



BLOODBORNE

THE CHANGED BOOK 1

A ZOMBIE NOVEL BY

S.M. LITTLE

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S.M. LITTLE

TO AIDEN

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PROLOGUE

MANHATTEN, NEW YORK CITY

Protesters lined Broadway all the way down and around to Fort Washington Avenue. Columbia Irving Medical Center was surrounded. It was just the latest protest in a long line of protests. The country had been inundated with them as of late, and nobody saw an end in sight.

Signs littered the crowd, ranging from ‘Synthetic blood is wrong’ to ‘You will kill us all’. Clergymen and women lined the streets, proclaiming synth blood was sacrilegious and a direct slap at God himself. Only God could create life.

Men, women, even children came out in droves to protest the manufacturing of synthetic blood. They had been protesting all morning after the news came out the previous night that scientists and doctors were close to perfecting ‘synth blood’, as it had become known. Their effort was to little avail, as the people inside the labs couldn’t see, let alone hear, their protest.

One protester even tried to rally support to storm the buildings in an effort to put a stop to this abomination. He had managed to garner quite a few people to join his cause. But he was quickly put down by the National Guard members, who had been called in by the Governor. The rest of the attackers were thwarted at the gates. The sight of an M4 barrel pointed at you will do that.

The frightened protesters backed away, even as they continued to berate the soldiers who had drawn their weapons against them. Anything to create commotion and chaos in an effort to draw more attention to their protest.

Inside the lab, scientists worked feverishly to finish what they had started. They were aware of the commotion outside but didn't care as long as the soldiers did their job.

"Cynthia, can you put these samples in the centrifuge?" Max asked. Dr. Maxwell Johnson was one of the brightest minds in medical research. He had spent his entire life dedicated to obtaining knowledge for the betterment of humankind.

"Absolutely," Cynthia replied. Currently, her job was to assist Maxwell in anything he needed. This current task was a simple spinning of the blood to separate it. Place the blood vials in the centrifuge machine, close the lid, and hit a button. Nothing to it. It wasn't her dream to be pushing buttons, but the opportunity to work with, and learn from, such an esteemed colleague was too good to pass up.

Cynthia placed the vials into the centrifuge, closed the lid, and hit the button. She stood transfixed as she watched the vials slowly start to spin. As the machine picked up speed, she soon could not keep track of the individual vials. She watched as they became one spinning unit.

"Cynthia, are you ok?" Max asked her.

Jarred out of her stupor, she replied, "Yes, doctor. Yes, I'm ok. Just a little tired, I guess."

"Maybe that boyfriend of yours should try flowers instead of so much wine?" Max retorted in jest. He knew Cynthia quite well. At least he thought so, having grown quite fond of her, in a father to daughter kind of way over the last few months. He was much too old for someone of her age, but he cared for her nonetheless.

"Yes, well, if Robert would produce a ring, he wouldn't need to use so much wine," she replied with a chuckle. Everyone in the lab knew she was smitten with her boyfriend of three years. She wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of her life with him but was tiring of waiting for him to pop the question.

"He still hasn't asked?" Another voice asked her. It was the voice of Dr. William Beagley. He was Dr. Johnson's partner, in professional terms. They had gone to med school together, completed their residencies together, and now were on the verge of one of the biggest breakthroughs of humankind.

"No, he hasn't, and I'm running out of ideas to give him hints," Cynthia replied.

“Maybe you should stop hinting and ask him? It’s not out of bounds anymore for the women to ask the man,” William told her. “I mean, if you love him, ask him.”

“I know, but it’s a girl thing. We want to know our man wants us, and the ultimate way is for the man to ask, not the other way around,” Cynthia said. “Besides, men need to be loved, women need to be wanted.”

“Touché, my dear. Touché,” Max said. “She got you with that one, Bill.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. In my defense, to know that would be to know what goes on in a woman’s mind and that will never happen,” William said.

“You two have so much to learn for being so smart,” Cynthia chided. “Women are not this abstract thing that no one can figure out.”

“I beg to differ with you,” William said. “Women are the most frustrating and dangerous species on the planet. Yes, I said species because you all are in a world of your own. I’ve been married for twenty-five years and I still cannot tell you what my wife wants on any given day. That’s just speaking of what she wants. I haven’t even mentioned the many moods you all have.”

“Ok, can we get back to the job at hand?” Max laughed. He had to save his buddy before the hole he was digging got too deep.

The others relented as Max went over to the centrifuge. It had finished while the three were joking around. He retrieved a sample and placed a drop of the blood on a slide for inspection under the electron microscope. The ‘scope’, as Max liked to call it, was the best way to see if they had achieved the reaction they needed. The scope allowed them to see individual cells within the synth blood. He needed to see if the proteins had attached the way he wanted them to.

“Ahh, yes. I believe we have obtained complete bonding between the proteins,” Max said. He wasn’t one to shout or jump for joy. There were too many times that he had failed at an experiment when he thought he had it figured out and it had taught him not to celebrate prematurely.

“Are they holding?” William asked him.

“So far, so good. Cells look stable,” Max answered.

“Does this mean we did it?” Cynthia asked excitedly.

“Not yet,” Max answered. “We need to see if the bonding will hold. Bill, could you set us up for storage tests?”

“Yes, doctor,” William answered. He knew Max hated being talked to like that and loved to annoy him.

“Enough with the ‘Yes, doctor’ crap,” Max barked.

William said nothing while he went to work prepping for the storage tests. He did smirk and chuckle a bit though.

The storage tests were to test the viability of the 'synth' blood after long-term storage. They did not know how long the product would be sitting around waiting for someone to use it. It was the last hurdle they had to jump before they could get FDA approval for mass production.

Outside the lab, the protesters' actions were reaching a fever pitch. They had worked themselves up until they were almost foaming at the mouth. The voices were turning angry. The once peaceful protest was about to turn violent.

Finally, someone threw a brick at the guards, knocking one out. Next they lobbed several Molotov cocktails at the guards and that's all it took.

The National Guard soldiers fired back with rubber bullets meant to stun their opponents. However, when someone stands too close to the rifle firing said rubber bullet, it can inflict deadly wounds, as was the case here.

After twenty minutes of close quarters combat between the National Guard troops and the protesters, twenty protesters were dead, while three soldiers and over one hundred protesters had been injured.

Not all of the deaths were directly related to the rubber bullets. Some had been caused by the sheer anger of other protesters. As the furious protestors retreated from the onslaught of the rubber bullets, they ended up stomping on people that had fallen, running over others and there were also several heart attacks.

Of course, the soldiers would end up shouldering all of the blame for the deaths, right or wrong. In the end, it was another example of how divided the country had become.

Nobody had any idea how divided they would be only a few short months later.

CHAPTER ONE

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

Lucy Bailey had just left a room that contained a patient with a serious case of the clap. It wasn't really what she had envisioned when she had attended medical school, but a girl does what she has to, and in this instance she felt she had gone above and beyond for her young age of twenty-eight. She had graduated high school with her first two years of college completed through a dual enrollment program, allowing her to start training earlier than most for her future career as a doctor.

Lucy had been accepted to, and graduated from, the medical program at Washington University in St. Louis. It wasn't as prestigious as Harvard or Yale, but it was closer to home and more affordable.

"Affordable," she mumbled to herself as she walked to the nurse's station to pick up the chart for the next patient. Affordable to her meant her student loans were just slightly smaller than those of other universities.

She had committed herself to learning everything she could while at school. While her friends were out on a Friday or Saturday night, meeting boys and such, Lucy stayed in her dorm room and studied. She also stayed during the summers, taking every credit she could towards her degree. By doing so, she managed to shave off another year of school, allowing her to enter Washington University's med school and then her residency program almost four years earlier than other students.

Lucy had visions of being an elite doctor, working in highly specialized labs, or performing missionary work around the world. That was not to be, at least for now. She had to establish herself, and that meant jamming needles in people's rear ends because they couldn't keep their zippers up.

Lucy mildly thought her mouth and attitude might also be holding her back from her dreams. She had a propensity to 'speak her mind' as her mother used to say, and her sister informed her she still did.

Lucy was the type to never back down from a fight. Instead, she charged in like a bull that had just seen a red blanket. She may have gotten that from her father, but she would never know. He had disappeared from her life at an

early age. Mom told her he went to the store to get smokes and lottery tickets. He must have won because he never came back.

The stories mom had told her led her to believe her father was a mouthy, pushy, arrogant S.O.B. If she was the female version of that, then so be it.

"If they don't like it, too bad," she mumbled again.

"What?" a patient asked her.

"Oh, nothing," she replied. She had entered the next room without realizing it. "What seems to be the issue today, Isaac?" She didn't need to look at the paperwork to recognize her patient and know the reason for his visit today. They were going to start awarding him frequent flyer miles if he didn't change his ways.

"It still hurts," Isaac explained, like she was supposed to know what hurt. Unfortunately, she did.

"Isaac, there are these things called condoms, and if you wear them, it won't hurt to pee anymore," she chided him. "Stay here. I'll go get the shot."

She went out of the room, prepared a dose of penicillin, and returned. Isaac had already assumed the position, pants down around his ankles.

"Oh, holy shit," Lucy stammered. She knew Isaac was brazen, but damn son! "What the hell are you doing?"

"Just figured I would save a little time," Isaac said. Isaac was seventeen and clearly had an infatuation with the good doctor. In his mind, he thought he was a studly man, entitled to affection from any woman he encountered.

"Trust me, son. Time is something that won't fix what you have, and I don't mean the head on your shoulders," she blasted him.

"Oh, come on, doc, you know what they say. Once you go Isaac, you'll want to buy it!" he said.

"Oh god, I think I just threw up in my mouth a little," she stammered. Lucy cleaned the injection site and just before she gave him the shot, he said, "Not gonna rub it a bit?"

She 'accidentally' shoved the needle in as far as it would go and pushed the plunger. She was rewarded with a scream of agony from Isaac.

"There, there. It's not that bad. Let me clean up the blood a little," Lucy said. She grabbed a cotton ball and pressed it against Isaac's butt-cheek, hard.

"Gotta make sure we stop the bleeding," she chuckled.

"I'm good," Isaac stammered out between sobs.

“Ok, so no more hitting on the pretty doctor lady, ok?” she gleefully informed him. “And wrap that thing next time!”

“Yep,” Isaac said as he ran out of the room.

She leaned out the door and yelled, “Don’t you want your band-aid?” but Isaac was gone.

As soon as Isaac was out of the office, the nurses let go with belly laughs that could be heard up on the next floor.

“What the hell did you do to him?” one nurse asked.

“Showed him what a night with me would be like. Apparently, he’s not into S&M,” Lucy chuckled. “What’s next?”

“Your appointments are done for the day, but E.R. needs you,” another nurse told her.

“Oh joy, E.R. duty,” she mumbled. Her perfect day was even better now.

It was common practice for this hospital to have its doctors help in the E.R., if they had no more scheduled appointments, due to the growing gang problem spilling out from Little Rock. The problem had grown substantially in the last year and the gangs were expanding into the surrounding communities. It was not too far of a stretch to have at least one gunshot victim every day.

On her way to the emergency room, Lucy stopped at the cafeteria for coffee and a smoke. She knew smoking was horrible for her health, but the habit was hard to quit. She had picked it up in med school as a way to keep herself awake during her long hours of study.

In the cafeteria she ran into Dr. Long, with whom she had every intention of showing what a night with her would be like. Maybe his name was hinting at something, she thought to herself.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Long,” she said, presenting the most dazzling smile she could muster. “How are you today?”

“Oh, just dandy,” he said. Dr. Long had specialized in Oncology, which Lucy knew she could never do. How could you become close to your patients, knowing that their chances of survival were so slim?

“Heather passed away this morning,” he stated rather sadly. “Her family didn’t make it in time to say goodbye. It was gut-wrenching.”

“I would imagine so,” she said, trying to put as much empathy as she could into her voice. She knew that caring about your patients was one of the hardest things a doctor could do. She may be hot-headed, but she wasn’t stone-hearted and she genuinely felt sad for him.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” she asked him.

“No, I don’t think so. It’s just...days like today make me question why I went into oncology, ya know? It’s rewarding when you can tell a patient that they are in remission, but today...?” he left the rest of his sentence hanging.

“Greg,” she said, using his first name, “You are one of the most caring doctors I have ever seen. You give so much of yourself to them it must hurt. The thing is, most of them need that. They need to know the person treating them, cares. With you, I don’t feel like a number on a sheet.”

Greg was not sure if she meant to say ‘I’ or not, but decided it was a minor slip and paid it no mind. It wasn’t, even though Lucy didn’t realize she had said it.

“I understand what you’re saying, Dr. Bailey. I guess I just don’t know how to disconnect from that?” Greg said.

“Please, call me Lucy,” she said. “And you don’t have to disconnect from it, you just leave it here. Inside of these walls you’re Dr. Long. The one who provides the hope that all of your patients need. Outside of these walls, you’re just Greg.”

“I kinda like that,” he said. “What time do you get done today?”

Lucy’s heart fluttered a bit from his question, and she stammered out her response.

“In a...couple of...hours.”

“Are you ok?” he asked her.

She quickly regained her composure and responded, “Yes, I’m good.”

“Good, would you like to get some drinks, or go bowling?”

“Bowling?” she asked.

“Yes. It’s actually great fun! You can play your game and chat at the same time,” he said.

She thought about watching him from behind, as he bent over, throwing a bowling ball and damn near screamed out, “Yes!”

“Good!” he said. “Can I pick you up? Say around 5ish?”

“See you then, Doctor,” she replied with a smile.

After that, E.R. duty seemed to drag on forever, but at last, she was free. Lucy raced home to get showered and ready for her date. She was unsure what to wear and decided on some tight-fitting jeans and a snug, but cute, top that showed off what she had.

Lucy wasn’t what she would call a ‘head turner’, but she knew she had it where it counted. She stood 5’6”, had a slim, athletic build, with just enough

up top to get guys' attention.

She dolled up her hair and was making sure her make-up was perfect when the entry buzzer sounded. Lucy sprayed a light mist of perfume in the air and walked through it while she answered the door buzzer to her apartment by saying, "I'll be right down."

When she walked out of her apartment building, Greg stood there, gaping, jaw on the ground. She thought something was wrong with him until she realized he had never seen her outside of the hospital. She was always in baggy scrubs, never had make-up on, and wore her hair up. Greg's gaze instantly sent blood rushing to her cheeks.

"Easy there, cowboy, you get to look all night long," she said seductively.

"I do?" he stammered. He felt like a high school kid again.

"Yeah, and maybe not just look, if you're a good boy," she said.

With that, Greg nearly tripped going down the steps to the sidewalk.

They made their way to the bowling alley, getting shoes and each picking out the ball they wanted to use. A server came over to take their orders for food and drinks. Greg seemed relieved when Lucy ordered a rum and coke.

"Something I should know about, cowboy?" she asked.

"Not really. I just have this theory. You can tell a lot about a woman by what she drinks," he answered.

"And?" she asked.

"Well, ladies that order Cosmos and fruity-tooty drinks are high maintenance. Girls that order beer are down to earth and real," he said.

"And me?" she asked.

"Don't know yet. Haven't had that happen," he replied, gesturing to her drink.

"And just how many drinks have you bought for the ladies?" she teased him as she went to roll her ball down the lane. She swore she could hear him gulp when she bent over.

"Um...not many. It's more of an observation," he stammered out, hoping he was able to cover himself.

"Don't worry, doctor," she said in a sexy tone, "You're safe with me. No judgements."

After that, it was his turn to roll the ball. She could tell she was getting to him because his ball went straight into the gutter.

"Oh, poor thing. Your ball's in the gutter," she said as he was trying to take a drink. The drink got sprayed three lanes over.

From that point on, Greg was completely enamored with Lucy, and would do anything she asked. It was a match made in heaven, if it was meant to last.

CHAPTER TWO

JOINT BASE CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Mike “Yeti” Willingham tightened the last bolt on the front landing gear of the Boeing C-17, otherwise known as the Globemaster III. It was a massive aircraft, reaching 174 feet in length, with a 169-foot wingspan. It was powered by four Pratt & Whitney engines, each rated to give up to 40,440 pounds of thrust.

Today marked the overhaul/refit phase for this particular plane and Mike was finishing up with the landing gear. His best friend, Pete Correro, was working on the hydraulics system. They had grown up together, played high school football together, even joined the Air Force together. Life, for each, was never far away from the other. Theirs was a true brotherhood.

Mike’s nickname was Yeti because he stood 6’3” and weighed around 260 pounds. Pete wasn’t much smaller than Mike, making the duo a formidable pair.

When the two decide to go to a bar together, most of the hardasses in the crowd parted like Moses and the Red Sea. Nobody messed with them, and nobody started a damn thing when those two were around.

Mike found it funny because, in reality, he was a gentle giant. An enormous teddy bear that only wanted fun and friendship. He was extremely loyal, almost to a fault. He was also extremely smart and could have had a future in any line of work he wanted, but he loved to wrench on stuff.

That’s part of what drew him to the Air Force. A chance to work on things that no ordinary mechanic could say they had worked on. Bigger vehicles, and in this case, planes, meant bigger tools, and any guy will tell you that a tool is also a toy.

“Need a hand over there, Pete?” Mike called out.

“Yeah, can you hold this pump while I ratchet it in?” Pete said.

It was an unspoken thing between the two that they could almost read each other’s minds. Mike knew when Pete needed help, and it worked the other way, too.

Mike walked over, held up the massive hydraulic fluid pump with one arm, and waited for Pete to tighten it in. Using the torque wrench, Pete

tightened the pump with just the right amount of torque. They both took great pride in their work, after all, lives depended on what they did in the hanger.

“Looks like that’s done, what’s next?” Pete asked.

“Wing root,” Mike said with a grimace.

A wing root inspection required them to get into the interior of the wings to inspect every nut and bolt there. It was no small feat for both large men to get into the wings and took a considerable amount of time.

They grabbed a ladder, placed it under the wing, and opened the small hatch they had to crawl through. Mike was the first one to go through. He got one arm and his head into the compartment and got stuck.

“Pete, I’m stuck,” Mike shouted out.

“I can see that. What would you like me to do?” Pete replied.

“Push!” Mike yelled.

“Just like Winnie the Pooh,” Pete grumbled.

Pete got under Mike and started to push.

“Hey, that’s my ass!” Mike shouted.

“Yeah, and if it wasn’t so bulbous, you might fit!” Pete hollered back.

“You just wait till it’s your turn, buddy,” Mike said back.

Together, they pushed and twisted until Mike managed to crawl into the wing. It was a cramped space, with no more than two feet of clearance to crawl through. Mike crawled towards the outer part of the wing, just to get some space to turn around so he could help Pete, but Pete had already climbed into the wing.

“How the hell did you do that?” Mike asked.

“Lots of KY jelly,” Pete laughed.

They split up inside the wing, each taking a section and inspecting everything there. It was a slow, tedious process, but eventually they were finished and climbing out of the wing.

“That about does it for today,” Pete said. “Time for a beer?”

“Absolutely,” Mike replied.

Even though there were on-base clubs, Mike and Pete preferred to hang out with the locals. The local places provided better atmosphere and entertainment.

They got cleaned up and headed out. The two found it somewhat funny that most of your average citizens didn’t know that life on base was a lot like civilian life. An eight-hour workday followed by whatever you needed to do. You had a place to stay on base but you weren’t confined to staying on base.

If you planned to travel over three hours away, you needed to obtain leave, but otherwise you were free to go wherever you wanted.

This particular evening, they decided to go to a local bar called Greg's. It was a biker bar through and through. There was a small stage for local bands to play on, and typical biker music like 'Born To Be Wild' or 'Freebird' could be heard every weekend. At least one fight happened every night and generally a pool would be started by one of the locals to bet on who would take whom home. It was the greatest place on earth in the opinion of Mike and Pete.

Tonight was no different, being a Friday night. They walked into the place and headed straight for the bar that was built along the left-side wall of the building. The stage was at the back, and tables littered the floor in front of stage and all the way to the bar. It wasn't a very large place but managed to pack in enough people to make the fire marshal blush. Currently, a band was torturing a ZZ Top song.

Mike and Pete walked up to the crowded bar and two guys immediately vacated their stools.

"Thanks, guys," Mike said. Having a reputation sometimes came in handy.

"The usual?" a woman asked them.

"Yeah, thanks Barb," Pete answered.

Barb was the owner. She had bought the bar several years ago and never changed the name. She was the epitome of a biker chick. Orange Harley Davidson bandana around her head, leather everything and a large nose. She had several nicknames, none of which she liked. Mike and Pete paid her respect by calling her by her name, instead of trying to be funny, like everyone else.

It was still relatively early in the evening, so no shenanigans had happened yet. Just the usual local guys trying to hook up with the local girls. The girls were paying little attention to the men because they hadn't consumed enough booze yet. It was a typical, small-town hangout. Everybody knew everybody, nobody was married, and they all 'took turns' having fun. Hence the 'hook up' betting pool and subsequent fight that Mike started that night.

"Hey Barb, I got ten bucks on Stumpy going home with Cindy," Mike shouted over the music. It was now Bob Seager's turn to get torn to shreds.

“Pool’s open!” Barb shouted. She took Mike’s money and went to a chalkboard. She wrote ‘\$10 – Stumpy/Cindy’.

From somewhere on the miniature dance floor, you could hear Cindy shout, “I’m worth a hell of a lot more than ten!”

“Not from what I remember,” someone shouted from amongst the tables.

“Oh shit,” Barb grumbled. “It’s starting early.”

“Just wait, Barb. This is gonna be good,” Pete said.

A girl flew from the dance floor, jumped two tables, and landed on some guy. She toppled him to the floor, put her knee in his crotch, and smacked him in the face. Getting up, she jammed her knee back into his groin. Everyone could hear him groan as she stood up.

“Now that’s entertainment,” Mike yelled out. Catcalls sounded throughout the bar, and everything went back to normal.

“See Barb, no harm, no foul,” Pete said.

“That deserves a shot!” Mike hollered. The entire bar erupted into chants of, “Shots, shots, shots.”

Barb pulled out the plastic cups and started lining up shots of Jack Daniels for everyone.

“You’d better be able to afford this, this time,” Barb glared at Mike.

“Since when have I not?” Mike shot back.

“There was that one time...” Barb started to say.

“That time doesn’t count. I was arrested,” Mike blurted out.

“Yeah, for starting a fight in my bar!” Barb hollered back.

“That guy was getting tough on me. What was I supposed to do?” Mike shot back.

“He wasn’t getting tough on you. He was a Navy squid, and he was shooting his mouth off about the Air Force!” Barb yelled.

“Same thing!” Mike shouted back. He was now standing and the veins in his neck were bulging.

“It is not the same thing. It’s not even in the same ballpark as the same thing!” Barb screamed as she stood on the bar.

“Oh, yeah?” Mike blustered back, joining her on top of the bar.

“YEAH!” Barb blared back.

They stared at each other for a minute, each breathing heavily, looking for all the world like an intergender fight was about to take place, right on the bar.

Just when it felt like the whole place was going to erupt, they both grabbed a shot of Jack, downed it, and embraced.

“Damn good to see you, Mike,” Barb said.

“Same here, Barb,” Mike said, getting down from the bar.

Pete just sat back and smiled. He’d seen these two do this routine for years and it never failed to get the bar laughing.

The band was now on to their second set of ridiculous covers, playing “Gimme Three Steps” by Lynyrd Skynyrd. It was horrible. The second set of the night also marked the time when fights would start brewing. Enough booze had been consumed that the women were now picking which guy was going to get lucky, and the left-out guys started getting sore about it.

One guy, in particular, was aching to get some revenge. He walked with a limp now because Cindy had kneed his jock into the third row.

“Um...Mike!” Barb shouted. “You might want to take care of that.” She was pointing at the guy heading towards Cindy.

Mike calmly put his beer down and made his way to Limpy.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Mike warned him.

“Stay out of my business,” Limpy said.

Mike didn’t waste any time, he grabbed Limpy by the arm and jammed it into his own back. Mike then grabbed Limpy by the back of the neck and squeezed.

“I said, I wouldn’t do that,” Mike reminded him.

Limpy replied by trying to kick his leg backwards into Mike’s groin, but Mike was too quick for such a sloppy move. Mike took his own left leg and crossed it in front of his right, blocking the kick meant for his jewels. Limpy thought that was the end, but Mike did not relent. His left leg continued until it went around and in front of Limpy. As soon as it was in front, Mike tripped him and pushed him faced first into the floor. Mike holding the arm bar as Limpy went down. Mike pushed the arm in even tighter, making Limpy howl in pain.

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” Mike growled at him. Not giving Limpy any time to think, Mike picked him up and dragged him to the door. Pete was already there, holding the door open. Mike tossed Limpy into the street, with Pete hollering, “And don’t come back!”

With that, the rest of the night went smoothly. Mike even won the pool when Cindy did indeed leave with Stumpy.

CHAPTER THREE

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Tina Rush placed her backpack in the rear cargo holder of their jeep. She and her husband, Bob, were going on a camping trip. They had been planning it for weeks, and as par for the course, Bob was waiting on her to finish packing.

“Don’t say it, otherwise, no damn lovin’ for you in the tent tonight,” Tina chided playfully.

“I had no intention of saying anything about how long it takes a woman to pack even though she’s had over two weeks to get ready. It hadn’t even crossed my mind,” Bob shot back, trying to egg her on.

This was the way it was with these two, always seeing who could make the other laugh. Tina knew she should have been ready days ago, but work had bogged her down.

Tina worked at the Allen Institute in Seattle. She was a scientist working on a human genome project. Tina spent hours upon hours staring at computer screens or into microscopes, trying to piece together what exactly made up human DNA.

She was extremely good at her job and the company paid her handsomely in return. At parties, when asked what she did for a living, she would answer that she was a lab tech, just to make the conversation easier. It would, inevitably, be followed by questions about what she did in the lab. In turn, she would be forced to answer with medical terminology that very few could understand. What followed, every time, was an uncomfortable silence because no one could ask follow-up questions. Every. Single. Time.

“That’s it,” Tina announced as she sat in the passenger seat. “No lovin’ tonight!”

“It wouldn’t matter anyway, you’ll be asleep before nine o’clock,” Bob pushed back.

“Did you hear that, girls?” Tina said, looking down at her chest. “He thinks we won’t be awake long enough for love.”

“I guarantee it,” Bob said, pushing even further.

“Well then, my girls say that you don’t have enough balls to try,” Tina challenged.

“Your girls and I need to have a chat about who is boss,” Bob said, knowing he had won the conversation.

Bob pulled out of their suburban home and started the drive towards Mount Rainier National Park. It was full of campgrounds, hiking, climbing, and anything an outdoor adventurer could want. It was their favorite place to go camping because of all the different activities it offered.

“My girls look forward to that conversation,” Tina said as she settled in for the drive. On long drives like this, she liked to think back on the events in her life. What had gotten her here, and where she her life was headed.

The latest mock argument between her and Bob got her thinking about how they had met and eventually gotten married. They met while she was in school, earning her degree in molecular biology. She, at the time, couldn’t understand why Bob found that so interesting. He even said one time that it was sexy. Weird, that man.

She had been out on a Saturday night with her girlfriends, enjoying a night out in the big city. They were at a nightclub frequented by college students. She was about to hit the dance floor with her friends when a guy caught her eye. It wasn’t because he was cute or anything like that, it was because he had a serious stalker look and feel about him. He kept staring at her, following her around the club with his eyes.

She was about to tell her friends they needed to leave when stalker guy tapped her on the shoulder. He was about six and a half feet tall, thick, and scary looking. Tina turned around so fast she nearly fainted.

“What’s it gonna take to get into you, girl?” Stalker breathed out. Tina almost passed out from his breath. It was horrid, full of booze and rancid smelling.

“Excuse me?” Tina shouted. She was trying to draw attention to herself, so other people might notice what was happening.

“I said, what’s it gonna take to get inside you?” Stalker bellowed. The music was so loud that nobody paid any attention.

“Not on your life!” Tina shouted and tried to turn away.

“You don’t understand. I will get what I want, and I will get it from you,” Stalker said, as he grabbed her arm and turned her back around to face him.

Tina tried to wiggle free but he was too strong. She turned her head to search for her friends but they were on the other side of the dance floor, giggling with some guys. She was alone and about to have something horrible happen to her.

“I think the lady said no, mister,” an unfamiliar voice said. Tina whipped her head towards the voice to find an average-sized guy dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He wasn’t huge, by anyone’s standards, but right now, to Tina, he was Andre the Giant.

“Help me,” Tina shouted to the new guy.

“Yeah, help her,” Stalker said, as he released Tina and turned to confront the new guy. Stalker reared his right arm back and swung for all he was worth. New Guy easily ducked under the typical drunk round house right, stood back up and jammed his right foot into the knee of Stalker. Stalker dropped to his left knee, howling in pain. That’s when the elbow of New Guy shattered Stalker’s nose. As blood exploded out from his broken nose, Stalker fell to the ground, unconscious.

