

DOUG LANGILLE

Eddie Zero

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# Chapter 1

I didn't kill him. He was already dead.

The room was pitch black when I awoke. I fell asleep leaning against the back of the door. My shoulders tingled as my circulation returned. It didn't help much. With my arms restrained like they were, it was nearly impossible to take a full breath. My head swam as my eyes adjusted to the dark. The sparks and flashes of dust motes disoriented me, awash in a sea of teeming life where darkness reigned.

The power had been out for a couple of days, from what I surmised from the dim glow ebbing and flowing through the wire-reinforced glass in the door. There was no real way to be sure though. Time was elastic for me at the best of times. These days? Well, let's just say things were different.

The air was hot, stale and reeked of my own sweat and stink, and his as well, I suppose. I shot my foot out to kick him. It landed with a wet thud. In some ways, I was thankful for the dark. The air exchangers were out, but there must have been some venting somewhere. My breathing grew frantic again, so I closed my eyes against the murk and did the breathing exercises Doctor Goodwin taught me. She was my favorite. She always smiled at me. At least she did when she possessed a face. *Bastards*.

We were in group session when the arse fell out of the world.

Doctors Goodwin and Meier were running the show with a stuffed bear as a talking stick. Barry, Emma and Hughie went first, leaving me and Haley. I got bored and antsy with Hughie's crying and Barry's whimpering as he rocked back and forth. Haley stood and walked around her chair clockwise, then counter-clockwise humming a nursery rhyme. Meier guided her back to her seat. *Man, these people were nuts.*

Goodwin got a buzz on her cell. She glanced at the number and excused herself to take it. I watched her shapely legs swish away with approval. *I hate to see you go, but I love to watch you leave*, I mused. Then that damnable bear was stuffed in my face, blocking my view. Hughie shook it like a rattle. I wanted to punch him. That was probably why I was in restraints.

"It's your turn, Eddie," said Meier. "Do you have anything to share this morning?"

"Fuck you."

Meier shook his head and bent forward to scribble in his chart. The bald spot looked like a tantalizing target. Goodwin came back, put her hand on her colleague's arm, and handed him a note. His glasses fell from his face and dangled around his neck on the chain that later facilitated his untimely demise.

The security alarm clanged as the double-doors at the back of the ward burst open. A small crowd of dishevelled people broke into the room. They were all bloody and torn, but moved with a swiftness I hadn't thought possible. Immediate pandemonium erupted as a melee of gore and violence swept across the room. I froze in shock as I witnessed the escalation. Three assailants ate Goodwin's pretty face after tackling her to the ground. Barry vomited all over his pajamas, but it didn't matter. He didn't make it out of the circle. None of them did.

Meier and I clambered over and around each other trying to

get out the south door. I threw my body against the press bar and fell through. Still bound in the jacket, I panicked and yelled as I flopped on the floor like a fish out of water. Meier, wide-eyed and bleeding, helped me stand and we bolted to the cell block to hide.

It wasn't until later I realized he'd been bitten.

\* \* \*

I kicked Meier again. Nothing. I didn't mind hunger, but hated being thirsty. Drinking from the toilet like a dog had to be pretty much the lowest point of my miserable life.

The dark got to me. At first there was a lot of noise, but it'd been relatively quiet for some time. No screaming. No growling. With the power off, I faintly made out the sounds of the street below. Sirens. Gunfire. There was an explosion last night, but nothing in the ward.

I paced around the cell. It wasn't mine, but Marky's, I think. I can't remember. We weren't exactly reading room numbers, if you know what I mean. A lucky break in one hand and a dumb-ass move in the other, we hid in a cell that automatically sealed when closed. It needed to be unlocked from the outside. *Nice.*

Meier and I cowered like children, holding our breath. I begged him to take the jacket off, but he wasn't having any of that. Paranoid or just an asshole, who knows? *Rotten fucker. Glad he's dead. No, I won't take it back.*

The good doctor found Jesus, Allah and Buddha. He hedged his bets, I thought. Sometime after the first couple of long hours, he raved and babbled. The crowd of crazies on the other side of the door heard him and screamed incoherently, banging on the metal. The emergency lights were still on, and I worried

they'd figure it out. They weren't likely getting inside without a working brain cell to spare. It was Meier who drove me batty.

All at once, he got quiet and passed out. Eventually, the crazies begged off to find other faces to peel and limbs to eat. I bent over him to listen for a breath or heartbeat. It would've been much easier with hands, of course. Nothing.

