

36 Hours

A Tale of the Undead

the 2nd edition by

Anthony Barnhart

THIS WORK OF FICTION IS DEDICATED TO SOME OF THE CLOSEST
FRIENDS I'VE EVER HAD: CHRIS, LEE, DEWENTER, ASHLIE,
DYLAN & TYLER

"Your dead shall live;
Their bodies shall rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
Awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of light,
And the earth will give birth
To the dead."
- Isaiah 26:19



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Anthony Barnhart, 2010

The Beginning of The End

April 14, 2004

The strain of [avian] flu virus that has spread in Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe has not been found in birds—or humans—in the United States. There's a very low risk that people in the United States will get infected with the avian flu unless there's a global outbreak.

– Mary Gavin, MD

She stood outside, the stiff breeze billowing the lavender dress around her legs. She hunched down, scooped a shirt into her hands, stood, raised her arms, clipped the shirt upon the clothesline. She stood back for a moment and took a deep breath, her hands dropping down to her bulging stomach. Birds cried out in the distance, singing to one another, and she felt a slight thrust in her abdomen, and a smile crept over her worn lips.

The house's back screen door flew open, and her son and another boy hopped across the concrete patio facing the swing-set. They shouted to one another as they ran towards the tree-line, and the woman watched with a faint grin as they disappeared down the wooded trail. She stared into those woods for the longest time, gazing at the black oaks and yellow poplars with their bright leaves, the red mulberry trees with their purple grace, and the pitch pines rising like quiet sentinels into the clear blue sky. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she became lost in the wind's soft kisses.

The serenity shattered as she heard a voice coming from inside the house; she grunted, shook her head, and abandoned the clothesline. She entered the house and made her way into the living room. The boys' PLAYSTATION sat unused before the large-screen HD TV. On the screen, a reporter stood amongst a chicken coup with clucking chickens, a microphone held in front of her wind-swept face: "...The people who have gotten sick, or died, from Avian Flu in Asia have had direct contact with birds. And though the Avian Flu, called H5N1, cannot be spread from person to person, scientists are concerned that the

virus could undergo a genetic mutation that could spread from person to person.” The woman moved towards the television and hit the POWER button. The reporter’s last words echoed in her mind, but only for a moment, before she returned to hanging clothes upon the clothesline: “As of right now, there’s no vaccine for the bird flu, so scientists are worried that if it *does* mutate, it will be difficult to stop and could cause a pandemic... A global outbreak.”

She stood humming to herself quietly, a pair of khakis being clipped to the clothesline, when she heard the shout. She spun around, her heart lodged in her chest; her son came stumbling through the woods, staggering through the grass, tears crawling down rose-blotched cheeks. She left one pant leg dangling upon the line as she ran across the lawn, lower back aching. Her son threw himself upon her, wrapping his arms around her large waist, the tips of his fingers touching behind her back. She knelt down on one arm and hugged him tight. He buried his face into her shoulder, and she could feel him shaking in her arms. She pulled herself away to look at the boy: several deep scratches covered his face, fresh blood still smearing his cheeks; one of his eyes hung limp and swollen. She felt tears brimming in her own eyes.

“What happened?” she demanded in a rush. “Where’s Kenny?”

The boy stammered through choking sobs, “He wouldn’t let me play with it...”

“Ben.” She ran a finger across his cheek; warm blood trickled down her fingernail.

He hung his head low, whimpering. “I just wanted to play with it...”

“Where’s Kenny? Ben.” She tried to get him to focus. “*Where’s Kenny?*”

“He said it was his because he found it...”

She grabbed his arm, trying to get him to focus. “Ben. Did Kenny hurt you?”

“We found a baby bird, Mommy.” His nose sniffled. “He wouldn’t let me play...”

“He wouldn’t let you play with the bird?”

He shook his head *No*.

"Okay, Sweetie." She brought him close, kissed his forehead.

With his face buried into her shoulder, he moaned, "He wouldn't let me play..."

She wiped a tear from his eye, pulled away. "So he hit you?"

He nodded, eyes sour. "And he bit me, too."

Surprised, she asked, "He bit you?"

A nod.

"Where?"

He pulled away now, and he showed her his arm. Several tiny teeth marks could be seen in a concentric half-circle, the blood from the broken skin already beginning to clot. "It hurts, Mommy."

"I know it does, Ben. I know." She stood. "Go into the house. Wait for me to come back, and I'll clean it out for you."

He fidgeted for a moment. "Will it hurt?"

"A little bit. But not for long. You're a big boy, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. Where were you and Kenny playing?"

"We found the bird by the waterfall."

"Okay. You go inside. I'm going to go get Kenny and call his mom."

The boy suddenly exclaimed, "No! Mommy! He'll hurt you, too!"

"No, he won't," his mom said. "I promise."

The path through the woods began to sprout grasses through the trodden dirt, the blades whispering under her footfalls. She became lost in the quiet, which broke only with the occasional songbird or the buzzing of an insect. The path wound between groves of flowering dogwoods and chinkipins, stands of serviceberry and southern magnolia, the occasional shagbark hickory with its gray bark and shaggy trunk, reaching over a hundred feet into the cerulean sky. The sounds of the brook became dominant, and the path followed a stream with clear water filled with minnows and crayfish, large polished rocks covered with

lichen and moss rising stubbornly from the shallow rapids. The path crossed over a creaking wooden bridge with faded carvings etched into the rails, mementos of undying love, long-lost. The trail bent to the right, following the stream along the other side. She followed the path up a moist hillside, the branches of swamp maples with their winged red fruits blocking the warm sunlight.

The path opened up before a waterfall; the water fell from a twenty-foot high ledge and splashed into a bubbly oasis that meandered into the stream, flowing towards the ocean. She stood staring at the waterfall, and behind the shimmering sheet of falling water, which seemed to sparkle as if drenched with diamonds, she could see brief flashes of a small, hunched figure.

She moved closer to the waterfall and shouted Kenny's name. No response. The figure refused to move. She told herself that he cowered behind the waterfall in shame, afraid of facing the consequences of his actions; though she never knew Kenny to be the violent type, for he laughed often and spent his days playing with his dinosaur toys in the backyard.

The woman drew closer to the falling sheet of water. The path wound around and went behind the cascade-falls. She took her steps gingerly in the muddy earth. She moved around the sheet of water, and Kenny's back faced her. He stood awkwardly hunched forward, arms dangling at his side. A small shiver ran through her, as if a phantom kissed her soul. "Kenny?" she choked, her voice almost a frightened whisper. A deep sense of fear crawled through her veins, but she moved closer. "Kenny?" No response. He stood only five feet away, his body seeming to move in rhythm with his deep and somewhat scattered breaths. She took another step forward. Her arm reached out. She grabbed Kenny's arm with her hand. He swung around—and she screamed.

She stumbled down the path, panting hard, the image of Kenny's face engraved into her mind: skin pulled taught among his bones, flesh a blue hue, lips swollen and cracked, eyes sunken and glazed, bloodshot; and his mouth! He had swung around, and his mouth had been caked with blood and feathers, the

head of the baby salt-marsh sparrow dangling by hewn sinews between his teeth. The image would not leave her, and she cried out at the top of her lungs, the world spinning around her, the trees turning into a blur. She glanced back behind her, saw the wild trail dancing, and she tripped, screamed, her ankle searing with pain. She fell to the side, lost her balance, and the world turned upside down. She landed hard on her chest and tumbled down a hillside, briar thorns tearing at her dress. Her body somersaulted upwards and she hit a tree head-on, her forehead smashing into the bark. She groped at the sourwood trunk, but she could not find a grasp, and she fell backwards, rolled head-over-heels, and suddenly she found herself weightless, the blue sky interspersed with oak branches above, and then her world shattered. She landed hard in the stream, and her back burned with agony as sharp rocks dug into her skin. Cool water washed through her hair, matting it to her head, and she lied sprawled in the stream, chest moving up and down, each breath excruciating. She felt something warm in her groin, and then there came a sharp burst of pain. The warmth spread down her legs, and in a moment she realized what was happening. A great shout rang out, and she lifted her head, tears beginning to come forth. She leaned over on to her side and vomited into the stream, the crystal water carrying bloody bile between the polished and moss-covered rocks.

The sound of splashing came from the direction of the waterfall. She raised her head, felt her neck burn, to see a figure moving towards her down the stream, water splashing with each step. Her vision blurred as it tried to focus, and she could see it was Kenny, the blood still staining his lips, the eyes maniacal, his figure hunched, hands twitching. She moaned and pleaded, told herself to get up, to run, but she could not. Kenny approached, and his shadow fell over her. She raised her hands as if to protect herself. Kenny ignored her protests, fell down onto his knees. His quivering fingers, stained with bird's blood, fingered her tattered dress, as if in awe. A certain innocence sparkled in his act, but it became nothing as he moved forward on his knees, in the water, and straddled the woman. She pressed her hands against his chest, tried to push

him off, but weakness invaded. She shook her head, felt the cold water rushing through her ears, the world gone silent, and tears traced lightning-streaks across her cheeks as her words fumbled through half-words and partial-syllables, begging Kenny to cease.

She let out a dying shriek as Kenny bent down, placing his mouth upon her neck.

Birds took flight from their perches in the cottonwoods and ashes and climbed into the cool, splendid morning sky as the woman's banshee-like cries echoed through the woods, mingled with the buzzing of cicadas and the broken songs of swooning cardinals.

The sun had begun to set. The silver Ford Taurus pulled into the driveway of the country ranch-style house. The driver parked it beside the minivan setting in the eastward shadow of the garage. His door opened, and he stepped out, wearing a rough-necked black suit and carrying a SAMSONITE briefcase. He found the front door unlocked and entered the parlor. He stood upon the hardwood floor and felt a deathly, silent pall creeping into his bones. He took a deep breath, slightly unnerved. He knew she was home, the van sat in the driveway. Holding the briefcase in his hand, he called out her name, only to have it echoed back to him, mixed with the gentle, clicking rhythm of the grandfather clock sitting in the living room. He looked into the room with the clock and saw no one, only the PLAYSTATION with its controllers spread out on the floor before the silent television set. He called out her name again, and when the echo settled, his ears perked at the sound of a faint *thump* from upstairs. He paused a moment, set the briefcase down upon the floor, and ascended the stairs.

The hallway led directly to a window overlooking the woods, wan evening light filtering through the closed blinds. The door to the bathroom and Ben's room were on the right, the bathroom door closed and Ben's slightly cracked, yellow sunlight coming between the crack in the door. The doors to the closet and he and his wife's bedroom were shut tight. He moved forward, hearing his

feet creaking upon the floorboards underneath the worn, haggled carpet. He heard another noise coming from Ben's bedroom. He stood before the slightly-opened door, called out Ben's name. No response. He traced his fingers across the polished oak door, and he slowly pushed the door forward, and it swung into the room, revealing Ben's dresser and desk, the dinosaur posters on the walls, LEGOS scattered on the floor in front of his bed, which jutted out from a single wall. He could see Ben's back hunched over on the other side of the bed.

His mouth moved, and his voice came deafeningly loud: "Ben?"

Ben's body arched upwards, snapping at the sound.

The man staggered backwards, through the open door, into the hallway wall.

Ben stared at him from across the bed, bloodshot eyes spitting venom, the swollen blue skin pulled tight. In blood-stained jaws, the boy held the scrawny neck of the family Chihuahua. Blood covered the dog's white coat, and the eyes hung lifeless. The boy—no, what had once *been* a boy—opened his jaws, and the dog fell onto the bed, neck contorting and twisting, blood gushing over the Stegosaurus and Triceratops stenciled upon the bed-sheets. The boy stared at the figure in the hall, and with his mouth opened, he shrieked.

The otherworldly scream shook the house, blended with the wails of a dying man.

The jade-green Sedan pulled into the driveway, stopping behind the minivan and the Taurus. "Hurry up," the driver said, "I have a pot roast on the stove." The twin back doors opened and two girls jumped out, donned in their tan GIRL SCOUT uniforms. They began heading to the front door. The driver rolled down the window, and she exclaimed, "Don't forget the cookies!" The girls exchanged exasperated glances, and one trotted back to the car and leaned inside, grabbing the cookies. The woman, frustrated, sighed: "Hurry up, okay? *Move.*" The girl rolled her eyes and slipped away, running to join her friend at the front door, whom had rung the doorbell. They stood upon the steps for a moment, rang the doorbell once more, heard it chiming within the house. One of the girls looked

back at the car and shrugged. The woman leaned out the rolled-down window and shouted, "Go around the back! They might be out grilling or something." She leaned back inside as the girls made their way around the house and into the back.

The girls passed between several clothes hanging upon a line, the fabrics swinging gracefully in the early summer breeze. They tried knocking at the back door, but no response came. They glanced over at the swing-set, wanting to swing for a bit, but knew that the scout leader would have a fit. They began heading back. As they rounded the side of the house, that's when they heard the scream. Panic leapt into their hearts, and they began to run, the one girl swinging the bag of thin mints and peanut butter cookies in a clenched fist. They ran into the front lawn and stopped dead in their tracks. The screaming filled their ears like nails on a chalkboard, and their eyes beheld a man, blood covering his black suit and tie, reaching into the car from the driver's side window, his face hidden from view. The scout leader struggled, shouting for help, and then the figure leaned in closer, and through the windshield they could see the man's mouth biting down upon the woman's throat. A burst of brilliant red blood sprayed against the windshield, the jugular severed, and blood crawled down the curved glass. The girl let the bag of cookies slide from limp fingers, face ashen and eyes wide as saucers. The car seemed to shake and quiver, though nothing could be seen through the blood-soaked windshield. The girls started to cry as the woman's hands appeared, scraping along the inside of the windshield, smearing the blood in great swathes.

The girls turned and ran back around the house, not knowing where to go, knowing only to escape. They neared the clothesline, and in the next moment one of the shirts tore from the line, wrapping around a figure. The girls froze, flailing backwards; the shirt ripped away from the figure with a burst of wind, and they could see a pregnant woman, blood still flowing down her shirt from her wounded neck, running towards them, arms outstretched, recurved fingers forming a claw-like frenzy, the bluish skin pulled taut around bloodshot eyes, bloodstained teeth opening between blood-swollen lips.

August 2025

The sunlight glinting along the ledge in the low mountainside caught his eye and they pulled the trawler close to the shore and he got down into the canoe and paddled across to the stone-strewn shoreline. He looked back to see his partner standing on the deck of the fishing trawler smoking a cigarette and lazily casting a line out into the dark channel waters. He turned back around and crawled out of the canoe's bow and turned and grabbed the bow's lip and pulled it onto the rocks painted in algae and moss. Orange lichen woven like a spider's web across the polished surface. He looked up the towering mountainside. The incline had looked less steep from their position on the water. He made up his mind and went ahead, using the hewn stones as handholds and grabbing the spruce trunks to pull himself up. He reached the ledge in the mountainside and stood on the tracks in the bleak afternoon sunlight. Mist clung to the top of the mountain and inched its way in weaving fingers down the gnarled pine-laden slope. Standing on the tracks long corroded and crumbling in red oxidized pieces, he looked back down the steep slope and saw the canoe beached farther out and the fishing trawler in the channel looked surprisingly small and his partner had returned down into the trawler's cabin. He stood breathing hard with his limbs aching and fingers cut and he watched the dark clouds tumbling over one another above, their bellies swollen dark with gathered moisture. The sunlight penetrated the clouds in piercing shafts that shone down like beams from heaven. He reached into his pocket but found it empty and cursed, wishing he'd brought his cigarettes, and he walked down the tracks. Trees sprouted between the laid iron and ahead of him before a tunnel carved into the mountain it sits still and quiet.

He stands before it. Watching. He looks behind him. The tracks snake along the mountainside's ledge and then disappear into another tunnel. The diesel train with its engine and four passenger cars is quiet and forlorn. Paint long dulled and chipped. Exposed steel rusting and pocked by the salt air. He walks to the last passenger car and climbs onto the back and twists the door's handle. The door opens and he steps inside. The aisle leads to the front of the car, and along

either side are seats filled with suitcases and duffel bags caked in a thick layer of dust. One broken windows, the others stained with grime. He walks down the aisle, stepping over strewn luggage. A bird's nest in one of the seats. Mice scurrying in panic at the resounding thunder of his footfalls. A seat gutted as if with a knife, the stuffing pooled out in strands. The arched walls furry with green mold.

He goes to the next car and to the next, each car resplendent with abandoned luggage. He tries to piece it together in his mind. *The train rolls to a stop, the engine deprived of fuel. The passenger disembark, leaving their luggage behind in their haste. They head down the train-tracks, disappearing into the tunnel. The train abandoned forever.* He wonders if he is the only man who has set foot in these carriages since that day. Decades ago. It is not unbelievable. He goes to the last passenger car. In a seat is a headless skeleton. The skull lies between the bony legs, nestled against the hip bone. Cradled by crooked, upturned hands. The skeleton wears a suit that is now nothing more than faded and moth-eaten rags. He stares at the skull and it stares back, the dark eye sockets emptying into a brain cavity long abandoned. He bends down and grips the skull and then he wrenches his hand back as a mouse shrieks and leaps out of one of the eye-sockets and scampers over the bony fingers and down the leg bones to the floor, disappearing under the next seat.

He's in the Engine. He sits in the dusty chair and traces his hands across the controls. A rain begins to fall. A quiet drizzle. He leans forward and runs his hands across the inside of the window, smearing away a thick layer of dust. He wipes the dust on his faded jeans and leans back in the chair against and stares forward through the window at the dark tunnel ahead. Shifting shapes within. He knows it's time to leave. But he just sits there and closes his eyes and he can almost hear the throbbing engine and the blows of the horn and the laughter of children. He opens his eyes and now hears nothing but the rain drumming on the roof. The shapes within the shadowy tunnel continue to shift and contort,

shadows within shadows. He knows they're watching him. He stands and leaves the train and walks through the rain and descends the mountainside and returns to the canoe, pushing it back into the channel as the rain comes down without a whisper of thunder.

He returns to the fishing trawler and climbs onto the deck and lashes the canoe to the side. The rain comes down harder and the boat rocks under the waves. Even in the narrow channel the waves can become frighteningly violent and he descends down into the cabin. There are two twin-sized beds against either wall but one is filled with crates and boxes and on the other his partner sits with a map spread over his legs and a pencil in hand. The high windows are rain-streaked and dark and there is a mounted oil lamp giving off meager light. The man who had come from the mountain says nothing and strips down and changes into dry clothes and he goes to a dresser and pulls out some strips of dried beef. His partner looks up and asks if he found anything. The man shakes his head and lights a cigarette, and he tells him it was a diesel train—a relic even for the age of its abandonment—and says he saw shadows in the tunnel cut into the mountainside. His partner asks if his mind was playing tricks on him and he says, “No. They were just wolves.” His partner asks if they were really wolves. He replies, “We see what we want to see just as much as we see what we don’t want to see.” Then his partner makes a comment about him smoking and how his wife won’t like it and he just says she’s not here so it doesn’t matter.

The rain continues unabated for several hours. The man who had explored the train goes up to the deck and braves the rain and makes sure the anchor is secure and then climbs the ladder into the fly-deck. He stares through the rain-laced window at the choppy, white-tipped waters and he looks up the mountainside and even in the dark and the fog he can see the train and he sees faces looking at him from the windows. He blinks his eyes and they are gone.

He goes back down to the cabin and asks what the weather channel forecasts for the storm and his partner just laughs and hands him the map. "It's been a while since we've been to Klawock," he says. "I'm thinking in the morning we can check it out, and it's just eighty odd miles south of the rendezvous." The other man says that Klawock's been visited before, there's nothing new there. The man who had charted the course says, "It's been scouted. It hasn't been visited yet. We can check it out. That's what we're being paid for, anyways." The man says something about how he would rather just fish, how he hates being away from home for days at a time, and his partner smirks and says, "At least you can smoke without having to time it to where she won't find out."

The rain lets up overnight and the mist has returned to the mountains once the sun has risen. The channel becomes placid again and the trawler leaves a wake in its path. He operates the engine and the controls on the fly-deck and his partner throws out some lines. They usually fish with nets and baskets but he is fishing for sport now. The gray clouds casting the trawler in shadow dance in an acrobatic tumult and the sun's rays barely penetrate. There are no sunny days here: an adequate reflection of many a man's heart: gray, unchanging, cold, calloused. The man takes the trawler around the channel and as the channel bends a town comes into view. Farther down the water is another town, but it is not visible due to the fog. A larger town. Craig, if he remembers correctly. The larger scouting crews are taking the larger settlements. Klawock is blanketed in the same fog straddling the mountain shores. He calls down to his partner and his partner joins him and as the trawler nears the town the fog seems to curl backwards revealing remnants of what had at one time been a dock. Now the wooden planks have rotted and fallen from their posts and disappeared into the frigid water, becoming havens for crabs and mussels and barnacles. All that remain are the largest posts jutting out of the water, arranged in geometric fashion, the wooden sides eaten away by salt and rain and wind, leaving ragged spikes upon which barnacles roost. Erecting out of the water beside the fallen dock are the corroded masts of sunken boats; most masts are

barren but some still hold tattered sails that flap in a stiff breeze. He guides the trawler closer and the mist continues to thin. He turns down the engine to a mere idle, aware that just underneath the surface of the water are sunken hulls that may damage their boat. Now he can see the remains of the closest buildings. Along the rocky shoreline and emerging from the bleak fog stand several wolves with grizzly hair and featureless glowing eyes. The partner murmurs and goes back outside and down onto the deck and opens a safe and walks to the bow and raises the rifle and fires off several shots. The gunshots echo back and forth between the mountains and carry down the channel. The wolves scatter silently into the mist as several bald eagles take flight from their nests in the towering pines.

They anchor the boat just offshore and they climb into the canoe and guide it through the maze of spikes. Beneath the water on either side the man can barely make out the rusting halls covered with sea life. Sea cucumbers, starfish, and a vast array of crabs and jellyfish make these shorelines their homes. Deeper out in the twisting channels and engulfing bays are fields of towering kelp dancing in the underwater currents. The waters swim with northern pikes, brook trout, coho salmon, halibut and herring, and colonies of whitefish. As the water grows deeper still, orca families dine on seals; and even farther out, past the last stretches of the mountains, humpback whales frolic in the depths. Beneath the dark gray skies and oblivious to the great storms of rain lies another world, a world free of pandemonium and panic, a world free from the scourge, a world that has flourished under mankind's near-absence. It is a world that ignores man and a world men ignore.

They step out into the inch-deep water beside the rocks that climb onto the shore and together they grab the canoe and pull it up onto the polished rocks. He takes the rifle in hand and the two of them walk into town. Along the docks is what had once been a park. The grass overgrown. The pavement broken and weeds poking through. The benches along the sidewalks are rusted and falling

apart, the metal pocked by salt carried by the wind. The first buildings are completely rundown. The trusses have collapsed against one another and the walls lean to the side and the roofs have crumbled inwards. In other buildings the joints between the walls and rooflines have separated with the expansion and contraction of the buildings' innards: rain had leaked in, the bolts had rusted, the facing had popped off, and the insulation had become exposed. The man doesn't expect to see any buildings standing.

Despite all mankind's advances, the buildings they left behind—or, rather, the buildings that have been taken from them—have quickly been consumed by nature. Even the roads upon which they walk have not been impervious: the elements of freezing rain during winter has cracked at the cement; weeds have filled the cracks and have spread the cracks even wider with their roots; dogwoods and cinquefoil and fescue now spread themselves outwards from the cracks and crawl over the broken pavement. It is no surprise to see a juniper tree growing in the middle of what had been the town's arterial road. The juniper tree sprouts its berries for sparrows and chickadees.

The man keeps an eye out for the wolves as he goes, but he doesn't see them. The largest building in town had been a fishery, but it has long since collapsed in on itself. Vines scale its side and the shattered windows are now home to a vast array of plants crawling into the building and slithering along the walls. The empty windows are dark and dripping with rainwater and the man sees a pair of eyes watching him from within. He nudges his partner in the side and his partner looks and then the eyes disappear and in the broken sunlight they see grisly hair and the wolf moves deeper into the building.

The road bends around the foot of a mountain and along the side of the mountain sits a store with an advertisement for Coca Cola still vibrantly visible along a hanging placard. The building seems intact despite the broken windows and the vines crawling inside. The man looks back down the street to see if he is

being followed and, seeing nothing, he approaches the convenience store. The painting is dulled and the underlying plaster has mellowed to muted patinas. Brick-shaped gaps in the outer walls reveal where mortar has dissolved under the elements. The wind from the channel, cutting between the ruins of several homes, makes the hanging placard creak and groan on its rusted chains. The man looks back at his partner who shakes his head, making some comment about not going inside—"If there's mold, even the vapors can poison you."—and the man wonders if it's true as he accuses his partner of being a pussy.

He steps through one of the windows and his feet splash in the puddled water. The vines at his feet have spread into the store, tracing their way down the aisles and climbing upon the ends of the shelves. The green leaves turn towards the window to absorb scarce sunlight. The man quietly steps forward and listens. All he can hear is the whining of the wind through the windows and the dripping of water from the ceiling. There is no movement. He steps into one of the aisles and sees a shopping cart lying on the curling and yellowed tile floor. He shoulders the rifle and bends down and picks it up. He gives it a push across the floor and the rusted wheel hinges snap and the wheels shoot out to the side and the cart grounds itself. The man shakes his head and walks around it. All the canned goods are gone. Ransacked by the last holdouts. Most of the shelves are empty, the contents having been consumed by rodents and cockroaches. In some places all that remains are pieces of aluminum foil. He reaches the back of the store, the meat department. The meat has long since been consumed and now the racks that once sported fresh fish and imported beef and chicken are covered in green and yellow mold. A swathe of fungus grows along an arch to the ceiling, spreading out along the ventilation shafts, the grills of which drip with stringy moss hanging down like angel's hair. The man heads down the length of the store to the section for alcohol. Empty shelves. He knew it would be so; it is always this way. He finds gallon jugs of distilled water collecting dust. He takes one and screws off the cap and wipes dust from the jug's lip and takes several long drinks. He screws the cap back on

and sets the jug back in the rack and takes a full one and continues on. He comes to a rack of corroded batteries leaking acidic goo. He goes to the front of the store. The cash registers are drenched in dust, their drawers yanked out and wreathed in blank-faced coins on the floor. The digital computer screens are dark and laced with mold. Beyond the registers is a Plexiglas case covered by a thick layer of mold. He tries to open it but it's locked. He looks around the cash registers and finally finds a key, hoping corrosion hasn't made it useless. Thankfully the lock on the glass case opens and he pulls it open to reveal carton upon carton of cigarettes untouched by mice and cockroaches. He grabs several cartons and puts them under his arm. He locks up the case and sets the key where he can find it again if he ever returns. He smiles and leaves the store, stepping through the windows. His partner asks if he found anything other than smokes. He shakes his head, *No*, and they walk down the street and the sunlight breaks through the clouds and his partner whistles to himself and it is the only sound.

On down the street is a bar with a fading façade, the back of the building crumbling. The stone face is covered with ivy and moss and a carpet of dead lichen. The wooden door has fallen from its hinges. The man's partner says he is going to go down the adjacent road, and the man says that he is going to see if the bar has anymore stocks. "You know they won't," the partner says, but the man says he's going to check anyhow. He enters the bar and looks around, his eyes adjusting to the wan light. The tables and chairs sit just as they were so long ago, accumulating dust. Broken glass covers the floor. The bottles of alcohol along the shelves behind the bar are either broken or empty. The man sits upon one of the bar stools and takes a menu, scanning it to decide what he wants. He orders to no one—"The Catch of the Day, hold the tartar, fried and not grilled, and a bottle of Guinness to top it off"—and he sets the menu aside. He sits at the bar and smokes a cigarette and closes his eyes and pretends she's here and she's smiling and laughing and playing with her cross necklace and

she asks him if he'll buy her another drink. When he opens his eyes there is no woman, there is no one, no one but him.

He stands to go when he hears the noise coming from the back of the bar. He turns and sets down the cigarettes and unshoulders his rifle and moves among the barren tables. At the back of the bar is a door leading to a restroom and a cigarette-dispensing machine and a jukebox. The noise comes again. He moves to the door and pushes it open with his foot. There is a window high above in the bathroom letting down morning light, and the light washes over a man lying sprawled out on the broken tile floor. The man on the floor is naked and emaciated, skin splotched orange and purple; he looks up at the man with knotted hair falling before his face and he opens his jaws and tries to shriek but all that comes out is a hoarse rasp. The man moves forward and the figure on the floor feebly reaches for his ankles. A skeletal hand falls upon his ankles and he lowers the rifle and points it at the back of the figure's head and pulls the trigger. The figure goes quiet and blood seeps from the wound. The man kicks the hand off his ankle and leaves the bathroom with the door open and goes outside to see his partner coming towards him. "Did you get one?" he asks. The man nods, *Yes*. "Still," his partner says, "one is pretty good." He replies, "One is one too many."

They walk down the street, heading the way they had come. Up ahead are two wolves prowling down the road. He curses and sets the cartons down and unshoulders his rifle. The wolves look at them and lick their muzzles and then they turn and slink away, disinterested. The man waits for them to go and then hands his partner the rifle and takes up his smokes and they continue walking. As he walks the man pretends he is amidst a carnival and there are booths along the side of the road and inflatable games and people eating caramel corn and snow-cones and cotton candy on sticks. He imagines a jazz band playing under a large canvas tent and a horse-drawn sleigh clopping through the huddled children and the couples holding hands and clutching steaming cups

of burnt coffee and hot cocoa. But the street is empty and slick with the rain and the fog is encroaching and the road is covered with weeds and moss and the two of them are alone.

That night they meet up with another trawler coming south from Sitka. The two anchor beside each other and a plank is dropped and they share notes and stories and statistics. As the night grows deeper, the men from the Sitka trawler unveil several bottles of bourbon and the drinking begins. Within an hour everyone is drunk and telling stories and spinning jokes. The man feels nauseas and goes up to the fly-bridge and looks out over the dark waters under the heavy clouds above. He smokes a cigarette and feels the wind and the waves rocking the boat and he leans against the wheel and presses his forehead against the cold glass window and closes his eyes and he can remember all of it, memories he has tried to forget and forsake, and he knows the men below know nothing of it, are remnants of a certain type of man—the kind of man who doesn't experience but who embraces pretense as a farce of understanding—and he hates them. He hates them for how they laugh about what happened and make jokes about the horrors everyone else endured, and he hates them because they and their families survived and he lost everyone. He sits down in the fly-bridge and lies down and the world spins from the alcohol and the waves and he closes his eyes and he can see her face and he feels guilty but there is nothing he can do.

