out the window wildly firing. He didn't mean to hit them, but just wanted them to back off a bit.

Rob climbed out the window and into the bed, loaded a disk, pointed the gun right between the headlights and fired. Nothing. He loaded another disk and again tried to point between the lights before raising it up a bit. The truck was swerving and bouncing around. He fired. This time it had the desired effect.

A two pound 8 inch disk moving at four hundred miles an hour can be devastating. The first disk had indeed hit. It plunged through the radiator, through the fan and embedded itself in the engine block. The leaking coolant and oil would have soon disabled the vehicle. The second disk went through the hood, through the firewall, the dash, the driver, the seat back, the rear seat the sheet metal and through the gas tank. In a matter of seconds the vehicle went from pursuit to critically leaking coolant to a driver literally severed in half and a ruptured gas tank. The metal disk exiting from the tank ricocheted off the concrete sending up a spray of sparks before bouncing off into the weeds. Spilled gas and sparks effectively turned the rear of the car into a high explosive causing a massive fireball and flipping the car over.

Rob called into the headset, all clear. No more pursuing vehicles.

Mari started slowing down to pull to the side of the road but Wolf insisted she keep driving until it was light out and they could pull off in a safe area. He assured her his wound, while painful, was not life threatening. She risked a glance

back and he seemed to be aware of what was happening if a bit pale. She finally accepted that he probably knew his limits and kept driving.

Just a few hours later dawn broke and the sun was rising. Wolf directed her to pull off at the next exit and then into the parking lot of the local motel.

Wolf brought up his AR into a ready position and told the others he'd remain with the vehicles. They needed to clear the surrounding area and the hotel, each and every room, before they'd settle in. That took almost another hour. The group had to pretty much carry Wolf into the room and try to make him comfortable on the bed. Roy and Anna had taken a few first aid courses and were the most qualified of the group to try and treat him.

They stripped his pants off and set to cleaning the wound. He drifted in and out of consciousness but during one brief lucid interval he told them to check his truck for a red bag. Julie still had the keys and ran out to look for it. She found it stashed inside a backpack and brought it in. They opened it and found a well stocked trauma kit. Anna cleaned the wound and then put a drain tube in, applied antibiotic and wrapped a gauze bandage around the leg making sure it was snug but not too tight.

Now all we can do is wait. Wolf drifted in and out of consciousness for the next week while the others changed his bandages and kept up their patrols. Finally he turned the corner and he woke up one morning feeling weak but was alert and hungry. They remained for another two weeks allowing him to rest up and regain his strength. By the third week after being shot he was up and walking about, with just a minor limp, and ready to get moving. His left leg had been shot so he was still good for driving and was happy to be back in his truck again. While they were packing up he asked Nicole to add 'advanced medical gear' to her salvage list. He suggested a fire station as the best source since their gear is designed to be portable and used for life saving measures in the field.

John overheard and suggested they try to find a way to get a laptop working and find a copy of one of the mapping programs as it would have gas stations, hospitals and other key features that could prove handy in locating. Julie joined them suggesting they just check the GPS built into the Escalade as most will direct you at least to hospitals if not other places of interest.

Julie was assigned that task and Nicole was furiously scribbling down notes of what to get and where to get it from.

Chapter 10

Hospital

As the group moved out they continued their westward journey on interstate 80. By avoiding major population centers the zombies were infrequent enough that they could either avoid them or easily dispatch them either with their vehicles or weapons. They skirted around Des Moines and Omaha before getting back on 80 and went through Lincoln and Cheyenne. All passed by without notable incident although on the outskirts of both Lincoln and Cheyenne they could look into parts of the city and see enclaves, literally fortresses, of the living and fairly large numbers of zombies roaming the streets.

The miles wore on with less frequent stops since they now had their own gas supply. When an opportunity to scavenge some usable equipment came along the group definitely took advantage of it and managed to check off a few more items from Nicole's ever growing lists. It was these lists that prompted a stop in Rock Springs Wyoming. The interstate went pretty much around the city allowing them to avoid city streets, all of which were usually infested. The caravan existed at Dewar drive and headed east through a fairly open landscape with just a scattering of businesses. The goal, just a mile off the highway, was the Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County.

Upon exiting the highway Nicole grabbed Mari's sleeve and gave it a tug. Mari briefly took her eyes off the road to look at her and asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What it is this time?"

"Hard to say, just a lot of voices yelling."

“Wolf, come in.”

“Wolf here.”

“Nicole’s having another episode.”

“What is it?”

“Many yelling voices.”

“That’s it?”

“Afraid so,” she answered after looking to Nicole and getting a shake of her head as a response.

Wolf guided the group off Dewar and turned down another street leading up to a Walmart. The lot had a scattering of cars in it and just to the east they could make out a subdivision with some type of high patchwork looking wall around it. The group pulled into the Walmart lot, stopped and got out of the vehicles heading for Wolf and his security detail assignments when all around them they heard the racking of shotguns and sliding of actions on numerous semi auto weapons.

They looked around to find at least two armed people behind each supposedly abandoned vehicle and all were pointing their guns at the group. They, of course, brought up their weapons to bear and it was a standoff.

Roy broke the silence when he spoke out, “We’re not zombies.”

A voice responded, “We can see that for ourselves.”

“Then there is no need for any violence.”

“That is yet to be seen. You’re definitely not from around these parts and we don’t take kindly to strangers stealing our stuff.”

“We’re looking for the hospital.”

“Does this look like a hospital?”

Wolf answered this time, “No, the hospital is down the road a bit. We know that. We turned off here to do a bit of reconnaissance first and to be honest I was hoping to replenish our ammunition but we’re certainly not going to just steal it. I can trade and barter for it or just make do without.”

“What’s your business with the hospital?”

“Again, looking for supplies. If it’s still occupied then we can trade for them.”

“And iffin it’s not?”

“Then I’m sure a suitable arrangement can be reached.”

There were some snickers and a bit of laughter heard coming from most of the locals. Wolf just stood there waiting for something more. He could hear some of them talking amongst themselves but not loud enough for him to distinguish any specific words. Finally one of them stood up and approached Wolf, still pointing his shotgun at him.

Stopping just a few feet in front of him, he poked the shotgun into Wolf’s chest and said, “How about you leave that gas truck here and we’ll call that a suitable arrangement.”

Again more snickering was heard but when Wolf did not reply and was not showing signs of fear it quieted down quickly. The asphalt parking lot, being cooked in the sun, had waves of heat shimmering above it. The stranger held his ground, gun to Wolf’s chest, with sweat dripping off his face.

Without warning Wolf’s right arm swung back holstering his weapon in one smooth motion while his left arm shot out and up grabbing the barrel of the shotgun and lifting it. His body pivoted sideways to the left resulting in the shotgun pointing at empty sky. He continued his pivot while holding the gun forcing the stranger to move to follow the gun. Wolf rolled the gun up and over dragging the

arms behind it until the position was too awkward and the grasp too weak to maintain a hold on it.

Just as he let go, Wolf grabbed one of his wrists with his free right hand and continued the turning and pulling movement while stepping one leg around the stranger's legs. Just the slightest additional tug through him off balance and attempting to step backwards to recover had him tumbling over Wolf's leg. Through the fall Wolf maintained his hold on the wrist spinning the stranger to the ground face first. He stepped forward and put a foot on the stranger's back and pulled on the arm effectively pinning him to the ground. His other arm swung around with the shotgun pressing it up against his head slowly forcing the face ever closer to the hot asphalt.

The entire action literally took two seconds. To those watching it was mostly a blur that ended with their leader on the ground and his own gun pressing into his head.

"Sorry, I don't like that arrangement. How about we negotiate another one?"

A woman's scream was heard coming from the direction of the walled off subdivision. Running towards the group was a small boy, maybe 5 years old with a knife in his hand and a woman in pursuit. Even at a distance it was obvious they were quite dirty with well worn clothes and a haggard appearance.

As the boy got near Wolf he yelled out, "Don't hurt my Daddy or I'll cut you!" and continued his approach.

At the last moment, Wolf released the man's arm, reached out and caught the child's wrist giving it a quick turn and the resulting pain made him drop the knife. He continued turning the arm around until it was pinned behind his back, just enough to hold him in place but not cause any undue pain.

"Don't hurt my boy," said the man on the ground.

Wolf pulled the shotgun off his head. "Get up."

The man scrambled to his feet feeling the relief at being off the burning surface. Even through his clothes he had felt the heat and burning sensation.

Wolf pushed the boy toward the father who caught him up. The woman came rushing up and took up a protective role in front of both the man and the child.

“Do what you want to me, just don’t hurt them.”

“Ma’am, I don’t want to hurt anyone. We stopped here to look into some medical supplies and maybe replenishing our ammunition supplies. Our greeting party was less than cordial.”

She turned and started arguing with the man who argued back. This went on for some time with everyone watching and listening to them yelling at each other. The locals behind the cars had all lowered their guns and come out while watching the two of them go at it while Wolf’s group ended up following suit.

The gist was the man’s argument that they had to look out for themselves and couldn’t trust strangers while the woman was stating that caution was good but not bullying tactics. Outsiders could bring information or goods to trade that they needed. Even though to everyone else there was no clear winner of the argument, the woman turned to Wolf and said, “Thank you for not hurting my son or husband. I’d like to apologize for their approach.”

“No harm done ma’am.”

“Cindy.”

“Wolf.”

“Excuse me?”

Mari stepped forward, “Really that’s his name. Wolf. I’m Mari.” She proceeded to introduce the rest of the group and Cindy introduced most of the people in her group.

“How has it been around here for you all?”

“Not so good. We’re at least a bit away from the main part of town. Once we put down the nearby zombies we ransacked the Walmart here and the other stores pretty hard plus all the now empty houses to get enough material to put up that wall around us. A couple guys had construction experience and stole some backhoes and bulldozers and we further fortified the wall with the dirt mounds. Once that was in place we grabbed all the food we could and holed up in there. A few times now we’ve had to drive off raiders who came in shooting so you’ll have to excuse our concern at outsiders, especially with vehicles like yours.”

“We’ve been working our way across the country trying to get some of our group back to their homes or to relatives. A few of our guys are engineers and went crazy in a metal shop trying to make sure our vehicles would remain safe if we got attacked by zombies or worse... and we have been attacked by worse.”

“You’re welcome to head into town but you do understand that we’ve laid claim to this area.”

“Yes we do and accept that. We’re planning on hitting up the hospital, either scavenging or trading if we can.”

“Good luck. The place is surrounded by zombies. We think there might be some survivors in there but no one has dared get close enough to try and find out. There’s just too many of them.”

“If there is a way, Wolf will figure it out. He’s quite resourceful.”

“Yes we’ve noticed,” said Cindy’s husband still rubbing his wrist.

Wolf went forward on his own to survey the hospital. Using his rifle and scope he was able to ascertain that the hospital complex was indeed surrounded by

zombies. On the upper floors there were hand written signs with large block letters, drawn with a marker, affixed to the windows. 'HELP' and 'NEED RESCUE' were visible to anyone with binoculars or a scope. He couldn't tell how long the signs had been there and couldn't see anyone moving through the windows.

Focusing on the zombies Wolf was quite surprised when one of them seemed to move at a speed approximately the same as a normal human but was even more shocked when it seemed to gesture in a particular direction and a group of zombies seemed to shuffle off in that direction. Was it coincidence? Or was this one actually leading the other zombies? Directing them? What about his seemingly normal reactions and movement? Wolf left with more questions than answers.

Joining back with the others he found they were on their own once again with the locals having finally headed back for the subdivision enclave after deciding they weren't a threat after all. Roy, noticing Wolf's return, approached him and gestured that they should continue walking out of earshot of the others.

"What's the matter Roy?"

"It's Melvin. He's been putting forth a good front but the wounds from the zombie attack awhile back are not healing no matter what Anna or I try. If I had to say I'd even guess they're getting worse. It's been a month and a half now. I'm not sure how much longer he has."

"That's not good."

"No, it gets worse. I've caught him a few times sniffing the air like an animal would. I don't think he noticed me watching then again look at his eyes. They seem almost glazed over lately with a vacant stare. The sunglasses he's been wearing help to hide it but I'm worried the virus got in his system and is taking over."

"I'll take a look and let you know what I think."

“Thanks,” Roy replied and then stood there with an awkward pause.

“Anything else you wanted to say?”

“Yeah, um, well if he does turn into one...”

“I already told him I’d make it quick and painless.”

“But what if you aren’t around? I’m not sure any of us could do it.”

“You mean you’d let him attack Anna? Or Nicole? Or Lucas? Or...”

“Enough. I get it. I guess you’re right. I’ll do whatever is necessary.”

“You will or you will die. You should know that by now.”

“I do. It’s just that until now they were faceless or maybe I should say nameless. Just some creature trying to hurt me. But this makes it personal.”

Wolf nodded in agreement and turned to head back to camp.

The following morning after a quick breakfast Wolf again said that he had some scouting to do and asked Melvin to accompany him. The request caused some raised eyebrows in the others but no one said anything. As they approached the same observation point Wolf gestured to some shrubs to take cover behind while he did the same and began glassing the facility again. Nearly a half hour passed in silence.

“Do you want to tell me what this is about?”

“What do you mean?”

“We all know you don’t need me to help you scout. I’m more of a hindrance than a help. That’s obvious even to me. So why did you ask me to come with?”

“You don’t know?”

Melvin and Wolf held each other's stares before he finally looked away.
"You said you'd make it painless."

"So you do know."

"I suspect. I'm having a hard time focusing and concentrating and my vision seems to be off a bit yet I'm smelling things I never could before. If the wind is blowing right I can tell who's approaching simply by their unique odor."

"We're all pretty ripe."

"Yeah, but this is a distinct odor, not just a general unwashed sweat smell."

"Let's head back to camp then. I know some of the others suspect too. On the remote chance we can find a cure or at least stop it from progressing I'm willing to constrain you for now but if you do fully turn I'll stick to my word and make it quick."

"Not exactly how I envisioned it ending you know."

"I don't doubt that."

"I figured after graduation I'd get a job in R&D at one of the big Internet players. Maybe Google or Yahoo or even Microsoft get a few years under my belt and then form my own company with some venture capital backing. Come up with some revolutionary new product or system and then kick back with my millions while the girls throw themselves at me."

"We all had plans. Plans changed."

The group was surprised to see the two of them return as quickly as they did. Wolf had them hold up a distance from the others and spoke up.

"We all know Melvin was attacked awhile back. Despite our best efforts he appears to be infected and possibly in the late stages of turning. For his and all of our protection he's agreed to be restrained until such time as we know differently."

Wolf produced a set of handcuffs and cuffed Melvin's wrist to the steering wheel of an abandoned car in the lot.

"Roy, see what you can rig up here for shade and some privacy for him. Julie, you're with me and bring your rifle."

Wolf unboxed his sniper rifle and headed off with Julie in tow.

Once more he approached the observation area, gestured to the bushes and they assumed the prone position and readied their rifles.

"So, what's the plan? Just take them out?"

"No, I want to see if there is anyone in the hospital. Check out the signs over there on the 3rd floor windows."

She scanned them and replied, "The occupants could long be dead."

"Yes. But then why would the zombies still be around? Also check out the one over there near the main entrance."

After extensive observation she came back with, "He appears to be coordinating them... or is the heat getting to me?"

"No, you saw correctly. I came to the same conclusion yesterday. He also seems faster. Make sure, when we get back, that you let Nicole know to record that."

"So how do we get in? Or better yet, how do we even figure out if anyone is still worth saving?"

"Shoot the window?"

"I guess as long as we don't shoot someone behind it."

"Aim for the upper corner. It should be a low risk shot to anyone inside."

Julie took her time to adjust the scope for the wind. Snuggling herself down a bit more she had everything lined up and adjusted to her satisfaction.

Wolf pulled a radio from the pack and called back, “We’re going to fire a single shot. Repeat, we’re firing a single shot. Out.” Turning to Julie he nodded. She once more got into the zone slowly squeezing the trigger. The break came as a surprise to her and the bullet sped on its way. A fraction of second later the third floor window shattered spraying glass down among the zombies.

As hoped they couldn’t locate the shooter with just a single shot even though it did agitate the zombies quite a bit. The mass seemed to seethe and mill about but only the smart one actually looked around with obvious intent of locating the source of the disturbance. He actually looked at the broken window, briefly, and then started peering out to the surrounding landscape as it trying to determine if the source of the breakage originated out there somewhere.

Eventually a few visible forms were seen inside the building tentatively looking at the broken window but not getting anywhere close to the edge. Wolf was ready and started flicking a small piece of mirror back and forth intentionally shining it on one of the people. It took awhile before they realized this wasn’t coincidence and started waving back.

“Well that answers the question of survivors. Now what?”

Wolf and Julie were far enough away that they couldn’t easily communicate so it would be up to the survivors to initiate a method. Finally a few more appeared with a portable white board. They wrote in large letters on it. ‘FRS’.

Wolf shook the mirror in a no movement making a reflection go back and forth on the board.

They tried again with ‘GMRS’.

He shook the mirror in an up and down fashion.

They proceeded to write a number on the board which Wolf wrote down. “OK, we got what we need. Let’s get out of here.” Staying low they worked their way down and out of site of the zombies before standing up and heading back to the camp.

“Melvin, they wrote down GMRS and a frequency. How do we call them?”

“Ask Nicole. I’ve been teaching her. She’s going to have to be your expert really soon if this is, well you know...”

Wolf gave him a nod of respect and went to find Nicole.

“Hello hospital is anyone there?”

Nothing.