He sprang forward and growled like the freaks outside. I'd seen enough zombie movies to guess where this was going. I didn't get out of his way in time. He tripped over me, fell forward and slammed his head on the toilet with a dull crack. Not waiting to see if it slowed him down, I jumped on his back and dug my heels into his pudgy hips. I grabbed the chain of his glasses with my teeth and leaned back with all my weight, holding him down with my knees on his shoulders. His back arched so he couldn't get up. Meier kept trying to reach me with his hands, but his middle-age lifestyle didn't permit the flexibility. He gurgled and sputtered as he twisted and flailed. I rode him like a rodeo bull. *Yippie!*

Why the chain or spectacles didn't break, I have no idea. *Thank you, Jeebus.* With one of his jerks he threw me off, but I managed to hold on to the glasses. His neck snapped audibly and I lost a couple teeth. Meier shit himself and died. That was that.

As I crossed the cell for the millionth time, I booted him again for good measure and stopped. Did I hear something? Was someone yelling? Yup. Words, not growls. It was Haley. Shit, of all my saviours, it had to be the obsessive-compulsive. I kicked the door with my feet. "Haley! Over here!"

"Haley!" Fuck, I tired of saying her name. "Haley, can you please open the manual door lock? Pull it out, turn it one-quarter, and push it back in. That's all you gotta do." I had this place cased. I paid attention. I knew how things worked.

I saw her pacing back and forth through the glass, leaving little bloody footprints on the tile with her elasticized paper booties. Back and forth, chewing on her nails. "Eddie, I can't!" she squeaked. She was crying, of course. *That was useful.* "I can't make it three! It needs to be three! Doctor Goodwin said it was okay, but it's not!"

For Christ's sake, why did I draw this winner? "Listen to me. It is three. Three steps. Three God-forsaken, monkey-fightin' steps. Pull, twist, and push. Count 'em, Haley."

"No." She let out a huff of air. The motion shook her small frame. How old was she? Fourteen? She put her lower lip atop her upper and sat on the floor, arms and legs crossed. "You're being mean to me, Eddie. Doctor Goodwin said you had to be nice to me. Remember? I won't let you out until you say sorry."

I fought to not tear this little bitch a new one. I walked over and gave Meier another boot, then another one, real hard. I stretched my back as far as the jacket allowed. My shoulders cracked with the stress. My hands were wet with sweat and probably blood. I clenched my fists, digging my nails into my palms. With great effort, I forced myself to relax my hands. The tingle of the change in blood circulation made them hurt. I ignored it.

"Haley, I'm sorry." I put on my 'good guy' voice. I don't usually take this pansy-arse out to play. I wanted to kick my own ass. *Embarrassing.* "Please, let me out. We'll figure this out together? Are you hungry? I know how to score us some food." My stomach rumbled at the thought, despite my rising gorge from the cell's stench. Shit, puke and rot. Time to get the hell out of here.

"Thank you, Eddie. Apology accepted. Was that so hard?" I bit my tongue. More blood. She then stood up, now coated in

syrupey red. She approached the door and did pretty much what I expected. Pull, push, pull, push, pull, push. Pull. Twist right, left, right, left, right, left. Twist right. Push, pull, push, pull, push, pull. Push.

*Man, this was killing me.* “Okay, Haley, open the door.” Turn, turn, turn. Open. I was free. I rushed forward into the cooler hallway and enjoyed a fresh breath.

Haley stood a couple paces away. She was afraid of me. Good. She should be. “Haley, would you be so kind as to undo these buckles?” I made my best ‘good guy’ smile. *Oscar worthy.* I turned my back to her and she crept forward. Her little fingers trembled as she fiddled with the straps. It took forever!

I shook her and the jacket off. It fell to the floor with a thud and clang. Too loud. I pinwheeled my arms to bring them back to life. They felt extremely light, but strong. “Two or three days?”

“Only two days, Eddie,” she said. “I saw it on Doctor Goodwin’s watch. I took it from her. It’s pretty. She let me play with it once.” Haley jingled it on her wrist for me to see. It was too big for her. My annoyance heated up. Bye-bye, ‘good guy’.

I pivoted on my heels and reached her in one step. She yelped like a wounded puppy when I grabbed her by the hair and pulled her face closer to mine, forcing her to stand on tiptoes. That was fine with me. I held her in place for a three-count and then let her go. She nearly fell, but managed to keep her footing; amazing, really, given her footwear and the condition of the floor.

“Haley, now you listen to me. I’m nuts, but you’re crazy. If you weren’t a kid, I’d drop you like a sack of moldy potatoes. If you want to live, you best heel and keep up.” I softened my tone and dropped the psycho-act, point made. I said, “You hungry? Let’s hit the staff lunchroom first. Stay on your guard. The

bastards could be anywhere.”

She nodded. “Yes, Eddie.” *Good girl.*

It wasn’t supposed to be a terribly complicated affair to find us some grub. *Ha!* I turned to Haley. “You ready?”

She nodded and eked out “Y-yes, Eddie.” The girl skittered around me, a couple paces away, lest I grab her by the scruff again. Hey, whatever kept her on her toes.