“Ma’am, I think we need to get out of here,” New Guy said.

“Agreed,” Tina responded. They raced over to get her friends and leave before the cops showed up.

Tina smiled to herself while reminiscing. She never realized, on that night, that her knight in shining armor stood 5’10” and weighed about 185. She also didn’t know that night how madly in love she would fall with him.

They traded phone numbers after departing from the club. She at least had to thank him with a dinner or something. He wasn’t exactly her type, as far as appearances go. It’s not that he wasn’t cute, but she sort of had a thing for GQ types. New Guy was cute in a more rugged kind of way. His face spoke volumes about the man he was. It was weathered, even for his young age. That made him sort of handsome, at least to her. It was his eyes that did it for her though. They were a brilliant blue, and like his face, spoke volumes. They told her this man was caring and gentle. Those eyes warmed her to her core.

After that night, they spoke nearly every day. His name was Bob, and he was finishing his education to become a paramedic. He was also a volunteer firefighter, which made him even more attractive, especially to her friends. Many nights they would tease her about his firefighter suit.

Bob also wore his heart on his sleeve. He knew within days that Tina was ‘The One’. He even told her so. She remembered the day he told her they would get married. She nearly broke it off then but didn’t because he said it with such certainty and such charisma that she decided to hold off to see if it would be true.

Bob carried himself with such confidence that women couldn't help but be attracted to him. He knew what he wanted from life and wasn't afraid to go after it. The only thing that was a negative, if it could be considered that, was he hated to fly. She couldn't get him near an airport even if that was the only thing that would save his life. Tina decided that if that was the worst thing about him, she could accept that.

As for herself, Tina could not complain. She stood 5'6", 120 pounds, with flaming red hair just past her shoulders and an athlete's body. She worked hard every day to maintain her figure, because when Bob complimented her on her 'brains and beauty', she had to keep from blushing. Tina liked the looks he gave her, and she worked to keep it that way.

Nature had given her enough up top to keep most men looking, even when Bob shot them his best death glare. She knew he didn't really mind the looks others gave her, because he knew that at the end of the day, she was a one-man woman. Bob was hers, and she was his.

They finally arrived at the entrance to the park, paid the fee to enter, and reached their favorite camping spot. It was the same one they used every time they came here. A tall tree provided plenty of shade to keep the tent cool. A small, wandering stream was off to the side and the site had plenty of million-dollar views around it.

They settled in, pitching the tent, and getting their camp set up. It wasn't long before night fell, and her girls needed to have that conversation with Bob.

CHAPTER FOUR

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan Dalton lay awake in bed. He had a big day ahead of him. He was going to meet up with his ex-girlfriend, April. She was his high school sweetheart, but their relationship wasn't working any more. April couldn't handle being with someone who was gone so often.

Dylan's job forced him to be away for long periods of time. He was a Marine. Not just any Marine, he was a Force Recon Marine. Special assignments for him meant traveling overseas and doing things that he could never tell his mother.

Dylan had a passion for his country that many could not understand. It was a part of him from an early age. He learned about the Fourth of July and what it meant. He learned about all the wars that America had fought. Dylan learned about 9/11 and what it did to the country. He decided after learning about 9/11 that he wanted to join the military. He then dedicated his life to being ready for the day he could join.

Dylan was always in the gym at school, pumping iron and running. Anything he could do to be physically ready for his military career. He studied war manuals and bought gun magazines to read up on weapons. When the Military Channel came out, he thought it was better than sliced bread.

When the time came to enlist, Dylan was a brick shithouse. He stood 6'0" and weighed around 250. It was solid muscle. He was in better shape than a lot of guys coming out of basic training.

He attended every training course he could. Scout sniper, SERE training, everything. What sold him on Force Recon was the movie *Heartbreak Ridge*. He thought they were so cool after Gunny Highway made the squad into Recon Marines.

The only thing he didn't count on was falling in love with April. She mattered almost as much to him as his country. It was the hardest decision he ever had to make. They tried to continue their relationship while he was in basic and in other schools, but it just wasn't working. Maybe if he was a recruiter and in a stable location, but not while he was gallivanting across the globe. They still cared very deeply for each other and neither one could

find the will to move on. He always looked forward to getting leave so he could go home and spend time with her.

Today was that day. He was home and ready to meet her. Nothing was going to stand in his way, not even the zombie apocalypse. He jumped in 'Eleanor', his 1967 Ford Mustang. He had spent some time restoring her, but she was a far cry from the car in *Gone in 60 Seconds*. Pulling out of his parent's driveway, Dylan hit the gas, spun the tires, and screeched away. He loved doing that. He was a man's man, after all.

It didn't take him long to arrive at April's apartment. He reached the entrance door to the building to find that she was already there, waiting. He stepped back in utter amazement.

She stood before him, all 5'1" of her. She wore her blonde hair down, as usual, but this time she had red highlights. It amazed Dylan that she had managed to maintain her figure from high school. She was always active, but now she seemed to have put on a little muscle as well. She still very much looked like the head turning, stunner he once escorted to the prom.

"My god, girl. What have you been doing?" Dylan said in amazement.

"My new job has me lifting all sorts of things. I guess it's paying off," April said.

"I would say so," Dylan said while he stared at her.

"Ok, enough undressing me, let's go. I'm hungry," she said.

They hopped into the car and Dylan sped away. First on the agenda was to put some food in his girl's belly. Red Lobster was always a favorite for them, so seafood it was. Being so early in the day, they ate a light lunch and then headed off on their next adventure.

There was always so much to do in Duluth that one never thought about being bored. Their favorite thing to do was hang out in Canal Park and watch the cargo ships come in and out of the harbor. There was a museum right next to the canal that had a complete history of the harbor and a chart displaying the times when ships would be coming through. All a person had to do was be there at the right time to watch the lift bridge go up and a ship entering or exiting. It was always fascinating to watch the massive ships as they were piloted through such a small canal.

There were also shops all along the road leading into the park. Some were famous, like the Duluth Trading Company, with its awesome commercials. Others were not so famous, but just as fun to visit, anyway. Toy shops, candy, clothing, just about everything you could think of.

Of course, there were also eateries and bars all over the place, trying to take advantage of the tourism that the city brought in. One such place even had a famous marathon named after it.

The two spent much of the afternoon wandering around the shops, buying this or that, and just people watching. Later in the afternoon then ended up at a local watering hole, enjoying Mojitos on the outdoor patio.

Dylan thought the day was just as gorgeous as his girl. Small puffy clouds, a slight breeze off Lake Superior and plenty of sun. He felt it was time to drop the bomb.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” Dylan started off. “I’ve traveled the world. Done my bit for king and country. Maybe it’s time for me to slow down a little?”

“What do you mean by slow down?” a shocked April asked. She had waited for this conversation for years. She never actually thought it would happen but had always dreamed about it.

“Ok, don’t get me wrong here. I am still very much a soldier and would do anything for my country, but maybe it’s time I focus a little more on us,” Dylan said hesitantly.

“Focus?” April asked. She didn’t know whether to be elated or pissed.

“Um... Yeah?” Dylan said, even more on guard.

“Focus? After all this time, is that all you can say? Focus? Don’t you think we deserve more than just focus?” April blasted out. Pissed had won.

“Ok, maybe it was a bad choice of words,” Dylan defended.

“Bad choice? I’ll say,” April retorted.

“Babe, can you just listen to me for a second? Please?” Dylan begged.

“Fine,” she growled out.

Taking a deep breath and trying to form the right words in his mind, Dylan just blurted it all out in one long-winded barrage.

“I am taking a new assignment with the Corps. I won’t be traveling overseas anymore and hoped that maybe we could think about trying to be together again. Only if you think you want to, because I wouldn’t want to push you into anything you don’t want to do, but I was also thinking that maybe we could think about getting married, if you think it’s a good idea?”

April sat there in a daze, trying to comprehend the words that had just flown out of Dylan’s mouth. All she got was ‘assignment’, ‘together’, and ‘married’.

“Um, can you repeat the part of the stuff where you talked about... things?” April blurted.

Dylan took another deep breath and tried to calm down.

“Baby, I’m not on active assignment anymore. I am still with the Corps and still a Force Recon Marine, but I can be home now,” he started. Dylan got out of his chair, got down on one knee and produced the ring.

“Will you marry me?” he said, trying not to let his nervousness show.

April jumped out of her chair and launched herself at Dylan, knocking him over. They landed on the ground with her on top of him.

“Oh, YES!” she screeched. “YES, YES, YES!”

The other occupants of the patio all stood up and started to cheer and clap. Loud whistling could be heard and April immediately turned nineteen shades of red.

“Shall I break out the champagne, sir?” the waiter asked him, laughing.

“Yes!” Dylan shouted, as he got up and picked up his bride to be. “Drinks for everyone!”

A loud cheer erupted from the peanut gallery as the party started. From somewhere in the crowd, both Dylan’s and April’s parents walked up to them.

“Did you guys know about this?” April asked.

“Yes. He’s had it planned for a while,” Dylan’s father said. “He wouldn’t let us show our faces for fear that you might think something was up.”

April raced to hug her parents and Dylan’s parents. She was as giddy as a school kid. She had always hoped that Dylan would ask, but the more time that passed, the more she doubted it.

“I love you!” she said to Dylan and kissed him. It was a passionate kiss, filled with all the joy and love she felt in that moment.

She finally broke off the kiss and stared into his eyes. “I’ve waited a long time for this.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. It’s our time now,” he promised her. “I just need to get back to Lejeune to do some final things. I won’t be gone long.” He was referring to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

“You better not be!” she said. “When do you have to leave?”

“Tomorrow. I need you to take me to the airport. I’ll be back within a week,” Dylan said.

“Ok, the Corps gets you for one final week starting tomorrow. Tonight, you’re mine,” she told him.

“Fair enough,” he replied.

CHAPTER FIVE

MANHATTEN, NEW YORK CITY

Brian Johnson was driving down FDR Drive with his wife Amy. They were late for work, and he was racing down the road as fast as traffic would allow. It was a terrible morning for the couple. The previous night Brian had gotten confirmation that Amy wasn't exactly the faithful, loving wife he thought she was. She was having an affair.

In spite of that, Brian was willing to overlook the affair if she would agree it stopped now. He knew he was acting like a gullible fool, but he loved her. All he wanted was for them to live a long life together. She was all he ever wanted, and if it took forgiveness, then so be it.

This morning's argument came from Brian not wanting her to go back to work. She had betrayed him and he felt the least she could do was quit her job and find another. It was her boss she was having the affair with, after all.

They were cruising down the FDR when they got to East 23rd street. They were still arguing, so Brian only had half of his attention on the road. He veered to the right as he was yelling at Amy, and the right front of his car plowed into the rear of another car. That car slid forward and hit a pedestrian, while the rear of Brian's car swung around to the left and smacked a second car coming the opposite way.

When Brian's car slid into the oncoming car, glass shattered and flew everywhere. One piece hit Brian in the neck, slicing his neck open. Amy's head first hit the windshield and then bounced to the left as they collided with the second car. Brian's body shielded her from a majority of the flying glass, but a piece of debris sliced open her wrist, nicking an artery.

The pedestrian, a woman named Jordan Stark, saved herself by jumping upwards to avoid most of the impact from the vehicle. Upon landing, she hit a piece of glass and tore open her leg. To her misfortune, she was on blood thinners, so for her any cut meant severe blood loss.

The man in the first car that was hit, Charles Evans, wasn't wearing his seatbelt. After hitting Jordan, his car slammed into a light post, sending him headfirst into the windshield. He received a large gash on his head and had a large shard of glass embed in his shoulder. Charles began bleeding profusely from both wounds.

The ambulances arrived, and transported all four the several blocks to the Bellevue emergency room. The scene inside was absolute chaos. The nurses liked to believe it was controlled chaos, but it was chaos, none the less.

Brian was the first one in and examined quickly. The ER staff determined that he had suffered a severe cut to his throat, which nicked his carotid artery. He was in danger of losing his life if the medical professionals couldn't stop the bleeding and get him more blood. The ER doctor quickly repaired the damaged artery as the rest of the staff worked to stabilize Brian.

"What's his blood type?" one nurse shouted.

"Doesn't matter, give him the synth blood," the doctor ordered. "They all get the synth." The doctor wanted to get things moving so he could help all the victims.

One nurse, her first day in the ER, was so nervous she was shaking. She attempted to set up the blood transfusion but somehow ruptured the first bag when she attempted to start the IV. Synth blood flew all over the room, coating everyone there in blood. The nurses frantically continued to work and finally got a fresh bag of synth blood prepped for Brian's transfusion.

Amy was in the room next to him, getting the gash in her wrist repaired. It didn't take long for the surgeon to repair the damage and the staff got her hooked up with a transfusion of the synth blood to replace what she had lost.

Charles, the driver of the other car, was next. Looking at him, the nurses could tell he had lived a rough life. They could see track marks on his arms and knew they had a possible addict in front of them. Just because he was an addict didn't mean that he deserved less treatment from them, but they were more cautious about the medicines they used around him.

The nurses worked continuously, stopping the bleeding and repairing the gash on his head. He howled in pain as they removed the shard of glass from his shoulder. It had penetrated deep and hit some nerves. Any movement sent waves of nausea through him. Soon, the glass was removed, the wound cleaned, and he was stitched up. They started replacing the lost blood with synth blood.

Last was Jordan. Her wounds were not that bad, her problem was primarily the blood loss caused by the blood thinners she was on. It took no time for her to be patched up and a transfusion of synth blood administered. She was released after a night in the hospital for observation.

After being released, Jordan returned home. Her husband had been worried sick about her and had decided to give her a special treat after the accident. After a day in the park, they returned home and relaxed in the hot tub, making sure her wound was covered with a waterproof bandage. He made a fancy dinner for two and they sat together at the candlelit table, shared a bottle of wine, and ate the delicious food. They wrapped up the night in bed together, sharing a perfect moment to end their perfect day.

Charles, upon being released, needed one thing only. He walked out of the hospital scratching himself all over from withdrawals and dying to get his next fix. He wasted no time in finding his dealer. Charles paid him the money and the dealer set up the needle. There were several others in the dingy room anxiously waiting their turn and watching as the needle was inserted into Charles' arm. He watched with eager anticipation as the dealer depressed the plunger. Charles quickly drifted off into a dreamlike state where there was no pain. If only the dealer would have used a new needle for all of his 'patients', but that tapped into his profits. Instead, greed won, and all of the onlookers were shot up with the same needle used on Charles.

The last to be released was Amy. She tried to be mad at Brian for the accident, but knew it was just as much her fault. If anything, it made her remember why she had married him in the first place. She made up her mind then and there that she was going to do whatever it took to make their marriage work. Sure, money was tight right now, but quitting her job and getting away from her boss was the least she could do to try and save their marriage.

Once she was released, she headed into the office to tender her resignation. What she hadn't factored into her plan was her boss turning on his charm one last time. One last time to be together with him, and then it would be over.

It wasn't that big of a deal to her boss, he just wanted her before he left for Europe. Just to prove to himself that he could have her whenever he wanted, no matter what she decided. It was nothing more than placating his ego.

After all that, he loaded his bags and left for Europe, leaving Amy wondering if she really could save her marriage.

Of course, she could! He had his whores in Europe, after all.

CHAPTER SIX

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

Lucy scrambled to prep the ER. They had a gunshot victim on the way in, and it was bad. More product of the gang violence in the streets of Little Rock.

The ER was set up in a reverse 'L' shape, with the ambulance bay on the upper part of the 'L'. The lobby was on the opposite side of the ambulance bay, at the bottom of the 'L'. There were triage rooms between the lobby and the bay.

The victim, according to the reports coming in on the radio, had a severe chest wound from a gunshot. He also had bullet holes in his legs and one arm. It didn't sound good, but Lucy was not one to give up.

The ambulance quickly backed up to the entrance of the emergency room. The back doors of the ambulance were flung open and EMTs raced the victim into the ER. They got him into a bay and as one, the EMTs and nurses transferred him onto the bed.

Lucy pushed her way into the room and took over.

"Vitals?" Lucy barked out while simultaneously checking the victim over with her stethoscope.

"BP is 85/40. Pulse slow and intermittent. He's not gonna last long, doc!" one of the EMTs shouted.

"Get me that synth blood! I need Dr. Felson, NOW!" Lucy barked. She was operating on autopilot, barking orders and treating the victim.

It looked like the chest wound was the greatest problem. She needed to stop the bleeding quickly or this guy was going to die.

Dr. Felson walked in. "Where do you need me?"

"Legs," Lucy shouted. She needed Dr. Felson to start taking care the lower half while she worked on the guy's chest. "Where's my blood?" she screamed.

"On its way!" another nurse said.

What would look like pure panic and chaos to the untrained was actually quite the opposite. Everyone knew their roles and performed them to perfection.

Lucy was diligently sewing up what she could, clipping away dead tissue and repairing the damage as she went. Dr. Felson was working away on the guy's legs, doing the exact same thing. All the nurses kept running around, making sure the doctors had a steady supply of clean, sterile instruments to use.

A nurse came running in with a bag of synth blood, massaging it out of nervousness. She was new to the ER and hadn't dealt with anything like this before. She was paying more attention to her surroundings, trying to make sure she didn't bump the table or anyone else, when she accidentally squeezed the bag too tight. It wasn't her fault, really. The blood manufacturer was in such a rush to get supplies out for the public that the company hired to make the bags skipped several quality control steps.

The bag wasn't sealed properly at the top. It was supposed to be double heat sealed at the top but the bag had been misaligned during the sealing process. All it took was a little too much pressure and the bag exploded turning into a geyser of blood. The result was like witnessing Old Faithful erupt.

Since the nurse was holding the bag down by her waist, the blood shot up under her protective face shield and saturated her eyes. She still had a mask over her mouth, but there was so much volume that blood found its way into her mouth in spite of the mask. The eruption doused another nurse standing next to her, with similar results.

"Damn it! Get another bag quick, we're losing him," Lucy nearly screamed.

The nurse ran back to get another bag, but by the time she returned it was almost too late. The nurse set up the IV and managed to get the synth blood flowing into the victim.

"We're losing him, Doctor," another nurse shouted.

Lucy feverishly tried everything she could think of to save the man, but it wasn't enough. The damage was just too severe and he had lost way too much blood. Lucy stopped what she was doing.

"Time of death, 3:05 pm," Lucy calmly stated. "Guys, let's get this mess cleaned up and get him to the morgue." Not that Lucy didn't feel remorse over the loss of life in front of her. She did, but a body does several things after death and the morgue was better prepared to handle that. Like it or not, there was still work to do on this man, even after death.

“Dr. Bailey, you did everything you could. The damage was just too severe,” Dr. Felson told her while they were scrubbing up.

“I know. It’s just senseless. That guy couldn’t have been over seventeen. He was still a kid,” she replied, exasperated.

“I agree. Lucy, it’s not your fault. All we can do is deal with what we are given,” Felson told her.

“Yeah, a shit sandwich with a side of crap,” she returned.

While everyone was cleaning up from the ordeal, they transferred the victim to the morgue in the basement. There he was put in the cooler until the technicians could prepare the body, and the police could do their investigation, before he would be released to the family.

It would be quite the shock for whoever opened that cooler next.

Lucy left the ER to find Greg. She’d had enough for the day and needed to vent a bit. She found him in his office.

“You look like hell,” Greg commented. “What happened?”

Lucy explained the ordeal in the ER, how the nurse burst the bag of synth blood and doused several others. She explained about losing the patient and how it made her feel. By the time she was done she was almost in tears.

“Lucy, it’s not your fault. As doctors, we are required to put aside our own emotions and focus on our patient’s health. It’s not fair, because the drain on us can be unbearable. I know this from experience,” Greg told her. “You have to remember all the good you do every day.”

“Oh, like ramming needles into asses because some jock teenager can’t keep it zipped? Or put up with the same teenage brat hitting on me because, wait for it, I’m cute? I’m young?” she went off.

This sounded a lot more like the Lucy that Greg knew. That meant she was starting to regain her equilibrium. He just shut his mouth and let her vent. If Lucy only knew what he was doing at this exact moment by shutting his yapper, she would have married him. He was easily trained.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NEAR SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Tina and Bob had been back home for several weeks since their camping trip. It had been the best trip they had ever taken to Mount Rainier. They fished, hiked, and took days to be lazy.

With their batteries recharged and a renewal of their love for each other, they returned to the daily grind. It wasn't that much of a grind because they both were doing what they loved. If a person finds what they truly love to do and makes that their career, they never work a day in their life. Or something like that.

It was a Saturday morning. The norm for them was to sleep late and eat breakfast together. They rarely had a chance to do that during the week because of their hectic schedules. This morning would be different.

"Eggs and bacon?" Tina asked.

"Sounds good to me," Bob replied. He walked up behind her and gave her the reverse hug she liked as a thank you. She was so easy for him to read after all these years.

Their embrace was broken up by the ringing of Bob's phone. He released Tina and picked up his phone. The caller ID said, 'Fire Dept'.

"Yeah," Bob answered. He didn't say a word as he listened to the instructions given to him.

"On my way," he replied, after listening for a minute, then hanging up. It used to be a page was sent out in the event of a fire, but who the hell wears a pager anymore?

"Gotta go, baby. Big fire by Sammamish Park. Threatening some homes. They're calling everyone in," Bob told her.

"Be safe," Tina replied.

He kissed her and headed out to his truck. The drive to the department wasn't that long but by the time he got there all the other volunteer firefighters were there.

He quickly turned out and hopped on the engine. He always wondered if other volunteer firefighters had a Dalmatian to ride on their trucks because he thought that would be cool. Unfortunately, his department didn't think the same way.

By the time the firefighters arrived on scene, the fire was roaring. Flames were reaching heights of more than twenty feet. Smoke billowed from the inferno, blocking out most of the sun.

The firefighters that were already there had managed to stop the fire from taking any homes, their progress helped by a change in the wind. They were trying to beat it back further away from the houses, because they knew the wind could change again at any minute.

"Fire's turned back to the east," the chief in charge of the scene told him. "Looks like it might jump the highway. Head over and keep it contained there."

"On our way," Bob replied, and took his crew to the highway. When they got there, the fire was still over a mile away, giving them some time to set up a defensive line. The highway had yet to be closed but traffic had come to a standstill as gawkers couldn't help but sit and stare.

It made getting into the area a little tricky, but they made it to where they needed to be. State patrol was now on the scene directing traffic and keeping the gawkers to a minimum.

Bob deployed his men to several strategic spots to help keep the blaze contained. Whatever plan the chief in charge on the scene was using was working. Several different departments were on the east side, keeping it from advancing, while other crews attacked from the west, putting the blaze out.

The raging fires that were present when Bob first arrived on scene were no longer visible. Experience taught him the job was far from done but they were gaining on the blaze.

Just when Bob started feeling good about the situation, he heard a series of car crashes behind him. He turned to look and saw one car had rear-ended another one. Pinned between the two cars was a state patrol officer.

Bob raced to the scene of the accident and did a quick assessment. The officer had his leg pinned between the two cars. Bob ran over to the driver's side of the car that was in the rear position.

"Back up, slowly!" Bob shouted. He went to the front of the car to catch the officer as the car pulled away. The officer was shouting in pain.

"Officer, try to relax," Bob said. The car backed away, releasing the officer. He collapsed onto the pavement, blood squirting out of his injured leg. Bob quickly placed a hand over the injury and applied pressure.

Another medic arrived quickly on scene. It was his best friend and fellow volunteer firefighter, Ted.

“Ted, we gotta slow this bleeding,” Bob yelled out.

Another passerby stopped and tore his own shirt off.

“Here, use this,” the shirtless guy said.

Bob grabbed the shirt and went to place it over the wound. When Bob lifted his hand, blood squirted out of the gaping wound and landed on his face. Ted got a heavy spray near his eyes.

“Shit, that was close. Keep pressure on it,” Bob told Ted. As Ted reached for the wound, Bob talked to the officer.

“What’s your name?” Bob asked him.

“Officer Dewey. This ain’t good, is it?” he replied through gritted teeth.

“Honestly, no, it isn’t. I’ve seen worse though,” Bob reassured him. “You’ve got a severe laceration on your leg, most likely nicking your femoral artery. Paramedics are on the way. As long as we can control the bleeding, you should make it. Might need a transfusion.”

“Damn, I just got out of the hospital from a transfusion. Got that new synth blood. Felt like shit ever since,” the officer told him.

“Well, you ‘re gonna need more of it,” Bob told him.

The officer was in no better mood by the time the ambulance got there. The paramedics stabilized the officer and got him into the ambulance.

“You saved his life,” one paramedic told Bob.

“Just part of the job,” Bob replied.

With that, Bob went back to fighting the fire, which now was down to putting out hotspots.

Bob decided he might get to enjoy the weekend after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Mike and Pete were walking away from the bar late that night. They had consumed a considerable amount of beer, along with the shots they earned from winning the betting pool. Cindy had left with Stumpy, again.

“Must not be too stumpy if she keeps leaving with him,” Pete said.

“There weren’t a lot of options for her,” Mike replied. “She’s been with every other guy there, literally.”

“Yes, and she’s not afraid to make it public, either,” Pete replied.

“No, she’s not,” Mike said as five large guys walked up behind them.

“Let me guess, Air Force, right?” a guy wearing a wife beater said. “Not good enough for the Army?”

Mike wheeled around and looked at the guys. They were large, but unconditioned. Being large only helped if you knew how to use it. From the track marks on their arms, Mike was betting they didn’t.

“No, just not that stupid,” Mike replied with a tinge of anger in his voice. This was a sure-fire way to ruin his buzz.

“Oh, you look plenty stupid to me,” a second guy said. He was shirtless and had brass knuckles in his hand.

“That a fact?” Pete challenged.

“Yeah, fact,” Wife Beater said.

As the conversation continued, the other three circled around Mike and Pete. Both men were aware of what the other guys were doing and were making note of what weapons they had. One guy had a lead pipe, another had a 2x4, and the third had just his fists.

“How hard you want to be on them, Mike?” Pete asked.

“All the way,” Mike responded as he lunged at Wife Beater. His massive fist connected with Wife Beater’s face and caved it in. The guy was out before he hit the ground.

Pete bull-rushed Lead Pipe, knocked him to the ground and then swung at Brass Knuckles. Knuckles dodged backwards into Fist and tripped to the ground.

While Pete was playing with those three, Shirtless made a run at Mike. Mike sidestepped and whipped his leg up in a roundhouse kick to the

abdomen. Shirtless doubled over in pain and landed on his hands and knees. Mike got behind him and lodged his steel-toed boot right between Shirtless's legs, catching both of Shirtless's boys with one kick.

Mike turned to check on Pete's situation, and noticed he was failing into the numbers game. Lead Pipe had gotten back up and was swinging wildly. He was forcing Pete to retreat into the other two.

"Need a hand, brother?" Mike asked.

"Anytime you wanna join in would be great," Pete yelled.

Lead Pipe heard what Pete said and turned to Mike. Mike had an evil grin on his face, waiting for the dumbass to start.

"Playtime!" Mike shouted and advanced on Pipe Guy. Lead Pipe didn't know what to make of the situation, he thought they still had the upper hand on these two, but somehow this brute had felled two of his guys already.

By the time he figured out he needed to swing the pipe, it was too late. Mike had picked up speed and speared Lead Pipe right in the stomach. They both hit the ground hard, Pipe's head smacking the pavement with a loud thud. Mike sat on the guy's chest and whaled away on him until the guy was clearly unconscious.

While Mike was busy with Lead Pipe, Pete had turned around to face the last two. They both glared at Pete as they heard Mike pummeling the other guy.

"You wanted some, now come get it," Pete spat at them. Pete was a different fighter than Mike. Mike preferred to take the fight to the enemy. Pete was more tactical, waiting for the enemy to make a mistake. He was rewarded with his patience.

Fist waited for Knuckles to make the first move, but Knuckles wanted no part of Pete. Pete was twice the size of Knuckles. The two thugs turned to look at each other and that was the opening Pete needed. Pete launched himself at Knuckles, driving an elbow into his right temple. He quickly spun to his right and swung his arm, connecting with the nose of Fist. Blood spurted out of the man's nose and both men hit the ground at the same time.

While this was going on, Shirtless had gotten back up, albeit slowly, and charged a prone Mike. He dove at Mike and the pair rolled off of Lead Pipe. Shirtless got a couple of good punches in before Mike could counter.

Using his own weight, Mike rolled Shirtless to the left and ended up on top of him. Mike reared his right arm back and laid a punch that would have made Ali blush. Shirtless was out cold.

Mike stood up to check on Pete, who was standing there watching the show.

“You could have helped!” Mike said.

“Why should I do that when I had three to your two?” Pete asked.

“Hey, your three turned into my three,” Mike shot back.

“But one of mine had a lead pipe,” Pete countered.

“Yeah, that’s the one I took. You never could handle your own, always gotta pawn them off on me,” Mike chuckled.