“Hello hospital?”

“Yes, we read you... although you sound kind of young.”

“I am. I run the radio. Here talk to Mr. Wolf.”

She handed the radio to Wolf who pushed the button and started speaking. “How many of you are there and what condition? Has the building been breached? What do you have for weapon? How are...”

“Whoa there! One question at a time.”

“Are you secure?”

“Yes. No zombies in the building that we know of. We do a sweep every hour.”

“Weapons?”

“Just a couple of handguns that the local police had on them when this all started.”

“How many?”

“I said, just couple of handguns.”

“No, how many people? Anyone hurt?”

“Seventeen of us. We’ve been living off the cafeteria food and vending machines and are holding our own for now. Most of the patients either died or fully recovered so at this point I wouldn’t say anyone is hurt.”

“Is there any way in or out besides the main doors?”

“Not that we know of.”

“Any chance your building manager survived and is there?”

“Nope.”

“IT Manager?”

“No, but our network tech is in here. “

“Put him on.”

“Here she is.”

“Um, Alice speaking.”

“Hi Alice. I’m Wolf.”

“Wolf?”

“Not now. What kind of connections do you have there?”

“We got multiple redundant DS3s running over fiber. It’s part of an OC12 circuit we also use for voice.”

“How were the circuits installed?”

“Um, standard d-marc interface in the telco room we have in the basement.”

“Yes, but were they trenched and buried? Or ground pull through an access tunnel? Or some other method?”

“I’ve got no idea but I guess I could head down there and look.”

“Please do. We’ll wait.”

Nearly 30 minutes later Alice returned on the radio. “Uh, Dog guy?”

“Wolf.”

“Yeah, Sorry. Well the lines run along the wall and then disappear into the wall near a door. It was locked and I couldn’t find a key.”

“Did any other wires go into the wall too?”

“No, but a lot of pipes headed into it from all directions. Some small and some large.”

“Good job Alice. Now either find the key or bust the door down. Get help if you need it. Report back what you find.”

“Mr Wolf, why are you asking her to do that?”

“This is a fairly modern building and they may have been smart enough to put in a tunnel to bring in all the utilities from the street. If so that’s our entrance and exit. If not there’s just another room on the other side of the door and all the pipes and wires just disappear into the ground.”

Again nearly a half hour passed before Alice once again picked up the radio.
“You still there?”

“Yes.”

“We finally got the door open. It’s a small room, maybe 10 by 15 with a some telco patch panels on the wall. Looks like legacy wiring that was probably abandoned when the digital circuits were installed. I can see pipes that disappear into the walls but most go up through the ceiling. We did find a ladder bolted to one wall that leads up to a manhole cover. I had one of the guys go up there and lift it just a little bit. He peeked through the crack and saw zombies, but on the other side of a fence. Does that help?”

“Hang on,” said Wolf as he started scanning the facility with his scope.

Nicole and Wolf spotted it at nearly the same time. A small fenced in area on the back of the hospital where the backup generator was housed. Various pipes came out of the ground and led to the generator while others continued along the side of the building, through the fence and to various valves.

“Alice?”

“Yes.”

“OK, I see where you described. It’s a small fenced in area by the generators.”

“Can we get out that way?”

“Maybe. I have some planning to do. We’ll call you again in a bit. Out.”

“Uh, OK. Um Out?”

Nicole and Wolf worked their way quietly back from the bushes and returned to the makeshift camp in the parking lot. He described the situation to them and asked for options. Tentatively at first a few ideas were offered and fairly quickly discarded and then more and more were considered. As the group

coalesced around one main theme they were able to work out a fairly reasonable plan until Anna asked about the original purpose for their stop, obtaining supplies.

“Wolf to Alice, are you there?”

“Yes, where do you think we went?”

Ignoring her sarcasm he continued, “How are you for supplies?”

“We’ve got some food and water yet.”

“No, medical supplies. Bandages, antibiotics, portable battery operated equipment and such.”

“We’re at about normal stocking levels. Why?”

“We’re working on a plan to get you out of there but, to be honest, our first goal was to scavenge supplies from the hospital.”

“You what?!”

“That was before we knew it was still inhabited. We’re not here to steal anything but we certainly wouldn’t object to a small quantity of the supplies. Regardless we’re going to get you out and as many of the supplies as possible. What you choose to do with them will be up to you once we get safely away.”

“Do I have your word on that?”

“I just gave it to you. You need to start gathering everything you can possibly take and staging it downstairs near that manhole cover. Keep in mind it has to fit through there so nothing too large. We’ll be in touch but figure at least a couple of days to get our plan together, maybe more. Out.”

Rob, with the help of Roy, Darren, John and Wolf worked harder than he could ever remember. Jake, Lucas, Mari, Anna and Julie maintained a rotating guard watch along with preparing the meals. Nicole continued her radio lessons from Melvin staying a safe distance away from him and writing down everything he could tell her and trying out as much as she could on their current equipment.

Finally after almost four straight days of work Wolf contacted Alice letting her know that the plan would be going into effect tomorrow at noon and that everyone should be assembled and staged down by the manhole room along with all the supplies.

After giving everyone a lengthy rest the group made final preparations cleaning each weapon and checking the magazines. They packed up the camp and loaded everything into the vehicles. Melvin was transferred to one of the truck beds and handcuffed to the side of the truck once more. He willingly went along with a number of the group keeping the weapons handy although not pointed directly at him. His condition was even worse and Wolf was not holding out any hope for him.

Finally Rob, Wolf, John and Julie secured their vehicles and, leaving the others to guard them, mounted up in Rob's newest creation, a full size cross country touring bus. They found it back up on the expressway, brought it to the lot and had gutted the interior to make as much room as possible, completely armored the exterior including covering over all the windows and cut a three foot square hole in the bottom. Surrounding this hole was more armor plating that reached to within a couple inches of the ground. Most of the armor was sheet metal scavenged off other vehicles. It didn't need to stop a bullet, just keep the zombies away. Another plow was attached to the front, this one designed to deflect zombies off to the sides instead of underneath. Rob fired up the big diesel engine and they rolled out heading towards the hospital. The armor plating greatly reduced the speed and resulted in handling that felt definitely off balance if not top heavy.

Rob kept the speed low and choose the route carefully to avoid getting the low riding armor chute in the middle of the bus hung up on anything. After a tense but uneventful drive the behemoth pulled into the parking lot of the hospital and continued around towards the back. Zombies were immediately attracted to them and almost from the moment they entered the lot they were plowing them out of the way. Their slow speed didn't really result in any injuries to the zombies, just mostly pushing them out of the way.

Finally the fenced in generator came into view. Peering through the small view port that Rob was using to see where he was going he saw the man hole cover. Centering the bus on it he slowed his approach even more. With a screeching crunch the plow made quick work of the fence and the bus inched onward.

Wolf began to call out, "Slowly, slowly, a bit more, a bit more."

When the manhole cover came into view below the chute he yelled out, "STOP! NOW!"

Rob smashed down on the brake and the iron clad vehicle lurched to a halt.

"You're just barely covering it. Just inch up a little bit."

Rob eased off the brake and let the idling engine start to take them forward for a few seconds before he hit the brake again.

"Perfect. Don't move."

Rob shifted into park and Wolf jumped down the short chute to the pavement below. He banged on the lid and called down. After what seemed an eternity, the lid finally rose a bit. Wolf reached down, grabbed it, lifted and pivoted it away from the hole only to be greeted by the business end of a .40 caliber Glock. Dropping the lid he swung his arm across the hole and grabbed the gun forcing the slide out of battery in the process thus rendering the gun inert. A quick twist and he neatly yanked it from the hand that was holding it.

“I’m not a zombie so stop screwing around and get your ass up here.”

The chastened officer climbed up the rest of the way into the chute where John helped him up into the bus. Wolf turned and handed the weapon back to the officer. “Here, put it away.” Turning he saw no one else on the ladder and climbed down the hole into the subterranean room.

“Alice?” he called out.

A woman stepped forward, “Yes?”

Wolf had to admit she looked every bit the part of a computer geek, but she had apparently come through as the room was nearly packed with supplies and through the doorway he could see people craning to look around all the additional supplies and equipment back towards him.

“I’m Wolf, nice to finally meet you. Let’s load up.”

“You sure the zombies aren’t going to get through?”

“Yes. When you see our Trojan bus I think you’ll agree.”

With all the bodies they quickly started an assembly line passing along packages from one to the next, up the hole and into the bus. The group in the bus began stacking the boxes as neatly as possible to allow for as much as possible to be loaded.

“Wolf! Get up here! Now!” shouted Julie.

He scrambled up the ladder already hearing the pounding on his way up.

“They’re pounding on the bus!”

“Let me see,” he said moving to the view ports and peering out.

The zombies had the bus surrounded and were ineffectively banging their arms against the sides. Checking out both sides and the front he found more and

more streaming in but other than the closest ones hitting the bus the rest just seemed to be massing in the crowd.

Wolf leaned over the chute and yelled down the hole, “Double time! We got company but so far we’re secure.”

The assembly line continued passing box after box, each stuffed with bandages, sutures, pills, antibiotics, gloves, surgical instruments and a wide variety of supplies that a well stocked hospital would normally use. Various technical, and portable, exam equipment was passed up too.

The pounding on the bus seemed to lessen a bit Wolf noted as the bus rapidly filled up.

Without warning it gave a lurch to one side. Wolf ran over, looked out and noted the zombies on that side had stopped pounding and instead were pushing and doing so in unison. Scanning the crowd he noticed the same faster zombie from earlier who seemed to be directing more zombies around to this side.

“That’s it!” yelled Wolf. “Everyone grab a box and get up here we’re moving out now!”

The people ran to the ladder, passed up the box they were holding and scrambled up the ladder into the bus as it lurched again even harder. As the last few were coming up the ladder Alice, still down below, yelled out, “Hang on, I need one more thing and dashed off.”

“No, leave it!” yelled Wolf to the retreating figure.

The last person was up the ladder and being pulled from the armored chute into the bus when it lurched again, this time sliding almost a foot over and briefly going up on two wheels, well technically five wheels due to the dual pair of wheels on each side in the back.

Wolf grabbed his bag, shotgun and yelled to Rob, “I’m going after her. Let’s hope the zombies are all around on this side of the building. Drive around the lot as

long as you can then head around to the front. If it's clear we'll meet you there, if not get back to camp and we'll figure our own way out."

Julie yelled, "No, Wait!"

But Wolf had already dropped down into the hole and was sliding the cover back into place. The moment it clanked down John called out, "Go! Go! Go!" to Rob who shifted the idling bus into gear and pressed on the gas just as another zombie push definitely had the bus up a noticeable angle again. Teetering for a moment it crashed back down on all wheels slamming the armored chute into the pavement before the suspension stabilized the bus and it started rolling forward.

Rob accelerated pushing zombies out of the way with the front plow as arms started failing against the sides of the escaping bus. Mowing the zombies out of the way was easy due to their mindless frontal approach towards the bus yet one quickly stepped to the side to avoid getting hit, Rob, unfortunately did not notice this.

"Alice!" Wolf called without receiving an answer. Fishing a flashlight out of his pack he quickly fastened it to the bracket on the front of the shotgun, turned it up to high producing 400 lumens of nearly blinding light and started off after her. As he walked he gave his leg a quick massage where the nearly healed gunshot wound was protesting the previous jump down the hole.

He noted just a handful of boxes in the ladder room and as he moved into the telco room he again saw just a few boxes left, noting with some satisfaction that they had gotten most of the supplies. Wolf continued into the hallway and began sweeping the floor for Alice. Advancing room by room he found most were storage rooms and appeared undisturbed, some had locked doors. He ignored these when his calls went unanswered. He reached the elevators and the stairway up and, without power, was forced to use the stairs. Advancing to the first floor he was in a

quandary. He didn't know which floor Alice was on and could spend precious time searching while she passed him by on her way back down to the basement.

Pausing to think of a solution, the problem resolved itself when a door two stories up crashed open and he heard hurried footsteps coming down the stairs. He pointed the gun, and light, upwards and quickly saw it was indeed Alice returning with a shoulder bag.

“What the hell was so important that you had to go back for that?”

“It's my laptop along with...”

“Laptop!?!”

“ALONG with the archive CDs of all the manuals for that equipment we loaded onto the bus AND the complete medical library covering pills, doses, procedures, diagnostics and just about everything else you'd need for treatment.”

“Oh.”

“So can we get to the bus now?”

“No. Your little side trip, as well intentioned as it was, took too long. The bus was nearly overrun and I had to send it on its way. We're on our own for now.”

“Great. So now what Rambo?”

“Rambo?”

She gestured towards the shotgun.

“Whatever. Stick close, I need to see what's going on out there.”

Wolf advanced towards the lobby staying low and utilizing cover to prevent anyone on the outside from seeing in.

“Not good. The bus attracted a lot of them but there are still quite a number out there.”

He took in all he could see and then backed them down the hall out of sight from the main windows. "Let's get back to the stairway."

"Why?"

"I need a map."

"Map?"

"Enough with the questions. Come with me if you want to live."

"O. Whatever you say Arnold."

"Arnold?"

"Terminator 2?"

"Huh?"

"Forget it. Old movie joke."

"I don't have time for jokes, our lives are at stake. You've been locked in here since this started. We've been out living in this, day to day, fighting off zombies, scavenging food for our survival and dealing with two legged predators trying to take advantage of the situation."

He turned and stormed off not checking to see if she was following and really starting to not care. Back in the stairwell he shone the light around until he found what he was looking for. The fire escape plan with the expected 'you are here' indicator. It had a complete outline of the building including the lobby and main doors. Nodding his head he turned and proceeded up the stairs checking the second floor map and then the third floor map before proceeding through the door with Alice still in tow.

Having already memorized the relevant parts of the map he overlaid the image in his mind with the actual hallways he was heading down and proceeded

directly to patient room 317. Entering the room he advanced to the window, looked through it and inwardly smiled as his plan came together.

Wolf took a radio from his bag and called, “Wolf to bus, over.”

“Wolf, it’s Julie. Where are you?”

“Third floor, room 317.”

“Where’s that?”

Stepping well back from the window he spoke, “See the lobby canopy.”

“Yes”

BOOM!

“Got it. We’re on the way.”

“What the hell did you shoot the window for?”

“Saving our asses. Out the window. Now!”

“We’re on the third floor, we’ll fall to our deaths!”

“Fine. Stay.”

Wolf turned, jumped through the window and only dropped down about three feet before coming to a halt his head still visible. Alice went up to the window and saw the canopy directly under the window. She quietly climbed out the window herself just in time to see the bus approaching the canopy.

“Get ready. We’re going to have to jump. Don’t try to land and stay on your feet. As soon as you touch, drop down and get prone on the roof.”

No longer questioning him she got ready to jump. The bus slowed as it approached to just a few miles an hour. They both leapt from the roof dropping about six feet to the top of the bus. Going prone allowed them to fit under the canopy roof they had just been standing on.

Upon hearing the thumps on the roof Julie yelled to Rob, “Got em!” and he pushed the pedal down slowly accelerating the lumbering mass away from the hospital, zombies in slow shambling pursuit. At least most of them. A small handful were moving more quickly after the bus, almost at a running speed.

Wolf worked his way to the back of the bus, took aim and fired his shotgun at these faster zombies. The less than stable platform coupled with buckshot opening up with the increasing distance did not provide him with any kills but the injuries to the zombies ensured their pursuit would now be much slower.

With a loud squeak the air brakes brought the bus to a stop back in the parking lot. After undoing the additional reinforcing bars on the inside, the door was opened and the hospital people emerged from the bus into the sunny afternoon air for the first time since the start of the uprising. It wasn't long before Cindy, her husband and handful of others from the subdivision enclave emerged and came over to check on the people, all locals from the town, some from the very same subdivision.

Joyous reunions were soon tempered by tearful realizations that not everyone survived the weeks of self imposed imprisonment in the hospital. Soon Wolf spoke up.

“Some of them were following us when we left. I plan to loop back that way with the bus and lead them off in the other direction before heading for the expressway. In case they don't all fall for it I'd suggest everyone take shelter back in your subdivision. The rest of you, take the vehicles and head west, I'll catch up with you.”

“What about the supplies?” someone from the hospital group called out.

“Yeah, you said it was up to us to decide what to do with them,” said Alice.

“That I did. I’m taking the bus. If you want them you unload them. Just keep in mind the longer you take the closer the zombies get.”

They looked at each other for a moment before the hospital group rushed the bus and started a new assembly line to offload the supplies as quick as they could. Unfortunately for them they were no more than a minute into it when Ed called out, “Zombies!”

With a few dirty looks at Wolf everyone from the hospital and subdivision grabbed as many boxes as they could and sprinted for the subdivision’s armored gate.

“Wait until they turn to follow me then take off in the other direction. Got it?”

“Yes,” came the chorus of replies from the drivers.

Wolf got in the bus started and drove straight for the zombies. Slowing down he cautiously weaved around them careful not to injure any. He wanted them to follow him, not remain here in a still semi mobile state. His plan worked, almost too well as he saw how many were around him. Continuing at a pace fast enough to stay ahead of them he continued back towards the hospital.

He turned into the hospital parking lot, did a few laps and then took a different exit back out to the main road heading north towards Interstate 80. Passing another subdivision near the expressway he heard a few shots ring out. Wolf’s assumption was the shots were directed at the zombies, now well behind him however when the pings of the rounds impacting with the armor on the bus told him otherwise he accelerated away crossing over the highway and then taking the entrance ramp to loop around and continue the pursuit of his team.