“We gotta get out of this block and to the stairwell on the other side of the common room. Let’s go. Stay behind me.” Like a beaten dog, there was little fear of her doing otherwise.

I felt exposed as we walked in the darkened hallway. There was barely enough light to see. The waxed tile floor glowed with the ambient light from the high windows. Without the hum of machinery, I was conscious of the sound of our progress. Our breathing. Our shuffling. The wet, slurping noise as we hit an area slick with bodily fluids and other sticky bits. We came across four bodies between Marky’s cell and the monitoring station. Well, there were four separate heaps. Everything was torn and ripped apart. One pile contained too many arms and another had too few heads. Haley kept trying to identify them.

“That one is Grace. She was nice. And that one there was Elias. He always touched himself down there when I saw him. Gross. That there is Paula... mixed with Charles. Some of him anyway.”

“Haley,” I hissed.

“Yes, Eddie?” she sounded almost chipper. *What the fuck?*

“Haley, shut the hell up before I punch you.”

“Okay,” she sang. If we weren’t already in a nuthouse, I swear she was losing her marbles. Can you do that twice? I shook my head. *Focus, Eddie. Food. That’s all you need. Fix you right up.*

We came close to the common room door, and I counted another six corpse-piles. *Thanks, Haley.* At least her naming

ritual was done. The room ahead shone brighter because of a skylight, but I couldn't see inside as the glass was smeared with red and black. What I did make out would have made me shit my pants if I'd been well-fed. It was a good thing Haley slinked behind me, because the last thing we needed was a scream-fest. A shadow moved around in the common room.

"Turn around and keep an eye behind us while I scope this door."

"Eddie, I hear something." Haley squinted into the murk behind us. "There's something coming. Hurry!"

I heard the scrape and scurry. Something was coming for sure. A low growling swelled from Heap Number Four. A grunt and then some movement. Haley wailed "No, no, no, no...."

My hands were still sore from the restraints, causing me to fumble with the latch of the door handle. A heat, red and furious, formed behind my eyes as the adrenaline surged forward. I balled my left hand into a fist and smashed it down on top of the latch as I yanked with my right. The door wouldn't budge. The fleshy pad of the bottom of my left hand did little to cushion the blow. My whole arm registered the pain. The predatory sounds behind us continued to grow louder. There was more than one. *Oh Fuck.*

Haley pawed at my back frantically. She was terrified, panicked and useless. The rage part of me wanted to lash out at her, to throw her to the dark. I fought the urge. It was too short-sighted. I brought my left arm around again on the stuck latch. It gave way. The door opened towards me explosively with the force of my yank. Haley and I fell backwards on the floor, closer to the advancing hunger.

The light from the common room spilled down the hallway, lighting it up like a flare. There were nine distinct movements.

Nine ways to die. Their growls got louder, becoming screams as they reacted to the light. Three retreated from the brightness, but the other six surged forward. I grabbed Haley by the wrist, dragged her to her feet and pulled her with me as I leaped across the threshold into the open room.

Wheeling to face the maw, I yelled back to Haley, who stood dumbed by shock. "Get over here! Help me close this fucking door!" She skidded over and contributed her weight. I slammed the steel door shut and hit the emergency bolt lock as the mass of flesh and bone assaulted the now sealed door. It was savage and raw, but the sound of crushing bodies and breaking limbs were muted by the insulating reinforcement.

I took Haley's hand and together we turned to face the horrors of the common room.

The first thing I noticed was an abundance of light. The skylight of the common room exposed the brilliance of the summer sun. After the dark and dim of the ward, my eyes issued their complaint. A dull throb grew in my forehead with the same blistering cadence as my bruised hand. I shivered with excess adrenaline even though the room warmed with the sunlight. The putrescence of decay emanated here.

To the left of the door hung Doctor Andrews. He swayed back and forth gently, casting a long shadow. His neck hung at a queer angle. I guess that'll happen when you string yourself up to a basketball net with your own necktie. One shoe sat on the floor below him. The calf of his left leg was split open and half-eaten. Precious little remained aside from the chewy tendons and ligaments. It looked like his bandaged right bicep had taken a bite as well. I wondered if the good doctor did some last bit of public service in removing himself from the zombie gene pool. What I didn't really get was why he moved. We were alone. Sorta.

There were close to thirty people here when shit went down. Now, the floor of the common room was littered with bits of shredded human. It looked like the worst kind of food fight at summer camp. I remember a riot back in the prison's cafeteria. Best workout ever. That was a good day. Today was not. Haley sat in the middle of the room, legs splayed, cradling the head of what looked like Emma. I didn't see the rest of her, if there even was a 'rest of her' any more. Haley sang lightly. "Pockets full of posies. Ashes, Ashes..."