“Not my fault that he went to you,” Pete replied.

“I’m just better looking,” Mike said.

“Yeah, for a jackass, you look pretty good,” Pete retaliated.

The two continued their banter back and forth as they walked back to the base, leaving the five goons laid out in the street. It wouldn’t be the last time they saw those guys.

CHAPTER NINE

NEW YORK CITY

Amy sat on her bed, feeling lousy and trying to decide whether to call in to work on her last day or not. She had wanted to quit on the spot, but her boss made her fulfill her two-week notice. She hated every second of it.

Her boss refused to stop hitting on her and she ended up sleeping with him two more times. He had also threatened that if she did not fulfill her notice, he would make her life a living hell. He was a rich man with connections so she knew he could live up to his promise, and it would be impossible to find another job in her field.

She just could not shake this bug out of her system. She had tried everything she could think of, but it just wouldn't end. Amy was running a fever, had chills, diarrhea, some vomiting and overall felt like she had been run over. The body aches were the worst. She could barely move.

"Enough of this," she said to herself. She picked up the phone and called the office.

"I can't make it in today," she told her co-worker. "This bug is killing me."

"You know what he will do if you don't make it in today," her co-worker said.

"I know, but I need to go to the hospital," she told them. "It's getting worse."

"Ok, I'll let him know," her co-worker said, but Amy didn't hear her. She had collapsed and started convulsing. Her co-worker could hear everything that was happening over the phone but did not quite understand what was going on.

Deep inside Amy's body, the synth blood from her transfusion had anchored itself to the molecules in her body. It attacked with a ferociousness and was literally changing her body at a molecular level.

The co-worker could hear the volume of Amy's whimpers and moans increasing and could not get Amy to respond to her increasingly frantic demands.

"Someone call 911. Amy collapsed at home," she yelled out, still listening in horror as Amy changed.

Whimpers and moans quickly turned to screams. Not just any screams, screams of terror, screams of pain, a high-pitched wailing filled with rage. The co-worker could not understand what was happening. It sounded like Amy was being skinned alive.

Body builders transform their own bodies by working out and stressing the muscle groups. Each group that is stressed feels sore for several days while it heals itself, thus growing bigger and stronger. The transformation of the muscle groups takes months of hard work to get the desired results. This all happened to Amy in mere moments.

The co-worker sat in horrified fear. The screams were so loud that other workers could now hear them across the office. The high-pitched screams then started turning into a gurgling sound, then turned to venomous growls. The growls sounded evil and had sounds of rage laced in them.

At home, Amy's muscle structure changed from lean, almost skinny, into that of a hardcore body builder in seconds. Bones shattered to accommodate the new muscle structure. Every time a bone broke, Amy howled louder. Pain radiated through her body as broken bones healed in seconds. The bones moved on their own, reforming with an intense fire. The burning was like nothing Amy had ever felt before. It was like a million suns had taken up residence in her body.

The pain from the change was intense and unyielding. So much so that it triggered a primal urge in the creature that used to be Amy. It needed to be fed. It needed fuel to continue its relentless assault on her body. Once the hunger hit, she was no longer Amy. She was no longer a member of humanity.

All she could think of was to feed and by feeding the hope was the assault would lessen. Until then, she was this mindless, roaming void, looking for anything to relieve the pain.

Amy was now a massive creature. She looked like an enormous body builder that had been working out her entire life. Her eyes were dull and lifeless and her teeth now had razor sharp points on each of them.

Her blood had changed at a cellular level, transforming into a luminescent purple goo. Her veins popped out, clearly visible from a distance and she actually glowed purple.

Just as her veins popped out, Charles came home. He was sweating and very pale.

"Babe, I'm home," he called out. "I think I caught whatever you have."

Amy barreled through the house, down the stairs and launched herself at Charles. The weight difference from the old Amy to now was incredible. Charles had no chance of fending off the attack.

She landed squarely on his chest, knocking him down and onto his back. She stayed there, on his chest, drinking in the scent from his body. Growls and snarls escaped her lips and then she stood up and moved away from Charles.

Fear ran through his entire body as he watched his wife, or what he thought was his wife, look down on him. Screams erupted from his mouth that he didn't realize he was letting out.

Back at the office, all of Amy's co-workers had stopped what they were doing to listen in on what was happening. They could hear the screams from Charles and the snarls from Amy. It sounded like Amy, sort of. It was her tone of voice, but much deeper. Deeper and filled with rage and hatred. They all sat in horror as they could hear a door opening.

"Paramedics," a voice called out.

Amy's primitive brain recognized that there was new prey in the room and she leapt at the voice. She tore into the paramedic like a fat man at a buffet. The second paramedic stood in terror as Amy ripped out the throat of the first guy with her teeth. She had a look of intense satisfaction on her face as she swallowed the flesh.

The second paramedic and Charles vomited all over the floor while watching. Charles had managed to reach a crouched position but all of a sudden, he fell flat on the floor as he started to scream anew. Agony ravaged his body as he started to turn. He trembled at the feelings coursing through his body. He didn't know what was happening to him. All he knew was he had never felt this kind of pain before.

Convulsions took over as he quickly made his conversion to join the ranks of the undead. Only, his change was different. It wasn't nearly as long as Amy's and not nearly as intense. It was only a fraction of what Amy had gone through.

By the time the change had finished, Charles was a mindless body. Green, glowing veins popped out. His eyes were covered with cataracts and he had zero visibility left. Smell was now his primary sense and it worked better than a canine's. His only focus was biting everything and everyone around him.

The second paramedic had collapsed from a fear-induced heart attack and was in no shape to counter anything Charles did.

Charles stumbled over to the second paramedic and bit into his throat, ripping it out and swallowing any blood that ran into his mouth. Unlike Amy though, Charles was content to leave it at that. There were others to go bite. He slowly stood up and stumbled out the door.

All the while, Amy continued to feed on the first paramedic. She had ripped open his chest cavity and was devouring his internal organs. She had the most pleasant look on her face, but that only lasted for a few moments until the hunger came back. No matter how much she ate, the hunger was always there. It would never relent, never stop driving her to consume as much as she could. Rage continued to fill her very being. Continued to make her destroy any living thing she came across until the hunger was satisfied. But it never would be.

CHAPTER TEN

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Bob was at Virginia Mason Hospital in downtown Seattle. Ted had come down with some sort of fever that wouldn't go away. Ted was lethargic, pale, had body aches that wouldn't quit and generally felt horrible. Bob had come with him to the emergency room as support but was shocked when they immediately admitted Ted into the hospital. Something in his bloodwork had come back weird, and they wanted to monitor him.

Bob was in the room with Ted, watching all the monitors. It was a small room in the ICU. It held one bed and several machines with which to monitor Ted. He was on oxygen and had every conceivable wire and tube hooked up to him. There was a window next to the door so the nurses could look in as they walked by.

Ted had fallen asleep a little while ago and Bob did not want to wake him up. Bob texted Tina to tell her that Ted had been admitted and he was going to hang out for a while to help him.

Just as Bob finished texting Tina, Ted's monitors all went off at once. Ted's blood pressure shot up, his pulse skyrocketed, and his fever reached temps close to 108 degrees. Nurses came rushing in before Bob could even yell for help. One nurse ushered him out of the room and shut the door. Bob watched through the window.

Ted started convulsing as the nurses started packing ice bags around him. Sweat poured off Ted as his temperature continued to climb. The monitors connected to Ted continued to blare their warning sounds until a final, telltale steady tone was heard. Ted had died.

Bob stood in utter shock, too dumbfounded to even move. He heard his heart pounding as the nurses started to clean up Ted.

"What the...?" Bob said in a near whisper. He couldn't believe he had just watched his friend die. He was so healthy only days ago. What the hell happened?

"Sir, I asked you if you know where Ted has been?" a voice said.

It took a moment to register with Bob that a doctor had been speaking to him.

"Excuse me?" Bob said.

“Was Ted ever out of the country?” the doctor asked.

“No, never. Ted never left Washington state. He’s always been here. Hated to travel,” Bob said.

“We will need to ask you some more questions. Did Ted have any family?” the doctor asked.

“Just me. I’m...I was his best friend,” Bob corrected himself. “His parents died years ago. Only child,” Bob said in a daze.

“Ok, if you could come with me. We have some things to figure out,” the doctor continued. “We need to figure out what he might have come in contact with over the last week. People just don’t spike a severe temperature for no reason.”

“I understand,” Bob said, taking one last look at Ted before he started to walk away with the doctor.

The nurses were doing their best to get Ted cleaned up and get the machines unhooked. None of them saw the movement from Ted until it was too late.

Growling, Ted rose from his bed and bit into the first nurse he could reach. He tore a huge chunk out of her arm and spit it out. She screamed in horror as she looked at her arm. Blood poured out of the wound, coating the floor. Ted reached the second nurse before anyone could react. Flesh ripped from her upper arm as people started to figure out something was wrong.

As both nurses dropped to the floor, screaming in pain, the third nurse tried to reach the door, but Ted was between her and the door. She tried to run around him, but only bounced back as Ted lunged at her. She fell to the ground and within seconds Ted was on her, biting her neck. Ted tore away the side of her neck with a grunt and blood spurted everywhere, pulsating out with every beat of her heart. She bled out in seconds. Ted chewed and swallowed the flesh, giving a grunt of satisfaction.

Bob stood transfixed, looking into the room. Seconds ago, he had watched his friend die, now his friend was roaming around the room, biting and eating nurses. Bob watched as Ted chewed away on the nurses, noting that Ted’s veins had popped out on the surface of his skin. They looked green and had a slight glow to them.

“What in the actual fuck?” Bob shouted out.

The doctor called for security and then charged into the room. He didn’t get very far before he slipped on the bloody floor. Ted quickly realized he was there and attacked. The doctor, as he lay on the floor, watched in horror

as Ted latched onto his leg with his teeth. Screams of pain erupted from the doctor's mouth as Ted jerked his head back, ripping a sizeable chunk out of the doctor's calf muscle.

As all of this was happening, four security guards rushed into the room. The first one slid on the blood and ended up crashing face first into Ted. His nose was bitten off within seconds. The following guards entered more carefully, reaching Ted just as he was going to take another bite of the first guard.

The three remaining guards grabbed Ted all at once in an effort to subdue him and were surprised by the strength Ted used to throw them all off of him. They attempted to grab Ted again and this time they held on for dear life. One guard managed to stand up and grabbed the flexi-cuffs he had on him. As the cuffs were being put on, Ted bit another guard that had come too close to his mouth.

They half dragged, half carried Ted out of the room. As they were exiting the room, the group passed directly in front of Bob. Bob could clearly see Ted's eyes. They were filmed over with cataracts and Ted's face was blank. Bob jumped back as Ted started snapping his jaws in his direction. This was not his friend anymore. Bob had no clue who this was, only that something had taken him over.

All in all, Ted had bitten three nurses, one doctor, and two security guards before they could subdue him. One was now dead and the other five would soon wish they were.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

Emergency room duty wasn't exactly something that Lucy loved, but she didn't loathe it either. It was just something that she had to do. It appeared the chaos from the last time she was in the ER hadn't let up at all, until tonight. Thankfully, everything had been quiet this evening, except for the occasional case of the sniffles and an overanxious parent.

She was working with the same nurses from her previous shift in the ER. Both nurses had finally recovered from the shock of being sprayed with blood. They had initially freaked out, until they were reminded that it was synth blood and no testing for HIV or other diseases needed to be performed. Unpleasant as it had been, being drenched in blood, it was a small price to pay in an effort to save a life.

Both nurses weren't feeling all that well tonight. They complained of body aches and fatigue, and both had developed slight fevers shortly after they came on shift. Lucy was about to send them home when a middle-aged man came into the ER complaining of chest pains. He was severely overweight, sweating, and said his left arm was numb.

The patient was rushed into a room and Lucy went to work. She quickly diagnosed the man with symptoms of a heart attack and immediately put him on oxygen and gave him an aspirin. Aspirin, as many people know, can work as a blood thinner, keeping blood clots from forming until further treatment can occur. Next, she sent one of the nurses to get the cardiac catheterization kit. It is a kit used to run a flexible tube from a blood vessel from the wrist or groin, into the heart to perform diagnostic tests and help resolve known heart problems.

Surprisingly, the man lay on the bed, calm and collected. Lucy didn't need to tell him that if he was overanxious or panicked, he could make things worse.

"What's your name?" Lucy asked him. Talking to the patient was a good way to keep them from thinking about what was happening around them. If they started to think, they might start to panic.

"Andy," he replied.

“Well Andy, has anything like this happened before?” Lucy asked. She had a hunch it wasn’t his first heart attack, he was just too calm and collected.

“Yes, three times,” he replied.

“You’re an old pro at this, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. Wife keeps telling me that I need to change my diet and exercise. Just don’t have the will power to do it.”

“Well, we’ll have you fixed up in no time,” Lucy said as reassuringly as she could. Andy was in bad shape and she could tell he wouldn’t have much time left if he didn’t change his ways.

Lucy got the catheter inserted in Andy’s wrist and was carefully threading it up to Andy’s heart when one of the nurses dropped like a rock. She was ghost white and had started convulsing. Shouts of pain echoed through the room. The shouts turned to screams that reverberated throughout the ER.

Lucy was stuck. She had a cardiac catheter partially started in a patient and one of her nurses had dropped to the floor with convulsions. She didn’t know what to do. Indecision struck her for the first time in her life and it didn’t feel good.

“What the hell was that?” a voice asked. Lucy turned her head to see that Dr. Long had come running into the room to assist.

“Maggie collapsed. She hasn’t been feeling good,” Lucy shouted. As she finished her sentence, she looked at Maggie, the fallen nurse. Maggie was writhing about on the floor and pain flared in her eyes, but along with that was something else. Rage. Lucy could see rage in those eyes, and it wasn’t any rage, it was a rage filled with vile hatred. Lucy gasped at what she saw next. Maggie’s eyes rapidly glazed over with cataracts. Lucy continued to stare as the veins in Maggie’s body popped out and turned green.

Dr. Long was preparing to assist Maggie but he saw the same thing happening that Lucy did and stopped short.

“What the hell?” Greg whispered.

As he was trying to make sense of what he was watching, the second nurse, Becky, hit the floor with an ear-piercing scream. Becky flopped around on the floor, shouting obscenities to anyone that could hear. She was shouting in great detail about what was happening to her body. She screamed about the burning, intense fire that was sweeping through her body. Lucy had no idea what was happening to her nurses or why it was happening so suddenly.

At that moment, Maggie stood up and latched onto Andy's arm with her teeth, missing Lucy by no more than an inch. Andy howled in pain and the catheter inside him tore through his blood vessels. He was dead in minutes.

Maggie released Andy and managed to stand completely upright. She sniffed the air like a dog and stumbled towards Greg. Greg leapt out of the way as Maggie lunged at him. Maggie tripped and hit the floor, rolling into Becky. That was when both Greg and Lucy noticed that Becky had changed as well.

Both nurses rose to their feet and started to charge towards Lucy. Charge might be generous as they more stumbled toward Lucy, bumping into the table that still held Andy. Their collision with the table gave Lucy enough time to grab a nearby IV stand. Lucy used it like a baseball bat and swung like she was Babe Ruth. It connected with Maggie's body, knocking her into Greg. Becky was still on the attack and moving faster towards Lucy. Just as Becky came within reach, Lucy swung again and the IV stand connected with the back of Lucy's head. It pierced through the skin and into her brain stem. Becky dropped faster than a skydiver without a parachute and did not move.

While Lucy was busy with Becky, Greg was locked in a fight to the death with Maggie and he was afraid it would be his. When Maggie was knocked into Greg, they both fell to the floor with Maggie on top. Greg was able to get his hands around Maggie's neck and keep her snapping jaws away from him.

"What the hell, Maggie? It's me, Dr. Long," Greg gasped at her, but she didn't hear a word, just continued to react to the sounds that emanated from her prey. The sound of his voice made Maggie work even harder to try and bite him. She was only inches away from his throat when the IV stand struck her in the back of the head. She immediately went limp, all of her dead weight lying on Greg. Lucy rolled Maggie off Greg and helped him up.

"I don't know what the hell that was about, but I don't think we can stay here," Lucy said.

"I don't know either. We can't just leave. If there is something going on, these people need our help," Greg said.

"Greg, you're a great guy and I would love to spend more time with you, but I will not stick around to become someone's lunch," Lucy said.

"Ok, I can agree with that. What did you have in mind?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WHITE HOUSE

President Ford sat in the situation room attempting to get the full details of the situation from his staff. Unfortunately, details were not in great abundance. What they knew about the attacks was very little.

“So, you’re telling me that people just start biting other people?” he asked. He wasn’t the brightest bulb on the tree and routinely had to have facts repeated to him more than once.

“Yes and no, sir. Some of the people are just biting, but others have turned cannibalistic,” one aide told him.

“They are eating other people?” Ford asked.

“Yes sir, that’s what the word means,” another aide said before he realized what he was saying and to whom.

“Watch your tongue with me, boy. I’m the President of the United States and will be treated as such,” Ford yelled.

“Yes, sir. My apologies, sir,” the aide replied.

“Dennis, is this happening around the globe?” Ford asked his Secretary of State.

“Yes, but we don’t know to what extent. Other countries, particularly in Europe, are seeing the same events happening,” Dennis Ripley told him.

“Homeland, what is your assessment?” Ford asked the Director of Homeland Security.

“Our assessment can’t be made yet, as we do not have enough verifiable information,” Homeland Director Richard Parks said.

“Verifiable information?” Ford grilled him.

“Yes sir. As of now, all information we have is secondhand knowledge. Nothing concrete,” Parks told him.

“You mean to tell me you can’t verify if people are eating each other?” Ford blared at him.

“We can do that, sir. What we can’t do is speculate on why it’s happening. We won’t make guesses without better sources of information,” Parks replied.

Another aide walked over to the President and whispered in his ear.

“Gentleman, I have a video conference to attend with the G7 leaders. You all WILL attend this with me,” Ford proclaimed. He was not in a good mood and was willing to spread the wealth, as it were.

On the far wall from the President a screen came to life with the images of several world leaders appearing.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, friends. We find ourselves in a bad situation. For unknown reasons, it seems that people are biting and eating each other,” Ford started the meeting. He didn’t see the eye rolls from the other leaders, he was too busy looking at his notes.

“I would like to start this meeting by ascertaining how much of the population has decided to turn cannibal,” Ford continued. “Prime Minister Johnson, you may start.” The other world leaders couldn’t stand Ford, especially since he normally came off as a pretentious prick.

“Last known amount of people in Great Britain that have turned are roughly five percent of the population. We have no known reasons for this, but are working hard to figure out why,” Johnson said.

The meeting continued, with most of the globe reporting five to ten percent of the population having ‘turned’. None of the other leaders had any clue as to what was happening and reluctantly turned their eyes towards America.

“Let’s have another meeting in a few days to see what any of us have come up with,” Ford concluded the meeting. He didn’t even say ‘bye’, he just disconnected the call.

Ford looked around the room, glaring at his staff. “If any of you have a bright idea, now’s the time.”

“Sir, If I may suggest,” CDC Director James said. “Why don’t we form a task force, led by the CDC. We can attempt to determine what is going on.”

“What do you need?” Ford asked.

“Bodies. There are reports of the cannibals dying. If my team can get some of the deceased, we can start to get some answers,” James said.

“Might I recommend,” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Larson interrupted. “We put all military forces on full alert status and issue a media blackout of the incidents? We don’t need a panic on our hands.”

“Excellent ideas, gentleman. This is the action I’ve been asking for. Consider your requests granted,” Ford replied.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Tina sat in her chair, in bewilderment. Bob had just given her the news about Ted. She couldn't believe it. Refused to believe it. Nothing like that could ever happen. Turning green? Really? How did he all of a sudden turn into this enormous green rage-filled machine?

That's when the call came in. She answered it, still looking at her husband as though he was some alien. The call was from the Allen Institute, her employer. They told her the same thing that Bob had. People were turning colors, biting, and eating people. They also told her the President had initiated a nationwide research plan, in cooperation with the CDC. She was to report to work immediately and pack for an extended stay. Confusion gripped her mind to the point she found it hard to move.

"Babe, who was that?" Bob asked her, shocking her out of her daze.

"It was work," she finally said. "They are calling me in for an extended stay. Research into this new...thing. I have to go immediately. The President has enacted a plan to figure out what is causing this. If he has any plan. That guy couldn't find a coherent sentence with two flashlights."

"Not without me, you don't," Bob said. "You are not leaving my side."

"They won't let you in, Bob. No outsiders, remember?" Tina told him.

"Don't care. If they want you there, they get me as well," he shot back. "Tell them it's an extra pair of hands."

Both proceeded to the bedroom to pack for an 'extended stay'. Food wasn't a concern, as the institute could feed an army for a month. Bedding would be provided, along with everyday items such as toiletries. All they had to pack was clothing and any 'extras' they wanted to bring to make their stay more enjoyable.

Soon, both were in the truck on their way to downtown Seattle. It was an adventurous trip as people were starting to figure out that cannibalism was alive and well. Social unrest and societal breakdown were in their early stages. The closer they got to the institute, the more trouble they saw.

People were already starting to loot businesses. Stealing large screen TV's, computers, laptops, and all sorts of items that would prove to be fruitless. It looked like Black Friday gone mad.

Tina and Bob witnessed more than one person being attacked for whatever they had on their person. One person lay on the sidewalk in a bloody pool. Their attacker ran away with a pair of shoes.

The Allen Institute was nestled on the south shore of Lake Union. Lake Union was a waterway that connected Lake Washington to the Pacific Ocean via the Puget Sound. On the south shore was Lake Union Park and next to that a marina. The park was only a short hop across the road and one block down from the Allen Institute.

The Institute itself covered one square block of Mercer Avenue which ran along the south side of the building. The massive building, dedicated to life science research, covered 270,000 square feet and was six stories tall.

Bob and Tina managed to reach the institute without much fanfare. A couple of times people walked by and slammed their fists on the sides of the truck, but nothing else happened. They parked the truck in the underground parking garage, grabbed their suitcases and made for the elevator. They were in a hurry because they could see people coming through the barricade, on foot, and entering the garage. The intruders were shouting obscenities at them, telling Tina what they would do if they caught her.

Bob grabbed Tina by the arm and pulled her along, trying to get her to speed up. They had to get to the elevator before the thugs got too close. It was only about a hundred yards away, but the thugs were only fifty yards out and gaining on them.

“Hey sugar, where you goin’ so fast?” one thug said.

“Yeah, we just wanna talk,” said another.

“Screw that, I wanna jump that fine ass,” said the third.

Bob and Tina reached the elevator and she swiped her keycard to call the secure elevator. By the time the elevator dinged, the three thugs were on top of them. Bob quickly stood in front of Tina, guarding her from the three thugs. From his back, he pulled out his Glock 17.

“I don’t think you guys wanna push this,” Bob said, aiming the pistol. “A nine-mil can still leave a good-sized hole in your head.”

Tina stood in shock. She and Bob weren’t necessarily gun fanatics, but they did own a pistol each, along with various hunting weapons. She hadn’t seen Bob grab his gun when they left the house.

“Old man, you even know how to shoot that thing?” thug one asked.

“I’m good enough to put a round through your skull,” Bob retorted.

The elevator doors opened and inside stood three U.S. Marines in full battle rattle and armed with M4 rifles. They swung their rifles into ready position, aiming at the thugs.

“Step away from the elevator and exit the facility,” one Marine said.

The thugs stopped their advance and stared at three muzzles pointed at them, one for each.

“I SAID STEP AWAY!” the Marine shouted. All three thugs slowly reversed their course, still facing the elevator.

“We don’t want no trouble, just wanted to say hi to these fine people,” thug two said.

“They don’t want to talk, now move it,” the Marine said. The words said with a finality that made the thugs turn tail and run.

Once the garage was clear, Bob and Tina entered the elevator with the Marines.

“What the hell are Marines doing at the Institute?” Tina asked.

“Ma’am, the situation is getting worse by the minute. We are here to protect this building and its occupants, by order of the President. Your work here could help save our collective asses,” the Marine said.

“Thank you for the save back there,” Bob said. He was still a little juiced up from the confrontation.

“No problem, sir. That’s what we are here for,” a Marine said.

The elevator stopped in the lobby and the doors opened to show Bob and Tina exactly what kind of chaos was starting to happen. Outside, protesters and rioters were lined up and down the street, burning everything they could. They had taken control of the road and stopped traffic. Jumping on top of the cars, with occupants still inside, they launched Molotov cocktails at the buildings around them. There was an effigy of the President on fire in the middle of the road.

“Ma’am, sir, we really need to get moving,” the Marine told them. “We’re getting ready to lock down the building.”

The group ran for the nearest elevator to carry them up the several floors to the lab. As soon as they got to the elevator, an alarm sounded, blaring through the building and exciting the rioters outside. Heavy metal doors started to slide down in front of the windows and doors on the exterior of the building, shielding the inhabitants from the mayhem outside. Within thirty seconds, everyone in the building was relatively safe from those outside.

“How many Marines are here?” Tina asked on the ride up to the lab.

“Two squads, ma’am,” the Marine responded. He was the only Marine that rode up with them.

“How many is that?” Tina asked.

“We have twenty Marines on site,” he replied.

“Is that enough?” Tina asked.

“It should be more than enough to keep everyone in here safe. We have one squad set up on the roof. The other squad is located at strategic points throughout the building,” the Marine replied.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name?” Bob said.

“Lance Corporal Dawson, at your service,” he grinned back.

“Do you have a first name?” Tina asked.

“Just call me Harry. No, I’m not a hairy beast, it’s short for Harold, and yes, same name as that movie with Tom Cruise way back when,” Dawson told them. “I am here to assist with anything you need, so don’t be afraid to ask.”

The elevator arrived at the lab floor and Tina, accompanied by Bob, entered the lab area. It was enormous. There was a main area located in the middle of the floor that occupied much of the space. It was a collection of tables and shelves, all holding different scientific equipment.

The entire perimeter of the main area was lined with experiment rooms. Almost every room was now in use, with people flitting in and out between the rooms and the main lab.

“Tina, you made it,” a man said.

“Yes, I did. Dr. Mason, this is my husband Bob,” Tina said.

“Tina, you know the rules. No visitors,” Dr. Mason said.

“I don’t care. If you want me here, he comes with,” Tina blurted out.

“Please, don’t worry, Dr. Mason,” Bob interrupted. “I won’t be in the way. I just feel better if I’m with her, with everything going on.”

“Besides, he’s seen one of these things, up close and personal,” Tina added.

Dr. Mason looked at the two for a moment and then relented. “It’s just Mason,” he said, extending his hand to Bob. Bob accepted and shook his hand back.

“Mason, what the hell is going on?” Tina asked him.

“Let me get you caught up,” Mason said as they all took seats in the middle of the main room.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COLUMBIA MEDICAL LAB
MANHATTEN, NEW YORK CITY

The entire facility was in complete chaos. In the lab, papers lined the floor, people were running everywhere, and the noise from the chaos could rival any monster truck pull. Every machine in the lab was running at full tilt, as the scientists tried to find an explanation for what was happening. Every machine was spitting out printouts of test results. If the report produced didn't give any clues, it was ripped up and tossed on the floor, explaining the paper disaster.

The scientists had heard about the 'changed' people and had traced a possible source back to the synth blood. They had no proof it was their work that had created this, and most of them refused to take responsibility for it. A couple of them instinctively knew it was the synth blood that had changed people but they couldn't figure out how. They were desperate to figure it out.

Max, Bill, and Cynthia were working by themselves, away from the chaos. They were making another attempt at decoding what they had seemingly triggered with the synth blood. They had no samples from any of the Changed to work with. They could only go back over their own work and try to decipher what had gone wrong.

Bill was sitting at his desk, waiting for the latest results to come back from another round of tests. The printer started humming and soon Bill had a page in his hands that turned him ghost white. He quickly went to the nearest paper shredder and inserted the papers. Within seconds, the results he had just gotten were torn into small ribbons.

He stood for a second, lost in thought, then quickly scanned the area. Max and Cynthia were working at Max's station, oblivious to everything around them. Bill made up his mind in a microsecond.

In a lab such as this one, there were always going to be volatile liquids, that when combined in the right mixture, would set off a chain reaction of explosions.

He quickly grabbed the waste basket used for the shredder and poured a mixture of different chemicals into it. Without anyone noticing, he found a

natural gas line that was hooked up to one of the unoccupied stations. He opened the line at the station, allowing the combustible gas to fill the room.

Seconds later, Max looked up from his desk to see Bill standing over the waste basket, holding a vial of liquid.

“What the hell are you doing?” Max asked.

“They will never understand,” Bill blurted out. “They will never forgive us.”

“What do you mean? What won’t they forgive?” Max asked.

“Trust me, it’s better this way,” Bill said and then poured the vial into the basket.