‘His team.’ Other than the military he was always kind of a loner so when did he start thinking of it as his team? Wolf reflected on this strange chapter in his life. He never expected America to turn into a third world country. Heck, could it

even be given that high of a title? Country implied at least some semblance of order and a civilization. What they were experiencing was mostly a savage wasteland. You either constantly kept up your guard and repeatedly killed to survive or you died. Or worse. What were they going to do with Melvin? Wolf knew he could pull the trigger but how would the others take that? Would they treat him differently? Mari had almost kicked him in the nuts back in Iowa when he suggested shooting Nicole to save her from the animals that had them trapped. True once she thought about it she realized he was right but still did these people view him as an animal? Why did he care what they thought of him? Maybe this was his chance to go off on his own again. They don't need me. They know what to do now. Yeah, I'll just take the next exit.

Chapter 11

Salt Lake City

Forty minutes later the bus caught up with the caravan and continued to follow them.

Later that day the caravan pulled to a stop. Ahead, completely blocking Interstate 80, was an obvious road block with many military vehicles and dozens of men in BDUs. The radio chatter among the vehicles quickly turned to speculation on if this was legit or someone who got a hold of military hardware in the confusion. Wolf was not surprised, as the rest were, when they heard the radio come to life during a lull in their conversation.

“Attention caravan. We can assure you we are indeed US military forces. You can either turn around and go back or come forward and be tested. Any who pass will be allowed to continue into Salt Lake City, those who fail will be detained.”

“How did you break into our radio?” asked John.

Wolf answered before the military could. “We're not transmitting with any special encryption. A simple scanner would have picked up our conversation and told them what frequency to intercept.” He then continued, “Look to the left and right. About 300 yards up in both directions you should see the snipers. My guess they've got teams at both locations, armed with either .308 or .50 caliber rifles, maybe both and probably some rockets too. In front you've got the HMMWVs and Bradley's and I'm sure there are a few more further back behind us. Probably a couple of helicopters on stand by.”

“How do you know this? Are you military?”

“Let's just say I was special forces and this is, at a minimum, what I would have done.”

Roy chimed in, “We were tested back east. It was just a simple blood test and we had the results in minutes. It would be a pretty easy confirmation on Melvin.”

“Their SOP seems legit and the mention of the test meshes with Roy's report. Unless someone wants to figure out a way around, I say we go on,” said Wolf.

“Sergeant... ?”

“Wilson.”

“Sergeant Wilson, assuming we pass the zombie test, what is the current policy?”

“Sir?”

“Retainment of arms? Fuel? Food? Supplies? Confiscation? Are we free to leave?”

“We prefer a well armed civilian force that can act and protect themselves along with supplying for their own needs. If your group is in this situation then you're already much better off than most and we won't make any attempt to hinder you.”

“Any other comments or concerns?”

Silence.

“We go forward then?”

All vehicles reported back in affirmatively.

Wolf, pulled the bus to the front and lead the caravan towards the roadblock. He pulled to a stop in front of the military vehicles, put the bus in park, turned it off and got out. Each of the other vehicles pulled up with Julie bringing up the rear in the Escalade. Everyone kept their firearms handy but holstered or over their shoulder as they got out.

“What is she doing here?!” demanded Wolf to Julie.

“After you left with the bus she approached us and asked if she could come with.”

“No one thought to check if it would be OK with me?”

Mari spoke up, “Back in New York you said this wasn't a dictatorship. You weren't around and the rest of us didn't have any reason to say no. Are you saying this is now your way or the highway?”

Wolf held her gaze for an uncomfortable length of time before his shoulders dropped, he turned away mumbling just loud enough for the rest to hear, “No, you're right.”

A medic came forward with a tray of test tubes and syringes and started taking samples. Wolf positioned himself to be last and as his sample was being drawn he leaned forward and said something to the medic. He looked at Wolf, who nodded. Lifting a radio he called in, “Possible positive, response team to me.”

Half a dozen individuals in protection suits, and heavily armed, came forward and Wolf led them back through the vehicles to Melvin who was still handcuffed in the back of one of the trucks. A sample was taken from him while the suited guys stayed a safe distance back.

Within about fifteen minutes the results were as expected. Everyone but Melvin was clean. Wolf approached the sergeant in command of the blockade and asked if there were any options for Melvin besides being quarantined while he waits to be killed.

“Sir, we do have an experimental program going on. There have been rare cases in the past, specifically a trapper in Alaska and whole tribe of people living in the Peruvian Jungle, who have a natural immunity to rabies. While I'm not at liberty to discuss specifics, and in fact I don't have many details, I am aware that we are accepting individuals who are willing to volunteer for this program. To be blunt they're going to be lab rats. It would be a great service to their country but not likely to save their lives.”

“Well, let's see if he's interested.”

“Medic!”

“Sir, Yes Sir.”

“Please accompany...”

“Wolf.”

“Wolf?”

“Just Wolf.”

“OK. Please accompany Wolf to the infected and offer him a position in Project Porcupine.”

“Yes sir.”

As the medic turned to leave Sergeant Wilson turned to Wolf, “A moment more Wolf.” Turning to the medic, “Wolf will be with you momentarily. Dismissed.”

“Yes?”

“You said on the radio you were special forces. What program?”

“Classified. Suffice it to say I held an equivalent rank of Colonel in the Marines. At least at the point I still existed.”

“Understood Colonel.”

“Wolf.”

“Sorry sir. Understood Wolf. I've been directed to send experienced current or former service members to see General Rogers.”

“Where can I find her?”

He raised his eyebrows a bit in response to the fact Wolf knew the General was a her and not a him. “She is currently housed at Fort Douglass. You take 80 into...”

“No need. I'm familiar with the location of Fort Douglass Sergeant.”

“Very good sir. I won't keep you any longer as I'm sure you want to get back with your associates.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Wolf walked over and joined the medic who was already talking with Melvin.

“... it would be totally voluntary and your prognosis is most likely not going to be any different. You can consider this a service to your country and fellow man.”

Melvin looked questioningly to Wolf.

“It's up to you Melvin. You heard the Medic. Since you're infected you either go into quarantine and you will be killed when you turn or you can join the experimental program on the slim chance that some break through occurs. It's your choice.”

Melvin pondered the two choices and finally nodded to the medic saying, “Sign me up. Perhaps my life can yet have some meaning, even if it's just to save someone else.”

Wolf unlocked the cuffs on Melvin and the suited individuals and the medic led him away to a waiting vehicle, giving him a chance to say a last good bye to his companions before closing up the door and driving off with him.

Finally, turning to the rest of the group, and specifically to Alice he just came out and said, “So, why did you want to tag along with us?”

“Well, you still have most of the equipment in the bus and I got most of the instructions on how to use it. Besides, you're the only ones that had the balls to come in and get us out of there.”

“You questioned me the entire time.”

“You didn't explain anything and just came in making demands.”

“You ran off potentially putting the others on the bus at risk.”

“Look, I might be an IT geek, but I worked at the hospital because I want to help people. Where the equipment goes, I go and the information I took will let whoever gets the equipment help a lot of people.”

“Fair enough,” said Wolf ending the conversation by turning and walking back to his truck.

They got in the vehicles and after the military opened the roadblock, followed Wolf to Fort Douglass. Wolf had a few words with a soldier he found in the parking area and after just a couple of minutes, and a call to their superiors, they were falling all over themselves to arrange accommodations for the entire group.

The next morning the group met for breakfast and sat down to work out their plans. Mari and Nicole were planning on seeking out her grandparents. Roy's family was still hoping to get back to their home in Phoenix. John and Julie really had no where specific to go so planned to just hang around in Salt Lake for now.

As a group they agreed to donate most of the medical equipment and a sizable portion of the hospital supplies to benefit any relief and recovery efforts and Alice planned to follow 'her' equipment. The guys were planning to head to California to see if their families were still around.

With sad and heavy hearts the group broke up to go their separate ways.

Chapter 12

Separation

“Mari, are we really going to find my grandma and grandpa?”

“Yes Nicole. I was able to find their address in the phone book and one of the soldiers gave me directions so if you're ready it's only about fifteen minutes away.”

She was excited, actually jumping up and down and for the first time in quite a while being a kid again.

“Well, get in, belt up and we'll get going.”

They got into the armored up Jeep, belted in and Mari started it up. They pulled out of the Fort grounds and headed south west towards Sugar House Park. Nicole's Grandma and Grandpa lived just a few blocks away from the park. Nicole and Mari both noticed the destruction and burnt out stretches. People were out and about but at perhaps 5-10% of 'pre-zombie' levels. All were armed yet no one even gave it a second thought any more.

Almost exactly fifteen minutes later Mari was pulling into the driveway of a modest house. It was still there although the front windows were boarded over with some beat up weathered sheets of plywood. With trepidation she pulled into the driveway, parked the jeep and they got out, Nicole running to the door calling out to her grandparents.

In just a few moments the door opened and a tearful reunion began. Mari hung back until Fred, Nicole's Grandpa, noticed her waiting back by the jeep and waved her in. She grabbed her rifle and Nicole's, locked the Jeep and headed to the porch where Nicole was still hugging her Grandma.

“Sir, Ma’am.”

“Hi. Call me Fred, and this is Elaine.”

“Mari.”

“Thank you for bringing us our granddaughter,” Fred said with a touch of sadness in his voice and expression.

“You’re welcome, but, uh... is there something wrong?”

“Where to begin? Ha! What isn’t wrong. I guess I’ll start with the...”

“Now Fred, let the lovely young lady come in and get settled. No point in staying out here.”

“Yes Dear.”

The group moved in and settled in the living room. Mari propped the two rifles against wall joining the old double barrel shotgun already resting there. The shotgun had a sling with a dozen additional cartridges held in it. She still wore her side arm as did Nicole. Fred noted that and as they sat on the sofa, Nicole between her grandparents, he asked her about it.

“This?” said Nicole as she drew it out pointing it down and away from anyone. She quickly dropped the magazine, worked the action to verify it was empty and passed it to her Grandpa.

“Wolf gave it to me when we scavenged from that FedEx truck.”

A bit surprised at seeing his precious princess of a granddaughter casually, but safely, handle the firearm and talk about scavenging like it was a normal day to day occurrence set him back a bit. Elaine too although she kept her response better concealed.

Fred looked over the weapon, noted it was a .22lr and commented how it felt a bit small in his hands but probably was just about right for Nicole’s smaller hand.

“Yeah grandpa. It fits my hand just fine. It had a larger grip but after Wolf took that off and put on the smaller one it fit fine.”

“Have you ever had to use this?”

Turning to answer Elaine’s question, “No Grandma. I practice every few days at cans or bottles and I can hit them nearly every time at 15 yards but I haven’t had to shoot any zombies or bad people. The others always took care of that for me.”

“Others? You mean there are more people than just Mari and this Wolf person?” question Fred looking towards Mari.

Mari spoke up, “Actually we’ve had a good size group traveling for weeks and weeks now. Not to change the subject but outside it seemed that something was bothering you? Care to share?”

“Well, besides the zombies and the collapse of the world, I’m assuming that since Mari is with you that her mother, our daughter Jane, um...”

Nicole supplied the answer. “Mommy and Daddy never came home. Mommy said she had to run to the store to get something for dinner and that she would be back in fifteen minutes. She never came back. Finally I went to the neighbors to get some food when all of ours ran out but they were zombies and tried to hurt me. Mari came in and saved me.”

Elaine got up and said she was going to get them some drinks and snacks from the kitchen. Mari could see the start of tears on her face before she turned towards the kitchen.

Getting up to follow her, Mari said, “I’ll help.”

In the kitchen she went up to Elaine and just held her while she sobbed over the loss of her daughter. It took awhile but she finally got her composure back and gently pushed away from Mari and turned away.

“Thank you, I just need a moment. Glasses are in the cabinet up there and water is in the jug on the counter.”

Mari took the water and glasses out, poured four of them and handed them out, leaving one on the coffee table for Elaine.

A few moments later Elaine came out with some snack crackers and they just ate and drank in silence.

Clearing his throat, Fred asked, “So, pumpkin, it sounds like you had quite the adventure getting here.”

Nicole told the whole story. How they went out on the road, how they ended up at the restaurant where Mari was almost attacked but Wolf saved them. She told about some of the shoot outs and how everyone kept her safe. Told about the zombies. Always zombies. Mostly slow shambling zombies but not always. She described the adventure at the hospital, the bridge, and all the scavenging stops along the way. An especially proud moment was when her simple note taking was recognized by Wolf and how that he had her helping the whole group and even telling the grownups what to do.

Mari added the occasional comment or clarification and made sure to tell Nicole that the others didn’t think of her as a kid but as a grownup too since she acted like one and was very responsible.

After hours of storytelling Elaine suggested she prepare some lunch for them. Fred gave her a quizzical look and after a pause she nodded an affirmative to him.

“Nicole, can you come help Grandma in the kitchen?”

“Yes Grandma.”

Nicole jumped up and Elaine, more slowly, rose to her feet and followed into the kitchen.

Mari looked at Fred, “Did I miss something?”

“No, you are quite observant, and handy, and protective, and smart and....”

“I appreciate the flattery but I get the feeling there is more to it than that.”

“I guess I should add perceptive too. Yes, there is more. To put it bluntly, we’d like Nicole to stay with you.”

“With me, but you’re her grandparents! I’m just a stranger who found a girl and decided to go on an adventure with her.”

“You can say that but you are a lot more, especially to her. I can see it in her eyes when she talks about you and this Wolf fellow. Even the others seem to have a fondness for her. You all are her family now.”

“But you can’t mean that. I’m sure she’ll want to stay with you.”

“I’m sure too but she can’t.”

“You’d turn her away?!”

“Let me explain. She can for now, but not for much longer. Elaine is a diabetic and I’m on heart medication. We’re both old. We’ve been giving her the insulin but with the intermittent power in this area we’re not sure how effective it still is. I seem to keep having to give her a little more each day to get the same result. Eventually it either won’t work anymore or we’ll run out.”

“I can get you more from the military.”

“No. We both agreed that we have lived good full lives. Those with a lot of life ahead of them should get the limited drug supplies, not us. Without the heart medication I probably won’t last more than thirty days and without the insulin it’ll go pretty quick for Elaine. Our last wish was to see our family once more and you fulfilled that wish. At least as much as you could. For that we are grateful to you. We just ask that you take care of Nicole when we pass on.”

“I don’t know...”

“Please walk with me.”

He led her to a door and down into the basement. It was dry and neatly organized although mostly unfinished. The bare walls were concrete throughout most of the space with a single stud wall with open cavities facing them and drywall on the other side sectioning off a room. By the light coming in through the window well lights Mari could see it appeared to be a craft room. Probably Elaine’s she thought. With a bit of trouble Fred slid a book case away from the unfinished side of the wall and in between the exposed studs were a couple of long bags and one shorter pouch.

He took out the longer bags, apparently gun cases and set them on a workbench. Unzipping each, he extracted a couple of older rifles. Nothing fancy, in fact pretty run of the mill she thought also realizing that not so long ago she wouldn’t have even known it was a rifle. At that time they were all just guns.

“I was saving these for I don’t know what but I want you and Nicole to have them. I figure you’ll know when she is old enough to be able to handle them.”

“Fred, I still...”

“Wait, there is more.”

He went back, got the apparently heavy pouch and dropped it on the bench. A distinct thud accompanied by the jingle of coins was heard when it hit the surface. He untied it and turned it over dumping out nearly one hundred gold coins. Each appeared to be a one ounce coin.

“As compensation for taking care of her I want you to have this. It should cover her expenses.”

“Fred, that is very generous of you however if you’ll now let me say my piece.”

He nodded.

“I still don’t think Nicole would want to leave you. Either of you. She so looked forward to getting to see you that it wouldn’t be fair to drag her away now. As to the coins, she is not an expense and they, unless I miss my guess, were intended to be an inheritance to either her or her mother. It would be wrong of me to take these as they belong to her.”

Fred nodded again. “That is why we think you would be perfect to take care of her. Someone else would have readily agreed, just to get the gold for themselves. You’re concern is for her well being and making sure she is taken care of, not greed.”

Mari was taken aback. She had not realized this had been a test, one she obviously passed with flying colors, but still a test none the less. She wasn’t sure if she should be flattered or hurt but finally came to the realization that the couple just wanted what was best for Nicole.

“Shouldn’t Nicole have a say in this?”

“We do plan on telling her. As I said, we’re nearly out of meds so expect us to both be dead within a few months at the latest. In the mean time we could fix up a room for you and have you stay with us. If that would be OK?”

“I guess.”

“So you’ll agree to take care of her then?”

“It doesn’t look like I have a choice.”

“You’ve always got a choice.”

Pondering his words, she finally said, “Yes, I will be her guardian or big sister or whatever she needs for as long as she needs and keep her inheritance safe, but it will go to her.”

“Thank you. For now, let’s put this back where I had it. You know I bought these over a few decades back when gold was cheap. I’ve got no idea what it’s worth now.”

“At the moment, probably very little, but that doesn’t detract from it. If, or hopefully when, things start to get put back together I think it will have a lot of value.

“We should still put it away. There are some real animals out there and home invasions, usually for food, although they’ll take anything they find, have been increasing as the supply drops.”

“Isn’t the military helping?”

“Not that much. From what I understand they’re spread fairly thin just barely keeping the area zombie free. It’s been a safe refuge in here, however the less savory element has taken advantage of the situation and most of us are just trying to survive day to day now. That shotgun you saw...”

Mari nodded.