"They all fall down." I don't know why I joined in. The little bitch's voice was melodic and infectious, I guess. *Second verse, same as the first!* This was too much. I stepped over Barry. At least I thought it was him. Bloody blubber, puke and shit. Check, check and check! I caught myself from falling. *Christ on a cracker, this floor was greasy!* I crouched in front of Haley. "Quit the fucking singing." I spoke slowly. She stopped immediately.

That was good for about a second-and-a-half. Still playing rock-a-bye with Emma, a low moan rose from her. It grew louder and louder as her young emotions boiled over. *What the Hell?* We didn't have time for this. I grabbed Haley by the shoulders, probably a little rougher than intended. I wasn't known to be a gentle soul. "Haley, you need to stop." She didn't. I looked back at the door we came through. The banging and clawing stopped."Look at me, for fuck's sake." Nothing but that god-awful wailing.

I stood up and walked around her, running dirty fingers through dirty hair. My hands balled up into fists as the girl continued. I snapped around and let my backhand fly to shut her up. It wasn't until after she'd flown backwards that I registered I'd hit her with an open hand. Emma's head wobbled out of sight behind an overturned table.

I closed my eyes and lifted my head to the ceiling and muttered “Oh fuck.” I approached Haley who flinched away from me. Rightfully so. At least she stopped with the noise. “Haley, I won’t hit you again.” I lied, of course. How was I to know that? I held out three fingers. “Haley, how many fingers do you see? Count them.”

She looked up warily, the dark expression of her eyes partially hidden by wayward hair. She brushed it away from her face and focused on my hand, the one that struck her, now held aloft. “One, two, three. Three fingers, Eddie. Please don’t hit me, Eddie. I’ll be good. I’ll be quiet.”

“You’ll be safe with me, Haley. But you gotta buck up. Can you do this?” I asked, summoning my good-guy persona again.

“That’s what Mom used to say,” she said quietly. I knew from group her mother was recently pushing up daisies. At this little girl’s hand, no less. That’s why she vacationed here with us. It’s good to keep track of these things. It’s good to remember the little details. I’d have to be more careful. No channelling ‘Mommy Dearest’ with this one. No siree, Bob.

Haley’s eyes widened as they darted from meeting my gaze to over my shoulder. “Eddie...” she gasped. *Shit.*

The force of the blow sent me tumbling on top of Haley, in a tangled mass of arms and legs. My feet kept slipping on the greasy floor, failing to find purchase. The weight of our attacker fell upon us. I kept my limbs moving in an attempt to avoid getting bit. All I pictured was fucknuts hanging over there with bits missing. *Not this cat. Nope. Time to get my head in the game.*

My arms found solid floor and I threw my body backwards, using the girl as leverage with my legs. All I smelled was rot, strong enough to taste. Haley screamed, and so did the stinky fuck behind me. It sounded female. I managed to turn in to a

crouch before it leapt at me.

I grabbed the first thing I found. *Batter up!* Barry's leg felt heavy at the meatier end as I swung. Bits of flesh and blood splattered me as it made contact with the zombie bitch's face. It didn't slow her down, so I swung again. Crack. The leg broke and bent across her head. I tossed the shattered limb aside. Even in death, Barry was a useless tit.

Haley suddenly jumped on the larger woman's back, repeatedly jabbing her head with a shard of broken glass. *Crazy bitch.* It howled in fury as it tried to figure out how to deal with its unfriendly backpack.

A second undead bastard joined the fray and plucked Haley off. She turned around and cut it across the jugular, spraying putrid blood all over her face. He dropped her. Haley scurried over to where I squatted. She helped me wrench a metal leg from the upturned table.

We stood for a moment, squared off with the two monstrosities. I held my new bludgeon and Haley wielded her glass sabre. Her hands trembled as they gripped the blood-soaked cloth wrapping the makeshift hilt. Two more walking shitbags joined from the east entrance of the common room. *Damn.*

I looked at Haley. "You ready for this? This is where you shine. Pretend these ugly-ass losers are your mom. Don't stop until they do."

Haley's eyes flashed a hurtful fury at the mention of her mother. That was the point. Motivation. Then she did something I didn't expect. She smiled. Widely. This kid definitely had a streak in her. For a split second, I wasn't clear who was going to get the business end of her intent. She wasn't either.

She nodded to the gruesome foursome. They fanned out. Any theory I harbored of these being stupid movie zombies went out

the window. This would be a dance of tactics, guile and luck.

“Let’s do this, Eddie. I’ll head left, you right. Race ya to the middle,” Haley whispered, excited and light.

I nodded slowly. She enjoyed this. My gut feelings about this little girl were on the mark.

We yelled like banshees as we charged.

\* \* \*

Haley and I stood in the center of the room and surveyed our victory. We were soaked in the salty gore of hard-won blood and sweat. I waded my way over the ruin of flesh and bone to where Haley proudly admired her handiwork. With the table leg, I jabbed at the remains of the torso from the first bitch on the scene. My hand throbbed with the punishment. It started to swell, likely fractured. Add ‘First Aid Station’ to the list of visits in our little adventurous foray.