In the morning the two trawlers go their own ways. The man is hung-over but he doesn't care. He smokes his cigarettes and feels light-headed as his partner guides the trawler down another deep channel. A melted glacier submerging the roots of giant mountains. "This is Tracy's Arm," the partner says, pointing at the map. The man says nothing. They go deeper into massive channel. The fog is lighter this morning and the sunlight reflects off something farther down the channel. The man points it out, and his partner says, "Let's check it out." As they draw nearer, the man sees that it is some sort of large ship. Most ships

have corroded to the point of sinking into the depths; at one time the ocean had been a haven of ghost-ships wandering aimlessly under the relentless circles of the sun, moon, and stars. But age and the wear of time have sunk most of them, where they have become habitats for hammerheads and rockfish and king crabs. The man sees that the massive ship ahead is not free of corrosion. Its front end has beached upon the rocks of the northern shore, and its bow has pierced the slope of the mountain, which has rained builders upon its bow. The lower end of the ship has sunken significantly into the water, its entire submergence prevented by the bottom of the ship hitting the shallow slope of the mountain's underwater feet. The stern of the boat fills three quarters of the channel, and the water rushing through the unblocked quarter becomes tumultuous and filled with white-caps. The beached vessel has creating a raging funnel. The partner takes the trawler close to the shore to avoid being sucked into the bottlenecked current. They draw even closer to the ship and see that the paint has dulled and rusted and in some places entire sections of the steel paneling have fallen into the water to reveal different rooms within the ship, the exposed rooms and corridors now filled with perched bald eagles lazily tending to their young. The name of the ship is faded but the man can still somewhat read it, and when he reads it, he understands: M—N P—NCE—S. He remembers the grand staircase, the red-satin opera house, the ball room with its dazzling chandeliers, the tight corridors with dimming lights, and the dining hall with the expensive china and the way the wine in the glasses would sway with the rocking of the ship. His partner says, "It's a cruise ship," and the man says, "I know. And I've been on it before."

The cruise ship's hull with the peeling paint and the rusted exposed steel overshadows and dwarfs the canoe. The man paddles the boat under the shadow of the titanic ship. He reaches the shore and disembarks, pulling the canoe up onto the rocks. He makes sure it's wedged good and tight and then he scales the slope beside the crashed bow of the ship. He reaches the first deck and grabs the rusted railing and pulls himself up. Flakes of rust cling to his

palms. He stands on the deck amidst strewn boulders. They are slick with rain and crawling with lichen. Some of the larger boulders had crashed through the deck, leaving gaping holes that disappeared into the shadowy depths of the ship. The deck itself is oddly in good condition. In the center of the deck is a swimming pool, holding only standing water filled with algae. The jumping board facing away from the railing has detached for its moorings and lies upended in the shallow and stagnant pool. A flight of steps leads up to a higher deck and the man takes them gingerly, testing his weight on each one. This deck holds fifty or sixty retractable deck chairs in various states of disrepair. The deck has several flights of steps that rise to another level with faded signs that read *Authorized Personnel Only*. He ignores those steps and tries a door leading into the ship. It's locked but he easily kicks it open. He steps inside and finds that he is in some sort of restaurant. There are several round tables strewn about, and a bar. The room reeks of fermented alcohol. He leans over the bar and sees shattered bottles of alcohol lying on the floor. They must have fallen when the ship smashed into the rocks. *Piss-poor luck*. He finds a staircase leading down into the ship and takes it. Darkness wraps around him.

The steps reach a landing and he goes into a gymnasium. The workout equipment is falling apart and lies strewn about the floor. The only light comes from a branching corridor through which sunlight enters. He takes that corridor and finds himself in what had been a galley. The paneling along the side of the ship has fallen and he looks out over the rushing channel. Far back the trawler is anchored offshore. He steps up to the edge and looks down, a terrific drop. He backs away and retreats to the gymnasium and going deeper into the ship he pulls out his lighter and flicks the flame. The light flashes this way and that and he moves down the dark corridors lined with cabins once occupied by rich children and hopeful old men and honeymooning couples swooning in love. He can almost hear footsteps and muffled voices and he thinks for a moment that he sees someone turn a corner up ahead and he stops and stands in the silence and hears dripping water somewhere inside the ship. The aching and groaning

of settling metal. He takes a deep breath. If ghosts there are then let them be, but it's not the ghosts of the ship he fears but the ghosts of his own memories.

He continues down the corridor. The flame's light illuminates the rusted bronze placards placed over the doors sporting the room numbers and deck locations. The corridor bends and heads towards an elevator whose cables have long since snapped and which lies on the bottom deck amidst a pile of twisted steel and shattered glass. He goes on past and there is an open door and he looks into the cabin. There are two twin-sized beds with moth-eaten blankets and yellowed pillows. He steps back and shuts the door and goes down the hallway and hears something behind him. He turns and for a moment sees eyes watching him but then they are gone. A chill crawls up his spine. He slowly retreats backwards and reaches a stairwell. He takes it down, quickly, and then it opens up into a cavernous room illuminated by light coming through shattered floor-to-ceiling windows. Tables are overturned, linens thrown about; silverware and china accumulating mold on the floor; chairs propped on their backs with legs pointing this way and that. The giant chandelier lies on the floor, its bronze rusting and bent, the diamond-shaped glass now appearing as nothing but brown stones. Water drips from the windows' edges and the carpet is rotten with moisture. He feels a cold breeze and sees through one of the broken windows that it is raining again.

As he looks about the room, it changes before his eyes. The tables are upright, encircled by chairs; the tabletops are covered with tablecloths; and upon the silk tablecloths sits elegant china dishes holding lobster tails and grilled fish and steaks and butter rolls. There are wine glasses with white and red wines. He can hear the dense clamor of talking, the rattling of plates, the waiters and waitresses of foreign lands moving hastily through the room, delivering dishes and taking orders and bussing tables. Dusk sunlight comes through the windows and sparkles in the polished silverware. He scans the faces and sees the sorrow and joy and confusion, the conglomeration of peace and stress, and he

sees at a far table an older gentleman in a suede suit with his wife in a dazzling white dress decked out in multiple necklaces and wearing earrings so large they make her earlobes sag. But then he blinks and everything is back to how it is and how it will forever be. Those days are over and no amount of nostalgia will bring them back.

He moves through the ruined dining hall, avoiding the overturned tables. Rats scurry across the floor, their fur dripping wet. He approaches the French doors leading out of the dining hall. One of the doors remains on its hinges with the glass square windows shattered, and the other door lies at his feet and is covered in mold. He goes through the doors. The glass door leading to the atrium elevator is still intact but the elevator is long gone, the cables having snapped, and the elevator plummeted down into the bowels of the ship. He goes to the rusted railing and looks down and sees the various decks of the atrium. The beautiful atrium with its red carpet and polished wood now carries a deathly pallor, with mold and rust and grime covering everything. Bird droppings cover everything from where eagles have perched and defecated. Hundreds of nests saturate the atrium, nestled in nooks and crannies, in exposed pipes, in the shelving space of what had been a library but whose books had been consumed by bacteria and roaches. Nests even lie scattered about on the floor, some with pearl-white eggs or crunched eggshells, and he can hear the piping of young eagles somewhere near. Outside decks run along the sides of the atrium and the windows are shattered and the doors fallen. What had once been resplendent with cafés and bars and entertainment has now become a refuge for eagles. He closes his eyes and remembers how it had looked. He closes his eyes and envisions how it had been, but when he opens them he no longer hears the conversations of the huddled groups waiting for their tables, or the laughter of couples walking arm-in-arm, and no longer does dusk come in through the windows. But in the silence he can begin to hear the sounds again: the music, the soft yet vivacious melodies of Frank Sinatra. But then the music fades and the only sound is that of the rats in the walls and his

own labored breath and the metal bulwark of the ship falling apart bolt-by-bolt, dying with futile metallic cries.

At the bottom of the atrium had been a fountain in the shape of a circle with a statue of Poseidon rising out of its center. The fountain is emptied of water and filled with rusting coins. The statue of the god of the sea lies on the floor, the god's trident covered in moss. Not even the gods could survive this.

He returns to the canoe and paddles back to the trawler. His partner asks if he found anything. "Nothing of use," the man replies. He stands in the fly-deck and smokes a cigarette and the rain falls. "It's time to go home," he says. His partner nods and they turn the trawler around and begin the 200-mile journey south.

Before The End

April 18, 2004—22, 2004

April 18 Sunday

We had another awkward run-in at church this morning. She got upset about not having a boyfriend and I told her not to listen to them but she just got mad. Accused me of rummaging through her life, making a mess of things. And then she told me to leave her alone. This has been the pinnacle of my life: being told to leave her alone. The sad thing is, I'm no longer surprised by it. And as I lie here in bed, I wonder why I still like her. I know I can do better. Ashlie tells me I deserve better than Hannah. But my heart still wants her to be mine. It's ridiculous, I know. How absurd is it that I still want to be with her when she treats me like shit? I guess I keep thinking back to how she used to be, back when she was happy to be my friend, back before she cared about popularity and her reputation. Life was good back then. And I want that life again. I want her to want to be my friend, and I want her to want to be with me. I know I should be over her. Everyone tells me that she's "lost her marbles." But it's hard to give up hope when she gives me inklings of what we could be. That kiss back in January haunts me. I think about it all the time, wondering what it meant. If she hadn't kiss me, maybe I would have stopped liking her by now? Probably not. But the memory of that kiss—her very taste—fuels my heart in its affections for her.

April 19 Monday

At work I couldn't stop thinking about Hannah and how wonderful it would be to be with her. And how we could walk through North Park, laughing and having fun together. And how I would ask her to Prom, and she would say yes, and then she would say, "I was waiting for you to ask me!" And I would admit that I still liked her more-than-a-friend, and that I'd like to go to Prom with her as her date—"some passions die hard"—and she would say the same about herself. And I promised God that if she brought up not having a date to Prom, I would ask her; even though I know it would be like shooting myself in the face. Oh well. Risk is fun. And I thought of how all my friends spend all their time

with their girlfriends, making fun of me because I don't have one, and I remember them being so happy with their girlfriends, and my only refuge being found in fruitless dreams. I remember the days when all my friends would come over, but now they are all with their girlfriends, and now my once-busy room is quiet, and I am alone. I stare out my window.

Dad had the day off today, but he was called in.

Apparently there's some weird outbreak of some diseases in South Arlington. He said it's called Epiglottitis. Or something weird like that. I've never heard of it.

April 20 Tuesday

Did you know today is *National Pot Smoking Day*? Yeah, no joke. Les' mom made us all "special brownies", haha. Drake sprinkled green grass on his in the hope that it would work out better. Amanda, Chad, and Les came over today. We all hung out. I dropped off Chad, picked up Drake by surprise. He said that if I ever did that again, he would kill me—but he was happy to be with us. We haven't hung out in forever. On the way there we saw a bunch of birds dive-bomb a car and send it into a ditch, and then the birds flew up and sat on the telephone wires and just watched as the driver got out, cursing and screaming. It was hilarious. Tonight Drake made the comment, "All I want to do is slit the girls' throats! All they ever talk about is boyfriends and girlfriends and relationships!"

I talked to Les: "You're going to think I'm insane, Man."

He was clueless. "What?"

"I am thinking about asking Hannah to go with me to a movie. Not a date or anything. Just a movie."

He thought it over. "Sounds good."

So I planned on asking her at Small Group, but I never got around to it. When I got back to the house, I called her. Her brother Peyton answered, said she went to K-Mart. I said, "Tell her to call me back when she gets home."

"What's it about?" he asked.

"Crain. We have him for chemistry. Different periods."

So she called back. "Sorry, I didn't have my cell on. What did you need?"

"Drake rushed us out, so I wasn't able to ask." My throat hardened and my pulse quickened. "What are you doing Thursday... or Wednesday?"

A pause. "What time?"

"6:50... No, 6:30 to play it safe."

"Ummm... I have Bible Study on Wednesday."

"Thursday?"

Another pause. "I don't know."

AWKWARD SILENCE

"Okay," I said, voice speeding. "That's cool. See you later."

"Bye, Austin."

It's no big deal. But I was really nervous. So I guess it was a big deal after all. Dad dragged out of me what had happened. He looked angry. "What do you think you're doing? I don't want you to get into trouble. I'm afraid you're not over her."

"I am."

And I am... Sort of.

Dad said, "She probably thinks that you were asking her out on a date."

Well, I was. "I wasn't."

"That's what she probably thinks."

I talked to Ashlie. "I probably should tell her, but I won't have the chance. Tell her that I *wasn't* asking her out on a date." I told Ashlie everything.

Ashlie said, "I'll tell her tomorrow, okay?"

And so I am caught between a thin line:

She thinks it over and says yes, or

She tells her parents in 24 hours.

So to tell her or not to? To risk option 1 or to risk option 2?

Why do I even think I have a chance with girls? *I don't*. I need to accept this. I really do. Forget about romantic relationships with Hannah. Not a chance. I

am screwed because of my genes. Everyone else is so lucky. Why do I have these intense, non-sexual, romantic desires, and no water to quench their pulse? Why do I have feelings for Hannah, and yet no shot of being with her? Why do I dream of romance and love when I am only left to futile dreams? Perhaps there is no intricate reason or rhyme. Maybe it is a random roll-of-the-dice. Maybe there isn't any intricate, grandiose plan for my life?

The neighbors visited Mom and Dad.

They are worried about me.

Who can blame them?

April 21, 2004 Wednesday

Today sucks. Usually it would have been a good day. You'd think seeing a bunch of birds go at each other, talons and beaks and everything, killing each other off would make the day somewhat interesting. And, yeah, everyone at school thought it was a big deal, and the girls were all crying, and I was just like, "Birds are territorial. It happens." They called me unsympathetic. One girl even slapped me. But that's not why today sucks. I think it revolves around Hannah. In many aspects. One, she said no. Two, she said no because I am not hot and popular (probably, if history repeats itself). Third, if I were hot and popular, I'd have a fun time tomorrow with Hannah. My looks are seriously a curse. Maybe I am just a victim of the times. Fourth, why do I think I can even get a girl? It is out of the question. Fifth is a question, if anything: *WHY?* I want to know *why* no one likes me. *Why* am I the outcast? I just wish I knew the *reasons*, the *rhythm*, the *rhyme* in all of this. I wish I were back in Alaska, on that cruise ship, where everything was beautiful and pristine, when I was far from her. I want to be in that ballroom again, and I want to eat the saltwater crab legs, and I want to sit on the deck looking out to sea. Because then I had hope. Now I have none.

In other news, Amanda and Les came over. Les is doing a project on the Mesozoic for school, and I found some dinosaurs for him. I took Les home, then

I picked up my friend Rick. He is a cool friend from work and school. Me, Ashlie, Amanda, and Rick went to Borders. Rick bought some adult books. Ashlie and Amanda perused the “Visual Guide to Better Sex” book. Embarrassing. We went to ½ Price Books and I got three Stephen King novels: *Insomnia*, *Skeleton Crew*, and *Pet Semetary*. I took Rick back home, visited Chad and his girlfriend Ally. We think they were making out in Les’ room. I won’t be seeing Chad for about a week—he is going to a Christian music festival in Kentucky called Ichthus, and Drake is going with him. In History class, we watched the television. There’s been rioting going on in Hartford, Connecticut. No one knows what’s about. Men, women, children—everyone is rioting. It’s a pretty big deal.

April 22, 2004 Thursday

Ashlie told Hannah that I didn’t mean the movie to be a date. That’s good. I kept checking my email to see if Hannah had sent me any messages. She hadn’t. I waited by the phone all day, hoping that Hannah would call. I kept pondering what was going through Hannah’s mind—*What does she think about all this?* Ashlie told me, “You have sad, depressed eyes.” Wonder why. Les and I took a walk in the rain, going down to the muddy trails at North Park. In the rain, it seemed that all my worries left me. Even though Hannah said no, I am glad I asked, or these journal pages would be filled with tears regretting not taking the risk. Perhaps it broke the ice for the future.

I wish Mom and Dad would get off Laura. They keep talking about her.

Laura doesn’t even talk to me at school, even though I try.

It’s almost amusing. Almost.

Oh. And some kid asked me if I was albino.

I’m going to bed. I have school tomorrow.

Another boring day.

And Hannah will keep ignoring me.

I have no future.

August 2025

The trawler reaches Ketchikan by mid-morning the next day. The mist covering the waters peels away to reveal a large titanium mesh emerging out of the channel before the town. In the middle of the half-submerged fencing are two watchtowers facing one another with a gate in the middle and platforms extending out over the water and held up by floating barrels. The trawler flashes its lights and one of the towers flashes back and the man handling the boat idles the engine and they crawl up between the floating platforms jutting from the towers. They walk onto the deck and doors leading to the platforms from the towers open and men come out and board and they go down into the cabin and they take turns stripping down and being inspected. The man's partner grumbles—as he always does—about the procedure, and one of the investigators says, "Remember Juneau, my friend. Remember what happened there." They dress after being searched and the men disembark the trawler and a few moments later the gate creaks open and they go through. The water is choppy as the channel grows narrower and the mist wraps around them again and then they can see nothing but the mist and the distant shore to their right crawling with pines and boulders polished by the channel's currents.

They reach the town. The harbor arises out of the fog, revealing several trawlers and motorboats and sailboats with the sails tied snugly against the masts. They pull up to one of the docks and perform the checklist and a man comes up to them and asks what they found. The man who had driven the boat gives him the report, the various towns they visited, the stocks they discovered, and any infectious activity. "Only one," he says. "And we took care of it." The man asks how the infected looked. "Malnourished. Weak. Starved. Like they all do before they die." The man nods, thinking this is a good thing, and then he leaves. The man who had given the report helps finish tying up the boat and shutting everything down and then they walk towards the buildings scattered beside the harbor along the shore.

"Want to go get a drink?" his friend asks him. "Best hops in town."

The man just laughs. "No. I'm going to see Jessica."

"Old man Thatcher just got a new barrel ready. Or so I was told."

"Maybe I'll partake tomorrow."

"Do you ever miss the bachelor life?"

"Only when I'm not around you."

He walks down the road. The streets are empty of vehicles but people move all around. There are clothing shops and bakeries and pubs and even a theater and a mini golf course. Most of the buildings have become residential, housing up to thirty people per unit. This is why the government began playing with the idea of relocations. He was chosen, as someone who had previous "experience" as well as knowledge of the area due to his fishing occupation, to be one of the scouts: going into the long-abandoned towns and seeing what (if anything) lied there. Other than the events at the pub in that god-forsaken town, all that had been found was ruin, nature's reclamation of lost territory, and wolves. So many damn wolves, more wolves than he had imagined would ever be possible. Someone had told him, "Wolves are like the bunnies of the predator world: they reproduce like crazy. Just look at Yellowstone before the plague—or, rather, afterwards."

He walks through the town, shuffling beside people coming and going, and he thinks to himself that it almost looks like a tourist attraction. And at one time it had been. He turns his head and sees a totem pole rising out of a park, a remnant from ancient Indians who had settled the land before modernization. And then he looks the other direction and sees a road elevated above a river, where tourists used to kayak amongst the pillars, and he remembers how the road used to be full of whore-houses but had become a tourist attraction full of shops with overpriced items: mugs and t-shirts and little figurines. Now the buildings are occupied by the army. He looks farther down the road and knows that far beyond is a gate-post manned by soldiers. A gate keeping people from leaving the town. The gate extended through the waters and onto the opposite shores of the channel, and it looped back around through the channel and

encircled the town. As much as one might like to think this was a happy place, it always carried with it the stink of prison. And for the last twenty years of his life, it had been the only home he'd known.

On down the road is an old school. He walks through the picket fence gate and goes through the front door and down the hallway. The walls are decorated with charcoal paintings and there are waist-high lockers without any locks because they're never used. He reaches the right door and looks through the small square window and sees her standing before the chalkboard, her bright jet-black hair settling upon her shoulders. He feels his heart ache. It's been days since he's seen her. She is talking about something—mathematics, he thinks, due to some sort of algebra on the wall. These children have known no other world than the one in which they live. This is normalcy for them. It has become more normal for himself, but it still bothers him. There is always the aching pain of nostalgia for the Old Age. She looks over at the window and sees him and smiles and excuses herself and walks to the door and he steps to the side and she comes through. She shuts the door and they look at each other smiling and then he steps forward and embraces her and squeezes her tightly and kisses her. She pulls away and blinks away tears and he asks how much she really missed him.

"I was just scared. You know. Because of what you were doing."

"I can handle myself," he says. "Obviously. I'm still here."

"I know. I know. But you know me. I always worry."

"I always had a gun."

"Did you have to use it?"

He pauses, lies: "No."

"Did you see any?"

"No."

"Are you lying?"

"Please."

"I'm sorry." She hugs him again. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too."

She pulls away. "Have you been smoking?"

"What?"

"You smell like smoke."

"Oh. I was around Billy. He was smoking."

"You were around Billy and you didn't smoke?"

"I didn't say that."

"You know I don't like it when you smoke."

"I know. But I was nervous. Being out there. I'm sorry."

"Why were you nervous? I thought you could handle it?"

"I know. But I was still... You know, I missed you a lot."

She bites her lip. "You're still in trouble, Mister."

"I know how you hold grudges."

She kisses him, then opens the door. "I have to get back to class."

"I know. Teach them well. I'll be waiting at the house."

"Okay. And you'd better shower. I don't want you smelling like smoke."

"I will," he says.

Once the sun sets the rain begins to fall again. They sit in the dining room of the cryptic house and hear the rain drumming on the roof and rapping on the windows. A fire burns in the hearth, the smoke crawling out the chimney, and they talk about everything and nothing and eat grilled deer with potatoes. After dinner he helps her with the dishes and then they sit on the sofa and watch the fire in the hearth and touching leads to kissing and kissing leads to sex, and then they are lying naked and in one another's arms upon the sofa. They kiss and cuddle and then go to bed and he awakes in the middle of the night by her shaking him. He feels sweat across his brow and his fingers are trembling as if upon a keyboard and she tells him that he was crying and asks what he was dreaming and he doesn't tell her that he saw his sister and what happened to her and that in the dream he held the rifle in his hands. He tells her he doesn't

remember and then he lies there and she wants to hold him but he doesn't want to be touched.

"Why won't you talk to me?" she whispers in the quiet.

"I do talk to you."

"No you don't. I don't know anything that happened to you before we met, except what you've told me about being rescued from the ocean. All I know is that you're from somewhere in Ohio."

"Is that not enough?"

"Not when you wake up screaming or crying every night."

He doesn't say anything.

She kisses his bare shoulder, says, "Sometimes it's as if I don't know you at all."

He wakes up late and she's already gone. He goes outside and sits on the front porch drinking a coffee. He hears the sound of a vehicle and then it appears down the winding driveway that cuts through the deep blanket of forest. The truck stops and a man gets out. He is wearing an Army uniform. The man sets down his coffee and steps down off the porch and greets the soldier. The soldier just hands him an envelope and then heads back to his truck and gets inside and drives off. The man watches him go and then opens the envelope. Typewriter print spells out his name and a simple message. It's from the capital of the United States. He's been called in for an unnamed and un-described project. He has no choice but to go. He sits back down and stares at the telegram and sips his coffee. He knows she'll be pissed, but she'll have two days to settle down. It's not until then that a plane will carry him to the new capital in Ohio.

INCEPTUM:
The First Twelve Hours

April 23, 2004 Friday

6:00 AM

He dreamt of her often and this night he dreamt that she was in her room and totally naked and he was sitting down clothed and she was on top of him. And she wrapped her arms around his neck and he kissed her lips, the most tender and sweetest kiss, and his shaking fingertips traced up her calves to her upper legs and across her buttocks and spine and to her taught shoulder-blades. His breath came in ragged gasps and she kissed his quivering lips and she said, "You're shaking." He told her he was shaking because this is what he always wanted and she said, "Then how come I get to have all the fun?" And she reached down and grabbed his zipper and began pulling it down. But the alarm clock shattered the dream and he let his loose fingers drift off the last tendrils of the fantasy and rolled over in his covers. Golden light came in through the open window and the sounds of birds chirping tickled his ears. A car drove past on the road outside. The tree outside his window spread its frosty leaves and a cold wind rushed over the comforter. He found himself tempted to close his eyes and drift back to sleep, perhaps in an effort to rekindle that dream, that brief hiatus from the reality of their dismembered love, but he refused to do so. The digital clock raced through its numbers and seven minutes passed.

His dad walked in. Sunken eyes. "Are you up?" he said.

"I'm up", he lied, unmoving beneath the sheets.

His father rubbed his groggy eyes. "You're going to miss the shower."

"I'm up," he said again.

His father mumbled and left.

The boy lied in bed. He heard the shower head start to drip and then pour.

He'd missed the shower. Damn.

He got out of bed once the shower stopped and he beat Ashlie to the bathroom. She banged on the door but he drowned out her voice with the shower window. No shampoo. A measly half-bar of soap. He lathered it over his body. Rinsed.

Dried. Got out and wrapped a towel around his waist. He exited the bathroom and expected Ashlie to be fuming with her conventional morning rage but she just half-heartedly shoved him out of the way and staggered into the bathroom and fell onto the tile floor and flicked up the toilet seat lid and her face tightened and she heaved and green vomit splattered into the toilet. Bile crept into the back of his throat and he turned away.

"Austin?" she asked with a raspy voice. "Can you tell Mom I'm sick? I threw up all over my floor last night."

"Did you clean it up?" he asked, not looking at her.

"Just tell Mom, okay?"

He went into her room and smelled the stench and backed out. He went to his parents' bedroom across the hall. The bedroom's bathroom door was shut with wan light filtering from underneath. He woke up his mom who continued sleeping under the covers. "Ashlie is sick," he said. "She's puking in the toilet. And she puked all over her floor last night, too."

Her mouth was dry and lips chapped as she blinked crust from the corners of her eyes. She lied there with her eyes swimming lazily in her sockets and formulated her words in a half-asleep stance. "Can you clean it up?"

He hated the prospect. "I woke up late..."

She turned over in the covers and cocooned herself within them, fell back asleep.

He glanced at the red alarm clock. Heard her snoring. "Sure," he moaned.

He quickly grabbed some cleaning solutions, a towel, and some paper towels. He closed his eyes and breathed through his mouth and went into her room and cleaned up the stale vomit with the paper towels and threw them into her wastebasket. He slid the basket next to her bed. She would need it. He then sprayed the stain with carpet cleaner and scrubbed it hard. Light bled through her window. He glanced at the Dalmatian clock. "Shit," he said. He said it low, under his voice, an instinct in the house—his parents despised foul language.

He ran back into his room and dressed and snatched his keys and wallet and sprayed some Axe spray over his clothes.

His dad entered the room, wrapped in a robe. "My work called. For some reason the South Arlington Municipal Courts have been shut down. I don't have to go to work."

"Then you can take care of Ashlie."

"What? Isn't she going to school?"

"She's sick, can't you smell it?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Okay. Yeah. Better than work, I suppose. I'll pop her up on some medicine and buy her some soda from Homer's Grocery. Do you know if Mom kept any of that club soda punch drink?"

He went for the door, pushed past his father. "It's in the refrigerator. Shake it up. The fruit settled."

"Thanks."

The Jeep was parked on the curb. A thin layer of frost glazed over the windows. The door opened easily and he jumped inside. He started the car and drove away from the house, gunning down the twisting subdivision streets until he reached the road heading east to the intersection settled by Homer's Grocery and the Clearcreek Plaza. He took a right turn and hit student traffic through Olde Clearcreek. The time melted away and he considered taking a shortcut but decided against it. He passed the junior high school. Parents were dropping their students off by the main entrance. Yellow buses lumbered like beasts down the road. Brakes squealing. The high school entrance loomed and he pulled in. Here the school traffic lightened and he found his parking spot and turned off the engine and got out of the Jeep with plenty of time to spare.

The Sunfire in the dream drove past and parked a few spaces down.

He walked over. Through the tinted windows he saw two friends.

And one of them whom he couldn't figure out.

The engine cut and the driver's door opened. Hannah stepped out. Her brown hair dripped with the last water from a hasty shower. Her placid eyes glowed like twin torches. Her tender build captivating. Her smile resonated peace. She

looked at him warily. He knew she was somehow afraid of him—not afraid as if he were some sort of an axe-murderer. Maybe *uncomfortable* would be a better word. Discomfort etched itself across her wan grin.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Tired.”

Her brother Peyton appeared at the other side of the car, throwing his book-bag over his shoulder. “Hey, Loser.”

He kiddingly flicked him off.

Hannah turned away.

Peyton came around the side of the car. “Flirting with my sister, Austin?”

Hannah’s face flushed several shades red as she glared at her brother.

“Flirting?” Austin said. “No.”

“Did you know Hannah went to a movie last night with some guy?”

Austin’s heart skipped a beat. He looked over at Hannah. “Awesome. Who’s that?”

“No one,” she said.

“Oh, come on. You *did* go to a movie, right?”

“His name is Hal.”

“Is he nice?”

“He’s nice.”

“That’s good. I didn’t know you knew him.”

“We bumped into each other at the mall.” She turned and left.

Peyton stood by his side. “She’s known you for how long, Austin?”

“What? Oh. I don’t know. Four years. Five.”

“And she wouldn’t go with you. But she didn’t know what’s-his-face...”

“Hal,” he reminded him.

Peyton nodded. “She hasn’t even known him for a full day yet. And she went to a movie with him.”

The two of them walked towards the entrance.

Hannah merged with the flow of popular kids. The jocks. Cheerleaders. Assholes.

"Do you have a point?" Austin asked.

"You know what this place is?"

"Yes. It's our school."

"Yes. And it's more. It's a game. You know what game it is?"

Austin rolled his eyes. He hated Peyton's rants. "No. What game is it, Peyton?"

"It's a game where the losers die and the winners suffer. The die are popularity and good looks. Girls nowadays only care about popularity, reputation, and sex. Do you need an example? Les asked a girl out last school year. They had been friends, and the girl admitted *to his face* that she really did like him. They kissed five or six times. Seems like a sure-fire win, doesn't it? But he didn't look at the grim facts. She told Les she wouldn't date him because he wasn't popular nor cool, and thus he was not beneficial to her reputation. Les is a great guy. But he's not the most attractive guys out there. And he keeps getting fucked by girls because of it. Forget about what's important. Look at the glossy wrapping paper and fuck the present underneath. Hannah's no different. You're not popular. You're not stunningly attractive. So she won't date you. But Hal? He's a hunk. He's on the football team. *Of course* she'll date him."

Two police cars were in the bus lot. Cops sat inside. One reading a paper. The other sipping a cup of coffee.

"You're a weird guy, Peyton," Austin said.

They pushed through the front doors.

Some mangled talk of the Hartford situation: it was growing.

"You think I'm wrong?" Peyton asked.

"No. You're right."

"Don't count on getting her, Man. She's too swept up into this teenage bullshit."

"Yeah. I know. I didn't mean anything by the movie." He side-stepped a teacher barreling through the cafeteria. "I was going to go with Alex, then with

Les, but they couldn't make it, and Drake wasn't old enough, and neither were you, and I knew your sister was seventeen, so—"

"You're lying and you know it."

D Hallway closed around them. "Whatever."

The atrium looked above them. Brick pillars held up the second floor and a rounded petition looked up past the railed sides of the second floor to a looming glass dome shining sunlight down into the school. It was here that they split.