“I’ve used it. More than once. Had to drive off a couple of two legged predators. So, will you stay here too?”

“Is this another test?”

“Sorry about that, no. It’s just an honest offer. If you’re here with Nicole when we pass it might make the transition easier for her.”

“I do have some other ‘errands’ to take care of but otherwise I can stay. I can pop out during the days and be here at night to provide some extra security. OK?”

“That sounds good. Now let’s go eat.”

“You folks sure about this?”

“Yes Corporal. We’ve been traveling the roads since the east coast. We know what to expect out there.”

“OK. You are well armed and supplied and have done good for yourselves so far it seems. You know to avoid major cities? Well, actually I’d avoid any city. The bigger the population the more likely you’re going to have trouble of one type or another.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, one last thing, even though you’re clean, as soon as you leave my site you’ll be subject to retesting if you come back.”

“I would expect nothing less. Thanks again.”

“You take care.” The soldier waved them off and returned, with his companions to scanning the surrounding lands for any signs of movement.

“Roy, can we get to Phoenix without going through any cities? Our primary route from here would take us straight through Vegas.”

“I think we can make it using secondary highways. Grab the map book and see what kind of route you can come up with.”

Anna studied the map for awhile before suggesting a route taking them toward Las Vegas but then cutting back near Kanab and finally heading almost due south with a bit of zig-zagging until they reached Phoenix and their home. “It’ll add more mileage so we’ll definitely have to do some more scavenging.”

“You up for guard duty, boys?”

Lucas and Jake, now experienced guards, replied with a “Sir, Yes Sir!”

“I think even one night around the military was too much for those two!” she joked.

What should have been one long day or perhaps a modest 2 day drive turned into almost a week with the routine stops for scavenging for food, fuel and other supplies. Each stop involved a security sweep of the area for zombies or thugs, followed by a sweep of the target building and then a thorough search with the desired goods packed and moved to the door. Finally things like fuel had to once again be siphoned by hand into either the truck or into gas cans.

They lived in a subdivision on the very northern outskirts of Phoenix. As they figured, if something bad had happened they could have easily bugged out and been ahead of the rest of the people. Unfortunately their plans never included being across the country, with none of their gear and a complete breakdown of society. They turned onto the main artery into their neighborhood, and a couple of more turns found them standing outside the truck, jaws almost literally on the ground. What had once been their home was now a blackened pile of rubble. Other houses in the area had also been obviously vandalized, some burned down too.

Thinking perhaps some stuff might be salvageable, Roy started climbing through the debris but quickly came to the conclusion that the fire safe holding the weapons and ammo, while still there, was open and empty. Other supplies and preps that should have survived a fire, perhaps as burnt lump of metal or at least a melted lump of plastic, were missing too.

Roy came to the realization that someone was calling his name. Finally he noticed it was his wife Anna. She was waving him over where one of their neighbors was waiting.

“Hi Roy.”

“Hi Kurt. What happened?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“We know all about the zombies, I mean what happened to our house?”

“Honestly? I think it was your own fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“Last year, you went on that show, ‘Doomsday Families’.”

“You mean ‘Doomsday People’?” interjected Anna.

“Yeah, whatever it was called. You told people you had guns and food and water and all sorts of supplies. Plus you told them where you lived.”

“No we didn’t. We never gave out an address, nor did we give a last name and when they filmed they blurred out the house address.”

“Yeah, but not the street name there on the corner, and not your neighbor’s numbers. From that it was pretty easy to find the house with Google Street View and public records.”

“But you know us. Why would you do all that?”

“I didn’t. The people that showed up to take your stuff did. They had a whole list and bragged about how foolish you all were to advertise. You basically painted a ‘come and get me’ banner on your house they said.”

Roy hung his head in shame at his actions putting his family in such a dangerous situation as Kurt continued, “The first group cleaned out most of the boxes of stuff you had. We were yelling at them and threatening to call the police but we both knew with the zombies running around that the police weren’t going to come. Ironically enough, it was another small group with the same idea. They too had watched the show and targeted your house. They showed up with guns and when both sides opened up on each other we all ran. When we finally dared to come out the place was empty and pretty well trashed. Maybe a week later it caught fire in the middle of the night and burned down. Sorry but they had guns, we didn’t. There wasn’t anything we could do.”

“Don’t blame yourself Kurt. It was my fault. You would have died had you interfered and you have a family to take care of.”

“Had.”

“Huh?”

“Had. All got infected. I barely got away with my life.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Anna. The others offered their condolences.

Changing the subject Roy asked, “I see you decided to finally get a gun. What changed your mind?”

“You’re right. I was pretty anti gun as you know but finally figured out no one but me was going to be responsible for me and my family’s safety.”

“Uh, didn’t you say....”

“Sorry, Yes. I did lose them. Remember Trixie?”

“Yeah, didn’t her and Mr. Robinson live over there somewhere?” said Jake pointing down the block.

“Yes. She lost Lance and it was just her and Cindy. After running away from my family I returned and pretty quickly we all figured out who was still around and who was ‘lost’ to us. It didn’t take long until we started pairing up and in fact we have the Kravick’s living with us too all as one big family. Most of us left are now two or three families per home and the homes are clustered together too. Provides for a better defense with more eyes watching for problems. We walled off the yards and have been trying to grow gardens back there but this land just isn’t suited for that purpose. We’ve been mostly living off scavenging so far.”

“Can you tell us how the city is? We’ve got some stuff we left at the airport. It would be nice to get it.”

“You mean zombieland?”

“Wasn’t that a movie?”

“Yeah. Pretty funny at the time, now, not so much. We named the city proper after the movie. It’s pretty much nothing but wall to wall zombies. I’d suggest keeping out of there if I were you. I can’t imagine anything so valuable that you’d need to go after it.”

“Thanks. I guess you’re right. It’s just some supplies and such but definitely not worth risking our lives over.”

“Looks like you got a lot of stuff in the truck there anyway,” said Kurt slowing working his way toward it.

“Mostly junk we’ve picked up. Well thanks for the info. We need to get going. Anna, boys, why don’t you go ahead and get in the truck.”

From his belt, where it had previously resided, Kurt produced a revolver and pointed it at Roy’s head.

“Actually it would be best if they waited out here. Since you have a lot and we have almost nothing we’re just going to relieve you of some of your burden of ‘junk’ as you put it.”

“Dad, left.”

Turning his head he saw what Lucas saw, a couple of guys coming down the street, one with a rifle, one with a shotgun.

“Kurt, let’s be reasonable here.”

“I am Roy. They wanted to just shoot you and take the stuff. I convinced them to let you live if you just let us have the stuff so don’t do anything stupid.”

“Was any of that sob story truthful?” asked Anna.

“Most of it, yes. But you see it’s a lot worse than I let on. The scavenging groups have to go pretty deep into the zombie zones now and the pickings are almost nonexistent. If we don’t take your stuff we’ll probably starve.”

“Well, if you’d just told us it was that bad, we’ll definitely help you. Here, let me help unload some of the food for you. Kids, give me a hand,” said Anna.

Jake and Lucas reached over the side for some boxes and turned past Anna with them briefly shielding her from Kurt’s view. She reached in the cab, grabbed the AK47 and spun around yelling “Down!” which the boys were already in the process of doing having previously picked up on her intent.

At the sudden sound Kurt turned as she opened fire dropping him well before he could bring the revolver around.

The two guys down the block immediately opened fire and continued advancing. Roy pulled out his pistol and began shooting back while the boys scrambled to retrieve their rifles from the truck. Anna swung the AK towards the two guys pressing the trigger just before the barrel reached the first one. She kept pumping the trigger stitching a line of bullets across the two of them.

On the way down, the shotgun wielding thief let loose one last blast of buckshot before collapsing motionless to the ground.

“I’m hit!”

“Anna!”

“Mom!”

Rushing over they found her bleeding from the arm and chest where the pellets had caught her.

“Just get me out of here,” she gasped through gritted teeth. “Before any more show up.”

They helped her into the truck, the kids jumped in the back of the crew cab and Roy got in, started the truck and put it in gear. Intentionally he made sure to roll over Kurt's limp form laying in the road.

Racing back out of the city he went for a good 10 minutes before pulling over to check on Anna's whimpering sounds.

"It looks pretty messy. I can try to remove the shot or we can bandage it up and get you back to Salt Lake, but it looks like you took some to the chest. Maybe a collapsed lung."

"But that took us a week to get here," said Jake.

"All we stop for on the way back is gas. The boys and I can switch off on driving. We can be there in 24 hours or less."

"Whatever you think is best. I trust your judgment," she managed to gasp out before laying back, closing her eyes and slipping into unconsciousness.

Working quickly but thoroughly Roy cut away her shirt and light jacket while the boys dug out the medical gear. He removed any obvious bits of contamination, wiped down the chest and arm. He applied a patch on the chest to allow the lung to re-inflate and wrapped the wounds which were still oozing blood. With it secured for now he slipped back behind the wheel and put the pedal to the floor.

Getting in Brad's old truck, Darren and Rob struck out for their homes in California. Following the same path Roy's family took earlier that day, they headed down the highway. They had not stopped to talk with the military and as a result were not aware of the advice about avoiding cities. Without this vital piece of information they plotted their route right through Las Vegas.

Similar to Roy and Anna, they stopped frequently to scavenge for fuel and any other supplies with food and water being a high priority.

Rob brought up the topic, "You want to hit the strip?"

"Strip?"

“Vegas man. Lost Wages. It’s probably deserted and we’d have the run of the place. Just think of all the money laying around!”

“All worthless now.”

“Yeah, but just think how we could show off to the girls by using twenties for toilet paper and lighting our cigars with hundreds.”

“Neither of us smoke, and last I remembered, we’re a couple of engineering nerds who’ve never been laid. So just what girls are you planning to show off too? Most of them are zombies now.”

“You’re no fun.”

“What? You have a problem with staying alive?”

“We got guns. The truck is armored. What can happen?”

“Now you’ve jinxed it.”

“Seriously... what harm is there in just driving down the strip to see the sights. If we see even one we turn around and head back. OK?”

“You know Wolf isn’t along to save our asses.”

“C’mon. Just one quick side trip. It’s right off the highway. According to my map, just take the Flamingo exit east and it’ll put us right in the middle of the strip. We can see the Bellagio, Luxor, heck even Treasure Island with the big pirate ship.”

“I dunno...”

“Dude, it’s a once in a lifetime chance. Vegas for free.”

“I guess just a quick look won’t hurt, but first sign of infestation and we’re outta there.”

“Agreed.”

The next hour passed in silence as they worked their way towards Las Vegas. On the outskirts it was obvious something bad had happened. Literally as far as the eye could see were nothing but burned out houses. A few blacked sentinels amongst the flattened ruins of tens of thousands of homes. Surprisingly it looked like the 'strip' managed to avoid the destruction. The interstate formed a natural fire break and coupled with the vast parking lots surrounding many of the hotels, they looked to be in remarkably good condition considering all that had happened.

"Would you look at that destruction... I wonder..."

"What?"

"You think that was an accident or intentional?"

"Intentional? Who would set a fire like that intentionally?"

"Someone who either sees no way out or figured to take them all out at once in a zombie roast. Either way, the strip looks safe from here. Just think, we can spend the night in a deluxe suite, not on the ground or in this stinky truck."

"Yeah, that would be nice. I wonder if there is any food left?"

"Gotta be something. Imagine how much they had to bring in to feed all the guests, I'm sure not all of it went bad."

Darren took the Flamingo exit, looped around and headed east to Las Vegas Blvd. Turning north the two of them cruised along checking out the extreme decadence. Hotels and attractions, all based around the almighty dollar, rising up along both sides of the road. Abandoned cars littered the road, some with the doors still open, others crashed into each other, trees, light poles and anything else they could hit. It was quiet with not a soul to be seen. They made it as far north as the Stratosphere Casino. Next to the hotel was a spire leading up into the sky well over one hundred stories. At almost eleven hundred and fifty feet tall and what appeared to be the equivalent of a small office building on the top of it Rob was hooked.

“Hey, imagine the view from the top of that.”

“Well, what’s stopping us?”

“Rob, it isn’t safe.”

“What isn’t safe? Have you seen a zombie?”

“Well...”

“Just one? No. I didn’t think so. It’s a heck of a climb but I’m sure there has to be an emergency staircase in there that will let us go all the way up. Just bring an extra water bottle.”

“I guess. I’m parking right by the doors.”

“What, you’re not going to valet it?”

They both had a laugh at that. Parking the truck, Darren got out and grabbed his backpack, rifle and some extra bottles of water. As he shoved them in the bag Rob was likewise supplementing his pack. Once they both were ready Darren headed for the door while Rob walked towards the street.

“Rob, what are you doing?”

Yelling out at the top of his lungs, “Hello! Anyone out there?”

The echo came back “out there... out there... out there.”

“Will you shut up! You’re going to attract them.”

“Attract who? It’s a ghost down. Everyone’s gone. I haven’t even seen a single body. See and no response to my call.”

“Just come on and let’s get this climb over with.”

The lobby guide panel told them the top included an observation deck, rotating restaurant, shopping, an amusement park with rides and even something called a ‘free fall’ activity. It didn’t take long to locate the elevators and around the

corner the emergency stairway. Step by step they trudged up. By the thirtieth floor they were both sucking wind pretty hard.

“I got.... to... stop for a... minute.... pant... pant.”

“What’s the matter..... we’re..... not even a third of the.... way.... there....,” said Rob.

“You’re just as out of shape as I am.”

“How? We go on zombie hunts, we sleep under the stars and we scavenge all the time. We should be in great condition.”

“Most of the time scavenging is walking around and carrying boxes of toilet paper and all of our traveling is sitting in the truck. The only real physical activity involves the zombies and it’s not like we really have to chase them down. They come to you. As long as you can point and click, er, point and shoot you can take them out.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense. OK, let’s get moving.”

They two of them had to stop four more times before reaching the tower space at the top. The overwhelming engineering of putting something so large, and heavy, a thousand feet above the ground, and sitting on a relatively slender tower really spoke to the nerdy engineering side of the guys. They gawked with amazement at the sheer feat of engineering. As the novelty started to wear off they begin going through the shops and worked their way up to the restaurant. Most of the food was made from fresh ingredients so very little remained that wasn’t already long spoiled.

Heading over to the window Rob called out, “Look at that view!”

Darren joined him and they both stood there just taking in not only the buildings on the strip but looking further out at the sheer volume of destruction. Nearly everything west of the highway was destroyed by fire and some parts to the east look to have also burned.

Leaning against the glass, Darren looked down toward the street and cursed.

“What?”

“Look,” he said gesturing downwards.

“Where the hell did they come from?”

“I told you to keep your mouth shut, but no, you had to go yelling and advertising our presence. Now there are thousands of them out there and most are headed this way.”

“Let’s get out of here!”

“You think Einstein?”

They worked their way back to the doors to the stairway and started down flight by flight. The fear, adrenaline and the fact they were headed down and not up made it go much easier. Somewhere around the fiftieth floor Darren called for them to stop a minute.

“Shhhh!”

“Shhh.... Yourself.... Even going down... still takes.... a lot.... out.... of you.”

“Quiet! I think they’re coming up the stairs?”

“How?”

Peering over the railing they looked downwards. Every so often a flash of movement or an arm would briefly be visible.

“Crap! Quick, back up the stairs.”

Climbing flight by flight they forced themselves all the way to the top without stopping. The two of them burst through the door into the public space and dropped to the ground, once more trying to get enough air. Their hearts were

pounding like jack hammers. Within a couple of minutes they had recovered enough to try to figure out a way to block the doors.

A low tech solution was the best they could do. Grabbing a directional sign they bent it back and forth until the thin metal pole broke from the base. Jamming it through the door handles they both pulled bending the bar into a rough U shape. It probably wouldn't stop the zombies forever but might buy them some time to find a way out.

“How are we going to get out of here?”

“Where is the truck?”

Running to the windows they looked down and moved about until they found it almost directly below them.

“Down there!”

“Good. Look for enough rope. We can break the window and rappel down to the truck.”

“Eleven hundred feet straight down!? Are you nuts? First off, where are we going to find that much rope and second, do you know how to rappel?”

“Well, no, but how hard can it be?”

“Just leave your pack here.”

“Why?”

“I don't want you squishing the food and breaking the water bottles when you land.”

“Haha. Funny.”

“OK, how about the elevator shaft? There has to be a ladder or something in there.”

They ran to the elevators and as hard as they tried they couldn't pry the doors open with their hands.

"You know if we had a pry bar...."

"Yeah, but we don't."

"How about..."

"What?"

"You won't go for it."

"Just say it."

"That 'free fall' thing mentioned down in the lobby, maybe that's a way out."

They quickly located a sign and followed the arrows to the platform.

"You gotta be kidding me. I'm expected to just jump off the building?"

"No, look here. You're strapped in with double safety lines and they automatically slow you to a gentle stop at the end. According to this you land in that bulls eye down there."

"That spot way, way down there?"

"Yep."

"So how are you going to get down?"

"You think I'm chicken to do it?"

"No, I think after I jump there is no way to get the safety lines back up for you."

"So we jump together."

"Weight limit is 300 pounds."

“I’m around 175, you can’t be much more.”

“Almost 200 last I checked but that was a few months ago. Probably 180 now.”

“So we’re 55 pounds overweight.”

“With our clothes, packs and weapons, probably closer to 100 pounds over weight.”

They could hear the zombies off in the distance pounding on the door. While looking at each other and the jump instructions they heard the metal bar finally give way and clatter to the ground as the zombies made it through the doors.