Haley wiped her brow with the remnants of her shirt, baring her midriff. So many scars, burns and cuts. The miserable cow masquerading as a mother used her as an ashtray, among other things. I looked back at Haley’s face and caught myself smiling at the fresh smear of God-knows-what on her forehead.

“You missed a spot,” I said and pointed to the top of her head.

She reached up and drew her finger across the works and examined the gob. “Gross!” she said, wrinkling her nose. At that moment, she was more child than killer. “Eddie, I got Nurse Chumley all over me.”

The absurdity of her response was too much to bear. I broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Haley’s giggle joined mine in this shared little joke of battle. We were beyond speech. It was all about emotional release in the face of madness, possibly

on the verge of it. My ribs made their bruised and abused status known, cutting short my guffaws. When Haley saw me wince, she stopped as well. Her eyes displayed genuine concern. "You okay, Eddie?"

I nodded and forced a smile, the good-guy one. "I'm fine. Gotta get the number of that truck. What about you? Check for bites."

"I'm fine. It's only a couple of scratches."

*Fuck that noise.* Something wasn't right. "Take your clothes off. Now!"

"But, Eddie..." Haley looked at me as if I commanded her to kill a puppy. She'd done worse.

"Listen, you contrary little bitch. I'm not pinching for a peepshow. Show me your back, the shit you can't see. Then show me your arms and legs. I'll do the same. Gotta trust each other."

She nodded meekly and did as she was told. *Good girl.* No room for teenage modesty today. Her hands and arms took the brunt of the damage. There would be plenty more scars to add to her collection. Man, this kid's seen some action. My back didn't fare so well. There looked to be three deep gashes across my right shoulder to the small of my back. Fingernails. *Fuck.* It was weird I didn't feel them. That didn't give me the warm and fuzzies.

We left the room at the west, where the nursing station kept its patrons safe and medicated. We hit pay-dirt. Haley dressed my back from the medical kit and wrapped my hand. I did the same for her battered arms. Raggedy Ann and Andy, all patched up for another day of play. No meds though. Staying straight for once was probably the best thing either one of us could do anyway. I spied a water bottle with 'Janice' written across the side in block letters with a Sharpie. I drank greedily first before

handing the rest over to Haley. She scored a half-box of granola bars. The cardboard photo was flecked with blood spray from somewhere. We were too hungry to discriminate.

"I'm tired, Eddie."

I looked around the inside of the nurses' station. It was cozy, but most importantly, the doors and windows were equipped with rolling metal shutters. This stood as a fine little fortress. I turned back to Haley. "Me too. We'll camp here."

We grabbed a stack of blankets, hospital-issue cotton. Pulling down the metal shutters made an obscene amount of noise. Our hideout wouldn't be much of a secret for long.

I laid on my side, facing the door. My hands still clutched the table leg as I tried to get comfortable. Haley spread out under the counter top and dropped immediately to sleep.

It was a while before I nodded off, listening to the dark, my imagination running wild. At some point, I dozed then woke to find myself flat on my back with Haley curled up to me.

I ran my fingers through her hair and touched her cheek. She shivered as if fevered. Maybe it was me. I fell into a fitful sleep, praying for daybreak.

Guys like me never dream about nice things, only nightmares. Tonight wasn't any different. In this Hell-trip of a brain-cramp, I was locked up again in a hospital being hunted by zombies with a teenage psycho chick as backup. *Wait a minute. Shit. Not dreaming.*

"Eddie?" Haley's small voice broke through the radio static of my thoughts. "What are we going to do? I don't want to die in here."

"No shit," I quipped. That wasn't high on my list either. "We're getting the Hell outta here. It's been quiet. What time is it?"

Haley bent under the emergency light and wiped the face of Goodwin's watch. It was broken. She shrugged. It probably didn't matter much. It was time to skedaddle.

With that, we left our tin cage and ventured out.

On the other side of the station sat a shelf of linens and scrubs too fresh looking to pass up. We took turns standing guard outside the small washroom. The water was cold, but felt good on my face. I peered over my shoulder and peeked in the mirror at the festering mess brewing on my back. It looked angry but alive. I hoped that was the good news.

There was a pipe wrench in the can that hefted better in my hands than the table leg. Haley upgraded as well. Someone had a birthday. Maybe it was Chumley. *Who cares?* The six-inch blade whipped and chopped the air as Haley welded it as an extension of her arm. This wasn't her first rodeo.

Haley skipped down the hallway, pointing out the sights. The corpses here were largely staff, from what Haley reported. I was satisfied they didn't fucking move. Evisceration and dismemberment did that to a person. There weren't enough bodies, only rage and food. Where the Hell was everyone else? I remember the lockdown bells going off during the initial swarming of the common room during group. That seemed a lifetime ago.