"I'll see you at lunch," Austin said.

"You know it. Forget her, Man."

On the way to class he stole a glance into the administrator's office.

He saw the principal and vice principal talking.

And he saw on their faces a look he knew too well.

Nervousness. And fear.

7:00 AM

He skipped into class several seconds late, slipping through the door. He tried to tiptoe to his seat but Ms. Hood glanced back over her shoulder from the window. Her eyes burned and a scowl traced across her face. He stood entranced, a raccoon caught in the headlights of a speeding car. "That's a detention," she growled, "now get in your seat." He rolled his eyes and filed between the desks filled with the other students and took his seat. Ms. Hood went to the front of the classroom and just as she began to speak the phone hooked onto the wall rattled. She picked it up and started talking. Austin opened his folder and glanced at some Chemistry and World History homework and shut it. The Stephen King book of short stories, "Skeleton Crew," drew his attention. The introduction last night had been interesting. Ms. Hood continued talking so he flipped open to the story, "The Mist." He looked out the window. A thin line of trees separated the school grounds and the Greenview neighborhood. A mist curled around the trees and spilled over the grassy lawns and picket fences and squat houses in Greenview. In King's story, the mist was a harbor of fiendish, almost prehistoric—or alien—creatures. However you interpret it. He imagined the mist crawling towards the high school, creatures swimming about in its icy lace.

"Austin?" Ms. Hood said, setting down the phone. "Since you were so eager to wander the halls, why don't you go down to the administrator's office and get me some papers. I forgot my attendance roster. Thank you."

He set his book down and sighed. "The Mist" was just getting good.

But in this hellish place, a dash to the administrator's office was better than Accounting. He said, "Okay," and went out the door.

The halls that once swam with students were now empty. The hive dripped with silence. He came to the atrium. The glass windows reflected his figure as he walked towards the door. He had lost a lot of weight. Forty pounds. And

he'd been building muscle, too. He had decided to get rid of his overflowing love handles after doing push-ups and nearly choking on his own chin. He reached the administrator's office and the door opened easily. Probably greased last night. The receptionist was gone. Several chairs were placed about the room and an aerial photograph of the school hung on the wall. He walked up to the desk and rapped his fingers on the polished oak. He looked for a bell to ring but there wasn't one. He looked up at the television. Just a blue screen. Usually they scrolled announcements. But not until about eight or nine, when the students started waking up. Austin rubbed his eyes. The white light from the double doors near the bus entrance burnt brightly.

He heard something coming down the hall. From an office. Or the nurse's ward.

It sounded like the voice of an angry boy.

He continued waiting for the receptionist, but she never came.

He needed those papers.

He looked out the door and saw a cute girl wandering the halls, collecting attendance rosters from the little posts on the doors.

He bit his bottom lip and walked around the desk and made his way down the corridor. Offices on either side. Glass windows revealing humming computer screens and empty chairs. He went on down the corridor, which bent to the side.

The angry voice grew stronger.

He reached the door. A sign above it: *Nurse's Office*. Underneath was a small square window. He cautiously peered inside.

A boy sat in a chair. His head was down, long hair falling in braids. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved black *Independent* t-shirt. The principal stood to the side, rubbing his chin. A phone rested in his hands. He looked agitated. The vice principal paced in circles around the chair, talking to the student. And the nurse. She looked the worst of them all. Painfully afraid. She stuck to the back

of the room next to a glass cabinet filled with gauze and first aid medicines. The voices passed through the door.

The vice principal: "Who was the last person you touched?"

The boy: "My mom when I kissed her good-bye." His words were strangely furious.

He imagined the kid only an hour or two earlier. Going into his mom's room. She lies asleep in bed. Hazel morning light floating in from the window. He kneels down beside her. One of the blankets falls to the floor. He rests his knee on it and smiles. The sound of the shower shutting off. Feet scampering in the bathroom. His dad drying. His mom sleeping soundly. Her eyes closed and lips quivering with each deep breath. Lost in a dream. He couldn't know. He didn't know. He kisses her on the cheeks. Cheeks warm with life. She opens her eyes and kisses his cheek. He tells her she's going to school and she says she loves him and he says he loves her and his dad comes out and takes a drink out of the bourbon and curses his son.

The nurse asked the boy, "Is your mom in an affair?"

"Whose business is that?"

"Did anyone else touch you?"

"No."

"Did *you* touch anyone?"

"I give high-fives to half the school."

"Did you touch anyone sensually?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Just answer the question."

"I kissed my girlfriend. And she kissed me."

"Is that all?"

"I kissed Ellie Grabeman."

"Isn't she going with Alan?"

"And another guy, I know! Don't give me a damn sermon!"

The vice principal grabbed the kid roughly by the arm.

The kid howled and ripped away.

He lifted his face—
And Austin wanted to scream.

The boy's skin had gone a deep purple. His eyes had sunken into the back of their sockets. His lips had curled back revealing yellowing teeth. The veins in his neck bulged. Sweat cascaded down his face. Austin's stomach churned in revulsion and curiosity. He pulled himself closer to the glass.

The boy's wild eyes darted between the three people in the room. "Let me outta here!"

"No," the vice principal said. "No. I need to know what you've been doing."

The kid snarled, "This isn't right and you fucking—"

The principal stepped forward and placed a hand on the vice principal's shoulder. "He's sick." He looked to the kid. "You're sick."

"Really? Wow. How especially inquisitive you are."

The nurse croaked, "Matthew, you're sick. Look. We've called the paramedics—"

"I don't need the paramedics! Let me out of this cage!"

"You're not in a cage..."

The principal looked to the door and straight into Austin's eyes.

Austin ducked away, heard the principal: "Hey! There's a damned kid out there!"

He ducked down and scrambled down the corridor and nearly ran into the receptionist. He swung around her and bolted for the door but stopped when he remembered. He turned and said, "Ms. Hood left her attendance roster down here..." His voice danced with an untamed reluctance. "She sent me to..."

"To crawl down the hallways?"

"I've been looking for you. I was here. And I waited. And you didn't show up."

"Well. You found me."

"Yeah. I did." He glanced down the hallway. No one was coming.

The receptionist walked around the desk and opened a drawer and pulled out some papers and gave them to him.

From the nurse's office came shouting.

The receptionist glared at him. "Get along now."

He remembered the kid's name. "What's wrong with Matt?"

She frowned. "You know him?"

"He's a friend of mine," he lied.

"I just didn't think a skater and a nerd would be—" She shook her head. "I didn't mean to stereotype."

"What's wrong with him?"

"How do you know him?"

"He's my next-door neighbor."

"Then you know what happened to his mom?"

"What? No."

"Her husband woke up—Matthew's stepfather—and found his mom missing. She'd slept on the couch downstairs. I guess his stepfather would get drunk, and she didn't sleep with him when he was drunk. That's what Matthew said."

"Yeah. He's an alcoholic."

"Sad thing. But the back door was knocked off its hinges. And she was gone. Matthew remembers her kissing him before she went downstairs to go to bed. The dog was gone, too. And then Matthew broke out in these purplish rashes, and his skin got all tight, and his eyes bulged. His lips curled. Really something terrible." She spoke now under her breath: "I saw something on television. About Hartford. They'd found someone roaming about twenty miles northwest—our direction—and this person looked exactly like this kid here. And this woman they found. She was angry. Really angry. Screaming and hollering. Flailing her arms. She reached out for anyone who got close. She couldn't speak. Just angry ranting. No words. Just sounds. Hideous sounds."

Horrible sounds. Made my blood run cold. They'd bolted her down in chains. And they said that they'd found more, and they were all very angry. And then the video-tape cut off."

"And the woman in the video looked like Matt?"

"Yes. Except Matthew seems a lot less—ill."

"Is it a disease?" The Hartford Disease. Catchy.

"Yeah. They don't know how it's transmitted, though. They think through sensual contact. Body fluids. Saliva, blood, what-not. All of the government workers have been warned that if any of the symptoms break loose, they need to restrain the victims and call for help."

"I saw some police cars outside..."

"They left. Had other things to do."

He looked out towards the bus entrance. A patrol car pulled up along the curb. "This looks serious," he said.

"It *is* serious. All of the police in Hartford pulled out. It's spreading."

"I thought Hartford was quarantined?"

"It was. But apparently it wasn't effective."

"So Hartford's just been... abandoned? Because of this disease?"

Her face hardened. "Because of *something*."

The cops were coming into the building. Shouting came from the nurse's office, echoing down the corridors. Austin dipped away and walked past the cops and went back to class, holding the papers under his arm. Everyone stared at him as he walked in. His face was ashen white. Drained of blood.

"Did you get the papers?" Ms. Hood said.

He nodded and handed them to her.

The whole class continued to stare at him.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"The receptionist was busy."

"You're wasting my time."

He went and sat down and the boy's angry tells continued to echo in his mind like a skipping soundtrack. He kept thinking about how his mom had disappeared. Why couldn't she have just opened the door and slipped out? Why did she have to barge through the glass?

His thoughts were broken. A student stood from his seat and pointed outside.

Ms. Hood rolled her eyes. "What is it, Jeff?"

"Outside! An accident! An accident in the subdivision!"

Students leapt from their seats and crowded the windows. Austin stood from his desk and walked over, his heart hammering behind his ribs. He was short and couldn't see over their heads. He pieced the image together in his mind, an image forged from the students' shocked words:

The driver looks okay. He just got out of the car.

Why did the other guy swerve into his lane?

He's getting out of his car.

What's wrong with him? He looks fucked up.

Ms. Hood: "Watch the language!"

What're they doing?

Oh my God, he just tackled him. Is anyone else seeing this?!

He's whooping his ass, just beating him right on the street!

He's not beating him, he's killing him!

The trees! The trees! Look at them!

What's wrong with them?

They don't look right.

Austin climbed on top of a desk. Ms. Hood yelled at him but he didn't care. He could barely make out the base of the tree line through the mist. Out of the mist emerged foggy shapes. People. People hunched over with arms dangling and legs leading them this way and that. They materialized out of the mist. Men and women. Regular people. Some had blood staining their clothes. But most were just covered with that purple discoloration. The sunken eyes. Venomous teeth.

Absolutely god-awful-looking. They were headed towards the school through the brown and curling grass of the lawn. Moving between piles of moss-ridden dirt. Construction was supposed to be in late spring. The people meandered around the bobcats and construction equipment. Lacking any direction. Aimlessly walking. Some tilted their heads. Others fell only to get back up. As they drew nearer he could see drool dripping from their mouths. The beauty on the outside replaced with horrible ugliness. The beauty on the inside stripping away, revealing the dark malice and wretchedness just beneath the skin.

He jumped off the desk and ran through the classroom and out the door. Ms. Hood didn't even yell at him this time. Students filled the halls, talking hurriedly. Some teachers came out, trying to calm everyone down. He jogged over to the atrium and peered down. A cop stood on the first floor, a 9mm pistol in one hand and a radio in the other. He held the radio less tense than he held the gun. Some kinds bounced into him but he didn't seem to care. Doors opened and more students staggered out of classrooms. Austin just stared at the police officer and heard the frantic, nervous talk around him.

Did you see them? See them in the field?

There's smoke over South Arlington, something is burning...

There's a big accident on Main Street, and it's on fire.

There are people down there, coming towards the school!

People?

They don't look like people.

They're people. They just look... sick.

Austin half-ran and half-fell down a flight of steps, landing on the ground floor. Students were here and there, thick as flies over carrion. He thought of carrion. Dead flesh. The people coming towards the school were —

There came a crash, a shatter, a scream, a shout.

He turned around.

Students hollered and ran. Glass covered the floor from one of the main doors leading out to the concrete patio encircling the school. Hands were

reaching through the glass, groping blindly in the air. A hand grabbed the sleeve of a football player but he tore free. He punched the figure through the narrow glass and the hands slithered back outside. A stampede erupted as another door burst open and a deranged woman rushed into the hall. She was large and overweight with purple flesh rolling underneath her shirt. She stumbled into the corridor and grabbed a student, threw her against the locker. The girl beat the brute with her fists and the woman smashed her head into the girl's face, bashing it in. Blood flowed over the woman's arms. She sank her teeth into the girl's broken face and the girl's ragged screams were cut short. Austin couldn't move even with all the students sprinting past. The woman dropped the girl to the floor and then she turned and ran in the other direction, her heavy legs wobbling back and forth as she barreled through the sea of fleeing students. Another door leading to the outside opened and several men entered, twitching and flailing. He felt a bulge and streaking pain. His shirt tugged back. He glanced over his shoulder. An older man stood behind him, the once-comical age lines now replaced with hatred and blood lust. Blood dripped from his lips. Austin tore away and fell against the water fountain and collapsed to the floor.

From the floor he saw feet running past. The door at his feet splintered. A man rushed in and tackled a kid to the ground, beating him with his fists. Austin lied there too paralyzed to help. The youth's bitter screams resounded painfully in his ears. And then he saw the girl who had been bashed in the face getting to her feet. Blood flowed like a river from her face but somehow she stood. One eye caked in warm blood. She stared right at him and then surged towards his sprawled position. Her manicured hands snapped and jolted. Her lips furled back. The yellow teeth. Her eyes locked with his.

He ripped himself to his feet and ran down the hallway. Students were pouring down the steps leading to the second story. Some were even going upstairs. The atrium had become pandemonium. Some students lied trampled, groping at wounds. Others screamed and cried, frozen in place by the numbing and sudden fear. Several large, muscular students pinned themselves against

the bus entrance doors. Against the doors several people threw their bodies, clawed at the glass. Infected. That's what they were. Infected. Like the boy.

The boy.

He spun around to see the boy running straight towards him. The braids covered his fiendish face. He snarled and screamed. A blood-chilling howl. Austin reacted instinctually when the boy was upon him: he hunched down and drilled his foot into the boy's chest, knocking him down. He hit the ground hard and growled. He reached for Austin's ankles and pulled himself towards them, ready to sink his teeth through the socks. Austin suddenly remembered the girl. How she had awakened. How she had become something... not human. The kid's teeth glimmered. Austin backed away but fell, landing hard on his tail-bone. Nauseating pain. He didn't care. He kicked Matthew in the face—it *wasn't* Matthew anymore—and blood flowed from the shoe imprint. The boy abandoned his ankles and scraped at his face. Austin got to his feet and joined the crowd.

Those barring the door were thrown back as the infected people threw their entire weight onto the door. The athletes and jocks fell to the ground and the infected swarmed over them like killer bees. They screamed for help and tried to get up but the infected did not heed their cries. The athletes were beaten as the infected sank their teeth into them, as their hands clawed at them and ripped at their clothes, at their flesh. Mangled screams. Mutilated cries.

Austin stood near one of the brick pillars of the once-silent atrium. Those who had been barricading the doors sluggishly got to their feet. Their faces were covered with purple rashes. Their eyes were sunken. Infected. They lumbered towards the ground. A girl ran to one of them, screaming for her brother; her brother grabbed her and threw her against the wall and then bodily twisted her arm and pulled. The socket disjointed and he pulled again as she screamed and the flesh tore and her arm came off. Blood gushed all over the glass trophy display, running in great swathes down the polished glass. The girl passed out and her brother knelt down and held her dismembered arm and his eyes darted around the crowd as he began to eat.

Austin was carried by the crowd. Down D Hallway. Into the cafeteria. The infected were everywhere, pouring through windows and doors. He fell between two tables. An infected rushed at him. He kicked the table over, blocking its path. He stood and snatched a chair. Another came at him from the other side. A student from his health class. He swung the chair into him and knocked him down, and then he stomped down on his throat. He gurgled. Blood trickling from the corners of his lips. Austin wanted to cry.

The band hallway looked to be miles away. He ran for it and somehow reached it. He went through the swinging doors. He turned around and saw three infected humans coming towards him. An older man and two teens from the school. One bled profusely from the leg. Austin kicked the doors outwards, knocking them down, and then raced down the hallway.

A teacher appeared, hollered, "What's going on out there!"

"Run!" Austin shouted.

He tried to run past but the teacher grabbed him. The weight-lifting coach. "Where do you think —"

The door to the cafeteria swung open and the infected came through.

The coach's brow creased. "What the hell?"

The female gym teacher appeared from an adjoining hallway. She hollered and ran at them. Austin pulled free from the coach and ran for the glass doors leading to the grassy lawn bordering the parking lot. It looked clear. He reached the doors and shook them. Locked. The weight-lifting teacher swung at the gym teacher and knocked her to the ground. The other three infected intercepted. They were all over him, and he fell with blood flowing from his arm. The infected climbed on top of him, but he threw them off and stood. Austin saw that it was too late. The transformation had already happened. The coach stared at him as the purple rashes began to splotch out over his face. Blood gurgled from a broken artery in his neck, coursing down his shirt and pants and puddling beside his feet. He went towards the boy, lumbering. Austin was pinned. He jerked at the doors. He stepped back and kicked the glass as hard as

possible. It webbed with cracks. He kicked it again and it shattered. He ducked and punched his hands through the remaining glass shards. His knuckles bled with bits of glass stuck into them.

The coach was right behind him, reaching.

He crawled through the window.

Coach's hands brushed his feet.

Austin curled fetal outside under the warm morning sun.

The coach shook the doors and shrieked.

The other infected came to the door.

Austin knew they could fit through.

He didn't know how long it would take for them to figure that out.

He didn't want to stick around to find out.

He ran across the grassy knoll. Smoke rose above the skyscrapers in the distance, curling around the towering buildings like malevolent halos. He could see the junior high. Little kids ran and their whinny screams could be heard. High school students flowed from several entrances and ran for their cars. Some had already reached the parking lot and were gunning home in terror. The sick ones ran between the cars, emerging from the trees and from the surrounding neighborhoods. Horns honked everywhere. Madness. In the distance he could hear the smashing of metal. Screams and cries. An explosion behind him shook the ground. He looked back to see smoke rising above the school kitchen. Bits of debris rained around him.

Behind him the infected had crawled through the hole and were coming for him.

He turned and ran into one of the parking lot lanes. A car gunned straight for him. He ran across the street. The infected behind him raced into the street and were smashed by the car. Austin ran between the lanes of parked cars, searching for his Jeep. He found the Jeep Cherokee, the green paint warm under the spring sun. He ran to his door and tried to open it. Locked. Some of the

infected in the parking lot spotted him and began running around the cars and down the lanes to reach him.

He fiddled with the keys. Dropped them. Tried again. Dropped them.

They were so near, so close. They shrieked.

"God help me," Austin said. He found the key and unlocked the door.

He leapt in and slammed the door. Threw down the lock.

An infected hurled himself against the car door window. He spread drool and blood over the glass. Austin started the engine. "Calm down, calm down, calm down..." He threw it into reverse and stamped the gas, pulled out into the lane.

And he saw Hannah standing by her Sunfire.

Her keys were missing.

Tears crawled down her face. An infected rushed at her. Another from the other side. Austin didn't see Peyton. He put the Jeep into drive and hit the pedal. He slammed on the brakes next to her car. He reached under the seat and grabbed an iron wrench for changing tires and unlocked the door and jumped out. He shouted at her. She turned, pointed. He ducked just as an infected swung out at him. He turned and jabbed the pointed end of the bar upwards into the infected woman's stomach. She fell back, groping at the wound, fell against a parked truck. Blood spread between her fingers.

Austin turned and yelled: "Hannah! Get in!"

She ran forward and crawled through the front seat.

An infected came at the door. The government teacher. He'd gotten the Gold Coin award from her because he was, in her words, a "hard-working, determined student with a good attitude, and very admirable." Now she ran towards him, bleeding from the eye, wailing like a banshee. Another came from the other direction.

Austin jumped into the car and pulled the door shut and simultaneously hit the gas.

He left both infected behind him.

"What's going on?!" Hannah cried.

"I've no idea," he said under his breath.

He sped down the lane, out onto the exit road, and hit the pedal down to the floor. An infected jumped in front of them. He didn't have time to react. The body barreled over the bumper and thumped onto the windshield, pulled a cartwheel and landed behind them on the road, bones broken and jutting from torn flesh. He pulled the Jeep onto the main road. The stoplights were still changing but no one paid any attention. He sped past the junior high, towards Olde Clearcreek, towards home. He left the high school behind and was glad to be alive.

Hannah gaped at him, eyes filled with tears. "My brother..."

8:00 AM

What had been just an ordinary road cutting through Olde Clearcreek had become a cesspool of chaos. Accidents cluttered the roadway. Cars burned. Vehicles had slid into ditches. Smoke billowed from the burning skeletons of Miatas and Fords and Pontiacs. Austin clutched the wheel with white-knuckled fingers. Vehicles swerved all around him. Before him the skyscrapers of South Arlington continued to burn. Infected walked the road and roadsides, legs cutting through a shallow morning mist that lapped at the curb and wrapped around the trees and brushed up against the squat brick buildings of Old town. Hannah had hunched over in her seat, head held in her hands, tears running between her fingers. "My brother, my brother, my brother..." Austin didn't ask. He wasn't going back. He jerked the wheel and swerved around the collision of a truck and van. A man was crawling out of the truck's back window. As he drove past Austin looked back and saw an infected running towards the truth. For a moment his mind asked the inevitable question, *What the fuck is going on?* He didn't know. And he feared he never would. He felt bad for Hannah but every time she said, "My brother..." he thought only of Ashlie. And he cared more for Ashlie than he did anyone else.

The Jeep shuddered as an infected jumped onto the top. He scratched at the roof. Hannah looked up. Austin gritted his teeth and slammed the brakes. The infected flailed forward, hit the hood, grasped at the smooth paint, fell next to the front tires. The Jeep bounded twice, crunching the body into the pavement. The wheels jammed. They were at the entrance of a subdivision. The infected were everywhere, emerging from backyards and running through lawns and encircling the Jeep. Austin hit the gas again but the corpse's body had jammed into the axle. The Jeep bounded forward, spraying the blood of the victim all over the infected who had encircled the vehicle.

"Traffic," he muttered under his breath.

They continued driving down the road. The windows on most buildings were shattered. Some buildings coughed smoke and ash. Infected roamed the sidewalks. Little children ran amok. Two elementary schools were on either side and their inhabitants had emptied into the maelstrom. The sick grabbed tiny boys and little girls and tore them limb-from-limb. Even through the windows they could hear their whinnying, high-pitched screams. A little girl threw herself against the window. Steaming blood flowed from her scalp and clung to her hair. She stared at them through the window, her maniacal eyes dancing between the two ashen-faced riders. Austin stamped the gas harder and sped away, rolling over her foot with the tires; she just stood and watched them go, then turned on a panicking classmate.

A cloud of smoke blew over the Jeep and then thinned. A seven-car pile-up blocked their way. The road home. He did a U-turn, ramping over the sidewalk. Nearly hit a light-pole. He went back the way they had come. A Honda erupted from the smoke and nearly hit them. Austin turned right onto a road he knew fairly well. The road twisted and turned into a rolling mass of short and stocky houses compacted together. Some homes coughed smoke. He went around an accident in flames. The broiled body of a human flailing about within, writhing in fire. People dashed out of their homes. The sick wandered the street and attacked all who moved. Austin's eyes beheld terrible things. Men and women beaten down by the infected. Some walking without arms, crawling without legs, moving despite the loss of blood. Little children from the schools staggering about like zombies straight out of a Romero film. Accident victims feebly fighting off vicious assailants. Infected coming out of homes, drenched in blood. Husbands killed by wives. Children clawing at their parents.

They pulled down another road. Mostly quiet. Or *quieter*. Another turn. People stood outside their doors, watching, saw blood plastered over the wheels and staining the forest green paint. The confusion from Main Street hadn't reached

them yet. He yanked the Jeep to a halt, pulling up into the driveway of Les' home. He opened the door.

Hannah gawked at him. "What are you doing?! Don't go out there!"

"I have to get Les." Les was home-schooled.

"No..."

He ignored her and got out of the door and shut it and raced up the steps to the front door. Rang the doorbell. No response. He stood on the porch for a moment before the revelation came: *Why not just go inside?* He tried the handle. It was locked. He heard shouts and shrieks and horns and distant explosions. He looked over to the skyscrapers far beyond wreathed in smoke and ash and fire and brimstone. Donning the crowns of hell.

The neighbor across the street stepped out of his house, shouted, "What's going on?!"

Austin waved him away. "Get inside!"

Several infected appeared down the street.

They saw an older woman and ran for her.

Austin looked to Hannah and motioned to her, *Come*.

She shook her head.

The house door opened.

Austin barely noticed: an infected clambered down a fence next door and came right at him. Les stood in the doorway. Austin turned and ran inside, glanced back to see Hannah locking the Jeep doors. He slammed the front door and locked it with haste. Les stood back staring at him, confused. Silence in the house. The walls were sound-proof: he'd been in a rock band, and after getting noise complaints from the neighbors, his mom had installed sound-proofing. Austin fell against the wall, gasping for breath, fearing he would slip into shock.

"What are you doing here?" Les asked. "Are you okay?"

He shook his head *No*. "Les... Have you heard —"

"Heard what?"

"Outside."

He paused. "It sounds like terrorists..." He reached for the door.

Austin slapped his hands away. "No. Not a good idea."

"Why?"

"Because *they're* out there?"

"The terrorists? God. Are terrorists seriously attacking?"

The large bay window shuddered. Les looked over and recoiled in shock. The neighbor Austin had just talked to had sprayed the window with blood from a wound in his neck. Rabid eyes. Austin didn't bother to look. The neighbor pressed his palms against the window and stared at them. His chest heaved and blood dripped down his shirt.

"That's Mr. Gray!" Les shouted. "We have to—"

"No." He blocked his way to the door. "It isn't Mr. Gray. Not anymore."

"What?"

"Do you see him? See his eyes?"

But Mr. Gray was gone. Blood smeared the window.

Les tiptoed to the window. "Austin! It's Hannah!"

"She's in the Jeep." He looked down at his arms and legs. Shaking.

"The Smiths down the street are trying to get in."

Austin cursed and went over to the window and stood beside him. Infected climbed all over the Jeep. An older man and woman. The spots of blood on the clothes implied Mr. Smith had killed his wife and she had joined him in his awful status and the two of them had escaped from their little retirement home. Mr. Smith was atop the Jeep, pressing his head, hands, knees and feet against the cold top. His wife squatted next to Hannah's door, wrestling the door-knob, snarling into the window. More infected swarmed from homes and headed towards the intersection close to Olde Towne.

"Are all your doors locked?" Austin asked.

"All of them. Since you locked this one."

Honking. Shearing metal. Down the street. The floor rocked.

"We have to get her out of there," Austin said.

"The Smiths are nice people. I wouldn't—"

"Les, shut the fuck up and look at them!"

He bit his lip.

"You have a paintball gun, don't you?"

Les nodded. "It's in Jack's room."

"Get it. Shoot from the window, down at the Jeep. It should scatter your neighbors. Confuse them at least. And I'll grab Hannah and we'll come back inside. Sound good?"

"That's the shittiest idea I've ever heard. You're going to get hurt."

"I know. Do it anyways."

"You're going to get hurt."

"When has that ever stopped us before?"

Austin stood by the front door and unlocked it. Grabbed the knob. Rested his shoulder against the door in case anything—*anything*—tried to get in. Clattering and shuffling upstairs. A pause. Creaking. The upstairs window opening. Then he heard the pops and through the window heard the shrieks of the infected as they scattered off the Jeep and ran about, confused. He flung open the door and raced out to the Jeep, dodging a panicking Mrs. Smith. A paintball stung him in the cheek and the paint dripped down his neck. Hannah sat in the Jeep, ashen-faced and red-eyes. He grabbed the doorknob. "Unlock it!" She shook her head. The Smiths were out in the street now and Les continued firing. Paintballs splattered everywhere. "Hannah! You have to open the door!" She did. He grabbed her arm and yanked her out. The paintballs ran out. The Smiths in the street cocked their heads and stared at the two uninfected beside the Jeep. And then they charged. Austin shoved Hannah towards the door and was right on her heels. Hannah went inside and then he followed, and he shut the door and locked it just as the Smiths threw themselves against it. Dust fluttered off the hinges. He feared the hinges would snap. But the door stopped shaking. Hannah had fallen to the ground. Austin stepped over her and went to the window. The Smiths meandered around the Jeep. A man was running down the sidewalk towards them. The Smiths went after him. Austin turned away from the window and didn't watch the man's demise.

He stood over her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, curled up on the ground in a fetal position.

His heart raced.

Les came from upstairs, the paintball gun in hand.

"Thanks," Austin said, casting him an offbeat glance.

"Holy shit. That actually worked." He looked down at Hannah and then back up to Austin. "It's not safe down here. The glass on the bay window could break. Upstairs. Jack's room has about fifteen hundred locks on the door. Bolted windows. And a bathroom."

Austin helped Hannah up and the three of them went up the twisting staircase into the hallway and into Jack's room. Les shut the door and twisted six or seven locks. In the room was a desk, a dresser, a television, a bed. Jack was off at college. Windows overlooked the side yard and the street. The door to the bathroom was on one hinge. The bathroom window looked into the backyard. Austin went into the bathroom. A toilet, a shower, some cabinets, a sink. He turned the faucet on the sink and ran water into cupped hands and drank greedily. In the bedroom Hannah sat on the bed and Les stared out the window down the street, at the neighborhood homes. Austin dried his hands and left the bathroom.

Les said, "The Smiths are gone. There's others, though."

"Don't let them see you."

"They can't get in here."

Shattering glass downstairs, hollers floating up the stairs and to the door.

Hannah stared wide-eyed at the doorknob.

"Are you sure about that?" Austin asked.

Les ducked away from the window and sat down next to Hannah, pointing the gun at the door. Austin stood near the bathroom. It was comical: a paintball gun. Silence downstairs. Then the sound of pots falling and hitting the tile floor. Les' dog started barking. Another sound in the barking. The barking stopped,

cut off by a rising squeal, then tapering off into a mangy gurgle, and then nothing. Les' eyes glazed over. Scuffling feet. Sweat dripped down Austin's face. The fan overhead hung low, turned off. Hannah whimpered. The paintball gun shook in his hands. The door seemed to loom bigger and bigger. The feet scampered downstairs and then began coming up the steps. Each footfall echoing with a resounding creek in the old wood of the house. Hannah's whimpering grew louder. Tears welled under her eyes. She opened her mouth, gasping for air. Les stared at her in horror. Austin rushed forward and threw his hand over her mouth, muffling her cry. The footsteps stopped in front of the door. Silence. The doorknob jingled. Everyone frozen in place, daring not to even breathe. The lock kept the door from opening. The doorknob rattled harder and harder. And then it went quiet. The footsteps trotted backwards, back down the steps, and vanished. They listened for ages, for anything, ears drowning the noise outside the windows and jumping and every crack and nuisance outside Jack's door.

Minutes passed. Austin removed his hand from Hannah's mouth. Her head dropped into her hands. Les drew several deep breaths. Color began returning to his pale face.

"Do you think he's gone?" he whispered in a hoarse voice.

"How the hell should I know?" Austin went over to the window.