“It’s just a matter of time until they find us up here. You know, I’m sure this is way over engineered. I would have if I’d designed it.”

“Do we have a choice? I guess now or never. Here’s one of the harness suits. Strap it on while I put this one on.”

A few minutes of fumbling with the zippers and latches and they were finally both suited up. They stood face to face, just inches apart snapping the safety line to their harnesses. Each holding their weapon with one hand and their pack in the other hand they got ready to jump.

“On the count of three. Ready?”

“Here they come! Screw it! Three!” yelled Rob as he pushed off taking Darren by surprise.

Instantly they were both in full free fall plummeting towards the earth. Darren was screaming while Rob detached his mind from the situation by calculating the acceleration of a falling body when affected by gravity but also factoring in the terminal velocity that the resistance of the atmosphere creates. By the time he had the formula in his head they were a mere one hundred feet from the ground and rapidly slowing down. This is where we find out if they over

engineered it or not, he thought. If so the braking system should gently set them on the ground. If not, well broken legs will probably be the least of their problems.

Sure enough competent engineers designed the system and over built it so their combined nearly 400 pound weight was still safely handled. As their feet touched down they looked around and saw zombies streaming out from the buildings as far as the eye could see, all headed towards them.

Frantically working the snaps they released themselves from the safety line and ran for the truck shooting any zombie in their path, ignoring the rest. The passenger side was closer and they both piled in the same side with Rob scrambling across and behind the wheel and Darren inches behind him. Slamming the door on more than one hand he yelled to Rob to get the truck moving.

Fumbling with the keys he managed to finally get them out of his pocket, pick them up from the floor, twice, and get the right one in the ignition. Rob turned the key and as the engine roared to life slammed it in drive and floored it. The armor plating kept the zombies at bay while the plow on the front pushed them out of the way.

He raced back down the street taking the first right turn and heading back toward the expressway. As they left the hotels behind the zombies thinned quickly and then suddenly there were none. At least none in the road. Looking in the mirror they could see at least one still hanging from the side of the truck, its hand stuck in the closed door.

“Hang on,” yelled Rob.

He swerved back and forth a few times until the arm ripped free from the body leaving the zombie tumbling along the road in the dust behind them. Darren unlocked and opened the door enough to let the arm and crushed hand drop free and then quickly closed and locked it again.

Rob turned on to the entrance ramp and back on to the expressway continuing on towards California. Fifteen minutes later Darren turned and punched Rob in the arm as hard as he could.

“What the hell man?!”

“No more detours! I ain’t listening to you again.”

Another hour passed in silence before Rob slowed to a halt.

“Now what?”

“Trouble, maybe,” he said pointing forward.

Coming the other way, weaving their way around most cars and pushing others out of the way, was a line of Bradleys, HMMWVs and MRAPs. The two guys stayed in the truck not moving as the convoy approached in the oncoming lanes. About 100 yards away the entire convoy came to a halt and immediately started disgorging soldiers until almost twenty were boots on the pavement, weapons out and running toward the truck. They quickly surrounded it yelling, “Out of the truck! Get down on the ground!”

The guys looked at each other before deciding that once more there wasn’t a choice and proceeded to get out and lay down on the ground.

“Medic!”

Rushing forward, a soldier with a small bag approached the guys.

“You will remain motionless on the ground. You will not raise your head. You will not look at the medic. The medic will draw a blood sample. You will....”

Rob finally yelled out, “Yeah, we know, we’ve been through this before. Just run your test so you can prove we’re not infected.”

The medic came forward, drew the blood samples and quickly stepped away to complete the testing process. A bit later the guys were instructed they could get to their feet.

“All you had to do was ask. We would have happily submitted to testing.”

“Sir, we can’t be too careful. Now, where are you headed?”

“LA.”

“Not any more you’re not.”

“But we have family there.”

“I’d pray you didn’t.”

“Why?”

“Oh four hundred this morning operation zombie roast started.”

“Zombie what?”

“We’re basically covering LA with Napalm. Well, actually a more environmentally friendly version, but the same affect.”

“But our parents!”

“Son, either they’re zombies or they got out. We lost a lot of good men getting out the last of the civilians. We flew choppers with massive loud speaker systems letting everyone know what was going to happen and pulled out everyone who couldn’t make it out on their own.”

“So that means they’re safe then! Where did you take them?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Concentration camps?”

“No, I mean I don’t know who was rescued. I don’t have names. As to where I also can’t answer as they were scattered all over to various bases and cities that we still have control over. It’ll be months before all the paperwork gets caught up.”

“So there’s no reason for us to head to LA then.”

“Nothing there but scorched earth and roasted zombie flesh. Where you coming from?”

“Vegas”

“Salt Lake”

“Which is it?”

Darren spoke first, “Salt Lake. We’ve got friends there. Roy, Anna, John, Wolf, Julie...”

“They don’t care about that,” interjected Rob.

The soldier spoke, “Wolf? Big guy? Good shot?”

“Yeah, you know him?”

“Of him. He’s kind of a legend in the service although rumor was he’s dead. The missions he’s been on are unbelievable and many of his tactics and procedures are now part of the standard training we go through. If that really was him then that’s one hell of an honor to have traveled with him, even more so to call him your friend.”

“Huh. We never realized. He mentioned being in the service but never really talked about it. Well after we got to Salt Lake our group each had their own goals and we split up. We were headed to LA but he,” said with much derision and gesturing toward Rob, “wanted to make a quick stop in Las Vegas to see the strip.”

“I hope you boys didn’t try that. Vegas is a write off. We’ve got them slated for our next napalm campaign starting as soon as we can pass through and certify no more civilians.”

“Too late. We went through there earlier today. They came streaming out of every building on the strip. Literally by the thousands.”

“How’d you get away?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Ran up fifty flights, jumped off a building, flew to the ground and shot our way to the truck and drove out.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But, that doesn’t matter. You tested clean. My advice, turn your truck around and head back to Salt Lake. You’re welcome to follow us for now. There’s a half dozen other civilians back there, just drop in line with them.”

“Sounds good. We’ll have to find the next U-turn spot and then catch up.”

“About a mile back that way. If you go now you should be able to catch up before we even get rolling again.”

“Ok, thanks.”

They got in the truck, drove down, found the space where they could make a U-turn and end up on the other side of the highway. Accelerating they soon caught up with the other cars just as they were starting to move.

Chapter 13

Old Friends

Wolf walked down the hallway and without warning, turned between two armed soldiers, opened the door and stepped through.

The woman sitting at the desk looked up just as the soldiers burst in behind Wolf reaching for him and firmly stating, “Sir you can’t be in here.”

“Corporal, release him,” said the petite dark haired, professionally dressed, vaguely ethnic woman sitting at the desk.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“From now on this man has full unrestricted access,” she said emphasizing unrestricted.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“You will not hinder him in any way and provide him with anything he requests. Understood.”

Again they both responded in unison and replied, “Yes Ma’am.”

After a brief pause to see if any other directives were to be offered they spun on their heels and returned to their positions on either side of the door closing it as they went through.

“Security’s pretty lax.”

The woman raised her hand up from under the desk laying the .40 caliber Sig pistol on top.

“Really?” she said with a smirk.

“Should have known.”

“Should have? You are getting old.”

He offered a slight shrug of the shoulders in response.

“It’s good to see you again Wolf.”

“You too Janeen.”

“How did you know we were here?”

“Didn’t until I met the welcoming committee on the way in.”

“It must have been a long and lonely road.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“No, not like that,” he said blushing a bit. “I picked up some mutts along the way. Oh and one former senator.”

“Former?”

“The one who got my team killed.”

“Mitchell?”

A nod.

“You took him out?”

“No. Let’s just say he had difficulty outrunning the zombies.”

A slight mischievous smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“So did you enjoy babysitting?”

“At first, not so much, but over time they came together quite well. Gelled into an effective force. They picked up on my training quite readily. Still were a

few sticky situations that a real team would have avoided, but I would, and did, trust my back to them on more than one occasion and they came through. Even Nicole.”

“Nicole?”

“Short, blond hair, cute, smart and well organized.”

“Sounds like your type.”

“She just turned ten.

“Oh. Oh!” she said at first confused and then again with understanding. You trusted your life to a ten year old? You really are mellowing out with age.”

“At first I didn’t know what to make of her, but on her own she started keeping notes on our zombie encounters...”

“Intel will probably want to see those.”

“ I figured so I encouraged her to keep them up. She also took over inventory control, assignment roster and then moved into communications. One of our geeks, now part of Porcupine....”

“Someone blabbed I see.”

“Yeah, well, I can be persuasive.”

“Uh huh.”

“Anyway, he was great on the radios and managed to bring her up to speed at least equal to any of our standard comm guys.”

“How did he end up in Porcupine?”

“Opened the door to a semi cab without checking first. Zombie fell out on him and managed some serious scratches and maybe a bite or two.”

“It’s not a pleasant way to go.”

“No argument here.”

The door behind the desk opened.

“For a dead man, you look surprisingly well Colonel Wolf.”

“As do you General Rogers,” said Wolf going ram rod straight at attention and saluting.

“So Harry, how have you been?” she asked with a warm smile breaking out.

“Oh, the usual, Marilyn, but only got shot once this time,” he said with an equally large smile and adopting a much more casual posture.

“Come on in, let’s talk. Janeen....”

“I know, hold your calls, no interruptions.”

“What would I do without her?”

“Probably have to hire three to take her place.”

“Just three?” said Janeen flipping him off.

Wolf laughed as he followed general into her office. The room was a modest ten foot by fifteen foot rectangle decorated in normal military fashion, as in none. The desk and a file cabinet took up part of the room, the remainder was a conference table with a half dozen chairs. Wolf noted the General not only had on a side arm but propped against the wall behind her desk was a Mossberg shotgun and the standard issue M16.

She caught his glance and answered the unspoken question. “Yes. Actually a few times when we were abandoning Washington. I never thought I’d be in combat again, let alone firing on Americans.”

“Zombies.”

“American zombies. Some were people I used to know.”

Taking a seat at the conference table such that he could watch the door, Wolf asked “So how bad is it?”

She joined him sitting at a right angle to him also affording her a view to the door and quick access to her weapons behind the desk. “We’re barely holding our own.”

“Locally, nationally or globally?”

“Yes. This thing swept the globe pretty quick. There’s a long incubation period and that allowed it to get wide spread over a number of weeks. The first few cases reported on the news were covered up with the whole bath salts story but once the outbreak reached critical mass there wasn’t anything we could do other than cut our losses. “

“Most of Washington got wiped out. Right now the Secretary of some department is the current president. He, at least I think it’s a ‘he’, is holed up at Norad but there are rumors that a carrier got in before they locked it down so the whole place has been quarantined and sealed. When enough time passes we’ll crack it open and see if anyone is still alive or more specifically, if they’re all still human.”

“We’re estimating current losses at 75% of the population. That 75% is either dead or infected with the vast majority in the infected category. Out of the remaining 25% we’re not sure how many are infected but not showing symptoms yet and how many are still clean.”

“All over the country, heck, all over the world, the healthy are banding together and creating zombie free pockets that we’re defending with our lives. If the people didn’t act fast enough to defend themselves then the zombies get a foot hold. Some places are getting firebombed into oblivion in an attempt to knock back their numbers. We make an attempt to warn the living and get them out but it pains me to say not all of them got out. I think LA is on the schedule for tomorrow and Las Vegas a day or two after that.”

“The worst areas are in gun free, or at least gun restricted, areas. People were so scared about defending themselves that they were decimated by the zombies. Chicago, Washington DC and New York are three of the worse zones. Besides the sheer volume of people, the gun restrictions kept most from putting down the early zombies. Many had no firearms at all. On the other hand, a lot of cities here in the northwest kept them in check and have since become safe enclaves.”

“CDC has been working on a cure but it looks like a vaccine is the more likely outcome. Once you’re infected you’re lost but if you’re vaccinated first then you can’t get infected, at least that’s their theory.”

“Porcupine?”

“I see you still have the knack for intel. Yes. Porcupine is basically a group of test subjects, all voluntary, that we’re testing the newest drugs against.”

“After we bailed on Washington we flew west hoping to hit the coast but the massive outbreak had us rethinking our plans. We landed here, as the closest point at the time, to refuel, and found a fairly clean city so setup camp and pretty much haven’t left. We’re spread pretty thin with our defense of the area but at this point we’re holding our own.”

“So, tell me about your story? I trust Janeen got the warning out to you early enough?”

“Yeah, just barely.”

Wolf proceeded to describe his journey from initial outbreak to when he arrived in Salt Lake City. The general had a number of questions that Wolf answered for her.

“So, Marilyn, tell me if you will. Just what is the plan for the 80%? Are we going to go around shooting 250 million citizens, just in the US, to eliminate them? Or do they eventually die or decompose on their own? Or perhaps starve to death?”

“That, my friend, is the million dollar question. We have a group of them locked away and have been trying all sorts of tactics against them. Poison seems to have no effect. Same with gas and chemicals applications. If you starve them long enough they just go dormant until a meal comes close at which time they come awake and go after it. Of course we have no long term studies yet as we’re all learning as we go.”

“Gas? Chemical?”

“The usual suspects including mustard, sarin, ricen, chlorine, VX and some real nasty experimental stuff. From what the biologists and doctors are reporting, their circulatory system and most brain activity is pretty much non existent or at such a low rate that they aren’t really taking in the poison. Even the contact stuff has no effect, almost as if their nervous system has shut down. Of course we know that can’t be true as they couldn’t move then.”

“So, as a control measure, we’ll be administering .223 and 12 gauge cranial implants for the foreseeable future?”

“Funny way to put it, but yes. Unless the scientists come up with something better.”

“How about places like Africa, India and China with vast populations?”

“Reports from the indo-china area are very bleak. Estimates are 90% or more infected and not many dead. Many parts of those countries are not very well armed. Africa and the middle east are holding their own. Seems that just about everyone had an AK hidden somewhere. Their numbers are much in line with ours. Europe is sitting around 80% infected last we heard.”

“No one has taken advantage of the situation?”

“Meaning?”

“Iran moving on Israel , North Korea going after South Korea, need I say more?”

“Surprisingly, no. The analysts believe the crisis is too critical to bother with the petty bickering of the past. Maybe once this is under control we’ll see them revert but we’ve got birds watching all the hot spots and not one has even rattled a saber let alone started a charge.”

General Rogers glanced at her watch and said, “I don’t mean to cut you off but I have a video conference with the Joint Chiefs in 5 minutes.”

“I understand,” he said rising to his feet. “Good to hear that the Chiefs survived.”

“They didn’t. These did.”

“Oh. Gotcha. They playing nice?”

“All things considered, actually, yes, they are. Can you stop back in a few days? I’ve got something you might be interested in.”

“Yes General.”

Wolf gave a salute, turned, opened the door and left the room closing the door behind him.

“You were in there quite awhile.”

“Lot to talk about.”

“My shift ends in a few hours, if you want to get some dinner.”

“I thought you were always on duty?”

“True. Let’s just say I’ll be heading to dinner in a few hours and wouldn’t mind some company.”

“What are the choices?”

“Mess hall, line A or line B.”

“I’ll meet you there, Janeen.”

“I’ll be waiting, Wolf.”

Wolf left the office, heading back down the hallway without noticing the dirty looks the guards gave him. He was too busy mentally making and checking off lists in his head. Dinner tonight, meeting with the General in a few days for, most likely, some type of mission. Find who was still in town and who left, get them to talk to whomever was gathering intel data for the scientists. Make sure Nicole still had her notes and get those turned over too. Scout the city and verify the security. Look for likely exit routes and also zombie invasion routes. They still had equipment to sort through and clean. See if he could locate some type of store or barter market to unload the stuff they didn’t need. He really hoped some of the group was still around to help.

Back at the rooms assigned to him and his group he found Roy’s family gone, Rob and Darren gone and Mari and Nicole missing, but at least some of their gear was still there. He paused outside of John’s room with his hand raised to knock but from the sounds behind the door he assumed Julie was in there and they didn’t want to be disturbed.

With a private smile to himself he thought about youth and how they were driven by their hormones, zombie apocalypse be damned. Back in his room he scribbled a quick note to Mari, Nicole, John and Julie and left them in their rooms, or in the case of John, taped to his door.

He returned once more to his room, gave his personal weapons a thorough cleaning and decided, even in the safety of the city, he should carry more than his side arm with him. He briefly considered taking his M1A but being setup as more of a sniper rifle he felt his AR15 made more sense, especially in a military zone. Attaching a sling and filling a light shoulder bag with a dozen magazines he felt a bit more prepared. With an hour to kill before dinner he hit the base gym and went

through an intensive forty five minute workout leaving just enough time for a quick shower and a brisk walk to the cafeteria.

Janeen was waiting just inside the door for him and fell in step at his side as he walked in. A brief nod of his head and they headed to the food line picking up their trays on the way. Wolf picked the mystery meat stew, Janeen selected the mystery whitefish with rice. Both added their drinks and a cookie before finding an out of the way table.

The two of them ate while making a bit of small talk. With both trays finished, Wolf casually looked around to make sure no one was in easy ear shot before asking, "I assume you heard it all."

"Yes."

"Was Marilyn straight with me?"

"Mostly. Things really are pretty bad and we're spread quite thin. I think the number is now closer to eighty percent here. "

"Anything she didn't tell me?"

"Yes, but you'll find out that part in a few days anyway."

"Fair enough."

"How about the others?"

"In the early days I reached about half with the same message I gave you. Since then you're the third to make contact. The other two are both at Fort Benning."