"Haley, hold up." I bent over the bloody torso of some miserable fool in a lab-coat. The badge said he was Assistant Director Stevens. I took the badge at face value as there wasn't one left to verify. But, hey, we scored a swipe card. Aside from emergency lights, the doors outside the ward were all electronically keyed.

The girl stood over me and looked up and down the hallway. She touched my shoulder. It burned. "Eddie, where are all the

guards?”

*Good question.* It was all lab coats, scrubs and johnny shirts. Nothing but dead and infected folk. From a tactical perspective, that didn't bode well. “We have to get off this floor. Now.”

We sprinted through the dim to the stairwell at the end of the hallway. Human ruin blurred past as we went. The smell of it all no longer bothered me. Even for me, this marked a new low. My feet hurt. Hospital slippers were not meant for athletics.

My numb hands fumbled with the swipe card. The blood beat in my head as my heart thumped in my chest. The card fell from my hands. Haley picked it up and unlocked the door. I flung it wide and we went through.

The stairwell was brightly-lit. Did the power come back on? No. High windows.

“Which way, Eddie?”

“Down.”

The metal grate steps ground painfully into our feet as we descended the first flight. Sneakers. We should have relieved a few folks back on the ward. *Not smart, Eddie. Gotta do better.*

The crash of the door below deafened us. Haley and I saw the dance of seven or eight red dots hit the wall three flights down. This would be all shoot-first-questions-later kinda action.

Haley looked frightened. *That was helpful.* “What now?”

“Up. We go up.”

Haley and I managed to gain two flights before the echo of gunfire threatened to rupture my eardrums. I remember stopping my ascent at the first report, closing my eyes and waiting for the wind and sting of the lead rain to come. It didn't. I looked up at Haley. She looked down at me, then beyond to the melee below.

“Eddie, those aren't soldiers.”

I turned and saw a dozen men in black jumpsuits, vests and ball caps. They brandished automatics. I couldn't tell what kind, but it didn't matter. They weren't pointed at us, but at the door to the floor below the ward. It was open and the squad dumped hot metal inside like rice at a wedding. It didn't change anything. The men were becoming overwhelmed by the onslaught. There were too many of them.

"Climb, Haley. Hurry."

By the time we reached the top floor, the guns fell silent with empty magazines. Soon after, the screaming stopped, the sound of men and women being eaten alive finished. Haley and I looked at each other in unspoken understanding. Our own end would be quite different.

We slipped inside the door to the top floor and heard the lock click behind us. Another windowless door stood in front of us. We were in some kind of ante-room, small and dark, more so after the glare of the bright stairwell. The buttons on the keypad glowed their request. I swiped the card and waited. Pin code. *Shit.*

"Birthday," Haley said.

"What?"

"Try his birthday, Eddie. It should be on the card."

It was. The keypad made a beep and there was a clunk as the mechanism turned. I turned to Haley. "Thanks," I said. "Doesn't mean you get a fucking gold star or anything."

"Whatever, Eddie," she said as she skipped ahead of me through the open door. *What the hell was wrong with this kid?* "You coming?" she asked. Her eyes danced. Haley looked possessed with our little game of hide-and-seek.

"Hold up," I said. Things were too quiet in here. It was a hallway lit solely by the emergency lights with all the office

doors closed. It was clean, antiseptic clean, hospital clean. Well, some hospitals anyway. After what we'd seen below, this was the last thing I expected. Double-doors loomed at the far end. "You got your knife?" One, two, three came her swipes in the reddish lamplight. I felt under-armed as I hefted my heavy pipe wrench. "Let's go. Slowly."

We made our way to the end of the corridor. I pushed one of the doors gently with the business end of the wrench and found it gave easily. Haley and I crept through. I looked about the large area. This was more like it.

The main room was huge, with what looked like smaller procedure rooms circling the perimeter. Another set of double-doors stood exactly opposite to our position. There were high windows, much like the common room back on the ward floor. I had no idea what time it was, only that it was still daylight.

The center of the space drew our attention. We easily imagined how things were setup, orderly and all scientific-like. To the left would be row upon row of gurneys with straps running the length, facility for at least twenty beds. At the right stood a bank of heavy metal shelving filled with stainless steel cages. We didn't bother counting them. This was nowhere near orderly. This was chaos.

Cage doors hung ajar as if torn. Gurneys were askew, straps snapped and shredded. Some were toppled over. One bed and its hookups were smashed into the cage-wall. Coating everything was blood and ruin. There were no bodies, human or otherwise.

Haley and I found ourselves in the center of the wreckage back-to-back, her eyes watching the left, while I guarded the right. My heart pounded against the brain noise of the quiet room. I realized we were both holding our breath. "Breathe, Haley," I said. She reached behind with her shield hand for mine and

laced my fingers. I let her. She was cold.