Smoke rose from many different places. Down the street a van had slammed into a light-pole, tearing it down. The driver was gone. Blood splattered the pavement. A few infected darted here and there. Some crawled like animals along the sides of houses, sniffing at the windows. They moved toward the intersection and then toward the heart of Spring Falls. In the direction of downtown South Arlington. Where Austin's father worked—but his father was at home. With his mother and sister. He suddenly yearned so strongly for all of them. "We need to go."

Hannah looked up. "Are you insane?"

"My family is at home. They're worried about me."

"Who cares if you're worried?" Les said. "You're safe here."

"For how long?"

Hannah wailed, "It's death out there!"

He glared at her. Why did she need to be so loud?

He went to the window overlooking the driveway. The keys to the Jeep were in his pocket. The Smiths had vanished. "My Jeep has enough gas. The sick people, they seem to be leaving." His hand went into his pocket and his fingers curled around the keys, running along the spliced grooves and edges.

"They're leaving? Where?"

"Towards South Arlington. I don't know. But there's not as many out there now."

"We don't know where the Smiths are. Or Mr. Gray." Les looked at the door. "Or the person in the house."

They could argue all they wanted. Austin didn't care. "I'm leaving."

"Not me," Les said. "I'm staying the fuck here."

Hannah said the same.

Austin shrugged. "Well. You guys are smart, I guess. But to all his own."

He went for the door.

Les jumped in front of him. "No."

"You can't make me stay."

"Look. There's someone or something outside the door."

"They left."

"You're going to get us all killed!"

Hannah shouted, "It's death out there!"

Both Les and Austin glared at her and then looked back to each other.

"Look out the window," Austin said. "They're leaving."

"You don't know that. There's no way you can know that. Maybe they're hiding."

"And planning an ambush? These people act like animals, not people."

"Haven't you seen Animal Planet? Animals do shit like that all the time."

"Stop talking."

“Austin...”

He pushed Les out of the way, but he shoved him back. He fell into the dresser. Pain streaked along his back. Les towered over him, suddenly taller. Austin kicked him in the groin and leapt up and shoved him towards the bed. Hannah leapt out of the way as Les fell. Austin turned and threw back the locks and opened the door and ran into the hallway. Hannah shouted and jumped up and ran to the door, slammed it shut. Locked the bolts. He heard Hannah crying again. Les saying something quietly, undecipherable.

Austin walked down the steps to the front door. He grabbed the handle. But he couldn't leave. He thought of the two of them upstairs, refusing to move. Stubborn. And he imagined them dying up there. Someway, somehow. And their bodies rotting, leaving retired skeletons. The bones yellowing with age. And he saw himself sitting at home, drinking and eating, surviving the outbreak, knowing he left them to die. He released the handle. He went into the kitchen and opened a drawer and withdrew a dull steel butcher's knife. He turned to head back to the stairwell and looked into the living room and saw a stream of blood flowing around the living room bar—where Les' mom kept her stock of bourbon and whiskey—and it trailed into the corridor and into the kitchen and past his feet. Such a dark red. He clutched the knife and went into the living room and stared at the bar. The trail of blood went around the bar and disappeared from view. He crept closer. The dog's muzzle pointed from around the bar, mouth slack. He stepped closer. The fur glowed a dark red. Matted down with blood. And then the dog's head pulled back a moment and then returned to where it was. The fur had a dent where its head had been resting. Now the angle was different. Austin leaned over the counter. A teen from across the street hunkered over the dog. He wore nothing but shorts and had three ragged slashes down his mottled back. Hair drenched with sweat and blood dangled down his scalp. Austin let out a muffled cough. The head snapped up. Flesh, fur and meat hung from his jaws, blood dripping down his chin and running down his neck. Those sunken eyes stared at Austin as if in

wonder, and then the jaws opened in a gruesome screech and the flesh fell from his mouth and he stood and lunged at him. Austin backed away from the bar and the boy fell on top of the bar. Bloody claws reached out and scraped at him. Austin bore the knife and the boy shouted and he acted instinctually and drove the knife into the boy's neck, pressing down with force and feeling the flesh and tissue shear under the tip and blade of the dagger. Blood squirted all over his shirt. The boy twitched once and then lay still. Blood gushed up and around the knife.

He let the knife stay in the boy's neck and stumbled backwards, collapsed onto the couch. He breathed so hard he felt his lungs would burst. He tried to wipe the blood off his shirt but just got it on his hands. Sunlight from the window caressed his face. The window was broken, a gaping hole looking into the room. Glass shards covered the floor. Glittering like jewels in the morning light. A fine spring wind breathed in and he welcomed it. The street was deserted except for one man running down the sidewalk, obviously in fright. But he was not chased. Why was he running? And then Austin knew: *We all have to run. No one is safe. Hartford was a nightmare, and it was just the beginning. It succumbed.* And he had a thought, a fear, a revelation: *We will succumb, too. All of us.*

9:00 AM

He went back upstairs. The door to Jack's room was locked. He wiggled the doorknob. And then he knocked. Les let him inside.

Hannah stared at him from the bed. "Did you change your mind?" And then she saw the blood spattered on his clothes and her hand flashed up over her mouth and she rolled onto her side in Jack's bed. Les gaped at him in shock. Hannah started to cry again. Hands folded over her head. Tears dripping between tender fingers.

"What the hell happened?" Les asked.

His breath still came in ragged gasps. The blood was warm on his hands. "You were right. There was someone down there." His own voice surprised him—his soul was chaos, his mind an inferno, and all that came out was a detached, mechanical tone.

"Is the person still down there?"

"Yeah. But... I took care of it."

"Do you want some water?"

"Yeah."

He went into the bathroom and ran water over his hands. The light above him bobbed. He found it surprising that the electricity was still running with all the accidents and fires and mayhem. And then he remembered that Spring Falls was hooked onto a back-up electric generator. It had a couple of hours electricity stored on it, so they had... He looked at his watch. Only about another two hours before the electricity would short out. By noon they'd be without power. And then night would come. He pushed it from his mind. He didn't want to worry about that. His stomach growled and bladder cried. He shut the bathroom door and relieved himself.

A knock at the door. Les. "Is it safe to go downstairs?"

"Should be. Just don't look in the living room."

"Why?"

He zipped up. "Not now. I don't want to think about it."

He washed his hands and left the bathroom. Only Hannah was there. Standing beside the window. The door was locked. He walked up to her and together they looked out the window at the branches of a splendid oak. Fresh leaves blossoming and swaying in the wind. The street was deserted. Sirens wailed in the distance, mixed with honking. The faint whisper of screams. He didn't understand why they were so alone. And then he figured they weren't. Survivors—more than just them—had to be out there. Locking themselves in their homes. Hiding out. Trying to make sense of everything and, undoubtedly like them, failing.

"Do you know why?" Hannah asked, surprising him.

He looked at her. "What?"

"Do you know why my brother wasn't with me?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you think I would've left Peyton?" Her eyes bore into him. Dangerous eyes. "Do you think I would've abandoned my brother?"

"No."

"I loved him. I loved him *so* much. I don't care how many times he playfully punched me in the arm, knowing I didn't like it. I always complained about how much it hurt, how I hated it." She rubbed her arm. "I didn't like it. But it didn't hurt. Not really. He never would've hurt me. He didn't do it to hurt me. He did it to tease me. He felt comfortable teasing me. He loved me. And no matter how much he drove me insane, no matter how angry and irritated he made me, I always loved him. I missed him on school vacations. When we would go to Washington, D.C. Or to Chattanooga." She shook her head, the tears returning. She stared directly at him. Her voice was choppy. Choked. "I loved my brother, Austin. You know I wouldn't have left him behind."

"I know that," he said. He didn't know what else to say.

She managed through weak sobs, "I tried... You know I... But it... He..."

"It's okay."

"No. *No*. Don't say that. It's *not* okay." She wiped tears away with her hand. "Austin... I *watched* him. I *saw* what happened to him. I *saw* it. I *saw* my brother..." And she said no more, the weeping overcoming her, and she went over to Jack's navy beanbag chair and dropped down. She curled into a fetal position and faced the wall. Her tears dripped onto the wooden panel flooring. She shook under her clothes. Shaking in mourning. Her chocolate hair stuck to her face as her eyes bulged and her throat rasped and her tongue swelled. Austin's heart lodged in his throat. He hurt for her.

A knock at the door. Austin turned from Hannah and walked over and opened it.

"It's Chris King," Les told me. "He rode our bus. His license was suspended for—"

"Who? Outside? For God's sake, let him—"

"No. He's downstairs."

A pause. "Oh."

He looked over to Hannah, said, "Come into my room with me."

He pointed a thumb in her direction. "And leave her?"

"She's safe. We need to talk. Come on."

So they shut the door and left Jack's room and walked down the hallway into Les' room. A Dell XP desktop sat dark and sullen on his desk. A digital clock slowly ticked its neon numbers. Les' clothes hung from a hook. The bed was a gnarled mess of twisted blankets and thrown pillows. Les shut the door and locked it tight.

He went to his window and looked outside. "It's a ghost town."

"It doesn't feel right."

"I know. What do you think happens to them?"

Austin rolled out the leather desk chair and sat down. "I've no idea."

"It's like it just... latches onto people."

He remembered the school. Those who were bitten became infected. "I don't know. I guess. It's not random, though."

"No?"

"Everyone who turns into these... things... has come into contact with them. I mean, they've been attacked."

"So if you're attacked, you become like them?"

"No... Maybe? I was attacked and didn't become one of them. I think it's if you get bitten." He remembered the nurse's office. The receptionist saying something about it being transferred through sensual touch? Body fluids? "It's a disease. A communicable disease. Through saliva. Or blood. Or both. I don't know."

"Body fluids?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"So if you get the body fluid of an infected in you, you become infected. Right?"

"Tell me again, Les, how in the hell should I know?"

He sighed. "It's just —"

"Do you hear that?" Austin jumped up and went to the window. Les right behind him. A truck drove by, frantically swerving down the road. In the bed an infected was crawling towards the cab. The back cab window slid open and the barrel of a shotgun poked out. A blast of white light and the infected lit up with plumes of meaty red and purple flinging into the air. The infected fell backwards, flipped over the back rail of the truck, and fell onto the street. The barrel pulled back into the cab and the truck went down the road, out of sight. It was over in seconds. The corpse lie there on the pavement, a chasmic hole ripped through its chest. Lying in a widening pool of blood.

"I guess," Les said, "they're still around."

"We can't let our guard down."

"I wonder if the phones work."

They went downstairs, avoiding the carnage lying in the living room. On the countertop island. Les pulled the kitchen phone off the hook and dialed. He dropped the phone. "Just silence. Not even static. Nothing."

Austin's nose wrinkled. "God, that stench."

"It's the scent of death."

"Nice parody. Didn't need it."

"I know."

"Please stop."

He crossed his arms. Blood ran between their feet, through the kitchen, into the dining room. The blood was becoming thick in spots like the glazed film over spoiled milk. Les rubbed his eyes and went into the family room. Austin rummaged through the cupboards, looking for a snack. He discovered a box of Cheezits and popped a few into his mouth. Stale. He ate some more. Les went into the front room, peering out the bay window, shaking his head. Austin dropped the box and stepped over the river of blood. And he followed the river of blood into the living room. Blood stained the bar in dripping torrents. Splattered as if with red paint.

And Chris King—the boy he had slain—was gone.

His heart pounded. It was impossible. He had thrust the knife into the neck. Blood had gushed. The body had gone limp. Chris King had died. *But he was not there.* Austin crept into the living room. It was empty except for the dog's corpse, the tongue lolling out past its teeth, the blood-drenched fur. The bar stank of vomit and urine and feces blended with the sweet and sour odor of drying blood. He walked around the bar, bracing himself. The dog's side was torn open as if hands had dropped in and pulled at the organs. Flesh ragged at the sides. Blood had formed a pool within the cavity, bones smeared and protruding, organs open and spilling yellow puss. He turned away and saw a bloody trail leading back to and out the window. He walked over to the window and stood amidst the shards. The wind ruffled his hair. The street was deserted except for the infected who had caught the shotgun shells in his chest,

turning it into mauled meat. He went back to the bar. King was gone. But how? How did a dead body rise up and just walk out? *What the fuck?* He turned around and looked out the window and saw the infected in the street wobbling to his feet. Hunched over. Bleeding.

“What the fuck?” he said under his breath.

The blood stained his clothes as he turned around in the street. Blood gushed from the wounds in his chest. Dripped down his pants. Puddled on the pavement. The head on the shoulders turned back and forth. The eyes were alive. And then Austin made the connection. “Fucking Romero was onto something.”

He had seen the bullets.

He had seen them tearing through him.

He had seen the body ruptured and broken.

He had seen him fall from the truck.

He had seen him die.

And now he was on his feet.

A cold sweat popped over his brow. His arms shook and knees knocked and his muscles turned to a slush like the snow after it fell and became soiled by the exhaust of tractor trailers and snow plows. He teetered backwards, grabbed a standing light for support. It crashed against the wall and the bulb shattered. The noise thundered. He regained his balance. Ears burning from the noise.

The fallen-and-risen in the street stared straight at him. Those awful eyes.

Alive.

The mouth opened. Bloodstained teeth. Feral eyes.

Alive.

It knew.

“Shit.”

He turned to run out of the room. He slipped on the blood trail and fell face-first into the door-frame. Stars floated before his eyes. He tried to get to his feet

but they lost traction in the blood. His forehead burned and blood trickled from a swelling on his forehead, stained his eyes, burnt like acid. He tried to blink it away and saw only red. One of his arms groped at the wall, the other fumbled about on the floor. The light from the broken window went dark. He rolled onto his back and looked to the window and saw a hunched figure standing inside the room before the window. An elderly man. Someone's father, someone's grandfather, someone's lover. Austin scrambled to his feet as the infected lurched after him. He pressed himself against the door and kicked his leg out, catching him in the chest. The infected fell backwards and tumbled over the couch, landed on the floor. Austin shouted for Les and unlocked the back door and ran outside onto the wooden back deck. Birds on the picnic table flapped away. He ran down the wooden deck to the dining room window. He banged on the glass and the infected appeared at the door from the living room. Les appeared in the dining room. He rushed to the window and opened it. The infected screeched and began to run towards him. Austin jumped through the window head-first and fell over the dining room chair and onto the table. His legs dangled out the window. Les shouted. The infected grabbed his foot, clawed. Austin kicked away and writhed off the table and fell onto the floor. Les stood over him. He swung a pan out and bashed the infected in the face as it tried to come through. It tottered backwards away from the window.

"Shut the window!" Austin yelled from the floor, a hand over his bloodied forehead.

Les dropped the pan.

"The window!"

"I got it!"

Austin got to his feet and ran into the kitchen and opened the drawer and grabbed a steak knife. Les struggled with the window as the infected reached his hands through, groping at Les' arms. "Les!" Austin shouted. Les backed away and Austin took his place as the infected wove his head through the window. He looked away as he stabbed the knife into the infected's eye. Blood surged onto the windowsill and dripped down the wall to the floor. The

infected let out a grunt and fell back, landing hard on the deck, the knife poking from its eye socket. Tendrils of steaming blood oozed out from the eye and down the cheek and onto the deck. Dripped between the cracks in the wooden boards. Austin stared in disbelief and Les pushed past him and shut the window.

"Lock it," Austin said.

"It doesn't lock. He's dead, anyways."

"Don't count on it."

He squinted out the window. Sunlight reflected sharply in his eyes.

Austin sat down in the dining room chair, chest heaving.

"I don't know," Les said. "You got him pretty good."

He pointed into the living room. "Look in there."

He went through the kitchen and into the living room. "Where is he?" he asked when he returned.

"He left. He just got up and left. See the guy out the window? He was the one shot with the shotgun. He came back to life. I *saw* it, Les. Saw it with my own two damned eyes. Don't believe me? Half his chest is gone. I saw him get off the street. He came through the window at me."

"That's impossible."

"I don't think impossibility counts for much anymore."

He changed the subject: "Blood's all over your shirt. I don't know how to wash it."

"Yeah. I'll wear one of yours. If that's okay."

He tensed. "Did any get in you?"

"What?"

"Did any body fluid get in you?"

He shook his head *No*.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not clawing at you and my skin isn't turning purple, is it?"

He shrugged. "Okay. Let's get you changed."

As they left the room, Austin cast a risky glance out the blood-smeared window. The man still lied there, the knife in his eye, the blood gently oozing along the aged contours of his face. They went upstairs. Hannah stood by Jack's door. "What happened?"

"They don't die," Austin said.

She followed him with her eyes. Looking at all the blood.

She went with them into Les' room. Les grabbed a shirt and Austin changed. It felt good to be in something clean. Hannah turned away when he changed his pants. They threw the bloody clothes onto the floor. No one cared.

"Be sure to wash up," Les said when they returned to Jack's room.

"I will. I want to get this blood off my hands."

"It's in your hair, too. We should've had to change after you cleaned up."

"Does the shower work?"

"At your own risk," Les said. He turned and locked Jack's door. "Before things heat up... Or get worse... Hannah, when he's showering, can you watch the window? Make sure no one comes after me."

Austin was at the bathroom door, turned around. "Where are you going?"

"I don't want to go downstairs to get food when night comes. We'd better stock up. I'm going to grab anything I can. Mom—" He paused for a moment at the thought of his mother. She was out-of-town for at least another day. And probably longer than that. He didn't want to think about it. At least she was in the countryside, away from... so many people. "She usually keeps big boxes in the downstairs closet. I'll fill one to the brim with food. And I'll get some of the bottled water. That should last us a while."

Austin nodded. "Better to risk it in daylight than in dark, I guess."

Les looked to Hannah. "Sound good?"

She shrugged and went to the window. Stood silently like a statue.

Les left. Austin went to the bathroom.

Austin shut the bathroom door and tried to lock it but it refused to lock. He stripped out of his new clothes. He wrapped toilet paper around his hands and

folded the clothes neatly over the toilet. He looked into the backyard. Fences enclosed the Whites' yard, where their little Chihuahua barked at the commotion next door: infected running through a home. A house on either side and one behind them. One was empty. The other yard had some dogs moving about. The other neighbor's dogs were gone. The chains lied sprawled in the waving grass. On the far neighbor's back porch and infected just stood there, hunched, arms drooping at her side, staring into space. The door was open and another infected was moving about inside, tearing at the furniture and gutting the cupboards of the kitchen and dining room. He abandoned the window. No need to be seen.

He opened the fogged door and stared at the grime and mold crusted over the edges of the shower. A cockroach scurried into the drain. He stepped inside and shut the fogged door. The faucet knob turned lazily, as if it were never used, and cold water sprayed out, dazzling. He pressed himself out of the spray but it stung at his legs. Stupid! Let the water get hot first. But then it did and it felt better. He stood there letting it run over his body. For five minutes he stood there and felt the heat and closed his eyes and pretended this was a different time and a different place. He thought of Chad and Drake and for all he knew they were dead. And Jack wouldn't be coming home from college this time. Blood clotted his hair and his mind would never forget as long as he lived, and these moments would haunt his dreams. The water ran into his eyes. He rubbed them and searched for shampoo. None. He opened the door, shouted. "Les! Hannah!"

The bathroom door opened. He shut the fogged door. She sauntered inside. He could vaguely see her form behind the fogged glass, and he knew she could see his, just as fogged, yet knowingly nude. His face reddened. "I need some shampoo or something," he said. "To get out the knots." To get out the blood.

"Okay," she said, and she vanished.

He looked down at his chest. The water running from his scalp was tainted red.

She came back in. "I couldn't find any shampoo. Here's some soap." She tossed a wrapped bar over the shower door.

"Thanks," he said, catching it. He unwrapped the package and dropped the wrapping to the ground. He lathered his hands with the soap but the suds washed out. He rubbed the bar all over his head, felt it tugging and shearing at his hair. Bubbles rose in his matted hair. He bent down and rinsed. The water fell in a splatter of maroon.

"Austin." She was still in the bathroom.

"What?" he said.

"I loved my brother."

"I know."

She didn't say anything more.

He ran the soap through again.

Her voice came again: "You know I tried to save him."

He stopped washing. The soap bar rested in his hands. "Hannah?" he asked from behind the shower door. "What happened?" He knew she wanted to tell him. But she wouldn't. Not until he asked. That's how she was. And Peyton was *her* brother and *his* friend. They both knew him. He would go over and play basketball with him. Hannah would make food. When Ashlie was there, she would make the drinks. And he and Peyton would clean up.

She didn't answer.

"Hannah?"

"I was in Food and Nutrition Class." She had always liked to cook. "Then we heard the doors downstairs breaking open. And then we heard the screams. Ms. Hamlin tried to keep us in class. But we opened the door and we saw people running around." Her voice was detached. "Then one of the sick people came in. Ms. Hamlin didn't know. She tried to help her. The woman was sick, she was an old lady, but she was sick. And Ms. Hamlin tried to help her, and the woman... She clawed at her so hard that she tore out her cheek. Ms. Hamlin screamed and the woman jumped on her and Ms. Hamlin fought her off but she bit her and then Ms. Hamlin threw her towards the window and the window

broke and she fell out. Everyone was scared and Ms. Hamlin turned around and screamed and when she turned around she was sick, too. She looked right at me and came after me. I got out of there. Ran through the halls. I found him... My brother... at the top of A Hallway. He ran up to me and he told me that they were killing people. He was really scared. So we went to the staircase. And then one of those sick people came at us. I got out of the way but Peyton didn't. He was knocked over the railing of the stairs and he fell onto the stairs and the people just trampled him. I ran down to help but, but blood, it was flowing out of his ears, his nose, his mouth. His body looked crushed. I couldn't help... I couldn't... Couldn't help..." She sniffled. "I would've saved him, you know?"

"I know."

"But he was already dead. He wasn't breathing. How could he still be alive? I left him there on the steps and a sick kid was coming down..."

"What could you have done, Hannah? Nothing."

"I just left him."

"There was nothing you could do."

She spoke quieter, almost in a whisper. "I'm so sorry. I loved him. I went to the atrium and it was terrible. You know. And I turned to run back, and then I saw him coming out. I ran to him. He was bleeding, but he was alive. I ran for him, I reached for him..." Her voice trailed and then cracked. "But his eyes. They were so terrible. And they looked at me. And I knew it wasn't him. He chased me but he finally gave up. He became one of them, Austin. He became a demon. He tried to hurt me. He tried to *kill* me."

"It isn't your fault."

She said nothing.

"Hannah?"

He heard the bathroom door shut.

He was alone.

10:00 AM

The water trickled to a stop and he got out of the shower. He quickly dressed, feeling fresh and right, and he joined Les and Hannah in the room. Led had dropped a cardboard box of food on the bed, everything from chips and crackers to bread and canned foods and fruit juice boxes. All thrown haplessly together. His shoes had trekked blood into the room in the outline of footprints. The television was and Hannah sat entranced on the edge of the bed. Les leaned against the dresser. Austin stood rigid by the door, watching the screen, which intermittently fuzzed in and out with static. The picture would blur, then sharpen, blur, shake, sharpen.

“Good news?” Austin asked, hopeful.

They didn’t answer. Les just shook his head.

Hannah didn’t look away from the screen. “It’s all over the place.”

Austin sat down on the floor beside her, head level with the television.

The three of them absorbed the numbing images.

A view from a news station. A harried reporter shaking with the troubling reports. Saying the city was falling to the disease. He pointed down from the rooftop. People ran in the streets. Infected whisked through the crowds like a dying October breeze. There was a large crash. The camera-man pointed skyward and the camera followed to see a helicopter smashing into a skyscraper. The reporter said, “That was one of the helicopters carrying people out of the city.”

The view from a helicopter flying over white-sand beaches and a marina emptying of its inhabitants. Boats streaming out to sea in the hope of escaping the mainland bloodshed. The infected swarmed the beach, running in and out of buildings and milling

about on the boardwalks. None seemed to run into the water. Many people running to their boats were trampled underfoot or became victims to the infected.

London, England. Big Ben slowly ticked as a tour bus overturned and erupted into flames. Metal blasted everywhere. The infected ran through the fire, flailing about as they burned. British citizens and tourists ran helter-skelter for their lives. In the background one of the many bridges spanning the great river collapsed and the sick and healthy mingled together in a shower of screams and were washed out into the river amidst sinking cars and bits of concrete.

Baghdad, Iraq. American troops caught in a hailstorm of gunfire, spraying tracers into crowds of Iraqis. Some of those who fell got up again and again, some with limbs missing, others with holes torn through their bodies. They rushed at the troops. Legless victims crawled towards the barricades. Huey gunships took off into the air, soldiers clinging to the struts. Shouts and screams as the infected overran the barricades. The camera blacked out.

People ran out of the subways and into them. In Paris the living hell ruled aboveground and belowground. The Eiffel tower stood grisly quiet. Bodies could be seen plunging from its top. Humans deciding to lose their lives in the fall instead of falling to the gruesome creatures that had once been loving mothers, hard-working fathers, and rowdy school-children. All across the globe men and women and children were committing suicide rather than succumbing to the madness.

The video feed of a camera-crew who had stolen away to a farm. The smoke rose from a nearby town. Infected could be seen walking the barren fields, staggering towards the farm with no direction nor goal—the only desire that of satisfying their hunger. The reporters said the small town had virtually fallen except for some pockets of brief resistance and some who had cleverly hidden from the infected.

United States Army helicopters flew over suburban neighborhoods, spraying gunfire down on American streets as infected could be seen to the horizon. The flash of the guns mixed with the shards of blasted concrete and blood shed on the ravaging infected below. The helicopter pulled up over the street and one could see a distant waterfront city burning. The screams were drowned but could still be heard. The voices of the soldiers shaky and insecure.

“The Army’s involved,” Hannah said. “Maybe they’ll come for us.”

Austin ran over to the window, looked down the empty street. “Maybe someone from the Air Force base...”

Les said, “They’re only Reserves. It isn’t stocked. It’s probably fallen.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Fine. Sacked then. It’s sacked. But it probably isn’t safe.”

“Maybe if we get to the roof, we can wave our hands and call for help.”

“How will that help? It’ll only attract attention.”

“Attention from the soldiers.”

“Austin. There aren’t any soldiers around here. The base is twenty miles away.”

Hannah stared at the screen. “It’s so hard to believe.”

Austin bit his lip and looked to the ceiling. He knew they couldn’t expect help.

A reporter in a dimly-lit room said, “No one really knows how this disease—if it is a disease—is spread. But we do know that those who are attacked become like the attackers. Many people who die during these attacks become attackers themselves. It is the belief of many that this is merely psychological. Primal, unconditioned animal instincts let loose. Others see it as biological. The Army is dwindling as many of its members become infected themselves throughout the battles in the towns and neighborhoods and cities. Whatever the cause, whatever you want to call this, this cannot be denied: it is spreading.”

Those words were haunting. *It is spreading.*

Austin went back into the bathroom.

Out the window the infected were crawling around in the neighbor’s yard. They had pinned a little Chihuahua in the corner of the fence. The dog barked and yipped and its hair bristled. Austin watched as the infected closed in on the dog. It escaped between their legs. He turned away from the window and watched the television from the bathroom.

“We urge all of you who are listening to get somewhere safe. The infected do not seem to go near the water. If you can get out onto a lake or a river or the ocean, you will not, if their traits do not change, become a victim. But please know that all the major islands of the Pacific, from Hawaii to the Philippines, are dealing with their own outbreaks. The entire world is fighting—and losing. If you cannot reach any bodies of water, we desperately urge you to lock yourself in your homes, offices, in your cars, wherever you are, or just to get away from populated areas. And if someone—even a friend or family member—contracts the following symptoms, kill them or escape. These symptoms

are..." The reporter held up a manila piece of paper and began reading them off. "Purplish swelling of the skin. Sinking eyes. Folding lips. Discoloration of the eyes and teeth. A hunched posture. Psychologically, fluctuating emotions ranging from amazingly passionate to gruesomely vicious before death. None have been known to go through the symptoms and to come out on top. You *must* distance yourselves from the infected."

Les scratched his chin. "Unbelievable. Utterly unbelievable."

"Worldwide?" Austin said under his breath. "This is happening everywhere?"

Europe. Africa. Asia. Australia. Everywhere.

Les repeated, "Unbelievable."

The reporter onscreen was replaced to a camera feed from a barren, undisclosed location. A man in a black suit frowned into the camera and asked if he was on. Someone off camera said, "Yes." He looked to the camera and spoke. "This is Homeland Security Advisor Richard Lakota. What I am about to tell you has been put together over the last few hours as a survival guide and contains information based solely on what we currently know at this time.

"We do not know where the infections originated from, though we are estimating the point of origin to be somewhere near the equator. However, the initial outbreaks have been all across the globe, from South America to Africa to India and Europe and even as far north as Alaska. Cases of 'unknown' illnesses have been filed over the last couple weeks, and because they were so sparse, we did not know until now how severe the situation was. Doctors studying these cases say the symptoms are reminiscent of Epiglottitis, a disease found most often in young

children. Though the after-effects of the symptoms are obviously different than what we see with that other disease.

"The symptoms to look for are as follows..." He read from something off-screen. "In the face there will be a bluish-gray paleness. The blood has thickened and the veins are partially visible through the semi-transparent flesh. The eyes lack depth. The eye sockets are somewhat sunken due to physiological reformation, resulting in a fixed stare. Dark rings directly below the eyes give the subject an exhausted appearance, and the eyes have turned yellow due to the decaying rods and cones, and they have sunken into the sockets. In the mouth there is a visible thickness of the tongue and a darkening of the gum tissue, and there is a massive amount of drooling due to excessive salivary production. We believe the disease is passed through the saliva and into the bloodstream via the bites. In the chest the organs can somewhat be seen due to a thickening epidural layer above the ribcage. Dark, subcutaneous lesions can often be seen running along the arms and legs of the victims, then slowly filling out to the rest of the body. The flesh of the victims slowly takes on a purple coloration and often excretes hormones in body oils. The reason for this is unknown.

"The amount of time until an infected person dies and reanimates depends on the size of the bite and its closeness to a major artery. One to five minutes after all vital systems end, reanimation occurs, and the subject will react with homicidal aggression. Do not go near any reanimated humans. It is unclear whether or not this disease can be passed to animals.

"The infected menacing society are clinically 'dead'. The 'turn' occurs only after their passing. Reanimation is caused by the virus or germ overtaking the dead brain and revitalizing its electrical impulses, which bring to the surface primal instincts

and some decaying consciousness. Thus they have non-humane and unethical traits. The infected exhibit no signs of emotional response nor memory of their former life. Do not be swayed by the concept that they are family members or friends: the person you knew is dead. The virus will not reanimate until the host has clinically died.

"An infected can only be neutralized by destroying the brain. This can be done by piercing or cutting or decapitation. Firearms are the most effective weapons against the reanimates. If no firearms are available, improvise with a weapon strong enough to pierce the skull or sharp enough to sever the head completely. Always target soft entry points: the ear canal, eye socket, the temples, nostrils, mouth, or underneath the chin.

Les walked over to Austin. "Chris King left, right? Did you get *him* in the head?"

"No," Austin said. "I pierced his neck. Not his head."