"From what the General said, if the rest of the world is now playing nice, we might just be out of a job."

"Oh, I think we'll still find something for you to do."

The next hour was spent catching up by a couple of old friends before Janeen finally excused herself as she had to get back to her desk.

“You’ll give her a good report?”

“Don’t I always?”

“I’m still breathing, so I guess that would be an affirmative,” he said with a smile.

Wolf walked back to his room thinking a lot about the future of civilization.

Buzz. Buzz. The General answered her encrypted cell phone. “Is he still up to it?”

“Yes. The edge is still there. I think it is possible, we just need the right support team.”

“Thanks Janeen. He doesn’t suspect?”

“Oh, he knows. He knew I was listening earlier and knew I’d be reporting in.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, some days I think it’s more a case of us working for him. What did you say?”

“Just that he’d find out in due time. He seemed satisfied with that answer.”

“He really is mellowing with age. See you in the morning.”

The phone clicked dead and Janeen pocketed it, heading off to the gym for her own workout.

Chapter 14

The Mission

Mari told Nicole she was heading back to the base to talk with Wolf but that she'd be back later in the day. Mari gathered up her rifle and BOB while Nicole and her grandparents accompanied her to the front porch to see her off. Assuring Nicole she'd be back soon she headed to the Jeep.

With the passenger door open, Mari was stuffing her bag on the floor by the seat and arranging her rifle to be within easy reach while driving. She never heard the dog coming up behind her until the first growl. Turning around quickly she saw not one but three dogs, all fairly large at perhaps fifty pounds or so each. The drool coming off their mouths along with the vacant stare was not a good sign. They were perhaps fifteen feet away she estimated and was trying to determine if she could get in the Jeep and close the door before they reached her or if she was better off turning away from them, momentarily, to go for her rifle and hope they didn't charge when she wasn't looking.

Like most situations, this one eventually resolved itself.

Nicole yelled out, "Drop and roll under!" With her words she had pulled her pistol out and began firing at the dogs.

Mari quickly figured out she meant to get under the truck and out of reach of the dogs. She threw her feet out and slammed her shoulder into the ground while already starting a crawling roll underneath the armored Jeep.

She heard Nicole's 22 pistol rapidly run through the ten rounds with a few yelps throw in. Time seemed to almost come to a halt as she turned over, nearly completely under the truck now, and was able to see two dogs down and one still charging towards her, just a few feet from the truck. She heard the clatter of

something metallic bouncing off of concrete. The saliva was hanging from the dogs jowls in gooey ropes as it planted its front feet lowering its head and appearing to be readying itself to pursue her under the Jeep.

The sounds of a slide being released reached her ears followed almost immediately by more yelping as the pursuing dog began spasming with the impact of each round slamming into its flesh. It finally dropped and lay still, its muzzle no more than a foot away from her.

Mari scrambled out to the other side of the Jeep and got to her feet. She witnessed Nicole drop the second magazine from the gun and slam home a fresh one, keeping it pointed towards the three downed dogs. She opened the driver side door, reached across and grabbed her rifle and scanned the surrounding area for any additional dogs or other threats.

Nicole's grandfather emerged from the house with his shotgun only to find the situation over. In the ten seconds it took him to go back in, grab the gun and come back out Nicole had dropped all three dogs. He approached them cautiously and saw one still very weakly kicking one of its legs. A 12 gauge round filled with double ought buck shot applied to the skull of the dog ended the last of its movements. For good measure he put a load of shot into each of the other two dog's heads.

Mari came around the back of the Jeep, rifle still held at ready, scanning for threats but no more were to be seen. "Don't touch them," she warned as Fred was leaning over looking at one of them.

"Looks like they got rabies."

"But is it normal rabies or the zombie variant?" she said.

Elaine came down from the porch and was clutching at Nicole. "Are you all right dear? Are you hurt? Did they bite you?"

"Grandma, I'm fine. They never came near me."

“Elaine, give the girl some space. As she just demonstrated she’s grown up a lot and knows how to take care of herself.”

As Elaine and Fred got into their old couple routine of bickering, Mari pulled Nicole aside asking, “Are you OK?”

“Yes, I said they didn’t come near me.”

“I didn’t mean OK in that sense. You’ve never had to shoot anything before, just the bottles and cans that Wolf set up for you. This is a big step for you.”

“I know. I do feel bad about shooting them, really bad. I like dogs a lot, but I wasn’t going to let them hurt you either. I just knew it was them or you and I did what I could to keep you safe.”

Mari gave her a big hug and thanked her for her actions and quick thinking suggestion of taking cover under the truck.

“Honestly, that was just as much so I didn’t accidentally shoot you!” she admitted.

“Don’t you worry about that. From what I see every one of your shots went right where you intended.”

Speaking up so they could all hear, “Why don’t you all go back in the house and lock it up. I’m going to head over to the base and report this. I’m sure they’ll want to come on out and test these. Don’t touch them, don’t come back out until either I or the military is here. It might just be coincidence or this could be the start of another wave, this time with the animals.

Mari drove over to the base, saw the note in her room and went to track down Wolf. She finally located him in the gym.

“Wolf”

“Hey, I was looking for you. Did you find her grandparents?”

“Yeah. Interesting story there. Even more interesting was the shoot out we had this morning.”

“Zombies got in? I thought military had it locked down.”

“They had rabies I think, but they were four legged zombies.”

“Dogs?”

“Yep. Any chance at getting a patrol over there to pick up the carcasses and have them checked out? I’d hate to see a new wave catch us unprepared.”

“Hang on.” Wolf walked over to the wall, picked up the phone and made a call. He talked quietly for a moment before calling out to Mari for the address which she provided.

He hung up and said, “They’re sending a bio hazard unit right over. This isn’t the first time this has happened but it doesn’t seem to be going to epidemic proportions either. They’ll run an analysis and make some determination. In the mean time, make sure you’re armed at all times.”

“It thought I was. I had set the gun down on the seat and turned around to find three of them just a few yards away.”

“How did you kill them?”

“I didn’t. Nicole yelled for me to drop and roll under the truck. With no other options I simply reacted and did just that. I was still on the way towards the ground when she dumped her entire magazine into two of them and followed up with a second magazine for the third dog. Every shot on target. By then Fred came out with a shotgun and gave each a head shot to make sure they were dead. Since you trained her to shoot she really took your lessons to heart.”

“Fred?”

“Her grandfather.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Surprisingly well. It bothered her to shoot the dogs but her concern was my safety first.”

“She’s a tough little girl.”

“Not so little anymore. In the last few months I think she went from 9 to 30, at least in terms of maturity.”

“Well, at least she has family again and can go back to being a kid.”

“Nope.”

Wolf gave her a quizzical look and gestured that she should continue.

“They’re both terminal and with lack of medications don’t expect to make it another month.”

“What about Nicole then?”

“She’s mine.”

“Yours? Isn’t that a bit possessive?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it the way that sounded. Fred asked me to be her guardian when they pass on. He even threw in a bag of gold coins to sweeten the deal.”

“And?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you said yes. But I am curious about the coins.”

“ I told them I’d happily take the coins and hold them for her but that it was her inheritance and she would get them all when the time was right.”

“I expected no less of you.”

Mari, without knowing why, blushed at Wolf’s praise also for some reason feeling pleased that she was able to live up to his expectations.

“Any chance I could meet the grandparents sometime?”

“Sure. I’m headed back there shortly. I agreed to move in there, short term, until they pass on so it’ll be easier on Nicole.”

“She doesn’t know?”

“We’re going to sit down with her tonight and tell her.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Yeah.”

“Changing topics a bit, does Nicole still have those notebooks?”

“I think so. Why?”

“Military intel wants to see them.”

“It’s just some inventory lists. Are they that desperate for supplies?”

“No, her zombie notebook.”

“Zombie notebook? I didn’t know about that one.”

“It was her notes on everything zombie related. What we saw, numbers, actions, anything out of the ordinary, etc. When I first caught her writing in it I realized it could have value and encouraged her to continue. That’s about the same time she took over our inventory and scavenging lists.”

“You know, that really helped. Knowing what we needed instead of just grabbing stuff helped us to stay equipped.”

“Looks like you’re about to have yourself a real talented daughter then soon.”

“No. I won’t try to be her parent. Either a big sister or a guardian, then again after today I’m wondering if she’s going to end up being my guardian!” she finished with a smile and a little nervous laugh.

Even wolf broke into a smile at that statement.

“She took her pack with when we left the base so I assume she’s still got them. You want to head over with me? You can meet the grandparents and ask her?”

“I was hoping you could bring them here one day instead. I’m already stuck in a bunch of meetings.”

“I’ll ask but I don’t see why not. They haven’t been out in a while although Fred might be a bit concerned about leaving the place vacant.”

“Not a problem. Let me know when and I’ll send over a HMMWV full of soldiers to keep an eye on the place.”

“You really got that much pull?”

“Yes,” was all he said.

Later that day, Wolf saw a convoy pulling into the base with a familiar armored pickup trailing at the end of it. He waited to see what happened and as expected the pickup broke off and drove towards him and the barracks behind him.

Rob and Darren got out and looked like they’d been through quite a bit.

Wolf raised his eyebrows and asked, “Do I want to know?”

“No,” replied Darren walking past with a disgusted look on his face.

“Let’s just say I was a dumb ass,” said Rob, hanging his head and following Darren into the building.

Wolf figured there had to be a good story in there somewhere and it would just be a matter of time until it came out.

The next day Wolf met with General Rogers again. He once again stood at attention and saluted. She returned it with a completely professional military demeanor, turned back into her office asking him to follow. At her conference table were two young Majors, in uniform, she introduced as McConugh and Vitori. Wolf, still in civilian clothes was introduced and at the mention of his name, the two Majors briefly looked at each other even though their expressions were unreadable before rising and saluting.

“Gentlemen, let me get right to the point. We are sorely understaffed and barely holding our own. We’re not the only ones in this situation. Our bases across the country and other militarily protected zones, like here, simply do not have enough troops to do anything more than hold our own and some days even that is questionable. We had an incursion from the east yesterday that almost broke through the lines. It’s not that they’re that smart, but rather purely a numbers game.”

“We’re also starting to have problems with self appointed war lords. Most are former gang bangers and a couple of them, well to be honest, we’re not sure where they crawled out of. Usually they leave us alone but lately they’ve become more brash and appear to have picked up military grade weapons from somewhere.”

“If we’re going to maintain some semblance of order and civility then we’re going to need help.”

“What kind of help and from where?” asked Wolf.

“Frankly, your kind of help. The three of you are being tasked with forming groups. Call them a unit, a squad, hell pretend you’re the Little Rascals and call it Our Gang. I don’t care. We’re not looking for military procedures here. Rather we need ZRRTs, or Zombie Rapid Response Teams, as we’re calling them internally. Hunter killer missions against zombies, especially in areas not able to be fire bombed or where they are too widely dispersed for fire to be effective. Second, mounting rescue missions for those still holding their own but looking for evac to a large group like here. Finally, recon and offensive operations against the MZB groups.”

“MZB?” Asked one of the majors.

Wolf supplied the answer, “Mutant Zombie Biker. Consider it the generic term for bad guys who aren’t zombies. The acronym was born long before we had real zombies.”

“Thank you Colonel.” She continued, “If they attack us, it’s a free fire zone, otherwise try to communicate. I have no problem with the public being armed but not when they use that right to commit crimes. Most of the survivalists we’ve encountered have been great allies against the zombies, a few were nothing more than looters and thugs taking advantage of the situation. I will not tolerate those that are using the situation to their advantage. If you can link up with the honorable ones, they can provide a fountain of intel on the local theater.”

“So, are we talking self initiated missions or will you be supplying the mission profiles?”

“Both. I’m thinking two teams acting in mostly hunter roles, assigned to an area but acting mostly autonomous and one team focusing more on the specific missions, mostly rescued based. However don’t think for a minute that a rescue is simple a taxi service. You’ll probably be fighting your way in and back out with civilians in tow.”

One of the major's spoke up, "If the problem is that bad, how are three groups going to make a difference?"

"That's three groups out of here. Everywhere else we have enough presence to hold a base or a city the generals there are also sending out similar groups."

He continued, "This all sounds good, General, but since you said we're spread so thin how are we going to staff our groups?"

"Good question. The answer is you'll be training and leading civilians."

"WHAT? They're not qualified. There is no way a group of civilians could handle this. They'd freak out at the first sign of trouble. No way, not possible."

"Major, I disagree. Remember, our current military were all civilians at one time before training. Colonel, can you spend some time describing your journey here, specifically discuss the others in your group and what happened?"

"Certainly..."

Wolf proceed to spend the next hour laying out out his story including how they came together and the basic training he did with them. How everyone worked together for a common defense, patrols when camped, work schedules, scavenging efforts and the rescue at the hospital. He finally wrapped up with the most recent events in town including the dog shooting by Nicole.

"Well, you had a farm girl who could shoot, another woman who was obviously an experienced administrator who could also shoot, a prepper family and some skilled engineers, not a bunch of amateurs. "

"You would be wrong Major. The skilled administrator is a ten year old girl. She dumped 20 rounds into three moving dogs at about 20 yards and did not miss a single shot. The engineers were students in school. The farm girl? She's a flight attendant. The only vaguely experienced people of the whole group were the prepper family. But you know what? They all stepped up and did what needed to be done to survive. If you are selective about who you take and give them the

opportunities to step up I don't see a problem with a civilian group taking on these roles, especially once they've been trained."

"Start out with anyone with hunting experience but don't overlook those who can think on their feet and improvise in the field. A good scavenger, a tinkerer or someone handy at fabricating stuff can probably be taught, fairly quickly, to shoot good enough. We rarely found the need for sniping and when up against zombies they don't shoot back. It's the other skills that can make or break your group. When I got shot on the bridge we were still being pursued and I was out of the fight. The others had the sense to drop the traps and to have built the disc gun that saved all of our lives. Had they not thought of these beforehand and had the skill to build them we might very well not be having this conversation right now."

"OK Gentlemen. You know the mission profile. I'd like each of you to put some thought into possible team composition, logistics and supplies and we'll meet back here in," she glanced at her watch, "46 hours. Dismissed."

They got up to leave and as they were passing through the outer office Janeen spoke up, "Colonel, I have a message here for you."

"Thank you," he said hanging back to get it. Once the majors left the office Janeen nodded back towards the general's office. Wolf returned and looked questioningly at the General.

"Thanks for supporting me. I knew they would have resistance to civilian teams but I think what you said may have changed their minds or at least given them something to think about."

"Just doing my job," he said with a smile.

"I assume while we were discussing this you already have some thoughts on your team?"

"Yep. The same one I came in with."

“Well, except for the child, yes that sounds good.”

“No, she comes too.”

“Really? You’re going to put a ten year old in the middle of a war zone?”

“Can you guarantee her safety here?”

“Well, no.”

“Then it won’t matter where she is and she has skills I can use.”

“For now, just go think about it. We’ll talk more in a few days.”

Wolf had Janeen do a bit of work for him before heading back to the barracks where he found Darren and Rob in their rooms, both still sulking. “Guys, got a minute?”

“Sure.”

“Well, besides wanting to hear the story, I’ve got a job for you.”

“What?”

“The work you did on the bus and the trucks...”

“Yeah...”

“What if I gave you carte blanche and a month or two. What could you come up with?”

“Practically anything. What do you want it to do?”

“Think of the hospital rescue and the situation at the bridge in Iowa. Come up with something that would have made both situations easier to resolve.”

“So, a super truck?”

“Not necessarily. It could be multiple vehicles. Just work on some ideas. I need them in two days.”

“How many people?”

“Let’s just say I’m thinking of getting the band back together.”

They both let loose with a smile.

“Just remember, this is not public knowledge. Not a word of this to anyone else. Understand?”

“Yes,” they both said in unison.

“Here, these are passes that will get you into the machine shop, vehicle maintenance and repairs and the motor pool storage areas. Your cover story is that you’re analysts reviewing our procedures and inventory. The soldiers won’t like it but shouldn’t hinder you either. Oh, it’ll also get you into the armory but in there you will be under escort the whole time and are not allowed to touch, only look.”

On the next day, with no commitments, Wolf took his truck for a surprise visit to see Mari and Nicole at her Grandparents house. He was hoping they would have come to the base by now but figured they had enough to deal with.

A sharp rapping was heard on the door as Fred and Mari grabbed their weapons and Nicole backed Elaine into the kitchen and stood protectively in front of her grandmother. Mari lined up on the door while Fred, standing off to the side asked who it was.

“Wolf.”

At the sound of his voice Mari visibly relaxed and motioned to Fred to open the door. He did, still standing to the side. Once she had visual confirmation she stopped pointing the weapon at Wolf. He waited at the doorway until he was

invited in. Mari gave him a friendly hug and called for Nicole and Elaine to come out. Upon seeing Wolf, Nicole ran up and gave him a big hug as only kids can do.

Mari proceeded to introduce him to Elaine and Fred who profusely thanked him for getting Nicole to them. After they sat down Wolf stated that he'd heard about Nicole's fancy shooting outside and she proceeded to tell him the whole story.

Wolf praised her quick thinking and accuracy and then changed the subject to her zombie observation notebooks.

"Yes, I still got those," she said running off to the guest bedroom and returning with three notebooks.

"Good. Do you mind if I take these and give them to the army people? They are very interested in seeing what you wrote. I can make sure these get returned to you if you want."

"Really, they want to see them? OK then. I guess I would like them back when they are done if that's OK."

"Of course it is. I'll see that they are returned."