Then the goddamned monkeys showed up.

The absurdity of the approaching troop stunned me for a few moments. Sure, I expected there to be monkeys. That's what the cages were for. But there was a difference between knowing a thing from putting two-and-two together and seeing that same thing running towards you with teeth bared screaming bloody blue murder.

"Eddie," said Haley as she squeezed my hand. "Their fur is full of blood."

I shook her hand off, and time slowed. I looked to the procedure room where the parade began. It was human soup. The lab nerds must have sought safety and were picked off like fish in a barrel, a barrel full of monkeys now.

I swung my wrench and clocked the first one in the head, sending it tumbling wildly to the right. I nearly lost my footing with the inertia. The return arc nabbed two more. My foot connected with one under the jaw. *Lights out, little fucker.* By the time I brought the wrench around again, three more were in flight as they leapt towards my head. I clipped one as I ducked. The other two were on me before I righted myself.

Haley fared little better. The cake knife extended the reach of her swing slightly. She was quick and most effective when she caught the monkeys with the tip. Sprays of chimp blood whipped across the room in an abstract artist's fit of passion. She took out six or seven of them before the blade became lodged in the neck of one screaming bag of fur. Just like that, she was disarmed.

I bashed two heads together with a satisfying crunch when a gunshot thundered. I turned to glimpse Haley with her arms outstretched choking a wriggling monster Hell-bent on biting

her face. Then with another boom, its head exploded, showering the girl in dead monkey juice.

The second shot did the trick. The remainder of the troop yelped in panic and scurried back to the barrel room. Our apparent savior made chase and threw the door closed behind them as he shot a straggler.

He turned to us. "You guys alright? Are you bit?"

Haley and I quickly took stock and shook our heads. There was a lot of blood, but none of it ours.

"We're good," I said, not mentioning the festering scratches on my back. Haley kept the peace as well. *That's my girl. She learns fast.* "Where the Christ did you come from?"

"I'm Barney. I was in the can when shit hit the fan out here. Where'd you sprout up from?"

"Ward-floor." There wasn't any point hiding that fact. We were in patient scrubs. "I'm Eddie. This is Haley."

Barney was obviously a security guard, a little overweight but tall and strong-looking. The room was cool, but he dripped in sweat. He didn't come across as being all that bright. The man had the gear though. He still held his service weapon and wore a nightstick. The riot-gear vest he sported was too small for him, but made carrying spare clips easy.

He stuck his giant mitt out and I shook it. "Good to see normal folk for a change," he said enthusiastically before turning to Haley. "Welcome to the lab, kiddo." She smiled brightly at him and shook his hand with her whole arm. Barney saw her as a little helpless girl. I knew better.

"How long have you been here, Mister Barney?" *Cute, Haley. Cute.*

"Fifteen years," he said with a smirk. "Four days since the lockdown, three of them with only me and my little friends. The

squints didn't make it."

"Well, something made it off the floor. It's a shit show out there," I said.

Barney nodded. "Yeah, whatever these jokers were working on, jumped from chimp to human."

"By accident or on purpose?" Haley asked. Good question. She yanked her knife out of the dead chimp with a wet gurgle and pop.

He didn't answer, probably because he didn't know. Instead he said, "I called for backup."

"If you mean the rented guns, don't count on 'em. The bastards didn't make it past the second floor."

"Jesus. We're on our own then." He looked beaten, defeated and somewhat smaller.

Haley went over and hugged him. "It's okay, Mister Barney." I didn't expect empathy from the girl. She was chock full of surprises lately.

"You best stay clear of me, Haley." He gripped her shoulders, pushed her back to arms-length away and let go. He rolled up his sleeve and showed us his bandaged arm. It weeped pus and stank like rot, reminding me of good ol' Meier. "It's been a rough couple of days. The fever and puking started this morning. I probably don't have long."

Barney wasn't stupid after all. He knew the score.

The decision to kill Barney wasn't hard. Getting it done was a bitch.

I worked in the chemical room, putting together a poor-man's flame thrower by mixing hand sanitizer with lab-grade ether in a plant mister. It's funny what can be found if you're observant. Barney's yellow knuckles told me he kept a lighter handy, even if he was out of smokes. I'd pinch it later.

When I came out of the room, Haley and Barney stood facing each other several paces apart. She wore his vest. I stopped. He pleaded with her.

“Do it.”

Haley’s hands were shaking. It wasn’t that she couldn’t kill. Nope, that wasn’t the issue. She’d never fired a gun before.

“What if I miss, Barney?”

“You won’t. Use both hands. Relax your grip. Don’t lock your arms. Breathe deep and slow, sight along the barrel as you do. Hold your breath and squeeze the trigger.”