The liquid hit the basket and flames erupted upwards. Two seconds later, the waste basket exploded with such force that Bill was sent flying back twenty feet through the air and smacked the wall with his head.

The explosion ignited the gas in the room, blowing the entire lab and everyone inside into little pieces. It also destroyed the test results Bill had obtained, and any chance for a cure that humanity would ever have.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan was in his room, packing his things. He hated to leave after such a glorious stay with April. She was so happy with everything that she walked around with a glow about her. He was happy himself, after seeing her reaction. He was certain he had made the right choice about ending his career in the service.

“Are you sure about this?” April asked for tenth time.

“Yes baby, I am. I want to be with you now and forever. My service to the country needs to change so I can have a life. I want that life to be with you,” he answered.

“You know,” she said as she nuzzled in close to him. “I never thought you would give up being a Marine. It was always a dream of mine, but that dream seemed to fade away as time marched on.”

“It’s not a dream anymore, it’s reality. I love you baby, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy,” he replied. “And I’m still a Marine. Always will be.”

“Yeah, but you’re my Marine, the Corps be damned,” she said.

“Hey now, watch your mouth,” he teased.

“Maybe you need to close it for me?” she said, toying with him.

“I would love to, but I’ll be late for my flight,” he said, somewhat dejectedly. It pained him to leave her now, even if it was for a short time while he wrapped up things at Camp Lejeune.

“Oh, but do you have to go?” she said, batting her eyes at him.

“Yes sweetheart, I do,” he said apologetically. “It’s only for a week or so, and I’ll be back.”

“Ok,” she said, sounding bummed out. “When you get back, it’s bedtime for a week.”

“A whole week? What about food?” he teased back.

“We can order in,” she smiled at him.

Dylan went back to finish his packing and get the car loaded. April was going to drive him to the airport and bring his prized Mustang back to his parents. Dylan had never let anyone drive his car, but she was about to be his bride, so he figured he had to relent at some point.

The ride to the airport was quick, too quick for both of them. Soon, they were at the drop-off outside the airport doors. They took their time saying goodbye, embracing in a long, emotion-filled kiss. They didn't care who was looking at them. The only thing in the world that mattered was each other.

They regretfully released their embrace. They stared into each other's eyes one last time before Dylan picked up his bags.

"I'll be back in a week," he said through tear filled eyes. He always hated leaving her and it was even harder now.

"I know," she said through her own tears. "I'll be waiting."

Dylan gave her one last kiss and went inside the airport. He quickly turned to look at her one last time before he went through security. Just as he turned, he saw someone jump on top of her and start chewing on her arm.

He dropped his bags and raced back outside. He was just fifty yards away. When he reached her he almost threw up. The person that had jumped April was lean, almost sinewy. Bright red veins stuck out all over the person. The monster had a chunk of April's arm in his mouth and he was chewing it up like it was Thanksgiving dinner.

People outside the airport were running away, screaming in fear. Bags were dropped, cell phones skittered across the pavement. Cars that had been parked were now gunning their engines and racing away from the scene.

Dylan reached the red monster and pulled him off April. With a quick glance he noticed April had been torn to shreds and was clearly dead.

He had no time to mourn, as the red guy launched himself into Dylan with amazing speed, his jaws snapping at Dylan as the guy knocked him to the ground. Red Guy was on top of him, snapping for all he was worth. Even his jaws moved at an unbelievable speed.

Thankfully, for Dylan, the red guy had a physique built more for running and speed, while Dylan had at least seventy-five pounds on him, and his was all muscle.

Dylan grabbed Red Guy's throat and started to roll him over. To Dylan's surprise, the guy rolled with him, until they made a complete circle with the monster back on top. Dylan reversed the roll and this time compensated for the guy rolling with him. The monster's jaws never stopped snapping the whole time their battle was going on.

With the roll complete and Dylan on top, he finally had the advantage and used it. He launched a tirade of punches to Red Guy's face, followed by

several knees to the groin. They didn't faze the monster at all. He continued to try and bite Dylan.

Dylan then palm punched Red Guy in the nose, shattering it. He then stood up and smashed the guy's knee with his boot.

Thinking that should keep the monster down, Dylan raced back to April. He knew it was no use, but he had to try. She had one arm missing, half her throat had been torn out and she was covered in blood. Dylan tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't respond. Disbelief settled in as Dylan realized that his future lay in his hands, dead.

Dylan felt a huge push on his right side and his body flew ten feet away from April. The red guy was back. Hobbled, but back.

Dylan picked himself up and turned to face April's killer. He was going to enjoy this. The monster was looking at Dylan like he was trying to decipher him. The eyes of the man were slightly hazed over and there was only one emotion in those eyes, hatred. Dylan had never seen anything like it before.

Red Guy started towards Dylan and even with a shattered knee, he had incredible speed. Dylan timed it perfectly and sidestepped the onslaught. He brought his right leg up and jammed it into Red Guy's abdomen. The force of such a kick would have dropped any normal human, but not this thing. He had doubled over from the force of the kick but it wasn't from pain and he stood upright within a split second.

Red Guy came at Dylan again, but this time Dylan ducked down and rammed his fist into the guy's groin. He hit both jewels with enough power to shatter a man's jaw. Red Guy just tumbled to the side and stood back up.

Dylan was starting to get worried as the guy made another attack. This time Dylan sidestepped, grabbed the guy by his hair, and used his momentum to drive the man's head into the concrete, shattering his skull. Red Guy rolled over onto his back, and Dylan attacked. He grabbed the guy by his head and smashed it repeatedly against the pavement. By the time Dylan realized the guy wasn't moving, the monster's head was nothing but a puddle of blood and brain matter.

Dylan stopped what he was doing and looked around. Nobody was in sight. It was just him and Red. He looked himself over and other than some blood on his clothing, he had no scratches, bite marks, or any other wounds. Luckily, he had come through the fight unscathed.

He went to April and gently picked up what was left of her. He placed her in the Mustang and prepared to head out.

His eyes showed only one emotion...revenge.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Mike was working on another C-17. This one needed a routine overhaul of its engines. This level of maintenance demanded that they be removed, and certain parts replaced. It was a massive job that required several sets of hands. There were machines that could help, but the job still required many people to execute.

As they were getting ready to remove one of the engines, an alarm sounded throughout the base. A voice came over the loudspeaker announcing that there was an escaped patient from the base hospital.

Mike looked out the hangar doors to see MPs trying to catch the person that had escaped. It was weird that they would announce something like that, considering the hospital wasn't meant to hold loony tunes and psychotics. It was a basic infirmary limited to treating the common ailments on base.

Pete joined Mike at the hangar doors to watch the scenario playing out in front of them. The escapee, in just his underwear, was running away from the hospital towards the barracks. He was moving at an incredible speed. He was so fast that the MPs were having to use vehicles to keep up.

Every so often, the escapee would stop to attack an airman, tackling them to the ground and biting them. Mike couldn't be sure, but a couple of times he swore when he saw the escapee get up, he was chewing on something.

"What the hell is that about? I didn't think we kept crazies on base?" Pete asked him.

"Me neither," Mike replied. "Oh shit, get ready. He's coming this way. Everyone, grab something to hit this guy with."

Everyone in the hanger grabbed any large tool they could find to use as a bludgeoning weapon. Luckily, in this kind of hanger, large tools were not hard to find.

Before the airmen needed to use their tools, the MPs circled the escapee. Mike could clearly see that the guy had red veins covering his body and had blood dripping from his chin.

"What in good heavens happened?" another mechanic said.

"I don't know," Pete whispered. It was obvious that this guy had gone off the deep end. He was staring at the MPs surrounding him. It was like he

couldn't form a proper thought, he was only functioning by instinct. At least that's what it looked like to Mike.

"Something isn't right about this," Mike said.

"Yeah, I see it too," Pete said.

Just then, Underwear Guy raced towards the nearest MP and tackled him to the ground. Mike watched in horror as he bit into the MP's throat and pulled away, tearing a huge chunk out of his neck. The MP screamed in agony as he watched his own blood spurting from his body.

Underwear Guy quickly chewed and swallowed the piece of flesh and went back for another bite. A second MP kicked Underwear Guy off the first MP and brought his rifle up. Before he could fire, Underwear Guy launched at him, knocking him to the ground and landing on top of him, ripping his throat out. Several people in the hanger started to vomit.

The other MPs quickly discharged their weapons. A total of six shots rang out, all landing in the chest of Underwear Guy, knocking him down. To the shock of everyone watching, he got back up.

Mike stood there in complete disbelief. "What the hell?"

Those who hadn't been throwing up in the hanger watched and heard Mike, but they couldn't respond. How could a man get shot six times in the chest and get back up? It wasn't possible. Nobody could withstand that kind of damage and get up.

They all continued to watch as another MP shot Underwear Guy in the head, dropping him like a sack of potatoes.

After all was said and done, Underwear Guy had bitten fifteen people, killing three of them. It was rumored that he wasn't deranged, he was eating.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan stood in shock. He didn't hear anything around him, nor did he see it. All he could see was his love, his life, lying dead in the front seat of his Mustang. Might as well just rip his heart out and put it on the seat next to her.

Revenge had consumed his thoughts right after he put her in the car, but revenge on whom? Who would pay for this heinous act?

Nobody. That's the conclusion he had come to, nobody. There was nobody he could fault for this, nobody to blame. All he was left with was an emptiness, a hollow feeling that ran deep to the pit of his soul. He had nothing left.

As a Force Recon Marine, there were many times he had needed that rage, needed that sense of revenge, to enact all sorts of horrible things on those who deserved it. He always had someone to take it out on, but not now. Now, there was nothing. Without his beloved April, he was just an empty shell. A lifeless void without meaning. At least that's how he felt.

Screams from inside the terminal broke him out of his thoughts. He turned his head to see three people biting others inside the airport. He didn't even think, just reacted. In a split second, he had found his revenge, and it was going to be cold.

He raced into the terminal, past the security guards that were running away from the noise. He ran down the long hallway towards the three monsters. They were bumbling about, randomly biting people. Dylan could instantly see these three were different than the one that had attacked April.

Their veins had popped out but they were green, and they were not fast like the red guy.

"Playtime," Dylan mumbled. He ran towards the three, went down like he was sliding into second base, and took the legs out from under the first one. It was a girl with jet black hair and tattoos.

"Stay down, goth bitch," Dylan roared.

A second green monster stumbled toward him, arms reaching out to grasp him, but Dylan easily stepped way. This one was male and dressed in farmer's overalls. As the farmer went past him, Dylan stuck his leg out and tripped him.

“Stay down Farmer Joe,” Dylan spat out.

The last one was heading towards him at a trot.

“Is that the fastest you can go?” Dylan tried to taunt him. “Damn, I killed your cousin outside and he was a lot faster than you, pokey!”

Pokey turned towards Dylan as he was talking but continued to turn in circles even after Dylan stopped moving and stopped talking.

“Ahh, you go by sound, I see?” Dylan said. Pokey stopped spinning and turned back to face Dylan. He sniffed the air and made a gurgling sound.

“Was that a roar? Pretty damn pathetic if you ask me,” Dylan said as he reached for Pokey’s head. Dylan grabbed him and pounded his head on the floor. He smashed it so hard that the back of Pokey’s head caved in and he stopped moving.

By this time, Goth Girl and Farmer Joe were back up. They had a bead on Dylan, but he was way too fast. He began playing with them, trying to learn as much as he could.

As Dylan played keep-away from the two, he was searching for something he could use as a weapon. He found an umbrella lying on the floor a little ways down the hallway.

He quietly went to the umbrella and picked it up. He wanted to see how much sound needed to be made before the green ones could track him.

Dylan quietly snuck up behind Goth Girl. The wind wasn’t a factor inside the terminal, so he figured if he stayed quiet, he could sneak up right behind her.

He was mere inches from her when he whispered in her ear, “Right behind you, bitch.”

Dylan took a step back and got ready. Goth Girl turned around and gurgled at him. Dylan rammed the umbrella right into her heart, sticking it out her back. Green goo oozed out of the wound, slowly soaking the umbrella but she just kept coming towards him.

Deciding to test his sound theory again, Dylan snuck away from her and focused on Farmer Joe. There was a briefcase sitting at Farmer Joe’s feet. Dylan quickly snuck up to Joe and picked up the briefcase. It made a slight grating sound against the floor as Dylan picked it up.

Joe easily heard this, turned around and sniffed, but Dylan wasn’t there. He had already moved in behind Joe and as Joe turned, Dylan swung the briefcase as hard as he could. It connected perfectly with the back of Joe’s neck, breaking it, and Joe dropped to the floor, dead.

“It’s just me and you now, Goth,” Dylan said loudly.

Goth Girl whirled around to face Dylan and started towards him, but she had slowed even more since he had first stabbed her with the umbrella. It was too easy for Dylan to play keep-away from her. He wanted to see if a heart wound would put these things down. He got his answer five minutes later when Goth Girl finally dropped to the floor, dead. She had never managed to get within five feet of him.

Dylan was starting to smile his evil ‘I got my revenge’ smile when two of the people that had been bitten rose up. Their veins had popped out and they were gurgling. Dylan was too busy playing with the first three to notice that the screams he had been hearing had come from the ones that had been bitten. He thought he was hearing other people in the terminal screaming as they were fleeing.

Like the last three, these two were green, and Dylan had no problem dispatching them. He broke the neck of the first and stabbed the second one with a tactical pen to the neck.

Dylan raced out of the airport and jumped into his Mustang. He floored it all the way back home, not stopping for stop signs or red lights. He had a stash of gear at his house. All through his career, he had been able to purchase certain items at unbelievable discounts.

Soon, he was decked out in full battle rattle and went to check the TV and radio. There was nothing about people changing, nothing about people eating other people. They just gabbed away, talking about the weather or the latest baseball game.

He went to check his phones and ham radio. The phone had no updates, but the ham radio was ablaze with people talking about The Changed. The radio chatter was so intense that Dylan couldn’t get a word out.

He went back to his phone and left a message with his team about what he had learned and how to kill the things.

Once that was done, he said a silent prayer for his teammates, wished his beloved Corps good luck, and ran out of the house. He had people to save.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan raced out of his house and back to his car. April was still in the car, or what was left of her was still there. If what he witnessed was true, she could change at any moment. He had witnessed two separate people turn into those things right in front of his own eyes. He decided he had to do something with her before that happened. He couldn't bear the thought of his beloved April becoming one of those 'things'.

There was only one thing he could do to ensure she never became one of the Changed. He eventually pulled his car to the side of the road, stepped out, and looked around. He was out of the city now in a more rural, wooded area and there was no traffic in sight. He had no time to deal with locals thinking he was murdering someone. He wanted to make sure some passersby could not see him doing what he was planning and call the cops.

The road was clear and he went around to the passenger side of the car. He opened it and April's limp body fell out with a thud. It shattered his heart to see her like this, but better to do what he needed than to let her turn.

He dragged her off the road and into the tree line. Tears were pouring from his face as he looked at her. She was everything to him, outside of the Corps. He had planned to give up his career for her. Visions of their future life passed through his head as he grabbed the knife from his tac vest.

It was a standard K-bar, sharp as a razor. He put the knife to the back of her head and hesitated. He fell to his knees and thought, 'Was this really the way?' Would she change into one of those things? She showed no signs of life, and her body had turned ice cold and ashen in color. She was gone, but he still asked himself 'What if?'

As he sat there, he suddenly noticed that April had started to change color. Her veins were turning green and her eyes were starting to move. He had his answer.

With a guttural scream, he plunged the knife into her head, ending anything that she might have become. Her eyes stopped moving and the green color slowly faded.

His head started to spin and a wave of nausea overcame him. Dylan vomited all over the grass they lay on. He looked at her one more time and

his very being crumbled into pieces.

“Why?” he said as he looked up. “Haven’t I been a faithful man? Haven’t I done what you have asked of me?”

Dylan looked back down at his beloved April. She was so pretty to him, even now. He could remember her smiling and with the sun shining on her hair. How she made the most normal of things seem special. His heart fell to his stomach and the knot in his throat tightened. He did not want to start crying, because if he did, he might never stop. He couldn’t hold back any longer as he embraced her for the last time.

With his face soaking wet from crying and snot running out of his nose, his heart turned cold. A black, icy rage gripped his heart, and he knew what he must do. These things had to die, all of them. He wouldn’t stop until the job was done.

Dylan made a quiet vow to his beloved April to avenge her death, he placed her gently on the ground, and headed back to the car. He grabbed the tire iron and started to dig a grave. It took a while, but he finally managed to give April a proper burial. He said goodbye one last time and returned to the car.

Dylan got in and looked at the blood-soaked passenger seat. It no longer fazed him. He was in a zone that only a special few would ever understand. He was a Force Recon Marine, and a killer. Hard as stone and as lethal as a bullet from a gun.

He closed the car door and sped off, leaving his future behind him. There were still people he cared about that needed saving. Gunning the old Mustang, he raced to his mom and dad’s house. They would have no clue what was going on, he was sure. They needed to be warned.

He raced the car down their long driveway and slid to a stop in front of the garage door. He saw his mom in the garden and his dad mowing the lawn.

“I knew it,” he mumbled to himself. “Mom, Dad, get into the house, now!” He had never ordered his parents to do anything, he had always been an obedient child. They looked at each other and then at Dylan.

“Guys, in the house, now. We need to talk,” he said again.

They slowly followed him into the house, taking their time, as older people were wont to do. Dylan was losing patience and barked at them to hurry. He didn’t have a lot of time.

“What the hell is so important?” his dad asked, looking over his son. Dylan still had blood on him from taking care of April.

“You two need to listen carefully,” Dylan started. He told them about the incident at the airport, leaving out the part about April. They would not take that news very well.

“I think you’ve been a Marine too long,” his mother said. “Have you been drinking?”

“No, I have not. You guys don’t believe me?” Dylan asked.

“Not really, son. Now tell us what is really going on,” his father demanded.

“Ok, fine. Watch this,” Dylan said as he went to the family computer. He opened a web browser and typed in a search. It was for the Duluth Canal Park webcam. It was positioned atop the Maritime Visitor Center and Museum and it overlooked the canal that the large ships passed through to get into the harbor. It also showed the lighthouse at the end of the pier and all the people walking along the pier.

Today’s view was different. No ships were passing through, but people were running around being chased by several other people. The ‘chasers’ were different colors and they were biting and eating people.

“Now do you believe me?” Dylan asked.

Dylan’s dad went and turned on the TV to a local news channel. The station was reporting about the weather or sports, everything but what was happening downtown.

“What the hell?” his dad asked.

“Media blackout,” Dylan responded. “It’s very typical, and something we used to do overseas. If the government doesn’t want something out, they will force the blackout.”

“How can they do that?” his mom asked.

“Mom, they are the United States government. They can do whatever they want,” Dylan told her.

For the first time since he got there, his parents showed real fear. He could see it in their eyes. His dad was always the stoic one, preferring calm, informed, decision making. Nothing ever rattled him. Right now, he was rattled.

“What do we do now, son?” his dad asked.

“Pack up your stuff, and get to the cabin,” he told them. They owned a small cabin near the Canadian border. It was very remote, with the nearest neighbor ten miles away.

“Pack up everything you will need to survive. Bring all your guns and ammo. After you leave here, don’t stop. Don’t stop for anything, not even the cops. You get there and you hole up. Defend yourselves against everyone and everything. Don’t trust anyone, because very soon it won’t be just these Changed that we have to worry about.”

“What do you mean by that?” his mom asked.

“Very soon, society will fall. The illusion of safety that America has right now will start to crumble. The curtain will drop and eventually reveal the true nature of people. Then we will also have to worry about regular citizens. Right now, you have time, but not much.”

“What are you going to do? Go get April and her family?” his mom asked.

“Mom, April is dead,” Dylan told her. White-faced shock spread across their faces and their mouths hit the floor. Dylan went on to tell them about the rest of the airport scene and the side of the road.

“This is her blood on me,” he finished telling them. “I won’t rest until all of these things are gone.”

“Son, you can’t do that. It’s too much,” his dad said.

“The hell I can’t,” Dylan barked back. His rage had returned and it turned him into the experienced soldier that he had never shown his parents before. “I will do whatever is necessary to protect you two and that means ending this scourge upon humanity.”

“What about April’s parents? Do they know?” his mom asked.

“No. They are my next stop. I’m going to send them to the cabin as well, so be expecting them,” Dylan said.

“How will we know if it’s them?” his dad asked.

“Here,” Dylan said as he produced a small, portable ham radio. “Use this radio and the frequencies programmed into it.”

He took a few moments to go over the radio with them and how to check the frequencies. “Check them at noon, 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm every day. If they are close, I will tell them to wait until they make contact with you before they approach.”

“Son, you don’t have to do this,” his dad said. “Come with us.”

“No, I have to do this for April,” Dylan said.

He hugged them both goodbye as blackness filled his heart.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Mike and Pete were stuck on base. The base was on full lockdown as part of the President's order to bring all Armed Services to full readiness. Only personnel assigned to essential services were allowed some freedom of movement.

As airplane mechanics, they were vital to the keeping planes in the air. Especially the C-17s. If the base was over-run, the plan was for the Globemasters to get them all out.

The fence line was manned by personnel, all armed with M4s. Makeshift towers at strategic points along the fence were built and occupied, each supporting an M2, affectionately called the 'Ma Deuce'. The base felt as ready as it could be.

"Any idea what the hell is going on?" Pete asked Mike. They were in the hanger, working hard to get the latest overhaul finished.

"No clue, but if Silly Putty put us on alert, then we need to be ready," Mike responded. Silly Putty is what he called the President because he thought the commander in chief didn't have much more than silly putty for a brain.

A few seconds later, an alarm rang out and gunfire erupted from the south fence line. It was nothing more than a chain link fence with razor wire at the top. It was a 'double wall' design, with a second fence ten yards inside the first, but it would do little to stop what was heading towards them.

Mike and Pete grabbed their weapons and scurried to the line. They watched in horror as what looked like all of North Charleston was headed towards them. Masses of people were running and stumbling in their direction. The bodies were still too far away to see much detail with the naked eye, but Mike and Pete could clearly see these were the Changed. They were all different, glowing colors.

"Looks like a Lite Brite convention from hell," Mike whispered. He was using a pair of binoculars and he could see some of the closer ones in greater detail. They all were covered in blood. Some had missing body parts, others had holes in their stomachs with their entrails hanging out.

“Give me those,” Pete said as he grabbed the binoculars. He gasped as he watched the group come at them. “Oh my god,” he breathed out.

The Ma Deuces were ear shattering, as they pounded the Changed relentlessly. The big .50 caliber bullets shredded anything they touched. Soon, a red mist was hanging over the group, but still they charged forward. They were now within three hundred yards of the wire, and the M4s of the soldiers in the watch towers joined the battle. A few watchtowers managed to get SAWs into the action, and the invading group was pushed back to three hundred and fifty yards.

“Making some headway,” Pete stammered as he loaded a fresh magazine. Behind him, he could hear the massive roar of a Globemaster spinning up.

“Think they’re getting ready to leave?” Pete asked.

“Don’t know. Maybe. Keep shooting,” Mike shouted back. Between the gunfire and the planes, it was getting really noisy. Mike did notice that the sounds of the planes starting up sent a renewed energy through the Changed. They doubled their efforts and continued their charge.

As they approached the two hundred yard mark, Mike could really pick his shots. He watched for a second as bullets continued to pound away as the mass of bodies. Some of the Changed would drop instantly, while others kept coming.

He continued to watch and noticed that the ones that dropped were due to head shots. Mike thought he had this figured out.

“Head shots only,” Mike screamed, but only those closest to him could hear. The small group they were in followed his instructions and started aiming for head shots. All of the Changed that took a round to the head dropped.

Mike got excited until he realized that headshots were extremely difficult on a moving target, especially on those red bastards. They were fast as hell and smaller framed. He noticed some of the Changed were blue and others were purple. The majority were mostly greens, but that portion of the group hadn’t made it to within four hundred yards of the fence line yet. The green ones bumbled about but were still bumbling straight towards them. The purple ones scared Mike. It looked like they were just as fast as the red ones, but they were massive in size. Their bodies screamed power.

“Pete, shoot the Barneys,” Mike screamed out.

“What?” Pete yelled back.

“The purple bastards, shoot the purple ones,” Mike yelled.

Pete looked around and quickly caught on. The hair on the back of his neck stood straight out and goose bumps covered his body. Pete could see what Mike was saying. The purple ones were huge and fast.

Pete started showering the nearest one with a full magazine. He had been spooked by the information that Mike had laid on him, indirectly. A torrent of bullets ripped through one of the purples, ripping its chest damn near in two. It kept coming forward but was slowing with every step. Soon, it dropped like a rock, unmoving.

“Chest shots will work, but it takes a ton to drop them,” Pete reported.

“I saw that, keep aiming for the heads,” Mike said.

Another warning alarm sounded, and gunfire started on the north wall. Mike turned to look and saw airmen running for the north wall.

“They’re getting around us,” Mike informed Pete. “We’re gonna lose the base.”

“Well, fart in a church. This ain’t good, man,” Pete said. “They got those Globes up yet?”

“Don’t know. I heard at least three start up,” Mike responded.

The south grouping had managed to get within one hundred yards of the outer fence before the first wave of air support arrived. It was an A-10 Warthog. It let loose with its massive chain guns, turning the leading edge of the south group into mist.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Pete yelled out over the din of battle. “We don’t have any of those here.”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Mike said as he continued to rain fire on the Changed. His rifle barrel was hot to the touch and starting to glow. “We’re in shit soup if we don’t get out of here soon.”

A loudspeaker blared as another wave of Warthogs rained fire on the mass of bodies. It was hard to hear, but it was a call to abandon the base.

“Every third man, get to the planes,” a voice screamed as it went by them. The body belonging to the voice was touching every third person to signify that they were to leave the line.

Another alarm, and the west wall lit up with gunfire. They were quickly being overrun, and soon would have no place to go but up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

The situation had turned desperate at the hospital. They had been inundated with people coming in with savage injuries. Massive numbers of people with bite marks, torn limbs, rips, and tears. It was ruthless and constant. They just kept coming in.

The EMTs were reporting that their ambulances were out of supplies and that the cops were being overrun. The gang battles had spilled out of Little Rock and into their part of town. Looting was rampant, as well as shootings.

The Arkansas National Guard was called out, but it was too little, too late. The ravages of the Changed had taken over and nothing could stop them. Lucy heard stories about changed people being shot, and they kept coming. The Guard had tried to establish order by enacting a curfew that went into effect immediately, but that didn't work. Looters were out in force and didn't listen to any sort of authority figure. The Changed, as some had started calling them, just rampaged through Little Rock like it was a Sunday morning brunch.

Not long after it all started, people began to change in the ER. Screams of agony filled the hallways and several hospital staff succumbed to the change after they were bitten by patients. Staff were bitten, torn up and eaten as the patients they were trying to treat turned on them. It was gruesome and unending. After that, anyone coming in with bite marks was escorted to the cafeteria, under armed guard. They were quarantined there with no explanation. Shouts of anger turned to screams of pain as some started to change. Others in the cafeteria, that hadn't changed, screamed in horror as they watched what was happening to the ones around them.

Lucy was working on hour twenty-five without a break. She was more than exhausted. Her nerves were fried and all she wanted was for the chaos to end. Greg had come down from Oncology to help in the ER, where it was all hands-on deck.

"Greg, I can't do this anymore. Twenty-five hours without a break," she mumbled at him.

"It's getting worse," Greg replied. "A cop just told me that the Changed are closing in on the university in Little Rock. If they get there, then

the hospital in Little Rock will be completely swamped. They are close to filling all beds now and there is no end in sight.”

“We need to get out of here,” Lucy stammered. She was beyond the point of caring about anything other than a pillow.

“I know,” Greg said, shocking Lucy awake. In the past, Greg had never spoken a word about giving up on a patient, so for him to do it now meant things were getting bad.

“There have been no orders yet coming from on high about all emergency services personnel being mandated to report in, but it’s coming,” Greg warned her. “We need to get out before we can’t. Do you have a place to lay low?”

“Yes, my sister’s place. It’s a farm that’s pretty remote. We could go there,” she answered. “How do we get out without anyone noticing? I’m sure the higher ups won’t like us bailing like this.”

“Get what you need and meet me on the back side of the hospital. I’ll figure out how to get us out of here,” he told her.

With that, they both headed to their offices. Lucy grabbed everything she thought they would need. She had her pistol with her and she still carried a backpack. It was a habit formed from her college days.

She knew they need to swing by her apartment before they headed to her sister’s farm, so clothing and food she could grab there, but medical supplies would come in handy. She grabbed her stethoscope, some medical journals and books, jammed them in her bag and left her office.

She had to pass both the cafeteria and the pharmacy before getting to the back door. Luckily for her the cafeteria was first, so she could tell anyone who saw her she was headed to the pharmacy.

She started her journey along the corridors of the hospital, trying to appear as if she was on a mission. She was on edge because she was taking off, so every person she passed, she imagined them stopping her and questioning her on her destination. Paranoia was starting to set in after so many hours of sleep deprivation.