He went into the bathroom and looked out the window and returned. "The old man outside? The one you stabbed with the steak knife. He's still there. I think it's because you pierced the brain."

"He didn't get up?"

"He's still lying there on the deck. And there are birds on him."

"What to expect if bitten," the Homeland Security Advisor continued; "Depending on the severity of the bite, it may take seconds, minutes, or hours before the victim 'turns', succumbing to infection and reanimating. The virus travels in the saliva excreted during the bites. It is rumored to be communicable through all body fluids, but the danger is *only* in the bite. If someone you know is bitten, immediately restrain and gag the victim securely before they lose consciousness. If uncertain, you

will be able to see the symptoms before the victim loses consciousness unless they were killed in the initial biting attack. Once the victim reanimates, he or she must immediately be killed. If it is a friend or family member, do not hesitate—the person you knew and loved is gone. All that remains is the virus.

“If you yourself have been bitten, there is no question that you are infected. A bite is a death sentence. If you are bitten and become reanimated, you will not only be a danger to all those near and dear, but you will also be an active contributor to the global plague. Whether or not you will be able to experience reanimation is unknown. Some believe you exist on a much more primitive level, and others believe the infected are dead to themselves, the souls having passed to the hereafter. If you have been bitten, the resolution is yours to decide. We recommend you take your own life, but that is entirely up to you.”

Les ran a hand through his oily hair. “I can’t...”

Hannah turned from the TV, eyeballed them. “What’re we going to do?” Neither of them had an answer.

“Federal and State authorities stress the need to stay calm. They are urging respect for law and order. As quickly as you can, get off the streets, get into your homes, lock your doors and stay away from the windows. The federal agencies will be moving into troubled areas. It is just a matter of time. As you know, reserve units have been called up and are being sent to troubled spots in the United States. State and local authorities are also urging neighborhoods to form clean-and-sweep teams to overcome any infected and to destroy them immediately with a direct impact to the brain.”

"That's why Dylan was called up," Hannah said.

"Dylan was called up?" Les asked. Dylan went to their church. He'd been in the reserve for a few years and had recently returned from Iraq.

There came the throbbing echoes of an airplane soaring overhead.

A few moments later it was gone.

"What if this lasts forever?" Hannah said.

Austin shook his head. "It won't."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

Les grimaced. "You've always been a pathological liar."

The image went back to the reporter. There were screams in the background. The camera-man swiveled around just in time to catch the doorway spilling infected. The crew ran this way and that. Knocking over equipment. Hollering. Crying. A woman fell beside the camera and the infected on top of her bit her neck and an artery broke. The camera went red with the spray of blood. The screen changed, showing a harried news-anchor in what was the CNN News Broadcasting Station. His face was pale and eyes fallen and a look of rigor mortis was etched over his taught hands placed before him on the news-desk. "I've just been informed that we and all other stations will be switching to the Emergency Broadcasting System. God bless you all."

The screen instantly changed to a grayish background with a yellow triangle. Resting over the triangle were three bold letters: EBN. Underneath the letters was the simply the horrifying transcription: Emergency Broadcasting System.

They gawked at the screen, the length of the time an eternity, forever, and never-ending torture. Each one had thousands running through their minds.

For the first time Austin realized how terribly pinned they were, how far from escape they had come, and, cowering inside the stout home on 25 Rosebud Avenue, how close to death they were. As the world fell apart, they realized they could not expect help. The United States was floundering coast-to-coast, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Gulf of Mexico to the icy wind-falls of the Canadian border. Las Vegas, San Francisco, Chicago, New Orleans, New York City—Austin imaged the chaos there, the same as here, except replayed to a different backdrop. All of Europe was waist-high in the same shit. Africa was being swept up in the tornado. Asia, Australia, Japan, the Philippines were sinking like stones in the sea. And the three of them were holed up in the unknown Spring Falls, Ohio. A Friday morning transformed into a bloody cascade of will versus fate.

Les abandoned his spot against the dresser and went forward and turned off the television.

Hannah said, "We can't just stay here. This place isn't... it isn't safe."

"Hannah's right," Les said. "We can't just hole up here. The TV said this is happening all over the place. There isn't any help coming."

"So why go anywhere at all?" Austin asked. "It's just walking into a death-trap."

"Because we'll starve here."

"Out there we'll be murdered. Starvation? Murder? Which sounds worse to you?"

"I'm not going to starve to death."

Hannah looked over at Austin. "What about your family?"

Mom. Dad. Ashlie. Even the dog Doogie. He wanted to believe they were alive. They were all inside when it happened. Yes. They probably locked themselves in. His father was very clever, very cautious. He would've fixed everything up so they would be safe, and also so they could let in refugees. "How many more people do you think are hiding out like this?"

"A lot," Les said. "There has to be. We can't be the only ones."

"It just happened so suddenly... It's like it exponentially multiplied."

"People holed up in business buildings, subways, houses... We're not alone."

"Yeah," Austin said, eyes glazed over.

Hannah stood from the bed and went to the window. Her hair gracefully flowed behind her.

"This is so unreal," Les said. "*Unbelievable.*"

She stared out the window and said nothing.

Les walked over to the window and stood beside her.

Austin went to another window and looked out. The bars on the window were very thick and wrought-iron. Jack had always been paranoid. Down the street he saw dozens of infected coming down the road, walking through lawns, over the sidewalk, on the pavement, milling around a smoking car crash. A Volvo and Buick left in the debris.

"Everyone get *down*," he snarled.

Les and Hannah ducked away from the window and slid against the window.

Austin didn't move.

Les said, "Hypocrite. Get away from the window."

"They can't see me."

"If you can see them, they can see you. Austin!"

He ignored him. The infected drew closer. He thought of a funeral march. They moved together like a flock, a procession of mourners, hunched over in despair, trudging one last time to echo a farewell good-bye to a lost loved one. Except the opposite true. They weren't out to honor the dead but to slaughter the living. And that's when one snapped its head around and stared right at him, those fiery, sunken eyes ablaze with bloodlust. Austin's heart skipped a beat and he fell away from the window, crashing over a green storage trunk and falling to the ground with a large thud. The walls and floor vibrated.

Hannah's eyes widened.

Les hissed, "Stop fucking around!"

Austin crawled over beside the bed.

"No. Get against the wall. Crouch down. If they look in, they'll see you."

"The windows are high up—"

Hannah's voice watered: "*Austin, please, do what he says!*"

He muttered something under his breath and crawled over to the wall, scrunched up, held his legs to his chest. His heart hammered. Sweat dripped down his face, over the nasty cut on his forehead now scabbed over. He stared at Les and Hannah side-by-side and imagined them holding hands. Imagined Les leaning over, kissing her lips; her eyes fluttering. Imagined her returning the kiss with passion. His heart turned sour and his mind switched over from fear to anger and jealousy. The vision remained stark in his mind and worried him with no sensibility. Romances forged under the heat of battle.

Silence.

The wind rustled against the window.

The tick of the grandfather clock downstairs.

He mouthed to Les: *Are they gone?*

He shrugged.

Austin's legs felt numb. *I'm going to check.*

He shook his head *No*.

I'll be fine.

He shook his head again.

Austin ignored him again and scurried across the wall. He stood up with his back to the wall and the window beside his right shoulder. He took a deep breath and swung around and looked out the window. The street was empty. The car crash continued to smolder. The sun rose over the roofs of the houses down the drive. A smile creased his lips, and—He leapt back as a bloodied face jerked up by the window. The sunken eyes glared at him, the pupils widening with excitement. Torn flesh hung in ribbons from the cheeks and jawbones, dried blood caking the side of the face. The mouth opened, revealing the stained teeth, and the infected threw his head against the window, leaving cracks in the glass and a red smear. Hannah and Les jumped. A hand rose up and smashed

into the window. The glass shattered and blew inwards between the bars. The hand wrapped around one of the bars. Austin flicked its knuckles with his fingers, a comical action in hindsight. He then smashed the knuckles with his own and the infected howled, ripping back his arm; and the body fell away, landing with a crash in the overgrown weeds below.

Austin stared at the broken glass and the blood-smeared bars.

Hannah and Les were behind him, eyes afright.

The sound below of crunching glass. A breaking window. A creaking door.

Hannah shuddered, eyes wide as saucers. "They're... *inside*..."

Austin ran over to the other window and looked out. Infected swarmed the driveway around the Jeep. The crowd was dwindling. *They were coming into the house.* His mind flickered a horrible image—the door breaking apart and them rushing inside, tearing them to shreds as they screamed, with no help to come, just another tally in the growing enormity of the infected ghouls. The world flashed back to the present.

Hannah screamed, "They're in the house! They're in the house!"

"I fucking *know*!" Austin shrieked.

Les said, "We're going to die. We're going to fucking die."

"We're not going to die!" Austin said, facing them.

Les cursed. "You always were a pathological liar."

Austin ran into the bathroom. He threw open the latch on the window and pulled the glass pane away. His hands gripped the bars. The backyard was empty. The infected were at the front of the house, maybe the sides. The only route out was through the back. "Les!" he shouted. "Les!"

He ran in. "They're banging on the bedroom door!"

"How do you get these bars out of the way?"

"Are you mad? It's a twenty foot drop to the ground. We'd break our legs."

"Just tell me, Les."

He pushed him out of the way and grabbed two, pulled them in a certain direction. The bars popped loose. The wrought-iron grate fell to the floor.

Austin looked back towards the bedroom. Could hear the violent banging against the door. Les had locked all of the deadbolts Jack had on the door. Hannah stood by the bed crying. Thinking about her brother—was he out there?

"They're going to get in here," Austin said to Les.

"Where do you expect to go?"

"Does the bathroom door lock?"

"No."

"Get Hannah in here."

Les darted out and Austin looked around the bathroom. Everything was bolted down.

Hannah came in with Les.

Austin said, "Les. Grab Jack's chair. We need to hold this door closed."

"A chair won't hold it. Not for long."

"Hopefully long enough."

Les rolled his eyes and went back into the bedroom. He returned dragging the chair. It caught in the door. "It's stuck."

"Pull it in!"

"Austin! It's stuck! It won't come in!"

"Then pull it out and shut the door!"

Les tried. It wouldn't budge. "It's fucking *stuck*, Man!"

Austin leaned his head out the window. The deck below was clear.

Hannah began to cry again.

"Are you sure we can't make the jump?" he said.

"Chad tried when he was ten. And he half-floated down with a blanket for a parachute. He broke his leg."

"Just get the chair out."

"Austin—"

"Get the fucking chair out! Hannah! For God's sake don't fucking stand there, *do something*! Help with the fucking chair!"

She cowered in the corner by the shower and toilet. Sobbing. Shaking her head.

"Hannah! Help him!"

She wouldn't look at him, choked: "No... No... Please..."

Austin rushed forward, grabbed her violently by the arm and flung her across the bathroom. Her feet slid over the tile and she slammed into a cabinet. His eyes flickered with rage. *"Help him or we fucking leave you."*

She looked at him with fear—those eyes had never seen such hatred—but he didn't care. She got to work. Austin turned and faced the window. With Hannah's help the chair popped loose and fell into the room. Les and Hannah positioned it against the door. The chair was then propped against the door and Les sat down in it. Hannah stood beside him, biting her lip, eyes bloodshot and cheeks swollen.

"Austin..." Les said.

"Can we get to the roof?"

"The roof?" He paused. "Yes. If you reach good enough."

"You're the most athletic of us all. You go first."

He didn't really think about it, leapt up. "Okay."

"Hannah, sit in the chair." He stepped aside and Les moved forward.

Les crawled through the window, curled around, grabbed the roof gutter, pulled himself up. His legs disappeared. He made it. "Come on!" he yelled.

Austin looked to Hannah. "Your turn."

She refused to make eye contact as she stood and ran to the window. She easily made it through and Les held her up.

Austin stood in the bathroom alone when the door to Jack's bedroom splintered open. Snarls. Growls. Snorts. They were in. He turned and stared at the door with the chair propped against it. He heard their feet running about the room, tearing at the walls and furniture, knocking things down. Les yelled at him from the rooftop. But he just stared at the door and heard them against it, the doorknob rattling. They were going to get inside. The door bulged. Les continued shouting.

He turned and bolted for the window. He climbed up through the window and the door splintered apart and the infected pushed the chair away and surged into the bathroom. Les reached down from the roof and grabbed his hands. Austin kicked away from the window but he kicked too hard and his body twisted. Les' arms came loose and he fell, flailing. And it was only ten feet but it felt like twenty as he crashed onto the deck. Pain streaked through his body like pulsating lightning and he felt the deck-boards snapping all around him and splinters assaulting his bruised flesh and then darkness and cool earth and he was rolling in the shadow-stricken mud.

He lied there under the deck and coughed in the thick and putrid dust. He rolled farther away from the hole and gasped for air as the pain subsided. Warmth covered his back and he knew it was blood. Light splashed down into the dirt from where he had collapsed through the deck, illuminated rolling dirt and mud, brambles, a large spider crawling through the sheared splinters and chunks of wood. But Austin didn't care about any of that. He closed his eyes and drew ragged breaths and felt the pain with each breath and feared he had broken a rib but the pain subsided and he lied there in the cool dampness and heard Les and Hannah shouting but their voices were distant as if they were just background noises and his was a different reality. And he heard footsteps over the deck right above him and the planks quaked and dust fell down in currents. He lied completely still. Light came down from the cracks in the boards and the light became shadows as figures moved above. They surrounded the hole in the deck and reached down and swooped their hands back and forth, clutching at the soft earth and the splinters. He didn't move and then he didn't hear Les or Hannah anymore. And then he was crawling through the darkness, away from the light, despite the pain in his muscles. He came to the soft brick of the house. He remembered going into the cellar once. Nearly a year ago, perhaps even to the day. He followed the concrete wall and felt grimy glass. The cellar window. He couldn't see inside and he wrestled with the window but it wouldn't budge. So he slammed his fist into the window and the

pain streaked and the cuts from the window at the school were reopened with fresh impaled glass. He crawled through the small window and fell through, tumbling, landing hard on several boxes, his arm dangling to the side, fingertips brushing the cold floor. He'd made it.

The room reeked of old garbage and a rotting odor. His eyes adjusted as he sat between the narrow filthy walls closing around him like eerie mandibles. He got to his feet and had to bow down to avoid hitting the ceiling. He found several wooden steps leading up to a hatch. He knew the hatch ran into the parlor closet. He sat down on one of the steps and rubbed his bruised and sore arms. The cut across his forehead burned. His hands were lacerated with splinters. He reached up behind his shirt and felt blood along his back. He winced, feeling his back, several rough patches as if it had been ground with sandpaper. He stood and bent down and examined the steps in the darkness. Some had broken and all were rotting. He took them cautiously and reached the hatch. He pushed on it but it didn't budge. Boxes were probably on top of it. They stored their Christmas gloves and boots in a box and put it over the crawlspace hatch. He pushed harder and the box flipped over in the closet, spilling its contents against a vacuum cleaner. He pulled himself through and stood rigid against the closet door in that narrow space. It was quiet.

He opened the door and stepped into the family room.

The grandfather clock ticked.

Bloody footprints and shoeprints drenched the carpet.

A sofa was overturned.

The bay window had been broken in many places.

Glass littered the floor and the walk outside.

The front door hung loose on flimsy hinges.

The stairs were covered with those bloody prints, too.

Les and Hannah were still on the roof.

The house seemed empty. He could join them.

He fingered the keys on his belt.

He could go home. Leave this hellish place behind.

He didn't want to leave Les and Hannah... but what if they had *changed*?

They'd stopped shouting from the rooftop.

What if the infected had gotten up there? One *had* climbed to Jack's window.

He stared into the mirror against the far wall and saw his weary, haggard face staring back at him. He walked up to the mirror beside the stone fireplace and looked at himself and could see eyes that have seen too much. Dirt and mud on his face. Crusted blood encircling the scab across his forehead.

The mirror reflected the wall behind him.

And it reflected a shadow draping the wall.

He wasn't alone.

He swung around just as an infected woman walked out from the kitchen. She stared at him in surprise. And then she charged. He dove out of the way, rolling across the floor. She skidded into the mirror and shrieked. He jumped to his feet and she came at him. He grabbed the lamp on the small table beside the overturned sofa. Her clawed hands reached out. He side-stepped and swung the lamp, smashing her hard in the back of the head. She staggered into a bookcase and fell, sprawled over the ground, lying on her back. She stared up at him. He hurled the lamp down and bashed it into her face. Her arms quivered. He tossed the lamp to the side and grabbed the bookcase and grunted as he pulled it away from the wall. Books fell down on the woman and then the bookcase succumbed to gravity and collapsed on top of her. Her arms stuck out from the sides and continued to reach for him, groping blindly. He stepped aside. Blood spun webs from underneath the bookcase.

She wasn't the only one.

More were coming towards him from the living room.

He forgot about Les and Hannah and ran for the front door. He pushed it aside and the hinges creaked and he darted to the Jeep. An infected stood on the

other side of the Cherokee. Another infected was crawling through the living room window. The one by the Jeep snarled at him and he clocked the infected in the face, knocking it to its knees. The other was already in the living room through the window and he opened the Jeep door and got inside and threw the lock. Every other door was unlocked. He hastily locked them as infected came out of the house and appeared down the street, rushing to join the fray. He put the key into the ignition, turned. The engine sputtered. The dashboard came to life. $\frac{3}{4}$ tank of gas. More than enough. He threw the Jeep into reverse.

And somehow he could hear them. The frantic cries.

He reversed, rolling backwards, the wheels thudding over a crouched infected.

He backed up to the street and looked up and through the windshield could see Les and Hannah on the roof, waving their arms, yelling at him. He wanted to help them but didn't know how.

Infected beat the windows. One fumbled with the back door latch. *It was still unlocked.* Then one jumped on the hood, howling; and it raised a fist and slammed it into the windshield. The glass webbed out in vicious cracks and a few chunks of glass tinkered into Austin's lap. The infected grandmother raised her fist to strike again and he stuck the gear into drive and hammered the gas pedal. The vehicle lurched, the front end smashing into the glass of the living room. The woman was thrown forward into the living room. He reversed and backed out of the room back onto the driveway. The edge of the roof was directly overhead. Les and Hannah jumped. They landed on the hood and looked through the cracked windshield at him with shocked eyes, couldn't believe they'd actually done it, and then they climbed onto the roof. Austin reversed and pulled out of the driveway, being cautious so as not to let them fall off.

The infected surrounded the Jeep and reached for the non-infected on the roof.

One grabbed Les' leg and tried to pull him down.

Hannah jumped off of the roof and landed on the pavement.

She decked the infected grabbing Les' leg and the infected fell backwards.

Another infected came at her from behind. Les shouted. She turned and side-stepped and grabbed the woman by the hair and rammed her head into the Jeep.

Les dropped down from the roof and opened the trunk door and got in.

Hannah followed.

It hung open. It couldn't be closed from the inside. Infected reached through at them. Austin hit the gas and the Jeep bounded forward, leaving the infected behind in a spray of spitting dirt and pebbles. He weaved around the smoldering accident and accelerated down the road. Past fallen light-poles and bodies, taking wild turns and driving like a madman. The street was narrow. Sometimes he ramped up into the lawn. He ran over a dog. The Jeep shook. Not even Hannah complained. And when he hit an 8-year-old infected who had been standing rigid in the middle of the street, no one complained. Les even smiled.

The infected disappeared behind them. He stopped the Jeep on the road. He reached back and unlocked one of the back doors. "Shut the trunk doors and get in."

Hannah did so and got in.

Les crawled from the trunk into the back-seat. "They're coming." He pointed between two houses on the left. About a dozen or so infected lumbered over a wooden fence and came after them. The front door to a quaint little cottage opened and a teenage girl, stripped naked and covered with blood, ran after them.

Austin drove away. Les and Hannah breathed hard in the back.

"Thank God you came," Les said. "They had gotten onto the roof."

"Through the window?" Austin asked.

"No. The satellite ladder. I forgot all about it."

Hannah leaned back in her seat. "That place was like the fall of the Alamo."

No one said anything after that.

11:00 AM

The pandemonium that had engulfed the streets just hours before had been replaced with an eerie quiet sprinkled with the echoes of chaos. Telephone wires lied sprawled over the ground hissing sparks. Light poles had fallen over the road with their bulbs shattered. Cars had flipped over and crashed and even gone into houses. Doors hung open. Windows burst inwards. The dead littered the lawns and streets and sidewalks. Several houses charred by flames had been consumed to nothing but smoking ruins. Smoke rose in coughing pillars. In the distance one of the skyscrapers of South Arlington could be seen belching acrid plumes of smoke. Austin wouldn't put the Jeep above thirty because he had to navigate the littered streets. He went around a wreck and saw a woman hanging from the window, her head and one arm gone, leaving bloody stumps and a thick fountain of blood, now extinguished, running down the Escalade's slick paint job and pooling on the pavement. He made a right turn and put on his blinker. He shook his head and turned it off. At the intersection was a seven-car pile-up forming a ring around the dark stoplights. A crown of death and smoke.

Hannah stared out her window. *"Where is everyone?"*

The Jeep pulled up the hill towards the intersection. An Ameristop gas station on their left. The intersection was cluttered with the accident so he pulled into the Ameristop and drove underneath the overhang and between the gas pumps. A car had been abandoned at the pump and several more were in the parking spaces. The front windows of the station had been shattered. Glass strewn all over the magazine and utilities racks. There were no infected to be seen anywhere. He stopped the car and rolled down the window and listened. Far ahead of them lay the town of Franklin. The long road that was always busy even in the middle of the night was now overcome with a dark silence. The earlier sirens of police cars and fire engines had vanished along with the screams of the dying and the already-dead. The only sound was the chugging of

the engine and the brisk spring wind whispering through the cracked window. He looked to the police station across the street. All the police cruisers were gone, no doubt spread thin in Spring Falls and now abandoned. The front door of the police station was wide open and blood streamed out from the door.

"Let's stop here," Les said, "and get something to eat."

Austin looked all around them. No movement anywhere. Strange. "It looks okay."

"What if they follow us?" Hannah asked. "The ones that were chasing us?"

"How will they know we came up here?"

He stopped the engine and began removing the keys but decided against it. He kept them in the ignition and got out, tense. Felt the breeze ruffle his hair. Hannah and Les opened their doors and got out. Before they shut them, Austin said, "Keep them open. Just in case. And don't lock them." The three of them stared at the station with the shattered windows and they moved forward in rhythm.

Austin went in through the doorway. Les and Hannah stepped through the shattered glass windows. The place was completely empty. The small eatery was vacant. The tables and chairs unmoving. One chair flipped over. No one behind the counter. No one serving ice cream. Hannah went down an aisle grabbing candy and chips and pretzels and sunflower seeds. Some boxes of Oreos and Pringles. Dry cereal. She stuffed it under her arms. Les went to the rack of magazines and eyed them with glazed intent. Austin opened a freezer door and grabbed a Jones bottle, popped the cap, drank it. He set the half-empty bottle of soda in the freezer and shut the door and joined Hannah. "Let's load these up in the back," he said. "We'll make as many trips as we can manage."

"Okay," she said, not looking at him. She went and talked to Les.

Austin grabbed some crates of water.

She returned. "He'll keep watch. He's looking at magazines. He doesn't want to help."

"Looking at *magazines*?" Austin asked. "Seriously?"

"I don't know. He's acting weird."

"Weird? How?"

"Nothing like that. Just... I don't know. He doesn't want to help."

"He's so fucking lazy. This was his idea, too."

"Let's just get this stuff together, all right?"

Austin looked over her shoulder and saw Les standing by the windows with a magazine in his hand. He wasn't reading it. "Okay," Austin said.

They took their stuff outside and opened the trunk and put their loot inside the Jeep. They made several trips, dumping in everything they could. He went back in and got her the Jones cream soda, her favorite, and went back out and gave it to her. "It's warm, but still a little cold. I think the electricity may finally be out."

She didn't say thanks, just opened the cap and drank.

Austin bit his lip. "What's your fortune?"

She read the back of the Jones bottle cap. "It says 'Good days are ahead of you.'"

"We'd better load up some more Jones."

"Do you still want to go to your place?"

His mom. Dad. Sister. "Yes. If no one is there.... We can go somewhere else."

"No. I don't mind. Anyplace is good." A pause, then: "Well, no place is better."

He went back inside to get more dry cereal and found energy and protein bars. He searched for some red buckets next to the coffee stand and found one. He saw some coffee cream packs and thought of Chad. He would always drink those things straight. He wondered how he was faring down in Kentucky. Alive? Dead? Or worse—both?

"Austin," Hannah said, walking up. "Oh. Good. Energy bars." She took one off the shelf and unwrapped it and ate it.

He took some more and threw them into the bucket.

She said, "No, no. You're doing it wrong. Like this." She grabbed the entire box and dumped it into the bucket. "It's much more efficient."

He took the bars out to the Jeep and dumped them. When he returned Hannah was standing by the window, examining the utilities.

"We could use some of this stuff," she said. "They have lighters. Butane. Fire. They have some multi-tools. A Swiss Army knife." She tossed him one. "Do you have a bucket?"

"They're by the coffee machine."

"Thanks," she said, and she ran to get one.

Austin entered the eatery. Les was reading and watching the window.

"What are you looking at?" he asked him.

Les leaned over, showed him the article. "It's the Globe magazine."

"What's in the news today?"

"They were right. It's the end of the world." He showed him the cover. It read: *Satanists Declare the End of the World Coming Soon.*

Austin managed a wry smile. "They were bound to be right sometime."

Hannah appeared. "Austin, come on."

He patted Les on the shoulder. "Good man. Don't keep your eyes on the magazine, though."

"I know."

Austin joined Hannah and she showed him her catch from the utilities. "I grabbed some more knives and lighters, some butanes. It squirts out. Squirt it all over something, light a match, and it goes up like an inferno. I also got some candles for when it becomes night-time and we need to see. A couple locks, if we need to lock something, I don't know. Some nails and a hammer. Some tape. Duct tape. Always need that. Oh, and —"

"Austin!" Les roared. "Hannah!"

They eyed each other and ran into the eatery.

Les stood pointing by the window.

Between the blooming trees lining the Ameristop parking lot, they could see the murky images of infected running down the street towards the intersection. The same ones they had fled on Rosebud Avenue.

"Shit," Austin said.

"Right on time," Les said.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Hannah said.

They ran out through the broken front windows and got to the Jeep. An infected jumped from the room, landing on Austin and knocking him down to the ground. He felt him weighing heavy upon him. The warm, fetid breath tingling the hairs on his neck. Les kicked the infected hard in the face, sending the dread-locked fiend over onto the ground. Hannah stamped her foot into his face, breaking his nose and spilling blood. Austin got to his feet and got into the Jeep. Les got into the passenger-side. Hannah went to the trunk and slammed it shut. But it popped back open. Les got out and ran to help her but the trunk door kept opening.

"Something's in the way!" Les shouted. "All the stuff is sliding out!"

"Forget it!" Austin hollered. "Forget it!"

Les gave it one last thrust and it shut. They got in. The infected reached the parking lot from the street. Before they even got to the Jeep, Austin hit the gas and they drove out from under the overhang and scraped off the right-side side-view mirror against a fuel pump. He ramped over a curb and nearly hit a vacant SUV. Infected came from around the police station. An overturned fire-truck blocked the path to his house. He'd have to go the back way. He turned the Jeep around and by this time the infected had reached the Jeep and were clawing at the windows. He drove onto the sidewalk and around the accident intersection. Her turned into a smaller subdivision, passed the old pumpkin farm. Infected stood in the barren patch and loped over the house's walk-around porch.

He wrenched the wheel and drove up the gravel drive. The infected from the pumpkin patch gave chase. He drove past the farm-house, swung around a

ramshackle shed, underneath several overhanging trees, and followed the drive into blinding mid-morning sunlight. He followed the road into Spring Falls Plaza. Cars littered about the parking lot. A dance studio and photography shop to the right. A furniture store on the left. He gunned it through the parking lot. Spring Falls Hardware on the left. A vacant building, then Spring Falls Salon, Plaza de Spring Falls, and the Spring Falls Tanline. A large road cluttered with abandoned cars right ahead next to the bank and several subdivisions. To the right Homer's Grocery.

"They're right behind us," Les said.

Austin cursed and jerked the car to the right, weaving between parked cars, and then shadows fell over them as they drove into the Homer's Grocery drive-thru.

"Everyone out!" he shouted.

"What?!" Hannah screamed. "What're you doing?!"

"Trust me," he said. He turned off the engine and grabbed the keys and got out.

Hannah and Les followed.

Les ran to the side-door leading into the grocery's warehouse. "Austin..."

He pushed him out of the way and grabbed the door and pulled. Locked. "Shit!" He banged his fists hard on the glass, the wounds from the splinters and glass throbbing. He turned and saw Hannah staring right at him.

A shadow against the far wall.

A good friend of his rushing after him.

Lennie, who ran the drive-thru on Fridays. Her eyes had sunken down. Teeth turned a nasty yellow. Face blanched as she bared those awful teeth. She swiped her hands to grab Hannah. Austin yelled at her to get down. She did without thinking and Lennie tumbled over her. And then she came at him. Austin reached down and grabbed the bar next to the door which they used to prop the door open when ferrying orders. She snarled. He swung the steel bar up and she jumped at him. She knocked him down but the sharp part of the bar went underneath her chin. She shrieked as the pole bloodily tore through her

skin and went up through her head and exploded from the top of her skull. Blood sprayed over his shirt and Lennie's eyes bulged and one popped, hanging loose against her cheek by the cord. Her body started going into seizures and he shoved her off into several crates of beer.

Les stared past the Jeep to the parking lot. Infected amongst the cars. "We're fucked."

Hannah ran up to the door, ignoring the corpse. "Let us in! Let us in!"

Austin got to his feet and saw George and Diane on the other side of the glass. Cashiers. They saw him and their faces lit up. Hannah kept pleading. They opened the door and the three refugees raced inside. Diane calmly shut the door and slid the bolt back over it just as the infected reached the other side of the door. The infected threw himself against the door, growling and clawing. Lennie continued to writhe in a bath of blood. Austin turned and watched as the infected jumped upon the woman, tearing at her flesh and biting her neck. More infected encircled the Jeep and dove atop the woman. Hungrily tearing her apart.

"They eat their own dead," George said.

His voice was eerily placid. "You see," he told us, "you have to get them in the head. You have to pierce the brain. Blunt trauma doesn't work. We tried that." He turned and joined Austin and they watched the carnage in the drive-thru.

Austin turned and saw down on some wooden crates containing raspberry clutches. "Thanks, George. Diane. How you guys doing?"

Diane saw the blood on his shirt. The gash on his forehead. The cuts on his hands. "Better than you, I wager."

Hannah said, "Is this place safe?"

George glared at her. "Safer than out there, Miss."

"She didn't mean anything by it," Austin said. "She's just scared. We're all scared."

Hannah told him, "Thank you for letting us in."

He nodded a *You're welcome*.

Les stood by the window and watched. "Can they get through the glass?"