The monkeys were pounding and screaming at the wire mesh glass of the door as if they knew what was afoot. Neither Haley nor Barney took notice of them or me. It was their moment.

“I’m scared,” she said.

“Do it,” he said through clenched teeth, struggling for control. “Do it or I’ll hurt you.”

The gun roared, Barney toppled to the side and was still. Keeping a wary eye on Haley, I cautiously walked over and grabbed the nightstick and dug through his pockets for the lighter. Score. I smelled the sour metallic mix of burnt gunpowder and fresh blood. Haley watched me with detachment, her mouth slightly agape. The gun hung limply at her side.

“Haley,” I said. No response. I flicked the lighter. It was one of those butane torch types. Perfect. I gave her time. I hefted and worked the baton, a fine tool. I waited a little more before meeting her gaze again, cold and dead.

“Haley,” I repeated and moved towards her. “Give me the gun.”

“No,” she said quietly. So it was going to be this way? *Okay-fine.*

I thought about simply taking it from her, but something

about her demeanor made me reconsider. "Give me the fucking gun, Haley."

Like a doll brought abruptly to life, her whole body moved at once. Her hand tightened around the grip of the pistol and her arm raised deliberately and leveled the barrel at me.

"No," she said slowly, this time more forceful and decisive. The scared little girl vanished. I had no idea who this was in her place.

A few things happened at once. The security glass of the barrel room cracked and splintered as the hairy freaks threw each other at the little window. The double-door we came through forever ago burst open and a gang of fucked up misfits burst on the scene. Former patients, doctors and jarheads mingled together in zombie-harmony.

With a hoard to the left of us and a troop of rabid chimps pouring out from the right, it was easy to miss the small miracle of Barney's resurrection. He stood up, staggered and shook his head as he gained his footing. A flap of skin at his temple wagged to and fro. Haley's aim fired true but not perfect.

"Ah, shit," said Barney as he first looked at the encroaching parties then at what was clearly now Haley's gun.

Haley and I looked at each other and stifled a shared laugh at the absurd.

"Hey, Barney. Catch," I said as I tossed him back his baton. He caught it with one hand and gave it a twirl.

"Time to go to work," he said as he assumed a fighting stance. Barney swung the baton like it was part of his arm. I was impressed the large man moved with such grace, especially given his recent brush with death and the stink of what was to come. That kind of training marked him as a rare breed.

Haley fired in to the crowd repeatedly until she ran out of

ammo. Every shot hit its mark, but they hardly made a dent in the fray. She held only the cooks' knife and fell back to guard our rear. We were being forced backward an inch at a time.

Even Barney's acrobatics could not change our fate. We were being out-flanked. The lone weapon left having any effect was my fire mist. A few of the monkeys caught ablaze right away, making for a weird game of cricket as Barney batted them with his nightstick. I'm not sure a troop of flaming zombie monkeys was more or less dangerous. Their fear of fire granted us a small perimeter, a bubble of sorts.

When our backs hit the double doors of the opposite side of the room, my plant mister finally gave up the ghost with a melted nozzle. As luck would have it, it wasn't a moment too soon. The odor of propane filled the room.

"You guys smell that?" I asked.

"Smells like barbeque," said Haley.

"Roasted monkey meat smells like pork," chimed Barney. "So does human. Don't ask."

I didn't need or want to. Instead I said, "Look at the broken gas-lines. This place is filling up quickly. We gotta jet."

Haley's eyes went wide as she understood. "Eddie, we have to do it."

"I know. We will."

The hoard must have worked out we had no fire juice left and came forward in earnest. We took it as our exit cue and backed through the doors. Barney jammed his nightstick in the handles while Haley dropped the lock pins on the floor. I took care of the upper ones, buying us a few extra minutes.

"The roof access is over here," said Barney.

The three of us sprinted to the exit and clambered up the metal stairs emptying out on to the roof. The night air was cool, fresh

and dizzying. It hit me like a sucker punch. I heard the whump-whump of helicopter blades amid the yells of frantic people. I saw shifting spotlights, scurrying men in black-ops regalia and a half-dozen moving hazmat suits. I couldn't make out what was said. They were still out of earshot, but coming closer.

Haley touched my hand. "You promised, Eddie. Set this place to burn."

I showed her the butane lighter and said, "I'll be right back," knowing it wasn't a promise that could be kept. I turned to head back down the stairs not thinking about consequences anymore. Haley wanted to see this through and so did I, even if it was a one way trip.

Barney's hand hit my chest and stopped me short. He looked at me, warrior to warrior. "I'll do it." He indicated his wounded arm. "My goose is cooked anyway. Let me do this."

I held his stare a few seconds longer and handed him the lighter.

Barney's last words before he ducked back inside were a simple truth. "Besides, you need each other."

As Haley and I sat huddled in the back of the rising helicopter, we felt the warm wind of Barney's firestorm. We'd be okay.