Lucy finally made it to the cafeteria, and it was a disaster. Staff were shoving against the cafeteria doors, trying to get them shut after loading in the last batch of bite victims. Changed ones were pushing back, making it almost impossible for the staff to close the doors. Blood was all over the floor, making it slippery and hard for anyone to gain traction to keep the doors shut.

Lucy could see it was a losing battle and picked up her pace. The Changed were going to storm out of the cafeteria any minute.

People called out to her for help but she kept walking. Lucy turned a corner and started to hustle. The pharmacy was just ahead, and she was quickly running out of time. She made it to the pharmacy and told the pharmacist what she was looking for. Antibiotics were top on her list, followed by pain killers.

“Dr. Bailey, you know you need a script to take all of this out. I don’t care how bad it is in the ER,” the pharmacist told her.

“Jim, I don’t have time to write four hundred scripts. I need those meds now!” she hollered back at him. She could hear the people in the cafeteria, and they were about to lose control.

“Dr. Bailey, I told you—” the pharmacist was cut off by shrill screaming from the cafeteria. The Changed had made it out.

“Jim, run!” Lucy yelled at him and took off for the back door. Jim never made it more than three steps out of the pharmacy before a couple of Reds charged him. As Lucy opened the back door, she had a thought ‘I don’t have to be faster than them, just faster than you’.

She ran out the back door right into Greg’s arms. She didn’t realize it was him and started thrashing about.

“Lucy, it’s me,” Greg told her. “Stop hitting me.”

Breathless and sweaty, Lucy finally stopped and looked at Greg. A tear dropped from her eye and she quickly wiped it away. She was a tough broad, and she had to act like it.

“Let’s go. We need to go by my apartment first. I have supplies there,” Lucy told him. She quickly ended their embrace and headed out.

She was on guard, due to the Changed escaping from the cafeteria, and it was a good thing. She got to the corner and stopped. Peeking around the corner, she could see National Guard troops cordoning off the hospital. There was no way they were going to get to her car and drive out. They had to go on foot.

Her apartment was only a couple of miles away, but in these conditions, it might as well be in the next county.

“Bad news, Greg. They’re locking down the hospital. We have to go on foot,” she whispered to him.

“Wonderful. Lead the way,” he said.

Lucy took them on a southerly route through the forest behind the hospital. They had barely made it into the trees when a couple of soldiers came around the back of the building.

“We can stay hidden in the trees for most of the way but we will have to cross a couple of roads. One of them will be in front of a Walmart,” Lucy told him. “We need to stay together. Don’t get separated.”

“I’m on you like glue,” Greg said, and Lucy chuckled a bit at that. Fine time to have gutter thoughts, Lucy thought to herself.

They made their way south through the trees until they came upon the first road crossing. Lucy looked left and Greg looked right. Greg briefly wondered if that was because of the side of the bed they would sleep on. Fine time to be thinking about beds, he thought to himself.

“Clear,” they said at the same time and bolted across the road. They were in sync with each other, not even having to talk before acting. Fine time to be thinking about sex, they both thought at the same time.

Running through the woods may seem all fine and dandy when you’re not doing it, but late evening with people looking to eat you makes it a bit difficult. They both were getting scratched by thorns, tree limbs whipped in their faces, and dirt crammed into their shoes. It was not fun.

“I need to stop,” Greg said. He had somehow gotten a cut on his forehead, and it was bleeding.

“Let me look at that,” Lucy said. She carefully examined him in the fading light, trying to get a clear idea of how bad it was. Greg grabbed his cell phone to use the flashlight option, but Lucy stopped him cold.

“Do you want everyone to find us?” she whispered. “That light will attract anyone close to us.”

“Sorry,” he said.

She continued to look the wound over and determined that it wasn’t too serious, but a good cleaning and a bandage would help.

“Did you grab any supplies before you left?” Lucy asked him.

“No, should I have?” Greg asked. He may have been a brilliant doctor and was incredibly good looking, but he had a lot to learn about being in an apocalypse.

“Yes, you should have,” she glared at him. “Nothing we can do about it until we get to my apartment.”

Moving on, Lucy led them through the woods and across each road crossing until they reached the road with the Walmart. They stopped in a

deep ditch to check on the situation in front of them. The road in front of them was a busier street with traffic lights in front of the store entrances. Lucy's apartment was on the back side of the Wal-Mart, but there was a wooden privacy fence in between the two buildings. It was tall and not easily climbed.

The Walmart parking lot was packed full of shoppers and looters. Lucy couldn't see any of the Changed around, but that didn't mean they weren't there. It sounded like the shoppers were battling with the looters, and the score was tied.

"If we skirt around the store and stay in the shadows, we might make it," Lucy told him. "My apartment is on the other side of that fence."

Greg just nodded and surveyed the scene. He was trying to get his mind in the right place for this. He chose to be a doctor because military life wasn't for him. Bad choice on his part, he thought. He didn't want to upset Lucy any more than he already had, as he was still smarting from the glare she had given him earlier.

"Lucy," he whispered. "That might not work. I just saw flashes of light from the darkness where you wanted to go. It looked like cell phones coming to life and blinking back out."

"Good boy," she said as she patted his head. "You're learning. Ok, all we can do is either go the way I first said, or straight through the mess in the parking lot. It's getting dark, so we might not see anyone before we run into them if we skirt around."

"The mess might not be any good either. Looks like it's starting to get rough," Greg said. "I'm thinking we go around."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly. There are no good options here," Lucy said. Together, they approached the road and made it across. They were ten feet past the road when they came upon a green one. It stumbled towards them, arms outstretched. Gurgling, it tried to reach them but wasn't nearly fast enough.

With a start, Lucy and Greg both switched direction and headed for the parking lot.

"The mess it is," Lucy breathed out. The green one had startled both of them, but other than a small gasp, they managed to hold themselves together.

They trotted to the parking lot and made as wide a berth around the fray as they could. Everyone seemed too busy with the fight they were in to

notice them. They made it to the side of the Walmart building and hightailed it to the fence.

Greg put his hands out with his fingers laced together, in a clear sign that he was going to boost Lucy over the fence. She stuck her foot in his hands and he lifted her up. She quickly scanned the area behind the fence, saw it was clear and jumped over.

Greg, after helping Lucy, grabbed a dumpster from behind the store, wheeled it over to the fence and climbed up. Just as he was clearing the top of the fence, gunfire rang out from somewhere behind him and bullets blasted holes through the wood fence close to his feet. He finished climbing over and both of them ran to Lucy's apartment building. They were inside before anyone could see them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE WHITE HOUSE

President Ford sat at his desk in the Oval Office. He was about to address the nation. Indecision and ineptitude had further pushed the situation to the edge of collapse.

The cameraman gave him his cues and he started speaking. In the room with him was the Vice President, Secretary of State, Speaker of the House, and most of the other cabinet members. Ford had already told the Vice President he was to stay at his side through the duration of the crisis.

“Fellow Americans. Friends. The last few weeks have proven difficult. We are under duress from an unknown assailant. Many lives have been lost, and while we mourn for our friends and family, we must strive to do better.”

“The massacre at Charleston, which is still ongoing, and that many of you have heard about, is unwarranted and uncalled for. These ‘Changed’ people are still humans. We must find a way to bring them back. I have called for a cease fire from all military forces currently engaged there. To those on that base, lay down your weapons and proceed to engage with our fellow Americans through peaceful talks.”

“With that said, I encourage you to stay in your homes. If you happen to come across a ‘Changed’ individual, it our recommendation that you leave it alone. If you do not provoke them, they will simply wander off and leave you alone.”

“I have met with the great Governors of our country to institute a nationwide shut down of everything except essential services. Watch your local news channels for further information regarding that. Furthermore, all emergency services personnel will be required to report for work in the coming days. This is mandatory, as social unrest, along with the Changed, make it imperative that all emergency essential services remain available. Many National Guard members throughout the country have already been implementing this measure, and I fully support such a move.”

“I have, just today, signed an executive order halting the Posse Comitatus Act. For those of you who are not familiar with the act, the Posse Act, for short, forbids the United States military from acting as policemen. In short, all military forces will be allowed, along with Homeland Security, to act in

any manner they deem fit for the situation. This will allow our professionals to regain order and end this situation, quickly and peacefully.”

“For those who do not feel safe in their own homes, FEMA will be instituting ‘Safe Zones’. These will be camps set up that anyone can go to for protection, food, water, and medical services. I cannot stress enough, the importance of these camps. There are many Americans who don’t have a home. They will need these camps to survive.”

“For anyone choosing to go to a camp, you will be issued a ‘safe code’, which will allow you passage into said camps. If anyone is caught in a camp, without a code, they will be arrested and charges will be filed.”

“Looting and riots have been a mainstay in our country for months. It is time for that to end. I have signed an executive order giving the right to any police officials or military personnel, to use lethal force at their discretion. I know this will be met with varied degrees of acceptance, but we must come together, as a people, for the betterment of our society.”

“Lastly, with the suspension of the Posse Comitatus Act, I have instituted Martial Law. It is with regret that I have ordered this. Too many people are taking liberties with some of our unfortunate citizens. I institute this with the full intention of removing it as soon as it is convenient. Curfews across the nation will now be set at 8 o’clock, p.m. You must be indoors by 8:00 pm, local time. Anyone outside after curfew will be detained until further arrangements can be made. If everyone just stays home, we can avoid any unpleasanties.”

“Our country’s finest scientists and doctors, along with the CDC, are working night and day to find a cure for this...situation. We must trust in them to lead us out. If you are one of the many that have been called to duty, know your country stands behind you, as you toil away in your labs. We know you can save us. While the rest of the country works to limit any damage, you must remain in your labs, to find a way out.”

“We may be facing dark times ahead, but as Americans, I know we will persevere through it all and come out better on the other side.”

With that, any TV screen that had the President on went blank, leaving many in the country scratching their heads and in the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Bob was beside himself. The President had truly lost his mind. He had only seen one of those monsters, but that didn't mean there weren't more of them. Bob had told Tina about Ted, and what he had gone through. These things were killers, to the nth degree. How could they hope to ever save any of them?

"Tina, what the hell was that?" Bob asked her. "I've seen one of these things. They're like a terminator. They can't be reasoned with or bought off. They don't stop, ever. The only solution is to kill them, all of them."

"The President has issued his orders. It's not right, by any means, but we are safe here. Let me do my work so we can get out of here," Tina said.

"What do you need to finish your work?" Bob asked.

"I wish it was that simple, I really do. It's not," Tina said, sighing deeply. "No one has been able to dissect one of those things, to even figure out what they are. Even then, it could take years before we figure anything out."

"Years?" Bob asked, exasperated at that thought.

"Yes. Years. We are all doing what we can, but the science behind it all is intensive. It may never be over," Tina told him.

It took Bob a few minutes to digest that little nugget. He didn't come to grips with it lightly. He got dizzy for a moment as the reality of their situation hit him. He wavered a bit before sitting on the bed in the room they had been given.

"Are you ok?" Tina said as she rushed over to him.

"No, I'm not. My head is swimming from what you just told me. I know I needed to hear it, but all the dreams we had for a family have just gone up in smoke. Everything we wanted out of life has changed," he told her, still dizzy. "We wanted children. How can we bring a child into this kind of world?"

"We can't," Tina said softly. She too had been thinking about all of this. She had forced it out of her mind earlier so she could focus on what was in front of her.

"Maybe in time we can, but not now. There is too much to get done, and it's become much too dangerous for a baby," Tina told him. She was trying to

be reassuring. Bob had wanted to have a son in the worst way.

Bob cleared his head and stood up. "I'm with you, baby. Whatever you need to get us out of this, I'm here."

"It's not just me, Bob. There are thousands of doctors and scientists researching this, but it's going to take time," she said. "I have to get to the lab. Wanna come?"

"Yeah, not in the mood for any more Sponge Bob DVD's right now," Bob chuckled. It seemed like everyone in the Institute had a moment when reality hit them, and they needed to have a moment to sit and think it through.

They walked to the lab together, hand in hand. When they got there, the lab was a beehive of activity. They walked in to find another doctor giddy with excitement.

"We verified that whatever this thing is, it is transmitted through the bite of one of the infected," the doctor said. "We think there's more, but we need a Changed to run tests on."

Tina was astounded that they had gotten that much information.

"Where did you get this?" Tina asked.

"The Institute for Global Health in Germany," the doctor said. "They actually caught one of the Changed."

"Have they figured anything else out?" Tina asked.

"Yes, they think it's a virus, something from nature. Could be an animal to human transmission, but they are not sure. It's hard to get a handle on it. The medical histories from patients are hard to come by because, well, they change before we know they have it," the doctor said.

"Does the CDC have anything new?" Tina probed further.

"No, they have nothing new. Figures it would be the Europeans to get answers first," he said.

"It's not a contest, doctor. There is no first place, just winning the race, together," Tina scolded him. Too many times, Tina had watched a young scientist lose focus by trying to be the first to find something or do something. The only race that mattered right now, was the race to find a cure.

"Very right, my apologies," he stammered out and went back to his station.

"Would it really help to have one of those things?" Harry asked, as he walked up behind them.

"Holy puckered butt, batman! You scared the hell out of me," Tina said as she regained her breath. "Warn someone before you walk up behind them."

“Sorry. Would it help?” Harry asked.

“Yes, it would. It would progress our research tenfold,” Tina replied.

“Well, let’s make that happen,” Bob blurted out.

“What do you mean ‘let’s’?” Tina grilled him.

“Exactly that,” Bob replied. “Harry told me earlier that they don’t have a medic here, so I volunteered to go with them if they need it.”

“Volunteered? To go out with those freaks outside?” Tina said, getting angry.

“Yes, they need help, and I can provide it,” Bob replied. He knew this argument would happen and was ready for it. “Besides, who is gonna be testing this Changed one after they get it here? You, that’s who. Helping them is no more dangerous than you working on a live Changed one. In fact, what you will be doing is more dangerous. I’ll be with a squad of Marines. What will protect you?”

Tina had nothing to counter that attack. She wasn’t prepared for Bob to be so well prepared.

“You’re right,” she meekly agreed. “Go and get one, and get your ass back here, mister,” she told him. “We need to find a cure, because this baby factory ain’t gonna be around forever.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bob said as he saluted her. He loved it when she was in ‘take charge’ mode.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Bob saddled up with the squad of Marines. In the days that followed their arrival at the Institute, the Marines had built a blockade in the entrance to the parking garage. Up-armored Humvees had been acquired in the event they needed to leave the facility and the entire garage had been turned into a motor pool for the Marines. They had enough trucks and Humvees to enact an escape with all the civilians currently inside the institute. One of the vehicles they were using today was an MRAP (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected), able to carry up to twelve people, but also had room for any Changed they brought back.

Bob was nestled in the back, four Marines with him. They were loaded with all sorts of weapons that made Bob drool. On top of the MRAP was the great equalizer, a Ma Deuce. It was fear inducing to the average human and would turn any Changed into mist.

They pulled out of the garage and turned right onto Broad Street. Another quick right brought them to Westlake Avenue. One block more and a left had them heading east towards Interstate 5. That was the destination. The thought was that many people had become stranded on the highway and maybe some of the Changed were there.

They didn't get far before observing the chaos the city had become. People were out in force, looting what stores they could and taking from other people. Bottled water was the big item people were after, followed by food and weapons. There were no Changed around, so they kept going.

"Doesn't look good," Bob mentioned.

"No. These stupid bastards don't even know what they need, they're just taking blindly because they can," Harry told him. He, along with Cpl. Miller, Pvt. Faulk and Pvt. Jensen were the Marines chosen for this mission. They were 'Fire Squad One'. The squad had been newly formed this very day for the mission.

They got to Mercer Street and Fairview Avenue before they hit real resistance. Gangs had taken over the corner there and were only allowing people to pass after paying a toll. The toll was money or girls. The Marines stopped a block away and surveyed the scene.

“Jensen, get on the Deuce and let’s show them how the big boys play,” Miller told him. Jensen hopped into the turret and readied the weapon. From a block away, the gang members could hear the M2 getting ready for action.

“Look, the army boys want to play,” a gang member said. He was dressed in gang colors with a bandana on his head. He flashed some sort of sign with his hands and stared at the MRAP. He motioned for his buddies to aim at the vehicle.

“One more inch and we open up!” he shouted at them.

“He must be the leader,” Miller said. He brought a microphone up to his mouth and flipped a switch for the loudspeaker.

“This is Marine Fire Squad One. You are ordered to surrender your weapons and lay face down on the pavement. Any hostile act will be met with lethal force.”

The gang leader just laughed and ordered his men to open fire at the Marines. A barrage of bullets hit the MRAP and bounced off. Miller just sat in the passenger seat and laughed.

He hit the transmit button so the gang could hear him talk to Jensen.

“Lay a warning shot at their feet,” Miller told Jensen. .50 caliber rounds tore up the pavement three feet in front of the gang.

“I would suggest not firing on us again,” Miller warned. As soon as he finished saying that gang members flanked each side of the MRAP, trying to remove the Marines from the vehicle. Jensen saw what was coming and started firing down the left side of the MRAP, shredding the gang members into mist.

The right side of the vehicle was not as lucky. The gang members managed to reach the vehicle and tried to get in. The locked doors would not open, so they resorted to bashing the windows with the stocks of their weapons. From the passenger side seat, Miller just smiled at them as Faulk stuck his M4 out of the gun port and cut them down.

“Not too bright, are ya?” Miller said over the speaker. “Jensen, finish this,” Miller said over the radio.

Jensen once again opened up with the M2 and laid waste to everyone except the leader. He just stood there with his mouth hanging open. Miller was about to tell him to give it up, when he was tackled by a Changed. This one was purple and moved extremely fast. The gang leader was torn to ribbons in mere seconds. Everyone in the MRAP could only stare as they

watched the purple Changed devour its prey. Jensen lost his breakfast as the purple Changed smiled while eating.

"It's enjoying it," Bob said from the back. He was transfixed by what he was witnessing, wondering if his friend, Ted, back at the hospital was doing the same thing.

"Take it out!" Miller ordered. Every gun in the vehicle shot at the purple thing. Jensen pulled himself together enough to fire a burst into its head. It fell to the ground and ceased moving.

"Is it dead?" Jensen asked.

"I don't know, but we don't have time to find out," Miller said as he looked down the side street. A large grouping of Changed was heading towards them.

"Where the hell did they come from?" Faulk asked, as he readied his weapon.

"Don't know," Miller replied. "Must have been the noise that attracted them. Let's see what we can learn. Take out that blue one in front." The group was two hundred yards away from them and coming fast.

Faulk fired a single shot at the blue, hitting it in the stomach. It didn't even flinch.

"Again," Miller ordered. Faulk fired three rounds this time, each hitting dead center in the blue's chest. The blue slowed a bit, and then kept coming.

"Head shot," Miller said, sounding a little more worried.

Faulk aimed and fired, placing the round in the middle of the blue's forehead. Its legs went limp and it fell face first into the pavement.

"Head shots will take them down," Miller said. "Dawson, get us out of here." The group was now less than a hundred yards away and Miller saw no reason to stay any longer.

Dawson put the vehicle in gear and headed away from the group, only to drive straight into another one. Bodies bounced off the MRAP like ping pong balls. They could hear and feel each one that hit them, and the ones they ran over. The MRAP moved through the group like a hot knife through butter.

"Too many more and we will get bogged down," Dawson shouted. "We need an exit."

Miller searched through the front windshield and found an out for them.

"Jump the curb and head for the interstate," he yelled.

The group was getting bigger, making it tougher for the MRAP to move. There was a small window of opportunity on their right. The Changed

weren't as thick there, and if the MRAP could punch through, it was a short off-road run to the freeway.

"Everyone, start shooting them. We can double back to pick up some of the dead ones after we lose them on the freeway," Miller ordered.

The M2 opened up with a blistering rate of fire, creating a multicolored mist in the air.

"We need some of them in one piece, Jensen," Miller shouted.

Jensen eased back off the Ma Deuce, and let the others pick off the Changed with single shots.

Dawson got through the group, bounced over the curb and hit the gas. He launched the MRAP through the grass, up an incline and onto the freeway.

"Slow down a bit," Miller told him.

"Slow down?" Dawson asked, looking a little pale from the fight.

"Yes, we want them to follow us, so we can clear out the area," Miller told him.

Dawson slowed enough so the group of Changed could follow them. The squad lead the Changed over a mile away before Miller told Dawson to lose them. Dawson was more than willing to floor it and get away from those things.

They made their way in a circuitous route back to the site of the original ambush. Bodies were strewn about for several blocks. Each body was covered in a sheen of multi-colored blood. The gang members that had been killed by the Marines were torn apart and half eaten by the Changed.

"There," Miller said, pointing towards a pile of Changed bodies. "We can get our samples there." The MRAP slowed and came to a stop near the pile.

"Faulk, you're with me. Jensen, stay on that .50 cal while we're out of the vehicle. Shred anything that comes close," Miller ordered. He and Faulk exited the vehicle and walked up to the pile of bodies, weapons at the ready. They were taking no chances. Bob even had a weapon pointing out of the MRAP.

"Get this one," Miller said, pointing at a green one that wasn't too shot up. Faulk shouldered his M4 and went to pick up the green one. It was laying on top of the pile, so it should have been easy to pick it up, but it was heavy as hell.

"What the hell?" Faulk said. The body looked like a twenty something girl, very slim and not that heavy. "This body weighs a ton."

Miller came over to lend a hand and was about to warn Faulk when the green girl turned her head and bit into Faulk's leg.

He roared in pain as the girl bit all the way through his calf, taking out a large chunk of flesh. She spit it out and turned her head from side to side, searching for the noise behind her. Miller was walking up to her and his foot falls were making the slightest of noises.

It was like a pin dropping compared to the blast from Miller's rifle. He shot her in the head and ran for Faulk. He caught Faulk before he hit the ground.

"Ahhh shit," Faulk said through gritted teeth. "This can't be good."

Bob jumped out of the vehicle and raced over to Faulk. He looked at Miller and shook his head.

"From what I've seen, he is going to change. It's only a matter of time," Bob said. He pulled Miller away and whispered to him, "We can end it for him now."

"You ain't ending anything. Patch me up, tie me up, and bring me back. We need the info you can get from me," Faulk said.

"Do it," ordered Miller.

Bob reached into his pack and retrieved the first aid kit. Faulk howled in pain as Bob applied a package of quick clot to the bite to stop the bleeding. Bob wrapped the wound as best he could and looked at Miller.

"I don't know how long before we lose him," Bob said.

"Then we'd better hurry," Miller said. "Grab a couple of dead ones and let's get out of here."

They loaded the bodies and Faulk into the MRAP and started back towards the institute. They were stopped several blocks away by another group of gang members. The gang was pointing rifles at them and had vehicles coming towards them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

The east fence line now had Changed running towards it. Mike, Pete and all the other personnel were surrounded with only one avenue of escape. The Warthogs were doing an admirable job, but the numbers of Changed were just too many. The pilots overhead had radioed in that the group had surrounded the base and were stretched out just over a mile deep.

Bodies were starting to stack up outside the wire to the point that it would make the fence line a moot point. The Changed would soon be able to just walk over it. There was the ten yard 'no man's land' between the two fences, but that would fill up quickly, not to mention the inner fences would come down before the changed could just walk over the dead piled in the center.

Mike watched as several more jets flew overhead and made some space between the Changed and the base. Fire erupted as the jets dropped napalm and Mike watched in horror as the Changed kept coming even though they were burning from the deadly bombs. They would walk a few feet and then drop. Then they would continue towards the fence, crawling on the ground until finally succumbing.

"For all that is holy, what the hell is this?" Mike whispered. His M4 had long ago burned out, the barrel glowing cherry red. He was down to his sidearm because there was no time to go get another rifle.

Pete still had some life left in his rifle, but the glow of the barrel was starting to brighten.

"Pete, look out!" Mike screamed.

Pete turned his head to see a red one bolt through the onslaught of bullets and launch himself at the fence. Pete turned his weapon and dispatched it just in time.

"Holy shit, that's finding religion," Pete stammered. The red Changed was right in front of Pete, on the other side of the fence. The gurgling sound they had been hearing from the group had turned into a full-throated battle cry.

Mike looked around to see many of the other airmen holding rifles that had burned out. If it wasn't for the flyboys, the base would have been lost

long ago.

“We’ve gotta get out of here,” Mike said to Pete. Pete just looked at him, and a lifetime of brotherhood kicked in. They knew what they had to do.

At the same time, they both left their post and ran like hell to the nearest Globemaster. They had no idea how they were going to get on the plane, as the base had instituted the every third man rule. It turned out to be a non-issue as the loudspeaker gave the go ahead to abandon the base and for all remaining personnel to fall back to the planes.

They boarded the nearest plane and sat down. Immediately, the rear cargo door started to close, and the plane started to taxi to the runway. It wasn’t exactly normal procedure to taxi out while the door was closing, but the pilot was in a hurry.

“Must be getting worse out there,” Pete said.

Mike looked out the door as it was closing to see the south fence had been overrun. There were still airmen there, getting ripped to pieces by the Changed. Others that were watching started to vomit, seeing their fellow airmen being torn apart. Before the door fully closed, Mike could see Changed start to run for the plane. They had only moments before it would be too late for them. ~~If a changed one got too close to the engines, they could get sucked in and the result would be an engine blowing up.~~ (see comment – I would delete this sentence)

The door fully closed and Mike felt the thrust of the engines as the pilot pushed the engines to max power. Soon he could feel the plane start its upward ascent and felt the landing gear lock in place. They were airborne.

Pete let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding and looked at Mike.

“What now?” Pete whispered to him.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know where we’re going,” Mike answered.

They looked at each other for a long time, listening to others in the cargo area. Much of the talk was about what they had just left behind. Pete overheard someone talking about the President. It sounded like the President had addressed the country.

Pete got up and walked over to the guy.

“Excuse me, did you say the President talked to the country?” Pete asked him.

“Yes, he did. He doesn’t want people to hurt these things. He thinks if we leave them alone, they will leave us alone. Can you believe that?” the guy responded.

“Actually, yeah, I can,” Pete said and went back to Mike and filled him in on what he had learned.

“Are you serious?” Mike asked.

“As a heart attack,” Pete said.

“We can’t stay, wherever we end up,” Mike whispered. “You have family that will need you.”

“I know, but you know what that means,” Pete glared at him. “I’m in if you are.”

“They don’t know what to do. I fear that they will end up killing more people than they will save, and I can’t be part of that. The government is going to fail us,” Mike said in a low voice. He wanted to make sure nobody could overhear them and learn what they were planning.

“Agreed. That bastard wasn’t one to uphold the Constitution very much anyway,” Pete whispered.

“Ok, when we land, we load up and get out. Go to your sister’s?” Mike asked.

“Yes. Branson may be a long drive, depending on where we land. We need to be ready,” Pete answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

Lucy and Greg made it to her apartment and crashed. The exhaustion they felt from the long hours at the hospital and the walk back had taken everything out of them. They fell onto the bed and were asleep before their heads even hit the pillows. Greg did remember to lock the door.

They awoke to complete darkness. Greg checked his phone to discover they had slept all through the day and into the night. It was just past 11:00 pm. He decided to let Lucy sleep a bit longer and went to take a shower. Removing his clothes, he looked in the mirror and noticed his facial hair had grown. He normally kept everything neat and trimmed, as he felt all professional doctors should. He immediately opened the medicine cabinet for a razor, then remembered he wasn't at his house.

"Well, its gonna grow out anyway," he mumbled to himself. Looking closer in the mirror, he could see that his shoulder had a nasty scratch. It wasn't too deep but looked like something had gouged a trough in his skin.

"Holy shit, I didn't think the bullets were that close," he said. Greg looked for and found some medical supplies and proceeded to disinfect the scratch, wincing slightly in pain. Once clean, he bandaged it and started on the wound on his forehead. It was a thin slice, not much longer than a couple of inches.

"With the amount of blood that was pouring out, I thought it would have been bigger," he said to himself.

"Head wounds bleed profusely," Lucy said behind him.

"Oh, you're awake?" Greg said as he tried to give her a kiss.

"Not yet, big guy. I haven't brushed my teeth in two days," she said reaching for her toothbrush.

Greg thought again about the kiss and decided that he wasn't about to chance that encounter. He turned on the shower and got the water steaming hot.

"Care to join me?" he asked.

"Not yet. I need to eat. I'll grab a shower after you," Lucy said.

While Greg was showering, Lucy went to the kitchen and looked for some food. She usually ate at the hospital or ate out, so she didn't have much.

Some ramen noodles, stale bread, and Doritos. The fridge had some Coke and beer in it.

“Well, that’s not good,” she said to herself. She pulled some Ramen noodles out and started the water to boil. She didn’t have much, but they needed to eat. By the time Greg got out of the shower, she was wolfing down the noodles.