Diane laughed. "They've tried. But ol' Homer was a stickler. Everything is plate-glass. Bullet-proof."

"Stickler?" Les said, facing her. "Sounds more like a paranoid."

"That, too," Diane said.

Austin examined his hands and asked, "Is it just you guys here?"

"No. We have some customers upstairs. In the lounge. We've barricaded the doors leading down here. Those damned sick folk swept into our store like a strong south wind. Tore down shelves and turned the deli into a madhouse. The dairy was taken over, too. A lot of our guys were infected. I think it's in their bites. A lot of customers got sick, too. We were able to round up the ones who weren't infected and we took them to the lounge. Boarded up the doors to the store with boards. Nail guns and lots of crates. And those big black magazine return boxes. And all the glass down here, from when it used to be a bar, is bullet-proof. We've been able to keep them out. They've tried to get in, though. Believe me. They've tried."

"Who else is here?"

"Oh. You mean besides the customers? Mary and Louis. And Daniel. Though he came by before running up to his mom's. It's his day off. But he's here, too. Came in almost with the disease itself."

Today Kenny—an ex-World War II veteran—was playing the role of bagger, the role Austin held in the afternoons and evenings. "Kenny?"

George shook his head. "You know Kenny. Ever since the war, he's had that fighting spirit."

Diane said, "He kept them away from us as we made our way into the lobby. Sacrificed himself."

"I'll tell you," George said, "that I've seen a lot of shit in my life. I was a medic in Vietnam. But nothing compares to this... this... I don't even know what to call it. But nothing compares."

"It's like the end of the world," Austin said.

An eerie silence.

He stood. "I don't like standing here by the door."

"To the lounge we go, then," Diane said.

They walked between aisles of storage. Bananas. Green peppers. Onions. Stacks of soda. Cereal. Paper towels.

Les said, "How'd you know we were down there?"

Austin said, "There are windows in the lobby. Looking over the roof." To Diane: "Probably saw us, right?"

"Yes," Diane said.

"And you knew the Jeep was mine."

She shook her head. "No. The disease, they just don't drive."

They went up a ramp. Austin had gone up the ramp a million times before, each time looking at his watch to see how much longer until he could clock off and take a spin to freedom. He would go home and drop into bed and fall asleep. Dad would come in and say good-night. Mom would scratch his back and peck him on the cheek. Ashlie would be listening to hardcore music floating from underneath her door. Sometimes mixed with the curling smoke of incense. Austin's heart ached. He wanted to see his family. Wanted to know if they were okay. Wanted to embrace them. Hold them. He prayed they were safe.

George said, "I saw how you did in that woman." He pointed to his shirt. "Want a different one?"

"This is my second pair today."

"What happened to the other one?"

"Same thing."

Diane led the others down a flight of steps to the bathroom level. The men's bathroom and women's bathroom hooked up to the corridor. Diane took them up a parallel flight of steps and out of sight. The steps led to the Meat Department and the lounge door connected there. From the first steps down you could look up and see a grill, and behind the grill was a fan that blew cool

air into the lounge. George took Austin in the other direction to a storage room next to the employee's bathrooms. He rummaged around. Stacks of paper and some manila envelopes. Paper bags filled with folded plastic sacks for bagging. "Ah. Here." He pulled out a large red envelope and tore it open. A Homer's Grocery t-shirt slid out. "What size are you?"

"That'll work," Austin said.

He tossed it to him. "It's a Medium."

"Perfect."

"All right. Well you know the way."

"I do—did—work here."

George paused for a moment. "We had a television before the power went out."

"When did that happen?"

"The power? Half an hour ago."

"Okay."

"But did you see the TV news? See what the news anchors were saying?"

"It's all over the place. The world is getting caught up in all this shit. It's not local."

"They had to go to the emergency broadcasting system."

"I know."

He bit his lip. "I've been through a lot in my life, Austin—"

"George..."

"No. Listen. I've been through a lot. And I have a feeling—a feeling in the pit of my stomach—that this may be the end."

"George. Can I change? The blood is seeping through the shirt."

He nodded and left.

He quickly changed and threw Les' soiled shirt against the wall. He left the room and found the flight of steps and went through the meat department, through the door to the lounge, up a flight of steps, and he came to a closed door. He knocked. There was a pause and then a panel in the wall above it

opened. It was another one of Homer's paranoia installments. Mary's eyes glowered down at him and then vanished. The sound of scraping furniture. A bolt unlocking. The door opened. Light spilled all over him. Mary just stood there, then grabbed his hand, and helped him through. He didn't need any help; Mary was just tender like that. His eyes adjusted to the dim light. One of the two bulbs from the battery-operated lamp wasn't working. Several employees milled about and customers clung together. A tall man in a leather jacket and sunglasses smoking in the corner. An elderly woman with her husband. A grandpa in a wheelchair whose legs had been lost in a tractor-trailer accident. A young woman with several young children, crying so hard that with each deflated breath her ribs could be seen underneath a tear-soaked shirt. A police officer whose car had crashed. He had escaped. His partner had not. And several students from the high school who had escaped in Ford Explorer only to crash near the main intersection bordering the grocery.

Les and Hannah stood near a window with blinds. They seemed excited. The window overlooked the aisles of the store. A lamp shed light over their profiles.

He walked over. "What's going on?"

Then he heard a voice and swung around with elation. "Amanda!"

She stood there beaming. He had met her through his sister Ashlie and they had become good friends. "Hi, Austin," she said. "Les and Hannah were telling me about what happened. I'm so happy to see that you're fine."

"I'm even more happy about that," he said with a smile. "How'd you end up here?"

"I jumped in the back of a truck leaving the school. It crashed down the road. I was unhurt, thank God. A miracle. I ran across the street and got into the store before they closed the doors. Oh, and Bryon's here, too."

"Bryon's here? Where?"

"He's in the restroom."

"This is great! Wonderful."

"What about your sister, Austin? What about Ashlie? Please tell me she's okay."

He swallowed. "I can't."

She seemed on the verge of collapse. Tears welling up. "She became one of—"

"I don't know. No. At least, I hope not. She was sick today. At home. In bed. I hope."

"So do I," she said, regaining strength. "Les? What about Chad? Oh. Ichthus. I wonder if it's happened down... Oh. It's everywhere." She seemed to jump around with a fury of questions only to answer them with her own ferocity. "Hannah! Where's Peyton? I know you wouldn't leave the school without him."

Austin winced.

Les hadn't heard the story but knew the gist of it from her tears.

Hannah violently turned away and stared through the blinds. Her eyes were cold as stone and focused on nothing but the memories. A tear trickled down her swollen cheeks. Amanda bit her lip and backed off, literally backing into the chained and leather-jacketed Bryon Hunter coming through the door.

His face burst with brilliant excitement when he saw Austin. "Holy shit!" He saw all three of them. "Holy fucking shit! When did you guys get here?!"

Les said, "Just now. Thank God these people let us in."

Bryon laughed, looked at Austin. "Feels good to be back here for once, eh?"

A smile creased his lips. "For once."

"It's madness all over. I was at Sinclair, at South Arlington. I barely made it out. My English teacher went psycho and tried to kill me. He was one of the first catchers of this disease, this strain, they called it before they went off the air. I ran out of the room. A buddy didn't make it out the door before Hanover took him down. Then the kid came after me. You see. It spreads like wildfire. One person catches it, he passes it on, and it multiplies. It's unbelievable. That's why so many people have become infected so fast. It starts out slow, and gains momentum every second, until no one and nothing can stop it. Then hell's

doors open and it floods earth. I got to my Miata and was somehow able to get here from the highway. I was trying to go home, but the exit was cluttered with cars. A big wreck. Hell. The entire *roadway* was an accident. And the people who had caught it, they were everywhere, too. I locked my doors and rolled up the windows. They were down because it had been warm this morning. I got off the exit and came south. I just knew these people-turned-monsters were going towards the city, north, so I tried to get out of there as fast as my legs—well, wheels, really—could carry me. Then I got side-swiped by a truck coming through a field—you know, the one across the road, by the bank, with the neighborhood in the background?”

Austin knew—one of those houses always lit up like a blow-torch during Christmas.

“My car rolled into this parking lot—the Clearcreek Plaza—and I got out. A little bit of whiplash, couldn’t move my head. They were shutting the doors to all the buildings. The sick people were everywhere. I ran as hard as I could and fought off one or two—they’re not hard to fight off, they’re like grabbing children. Just more vicious. The doors here were closed, too. So I climbed a drainage pipe, onto the roof, and then a ladder to get to the second-story, and then I saw the latch on the roof. I was pretty safe, took a few moments to gather myself, knocked, and they opened it and let me in.” He pointed to a latch on the ceiling. Austin hadn’t noticed it before. “So here I am. And Amanda is here, too. And now you three.”

He embraced Austin, then Les. He tried to hug Hannah but she gave him the shoulder and turned and walked to the other side of the room. Stood in the shadows amidst the smoke from the tall smoker.

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked. No sarcasm—pure compassion.

Austin opened his mouth to reply but Hannah beat him to it: “She lost Peyton.”

“How?”

She shrugged.

Austin said, “He became infected.”

Bryon's illuminating eyes fell into a fading glower.

Les asked, "What's the plan now? Just wait it out?"

Mary appeared from the shadows. "We don't have a plan. Not yet. No rescue teams are being sent out. There's no hope of being found."

"Mary?" Austin said. "Let me onto the roof."

"What? Why?"

"I want to see."

"I don't know if it's safe on the roof."

Les said, "What are you hoping to see?"

Austin shook his head. "I don't know. I just... Shit. I don't know."

"You want to go onto the roof and you don't know why?"

"God. The latch is right fucking above us. It doesn't require a stunt double."

Mary said, "Are you claustrophobic?"

"Yes," he lied. "I'm claustrophobic and I'm about to have a panic attack."

"Okay. Then get out onto the roof. Get some fresh air."

And Austin wondered if that's what he wanted—just some fresh air.

He climbed up the creaking wooden steps and pulled himself onto the flat roof. He stood. Smoke rose all around. The road and parking lot were cluttered with cars. The stream of infected that had chased the Jeep were gone, nowhere to be seen. It was deathly still. As if the world had emptied. Except for the sound of crackling flames, distant explosions, fading spurts of gunfire, and the occasional chirp of a bird, it was eerily silent. "Ghost town." He remembered watching the weather forecast last night. Showers and thunderstorms late in the day. Starting around noon. He looked at his watch. Nearly noon. He turned around and looked out towards Olde Towne and the subdivisions. The low-roofed, almost antique buildings of Olde Towne stood stoic and unmovable. The main strip was trashed with overturned and smoking vehicles. A few stray bodies lying on the sidewalks. A flicker of movement. He walked across the roof to get a better look. A little girl walking between the buildings. Hunched over. Arms folded

over her chest. Fingers curled like tiny claws. She wore a blood-sprinkled shirt that read in big block letters: I LOVE MY MOM. She looked straight at him and just stared. He turned and walked back to the hatch and went inside.

"What'd you see?" Mary asked.

"Nothing. It's empty out there. Like a ghost town."

Bryon closed the hatch.

It didn't make sense. Thousands of people in Spring Falls, and right in the heart of town, no one to be found. Except for a little kindergartner who loves — *loved* — her mom.

"Are you hungry?" Mary asked.

He was. But not too bad. "I'm okay. What do you have?"

"Nothing. Except for my packed lunch. Well. What's left of it. A diabetic needed it. Oh, yes, and Daniel's lunch. A frozen pasta entrée. But it needs a microwave, so..."

"There's a diabetic up here?"

"One. That we know of."

"How long ago did he eat?"

"A couple hours."

"He'll need more food."

"We can't go out there," Mary said. "There could be some down there."

"Les," Austin said. "Look out the window. Who's down there?"

He looked. "No one."

"See?" he said to Mary. "It's safe."

"But it might not be."

"That diabetic's going to be needing more food soon. A frozen brick of pasta won't suffice."

Mary sighed. "Who's to go?"

"Me. George. Louis. Daniel. You and Diane keep things under control here."

"All guys. You know how I feel about sexism. And women's rights."

"Cool it. You're a cashier."

"So is George."

"But he was a stocker. He knows where stuff is. So do Daniel and Louis."

"All right. But hurry up. It doesn't make me feel good, you guys being out there."

"We will. George, Louis. Where's Daniel? Daniel! Over here. Let's go."

Mary peered through the slit in the door, looked down the steps. "Careful," she said again as she opened the door. George and Daniel went through, then Austin, then Louis.

They descended the steps quickly. A rancid stench burnt the insides of their noses. The stairs bellied out into the meat department. Slabs of warm beef and chicken. Red with blood and staining the counters. The door leading to the heart of the store had been wedged shut with several steel rolling tables, then barricaded with wire-frame struts positioned at an angle. It seemed frail but it took all four of them to move the contraption away. Louis looked through the twin glass windows in the swinging metal doors, saw nothing, pushed through. The rest of them followed, emptying into the store. Austin looked up into the lounge that overlooked the aisles. People watched from the window, pushing aside the flimsy blinds.

"Hurry," Daniel said. "We weren't able to board up this place. There could be some of them roaming around in here. In the aisle. Careful, now."

They split up. Austin went past the soda bins, stacks of fresh deli bread. He hopped over the counter of the deli and landed on his feet. He bent over and opened the sliding panel to reveal buckets of chicken and potato wedges and mashed potatoes and macaroni-and-cheese and even some salmon. Gallons of tuna and ham salad, chicken salad, deli cheeses and sliced meats. Honey-suckle ham and smoked turkey bacon. Ham wraps and the delicious but cold potato skins. His mouth salivated. He reached inside and grabbed some potato wedges. They were still warm. He bit into one and spit out the chilly potato filling. The chicken was still warm. He probed the inside of one with his finger to make sure. He pulled out the bucket of chicken and set it on the counter and

grabbed an overturned cart and righted and put it in there. He went down the produce aisle and grabbed bananas, apples, pears. Bagged nuts and seeds covered stand-alone basins. The far wall was lined with bottle-upon-bottle of cheap wines from all across the United States.

George ran up. "Hey."

Austin spun around, terrified.

He demanded, "Where'd you get the cart?"

"It was behind the deli."

"Oh. Okay. Don't go outside. They might be out there."

"I didn't plan on it."

He dumped some crackers into the cart. "Chicken? Is it warm?"

"Yeah."

"Good. We don't need to get salmonella up there."

"It's cooked chicken, George. Even if it's cold, it's cooked."

"Daniel and Louis are stuck in the alcohol section. Loading up a cart with beer."

He left.

Austin weaved through the aisles. Past the movies section. Around the registers. He went up past the service desk. Condoms. Lighters. Butane. Batteries. A sign advertising the week's sales. Video rental information. Dark and empty computers. Fans that were still and motionless without a single breath. Blood had jellied the floor near the end of the far register and had splattered on plastic bags, and there was —

He heard the crash and spun on his heels. It came from deep inside the store. Towards the soup aisle. He left his cart and ran for the source of the noise. He wheeled around to see the soup aisle empty except for a few cans rolling on the ground. One had split at the seal and leaked a colored murky goo. He then heard running feet in the aisle next to him. He turned around and saw Daniel half-running, half-falling at the end of the aisle, and then he was gone. Austin ran forward and turned out of the aisle. The large swinging doors leading to the dairy were rocking back and forth. Hands with needle-like fingers dug into

him. He whipped around, bashing the assailant in the face. Daniel staggered back, blood seeping from his nose. Terror in his eyes. He was pale and shuddering. Losing control. Austin grabbed him by the arm. "Daniel. Daniel. What's wrong? What happened?"

He was babbling under his breath.

He shook him violently. "Daniel? Daniel. *Daniel!*"

The store manager gasped for air. "I told him not to... He might still... But he didn't believe... Didn't listen..."

"What are you—"

A horrendous screech. He released Daniel and spun around. The doors were thrown back and George stumbled out of the dairy, landing hard on the linoleum. A deep gash gushed blood from his arm. A slashed artery. He cried out in pain, writhing about on the floor, gripping at his arm as blood spilled all over. Above the din of his cries Austin heard them banging on the windows of the lounge.

"Austin..." Daniel breathed.

He turned around. The store manager sagged against stacked sodas.

"I have to help him," Austin said. "Stay here."

"Austin..."

He ran over to George and knelt beside him, the doors to the dairy looming before him. Blood continued to spurt from his arm. His eyes flickered back and forth as he faded in and out. He felt for a pulse along the folds of his weathered neck. Very weak. He kept looking at the arm, the blood welting out like a spring. The flesh was spliced open from the shoulder to the wrist, tearing cloth and ligaments, splintering bones. Strands of muscle lurked from the wound. Blood trickled over his hands and a sudden burst sprayed his legs. He didn't care. George's eyelids fluttered. The old man reached up and grabbed him by the shoulder, choking. Blood in his mouth. His grip tightened. He leaned forward, purple tongue bulging, and his eyes slid shut. His grip loosened and he fell back, gurgling. His hand dropped down to the floor and blood trickled from his mouth.

He heard feet coming towards him. He turned to see Daniel hobbling from the soda.

"How did this happen?!" Austin demanded.

"Run!" Daniel gasped. He ran past Austin, and Austin stood, and Daniel looked back before going into the dairy department, and he said, "Kenny did this to him. God. Fucking Kenny did this to him."

"What?"

"He's in the aisles!" Daniel said, and then he disappeared behind the dairy doors.

He emerged a moment later and ran down the aisle towards the meat department.

Austin looked down at George. "Sorry, Buddy." But by now George's skin had turned purple-gray. His eyes had sunken. The lips unfurled before Austin's eyes, revealing yellowing teeth. The closed, sunken eyes tore open, and he glared at him. But it wasn't George. It was... something else. He snarled and wrenched upwards, snapping at him with his teeth. Austin's scream locked in his throat as he reeled backwards. George caught him in his arms, fingers clawing at his chest. He kicked him away and got to his feet. He grabbed a rack of wines and brought it crashing down on the cashier. Glass shattered and wine flowed like a flood between his feet.

They were still banging on the windows in the lounge.

And he remembered: Kenny.

He turned to run and remembered the chicken. The fruits. The food. They'd come down there for it and he'd be damned if they lost George without it. He turned and ran the opposite direction and leapt over a cash register and grabbed the cart and wheeled it around and began racing towards the meat department. Kenny spied him from an aisle and gave chase. He wheeled past the hot deli and the soda display. Standing in front of the swinging doors of the meat department was Louis, neck spurting blood. He ran forward and Austin slammed the cart into him, knocking him down. He wheeled the cart around

him and continued on course. Banging through the double metal doors and reaching the steps. No way in hell he'd get the cart up there.

He heard both Kenny and Louis coming toward the doors.

He grabbed the bucket of chicken and a bunch of bananas and abandoned the cart, raced up the steps. Mary opened the door and he dove inside, his things scattering about the room. Diane and Mary shoved the door shut and pushed the sofa against it. Austin lied there on the floor panting. Footsteps racing up the steps and then throwing themselves against the door. Mary sat down on the couch.

Daniel stood in the corner, sweat cascading down his face. And then tears.

12:00 PM

"We tried to warn you," Mary said.

"I know."

Diane glowered, "Kenny ran into the back room. We saw it happen. But we didn't see him leave. We just thought he had left when we weren't looking."

"Thanks for informing me."

Daniel was fine, despite his emotional trauma. But George and Louis were gone.

Bryon and Les watched from the window.

Hannah stood silently in the corner staring at him.

"At least you got some food," Diane said. "Is the chicken warm?"

"It's fine."

"What about salmonella?"

He rolled his eyes. "If chicken is cooked it won't have salmonella. God."

Everyone grabbed chicken and began to eat. Even Daniel ate once he composed himself. Austin took the last piece and pulled a strand of hair off of it. He saw Hannah standing in the corner. She wasn't eating. He stood and went over to her and tried to give it to her. "Come on."

"I'm not hungry."

"I know. But your stomach will be thankful."

"Why don't you eat it?"

"I tried," he lied. "I've lost my appetite."

"I don't want it."

He set the piece of chicken on the windowsill. Between the blinds he could see dark splotches of crimson blood on the floor and the knocked-over stack of wine. The store was dark because of the power outages but he could still make out faint swirls and shadows over the stocked aisles. Figures moving about. George. Louis. He remembered stocking those aisles. He had small fingers so

Mary always had him stock the small canned goods. A hunched shadow caressed the canned baby foods and then went on its way.

He took Hannah's hand. Cold. Shaking. "You're a liar," he said. "Eat the chicken."

She pulled her hand away, repulsed.

"Hannah..."

She denied looking into his eyes.

"Okay. Can I see your arm?"

Her eyes went livid. "It's fine."

"No." He took it. She didn't protest. Her skin was soft, smooth, cold. He rolled up her sleeve. Her mahogany skin faded to a mottled white after the tan line. A deep bruise swelling over her bicep. A pit of grief and shame tinged with guilt clenched his gut. He wanted to cry. He knew he had done this to her in the bathroom at Les' house.

"My leg is bruised, too," she said. "And it hurts. A lot."

"I'm sorry, Hannah, I really—"

"I don't want the chicken."

A knot formed in his throat. *Shit.*

He went back to the couch and sat down beside Les and Bryon. They teathed the frail chicken bones. Amanda stood at the end of the couch and had bit through the bone and was sucking out the marrow. Austin looked up at the ceiling and saw the hatch. An emblem of freedom and doom. He thought of his family again. Mom, dad, sister. His stomach ached not from lack of food but from the thought of never seeing them. "Guys. I have to leave. I have to get out of here."

Bryon and Les gawked at him. Amanda looked up. Some of the surrounding customers and employees turned their heads. Hannah watched from the corner by the window. Bryon said, "Say what? Leave?"

"I have to go home. I need to know if they're okay."

"Go home?" Les muttered. "Austin. That's, what, three miles away?"

"I know. I know. But I can't just fucking sit here and wait to die. Can't die on my ass."

"Austin..."

"I can't fucking take this. I just keep thinking about them."

"So you're going to walk into hell?"

"I have to go back, Les. If Chad and your mom and brother were at your house, you would go. But they're not. So you're content to stay here. My mom doesn't go into the school for work until ten o'clock. My dad's boss called and told him to stay home. Problems at the health department. And Ashlie is sick. Dad was awake this morning. He probably locked all the doors and covered the windows. He's smart like that." He nodded to himself. "They're all at home. Safe. I have to go to them."

Amanda glared at him. "Are you *serious*?"

He nodded *Yes*. "It'll be hard, Les, you're right. Three miles is a helluva walk. But I have the Jeep."

Diane said, "They're drawn by sounds. They'll flock all around you."

"Then I'll walk. It'll be quieter."

"Madness," Les said.

"You're going to *walk*?" Amanda said.

He was already forming the path in his head. "I'll cut through the Clearcreek Plaza, right past the old pumpkin farm. Through the line of trees, behind the restaurants next to the A.T.M. machine, around the library, across the field, down the street behind the houses, through North Park, through the woods, up my street and home. I've walked that path so many times. You know, Les. We used to walk that way all the time."

"That's insane," Diane said. "Shoot yourself and get it over with."

A customer said, "They'll be on you before you even get out of the parking lot."

Les fidgeted. "And you want me to go with you, is that right?"

"No."

"But you want *someone* to go with you."

"No. I'm just... I don't know. I just wanted you to know."

Diane shook her head again.

Austin spoke up. "Fine. Mock my plan all you want. But what's *your* plan? What are you doing just waiting here/ What're you waiting for? Waiting to starve? What happens at dinner? Are you going to cut up that frozen entrée and toss it about yourselves like wild animals? Because none of you will go back down there. Kenny stayed behind. And he's still here. With George. And Louis. All the chicken in the bucket again. Are you going to start eating each other? Like *they* do?"

No one spoke.

"Well. I'm going." And he leaned back, closed his eyes, and tried to sleep.

"What're you doing?" Les said.

"I'm trying to sleep."

Amanda said, "I wonder if we'll ever see a winter here again?"

Austin stood. "No putting it off. I want to get out of here before dark."

"You have hours," Les said.

"I know. But I don't know how many snags I'll run into."

"Hopefully none."

"Hopefully."

Les stuck out his hand. "Good luck, Man."

He shook here. "Here." He unlatched the keys on his belt and gave them to him. "I won't be needing them. This place won't hold for long. You know how to drive, even if the driving lessons cost too much. I don't think anyone's going to pull you over and ask for your license. You know where the Jeep is. If you need to, just shimmy down there and get in." He held the keys up to the dim light coming from the battery-operated lamp. The keys shone and glistened. "Don't lose them. Life is in these keys. It's the one that says 'Jeep' on it."

Bryon stepped forward, hugged him tightly. "You take it easy, Man."

He knew Bryon had a reckless spirit. "Sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm sure."

Amanda embraced him. "Don't do this. But be careful."

"You know I will be." He turned to Mary. "Okay. Can you get the hatch?"

She did. Brilliant sunlight poured into the room. He began climbing out and looked back to the others. "See you guys later. Much later than sooner, I hope. Or is it the other way around? Shit. I don't know. Okay. Bye." And he began climbing out.

"Wait." A voice in the darkness. The cop came forward. Austin paused halfway onto the roof, looked back. "I'll go with you. It isn't right for me to stay. And it isn't helpful. I'm no fool. There isn't food here. There's water downstairs, but you have to brave the sick to get to it. I have a gun. I may be able to help." He patted his belt. "Fully loaded and unused. A 9mm. And I'm an excellent shot."

Austin grinned. "Yes. Of course. Come along."

Bryon, never to be outdone by a cop, lurched forward. "Count me in."

"What made you change your mind?" Les asked.

He bit his lip, pointed at Austin. "He's a friend. I can't let him walk alone."

"A cop's going with him. That's all the protection he needs."

"Have you ever seen a cop from Spring Falls? Useless."

The cop glared at him.

Les said, "Don't insult the man with the gun when there's no one to enforce justice."

"It's all right," the cop said. "Come on."

Hannah, Les, and Amanda watched them go. The hatch shut. Then it reopened. Austin appeared.

"Change your mind?" Les asked.

"No. Don't forget: you have to brake before you can shift the Jeep into drive."

"I know that. I'm not an idiot."

"Your mom always said you forgot. Just don't forget this time."

"I've never forgotten that."

"Okay, then: don't forget."

And then he was gone for the second time.

The three of them stood alone on the roof. "Well," Bryon said, "we didn't climb onto this roof for nothing. How the hell we getting down?"

The hatchway opened. They turned to look.

Hannah emerged from the hatch.

"No," Austin said, walking towards her. "You're not coming."

She shook her head. "Austin..."

"Stay with Les. And Amanda. With the Jeep."

"No. I'm not coming."

He was beside her now. "Oh."

"I just..." She stood beside him. Storm-clouds building in the distance. A strong wind. "I can't be mad," she said. "You saved my life. You only did what you had to do. Don't be sorry. I'm sorry. I saw the guilt in your eyes. I'm sorry I forced you to feel that. Please don't feel it again. I'm sorry." A tear trickled down her frosted cheek. He was sincerely moved. He'd never seen this side of her before. "Austin... Really. Watch out. They're all around, even if you can't see them."

He didn't know how to reply. Here was the girl his heart longed to hold, to touch, to kiss. If he bent down and held her, touched her, kissed her, he knew she would respond kindly. In that moment he imagined himself swooping her into his arms and kissing her. The two of them on that rooftop kissing and oblivious to the world and its nightmares. She would find comfort in his arms and she would cry in the security and he would wrap his arms around her and run her silky hair through his fingers and he would taste her bitter tears as he kissed her and he would comfort her as best he could before walking off into certain doom. He would feel her body against his and get lost in time. All his dreams and fantasies and longings and desires would come true.

But instead he said, "Try to find some lotion to put on the bruises. Ben-Gay or something. And stick close to Les. He has the keys to get out of here. Hannah..."

I didn't meant to hurt you. I was just scared, that's all. I couldn't stand the thought of you or Les or me becoming like them." He pulled himself away and stood on the roof looking at the others. When he turned around she was gone and the hatch was shut.

1:00 PM

The storm-clouds advanced over the suburbs. Sheets of rain fell in the distance. The wind grew colder. Bryon and the cop walked to the edge of the roof and surveyed the area. Shocked at the emptiness. The cop said, "We'd better get moving before the storm hits. If we make good time, we can be there in twenty minutes." Austin hoped so, but a twist in his gut forebode that such would not be the case. Bryon walked across the roof to where broken tiles slanted downwards to a lower roof level. They went down. From there it was only a seven foot drop from the pavement below. The cop elected to go first and went down. He stood in the parking lot gripping the 9mm and glanced nervously about the lot. Bryon went next. Austin prepared to go when the two of them muttered something and ducked into the shadows. Austin got down on his stomach and peered over the edge to see a man in a Spring Falls Hardware uniform stumbling along the side of the building. He stood there for what seemed hours. Then he moved around the other side of the building and vanished. Bryon and the cop returned and Austin joined them. They were beside the window to the empty deli. Kenny, George, and Louis were in there. Austin didn't want to think about that.

The cop said to Austin, "You know the way."

They moved along the brick siding and passed the drive-thru with the Jeep sitting inside. He regretted giving the keys to Les but only for a moment. He knew it was for the better. They reached the end of the building where the lot ran down to the street. The air seemed to intensify and the clouds were overhead, draping everything in shadows. A true spring storm. They crossed the lot and reached the glass panel window of Dance with Teri. The glass was broken and in the room were patches of pink satin thrown around, some slick with blood. They moved along the building.

A jolting pain rippled through Austin's back and he fell. Bryon had shoved him down. Bryon rolled off and the glass window shattered, raining shards all over Austin's clothes. A ballerina lunged out, snarling and swiping with bloody hands. Bryon grabbed her by her frizzy hair, wrenched her head back, drew his switch-blade, popped it open, and shoved it into the girl's eye. Blood flowed over her frilly pink dress and she gave her last shriek. He pulled out the blade and her body crumpled to the ground. Her head landed next to Austin's and he stared at her gouged eye. He writhed to his feet, repulsed. Glass fell from his clothes, tinkered on the concrete.

Bryon held the knife in his white-knuckled hands. "Sorry. I saw her coming."

"It's fine."

They went around the building. The draping green-leafed branches of the trees hid shadows and murky holes in the earth leading up to the farmhouse. They moved quietly between the trees. The porch was abandoned. Broken in some places. They went past the house to the intersection. Ahead of them were several businesses and restaurants. The library. A subdivision to the right. The storm hovered above them. Lightning shot down into the subdivision and thunder echoed, a deep thunder that shook their bones. Austin led the way across the street and into the next plaza past the A.T.M. machine and several buildings. Doors hung from hinges. Glass windows lay in shards that reflected darkly off the stacking clouds. Tables and chairs in the eateries were overthrown. Bodies lied sprawled in morbid positions with slack jaws and wide-open eyes. Several shirts and pants and some Prom dresses and suits had been blown out of the dry cleaners and littered the parking lot. They went down a slight embankment to the street.

"Stop," the cop said.

Everyone froze, refusing even to breathe. They looked around the area. Only desolation. And the echoes of distant thunder.