"Thank you. I have one more reason for my visit but I'd like to talk to your Grandpa alone if that's OK."

Elaine stood up, "Come girls let's go make some cookies."

Mari and Nicole went to follow Elaine into the kitchen when Wolf called out, "Oh, Mari, can I have a quick word with you too?"

Shrugging in resignation to Elaine she returned to Wolf while Nicole and Elaine disappeared into the kitchen.

"What's up?"

“Consider this conversation classified, at least for now.” Fred made motions to get up, apparently to leave the room. “No, Fred, this includes you. Well, more specifically Nicole.”

His expression showed a bit of surprise.

“The military is spread pretty thin.”

“Yep. Already knew that.”

“So, they looking to form some teams comprised around civilians. It seems our group with our diverse talents and in the field improvisation coupled with the sheer distance we safely traveled is essentially their model. They want to form some hunter/killer teams to actively go out and eradicate the zombies but they’re also looking for a rescue team. Missions similar to what we did at the hospital, for example.”

“How does this involve us? Are they looking for info from us on how we survived?”

“Well, not really. They asked me to lead the rescue team and I want to see if I can get us all together again. We worked well and I think we can make a difference out there.”

“You’re talking about taking my granddaughter back out into that,... that... Mess?!” sputtered out Fred.

“Well, to be honest yes. But...” he said before Fred could get started again, “I don’t want her out there shooting. I want her in our mobile command center coordinating our group. She has a real talent for organization and communications. Believe it or not, she’s already at the level of most of the military communications people. A few weeks of intensive training with them and she would be a top notch support staff.”

Fred dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his face up and down, either in frustration, anger, or resignation, Wolf wasn’t sure which. Finally he lifted

his head and spoke. “I just keep thinking of her as our little princess. Not a zombie hunter. You know that Elaine and I, we’re not going...”

As Fred started to choke up, Wolf took over, “Yes. Mari told me. I have connections and can get you whatever you need.”

“I’m sure you can, but we’ve already decided that we’ve lead good full lives and we’re ready for whatever happens. Mari is going to be taking care of Nicole when we pass.”

“She also told me that. Have you told Nicole yet?”

“Yes, we spoke last night. It wasn’t easy and there were a lot of tears but you’re right. She’s a lot more mature then we give her credit for. If anyone else had asked or proposed involving our granddaughter in such a way I’d have run them out of here but the two of them both have spoke so highly of you and what you did that I really do believe you would do everything in your power, up to including giving your life, to keep her safe.”

Wolf blushed a bit but responded, “You are correct sir. We’re estimating a minimum of two months, perhaps three before we’re ready to head back out so, as I don’t know any other way to put this, they’ll be time for you to spend with her before you pass and time for her to grieve before getting her involved again. Also, we’re not drafting her. She will be told the mission and it’s her choice to participate or not.”

Turning to Mari, “Of course as her guardian,”

“Big sister.”

“Huh?”

“After we told her about her grandparents situation and that I’d be taking care of her, if she wanted, she readily agreed and said I’ve always been like a big sister to her so we decided that we’d just assume those roles from now on.”

“So, sis,” he said with a hint of a good natured smirk, “it will also be up to you to approve or veto her involvement. I’m hoping you’ll both participate but I believe the four of you should discuss this in private. I’ll be at the base so you can let me know. Oh, and the invite to come to the base still stands. Just let me know when and I’ll be sure your house is guarded while you’re away.”

Nicole and Elaine called from the kitchen, “Cookies are ready.”

Wolf politely had a couple and then excused himself saying he had to get back to the base.

A few days later Wolf, right after breakfast, located Rob and Darren and took them to an empty conference room.

“So, what can we do?”

“What can’t we do! You should see the equipment and supplies they got here! We could build you almost anything.”

“Perhaps I should rephrase this. What are your recommendations based on the criteria I gave you.”

“Well, do you know what an MRAP is?”

Wolf gave them a ‘are you kidding’ look which prompted them to quickly continue.

“Well, it already does most of what we would want. Think about a couple of those along with a faster scout type vehicle. We could take a Deuce and a half, chop it down to about the size of a pickup truck and rework the drive train for better acceleration and speed. “

“Why screw with the Deuce when we’re buried in HWWMMVs?”

“Height. The Hummer doesn’t sit up as high as the M35 or MRAPs. Modifying one for better performance gives you both the height and the maneuverability.”

“Fair enough. What about rescuing a bunch of people?”

“Well, using the same idea on the MRAP, we extend it instead of cutting it down. Make it large enough to mount a bus on top. Armor the bus up a bit more professionally than last time and setup a turret or two on the top with .50 caliber guns or maybe even a chain gun but we think the volume of ammo could become a problem for those. Select fire 50’s would probably be better. We could add a telescoping tube on the bottom and either a tube or a drop down rear ramp at maybe eight feet off the ground to avoid anything reaching up and grabbing on. That way the bus could back up to a second floor window and pretty much have people just jump down a few feet to our ramp.”

“What about fuel and supplies? Communications? Tools? What about accommodations?”

“With the group back together we could look at one vehicle with four people, two vehicles with two people, one single person vehicle and then the two of us could either share a fifth vehicle or each drive our own to make six total in the convoy.”

“So, figure three MRAPs, one bus and one scout vehicle. Bus needs room for people although the rescue supplies could go in there too. Scout vehicle needs to be self contained but shouldn’t be considered for group supplies. So, that leaves three MRAPs to be turned into a command center, mess facilities, barracks, tool shop, fuel and all our day to day supplies and food. Yeah, it just might be doable. Especially if we scavenge a bit out there. OK, you guys hang around, I may need to talk more later on.”

Wolf left the guys and walked outside for a minute to organize his thoughts before heading to the meeting with the General when a soldier came running up. “Wolf, sir!”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Trouble at the southern gate. The people there say they know you. Roy and Ann something.”

He ran to his truck, started engine and raced out of the parking lot. Ignoring the rules of the road, not that any were still being enforced, he reached the southern route into Salt Lake City in five minutes flat. The truck was barely in park when he was already out the door running for the barricades.

“Wolf, over here!” yelled Roy.

“Anna’s shot! They won’t let us in as they think she’s been infected. She’s doing really bad and I don’t know if she’ll make it another fifteen minutes that the test takes. She’s got a dangerously high fever and a nasty infection from a shotgun blast along with a collapsed lung.

“Corporal, these people are with me. Let them through.”

“Sorry, orders are no one gets through who has not been tested clean. Besides, who the hell are you?”

Wolf ignored him and grabbed the radio right out of his hand.

The corporal lunged for it while Wolf easily, with one arm, fended him off and actually put him down on the ground quite quickly. While doing so he had already hit the talk button on the radio, and spoke a coded phrase and the General’s name.

The remaining soldiers all had rushed over at the intrusion and were pointing their weapons at Wolf demanding he get down on the ground or they would shoot.

Wolf hit the speaker button on the radio so everyone could hear the General's voice answer the call.

He spoke, "General Rogers, this is Colonel Wolf. I have a situation at the southern gate. I need to get a family through here on a medical emergency and we don't have time for testing. They'll be under my supervision, I need you to tell the troops to stand down as they do not recognize my authority."

"Stand by Colonel."

Moments later the headsets of every soldier there went off all with a priority alert that they Wolf was indeed a colonel and they were to follow Colonel Wolf's orders without question and provide any necessary aid he required. It included the necessary security override codes telling them this was a legitimate order. Immediately all the rifles were pointed elsewhere and most of the soldiers made themselves scarce.

Wolf released the Corporal tossing his radio back to him.

"Clear the barricade. Now!" he commanded to the soldiers.

"Roy, get back in the truck and follow me. Do not deviate in your route."

"You, and you," he said pointing at two other soldiers, "take the HMMWVs and lead the way to the base hospital securing each intersection ahead of us."

"Sir, yes sir!"

In less than 30 seconds the group was racing down the streets back towards the base. Someone had the sense to call ahead and they found medical staff waiting outside with a gurney.

"Shot gun blast to the arm and chest, collapsed lung, probably still partially collapsed and definite wound contamination," Roy called out as they were removing her from the truck.

Wolf held Roy and the boys back while they rushed in with her.

“Let’s go, you need to get tested.”

“We’re clean.”

“I’m sure you are but I took a big risk involving the General and letting you in without the test. We need to prove the risk was worth it. You know the test doesn’t take long, besides they’ll be working on her for a few hours at least.”

Exhausted from both the physical and emotional toll of the last thirty six hours the three of them seemed about ready to collapse on the spot. Wolf led them in, found a medic who ran the blood test and verified all three were clean and wrote up documentation to that affect. He also went into the trauma room and pulled a sample from Anna’s good arm and she too tested clean.

Wolf gave the papers to Roy and told him to hang onto them for awhile in case any questions arose and then excused himself to go to meeting he was already late for.

“You’re late, she already started, better get your ass in there pronto.”

He nodded to Janeen as he proceeded into the General’s office coming to attention and saluting as he entered.

“As you were Colonel. Please have a seat. I trust the emergency was successfully resolved?”

“Yes. Satisfactory outcome.”

“Good.”

“The majors have both laid out their plans for their teams,” she said handing him some documents and continuing on, “and now we’re reviewing theaters for them. The three current vectors for our area include northwest, west and east. I’m leaning towards targeting rescue initially to the east with the hunter groups moving toward the coasts and then looping around and working their way back this way, as

they find rescue situations we'll then dispatch to deal with them. We're estimating a six to nine month primary deployment, possibly longer with scavenging."

Both majors seemed to have taken Wolf's comments to heart and adjusted their thinking to include a variety of skills, not just a group of snipers. They shared their similar, but still distinct, approaches, equipment needs and group sizes. Each was expecting fifty to seventy five members to their teams. A large number, thought Wolf, but then again he was used to finesse and surgical operations, not whole sale slaughter as the ZRRT hunters would likely encounter. They also planned on nearly as many vehicles to provide enough food, water, ammo and supplies for the mission.

"Colonel Wolf, are you prepared to share your thoughts?"

"Yes General Rogers. I consulted with a few members of the group I came here with. Other events over the past few days have shown that I believe all are on board which would give us a crew of eleven."

"Including the girl?"

"Yes, including the girl. Her grandparents and her, um, older sister, are all fully on board with the mission parameters and understand the risks. Regardless her, and every member, when formerly presented with the mission will be given the go, no go, option. We intend to retro fit one MRAP into a platform for a bus. An armored and armed bus with second floor and subterranean loading capability to be specific. An M35 will be converted into essentially a fast attack scout vehicle by shortening it and modifying the drive train. My guys feel the extra height makes it a better candidate over a HMMWV. Finally three MRAPs will be left in a standard package, armed of course, but converted into barracks and mess, command and communications along with supplies and one last one as limited machine and tool shop with additional supplies."

"But how are you going to carry enough supplies for your group?" asked Major Vitori.

“We’ll have further supplies in the bus intended for use by those we rescue. Otherwise we’ll do the same thing we did to get here. We’ll scavenge. Vast quantities of fuel, food, water and other supplies are out there. As long as no one else is relying on them I’d rather utilize them instead of depleting the limited resources here.”

“Gentlemen, each of your approaches sound reasonable. Consider this to be tentative approval to move forward with your planning. I’ll expect requisitions, supply lists and such on my desk in twenty four hours and bios of your proposed team in one week. Utilize the distribution centers in the city to get out the word as to what kind of people and skills you’re looking for. Dismissed.”

All got up to leave however on the way out General Rogers placed a hand on Wolf’s arm indicating he should stay behind. After the others left she asked Janeen to join them.

“Wolf, you are going on a special mission for your first rescue mission.”

“A special mission, why am I not surprised?”

“Also, Janeen will be accompanying your team.”

“Now that is a surprise.”

“Don’t think I can cut it anymore?” she asked with a smirk.

“Oh, I’m sure you can, just figured you enjoyed the cushy desk job too much to want to return to the field,” he joked right back.

“Enough you too,” said the General but in a good natured tone. “How soon can you leave?”

“Realistically? Two months minimum. The emergency earlier was one of my soon to be team members.”

“What happened?”

“Took a shotgun blast at very close range right outside of Phoenix.”

“That’s a heavily invested zombie zone. You sure they were clean?”

“I had them all checked at the hospital before I left. All came back clean. She was hit yesterday, arm and torso, collapsed lung. Part of a prepper family. Roy, her husband, got her chest wound sealed up and bandaged her the best he could, then him and their two teenage sons drove it straight through stopping only to scavenge gas.”

“Let’s hope she makes speedy recovery in the next few months then. Two months is about the window I was hoping for.”

“So what is the secret mission?”

“You’re going to bring back the people who might be able to stop this.”

“So Porcupine isn’t successful?”

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s working and we’re getting closer but a group of specialists in rabies ended up at Denver International airport when everything fell apart. They got swept up, it seems by luck, and taken into DIA-Prime1 before all hell broke loose with the zombies completely over running the place. We’ve got a data link to them but their supplies are only going to last another four to six months. They have what they believe to be a vaccine and we’ve been working with them around the clock yet we’ve been unable to synthesize what they have. We need them and their samples.”

“They’ve got supplies for ten thousand people for four years down there. How can they be almost out?”

“DIA-Prime1 is mostly command facilities with limited barracks and supplies. Primes 2-4 contain the labs, supplies and equipment. All three are compromised. They had to seal the interlocks and are stuck there with only two ways out, both dumping them right in the middle of the zombie hordes.”

“Floor plan?”

“You know that’s highly classified Wolf.”

“Janeen, how long to hack in and get us a set?”

She held up a flash drive, “You mean these?”

“I saw and heard nothing,” said the General.

Wolf pocketed the drive for later review.

“So you really think the scientists can stop it?”

“They were on the CDCs advance team with the preliminary field samples when they got stuck there. If we can get them out and into a real lab they think, with their samples, they’ll be able to re-synthesize it in three to six months tops.”

“Two months to go, figure at least a week or more round trip, six months of work, then ramp up manufacturing and distribution. Minimum of a year before most populated areas are going to get it. Maybe two to three years for the rest of the world population centers. Does anyone think we can hold out that long?”

“Let’s hope so. Janeen, your replacement is due here tomorrow. Do a knowledge dump and then join up with Wolf.”

“General, one day to transfer all the protocols?”

“He held the position before you did. It shouldn’t take long.”

She nodded her head in acceptance.

“Wolf, why don’t you go check on your friends and get your engineers setup with the motor pool. Janeen, go ahead and put in the authorizations for full unrestricted access to motor pool, workshop and maintenance for Wolf’s guys along with requisition approval for four MRAPs and a M35. No point in delaying their work.”

The next month was a whirlwind of activity. Nearly two hundred civilian volunteers went through a crash course in training, tactics, weapons and anything else the Majors wanted to throw at them. Except for Anna and Nicole, Wolf has his group also participate in the majority of the training. Thanks to his previous tutelage on the road, his group excelled and were soon challenging the instructors. His team was introduced to Janeen and quickly took her in as one of their own. They also had a chance to meet the General and once the General even went out to meet Nicole's Grandparents and to see her and them in a less formal setting. The girl surprised the general by answering the door before she even knocked.

"Welcome General Rogers. I knew you were coming."

"Oh, you mean heard the HMMWV drive up?"

"No, when I went to bed last night I told Mari you'd be coming over this morning."

"But... how? I didn't even decide until just a few hours ago myself."

"I don't know how I know, I just do."

Mari spent a few minutes explaining the other episodes to the stunned General. Later, after regaining her composure she praised Nicole on her zombie records and asked Nicole if she could see her other notebooks with her notes and inventory records. She brought them out and the General was impressed with the accuracy and attention to detail. Having gone through communications earlier in her military career she asked a series of questions all which Nicole correctly answered. The more she talked with Nicole the more she saw what Wolf and the others saw. Eventually thanking everyone for accommodating her intrusion she excused herself to head back to base.

Barely one week later Nicole's Grandparents both passed away, literally hours apart. They said after her Grandmother passed that her Grandfather's heart

gave out and he had a fatal heart attack but Mari and Nicole both suspect it was more a case of a broken heart at losing his wife.

A small service was held and attended by everyone in the group including Anna, Janeen and the General.

After a few days Nicole told Mari that she was now ready to, as she put it, “get to work.” Unlike her parents, she knew her Grandparents were going to pass and had come to terms with it ahead of time. It was still difficult for her and more than once Mari noticed her privately grieving.

Nicole finally participated in some of the physical training and shooting. With a bipod she had one hell of an accurate rifle shot. Many attributed it to the youth of her eyes but Wolf and Janeen both could see she was just a natural. Most afternoons were spent working with the techs learning additional communications and how they interfaced into the command systems.

Rob and Darren were busy trying to keep up with the vehicle modification projects. The maintenance soldiers were instructed to basically do anything the two guys wanted and as a result they were able to function more as design engineers instead of dealing with all of the hands on work themselves.

At almost exactly two months to the day they were running the vehicles through their final paces and working out the supply details. They’d be retrieving almost twenty people, including a half dozen CDC scientists and their support staff.

Chapter 15

Bait

Wolf and Janeen reviewed the full and highly classified bunker plans. The only way in, past the zombies, would be via an escape tunnel. It didn't directly connect however it shared a common wall. Normally, that is when not being pursued by zombies, someone escaping from the bunker would have access to the control panel which would detonate charges placed in the wall and allow them to get through. Since Wolf's group would be coming from the other side they'd have to create their own breach. Other than having to bust and cut through a foot of reinforced concrete it should be a pretty easy entrance.