“Mmm, Ramen, my favorite,” Greg said sarcastically.

Lucy shot him a look that said, ‘not now’, and took off for the bathroom.

“Guess mornings aren’t her thing,” he mumbled to himself. He ate his food until Lucy came back out. She greeted him with a kiss and scrounged for the coffee.

“Feeling better?” Greg asked.

“Yes, but I need my coffee,” Lucy said as she got the pot brewing.

“So, to your sister’s?” Greg asked, hoping to spark the conversation they had to have.

“Yes, but I don’t have my car, and it’s a long ass walk,” Lucy said impatiently. The coffee maker had a mind of its own. It knew she desperately needed coffee and was laughing at her while taking its own sweet time to brew the coffee. She got tired of waiting for it to finish, grabbed her mug and pulled the pot out, letting coffee splatter and sizzle on the hot plate. Pouring a cup, she quickly gulped down the hot liquid, sighing after she finished the first sip.

“I don’t have a car, I always rode my bike to work,” Greg said, envious of her cup of hot, black liquid.

Suddenly, both whipped their heads around to look at the wall between Lucy’s apartment and her neighbor’s. Loud gurgling noises could be heard coming through the wall.

“I have an idea,” Lucy said. She grabbed two kitchen knives, giving one to Greg and keeping the other one. They exited her apartment and walked to the neighbor’s door.

“This is my neighbor, Susan. She has a car and from the sounds of it, she won’t be needing it anymore,” Lucy said as she turned the doorknob. Slowly, she opened the door, trying to make as little noise as possible. She entered the apartment with Greg close on her heels.

They rounded the corner of the hallway to see Susan aimlessly stumbling through the living room, knocking over anything in her way. She had green veins protruding from her skin and cloudy eyes.

Greg sneezed, giving away any surprise attack they might have made. Susan made a beeline for them, as fast as a green one could, arms reaching out and mouth chomping. Her teeth clattered together, making a crunching sound.

Lucy wasted no time and attacked with fury. Susan had always looked down on Lucy, probably because Lucy was a smartass. Lucy wasn't going to enjoy this, but she wouldn't hate it either.

Lucy sidestepped the oncoming Susan and drove the knife deep into the back of Susan's head. Susan dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Greg stood in awe and wondered if he would ever get to a point where he didn't feel like he was disappointing Lucy.

Lucy withdrew the blade and wiped it off.

"Now we can go shopping. Susan was a hoarder, of sorts. She will have supplies, and..." Lucy said as she went to the small table near the door, grabbing a set of keys, "a car for us to borrow."

"Borrow?" Greg said.

"Yeah, we might return it one day," Lucy said with a giggle.

How could she giggle after what they had been through and what she had just done? Greg couldn't figure her out, which made her all the more desirable to him.

"You must teach me, oh great one," Greg said as he got down on his knees and bowed to her.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Lucy said, pulling on his arm to get him up.

"I've been trying to figure you out," Greg said, getting up. "How on earth you can go from the horror movie we were part of yesterday, to knifing your neighbor, to cracking jokes."

"Easy. No guilt, no regrets, no fear," she replied, as if it was the most natural thing to do. It never occurred to her that other people didn't see things that way.

"Those things will slow you down, make you second guess everything. Make a choice and move on. Susan was gone. Whatever that thing is, it wasn't her," Lucy added. The bells were starting to ring in Greg's head. He was starting to form a picture of who Lucy really was.

"Supplies," Lucy said, trying to get his attention back on track. "We're going to need water, food, any medical supplies we can find, and weapons. I

have my pistol, but that won't hold us for long. We need more."

They went through Susan's apartment, grabbing everything that might be of value. Some duffle bags, backpacks, food that would last them the duration of the drive, bottled water, several first aid kits and the car. Susan didn't believe in guns, so that was out of the question.

"I think I have an idea for weapons," Greg said. He told her his plan and she agreed. They would soon find out what kind of horror movie they were really living in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

Greg sat, peering through the windshield of the Jeep they had commandeered. He was looking at a small store that serviced hunters and hikers. Actually, that was what it was called, 'Hunters and Hikers'.

They had been sitting there for over an hour, watching to see if there was any activity around the place. Nothing was moving in or around the small mom and pop shop. It was an out of the way place that not many people knew about, on the outskirts of town.

"Looks clear," Greg said.

"Yeah, let's do it," Lucy said.

They exited the Jeep, locked it, and strode right for the entrance to the store. It was tucked back under several large trees that blocked the view once a person got close.

"How do we get in? They have to have an alarm," Lucy said.

"With the key," Greg said as he produced a key ring out of his pocket.

Lucy looked on in bewilderment.

"I know them. They were close friends of my parents before they died. They trusted me with a key to help keep an eye on the place," Greg told her. "They were trying to sell the store because they were getting older. Just couldn't keep up with it. They were trying to sell it lock, stock and barrel, all inventory included."

Lucy smiled at him as he opened the door and turned off the alarm. They entered the store, smelling the musty odors of a place that hadn't seen a human in some time. Mildew and dust motes infiltrated their noses, making Lucy sneeze violently.

"Good lord, we gotta be quick. This smell is going to kill me," Lucy said.

"You get hunting supplies, I'll get weapons," Greg said.

They split up to search the small store. Greg immediately went to the back storeroom because he knew that's where all the good stuff was kept. It was loaded with ammunition and several different styles of hunting rifles. The owner didn't want to have the guns on display. He was old fashioned in his thinking and believed that if someone wanted a weapon, they could ask.

Greg found several 10/22 rifles with extra magazines. These would help take down the Changed in a more rapid and safe fashion than using a knife. The 10/22s were semi-automatic weapons, meaning they shot one bullet for every trigger pull and reloaded themselves. If headshots were the best way to kill those monsters, then these would do nicely. He also found an old Springfield 30/30. It would help take down wild game if they ever needed to hunt for food.

Ammunition cases were few and far between, but he found a few that he loaded with rounds for both calibers. There were no pistols here, as the old man didn't feel a need to sell them in a hunting store.

Lucy was fairing slightly better, finding all sorts of equipment they could use. So far, she had started a pile near the front door that had a two-man tent, water purification tablets, metal mugs to use to boil water, campsite cookware, some additional clothing, ferro rods and other fire starting kits, and a lot more. She was starting to wonder if they would have enough room in the Jeep to hold all of this.

"Holy crap, that's a lot of stuff," Greg said as he came back into the main sales area.

"Hope we can fit it all in," Lucy said.

They took their time packing the Jeep but had to remove everything once and start over, playing their own form of Tetris in order to get it all in, but an hour later, everything was loaded.

"Looks like we're ready to go," Greg said as he was catching his breath. They had to keep their guard up constantly to watch for changed people and looters.

"Let's get going. Something feels off," Lucy warned.

"How so?" Greg asked as he got in the passenger seat.

"I feel like we're being watched," Lucy said. "Someone has been peeping at us for a while now, I can feel it."

"Let's get out of here," Greg said as Lucy started the Jeep. The engine turned over and the headlights popped on, illuminating several figures in front of them. They were holding knives and chains and were a bloody mess. Lucy could see that each one had bite marks and knew from the looks of them they weren't long for this world.

"Floor it," Greg yelled out as he leaned out the window. He brought the .22 rifle up and started to 'spray and pray'. It was enough to get the people in front of them to disperse so Lucy could drive away.

The roar of the engine and sounds of gunfire attracted a pack of Changed. Lucy was so concerned about getting away from the first group of guys that she didn't see what was coming up in front of them. A pack of Greens had walked into the road in front of the Jeep. Lucy swerved left, then right, almost launching Greg out the window.

"Warn a guy before you do that," Greg yelled.

"Shoot them," Lucy yelled back. The pack was growing, and other colors were getting involved. Red ones started chasing the Jeep, and with their enhanced speed, they were catching up. Lucy couldn't put the spurs to the Jeep for fear of damaging it by hitting all the Greens in front of her.

"Lucy, you gotta get us moving," Greg yelled from outside the window. He was still sitting on top of the door with his torso out the window. He had already burned through two magazines for the .22 and was reloading.

"Last mag," he shouted.

"Hang on," Lucy yelled as she hit the gas. "It's gonna get bumpy from here." The Jeep responded to her request for speed, barreling into several Greens. Lucy tried to avoid the majority of the bodies, but eventually was forced to hit some of them, as there were just too many blocking the road. The Jeep took some damage to the right front fender, bending the fender in to almost touch the tire. One more inch and it would be rubbing against it.

The Greens she hit bounced off the Jeep and hit the pavement with a thud. They got back up and started chasing the vehicle, as fast as they could bumble along. Soon they were out of the chase and wandered off to start looking for other fresh people to bite.

Lucy soon had open road in front of her and tried to push the gas pedal through the firewall. Greg maneuvered back inside and took a deep breath. He was ghost white and smelled of gunpowder. Close to hyperventilating, he closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing.

Lucy was in a little better shape, although she was freaked out. No matter how many times she was around those things, they were still creepy as hell and fear inducing. It was time to get to her sister's where, hopefully, it was safer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan pulled up to April's parents' house. He was trying to find a way to tell them he had killed their daughter and then figure out how to convince them to go to the cabin. It was going to be a hard sell, no matter how he sliced it.

He hopped out of the car with his head down, lost in thought, when something ran his ass over. It fell on top of him and before he knew it, he was battling April's dad. He was green and smelled like a sewer. It was something Dylan hadn't noticed with the other Changed. It was fairly common knowledge that when a human body dies, it releases all the waste that remains in the body. He thought it must be true for the Changed, as the smell coming from April's dad was rancid.

Dylan fought to get out from under April's dad, while doing his best to hold the chomping mouth away from him. He wiggled underneath, sliding to the left. It was working and he was almost free when April's mom joined the fray. Dylan could see her coming up on his left side and wiggled back to the right.

He figured his best bet was to stay underneath April's dad until April's mom became fully invested in the fight. She bumbled her way towards the dueling pair, tripping on the arm of April's father. She landed with a thud on top of him, adding more weight on Dylan.

It was getting hard to breath, so Dylan performed the only option he had left. He reached for the knife on his tac vest. It was located near his left shoulder. Once he got his left arm free, it was an easy reach to grab the knife. He was still holding April's dad at bay with his right arm as he took the knife in his left hand and plunged it into her dad's skull. April's dad immediately went limp against his body.

April's mom was still thrashing about trying to reach Dylan. She knew there was fresh prey, and that it was close. She managed to reach around her dead husband and grab on to Dylan's right arm. In response, Dylan grabbed her with his right hand and pulled her over April's father and down to the pavement. Once she was on the ground and no longer weighing him down,

Dylan took his left arm and managed to throw April's dad on top of her. He got to his knees and using the knife, ended April's mom.

Breathing hard from the fight, Dylan fell back to a seated position and stared at the two bodies. He had just wiped out the immediate family of the love of his life. Over the years, these two had become second parents to him. They had been invested in his life as much as his own parents. Now they lay in the driveway, smelling like shit, dead.

It was too much for Dylan to take. He let out a primal scream that emanated from his soul. It felt as if it came up from his toes and worked its way through his body to finally emerge from his mouth. It lasted for a full thirty seconds before he had to breathe, and that's when the tears came. They came all at once and it was ugly crying. Uncontrollable sobbing rocked his body as the events of the day caught up to him.

Fifteen minutes later, Dylan managed to get control of himself. He calmed his breathing and released all of the tension in his body. His eyes were closed, and he sat with his head down. One more cleansing breath, and he opened his eyes. He normally had bright blue eyes, but now, they were black. To anyone that looked at him, they were still blue, but inside his soul they were as black as night.

No longer would Dylan let his emotions take over. He was now a machine. A killing machine that would drive a stake through the heart of this new plague that had enveloped mankind.

He slowly rose and went inside the house. He found the dog lying on the living room floor. It was dead from blood loss. Taking no chances, Dylan drove his knife into its head and moved to the telephone.

He was always good at remembering numbers and he started making calls. He had decided to assemble a team made up of his old high school buddies, train them, and use them to protect innocent people and kill all those who had changed.

His first call was to Glenn Wilson. The last time Dylan had talked to him, Glenn had been working on getting his pilot's license.

"Hello?" Glenn answered the phone.

"Hey, flyboy," Dylan said. He didn't sound happy, nor sad, just even-keeled.

"Holy hell! The world goes to pot and look who calls. You know anything about what's going on?" Glenn asked.

"I know a fair amount. None of it good," Dylan replied.

“Man, everything is going down the crap hole. I heard about this girl that was ripped apart at the airport— “. He was cut off by Dylan.

“I was there. That was April,” Dylan said stoically.

“Oh shit. I’m sorry, man,” Glenn said.

“You still fly?” Dylan asked him.

“Sure thing. Need to go somewhere?” Glenn asked.

“Rotor wing as well?” Dylan asked.

“Yeah, what’re you thinking?” Glenn said.

“Get over to April’s parents’ house, we have work to do,” Dylan responded.

Within half an hour Glenn arrived and Dylan told him what he knew and what had happened at the airport. He showed Glenn the bodies of April’s parents, and then told him his plan.

“I’m in,” Glenn said. He was single and had no family left. No brothers or sisters, just long-lost relatives he saw once a year at Christmas.

Together they rounded up several more of their group from high school. The newly formed team consisted of men with varied skills that would all come in handy in this new world.

Scott Marshik had worked in the northern Minnesota mines for years and was skilled at using explosives. Tim Meyer was a licensed gunsmith. There wasn’t a weapon he couldn’t work on, and hopefully, build.

Randy Goetz was next. He was a mechanic, and a damned good one at that. People called him Gadget because he always had some sort of gadget that he could use to fix anything.

Robert Johnson, known as big Bob, was a former Army sharpshooter. It was said that he once shot a penny from seven hundred yards. He would neither confirm nor deny those rumors.

Bill Jorgensen was a jack of all trades. He was the high school quarterback, who at one time was known for his ability to attract all the girls, he now had his own business doing all sorts of odd jobs for people.

The last call was one that was tough for Dylan to make. His name was Larry Oldman, and he used to be Dylan’s best friend. They grew up together, joined the Marines together, went through boot camp together. The only ‘together’ that Dylan didn’t like was when Larry tried to ‘get together’ with April while Dylan was overseas. Yes, it was true that Dylan and April were not dating at the time, but you just don’t do that to a brother.

In the end Dylan relented and Glenn made the call. He told Larry to meet him at April's parents' house. Within the next hour, they all showed up except for Larry. During the call, Larry had expressed his reluctance to come over, because he felt it might be a trap. Things between Larry and the close-knit group had turned sour after his failed attempt to win over April while Dylan was gone.

Dylan got tired of waiting on Larry and started the little meeting.

"Hey guys, it's good to see you all again. I know the years have gone by, and we all have some catching up to do, but that needs to wait. You all have been watching TV and saw the President's speech, correct?" Dylan started. They all nodded in acknowledgement.

"Good. Here's the deal. What you saw and heard is true. It really is happening," Dylan told them. He continued to talk, telling them about the airport, April, and her parents. He had just finished telling them the story when a voice sounded from the back of the room.

"So, you killed her?" the voice asked. Dylan froze at the sound of the voice.

"Huh, you made it," Dylan said as he shot a glare towards the voice. "Guys, you remember Larry. I know I haven't forgotten him."

The temperature in the room cooled dramatically as tension filled the air. They all knew what had happened, but had always deferred to Dylan, because it was his place to seek retribution, not them.

The men watched as Dylan stared at Larry. Larry approached Dylan with anger in his heart. He had never gotten over April's rejection of him and blamed Dylan for it. Larry had not had a relationship with anyone since.

"You killed her?" Larry asked again, coming face to face with Dylan.

"Let's get something straight, right here and right now," Dylan seethed. "What I'm asking for transcends our past. Our past does not matter, because if we can't come together, we will all die. I am asking for help to save everyone we care about."

"The only thing I cared about, you killed today," Larry said, anger dripping from his every word.

"That may be, but she's gone, and so will a lot of other innocent people if we don't act. You remember those people, don't you, Larry?" Dylan egged him on. "You know, civilians that did nothing wrong, like those in Africa?"

Larry's eyes widened and flared with fury. He had no idea that Dylan knew about that.

"Don't you dare bring that up," Larry seethed. "That wasn't my fault."

"Even so, you know what happened. Wouldn't you like to redeem yourself? I'm sure your tormented soul would," Dylan hit back. He knew he had him.

Dylan watched as Larry's fist clenched tight and then relaxed. Larry turned, without saying a word, and sat down.

Dylan continued speaking to the group.

"April's parents had changed and I had no choice. They attacked me and I did what was necessary," Dylan told them. With that, he nodded to Glenn and Glenn removed the rug covering the bodies of April's parents. They were lying on the floor, where they were in plain view of everyone.

Gasps could be heard around the room as they all saw what would happen if they were ever bitten. The parents were still green, their veins still protruding, but they were starting to fade in color. Before, they had been a bright green, now they were more of a pea soup green.

"You can plainly see I'm not lying," Dylan said. His words were for everyone, but his eyes were glued to Larry. "If we don't do something, this is our fate."

"Do you have a plan?" Scott asked him.

"Yes, I do. We will use this house as our home base. We will train, and then go out into the world and protect those that are still alive, and kill every last one of these things," Dylan said, pointing to the bodies.

"Why here?" Tim asked.

"Because this property is huge. It has the resources and space we will need. Nobody in this room has anything close to what this place offers," Dylan said, then paused. "And April would want us to."

"I'm already in," Glenn told them. "Who else?"

They all looked at each other, nodded and stood up. They looked at Dylan and smiled.

"Wipe those smiles off your faces. You are now part of the Minnesota Changed Militia, and we do not smile. We will be killers, feared soldiers that the Changed will run from, and we will enjoy it," Dylan shouted.

All together they shouted back, "Ooh Rah!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

For the next several days Dylan put his men through their paces. He would never hope to make them seasoned Marines but wanted to give them enough skills to keep them alive.

They all went their separate ways after the meeting. They had been given orders to round up every vital piece of equipment or supplies they could. Every rifle they had, every last round of ammunition, every piece of food, anything that they would need to survive and carry out their mission.

Dylan took them through physical training, marksmanship, tactics, and team hierarchy on a daily basis.

Every day started off by reciting the mission of the group. “Defend the innocent, kill the Changed. Whatever it takes.”

The property, and all its buildings, would serve them well. It was a three hundred-acre spread with a large main house, a guest cabin down by the pond, and a massive pole building that housed all sorts of tools. It was there that Gadget found his Disneyland.

Once Dylan felt the men were ready, he assembled them together in the pole building.

“Guys, listen up. We’re going into Duluth today. I want to find out how the cops are doing and let them know we are here. I want to scope out the situation and gather intel. This is strictly a recon mission only, no cowboy shit,” Dylan told them, but was looking at Larry. “Group up into fire teams and let’s move!”

They all moved into the correct teams, falling in behind the leader of each fire team. Team one was Dylan, Glenn, Robert, and Bill. Team two was led by Larry, followed by Scott, Tim, and Randy. They all had radios for communication and had been taught how and when to use them.

After assembling in teams, they moved to the vehicles. They had two cargo conversion vans that they had “acquired” and once loaded up they headed to town.

The ride into town was adventurous, to say the least. Society was in crumbles, at least in Duluth. Duluth’s main industry was as a port city, along with tourism. Many people visited the city, coming via the ships or other

means of transportation. All the people in the city made it a prime target for both Changed and humans.

Gang violence had escalated overnight. It was becoming common knowledge that “safety in numbers” was more than a phrase. Recruitment for gangs had risen because people feared the Changed. One gang might offer protection, while others offered weapons. It really depended on which gang it was.

The city police were not in sight, at least in the part of the city the teams were currently traveling through. They were coming in from the northwest, on Observation Road. The police station, and the first stop they wanted to make, was located on the corner of West Michigan Street and South Third Avenue. Several city blocks lay between them and the station.

“Head’s up, stay sharp,” Dylan said over the radio. They had civilian CBs to use but only one per vehicle. Dylan knew the action would start to pick up and wanted everyone to be on alert.

No sooner had he said that than a group of Greens rounded a corner. Van One slowed as the guys opened the side door and they proceeded to shoot each of the Greens in a drive by fashion. Dylan was not driving, he also was not shooting, because he wanted his guys to get used to shooting while on the move. It was hard to practice that skill back at base, and there was no better time to learn than now.

“Van Two, pull into lead position,” Dylan said on the radio. He wanted each person to shoot while moving, so alternating the lead position was part of the plan.

Van Two roared in front of them and cut them off. Dylan knew it was Larry driving, and he was not happy with the decision.

“Van Two, watch your speed and angles,” Dylan barked over the radio.

“Aye, aye...captain,” Larry snarked back.

Dylan just shook his head, he knew Larry was trying to provoke him.

They were two blocks away from their destination when Dylan heard the commotion.

“Large crowd in front of the police station,” Larry reported back.

“Pull up in front of the door and block it off,” Dylan said. He watched as Larry barged his way through the crowd and pulled up in front of the police department doors. He had angled diagonally away from the building with the sliding door facing the station. Van One pulled in behind them and sealed the

blockade. People started pounding on the vans, some yelling obscenities and others begging for help.

Dylan jumped out, telling his crew to hold their ground and only fire if fired upon. Larry jumped out of Van Two and started to follow him.

“No, you stay here and keep these people from getting inside. Glenn, you’re with me,” Dylan barked out.

Larry was fuming but did as he was told. Dylan and Glenn walked inside and took a quick look around. The station was a zoo. Cops were running around with no sense of order. They all looked haggard, weary, and drained of energy.

“We’re a little busy for complaints right now,” a sergeant told him. “Come back later.” They hadn’t even made it to the front desk before they were told to leave.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know the station was closed,” Dylan barked.

“It’s not closed, we’re just busy,” the sergeant said. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week.

“I need to see the chief of police,” Dylan said.

“Don’t we all,” the sergeant replied. “Listen, we really don’t have time for any crap. If you stay in your homes, we will get to you as soon as we can.”

“That’s not why I’m here, now let me see the chief,” Dylan said.

The sergeant finally took a long look at Dylan and gave in. “Follow me,” he said.

They followed the sergeant as he walked towards the back of the station. A quick knock on a door and they were in.

“Two guys to see you, Chief,” the sergeant said.

If the sergeant looked tired, the chief looked damn near dead. Dark circles enveloped baggy, red eyes. Eyes screaming for sleep centered the pale face of a man that now looked twice his age.

“Dylan, is that you?” the chief asked.

“Yes, it’s me Coach,” Dylan responded. Dylan was looking into the eyes of their old football coach, John Walker. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks. How did you know I was here?” John asked him.

“April told me about it when you were elected,” Dylan told him.

“Ah, yes. April. How is she?” John asked.

“Dead,” Dylan responded. There was no emotion in his voice.

John looked down into his lap, mumbled some words, and made the sign of the cross.

"I'm sorry, Dylan. She was a right good girl," John said.

"Yes, she was," Dylan replied.

"What is it I can do for you?" John asked. "As you can see, we're swamped here."

"Maybe it's what can I do for you," Dylan said.

The chief just looked at him quizzically. He had no idea what Dylan was talking about.

"I am in a position to aid you and your men. You remember I was a Force Recon Marine, correct?" Dylan asked.

"Of course I do," John answered. "I helped you get there."

"Yes, you did," Dylan smirked as visions of the old coach yelling at him in the weight room came back. "I have assembled a team to help in this time of crisis. We are the Minnesota Changed Militia, MCM for short."

The Chief gave a literal sigh and his shoulders slumped in relief.

"You can? MCM?" John said. "I guess I'm too tired to fully grasp what you're saying. Don't get me wrong, having Marines here to help is a life saver, but I still don't follow."

"Coach, listen to me when I say that you need our help. We can help protect the honest citizens and kill the Changed," Dylan told him.

"We can't kill them, the president said it's against the law," John told him.

"That jackass doesn't know his head from a hooker," Dylan said. "These things can't be bargained with, or talked to, or reasoned with. There is only one option, and we have to act before it's too late." Dylan went on to tell him about the airport, leaving out the details of April's attack and subsequent death.

"That was you?" John asked.

"Yes, it was. I know how to stop these things and I know how to protect us all," Dylan responded. "What say you, Chief Walker?"

"I'm in. What do you want me to do?" John asked.

"First, my team needs some heavy-duty weapons. Was the Guard called out yet?" Dylan asked.

"Yes, they were overrun. What is left of them are heading for the Apostle Islands," John said. The Apostle Islands were a chain of islands off the northern coast of Wisconsin in Lake Superior.

“Good, we need to get to the armory and ‘borrow’ some weapons,” Dylan said while using air quotes around the term borrow. “Next thing. You need to start an emergency camp inside the harbor. Block it off any way you can. Use the water as a shield on your backside against the Changed and start building some walls on the front. That will help keep people protected.”

“Can these things swim?” John asked.

“I have no idea, but you can keep boats moving in the water to protect the people from the lake. Start setting up basic services inside the walls. Medical should be first,” Dylan told him. The chief was busy scratching down every word Dylan said. He was too tired to trust himself to remember.

“Get food and clothing down there. Set up water purification stations. Set up guard watches and get your people some sleep. If all else fails, you can use the ships to escape,” Dylan finished.

“How can I get ahold of you?” John asked.

“After we raid the armory, I will have a radio you can use to contact me. We will always be available to help you, but we will be busy killing the Changed and saving who we can,” Dylan said.

“I can’t thank you enough for this,” John told him as he extended his hand.

Dylan accepted the handshake and left the chief with one final warning. “You need to figure out a way to weed out people that have been infected BEFORE they get into the camp. It would do you no good to set up all of this and have a Changed get in through the front door.”

“How do I do that?” John asked.

“I don’t know, but you need to. Call the university and see if they have any info,” Dylan told him. He was referring to the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

“I’ll be back in a couple of days with that radio.” Dylan ended the handshake and walked out the door. There were still so many things left to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Chief Walker had been at it for more hours than he could count. He had followed the advice of Dylan and, with his staff, started to re-organize the harbor area to take in civilians. To anyone not familiar with life by a harbor, it might have looked crazy. Large sea-going vessels that were docked had been emptied of every container they had. The containers were moved and stacked to form a large barricade around one of the piers.

On the southwest side of the harbor, large channels had been carved out of the earth, providing ‘slips’ for the large container vessels to dock. Some of the ships were cargo holders, used for grains and ores mined and farmed in Minnesota. The remaining ground between the slips formed the piers that were used to off-load the ships. Most of the piers were full of parts, equipment and other items.

One pier was only partially finished and held absolutely nothing as it had not been put into use yet. It was very large, but not large enough to accommodate every person in the area. However, it was a start, and that was better than nothing.

“Keep stacking those containers. We need them to go all along the perimeter,” Chief Walker told his workers. He had recruited a ton of volunteers once the word got out about what was really happening.

“Where do you want medical set up?” a volunteer from the hospital asked him.

“One set up near the entrance for intake, and another in the middle of the platform,” Walker answered. He wanted everyone coming in checked while also having the ability to treat the people once they were inside. Medical may very well be the most important thing he established in the safe zone he was creating.

He had another idea that just hit him.

“Hey, get those container ships from over there,” he yelled at someone, pointing at the ships, “and get them parked in these two slips.” He wanted to have some form of escape if things got worse. Two men, part of the volunteers from the vessels docked at the port, ran to the ships. Soon, both ships were powering up to get into position.

“Do we know if these things can swim?” Walker shouted out. He had become accustomed to people staying close to him to act as runners and messengers if he ordered something.

“Not sure yet,” a meek voice responded. It was a teenage girl that looked vaguely familiar.

Walker turned to look and was surprised to see her.

“Who are you?” Walker asked.

“My name is Jill,” she said. “My mom was killed by one of those things.”

Walker’s heart melted at that point.

“Where’s your dad?” he asked.

“I don’t know, never met him,” she said.

“Any brothers or sisters? Any family at all?” he asked.

“Only one half-sister, but she never knew about me,” Jill said.

“Oh shit,” Walker let out.

“What?” Jill asked.

“Nothing,” he replied. John Walker had just pieced together why she looked familiar. She was April’s half-sister. He remembered hearing rumors about April’s dad not being completely faithful, and doing the quick math in his head, the age seemed about right. He had to take care of her, because Dylan would lose his mind if anything happened to her.

“Sweetheart, you stay with me, ok?” Walker said.

“Sure. You got any food?” Jill asked.

“Sure thing,” he said and led her to the chow line.

They got in line and Walker turned to look at the progress. Tents of all sizes had popped up everywhere. Medical was making an intake area near the entrance and setting up a trauma center near the middle. Water stations had been built and would filter the water from Lake Superior, providing safe drinking water for everyone in the safe zone. Food supplies were being collected from around the city and stored under the largest tents they could find. Anything that needed to be kept cold was put in freezer bags, then put into bigger bags which were tied to the platform and submerged in the water. It was the best they could do.

“What do you want to do with those ships?” a deputy asked him.