The cop knelt down, felt the ground. Then he stood and gazed down the road. His ears perked. They followed his gaze and looked into the first tendrils

of a snaking neighborhood. Quiet. The houses seemed to loom out at them like spirits. And then Austin's ears tickled, and Bryon heard it, too.

"It's a car," he said.

"It's coming toward us," Austin said.

"I don't see it," the cop said. "Where is it?"

The noise grew louder.

"It's not on the —"

The trees to their right, spindly and young, bent over and the wheels of a Ford Bronco spun over them, shredding leaves and spitting dirt. The Bronco lurched forward, sliding down the hill, and ramped the curb of the road. The bulky driver within yanked his wheel around and barreled straight for them. The grill rose before Austin's feet and somehow he lurched to the side. The brakes squealed and the Bronco fishtailed. Austin lied on the ground and acrid exhaust fumes swept over him. The Bronco rolled to a stop and the window rolled down and the driver stared at him. Heavy jowls and piercing charcoal eyes. He began cursing the boy but then saw the cop and he said, "Officer Jamison. I didn't expect to see you out there."

The cop launched to his feet. "You fool!" he roared. "Turn off the engine!"

"It's okay, I refilled it right before—"

"No! No! The *noise*, you ass! They're attracted to the—"

Bryon helped Austin to his feet and pointed to the trees. The flattened brush had been righting up but it was flattened again as infected swarmed after them.

The driver cursed. "I thought I lost them."

"All of Spring Falls is overrun!" Bryon hollered. "You can't fucking lose them!"

"Jump in the back!" he retorted. "Jump in the back!"

The cop—Jamison?—climbed into the back. Bryon jumped in and helped Austin up. The driver put the truck in gear and they sped away. In the bed of the truck were several barrels of insecticide and fertilizer. One had opened and purplish-gray crystals spilled out everywhere. Jamison bumped his arm into the

fertilizer and reeled backwards. "God! It fucking burns!" His tried to stand to get away but slipped in the fertilizer and fell backwards into the bed's latch, and the loose latch flipped and he tumbled overboard. The truck thudded over a pothole.

Austin turned and banged his fists on the windows in the back of the cab. "Stop!"

But it was too late. Jamison's arm had been crushed under one of the back tires when he had tried to catch himself. He lied there on the pavement, dwindling away, his crushed arm bleeding between protruding and shattered bones. With his good arm he aimed his 9mm and fired several rounds into the pursuers, shattering skulls and tearing apart chests. The infected fell but his magazine emptied. Those shot in the head didn't get up. The others did, and they closed in around him. He screamed for help as they surrounded him and began feeding. Austin and Bryon looked away as they neared the intersection.

"At least he took some down with him," Bryon said, wincing at the thought.

Austin opened his mouth to say something but didn't have time before it happened.

The driver lost control of the truck and wrecked.

Austin's vision tilted and his stomach leapt into his throat. The barrels rushed at him and hit him in the chest. He flipped over and bashed up his hand something awful. He spun through the air and saw the green clouds high above and then the dirt erupted all around him and he felt free and heard nothing but screeching and twisting metal and then he saw darkness. Then the darkness lit up with an indescribable brightness and he saw the sky again and his chest heaved as he lied in the grass next to a tree. He heard the crunching of metal and tires and then complete silence. Birds fluttered out of the tree.

Disoriented. Confused. He sat up. Sitting on a slope. Deep tire marks gouged into the earth. Pockets of dirt torn up. He stood and walked up the hill, grabbed a tree for support. The police department to the left. The library to the

right. And the wrecked hulk of the Bronco right in front of him, flames gushing from the cab, where the engine had caught fire and exploded.

"Byron!" he shouted, voice hoarse.

A figure emerged from around the wreck. Byron's scrawny figure. He stumbled away from the wreck and joined him on the slope. He had a large gash in his left arm and was leaking blood in torrents. He tore off part of his shirt and wrapped it up.

"What about the driver?" Austin asked.

Byron stared at the burning cab. "I don't think so."

"Shit. No mercy."

"What?"

"They're coming."

The infected ran across the street towards them, leaving the cop's location.

All that remained was tattered clothing and bits of bone tagged with flesh.

Byron looked away. "Shit, those fuckers can eat."

"The police station," Austin said. "Come on."

"I can barely walk..."

"Shit. Just hold onto me, all right?"

Austin half-ran, half-walked through the grass and then through the parking lot of the police station with Byron clinging to his arm. The infected had reached the parking lot when they moved along the side of the building and around the corner to the shattered glass of the lobby. The infected were nearly upon them. Out of the shattered windows leapt a police officer, swinging a golf-club. "Inside!" he shouted. "Inside!" They went past him and Austin helped Byron through into the lobby and the policeman was behind them. In the lobby the desk was empty and glass littered the chairs and potted plants had fallen over. "To the back," the officer said. The officer went ahead of them and they followed him down a corridor to a barred and padlocked iron-barred door. The cop drew a key and began unlocking it. The infected flooded into the lobby. The door opened and the cop pushed them in and followed and turned and shut the

iron door, locking it tight. They backed away from the door and the infected threw themselves against it. The three of them watched them on the other side of the door, drooling from the lips and that awful placid stare. Blood covered their hands and mouths. The cop dropped the golf club and left and then returned with a Beretta pistol, aimed, fired. One of the infected clawing at the iron bars was thrown backwards as the slug tore through his forehead and burrowed deep in his brain. The policeman scowled and fired again. Another infected fell. The infected turned and ran, but the officer didn't back off; he fired one more round, this time drilling an infected through the back of the head. The infected stopped, staggered down the corridor, fell against the lobby desk, groped at the computer keyboard and pulled it down with her. The others exited the station and after a moment the woman by the desk went still and moved no more.

"It scares them off," the cop said, unmoving. "I don't know. Maybe it's their comrades falling dead. Or the sound of the gun blast. It can hurt the ears." Austin knew this to be true. His ears had lit up with pain with each gunshot and they were still ringing. "But whatever it is, it scares them away." He holstered the Beretta and faced them, shook hands. "Welcome to our little fort. We've got good ammunition and good fortification. We've withstood all attacks. Can't leave, though. They're like hornets out there. Before long, all of Spring Falls—the world, too—will fall. But I'm happy to see you two fine young boys alive. How are things?"

"How do you think they're going?" Bryon retorted.

"Badly. Very badly. Tell me. Are you hungry? No? Thirsty? Ah. Yes. We have water. And lots of it." He led them down the hallway to an open room. Several desks covered with papers and lamps and computers filled the room. The walls were drenched with *Wanted* posters and maps and a bulletin board (*Staff Donuts & Coffee Tuesdays and Thursdays*). A coffee pot filled with stale coffee. The cop swung open a storage door and revealed a deep room lined with stocked goods—everything from food to water, radios and weapons. Cheap

weapons but weapons nonetheless. He lugged out a five-gallon water bucket and grunted as he lifted it and put it on a desk. "We don't have cups, so... Think of it as an upside-down water fountain."

Austin went first, cupping water into his hands and drinking like a thirsty horse.

Bryon said, "Radios. Why don't you call for help?"

"We tried. But no one answers. No one's out-putting signals anymore."

"Nowhere?"

He shook his head. "I told you, we tried."

"We?"

The cop nodded. "The captain. And two others. They're in the back."

"I thought *this* was the back?"

"The far back, then."

Austin finished drinking and Bryon took his place. Bryon was wary and he drank with an eye constantly on the cop.

Austin collapsed into one of the desk chairs. "So what's the plan?"

"Plan?" the cop asked. "Our only plan is to survive. To live." The cop turned and went to a door. "Don't you guys wander off. I'll be back with some food. You'll get hungry." He went through the door and shut it and locked it from the other side.

Bryon stopped drinking. "This isn't right, Man."

Austin looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Something's wrong. He's hiding something."

"Hiding something? He just saved our lives."

"Keep an eye open. That's all I'm saying."

"You're paranoid."

"Paranoid or not, it's obvious. Something's up."

"You have no reason to—"

"Why was he outside? Why not in here? Where it's safe?"

"Maybe he heard the crash."

"So what if he did? That wouldn't drag him out. It wouldn't drag anyone out."

"Bryon. Who cares? We're alive because of him. Show a shred of gratitude, Man."

Bryon shook his head.

The door opened again. "Sorry," the cop said. "Here." He dropped some canned tuna onto a desk. "Protein." Austin asked if he had a can opener. He fished one from his pocket and dropped it on the desk. "We used to have a cat around the station. Fed her tuna. No, it's not cat food. Don't worry. We've been eating it. That and candy leftovers from the 'Police Officer Appreciation' festival a week back. So." He took a seat in the chair. Bryon watched him warily. Austin went to the desk and opened the tuna and peeled back the lid and pulled out chunks of the fish and ate it. The cop said, "So what're you guys doing out here?"

"I was just trying to get home," Austin said. "I've been halfway across town. We were doing just fine until some guy came out of the subdivision with his engine so damn loud. I think they're attracted to the noises. They hear something and then go after it."

"Like hunting," the officer mused.

"Yeah," Austin said. "Hunting. So this guy comes at us, and those people—the sick people—are right behind him. They're swarming like those cicadas that came out early this spring, and since we couldn't outrun them, we jumped in the back of the truck. One of us slipped and fell. He was killed." He paused. He had spoken of Jamison's death with such directness, such numbness. It chilled him. "And then, I don't know how it happened, but I guess the truck flipped over. Bryon and I, we escaped, albeit Bryon is a bit hurt, and the truck went up in flames and the driver didn't make it out. So we just ran away from the sick people who were chasing us, and that's when we ran into you."

"Where'd you come from?"

"The grocery store down the street. There's about fifteen, twenty people there right now." He finished the tuna. "So your plan is to just sit tight?"

He laughed. "What do you think? What can we do?"

"So you're just... hanging out?"

"We're not going on suicide missions. Look. Just lay low. We have food. Water."

"Enough food? Enough water? For how long?"

"You were at a grocery store, right?"

"Yeah. Homer's."

"Did you see any of the diseased people eat?"

"Yeah."

"What did they eat?"

"Each other."

"Did the ones who got eaten, did they get up?"

"No. Only the ones who were bitten."

"Right. And did you see them grabbing food off the aisles?"

"No."

"So they don't eat. But they aren't supernatural creatures. They are by-products of an infectious disease. There's no mystery here. They *can* die. And they *will*. It's only a matter of time. Only a matter of time until they either eat each other to death or die of starvation. Then—and only then—do we care to venture out. And then others will venture out. I fear the numbers of survivors won't be too high. But no matter. Whatever the number, we'll be among them. We all will. Because we're going to survive. When they're dead, we're going to burn their bodies and start over again. It's just like a storm. That's all this is. A storm. A rainfall wiping away what needs to be wiped away. Evolution. Survival of the fittest. *We* are the fittest."

"What makes you so sure," Austin asked, "that they can die?"

"Logic. Common sense. Things that die don't come back to life again. It's natural biological law."

"But you're wrong. I killed one earlier today. I saw him die. And he was sprawled over the table. Bleeding everywhere. And when I went back, he was gone. He'd escaped through a window. A trail of bloody footprints showed his path. And then one was shot point-blank in the chest in the street and fell from a truck. He was *dead*. And then he was gone when I looked again. I think these things have a tendency to withstand biological necessities."

"Like reincarnation."

"Yeah. Maybe. No. I don't know."

Bryon stepped forward. "What does it matter? We're not staying here."

The officer went rigid. "Are you joking? You mean to *leave*?"

Bryon said, "You saved our lives. And we're happy for that. But we can't stay here. You're a stepping stone. And a good one. But we have to continue on."

The cop stood from the desk. "You can't leave. It's not safe out there."

"We're going. Thank you, for everything. The rescue. And the food."

"No."

Austin's eyes flashed between them.

The cop snarled, "You *cannot* leave!"

"What is it to you?"

"I don't want to see—"

"You lying son of a bitch," Bryon growled. "You're a fucking liar. You don't give a damn about our safety. You want us here for something you're too cowardly to mention through your own fucking lips."

The cop swung at him. Bryon blocked and drove his knee into the officer's groin. The officer fell backwards over the desk. Bryon went at him again. Austin yelled for him to stop. The cop writhed away and drew his 9mm and bashed the handle against Bryon's scalp. Bryon grunted and fell to the ground. Blood trickled down the side of his face. A nasty cut and bruise sweltering over his temple. The cop cocked the gun and aimed the sights over Bryon's face. Austin leapt forward and rammed his shoulder into the cop's back, sending him

tumbling into the wall. The gun discharged, the bullet echoing past Austin's ear. The cop spun around to see the boy standing over his friend, holding his arms out in front of him, the terror in his face silently pleading. The officer lowered his weapon. Austin's breath came ragged and worn. Bryon moaned on the floor.

The door swung open and two other cops dashed into the room. One was heavyset and sweating, jowls glistening like diamonds. The other was lanky but strong with a buzzed haircut and sunglasses. The big one held a 9mm, too, and the other held a small-arms machinegun. The lanky one pointed the gun at Austin and Austin's heart literally stopped in his chest. He expected the man to shoot him but he didn't.

"Everything all right, Paxton?" the lanky one asked.

"Yes," the first cop said. "Everything's fine." Cold sweat on his brow.

"Did he hurt you?" the lanky one asked, motioning the gun towards Austin.

"No. No, he's fine. He's not dangerous."

"What the hell happened?"

"The one on the ground attacked me. But I took care of it."

Austin felt raged. The cop had swung first. Had started it all.

"What do you want us to do with them?" the heavyset one asked.

Paxton licked his lips. "Throw the one on the ground in a cell. I'll talk alone with the other."

The officers rough-handedly pushed Austin to the side and grabbed Bryon, lifted him up, and took him through the door. Blood still smeared his face and his arm was purple and swollen. Austin had forgotten about it entirely. Austin looked at Paxton who now came towards him, suddenly more ominous than ever. And yet Austin found the energy—the courage—to say, "You took the first swing. He was defending —"

"I've been a cop for years," he interrupted. "I knew he was about to strike. I was on the defense. Are you okay?"

Austin thought his logic was crooked at best. "Yes."

"That bullet, it didn't hurt you, did it?"

"No."

"Graze you?"

"I'm fine. It didn't hit me." One could almost fall for Paxton's false sense of compassion. But yet if one looked hard enough he could see compassion's absence in the man's eyes. Instead they shone with a vivid cocktail of excitement and hatred.

"I'm sorry," Paxton said. "Really, I am. I didn't mean for the gun to go off."

"Did you mean to shoot Bryon if I wouldn't have knocked you across the room?"

"No. It was a display of force. Before my friends got here." He holstered his gun. "I need to show you something. Come on."

"Where are you putting Bryon?" he asked. "A cell?"

"They're nice. It's not like Alcatraz or anything."

"What about his head? And his arm?"

"We'll take care of it. Alvarez is a licensed physician. Get up. Come on."

He led him through the door and down a corridor with offices. Blood covered a spot of wall with flecks of human flesh branded onto the drywall. They went through an electronic door wedged open with a night-stick. The hallway bent around and they passed several high-plated glass windows overlooking the road leading towards the highway. Austin could see the Ameristop across the street. One of the pumps had burst into flames and the fire still ravaged the lot leaving the side of the building charred. Through the smoke he could see several figures moving about within the gas station. They went on through a door into a foyer. Paxton stopped, said, "You want to know how long until one of these guys starves? We're learning." He reached for the door, looked over his shoulder at Austin, and the darkness of the hall filled with a scouring light as

he opened the door to the courtyard. Potted plants along the towering brick walls. A few trees and a bench. Paxton drew his 9mm and went through. Austin followed.

Almost immediately he saw her. All he could see was her back. She was crouched in the corner with a chain around the neck. Blood soaked the back of her shirt in rivulets and her chest heaved in and out with every breath. She didn't turn around as they went behind the bench, feet softly padding over the tiled stone. Paxton said, "Clap your hands." Austin just looked at him. "It's fine. Clap." Austin bit his lip and did. The woman turned instantly and he saw the face of a once-beautiful police sergeant now turned into a ghoul from hell. Her short brown hair—a concoction of sweat mingled with blood—caked her scalp. Her purple skin meshed with the tattered sunlight and her sunken eyes stared forward. Her yellow teeth clicked and she leapt up and ran towards them, reaching out with hands in a death-reach. Austin ducked behind the cop and then her scream turned into a choke, a gasp, and the chain around her throat tightened. She fell over backwards, landing in several trimmed bushes, next to a spindly hammock. She got up and came again but fell back. She did this over and over, eyes betraying all sense of humanity, and finally she went back to the corner. Hunched down. Cowered.

"They don't learn," Paxton said in a bare whisper. "She's forgotten about us."

Austin clapped again.

She spun around, hissed, launched at them, fell back several times.

And then she retreated to the corner.

"We've estimated a memory span of about a minute. And she gives up if it's a lost cause."

"How? How'd you—"

"She was a friend of mine. Worked at the Station. We all loved her. She was single, so everybody jostled for her. Then some woman came rolling into the Station, one of the first. Before it hit so hard. She said she'd been attacked and bitten, and had knocked the attacker cold. She said it happened in the Eagle

View Condos. And then she started getting angrier and angrier. You see, the symptoms aren't just physical—they're also psychological. This person, she turned inhuman *psychologically* before she completely made the jump. Taylor didn't know what to do. The woman was screaming and we had to restrain her. Then she started to morph physically; Taylor tried to grab her arm, we were going to put her down with some sedatives—not kill her, mind you, just put her into a state of sleep—and then she bit Taylor, tore out a chunk of her arm. Taylor had gone hysterical, running around, and she was bleeding so bad. And then when she was getting gauze—I was with her—she threw the gauze away and started cursing, swearing. It wasn't like her at all. As if her soul was being taken away and replaced with that of a brute animal. Then she started to change, and I backed off. We had to lock the doors, and we were able to get her in a cell before she went insane. We shot her with tranquilizer—we have some animal tranq guns—and then we strapped her up and put her out here." His voice wavered; he bit his bottom lip. "She always liked to come out here and read. She really liked John Grisham. She was reading *The Testament*. It's still in her locker..." He turned away.

Austin looked at her now. She had a chunk missing out of her arm.

"It's the bites," Paxton said. "They bite you. And you become one of them."

Thunder crackled. She jumped up again and rushed at them. Paxton grabbed him and pulled him towards the door. It began to sprinkle. Paxton opened the door wide as the rain began to intensify. Lightning flashed above them. The courtyard grew brighter and then again enshrouded itself in the murky shadows of the oncoming storm. Taylor retreated to the corner, curled up, made guttural noises in the rain.

"She's gone," Paxton said. "It's not really her. Her body had been stolen."

They went back inside.

Paxton locked the door.

Rain drummed on the roof.

2:00 PM

They walked down the corridor the same way they had come. "You didn't chain her just because she liked to spend her break out there, did you?" Austin asked. "Why didn't you kill her? Shoot her?"

"She'll tell us when it's safe to go," he answered. "She'll die of starvation. And so will all the others."

They were starving her. Seeing when she would die. Seeing how long it would take until the infected were cleansed—not through serums or IVS or treatments, nor through the penetration of the brain, but through their grueling and agonizing deaths. Austin imagined her death-throe wails, chained and unable to flee, scorched beneath the bitter sun, skin wrinkling back and opening, revealing bloody flesh and muscle. He saw her writhing about in the garden, her cries resounding about the towering courtyard walls with no one to listen and no one to care.

The windows overlooking the street passed by on their right. Heavy rains pounded the grass and trees and buildings. Sheets of rain swam over the street between the wrecked vehicles and fires were smothered amongst choking smoke. One of the windows held a jagged crack, the panes on either side held taught and tense, on the verge of breaking. But then they were in the hallway with the offices. Paxton led him through a different door. The air grew colder. Another set of electronic doors wedged open with a night-stick. He put his foot in it and took out the bar and then slid open the doors. Austin followed and the doors shut behind them. A blank television set lied on the ground with the screen broken. Chairs scattered about the room. Mounted video feeds on the walls and ceiling hung like steel gargoyles bowed in prayer. The two other officers were there and they saw Austin and turned their heads, muttered to themselves. Laughed. The big one slid a hand over his mountainous stomach.

"Take it easy, Boys," Paxton said. "I just need to show him."

The skinny one moved in front of the door. "I don't think so."

"Come on. He needs to know."

"Why? Why does he need to know?"

"Stand down, Alvarez. Or I'll lay you down."

Alvarez's hand draped down to the 9mm in his holster. Austin flinched.

Paxton laughed. "Don't. You're tense. Don't be. We just checked on Taylor."

"How is she?"

"She's fine."

"Still going to the movie with her Sunday night?"

"I think we'll have to reschedule."

Alvarez relaxed and chuckled and stepped aside.

Paxton and the boy went through the door. The carpeting ended, replaced with cold, bare concrete. Austin's eyes adjusted. It was much darker. Shadows loomed out. Barred shadows. Iron bars. Cells. His ears caught the sound: deep, ragged breathing; and shuffling feet. Paxton walked away. Austin turned and went towards the sound. "Bryon?" he said in a hoarse whisper, not wanting Paxton to hear. He pushed through the darkness. No windows to let in even a sliver of light. Thunder. "Bryon? Are you—" He felt something run into him, cold and hard. He jumped back, almost falling, then cursed himself. It was just the bars of the cell, and—

The attack came suddenly and without warning. He saw the barred teeth emerge out of the shadows as the naked man threw himself against the bars. Enclosed like a lion. Only more vicious. Austin stood rigid and stared at the skinny naked man. Drool fell down his swollen and blistered lips. His hands clawed at Austin through the bars. Fingernails shorn off. The bony fingers grazed Austin's Homer's Grocery t-shirt and he stepped back and slipped and fell onto his ass. He could still see the figure with his arms protruding from the bars, groping blindly. Paxton came from nowhere and grabbed Austin under

the armpits and pulled him to his feet. Austin brushed himself off without taking his eyes from the infected in the cell.

"We're keeping them in here," Paxton said.

The infected leaned against the bars, his lacerated chest quivering with each painful breath. He watched the two of them and made some sort of awful, inhuman noise, and his cry was met with several resounding calls echoing throughout the chamber. Austin knew then that the cells were full.

"Test subjects," Austin said.

"We stripped this man down. His name is Alan Schmidt. We took fingerprints when we tranquilized him earlier today. He's a business manager of human resources at Delphi Automotive. Father of four. Divorced twice. Member of the Atheist's Club. A long-time chairman." He looked at Austin. "Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"It is good. To believe in God. Especially now. Because God is all you have."

"Do you believe in God?"

He didn't answer for a moment. "I believe that I am still alive. And this man is not."

He led him through the darkness and then light burst forth. He'd grabbed a flashlight off the wall. "I'm a fool," he said, apologizing. "I should've grabbed a flashlight before we came in. But I wasn't thinking. I didn't think you'd wander off like that. Don't go fucking around." He pointed the flashlight beam down the corridor lined with cells. "He's down there. Your friend." They went down the hallway and he unlocked a cell door. Austin heard grunting and metal-against-metal as the door creaked open. He lowered the flashlight beam over a bed against the concrete wall. Bryon lied there, strapped in. Drool dribbled down his face and he stared up at them with anger and hate in his eyes. His arms and legs pushed against the wrought-iron chains. Austin recognized the contraption. At San Quentin they used gurneys like that when executing inmates via lethal injection.

Paxton entered the cell and knelt down beside Bryon. "I've told your friend here everything he's wanted to know. He hasn't fled. He isn't dead. And I imagine he is more comfortable here than ever. Promise me you won't try any tricks again, and I'll let you free of this. And I'll get you some water. The tranquilizer often makes people thirsty."

Bryon's voice rasped. "You—"

"Promise me," Paxton hissed. "That's all I need. And you'll be freed."

In the cell next to them something moved. The beam faced the other direction.

Bryon's eyes were wide.

"Do you wish to see?" Paxton asked with a crooked smile. "Do you wish to see?"

Bryon stared into the other cell, the darkness cloaking anything beyond.

Paxton knelt down beside his ear. "Do you wish to see?" he whispered.

Bryon stared at the officer, eyes frightened.

Paxton stood and rolled the flashlight in his hands and swung the high-powered beam over the knotted and cracked floor and then over the moldy iron bars and then into the cell. Several hunched figures—an old woman, a beautiful damsel turned into a monster; and two boys and a twenty-year-old woman—threw themselves against the doors. The entire room shook as they snarled and shrieked, wincing in the bright light.

Bryon's body thudded against the gurney, terror gripping his bones.

In the cells beyond, more figures danced in the shadows, aroused.

The shouts of the infected echoed through the brick and concrete room.

Bryon shivered.

Austin felt goose-bumps spread over his arms, and he moved towards Paxton.

Paxton swung the light around, shining it in Bryon's face. His eyes snapped shut. His breath came out in wisps of warm air. The sounds died down but they were not deceived—the creatures were still there. Watching. Hunting. Hoping.

Paxton rose and told Austin, "Let's go."

He moved past him and to the door.

Austin stared at Bryon, pleading with him to make that promise.

Paxton stood in the door. "Do you want to stay here, too?"

Austin turned and backed out. Paxton was shutting the door and as he did so the beam went into the next cell. The infected hurled themselves against the iron bars. A screw popped out of the ceiling and fell to the concrete, rolled next to one of the gurney's legs. Paxton grinned and flicked off the flashlight.

Bryon hollered, parched: "I fucking promise! Get me out of this fucking cell!"

Paxton turned on the flashlight and went back inside. "Good choice. I don't know about these bars. They've held up so far. But weird things have happened."

He undid the clamps and helped Bryon up. Bryon turned his eyes away and hurried sluggishly out of the cell. Paxton shut the door and led them out of the cell corridor and into the room with the other two officers. They stood, tense, but Paxton waved them down. He took Austin and Bryon to a room they hadn't yet seen. It had two stuffed chairs and a bookcase and a computer on a desk. Paxton said, "See you later," and he shut the door and locked it tight. They were left alone in the darkness. But it was warm, and they weren't surrounded by the creatures from hell.

Bryon rubbed stiff muscles. "This is an improvement."

Austin pulled a lighter out of his pocket. Hannah had given him one at the Ameristop. He flicked it open and the light burned sharp, twisting its golden beams over the room. He spotted some scenic candles and lit them. The wicks burned strong. He slid the lighter into his pocket and fell into one of the chairs. His eyes drooped. Bryon paced back and forth, eyeing the dusty books and stacks of magazines on the bookshelf. Police reports. Some medals. Pictures of a smiling family at some lake house somewhere, dressed in fishing gear and

holding poles and tackling. He went through the desk drawers, picked something out, put it in his pocket.

"So you made a new friend," Bryon said.

He winced. "He let you out."

"What good is it to take a guy out of prison and put him in jail? Modest comfort. Modest. But still prison."

"I'm here, too. And, no, me and him? Not friends."

"Do you think this room is tapped?"

"Even if it is, the power's out."

"They could be listening behind the door."

"So? Who cares?"

Bryon brushed some papers and a pen aside and sat on the desk with his legs dangling. "What'd he tell you?"

"He showed me."

"What?"

"Showed me."

"No. I mean, what did he show you? I heard what you said."

"They chained up one of their officers. A woman. She's in the courtyard. They treat her like a whore. Well. Treated her, I should say. They're starving her. They have this theory that these sick people don't eat anything but fresh meat, I guess, and they're going to see how long until she starves to death. To see the life expectancy of these things. They think it's noble. Maybe it is. I don't know. But you were in those cells. They're *testing* them. Odd, isn't it, if they think this will all be over in a couple weeks? Why test them?"

"They're sadistic."

"Maybe. The woman in the courtyard, she was pretty attractive, maybe —"

"If you even mention it, I'll slit your throat."

Austin said nothing.

"Why do you think they locked us up?"

"I don't know."

"We should've just kept running. Right on past this place. Maybe to the library or something."

"Maybe we still can."

"We're locked up. And we're not getting out—unless you're Sherlock Holmes. And you're not."

"We've got to do something. I'm getting the vibe that us being locked up isn't a good sign."

"I'm getting the same vibe."

Austin looked up at the ceiling. "Bryon, didn't your mom used to lay tiles on ceilings?"

"No. Her friend did."

"You helped her once, didn't you?"

"A long time ago."

"Look at the ceiling."

He did, and then he smiled.

"You're tallest," Austin said. "You go first."

"No. You. If they come, I can fight them off better than you can."

"This coming from the guy who was knocked out after one hit?"

"He hit me with the butt of his fucking gun. He clocked me. That's different."

Austin stood on the desk and reached up, grabbed one of the tiles. It quivered under his hands. Bits of loose drywall fluttered down and flaked on his shirt. He wrestled the panel free and handed it down to Bryon. He set it against the bookcase. "Give me a push." Bryon did, and Austin squirmed through the opening in the ceiling. He positioned himself along the steel crossbeams underneath which the tiles were fastened. The air stank of mildew and age. The rain drumming on the roof sounded like thunder on its own accord. He crawled over the steel beams, careful not to press his weight onto the tiles. Light from the candles barely pushed through the cracks in the tiles into the ceiling cavity. Bryon stepped onto the desk. He pushed the tile up and Austin was alone.

"What the fuck is he doing?" There came a loud crash, the splintering of wood. He heard the door swinging open, creaking. Silence. Footsteps below. Sweat stung his eyes and crawled down his dusty cheeks. The dust turned to a ruddy powder. Bryon then appeared, removing the tile and swinging up and replacing it. He sat on the nearest steel beam behind Austin and then they heard feet rushing into the room.

Alvarez cursed. "They're gone."

"I can see that," Paxton said. "Where the hell did they go?"

"The door was burst open," the fat man mumbled.

"We didn't run into them," Paxton said. "They must've gone the other direction."

"They're trying to leave through the front doors," Alvarez said.

"Shit," the fat man grumbled. "Let them go."

"We *need* them. How else are we to be sure about the disease communication?"

Austin ground his teeth. They were lab rats. Fucking lab rats.

"Find them!" Paxton growled. "Shoot them if you see them. But *don't* kill them. The dead can't be infected."

Alvarez and the fat man ran out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

Paxton cursed and followed.

"They're going to find us," Austin said under his breath. "They'll block our exit."

"We're not leaving," Bryon said. "Not yet?"

"So, what, we're just going to roost here like fucking chickens?"

"They fucked with me," Bryon said, a wild glare in his eye.

"Bryon..."

"They fucked with me. I'm going to fuck with them."

"You're crazy."

"Just follow me."

He moved past Austin on a parallel beam and Austin followed. Bryon maneuvered along the beams and headed towards the back of the station. Back to the cells. Austin wanted to turn around, to return to the front, but he knew deep down that the cops weren't foolish enough to overlook a clever little scheme. And he knew they wouldn't go to the cells, because the refugees had no reason to go back to the cells.

"There's no way to get out from the jail," Austin said.

He didn't flinch, kept moving.

"Bryon..."

"Be quiet."

"Are we going to the courtyard?"