The access was located in a barn sitting in the middle of the field about a quarter mile south of the airport grounds. Very nondescript and ordinary looking to the casual observer. The run down looking barn, apparently on the edge of collapse, was just show to keep anyone from looking around too much. The surrounding fields were leased out and routinely had crops in them to help keep the illusion alive.

The entire team gathered together for the final mission briefing. Wolf described the barn and the trap door in the floor that they would use to access the basement. Once down there they would need to bust out the wall which would give them access to the escape tunnel system. Breaking into teams, they would follow the tunnels back to the central area, clear out any zombies and then signal the group they were sent to rescue. Once they released the interlocks and opened the door half the team would escort them back while the remainder functioned as a rear guard. They'd load up in the MRAP bus and move out.

Everyone was given an advanced headset and armband to wear. These armbands, with their ear pieces, linked into the command system and allowed Nicole to monitor all of them and communicate individually or collectively. In addition the headsets contained cameras, proximity and motion sensors communicating with the command system too. The resulting data streams, fed back to Nicole's station in the command vehicle would provide her a three sixty degree real time map of the group, their environment and any threats. It was her responsibility, along with communications, to make them aware of any zombie movements and coordinate the mission.

While last minute tweaks were preformed on the vehicles the team spent their time wisely training based on the given mission goals.

Finally the day arrived. All the supplies had been loaded and double checked. Everyone was armed. Wolf and Janeen took the lead in the scout M35. Mari and Nicole had the Command MRAP. Roy's family was in the Supply MRAP, John and Julie took the Bus MRAP and the final Toolshop MRAP was driven by Darren and Rob. They pulled out with the bus and the command vehicles in the middle, the supply and workshop vehicles front and back. Wolf and Janeen took advantage of their high performance M35 and raced ahead scouting at least a few miles ahead of the group.

For the first few hours Nicole went through all the communications protocols getting a feel for them in the field and found that with a few tweaks to the sensitivity to the system she could even start using the sensor head gear on a wide field setting to get an image of the surrounding area. It didn't take long for her to figure out how the system could link in with satellite imagery and actually plot out their movements on the real time surface map with other critical details also recorded.

"Scout-1, zombies, 2 o'clock, 300 yards. Looks like three."

Janeen's voice came on the radio, "Confirm. No threat, just ignore and continue. Nice spot."

"Wasn't me, these systems are amazing!"

"True, but you're the one running the system and interpreting the data so you get the credit."

Off radio she said to Wolf, "She's really got a good head. Even I didn't pick up the systems as quickly as she has."

"That's why I wanted her on this mission. As long as we keep her out of the main fighting I think she'll do just fine."

The group backtracked east on 80 returning through Rock Springs, Laramie and eventually hitting Cheyenne. The interchange to 25 south was located just outside the city so they easily avoided the zombie hordes within the urban environment. Being well stocked they did much less stopping to scavenge and made the Colorado border the first day. Since it was still empty, the bus was used as a makeshift campsite and allowed all a safe night's sleep.

As usual zombies discovered the group. A few quick shots, the following morning, from the gun turrets atop the bus cleared them out allowing everyone a chance to disperse back to their vehicles. Wolf and Janeen took off, again a few miles ahead in the lead. Before hitting Denver itself they took the exit for the Northwest Parkway and headed east towards the airport.

Not more than 10 minutes later they were passing by the airport and could see, literally, thousands of zombies on the grounds. A few took note of the passing vehicles and started their way but were not able to keep up and quickly disappeared from sight. Wolf led them to the 56th avenue exit and worked their way east almost a mile before heading north, across the fields, towards the sole visible barn in the distance.

Each of the vehicles easily handled the relatively flat plowed fields.

Most plans don't survive more than a few minutes of implementation before they have to be modified. Theirs was no exception. The 'bus', that they planned on pulling into the barn and to use the lower tunnel tube, wouldn't fit. The barn looked run down and about to collapse but the veneer was just that, veneer. The interior structure was steel and concrete, wrapped in a veneer of aged wood. Short of demolishing half the barn the bus wasn't going to fit.

The vehicles were parked to create a defensive perimeter around the entrance to the barn and the wall breaching equipment was taken out and staged in the barn. It took Wolf a bit of searching to locate the hidden trap door. Hidden was perhaps a generous term as the only real camouflage was the loose dirt and straw. With that brushed out of the way he lifted the ring and opened the door. They climbed down the wooden stairs into the musty basement of the barn. In a former life this room would have held the animal droppings accumulated over the winter which were then shoveled out in the spring and spread on the fields. Now it just smelled dirty and old. Three walls were traditional field stone construction while the north wall was newer concrete. Constructed to appear as a repair job, the bunker blueprints said differently.

They took turns with sledge hammers pounding on the concrete until a six foot by three foot perimeter was established and the rebar visible. Rob and Darren got to work with portable cutters slowly slicing through each piece. Again the hammers went to work pounding. Thankfully the noise was mostly contained in the basement. Finally they could feel it start to give. A few more hits and it dropped into the room beyond with a thud.

Weapons ready, they shined high power flashlights into the dark beyond. Other than the fifteen foot square room and a corridor leading off to the north, nothing else was visible in the small dust clouds still swirling in the air.

"OK, plan B. Since we can't secure this end with the bus over the tunnel and the vehicles sit up too high to effectively block the entrance from zombies we'll

need to guard this end. Rob, Darren, get up in the turrets. Anything comes within 500 yards, shoot it.”

“Nicole, you’re in the command center. I’m on point, following me is Mari, Lucas and Jake, then John and Julie. Roy and Anna, you’re next and Janeen will bring up the rear. It should be a good quarter mile walk or more until we enter the complex and they’re not certain if the tunnel is occupied or not.”

“Questions?”

“No? Let’s move. Nicole, signal them that we’re on the way and then start monitoring.”

Nicole signaled to Wolf that she wanted a private word with him before the group departed.

“Yes?”

“Mr Wolf, I had one of those feelings. Someone isn't going to make it back.”

“Do you know who?”

“No.”

“Well, then I guess there isn't much we can do about it. Thanks for telling me. Let's just keep this quiet from the others for now. OK?”

“Yes.”

Once the guys and Nicole were ensconced in their positions, Wolf headed off down the slightly downward sloping tunnel with the rest strung out behind him, at approximately 5 meter intervals. Each was carrying an M16, a dozen spare magazines, two pistols with spare magazines and at least two hand to hand weapons, usually machetes or bats, in holsters on their back. They had been outfitted with thick leather suits and basic body armor. The need was to stop a bite or scratch, not a bullet, so even the lowest grade armor was more than sufficient.

The gear was tailored to allow for great freedom of movement and, though warm, was comfortable to wear.

The moved in silence with the head lamps and weapon mounted flashlights brightening the tunnel quite a distance. Not long after they started a faint whirring followed by a metallic clang and another whir was heard. Approximately every fifteen seconds the sound repeated and the further they advanced the louder it became.

Wolf stopped and held up his fist. Everyone saw the signal, stopped and assumed a defensive position. Some low, some high and the rear three members keeping their focus on protecting their flank.

Slowly Wolf eased forward to the fairly large room. It was a large square, perhaps twenty meters on each wall with a large door set in the center of each. The hallway Wolf's group was in entered on one corner and a similar hallway left via the opposite corner and appeared to angle slightly upwards. Alongside each door was a keypad and a large number was labeled on each door itself. One through four. One, three and four were sealed tight, door two was not. Suddenly it started to retract and open, the whirring sound, stopped, the clang, and it tried to close again once more with the whir of a motor.

Blocking the door was a pile of gore and a human femur. The door must have been triggered on sensors as the moment it met the resistance it stopped, then after 15 seconds repeated the cycle. Wolf went back to the group and told him what he had seen. They would have to be silent as he was quite certain zombies were behind the door. He explained that he'd have Nicole signal the CDC members to release the door lock while they all created a defensive wall between the door and the escape corridor. Once the door was open he'd usher them all out.

Once in position he whispered, "Nicole, now."

Moments later the door released with a clang and started whirring open. A snarl was heard from the number two door and hands started advancing around the edges of it.

“Get ready! Here they come!”

The weight of the zombies against the door forced it open at the same time the other door opened.

Everyone opened fire and the room became a deafening echo chamber. Wolf darted into the bunker, DIA Prime1, yelling over his shoulder to Janeen to hold the room.

To the CDC people, “Are you all ready? We have to go now!”

“Yes, we’ve got the samples packed and all are notes are in here,” he shouted back patting a briefcase. “What should we do?”

“Line up here at the door. When I tell you to, you’re going to take a left out the door and run down the corridor and do not stop until you’re safely in the bus at the other end,” Wolf shouted to be heard over the gunfire.

Heading out the door he saw his line collapsing. There were just too many and if they weren’t stopped or distracted they’d eventually end up blocking their escape route. His mind made up he ran to Janeen, grabbed four of her magazines and yelled, “Fall back to the room. When they’re gone get everyone out.” He ripped off her headset and dropped it on the ground in the corner. “Have Nicole monitor your headset and tell you when it’s clear! Now go!”

Wolf herded everyone back into DIA Prime 1 and as the door was swinging closed he darted out and took off for the other corridor.

“Wolf! No!”, yelled Janeen.

Mari called, “Nicole, what’s he doing?” as the door slammed closed.

“He’s heading down the corridor that leads to the airport terminal. He keeps yelling and firing bursts back at the zombies in an effort to get them to follow and from what your headset is showing it’s working. They’re pouring out of the bunker and heading right up the hallway after him.”

“How is he doing?”

“Fine so far. He’s staying ahead of them, no wait! He just crashed through the doors into the airport terminal!”

“Wolf, proximity motion sensors show hundreds converging on your location!”

Janeen burst onto the radio, “Hang on, we’re coming!”

“NO, get the CDC guys and samples out, that is an ORDER!” he yelled before ripping off his headset and tossing it away. The last video Nicole got was Wolf leaping from a ticketing counter to an upper walkway while hundreds converged on the counter. He was literally surrounded and trapped.

“We have to help him,” said Roy.

“NO,” Janeen forcefully said, although Mari would have sworn she was tearing up as she continued, “he sacrificed himself so we could complete the mission. We can not let it be in vain. Nicole, is the room clear yet?”

“No, but the number has dwindled down to just a few at a time now.”

“Keep watching. Let me know when it’s clear. We’ll give it another sixty seconds and then move out. Jake, you and Lucas take the lead. The rest of you,” she gestured towards the scientists, “will follow them and we’ll bring up the rear.”

Almost 10 minutes passed before Nicole said, “No more in the last minute.”

“OK, everyone loaded? We’re moving fast and we’re not stopping. Got it?”

Nods all around.

“Let’s go. Open the lock.”

One of the civilians pressed a button on the keypad and the door clanged and started whirring open. Janeen was the first to slip out followed by Jake and Lucas. They silently gestured toward the hallway encouraging the civilians to get moving. Once they were the two of them ran to the front and lead the way at a brisk jog. Less than half were out when the zombies in the corridor turned back to investigate the clang sound.

“Here they come!” called out Anna as she started firing at them. Only head of throat shots had an effect so they couldn’t just spray and pray but instead had to line up each and every shot. The corridor was wide enough that with some pushing and shoving the zombies were coming about four abreast. Roy, John, Mari and Julie quickly jumped in the fight and were barely holding their own.

As Janeen ushered the last of the civilians out and down the escape tunnel she yelled to fall back. The group did though she remained at the entrance to the tunnel.

Seeing her halt they hesitated, “Go!” she yelled. “I’ll stall them for as long as I can.”

They group was half way back to the bus when they heard Janeen's firing stop. Coming into the basement a new sound took over, the sound of .50 caliber shots from up above.

Anna called, “Nicole, what’s going on up there?”

Rob answered, “A large swarm coming this way from the airport. We took out the fast ones, the rest are maybe forty five seconds out and we won’t be able to stop this many.”

“Hurry!” yelled Mari, urging them all into the basement and up the stairs to the waiting vehicles. They poured into the bus and the other vehicles. Mari was

about to go when Janeen came running out of the tunnel, out of breath, and into the basement. She held two swords absolutely covered in gore.

“What took you so long?” Mari said to Janeen with a slight smirk.

“Oh, you know me, I had to stop and do my nails along the way!”

The two of them charged up the stairs. Janeen flung the swords up and into the bed of the Deuce and jumped in slamming the door closed just as the fingers of the undead reached for her. Calling into the radio as Mari climbed into the MRAP, “Nicole, everyone accounted for?”

“Yes, well except for....”

Chapter 16

Future

Major Vitori and McConugh spent months in the field with their teams hunting down and exterminating every zombie they could find. It involved long hours, gruesome work and tested the soul. Many of their team members still have nightmares about this yet today. Soon more teams around the country were formed based on their models.

Our team successfully returned the CDC members and within a month they had the vaccine ready for production. Everyone on teams got the first shots and after some inadvertent field tests, i.e. zombie bites, we proved that it did indeed protect against it. We went on a series of other rescue missions and took a few turns at outright extermination missions but none of our group had the stomach for that.

About five months after the rescue the General returned from lunch and found a small figurine on her desk. It was a four inch tall exquisitely painted howling wolf. It would be a bit over a decade later before I knew for certain.

Once the vaccine was distributed and the zombies put down over about a five year period, we started rebuilding. Sure there was an occasional straggler, but no more hordes. The general eventually put in for retirement but not before Janeen had trained me. I found out she was part of some shadow Special Ops group that was led by the general. Her, Wolf and a number of other operatives were kept on even when the Senator had killed their original project. The general, meanwhile, had groomed her replacement, also a recently promoted general, to eventually take over.

Formerly, long before I joined and before the zombie incident, the operatives would take out select targets, assassinations, rescue those who were thought beyond rescue and basically do the dirty work that no one else would or could do. The goal was to do so quietly, quickly and with no traceability. They routinely did the seemingly impossible. Since the zombie uprising we continued with rescues and eventually morphed into more of a protectorate of the people as the rebuilding continued. We rooted out those who simply existed to make trouble and even ended up overseas ensuring certain individuals in foreign governments didn't jeopardize the world peace we were now enjoying.

On one of the last days before retirement, the general was in a meeting with her replacement and I was at my desk outside of her office, when a tall man with a bit of gray walked in. The two guards rushed in behind him. With barely a noticeable movement he had disarmed both and was presenting them with the weapons they had just moments before held in their hands.

"Dismissed," I said to both of them. Throwing some nasty looks at the older man they returned to their post outside the door.

"You're looking good Wolf."

"As are you Nicole."

"I'm sure the general will be pleased to confirm you're still alive."

"She knows."

"The figurine?"

He nodded.

"Your training has gone well and I see you've blossomed into a lovely young woman."

"I did have two of the best teachers, then again I think a few strings were pulled on my behalf."

“Janeen always was better than me. As an operative, I’ve never known her to be bested. She just didn’t have the stomach for all of the killing.”

“And you do?”

“No, but I’ve been able to bury it deep down better than she could. Speaking of, I haven’t seen her around in a few years now. Did she know? How’s she doing?”

“She suspected. About a year ago cancer got her. It was fast and mostly painless. Her last words to me were a message for you. Here,” Nicole said handing Wolf a sealed envelope she removed from the desk. “She told me where this was and to give it to you when you returned.”

“Thank you,” he said slipping it into his jacket pocket.

“How are the rest doing?”

“John and Julia got married but ended up fighting a lot. They finally went their separate ways. One on each coast, each involved with the rebuilding efforts. Funny thing, they never got divorced, just decided being married but living apart worked best for them. I think they still get together a few times a year. Roy and Anna have three grandkids now and spoil them rotten. They’re still here in Salt Lake City and would love to see you again. Lucas and Jake both joined up with the military, first in the hunter squads and later in the rebuilding efforts. Both married team members from their hunting days. Lucas has two kids and Jake has one with another kid on the way.”

“How about Mari?”

“I’d rather not say.”

He raised an eye brow at that statement but didn’t push for anything more on the subject.

“The geeks?”

“They also went with the hunter groups where Rob was killed in the Chicago zombie incident. There were just too many of them and when they got caught outside the vehicles there wasn’t anything that could be done to save them. Darren died a few years ago in the rebuilding. Stupid really, got a small cut and didn’t report it. He knew better. By the time the tetanus symptoms were apparent it was too late. They tried all the antibiotics but none were effective in combating it.”

A quiet tone went off in Nicole’s ear piece. “She’s ready if you want to head in.”

“She heard?”

“Actually no. I muted our conversation. She knows that someone is here to see you, just not who.”

He nodded and walked past her desk to the General’s office and opened the door. Stopping in the doorway he saluted. She returned the salute and then invited him in with a warm and friendly greeting.

“I knew one day you’d be back. You probably already know I’m retiring soon.”

“I know.”

“You should meet my replacement.”

“I’d be honored.”

“I think you already know her,” said the general gesturing toward the door.

From behind it Mari pushed it closed.



Culex Pipiens (pen name) is an amateur fiction writer focusing on PAW (Post Apocalyptic World) themed stories. Culex's work can be found on www.culexpipiens.com where many of the stories are available as free downloads. A number of Culex's stories are also available in the Kindle format on Amazon.com (search Kindle books for 'Culex Pipiens'). In addition, select stories are only available in Kindle format. If you like the stories and want to support Culex's work, consider buying one or more in the Kindle format which is readable on Kindle devices along with the free Kindle app for PC, Mac and many different tablets.

Culex Pipiens can be reached through the web site, via facebook (Culex Pipiens) and at Twitter (CulexPipiensPAW) and is regularly found on a handful of forums under the screen name of CulexPipiens.