“Anchor them next to us on each side and use them for more space. Use them for storage, I don’t care. Think of it as more usable area for us,” Walker replied.

His internal gas tank was running on empty and there was still so much to do. They needed to start collecting people to bring them here, they had more food to find, more medical supplies to stockpile, more housing needs, and the biggest one of all..., he still needed to find a way to keep the Changed out of the safe zone. All this would be one big buffet if one of them got in, or someone changed after getting in.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

“They look pissed,” Bob said from the back seat. He was watching the gang in front of them. There were a large number of them, around a three-to-one ratio, Bob estimated. They all had scowls on their faces.

“Yep. Pissed as all hell,” Miller replied. “Dawson, start backing away from them. Get us turned around and headed back to the freeway.”

Dawson put the vehicle in reverse and backed away. The gang saw what they were doing and opened fire.

“Floor it!” Miller screamed. They were relatively safe in the MRAP, but there were just enough bad guys that Miller did not want to play with them. The Marines had several hundred yards of open space between them and the gang, so it gave Dawson enough time to back into a side street and get turned around.

He put the vehicle in drive and laid on the gas pedal. Pebbles shot out from under the tires as the Marines headed back to the interstate.

Bullets bounced off the vehicle as Jensen turned the turret to the rear and hit the trigger. Short, controlled bursts took out the lead car after several rounds went through the windshield and killed the driver. The car veered off to the left and hit a bus stop, stopping the car cold. The passengers in the car were catapulted through the windshield and into the air, tumbling to the ground.

“One down, two to go,” Jensen yelled.

Dawson was on somewhat familiar ground, as they had just spent time going through this section of town. He hit the curb with force, bouncing into the grass. Bob was launched into the air in the back seat, coming down hard on his left shoulder.

“Keep shooting,” Miller said as he turned to check on Bob. The dead Changed had also been sent airborne and had landed on Bob. He was frantically trying get away from them. His mouth was closed tight and his eyes were squeezed shut. He wanted nothing to do with any fluids that might be leaking out of the dead bodies.

Miller pulled the bodies off of Bob as best he could, but they were heavy as hell. Another huge bump as Dawson entered the freeway sent the bodies

flying again. Bob managed to roll out of the way while the dead were being tossed around.

“You ok? Any fluids get in you?” Miller barked out.

Bob couldn’t answer because there was ‘dead’ blood right by his mouth. Miller grabbed a wipe and cleaned Bob up, then grabbed the bottle of bleach they had brought with them just for this kind of incident. He wiped down every area on Bob that had come into contact with dead blood.

“You’re going to have to be restrained,” Miller told him.

“I know. Can’t take any chances,” Bob said. Miller tied him up and got back in the fight. While Miller was busy with Bob, Jensen had totaled another gang car, but two trucks had entered the fight now. There were still three vehicles after them.

“Gonna need a new barrel here really soon,” Jensen yelled. Luckily for them, they had an extra one. The barrel that Jensen was currently using was starting to glow.

“Dawson, lead us to the group of Changed that we just left. Maybe they can slow these guys down,” Miller shouted as he handed the new barrel and some heat resistant gloves to Jensen.

Jensen expertly removed the hot barrel and threaded the new one on. Miller handed him another ammo box and he inserted the belt of bullets. He slammed the top down, pulled the charging handle and once again started sending controlled bursts towards their attackers.

Jensen nailed the engine of one of the trucks just as they entered the group of Changed that had followed them earlier. The gang members in the truck, including the ones riding in the back, were eaten alive.

The second truck pulled up short of the Changed group, threw the truck in reverse and sped away. The only gang vehicle left was the car that had followed them. The men in that vehicle were either brave or really stupid. They tried to follow the MRAP into the group of Changed.

The MRAP cleared a path through the Changed, leaving a trail of broken bodies behind it. The gang car had hydraulic shocks that raised the car. It was able to clear the mess of bodies that the MRAP left behind.

“Trouble ahead,” Dawson shouted. Miller looked forward to see that traffic had come to a stop on the freeway creating a roadblock. The Marines had been so focused on the gang and the Changed, that they had almost forgotten about the people who were fleeing the city.

Miller looked over to the other lanes and saw they were clear. "Get to the other side," he shouted. Immediately, Dawson veered to the left and entered the other side of the freeway, going the wrong way. The car followed them and sped up. There were very few Changed on this side of the freeway, so it was now a true running gun battle.

Jensen continued to lob volleys of .50 caliber rounds at the car, but the driver was very good at swerving from side to side in order to avoid the bullets. Jensen saw an opportunity to outwit the driver. He faked like he was going to shoot left and fired to the right. He anticipated the car's driver to jink to that side and timed it perfectly for the rounds to be there right when the car was. The engine block was hit by a barrage of bullets, sending hot steam and fluids all over the road.

Jensen yelled out that was the last vehicle and Dawson started back towards the institute. They had dead bodies that needed to be looked at, one team member about to turn, and a civilian that might be infected. Time was not on their side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

“Say again, Fire Team One,” a voice said over the radio. Miller had been trying to radio the institute to tell them they were coming in hot. The running gun battle had attracted every Changed in the city. It was like they were crawling out of the woodwork.

“Fire Team One is five mikes out. Coming in hot,” Miller repeated.

“Roger. Five mikes and smoking. Science home is ready,” the voice said.

“Science home?” Bob asked.

“Yeah, sorry. Best we could come up with on short notice,” Miller said.

They were five minutes away from the institute and all Bob could think of was getting back to Tina. He had no idea if he was going to change or not and he wanted to see her one last time. Memories of their life together flooded his mind. How they met, how she looked at their wedding, on their honeymoon. It all came back to him in a flood so intense, he started to cry. He had visions in his head about how she would survive if he did change. Could she make it without him? Of course, she could, but how hard would that be?

He was startled out of his daze when gunfire erupted from the turret. Jensen was mowing down a large crowd of Changed, trying to get them a clear path to the parking garage. Miller was using the radio to coordinate fire from the institute.

Bob looked out a window to see the carnage. It was an absolute mess. Bodies were starting to stack up, with no end in sight. The Changed just kept coming.

“When I say hit it, floor it into the garage,” Miller told Dawson. Bob had become accustomed to Dawson’s driving, so it was no big deal when he felt the MRAP lurch forward as Dawson throttled up.

The engine roared as they sped into the garage. Dawson slammed on the brakes and stopped just in front of the elevator. More gunfire sounded as the rest of the Marines turned their attention to the attack happening outside the garage. In the enclosed space of the garage, the gunfire was deafening.

The back door was flung open and Tina started to climb in. She was dressed in a hazmat suit, complete with breathing apparatus and duct tape around her wrists and ankles.

“I wouldn’t do that, ma’am,” Jensen told her. “Faulk was bit, and he’s not doing so good.”

“I don’t care, where is my husband?” she screamed.

“Right here, babe,” Bob said. Tina turned ghost white when she saw he was restrained. “It’s just a precaution. I got some blood on me.”

“Did you inhale it? Swallow any? In your eyes?” she rattled off. She was frantic as Bob was removed from the vehicle.

“No, none got inside me, but we thought it best to be careful,” Bob answered. Tina desperately wanted to hug and kiss him, but she knew that they were right. Any contact with him might get her infected. As badly as she wanted to just be a wife right now, she had to be a scientist first.

“Get them all to decontamination right away,” Tina barked. “Take Bob to Holding Room Two after the decon.”

“Take Faulk to Holding Room One. Restrain him with chains,” Tina continued. Faulk looked at her like she was crazy.

“I know you’re scared, and it sounds like overkill, but we are going to do the best we can for you. Restraints are a precaution,” Tina assured him.

“It’s ok, Doc. I know what’s going to happen. Think of me as your man-sized lab rat,” he told her.

She smiled at him as they took him away and went over to Bob. Any physical contact was ruled out, so she walked next to him as they transferred him to decon. She took over from there, ordering everyone out so Bob could have a little privacy.

“Ok mister, strip,” she ordered him.

“Sounds like a date to me,” Bob joked. He looked at Tina and saw no smile. She was in full doctor mode now, so he did what any husband would do when his wife gives orders, he obeyed.

Standing there, fully naked, Bob shuddered as water started pouring over him.

“Damn, that’s cold,” Bob yelled.

“Not as cold as I’m gonna be after you are cleared from infection,” Tina yelled back. She was caught between being worried and being pissed and right now, being pissed was winning.

“I told you not to go with them,” she continued. “But no, big man has to go out with the Marines and show how tough he is.” With that, the water stopped, and a bleach solution started spraying on him.

“Big man, with his big balls, is in big trouble. How tough are you now?” she ranted. Bob knew this was coming and stood there like a man and took it. He knew she was scared for him, and she was releasing her fear.

The bleach solution stopped and the water started again.

“Did you ever think about what would happen to me if something happened to you?” she yelled at him. Tears were starting to flow from her eyes and Bob knew she was about to break. This was what he had been waiting for. All their years of marriage had taught him to shut up until the right moment.

“Don’t you have anything to say, big man? Huh? No words of encouragement? No, ‘You’ll find someone else?’” she raged at him. The barrier finally broke when the water stopped. Her eyes opened wider and the tears flew freely. Bob was now free to run to her, hold her, and try to calm her down.

He went to her and said the only three words that were important. “I love you,” came out of his mouth and she flung herself into him. He held her tightly as she sobbed into his chest. Bob let her get it all out, not moving or saying anything until she was done.

She finally stopped crying and looked into his eyes.

“Are you ok now?” Bob asked.

“No, but I will get by. I swear, if you're infected, I’ll kill you,” she said with a slight grin.

After Bob was dressed in fresh clothing, they walked out of the decon area together and entered the lab. Tina quickly got to work. Both Faulk and Bob were going to undergo a battery of tests. Faulk was definitely going to change, and he showed no fear about it. He was at peace with what was going to happen to him.

The good thing, at least to Bob and Tina, was that they could compare Faulk’s tests to Bob’s. If they were similar, then Bob was in trouble.

Tina ordered blood tests, urine tests and collected fecal matter samples. A lumbar puncture was performed on both, x-rays were taken, CT scans, even an MRI. Every test she could think of, because they had almost zero knowledge of this infection or disease.

As the tests were being run, things outside the institute were getting dicey. The building was now surrounded by Changed. They were at least a block deep all around the institute. The Marines sat observing in horror as they tried to piece together what the various colors might represent. Nothing made

sense, other than the vibe they felt coming from the Changed. Rage. Each and every one of them was full of rage. The Marines on the roof could see it in their eyes. Every last one of them wanted to kill, except the green ones. They just milled about like they were looking for something.

One Marine witnessed a dog try to run past the crowd, but it was caught by a green one. The Greener bit into the dog with such force that they could hear the dog yelp over the din of the crowd. As soon as the green one bit the dog, he dropped it and walked away. Several other Changed ran over to the dog, sniffed, and let it go. The dog fell to the ground on its side, convulsed a few times and then lay still.

Some of the Marines started shooting at the crowd, but that only brought more in. The shooting was ordered to stop and an 'all quiet' was issued, much like on a submarine. The only noise that was allowed was the routine machine noise made by the building and the sounds of the frantically operating lab. Fortunately, the lab was deep inside the building and none of the noise reached the street.

They would eventually need to find a way to escape the building, but even more importantly, they needed to provide as much time as possible to the scientists doing the work.

The Marines placed a call to Naval Base Kitsap, to ready an extraction team, should the need arise.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ROBINS AIR FORCE BASE, GEORGIA

The Globemaster went wheels down at Robins Air Force Base just south of Macon, Georgia. The base was in chaos, which was abnormal for an Air Force base. Usually, everything was in order, but not today.

The Changed had changed everything, literally. Every branch of the military was gearing up for battle. Even though the President had issued orders to ‘leave them alone’, he wasn’t about to be caught unprepared. This particular base was taking incoming flights from nearby bases that were being overrun, or just needing to consolidate equipment. The overrun bases were leaving a lot of equipment behind, so there was a need to stockpile as much as they could from the other locations.

Mike and Pete exited the plane with the intention of getting lost in the chaos and getting to the armory. They had a plan to get loaded up with weapons and gear and then head to Pete’s sister. They were sure the rate of desertion would skyrocket, as servicemen and women started putting family before duty.

It didn’t take long for them to get away, as several planes were unloading personnel at the same time. No one expected anything like this, so keeping track of individual personnel was nearly impossible. The biggest thing that they would need would be a reason to get armed at the armory. In a situation like this, they knew the armory would not be left unguarded.

“I have an idea,” Mike whispered. He then took off with Pete right behind him. Mike was running towards the armory. He tore the name tag off his uniform and instructed Pete to do the same. He took his dog tags off and put them in his pocket. Pete followed suit.

“Let’s just fill out the forms, get armed and get out of here. Follow my lead,” Mike said. The form he was referring to was the AF form 629 that needed to be filled out prior to obtaining a weapon from the armory. To protect themselves from being charged for going AWOL, Mike planned on using a fictitious name and using the chaos of the Changed attacks to say he lost his dog tags and ID.

Their planned subterfuge proved unnecessary, as a long line had formed outside the armory, and they were handing out weapons like it was

Christmas.

The two men waited their turn and eventually made it to the front of the line. They were each issued an M4 carbine and a 9mm Beretta. They also got several magazines for each weapon, as well as some body armor. All they had to do was sign the clipboard. Just to be safe they used names of fellow airmen that hadn't made it out of Charleston.

They thought about getting some chow and other supplies, but they saw a convoy getting ready to depart, so they headed for the motor pool to see about appropriating some wheels.

There was so much chaos at the motor pool that they were misidentified as personnel going out on the convoy and given their own Hummer. They had no idea where the convoy was going, and they didn't care. As long as they could get off base without being detained, they were home free.

The convoy started out and the two men followed in last position. It would be the easiest spot to leave the convoy from. It felt like an eternity before they were outside the base fence line, but they made it out.

Biding their time until they were far enough away from the base, Pete slowed the Hummer a bit to let the convoy get ahead of them. They were heading north on highway 129, towards Macon. The 540 interchange was due to come up soon, and it was there Pete planned to make his escape. He turned left on Allen Road while the rest of the convoy continued north. They were free from the convoy and on their way to Branson.

"Pull over," Mike told him. Pete did as his friend asked and stopped the Hummer. Mike hopped out while Pete provided cover with his M4. It was a trait they had both picked up years ago during basic training, making sure each buddy was always covered.

Mike got under the vehicle to remove the tracking device. He found it and removed it, then threw it in the ditch. Once the two loaded back into the Hummer they quickly resumed their trek to Missouri.

"Smart," Pete said. "Good thing it was such a cluster back there. We may not have gotten out if it wasn't."

"Yeah, good thing," Mike replied. Going AWOL in this situation was the right thing to do, but it still sat wrong with him. He never thought the day would come when he would do something like that, but here it was.

"Brother," Pete said. "I know what you are thinking, so stop. You know as well as I do that this is going to spin out of control. We could have stayed,

and likely gotten killed following orders, or we could do what we are doing right now, staying alive and saving my sister. That's a non-issue to me."

"I know, I just don't have to like it," Mike said.

"Never said you had to like it, just accept it," Pete told him. He could tell Mike was about to descend into one of his moods.

"Listen, you can accept it and move on, or sit there like a whiny little bitch and cry over it. Choose," Pete told him.

Mike turned to glare at him but couldn't hold his laughter back. They both erupted into a fit of laughter that almost made them drive off the road.

"We still need supplies. Water, food, more ammo and a map would be nice," Mike said.

"On our way," Pete said as he made a right turn into the parking lot of a gas station. They had traveled far enough that they were out of the suburbs. Not into rural America yet, but close enough.

The gas station looked like it had seen better days. It was a little, out-of-the-way place that had a small shop attached to it. Bullet holes could be seen running along the wall, and broken glass littered the lot in front by the door.

"Eyes up," Mike said as he exited the Hummer. Pete turned off the vehicle, grabbed the keys and followed Mike. Both had their M4s at the ready, with Mike watching center left and Pete looking right and rear.

They had just made it to the door when the smell hit them. Dead bodies. Mike slowly entered through the broken glass door and scanned the store. It was small, with portable plug-in coolers holding what was left of soda and water. There were only a couple of aisles in the store with the shelves holding a few remaining candy bars and bags of chips.

Mike continued his survey of the store, clearing the main area and going back into the small storage room. He came back out a minute later with his weapon down. "Clear," he told Pete, and Pete came inside.

"Dead body in back, could be the owner," Mike said. Pete just nodded and went to the cash register. It had been pried open and the money taken. Pete looked below the register to where a square object had made an impression on the floor.

"Looks like they got the safe too," Pete said. He started rummaging through the papers behind the checkout counter.

"Bingo," he said to Mike, holding up a road atlas. "Now we have a map."

“Good deal. Let’s bag up some of this stuff and get out of here,” Mike replied.

While Mike was bagging up the remaining non-perishable stuff, Pete continued to root through the drawers and cabinets behind the checkout counter.

“What the hell are you looking for?” Mike asked.

“It’s a gas station, right?”

“Yeah,” Mike answered, clearly not understanding.

“Then there should be a key to open the underground fuel tanks, right?” Pete said.

“Ahhh,” Mike answered, now getting what Pete was talking about. “I’ll look in the garage for a pump.”

A few minutes later, Pete called out that he had found the key. They were hoping that it would be universal and open all of the underground fuel tanks. Mike found a hand pump a couple of minutes later.

“It’ll sure beat the hell out of siphoning,” Pete said.

“Agreed,” Mike replied. They had just grabbed their gear to leave the store, when a bullet shattered what was left of the front window.

“Down,” yelled Mike.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MOUNTAIN VIEW, ARKANSAS

Lucy woke with a start. Her surroundings were unfamiliar and there was a warm body next to her. It felt too small to be Greg. She looked and saw it was her nephew, Tyler. Memory started to come back to her. They had made to her sister's, barely.

The damage from running through the pack of Changed had finally disabled the car about ten miles away from her sister's. They had to walk the rest of the way, creating one hell of a blister on her right foot. It was late at night by the time they arrived, and Greg volunteered to go back and get the rest of the supplies.

Kay, her sister, had loaned Greg her car and he returned to the Jeep to collect everything they had left behind. By the time he got back, Lucy was fast asleep with Tyler sleeping next to her.

She carefully got out of bed and walked downstairs to the kitchen. It was still dark out, but Kay was already up. Greg was snoring on the couch.

"Morning," Kay called out.

"Uh huh," Lucy said. She wasn't much for mornings. She couldn't remember where the coffee pot was, but knew it was here somewhere, she could smell it. Like an addict craving their next hit, she used her nose to locate the precious black liquid. She poured herself a cup and without thinking, took a huge drink. Immediately she sprayed it back out.

"Damn, that's hot!" she yelped.

"Shhhh, you'll wake up snoring beauty over there," Kay said.

Lucy refilled her coffee cup and blew on it a bit before taking a sip.

"What time is it? And how long was I asleep?" Lucy asked.

"It is about four in the morning, and you were out for almost an entire day. What the hell happened out there? Greg filled me in on some, but he started snoring mid-sentence," Kay asked.

Lucy began telling her sister about all the events that had happened to her, leaving no detail out. She paid close attention to Kay, to see if Kay was believing her or not. When Kay's eyes got as big as dinner plates, Lucy knew that Kay had believed her.

"Are we safe here?" Kay asked after Lucy was done.

“For now, I would imagine. The rate at which this thing multiplies is monumental. I would think, soon, nowhere will be safe,” Lucy told her. It was hard to say, but it was truth. If they had any shot at surviving, they had to act fast. “We need to start collecting survival items.”

“Survival items?” Kay asked.

“Yes. Items we need to survive this...outbreak? Whatever it is, we need to be ready. Items like water, water purification items, food, ways to get food, weapons, a bug out vehicle, bug out bags, and tons of other items. We need to make a list, so we can start collecting. We also need a fallback location, in case we get overrun here,” Lucy said. She had rattled off the list so fast that she knew she had finally lost Kay because of the vacant look on her face.

“Listen, it’s no different than what you do here, just on a bigger scale. You farm this land, not only to make money, but to survive. We just ratchet it up several notches, and we should be ready,” Lucy explained. Kay finally understood what she was saying.

“Oh, you mean like preppers, on that show that was ridiculous,” Kay said. She was referencing the show *Doomsday Preppers*.

“Something like that,” Lucy responded. “Get me a pen and paper, I’ll start the list. You can start getting some food ready for all of us to eat. We’re going to need a good breakfast today.”

“Giving orders, as usual,” Kay chided her with a smile. It was the same way that they grew up, Lucy may have been younger, but her drive to succeed always made her the bossy one.

“Just start, its too damn early for that,” Lucy said.

Kay got Lucy the requested supplies and started breakfast. Mornings were a time that Kay usually spent thinking about the past. She never let on to her kids how much she hurt, both physically and emotionally. Tyler wasn’t even a year old when Kay’s husband, Mark, died in a farming accident. His arm got caught in the blades of a combine and he lost so much blood, he was dead before the ambulance could get there.

His death left Kay with three children to raise, by herself. If that wasn’t hard enough, she was bound and determined to not lose the farm, literally. She worked herself nearly to death trying to provide for her kids, and it showed. She wasn’t a tiny woman, but she wasn’t obese either. She had wider hips, due to birthing three children, and most of her ‘momma belly’ had gone away, but not all of it. It was her face that showed the wear and tear

of life on the farm. It was weathered from all the time outside and lines creased her face from the stress she was under every day.

Her 5'3" frame could still turn a head or two, she thought, but that usually never entered her mind. Mark was her one true love, and she had stayed committed to him all these years later.

She had received tons of help from neighboring farmers, and the kids helped as much as they could, while growing up. Now, with them older, they helped every day. Ben, 22, stayed on the farm and was starting to take over the day-to-day management. Shaley, 17, everyone called her Shay, was close to graduating high school, and showed great enthusiasm for the animals on the farm and was considering veterinary school. Tyler, 13, was still learning, but helped wherever he could. All in all, it was a good life, and one she would never trade.

Now, as she cooked breakfast, Kay stood wondering if it had all been in vain. If everything Lucy told her was true, then the farm might be a lost cause.

By the time she had food ready, everyone was awake except for Greg. He still lay on the couch, snoring away.

"We will never stay hidden from the Changed if he keeps snoring like that," Kay said.

"Changed?" Tyler asked.

Lucy just looked at Kay, and Kay nodded. Now was no time to sugarcoat anything, and the kids needed to know what they were in for.

Lucy retold the story, again, leaving no detail out. She made the story very PG-rated but told the truth. As a result, Ben was excited, Tyler was terrified, and Shay was rather introspective. She had always been the smart one, analyzing what everything meant before taking action. Each of them, instinctively, reacted like their personalities. Ben was the adventurer, Shay was the smart one, and Tyler was still a little young to understand it all, but with Momma's guidance, he started to see that if they were ready, it wasn't so bad.

Lucy got up and walked over to Greg. She'd had enough of his snoring for one morning. She sat next to him and rubbed his chest. It was a loving touch that she knew Greg would interpret a certain way. He started to grin in his sleep as Lucy bent to whisper in his ear.

"Greg, darling, you need to get up and quit snoring, or I'm going to cut you off," Lucy whispered.

Greg's eyes flew wide open, and he swiped at Lucy's hand, screaming, "You ain't cutting it off!"

"Greg, I said you, not it," Lucy giggled.

Greg calmed his breathing and relaxed. He noticed the giggles throughout the room and his face turned nineteen shades of red.

"Oh, right," he said as he got up from the couch. "What time is it?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"It's almost five in the morning. We have a lot of work to do today, so get some food and let's get busy," Lucy told him, still giggling.

They all sat down for breakfast while Lucy started giving out orders for the day.

"Ben, does the bus by the barn work?" Lucy asked him. It was a project that Mark had started, trying to turn an old school bus into an RV type vehicle. He wanted to use it for family vacations and such.

"Not now. It's been sitting for years. It would need a lot of work," Ben replied.

"Then start working on it. We need it running and modified to hold all of us. Beds, storage, armor, everything you can think of. Make it a battle tank," Lucy told him.

"Greg, you and Shay start gathering anything that could be used as a weapon. Both melee and long range. We need to be armed at all times and ready for anything," she continued. "Kay and Tyler, start getting clothing together for everyone. Once done with that, come back and help me get the food and water together." Lucy was certain she was missing something, but it would have to wait for now.

With that, they finished breakfast and got to work.

CHAPTyer THIRTY-FOUR

THE WHITE HOUSE

President Ford sat in the Oval Office pondering recent developments. The fiasco at Joint Base Charleston was over. The base was a complete loss. No survivors, except for those that had evac'd by plane. Communication with other world leaders was starting to dwindle as countries started to fall. Either from the Changed, or by citizens hell bent on getting answers that their governments didn't have.

Society was breaking down across the country as people started to be overcome by fear. President Ford had no more answers to give than he did several days before. The CDC was a joke, and every other disease center in the world couldn't get answers because they hadn't managed to get their hands on any of the Changed.

He honestly thought that this might be the end of the human race. Maybe it was their time, he thought. It had been a good run, after all. Maybe it was time to just pack it in and accept the inevitable?

As he was thinking about it all being over, the Secret Service rushed the Oval Office and started dragging him out.

"What the hell is going on?" he shouted.

"Changed are in the White House. We need to get you out of here," they told him.

As they rushed him outside, President Ford could hear gunshots echoing around him and from inside the building.

"Those people—" the president started but was cut off.

"Are dead," the Secret Service agent told him.

Marine One landed with a thud just as the group arrived on the South Lawn. They were taking no chances with the president, using speed rather than finesse in an effort to save him.

They boarded Marine One and the pilots took off before the president was even buckled in. It was a short flight to Andrews Air Force Base, where Air Force One was already waiting, engines running. All they were waiting for was for the president to board.

The president sat in his seat and felt the thrust from the engines as the pilot launched the giant 747 into a rapid, emergency vertical take-off. The

plane shot down the runway and started to gain elevation quickly.

Once they had achieved thirty-five thousand feet, the pilot eased the plane's acceleration back to normal and they all settled in for the ride to an undisclosed location.

"What the hell happened back there?" the president barked.

"Someone from the service staff changed while in the kitchen. No one could stop him from tearing the place apart," the Vice President told him. Ford was completely unaware that the Vice President was even in the White House, let alone onboard Air Force One.

As President Ford was about to ask another question, the plane dramatically changed angle into a steep downward dive. Everyone not buckled into a seat was thrown against the back wall.

Inside the cockpit, just as they had reached cruising altitude, the pilot convulsed and changed, he had then grabbed the copilot and bitten his nose off. During the fight between the pilots, the yoke of the plane had been pushed forward, causing the plane to go into a steep dive.

It felt like an eternity to all of the passengers before the plane hit the ground, nose first, but time has a way of doing that before you die. Air Force One crashed into a field, nose first, and exploded upon impact, killing all aboard.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan and his team were traveling to the National Guard armory, just outside of town. It was located near the Duluth airport, so the plan was to hit the armory and then scope out the airport to see if there was any action there. If it was clear, they would have their pick of airborne transportation that they could also “borrow”, adding more flexibility to their growing fleet of vehicles.

The armory was an odd-shaped building, located in a small warehouse-type district. It looked like a child had thrown a bunch of squares onto the ground and then mashed them together into a building. The motor pool was located to the rear of the building. While there were many other buildings around the armory, they didn't expect many Changed or people in the area as the warehouse buildings generally didn't employ many full-time staff. The airport was only a couple of blocks away and the sight of it made Dylan's blood boil as memories of watching his April die in front of him resurfaced.

The MCM drove around for several blocks to scan the building and its surroundings. The only fence that the armory had was in the back, surrounding the dirt parking lot that served as the motor pool parking area.

“I can see several vehicles in the dirt lot,” Robert said. He was used to looking through scopes from his time as an Army sharpshooter so he had been tasked with observing through a pair of civilian binoculars. “No activity from the building. Doors look to be open, but no movement from inside.”

“Let's go get some,” Larry blurted out and started to move.

Dylan stopped him in his tracks. “Not so fast. We don't know what's inside.”

Larry glared at him like Dylan had shot his parents.

“If we are going to have a problem here, you are free to leave any time you like,” Dylan shot back at him. “This unit is not a democracy, and we go when I say we go, understood?”

“Oh, yes frakking sir!” Larry said through gritted teeth. He forced out a half salute, mocking Dylan and returned to his original position.

Dylan continued to glare at him as he moved back into ready position, then turned his attention back to Robert.

“Bull, take a look through the windows. Look for any movement,” Dylan told him. Bullseye was his call sign, but they all called him Bull, for short. It also fit because Robert was built like a damned bull. Short, stocky, and beefy. All muscle.

“Roger that,” Bull calmly replied. As a sharpshooter, he was used to maintaining his calm in times of stress. It did no good if the guy being depended on to save the team with his skills was a nervous wreck. Bullets would fly everywhere except where they were intended.

“Motion from the right side. Two windows from the corner of the building,” Bull reported.

Dylan looked at the windows and saw the movement. It appeared to be the blinds waving in the breeze flowing through the open window.

“That’s just the shades moving,” Dylan told him.

“No, look behind the shades,” Bull said.

Dylan looked harder through his binoculars and saw what Bull was talking about. Behind the blinds was a green one. He was lumbering about the room, with no particular pattern to his movements. They could tell he had no eyesight left as he randomly bumped into the desk, walls and even the door.

“Ok, we have confirmed there are Changed inside, which is what we expected. Outside of the building looks clear,” Dylan told his team. “From what I can remember, the goodies are located in the northeast section of the building. Team One will penetrate the building and make their way to the goodies. Team Two will get to the motor pool and secure us some rides. Remember, we need those deuce and a half’s to transport civilians with. Don’t forget them,” Dylan said mostly to Larry. Larry just nodded at the blatant ribbing by Dylan.

“Everyone good? Remember your assignments?” Dylan asked. He got head nods from everyone indicating they were ready. “Move out.”

Larry immediately went for the east side of the building, leading Team Two in the opposite direction from where Dylan had directed them to go. Dylan had instructed Larry to lead his Team to the west side so both teams could cover for each other. The main entrance was on the southwest side of the building.

“Team Two, get back into formation,” Dylan ordered over the radio. Scott, Tim, and Randy started to slow, but Larry kept going.

“Let them go,” Glenn told Dylan. “They could get into trouble if there isn’t clear guidance from Larry.”

Dylan just glared at Larry from a distance. “Team One, move out.”

Team One headed for the front entrance. Dylan was in lead position, with Glenn following. Bull and Bill brought up the rear.

They reached the front door and stacked up to the right side. They switched comm channels so the two teams wouldn’t overlap each other and get confused.

Glenn tapped Dylan’s shoulder, telling him they were ready to enter the building. Dylan, in a crouched position, walked into the building with his rifle raised. He aimed left as Glenn followed him aiming right. Bill came in third, aiming forward, and Bull pulled rear duty, covering their six.

They entered the front reception area slowly. It was vacant of any living personnel. Several bodies littered the floor, bite marks covering them.

Dylan pulled his military issue K-bar knife and started plunging it into the heads of the dead. After hearing the stories from Dylan, the rest of Team One pulled whatever knife they had and joined in, making sure all of the bodies were truly dead.

The team continued down a long corridor that lead off to the right of the lobby. It led all the way down the front of the building. Offices lined both sides of the hallway, and the team took their time and cleared each room. Luck seemed to be shining on them as each room they had encountered so far was clear. They came to where the hallway turned to the left and stacked up again.

Dylan waited for the tap on his shoulder letting him know the team was ready. Once he received it he promptly ‘quick checked’ the hallway and gave hand signals back to his team. He held up five fingers and then shaped his hand into a “G”, to signify that there were five green ones around the corner. Two offices down, on the right, was the room where they had spotted the green one pacing behind the blinds. The door to that room was shut, and so far, they had no intelligence that Greens could open doors.

Dylan slung his rifle and pulled his K-Bar. He looked back to see his team do the same. They were learning quickly that ‘you did as Dylan did’. It was also immediately understood that they were going hand to hand with the Changed in the hallway.

Dylan stood up and rounded the corner. He crouched into a fighting stance, with his knees slightly bent and arms up. His teammates followed suit, forming a line, and essentially blocking off the hallway.

Dylan called to the Greens. "Hey you rage monster wanna be's. I'm over here. Come get some."

Immediately, as predicted, the green ones turned to face the noise and started bumbling towards the men. They were so slow that Dylan was getting impatient. The inner demon in him wanted out to wade in their blood, but he calmed himself and steadied. It would do the team no good if he went running off and got himself killed. There were still a lot of rooms left unchecked that could hold more of the Changed.

The fight finally started when the first green one was ten feet away. Dylan pounced on it, driving his K-bar through its left eye. Glenn followed him with his chef's knife, hacking away at the next Greener in line. Soon, the whole team was hacking away at the heads of any Greener that was near. It was a quiet killing, but not completely silent. Grunts and groans could be heard, not only by them, but by the Greener behind door number two.

Banging started on the office door, and they all turned to look. Greens lay strewn about as they looked at the door being pushed outward by the force of the blows.

"That's not just a greener in there," Glenn said.

"Rifles up!" Dylan ordered. "Run!"

As they turned to run down the hallway, the door was brutally shoved open and a purple-colored hell spawn ran out. It looked like a body builder that had been juicing for the last fifteen years. Its clothing had been torn by the growth of massive muscles that appeared to have exploded out of its body.

The team had a hundred-yard head start on the purple bastard, but they weren't sure it would be enough. Along with superhuman strength and size, the team discovered the purple ones could run like gazelles. They only had fifty yards left to go to get to the goodies.

"Get to the door then turn around and shoot that thing," Dylan barked out. There was no sense in keeping quiet anymore, not with the loud thuds that thing was making with every footfall.

The hallway ended at a door directly in front of them leading into the weapons room. There was a section of concrete wall on each side, and they lined up with the wall behind their backs.

Bullets flew as the team opened up on the purple beast. Bull was taking calculated shots, as he was taught to do. He was aiming for headshots, but the thing was moving too quickly for him to get a solid hit.

Bill and Glenn were starting to panic and began firing blindly. Most of their bullets missed, but some hit the beast in the chest. It was pure luck that their shots slowed the thing slightly. Dylan took that opportunity to send a salvo towards its knees. One knee was quickly shredded beyond any semblance of a human form, and its other knee also took some serious damage.

Purple Guy dropped to what was left of his knees but continued to crawl towards them. It was only seventy-five yards away and it would not relent. It somehow swerved from side to side, like it was deliberately trying to evade the shots from the team.

Dylan couldn't believe that it still had enough intelligence left to attempt to evade their fire, but time was now a major factor.

"Keep him back," Dylan ordered as he opened the door. He raced into the storeroom holding all the goodies. He searched until he found what he was looking for and grabbed two items.

Racing back through the door, Dylan shouted for his team to get behind him and to take cover inside the goody room. He quickly pulled the pin on two fragmentation grenades, looked the devil in the eye and tossed them down the hallway.

"Grenade," he shouted as he backpedaled through the door and took cover behind the cinder block wall. He swore he could see recognition in the eyes of the beast just before he took cover. Seconds later, the grenades went off, sending shards of metal into Purple Guy. He dropped like a bad habit when the shards went through his head. Several Greens behind the beast were killed as well.

Dylan quickly got up, closed the door, and locked it. He had no idea if there were any more purple bastards left but wanted to ensure they had a window of time in which to get out of there.

"Get moving. Load up on weapons and ammo and let's get out of here," Dylan ordered. He'd had enough of this place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Dylan switched his comms back to the main channel to see if Team Two had any luck with their mission.

“Team Two, Team One,” he said. He waited a moment and repeated.

Scott, otherwise known as ‘Boom’, finally answered. He was known as Boom because of his history with explosives while working in the mines.

“Roger One, this is Two.”

“Sit-rep?” Dylan asked. It was short for situation report.

“Vehicles obtained. No casualties. No resistance,” Boom answered.

“Where is Deuce?” Dylan asked. He was wondering where Larry, call sign Deuce, was and why he wasn’t answering the radio.

“Ah, he’s taking a shit,” Boom told him.

“A shit? Really?” Dylan said. He was flabbergasted, but still, it didn’t surprise him.

“Yes, on top of your new Hummer,” Boom said.

Dylan just rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“One ready for extract. Northeast corner of building. We will have to move fast,” Dylan told him.

Dylan didn’t let it get to him that Larry had not only put the entire Militia at risk, but had also decided to crap all over his new ride. He had more important things to do, like get his team out of the building.

The door to the goody room had been banged against a couple of times, but only minor bumps. It told him that Greeners were definitely outside the door, but he wasn’t willing to gamble on it being only Greens.

Luckily for them, this armory had a substantial supply of det-cord. Detonating cord is a hollow cord filled with explosive material. They placed a good amount of it on the exterior wall in the northeast corner. The plan was to blow a hole in the wall to get out.

Team One had built a small shelter out of folding tables and any other items they could find. Dylan got behind the barricade and looked at his team. They nodded that they were ready.

“Two, this is One. Stand back from the wall,” Dylan told them. He counted down from five over the radio and hit the detonation switch.

Thunder cracked inside the building as the det cord exploded. It left a hole in the wall big enough for them to exit through, but not much else.

“Team Two, cover positions outside the hole,” Dylan yelled over the radio. Everyone from Two went to the hole and faced outward from the building, except for Larry, who was busy looking for leaves to wipe his behind.

Team One immediately went to offloading goodies through the hole. Larry was supposed to be there with a deuce and a half, but he was occupied.

“Damn it Deuce, wipe your ass later. Get that truck over here,” Dylan screamed.

“Up yours,” Larry shot back.

Dylan was about to end him before Glenn stopped him.

“Mission first,” he breathed at Dylan. Glenn was also close to beating some sense into Larry for risking the entire team but managed to keep it together. That’s why he was Dylan’s number two.

“Boom, go get the trucks,” Dylan ordered.

In short order, they managed to get five trucks loaded with all the goodies they could carry. They didn’t leave anything behind, because they never knew when they would be able to get more. Along with the trucks, they also procured a few up-armored Hummers. Dylan had been hoping to get some LATVs (Light Armored Tactical Vehicle) or MRAPs, but a National Guard motor pool was not the most likely spot for those. He would have to make a journey to a different base to find those.

Bull had just finished loading the M2 mounted on the top of one of the Hummers when a huge bang sounded from inside the building. The door to the arms room flew open to reveal another purple beast.

“Load up!” Dylan shouted, making sure everyone entered a vehicle. “Bull, open up on that thing!”

Bull pivoted the M2 towards the target and pushed the trigger. Short, controlled bursts erupted from the gun, turning the purple Changed into mist.

“RTB!” Dylan yelled over the radio. He had given the order to return to base. It was there that Dylan would set Larry straight.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

The Allen Institute was completely surrounded on all sides. The noise from the initial pack had attracted more Changed. They were now at least two blocks deep, and estimates were at least ten thousand or more in the crowd. The order for all quiet had been nullified. The Marines had tried to thin the crowd, but they wound end up depleting all the ammo they had on hand. Time was running short, as the Changed breached the underground garage. The only thing stopping them was the elevator. Power had been cut off to the elevators, so none of the Changed could accidentally hit a button and get in.

Naval Base Kitsap had already sent two helicopters to the institute. They were sitting on the roof, waiting for the evacuation to begin. Several more were waiting at the base to help expedite the evacuation once it began.

The soldiers were trying to give the scientists as much time as they could, but things were getting hairy.

All the scientists were told to start saving any vital work in case the extraction order was given. The scientists had put up a fight because they were not aware of any other facility they could evacuate to that was safe and that could provide the research resources that the Allen Institute could. It took only one look outside to convince the scientists to start the backup procedures.

“Get the test results backed up, right now!” Tina ordered. She was at her wits end. Time was running out and if they didn’t get the results backed up, Faulk would have died for nothing. He wasn’t dead yet, but it was inevitable. His fever had spiked in the last five minutes, signaling the change was in progress.

“Move your ass! Tina bellowed. Bob had never seen her like this. She was like a crazed woman, ordering people around and running like mad.

“Babe, you need to calm down a bit. They are trying their best,” Bob tried to soothe her. So far, he showed no signs of any infection. His temperature had remained constant at 98.6.

“Best isn’t good enough right now. We need to move if we have any hope of saving what work we have accomplished here,” she fired back. “I have no

intention of losing you.”

If it hadn't been clear to Bob why she was being a slave driver, it was now. She was deathly afraid for him. It's not like he didn't know that but seeing it in her eyes drove the point home and he felt responsible.

“What can I do to help?” Bob asked her.

“Get all these papers into boxes and get them to the roof,” she told him, letting out a huge breath that she felt down to her toes. The stress of the situation was wearing on her. The military called it ‘battle fatigue’, but ordinary citizens called it stress. She was under a ton of it.

The papers she was referring to were hard copy backups of all the test results they had generated so far. They, of course, were also copying all the information to thumb drives and placing backups on the cloud, but Tina believed in the preppers motto, ‘Three is two. Two is one. One is none’.

Bob had just finished loading the papers into boxes when all hell started to break loose. Faulk had started to convulse, hard. His temperature had reached 108 degrees, and no amount of ice would lower it.

His convulsions were dramatic. A hundred times worse than an epileptic seizure and the doctors watched as the bones in his body started to break as the change began. Cries of terror and pain filled the lab as Faulk physically transformed before their eyes.

Marines came into the room, rifles raised, as Faulk's body started to contort. Faulk wasn't a large man, coming in at 5'9" and weighing 175 pounds, but he was suddenly growing, his muscle groups enlarging dramatically. Ripples flowed throughout his body as each muscle group contracted and released. After each contraction, the muscle groups grew bigger.

He also grew in length, growing from his normal size to almost seven feet tall. Every bone in his body had broken, and was repaired in minutes, making him scream in agony. High pitched wails emanated from his mouth as pain was the only thing he could feel. White-hot, searing pain flashed in his every molecule turning Faulk into a monster full of hate. Rage flashed in his eyes before they too changed. His pupils turned purple, covering almost his entire iris, leaving hardly any whites of his eyes. Small veins protruded out from his eyes, giving them a three-dimensional effect.

The bed he was on started to droop in the center as the mass he was gaining began to overwhelm the supports underneath the bed. The chains used

to restrain him were at their breaking point. Any more growth and they would fail.

“Everyone to the roof!” Cpl. Miller yelled out. “Evacuate this facility!”

Fear ran through every person in the lab as Faulk’s restraints gave way, popping like corn as they broke. People ran in complete chaos. The Marines never had a chance to do a walkthrough with everyone about the evacuation, so people just ran with no clear idea of what they were doing or where they were going.

The Marines had told them to remain calm during the evacuation and head to the roof, but that was all forgotten when Faulk’s restraints gave way.

Faulk was still lying there, the change not quite complete. His body was still convulsing, giving Tina a glimmer of hope that the research could be saved.

“Bob, get those papers!” Tina yelled at him as she started to grab thumb drives.

As she was doing that, Faulk started to move. Slowly, one arm started to rise, then the other. He reached towards the sky, and then in one fluid motion, he dropped his arms quickly and sat straight up. He took a long inhale of the smells around him and got off the bed. He was a purple menace, veins popped out and muscles rivaling a lifelong body builder.

“Too late!” Bob yelled as he grabbed Tina. He started to drag her across the room towards the stairs when Faulk let out a terrifying scream. It was filled with rage and hate.

Tina stopped fighting against Bob when she heard the sound and turned for the stairs. Gunfire erupted in the lab, followed by shouts and screams of pain, lending wings to their feet. Faulk had found his first victims.

A thought of ‘better you than me’ ran through Bob’s mind as he and Tina made it to the stairs. It was a horrible thought, he knew, but their deaths were saving Tina and himself. He snuck a look back as he was racing up the stairs to see a massacre occurring. The Marines with rifles were all dead, lying in pools of blood. Their bodies twisted into shapes that the human body was never meant to perform.

Faulk was destroying everything he touched, amazingly fast. Bob knew that anyone not already on the stairs was going to die in the next several minutes.

Tina and Bob reached the roof and boarded the helicopter. No one else was on board yet and from the looks of it, the other chopper was empty

except for the flight crew. Several seconds later they could see the pilot talking into his microphone and then the choppers started to take off. Tina grabbed a headset and put it on.

“We can’t leave yet,” Tina shouted.

“We’ve been ordered to lift off and get you to Kitsap ma’am,” the pilot told her.

“What about all those people?” she asked.

“All dead. It was Cpl. Miller who told us to leave,” was the answer.

Tina looked at Bob and tears flooded her face. All the people she had worked with for so many years, all the Marines that had protected them, all gone. Gone from one lone purple monster.

“Oh my god,” Tina breathed out.

“What?” Bob asked her. He had just gotten a headset on and hadn’t heard the news.

“They’re all dead. Everyone in the lab is dead and we have none of the research. It was all for nothing,” she cried out, grabbing Bob and embracing him.

In all the chaos, she had forgotten that two thumb drives had made it into her pocket, one labeled Faulk, the other labeled Bob.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Back at their base, Dylan launched himself out the vehicle and made a beeline for Larry. It was time to settle this thing, once and for all. Larry had not only disobeyed his orders, but he also selfishly put his petty feud before the team, putting all of them in danger.

Larry had exited the Hummer and was looking at the roof for his pile of crap, to see if it had flown off during the ride back. He was starting to smile, seeing that it was still there, when a sledgehammer-like blow caught him from behind.

He fell forward, face first into the Hummer. He knew who it was, fully expecting the confrontation, but thought he had a few more seconds before it came.

“Put yourself before the team, will you?” Dylan said as he grabbed a fistful of Larry’s hair. He pulled Larry from the side of the vehicle and turned him around. A big right hand landed on Larry’s face.

“Disobey my orders?” Dylan screamed at him as Larry hit the ground.

“Damn straight,” Larry countered as he lunged his right foot towards Dylan’s knee. He missed the knee, hitting Dylan in the shin. “She was going to be mine!”

“She was never yours, jackass,” Dylan yelled as he went to kick Larry, who was still on the ground. Larry countered by grabbing Dylan’s leg and twirling him around. Dylan ended up on his back next to Larry.

Larry saw his opportunity and jumped on top of Dylan. He reached for Dylan’s throat, thinking he could choke the life out of Dylan, but Dylan was stronger, and wiser.

Seeing that Larry was leaning slightly forward while reaching for his throat, Dylan lifted his hips and flung Larry over his head.

“She only tolerated you because you were my friend,” Dylan shouted, scrambling to his feet. He needed to regain his advantage.

“Uh uh, no way. She needed me because you were always off saving the world. She needed a man to be with her, not Mighty Mouse,” Larry said as he staggered back up.

That enraged Dylan even further because it was partly true. Adrenaline dumped into his body and he lunged at Larry. Larry knew this was coming and dodged the attempted spear by Dylan. He grabbed Dylan by the waist as Dylan flew past him and tackled him to the ground.

They continued to roll around, each trying to gain the upper hand, but failing. The rest of the team had gathered around the two, knowing this fight was inevitable. When it was clear the two were tiring out, Glenn stepped in to break it up.

"Enough!" Glenn yelled as he tried to separate them. Bull jumped in to help and they got the two separated.

"This infighting won't help anyone!" Glenn shouted. "People out there are dying and you two are fighting over a girl that's gone. Get real, you two. War is here, so start fighting the damned war, not each other!"

With that, Dylan settled down, but kept his eyes glued to Larry. Larry followed suit.

"He's right," Larry said. "But this ain't over."

"Damn right it's not. If you ever put yourself before the team again, I'll feed you to the Changed, one piece at a time," Dylan retorted.

"Try it, big boy," Larry said.

"I SAID ENOUGH!" Glenn shouted. "Dylan, act like the fucking leader you are supposed to be, and Larry, I swear on everything holy, if you do that shit again, I will kill you before Dylan has even one second to get to you!"

The rest of the team lined up behind Glenn, showing that they too, would drop him. Bull even went face to face with Larry, nose to nose.

"I won't kill you. I'll just chain your ass up and gut you like a pig," Bull whispered to him. His words were full of bile and rage. Bull knew the code and adhered to it to this day. You never put anything before the team when on a mission.

Larry eased up on his bravado and came to his senses.

"You're right. Team first, but this isn't over," he said, staring a hole through Dylan.

"No, it's not," Dylan said. "But Glenn is right. There will be a time for us to finish this, but it's not now." He turned to the rest of the team and looked each in the eye. Respect and admiration radiated from him as he silently apologized to each team member. They knew what he was doing and accepted his apology without saying a word.

“Unload these trucks and let’s get back to the airport,” Dylan ordered. He was uneasy about going there, as it was the place April had died, but they had to. They needed vital supplies and equipment from there.

An hour later, all the supplies were unloaded, catalogued, and put away. Bill served as quartermaster, because he was a jack of all trades, and could organize anything. He was famous for bartering and making trades, hence his call sign, Trader.

Altogether, they had come away from the armory with a ton of gear and equipment. Every team member was now armed with an M4, a tactical vest, and a ballistics vest. Every person had a blade, for close-up action. They each had a sidearm and loaded magazines for both guns. They had changed into military fatigues that they had sourced from the armory. Each person was issued several sets of BDU’s in different styles. Tiger stripe BDU’s, tactical BDU’s, and a couple of other styles and colors. They grabbed everything they could just in case their ranks grew.

Along with the guns and ammo, they also acquired a couple of cases of grenades. Both fragmentation and flash bangs. MREs (meals ready to eat) had also been found and gathered. In total, the team was ready for war.

They loaded into three deuce and a half’s and two Hummers. The Hummers were both armed with M2s on top, for security purposes. Dylan was certain there would be some choppers at the airport they could “borrow”, along with some smaller fixed wing aircraft.

They were almost back to the warehouse district when they started taking fire. Whoever was doing the shooting was smart, because both Bill and Randy, who were manning the M2s were hit.

Rapid rifle fire riddled the sides of the deuce’s, leaving Dylan to wonder if his men were alive or dead.

“Keep moving, punch it,” Dylan said over the new radios they had acquired. He looked back to see every vehicle continue forward, so he knew that at least the drivers were still ok.

He frantically looked for a place to go, but they were out in the open.

“Someone get on those .50 cal’s,” he shouted. “Where is that fire coming from?”

“Three o’ clock, low” Bull replied. He sounded out of breath.

Directly in front of them and to the left was a warehouse. Dylan ordered the team to take refuge behind the warehouse. They pulled behind the building to see ten men aiming rifles at them. They had fallen right into a trap.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MOUNTAIN VIEW, ARKANSAS

Lucy and the rest of the family had been working for what seemed like a week to get everything ready. Ben had pillaged every piece of farm equipment he could to get the bus up and running. It took him forever, working an average of eighteen hours a day, but finally, the old beast coughed to life. Thick black smoke poured out of the exhaust as the engine burned off old oil.

Ben took his time after that, making sure the old thing would purr. He tweaked this, tinkered with that, and now it was humming along. Repairs to the body had started, along with the renovation of the inside. They were trying to make it somewhat of a Mad Max-type vehicle. Ben had already installed a trailer hitch on the bus and had plans to make a trailer that could carry some of the larger items, even some of the livestock they had.

Along with the repairs to the bus, the family was gathering all the supplies they would need. Clothing was a big item for Kay. Being a mother, she was always on the lookout for what her children needed. She eventually took charge of the food, clothing, water, and other essential items that they would require, if they needed to bug out.

That left Lucy and Greg. It was up to them to get everyone armed, one way or another. The pickings were pretty slim at the farm. A shotgun, the rifles they had brought with them, and a bunch of old handheld farm tools that they converted to weapons. They would have to forage for other weapons as they went along if they had to leave.

Currently, Ben needed help on the bus. He was trying to install some bunk beds in the back section.

“Hold that piece right there, and turn your head away,” Ben told Greg. Greg had come to help him with the heavy lifting.

Greg held the metal piece in place, closed his eyes, and turned his head. Sparks shot out from the metal as Ben laid down a perfect bead of weld.

“There, that should hold,” Ben said, admiring his work. It was the last piece to weld and the beds would be done. The welds needed to cool off before they could put mattresses on the frames.

“What’s next?” Greg asked.

“I’d like to build a turret where the vent is in the roof. I have a ladder we can cut up and weld in place. Might make for a good lookout spot,” Ben said.

“Great idea. How do we do that?” Greg said.

“Boy, you’ve never worked a manual labor job before, have you?” Ben asked.

“No, I was hell bent on being a doctor,” Greg replied.

“No problem, just do what I say and we can get this done pretty quick,” Ben said.

As they started to cut out a bigger hole for the turret, Lucy was instructing Shay and Tyler on how to handle a staff and a knife.

“No, grab the knife like this,” Lucy said as she showed them the safe way to handle a knife. “You can also hold it like this.” She tried to show them how to hold it with the blade on the pinky finger side of their hand.

“Why would we hold it like that?” Tyler asked.

“For this,” Lucy said and swung at the dummy they had created. They had taken some branches from a tree and shoved them in the ground and dressed them in old, ragged clothes. It loosely resembled a human form. She took a swing to show them what would happen, then did it again, but much slower, so they could clearly see how to execute the move.

“Oh, I see,” Shay said. “The blade would point out and cut the attacker.”

“Yes, very good,” Lucy told her. “Did you see that, Tyler?”

“Yes, but how would it stay in your hand? Wouldn’t it come out when you hit the other person?” he asked.

“It might, but if you hold on real tight, it should stay in your grasp,” Lucy told him.

She was having a good time teaching her niece and nephew, she just wished it wasn’t for life-or-death circumstances.

Another week passed before the inevitable happened. They were discovered.

It was later in the evening when everything went down. Ben was finishing up on the bus before dinner. He had just welded the last of his ‘armor plating’ to the sides. He had welded half inch thick metal sheets to the sides, leaving a few openings for windows. The bus had been fully stocked with supplies and whatever ammunition they could find. It wasn’t much.

Ben lifted his welder’s mask to see a green one coming right at him. It was only ten feet away by the time Ben saw it. He had been told to bring a pistol with him while he was outside, and he was glad he had listened.

He grabbed the Glock and fire three shots at the Greener. Two shots hit it in the chest and one in the head. The Greener fell to the ground, lifeless and unmoving.

The noise from the gun alerted the entire family, but also any Changed that were in the area, which turned out to be more than they had realized. The family quickly came to the understanding that they had only minutes to spare before they were overrun.

“To the bus,” Ben shouted as his family ran out of the house. They hadn’t worked out any warning system, and from what Ben could see, they didn’t need to think of one now. A group of thirty plus Greens were heading right towards them.

Greg ran to the bus and got behind the wheel. He had been assigned as the driver to get them out. Tactically, Lucy had said that it would be better for Kay to drive, because she knew the roads in the area, but she refused, saying that she would never get there first if her children were not on the bus.

It really made no difference. Everyone was on board faster than a lightning bolt. The kids had been told the dangers of the Changed, and how important it was for them to be ready to go at any moment. They ran like the demons of hell were chasing them, and they very well may have been.

The kids were the next ones on the bus after Greg, followed by Lucy, Ben, and Kay. Greg slammed the door shut, started the bus, and hit the gas. They flew down the driveway and turned right when they reached the road.

They made it barely two miles before Greg slammed on the brakes.

“What the hell?” Lucy yelled as she pulled herself off the floor.

“Look,” Greg said, white faced.

Lucy looked out the front of the bus to see a swarm of Changed walking down the road away from them. There had to be hundreds of them, and as the bus screeched to a halt they all stopped and turned to look at the bus.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Again, I come to the end of another book. It's always exciting when it gets finished, wondering if people will enjoy it. This one was really fun to write, and I hope it's just as fun to read.

The ideas of the changed ones came mostly from my daughter, who loves horror movies. Without her assistance, I'm not sure this book gets written.

I give many thanks to you, the readers. Without you, I am writing for the sake of writing. It is such a joy when someone tells me that they enjoy my books. I can't say thank you enough.

With that said, I love when I can connect with readers, so I ask you to join my Facebook group [here](#).

Or you contact me via email

Authorsmlittle@gmail.com

As always, please leave a review. It is the best way for us indie authors have to let people know about our works.

Acknowledgement

This book was so much fun to write, but with that fun comes work. With that work, comes a lot of help.

To my beta readers, I could not have finished this without your help. I hope I have done you justice with this book. Linda Bailey, Mike Willingham, Tina Rush and Kathy Roberts... Thank you! I can't say that enough.

To my amazing editor, Amanda Poulin. Once again, you make me look good, which sometimes is hard to do. If anyone reading this needs an editor, look her up.

To Katie, Emma, Michael and Aiden. Your continued belief in me to write is inspiring. Thank you! Katie, this book does not get written without your ideas.

To Tracy. Your strength continues to amaze me. Thank you for your support of my writing.

Books By This Author

LOSS

What would you do if faced with EMP disaster? Jason Anderson is forced to deal with that exact dilemma. How to keep his family safe and alive while waiting for the last member of the family to arrive.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Aaron Oswald had given his life to the service. Now he must decide if current events are really what they seem, or are they a ruse going to the highest chain of command?

RUN

What happens when disaster strikes and you have to leave your home? Jason and his family must make their way across Minnesota to reach the safety of their cabin. Will they make it? What will they encounter?

Chairman Oswald has proof that President Evans has betrayed the country. How will he act to get America back on its feet and bring the traitors to justice?

HOME

Jason and family have escaped the latest battle for their lives. Who is remaining? Who is missing? What lengths will Jason and Kevin go too, to ensure their survival?

Chairman Oswald has been shot down. Where is he? Can he get back in time to save America? Can he bring justice to those who started this?

About The Author

S.M. LITTLE

S.M. Little lives in central Minnesota with hios family, where they do some farming, fishing and hunting.