He stopped and Austin nearly ran into him. Bryon placed his ear to a vent, then turned his head, and looked below through the grill. Muttered something under his lips. Then he raised his hand, clenched it into a fist, and slammed it hard into the grill. The grill popped out and strained the girders supporting the tiles. Austin's hand had been tentatively resting on a tile, and the shifting in the girders made the tile pop loose and fall and Austin's weight shifted as well and he gave a shout as he pitched forward, grazing his hair on a crossbeam. He grabbed at the bar but flipped around and fell, spinning wildly, and he hit the tiles all around him and they broke and he fell through into the room, landing onto the floor. He lied crumpled in a fetal position against something warm and hard. Bryon laughed and dropped down next to him.

Something came at them from the shadows, swiping and growling. A woman who stank of garlic and dried blood. Austin writhed away, seeing her shadow sweeping towards him. A bright flash of light, a clap of thunder so loud it sent lightning into his eardrums, and blood burst out from the back of the woman's skull, spraying the wall. She collapsed to the ground. Bryon lifted him up. He stank of acrid gunpowder.

"I found it in the office," Bryon said, showing him. "A magnum."

He faced the cell's lock and aimed and fired. The lock blew apart.

They moved out of the cell and Austin took a flashlight off the wall. He turned it on. The figures in the other cells threw themselves against the bars, shrieking. Bryon made sure there were no more in the cell they had escaped from and then he moved towards the back of the corridor. Austin protested and Bryon said, "Shut up and get next to the door."

He did as he was told. He could hear voices behind the door.

Gunshots came and light danced over the grimy walls.

"Bryon!" Austin yelled over the screams of the infected.

He emerged out of the darkness, screaming, "Go! Go! Go!"

"What—"

"Fucking go!"

Austin turned and grabbed the doorknob but it burst open, hitting him in the forehead, opening up the brutal wound that had clotted. Blood streamed into his eye. He fell to the floor as the cops entered. They tripped over his legs in the dark and fell to the floor. Bryon grabbed his hand and wrenched him to his feet. The flashlight beam spreading from Austin's shaking hands flew over the grounded officers, then up into the far corridor, where the infected were rushing at them like zombies from hell.

Bryon turned and ran the opposite direction. Austin followed.

One of the cops got to his feet, pointed his pistol at him.

Bryon swung around and fired. The bullet hit the cop in the shoulder, knocking him back down. The cop's gun skittered into the darkness. Austin watched the infected clamber over the officers, tearing them apart. Their screams shook the station's walls and blood poured onto the floor. Vomit crawled at the back of his throat. He turned and ran out of the room and down the hallway, following Bryon.

But Bryon was gone.

He fell against the wall, spots swimming before his eyes. "Bryon? Bryon!"

His wails echoed back to him.

Bryon appeared at the end of the hallway. "They're coming from the front!"

"The *front*?!"

"We're trapped! Austin! The door!"

Austin turned and saw the door to the cells still open. "Fuck." He abandoned the wall and ran to it and shut it. He looked back to see Bryon standing at the end of the corridor. "Bryon! The courtyard!"

"They're coming in through the entrance!"

On the long windows next to them infected threw themselves. The glass cracked and webbed. One of them had an eye dangling from its socket, the entire side of his face a deep red lacerated by raindrops from the raging storm outside.

Bryon said, "They're surrounding us..."

They threw themselves against the glass again. The cracks webbed wider.

"It's going to break," Austin said.

They took off through a branching door and ran into the courtyard. Rain hammered down. The plants were matted under a small network of muddy fingers and the spindly trees rocked back and forth. Taylor turned to face them and ran towards them, screaming. Bryon raised the gun and shot her in the head. Her head flipped back, the back of her scalp blown to the ground. The chain wrenched her to her knees and she fell onto her side, the gaping bloody hole in the back of her head steaming in the rain. A knot rose in Austin's throat, and he couldn't help but feel, in some way, *sorry* for her. Bryon ran to the picnic table and stood on it, grabbed a rain gutter on the building's outcropped low roof, and pulled himself up. Austin followed, walking around Taylor's corpse and the widening pool of blood; he wasn't tall enough to reach so Bryon reached down and grabbed his hands and tried to lift but the rain made their hands wet and slippery and he lost his grip. Austin heard a growl and turned to see an infected standing in the doorway to the courtyard, looking between him and Taylor's corpse. "Fuck." Bryon reached down, grabbed Austin's shirt-sleeve, and pulled. Austin kicked and lifted up, and Bryon pulled him onto the

roof. The infected ran to the picnic table and stood there eyeing them, then turned and went to Taylor and began to eat.

They stood on the roof in the rain with the storm overhead. "We're going to get hit by lightning," Austin said.

Bryon pointed to the library across a wide eighth-mile stretch of green lawn. The remains of the Bronco smoked in the cold drizzle. Rain cascaded down the bridge of his nose. "How's the library sound?"

"We should go to the park. Into the woods."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"There'll be people in the library. Maybe infected. Look at all the cars."

"But the *woods*?"

Lightning struck close and the thunder tore through their chests.

"We'll run past the library, then back behind the subdivisions. Then through the park."

"It's a long way to run."

"It's what I'm doing. You volunteered to come."

"All right."

He jumped down to the ground without giving it a second thought. He sprang lightly to his feet and took off across the muddy lawn, becoming a shadowy figure in the rain, then disappearing amidst the falling sheets. Austin shivered alone on the roof. He looked down. A ten foot drop. "Fuck it." He dropped down and hit the ground hard and rolled, feeling the wet grass sticking to his skin and clothes. His right knee burned like sulfur. He got to his feet and ran and winced with the pain in his knee but it subsided and then he was lost amidst the hammering sheets of rain. He could hear infected behind him and then scattered gunshots from the station. He reached the library parking lot and saw Bryon next to a parked car beside the bushes along the sidewalk. It was dark inside the library's windows.

"Still want to go through the park? The doors are unlocked."

"If anyone was alive in there, they'd have locked the doors."

The sounds of infected drawing closer.

"Sounds like we drew a crowd," Bryon said.

They took off into the rain.

3:00 PM

They made their way around the back of the library. The wide-branched oak tree with the benches spread underneath its canopy emerged from the dreaded rain, drenched in fog. One of the benches had been knocked over and the mulch at the base of the tree held footprints filled with water. They went past it and the library vanished behind them. The cries of the infected were gone now, and they came upon several cryptic and abandoned houses. One was half-burnt to the ground. In the driveway of another a woman lied sprawled on the ground, revolver in her hand, a hole through her head. They crossed the grass turf between two homes and jumped a fence. A dog came out of a doghouse, shivering and pale, watching them with droopy eyes. He cowered back into the doghouse when thunder struck. Bryon scaled the opposite end of the fence and Austin followed, cutting his pants on the pointed scaffolds lining the wooden boards. A line of trees rose from the mist and by now they were soaked and cold and covered with goose-bumps. Their clothes stuck to their skin.

“North Park is just beyond these trees,” Austin said.

The pines in the thicket sheltered them from the rain. They walked over a browning bed of fallen pine needles. Birds called to one another in the branches above and they soon exited onto a road. There were no vehicles as the road was barely traveled. The road banked right, leading to several apartments and to the multilane that ran straight to downtown South Arlington. To the left were more homes packed side-by-side. They ran across the road, mere shadows in the hammering rainfall, and they came to a low mound of dirt. They clambered over it and slid down the other side, avoiding the parked bobcat. They came to an empty parking lot. No one visited the park in the morning hours—it was for students and white-collar joggers. It sported a never-before used amphitheater, basketball and tennis courts, a pond overflowing with frogs and tadpoles with a sign forbidding fishing, and there was the new skateboard park. Weaving

around the fringes of the park was a mile-long concrete jogging path. Rain ran in shivers over the pavement but then they were in the grass, ascending a hill, the steep sides covered in runny mulch. They went down the other side and faced the amphitheater. The concrete amphitheater sat right against the thick woods that ran down to the wooden bridge. The roads were wedged up against Austin's subdivision. From there he would take the gravel pathway, go up the crooked wooden steps, past the gazebo, down and up the street, past St. James Street, and his house would be there. He knew he was almost there. His heart leapt.

"Are we going through the woods?" Bryon asked.

"Yes. How many times have you been here?"

"Once or twice."

"Okay. Follow me."

Austin led the way around the amphitheater and even through the heavy rain found the path entering the woods. He, Les, Chad and Drake had hung out in these woods hundreds of times in the last two years. He and Bryon went down the path. The ground was filled with rainwater and mud stuck to their feet, making sucking, slurping noises as they walked. The trees formed thick, overgrown barriers to their sides, and the path wound through the forest, and it reminded Austin of the Congo. He could feel the eyes of a tiger, or of a gorilla, prancing over him. Except tigers and gorillas weren't their worries. The path went down a heavy slope with wooden steps. As it would bank far down the slope it would come to the creek; and then it would follow the creek and reach the wooden bridge crossing the creek to the gravel path.

"We're almost—"

Bryon grabbed his shoulder, his fingers digging in like hooked claws. "Quiet."

He eyed him, blinking rainwater from his eyes. "What?"

"Quiet," he hissed. "Listen."

He heard only the rain. The rain falling through the trees, sprinkling on the path before them. He heard the rushing creek overflowing and bellowing like an ancient blow-horn as the water rose and burst over the embankments. He looked back at Bryon and saw his face pale not from the cold nor from the rain but from the fear.

He looked down at him. "They're all around us. In the woods."

A horrendous shriek shook the woods to their left, and another answered the first to their right. Another behind them. And then they all screamed at once, their cries lost in the deafening thunder. Bryon shoved Austin to the ground and bolted down the path. Austin fell and landed hard in the mud, his ankle and elbow searing with pain. He grunted and got to his feet. The woods seemed to come alive and through the scattered lightning-bursts he could see them moving through the trees on every side, enclosing around him as if it were some sort of ambush. He took off down the path, slipping and sliding; but he didn't fall.

And then the screams stopped.

Everything went quiet.

The woods ceased to shake and shimmer.

He came to a stop, breathing hard.

Blood had splashed the trees to his right, and it was all over the ferns and leaves. Blood on the other side, too. Dripping and smearing in the rain. Footprints at his feet, encased in the mud, filled with maroon water. The tracks of something dragged into the woods. He stared through the dense foliage, saw nothing.

Something emerged from the woods forty feet behind him on the path. He turned and saw Bryon standing there. One of his arms was gone, leaving a stump that gushed blood all over his shirt, down his pants, to the ground. His eyes had sunken and the goose-bumps were not a purplish red. His lips unfurled, revealing golden teeth. His fingers retracted into claws, and he

hunched over, foamed at the mouth. Stared straight at Austin. Austin turned and ran down the path. Bryon gave chase, slipping and falling in the rain. Austin turned and bolted into the woods, hoping to lose him in the mass entanglement of foliage. He regretted it instantly, seeing dozens of them in the woods around him, but they were held back by the dangling and coiled foliage, trapped in weeds and brambles, caught by vines. They tripped over roots jutting from the ground. Bryon ran into the woods, following him, trying to wind his way through the thickets. Austin came out of the trees, onto the path.

The creek roared, water bursting at the sides, washing out the path. The wooden bridge loomed up. He ran to the bridge and over the wooden planks. A man came at him from across the bridge, growling and snarling; he hit him with his shoulder, grabbed his shirt, and threw him against the wooden railing. He fell back, and Austin grabbed his legs and pushed, and the men fell and flailed, splashing into the foaming water. At that moment Bryon and more infected reached the bridge. Austin bolted across to the gravel pathway and up the crooked steps and past the gazebo engraved with the initials of long-lost lovers. He reached the road where a car had burst into the patio window of a home, sending the glass in a shower onto the street. Glass shards crunched under his shoes. He ran up a steep hill, his legs burning. The infected were losing momentum. He gritted his teeth and kept moving. He'd never run so hard in his life. St. James appeared, the bent sign hanging limp, sparkling with raindrops. Past St. James and around a curve in the road was his house; but right past St. James there came around the curve dozens of infected, drawn by the noise of the ones pursuing him. They ran after him from the front. He turned onto St. James. Behind him the two groups merged and followed. Austin knew St. James would take him to the other side of the subdivision. He broke from the road and went into a lawn—Chelsie's house—and jumped the fence, landing hard on the other side.

He stood and peered through the gaps in the fence. The infected had come to a stop in the street. Noticed their prey was missing. He turned and ran up onto the back porch of Chelsie's house. He tried the back door. It was locked. A figure appeared behind the glass—her dad. He came to the door and opened it, looked at him in the rain. Austin could hear the infected. Coming towards the house. He glanced back at the fence behind him, the fence bordering on his own house. He could just leap it if he got enough of a head-start run.

"Have you seen my daughter, Austin?" Chelsie's dad asked.

"No," Austin said.

He abandoned the porch and ran across the grass towards the backyard fence.

Her dad came out into the rain. "What are—"

But Austin leapt, grabbed the top of the fence, nearly slipped, grunted, pulled himself up, pushed himself over. The world spun and he landed in the dirt of his backyard, the wind knocked out of him. He looked up through the rain to see the backside of his house. He got to his feet and ran underneath several poplars and stood there looking at the house. It seemed quiet. Undisturbed. A good sign. He heard the shrieks of the infected from the other house and the breaking of wood, and he heard Chelsie's dad screaming. The screams dwindled into broken gurgles of spilling blood. Austin abandoned the poplars and sprinted up the lawn to the door leading into the garage. He twisted the handle. Locked and slippery with rain. He bent down and looked out to the empty street and could hear the infected fighting over the remains of Chelsie's dad and then he crawled through the doggy-door and was in the garage.

4:00 PM

The sweet smell of gasoline assaulted him. The garage door was down but hazel light came in through the door window. Rain thudded dully on the roof. The Ford truck and Transport sat side-by-side before him. He ran his hand over the cold metal of the vehicles, making his way to the door of the house, feeling his way through the darkness. The doggy door behind him flipped back. He spun around and the dog came in. He cringed back. But the dog wasn't infected. It leapt up onto his chest, pushing him back, licking his face, the tongue trailing drool over his shirt. He pushed him down, turned and went to the door leading to the house. It was locked. He bent down and searched for the key underneath the wooden step. He found it and unlocked the door. He pushed it open and a cool draft came from the kitchen. He stood there entranced, finding it strange that just a handful of hours before he had been in this place with no knowledge of the events about to unfold. He told the dog to stay and went into the kitchen and shut and locked the door.

"Mom? Dad?"

His own voice startled him, moving through the cryptic, silent rooms. The grandfather clock ticked back the seconds. Ice clattered in the refrigerator. He walked over the linoleum and into the den. His father kept his Nascar memoirs on the shelves. He stood by the filing cabinet that held their birth certificates and social security cards and his father's Seinfeld seasons.

"Mom? Dad?"

He went into the parlor.

Rain pattered on the roof and against the windows.

He peeked into the living room. The furniture lied quiet.

Like coffins.

His house had become a tomb.

He pushed the thought away.

Steps led up to the bedrooms, two baths and the closet with the washer and drier.

He stood at the foot of the stairs, called out in a low voice, "Mom? Dad?"

Another stairwell went down into the basement. But no one ever went down there. He began taking the steps up to the bedrooms when he heard movement coming from the basement. He snuck back down and opened the door leading to the basement steps and went down slowly. At the end of the steps to the left was his father's workroom with all his tools, the room barricaded by a locked door. In the room to his right the pool table sat with the balls swash-buckled over the green felt. He and his friends would always hold tournaments while goofing off with the pool-sticks. Directly ahead behind a closed door was the small family room. It had been his bedroom once but he had wanted more light during the summer and so had moved upstairs to the room with the big window looking out at the oak tree. Light floated underneath the door. He knew the power was out, all the lights extinguished; and he didn't know what would be issuing light on the other side of the door. He reached for the doorknob. Shuffling beyond. His heart began to beat quicker. He pushed open the door.

A magna-flashlight glared at him, stinging his eyes.

He stepped into the room and went around the flashlight.

And when his eyes cleared, he saw his mom in the corner.

Her back was to him. Something in her hands.

"Mom!" he shouted, happy to see her. She wasn't attacking. She was —

She turned her head around. Purple rashes on her skin. Sinking eyes. Her lips quivered, reflecting horribly in the light from the magna-light between her crossed legs. She glared at him with those awful eyes and hissed, "*Get away from me.*"

He had never heard that terrible, god-awful voice from her before.

It didn't sound like his mother.

He stepped away, the color drained from his face.

She showed him her hands. A revolver. She loaded a bullet into it. Small caliber. She loaded another bullet. "There's only two, Austin. Only two. One for me. And one for your father."

He tried to speak but couldn't, his lips suddenly numb.

"It was meant to be," she said. "This was supposed to happen."

"Mom..."

"I don't want to be like them, Austin. I don't want to be like them."

He stared at her, the world spinning. He felt lightheaded, shocked. Weakening.

"I'm sorry it has to be like this." She put the gun to her forehead. "I'm sick. Very sick. I can feel the changes now." The cold barrel illuminated beads of sweat on her face. The forehead he kissed every morning before school now kissed by the end of a pistol.

He stepped towards her.

She growled, "Don't, Austin. Don't get close. Please. I don't have much time. He bit me." She squeezed her eyes shut, dug the end of the gun deeper into the folds of skin on her forehead. "I love you. Don't get too close. Protect your sister. I don't think he knows."

He leapt forward, shouting her name.

The revolver barked. Her head wrenched back and the back of her skull blew out and bits of brain and bone and blood splattered the wall beside the sofa and she pitched to the side, landing hard. The pistol rolled out of her hands. He screamed and dove for her, landed beside her. He took her head and turned it towards him. Her eyes were vacant. Blood surged onto the carpet. Those terrible, awful, loveless eyes stared at him, blank and unrevealing. He shuddered and writhed away, got to his feet, lunged for the door. His stomach went sour and he hit the wall and his neck arched to the side and he vomited all over his pants and then stumbled from the room and slammed the door shut. He fell down beside the steps leading back to the main level and curled up with his knees against him.

She was dead.

She had killed herself.

He had seen it.

Tears streamed down his face.

Now he knew how Hannah had felt.

How long he lied there he will never know. Memories came over him, memories of his mother. And then they were shattered when there came a noise from upstairs, and his mother's last words echoed in his mind: *Protect your sister. I don't think he knows.* Fear gripped him, an unmentionable fear providing an unmentionable strength. He crawled halfway up the steps and got to his feet and went back to the main level. He heard noises by the front door and faced it. The door shuddered, then burst open, the flimsy screen door falling apart. Figures masked in shadow were coming inside. He abandoned the door and sprinted up the steps, thinking only of Ashlie. Her door was closed. He threw his shoulder into it and it flew open.

His father hovered over the bed.

Ashlie continued to sleep.

"Dad!" he wailed.

He whipped around and shrieked.

He was one of them.

His own father—kin, flesh-and-blood—came at him. He ducked out of the room and ran down the steps. He briefly saw infected coming through the front door. He darted into the living room and bashed his shin on the coffee table. He looked back to see his father at the top of the steps, howling a blood-curdling scream. Austin ran through the dining room and around the kitchen island to the garage door. He swung it open and ran into the garage, into the darkness.

He moved around the vehicles. And on the other side of the garage he found it. The axe that his dad used to cut firewood and to hack up the trees he would fell at his brother's house. He took it off the rack. The light from the open door leading to the kitchen was blocked. His father stood in the doorway, staring at him. Austin gripped the axe and went to intercept him. The doggy

door flew back and Chelsie's dad's head appeared, foaming and yellow-toothed. Without a second thought Austin swung the axe down. The blade slapped into the soft tissue in the neck and continued straight through the bone. His head fell to the floor, rolling about.

His father was behind him now, had gone around the back of the vehicles.

He could feel his fetid breath crawling over his neck.

He pulled the axe up and swung around, swinging it wildly.

The broad of the axe connected with his shoulder, throwing him against the Ford truck. He snarled and fell to the ground, struggling to stand. Energy coursed through Austin's veins. He swung the blade down, chopping off part of his father's leg. Blood sprayed out over the Ford truck's tires and onto the concrete floor. Dad howled—but it wasn't dad, this Austin knew—and he leapt towards him but fell down to the ground, unable to balance on one leg. He writhed on the pavement.

Austin stepped back, gasping for air. "Sorry, Daddy."

His voice had broken.

Tears continued to stream down his face.

He bit his lip, closed his eyes, winced. And the axe went down, into his father's forehead. His head split and blood and brain matter oozed out onto the axe blade. He released the axe lodged in his father's head, and his father fell to the floor.

He knew more infected were in the house but he didn't care. He grabbed a saw off the shelf and ran back inside, filled with raw and unparalleled rage. And that's when he saw them. Les, Hannah and Amanda standing beside the kitchen island. Amanda's side was covered in blood. She held onto her arm tightly. Hannah looked at him and started crying. Les dangled the Jeep keys from a limp hand. They had come in through the front entrance. There hadn't been any infected after all—other than his own family.

Austin shut the garage door, leaned on it. "What happened to you guys?"

"You were right," Les said. "It was overrun."

"Only three of you?"

"There were nine when we left."

Hannah said, "The guy in the wheelchair never even got onto the roof."

Les said, "Are you okay?"

"Mom and dad are dead."

The words were numbing. Surreal. Unbelievable.

Austin went past them into the living room, sat down on the leather sofa facing the fireplace. Listened to the rain outside.

Les came in. "Austin..."

He looked up at him. "Want to play some pool?"

5:00 PM

The human mind is endowed with a bitter hardening, a shell encasement, to protect the softer emotions in moments of trauma. On any day prior to this, Austin would have been a miserable wreck. But in that moment sitting on the sofa in the living room, he felt absolutely nothing. A numbness enveloped him and he thought of absolutely nothing as he stared forward to the windows. Les stood at the end of the sofa with his eyes upon Austin's nondescript features. Austin looked over at him and said, "Stay away from the windows." He could hear Hannah and Amanda moving about in the kitchen, digging through the cupboards. Austin just stared at the windows. His mom always opened the blinds in the morning to let in the sun and the songs of the birds. Spring had come. He always loved spring. The beautiful colors and the blossoming trees and all that is sacred coming to life. And then spring became summer in its fullness, and summer dwindled with the advent of autumn. Trees went bare. Leaves crinkled and cracked and fell with their throbbing veins to be trampled underfoot and blown in the stiff stale wind. The grass browned and the world died. Winter. A time of mourning, shivering in the cold, longing and desiring the return of vibrancy and life. And then spring. Cooling and refreshing and cleansing rain. And then Austin said, "Is this the first flower opening?"

Les eyed him. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

He wondered if this were the end.

The apocalypse.

"Austin!" Hannah hollered. "Do you have any bandages? Any gauze?"

He stood, divorcing himself from the thoughts. He went past Les, told him, "Close and lock all the windows. Draw the blinds. Lock the doors. Don't go downstairs." He didn't tell him why. He went into the kitchen and made sure the garage door was locked. Les went to the front door and locked it. In the

kitchen Amanda sat on the kitchen island, clasping a hand over her arm. Faint trails of blood echoed between her fingers. Her face a contorted mask of pain. Several soiled towels lied next to her, clothed in blood.

Hannah put another towel on her arm and said to Les, "We need something permanents. We're running out of towels."

"Did her artery get cut?" he asked.

"It hurts," Amanda said.

He remembered the television. The bites were what kill you. And transform you. He looked her in the eyes. "How'd you get hurt? Did you get bitten?"

A moment of silence.

She said, "No. I got hurt getting in the Jeep."

"How did it happen?"

Hannah snapped, "Bandages, Austin."

He nodded in a daze. Nothing made sense anymore. He was getting used to it. The stress and anxiety and sorrow clouded over him, and the world became a mist, a fog, and he felt detached. Rerunning in his mind was a tape reel replaying his father standing over Ashlie's bed, and the bloodied axe in his hands and his dad's body crumpling against the Ford truck; and he saw his mom, her eyes sinking and glowing, her tan skin burning, and he kept hearing that gunshot, over and over and over, the sound echoing, all other sounds mere murmurs, and he could see so vividly her body falling to the side and deep wells of blood splattered on the wall. It ran over and over in his mind and then he was there, standing beside her bed, the cloud lifted or at least thinned, and he stood there with his shirt covered in blood watching her sleep soundly, cuddled up in her covers, cocooned and oblivious.

Someone behind him. He didn't react. Through the reflection in Ashlie's wall-length mirror he could see Les' reflection. He looked back down at Ashlie. Les entered the room and shut the door. He locked it and walked across the room. Ashlie's Christmas lights ran the rim of her room. The dark television and her

Playstation 2 beside it. Crazy Taxi, Kingdom Hearts, The Haunted Mansion. A striped 1970s chair sat by her two-door-closet. Beside it on a table was a half-used plastic container of fake nails and glue and nail polish of various colors. Les sat in the chair and stared at the wall of Kodak pictures. Ashlie would take pictures from church events and school parties, from camps and from memories with friends, and paste them on her wall. Austin looked at the wall and saw pictures of Drake and Chad, Andrew and Les. Hannah and Amanda. Amanda was Ashlie's best friend. All the pictures were sunny, laughing. In one his father laughed with a bunch of her friends. In another his mother was fixing dinner as he emptied the dish-washer.

Les' voice cracked as he spoke in a bare whisper. "Where are the rest of them?"

"The rest of who?" Austin said, looking at him.

He paused. "You know."

He closed his eyes. "She's all. Dad is in the garage. Mom is downstairs."

"How are they?"

"Dad was sick. I took care of it." That last sentence was haunting.

"Oh."

"Mom killed herself. Dad had bitten her. I saved Ashlie before he got to her."

Les lowered his head, stared at his knees, then looked up. "Bryon?"

"There were a lot of them in the woods. I'm lucky to be here."

He said nothing.

"Thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Thanks for coming here. Being for me." He pointed to Ashlie. "And for her."

"There's no place I'd rather be, Austin."

He leaned over Ashlie as she slept. He reached to the window over her bed and locked it tight. Through the branches of the oak tree he could see columns of

parched smoke rising from the stretching suburbs and Main Street. The door across the street was thrown off its hinges and one of the windows was broken. He drew the blinds tight, wanting to close it off. Anything to forget. To play like it wasn't real. He could do it nowhere better than there, in his own home.

His sister stirred, rolled over, opened her eyes.

She looked right up at him.

His heart froze in his chest.

She mumbled, half-asleep, "Austin? What time is it?"

Les didn't move.

Austin knelt down next to her. "How are you feeling? Your sick bucket is empty."

"I feel like puking. What's that on your shirt?"

He shook his head. *Dad's blood, Ash! I killed him! I cut off his leg and then stuck an axe in his fucking head!* "We're painting the living room."

"Les?" She leaned up in bed, looked at him.

He weakly smiled at her, looked at her deep-pitied eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Helping to paint," he lied.

"I didn't know we were painting."

Austin said, "Dad's been wanting to do it for a long time."

"Where are Mom and Dad?"

He pulled the covers back over her. "Go back to sleep."

She nodded and rolled over. Her chocolate-strawberry hair splayed over the pillow.

He ran a hand through her hair.

"Scratch it," she said.

He scratched her head.

She grunted and fell asleep.

He stepped back, said to Les, "Let's go. Let her sleep."

They left the room and shut the door. Austin went into his parents' bedroom and into the walk-in closet. He rummaged between his father's work shirts and his mom's blouses, opened boxes filled with photo albums and alumni awards from college and a wedding gown and tuxedo. He finally found the box in the closet corner. A red cross covered the vinyl side. He opened it and told Les behind him, "Mom used to be a nurse. Worked in downtown South Arlington." He flipped the latch, opened it, searched for some gauze. A white bundle rolled up. He took it and left the closet. Les ducked down and grabbed some antiseptic from the box. They went back out to the hallway and down the steps. A mirror mounted on the wall reflected Austin's haggard face. Bags under his eyes. His golden blond hair ruffled and still wet from the rain. Red-brown splotches of dried blood on the gash of his forehead, dried and caked mud on his cheeks, blood on the Homer's Grocery t-shirt.

They entered the kitchen through the den.

"Give me the gauze," Hannah said.

He gave it to her.

She went to Amanda sitting on the island. "Open up the wound."

Austin stood by the pantry and watched as Amanda removed her hand. Les side-stepped in front of him, blocking his view. Amanda grimaced as Les went to her and dumped antiseptic into the wound. She said something low under her breath, looked to Hannah, who frowned. "It's okay," Les said. Harsh whispers and stale growls.

Austin moved forward, grabbed Les by the shoulder. "Move."

He numbly stepped aside as Hannah dressed the wound in gauze. Red stains dribbled onto the gauze. The cloths were soaked in blood, and a pool of blood trickled on the island counter-top. Her arm was streaked with blood as were Hannah's hands.

"How much blood has she lost?" Austin asked.

Hannah said, "She's fine. About a pint. But she'll be okay. Look. There's still color in her face."

"Not a lot."

"But it's still there. Amanda, do you feel faint?"

"Just a little bit," she said. "More tired."

"See?" Hannah said, looking over at Austin.

"Okay," he said. "Does she need sugar?"

"Food would be good."

They hadn't eaten since the cold chicken in the grocery store. And he hadn't eaten since the tuna at the police station. He went to the pantry door and opened it. A gold mine. Hannah and Les crowded behind him. Hoe-hoes and Twinkies, the strawberry pop-tarts and chocolate mini-brownies. Austin grabbed a Twinkie, a nutty-bar, and two packs of strawberry pop-tarts. Hannah went to the fridge and rummaged around, but everything was warm. She went to the freezer and opened a container of ice cream, scowled, and put it back.

Austin opened the pop-tarts and went to Amanda. "Eat this."

"The chicken made me sick," she said, shaking her head.

"You need to eat," he said.

"Fine," she said, taking the pop-tart. She ate it slowly.

He watched her for a moment and then left the kitchen and went back to the living room. He sat down on the sofa and faced the fireplace. Charcoal logs draped the inside. They'd had a fire a few nights ago. Ashlie wanted to cook hot dogs, but it was raining, so Dad had dragged fire logs from the garage and had made a fire in the fireplace. "Like camping out," he had said, "except more comfortable."

Les came out and sat in the overstuffed leather chair. He began eating a sandwich.

"Isn't the cheese and turkey warm?" Austin asked.

"They're warm when I pack my lunch."

Les ate. Hannah and Amanda talked in the kitchen, using low voices. His mom used to call them "inside voices."

Les asked, "When did you get here?"

"A few minutes before you."

"What took so long?"

"It wasn't a straight shot," Austin said. He ate his pop-tarts and nutty-bars and told him of the chase to the police station, the horrors there. And he told him of the holocaust at North Park, the vicious chase up St. James, where Chelsie's dad was consumed, and how he had made the frantic escape to his own house, crawling through the doggy-door to safety. And he didn't forget to mention the nightmare he encountered downstairs and the creature salivating over his little sister. Could all this have happened? It seemed so surreal. "I woke up this morning at six-o'clock," he told Les. "Everything's changed." He went quiet and stared out the window at the flashes of lightning bleeding between the blinds in the deepening dusk and heard the rain on the windows and thudding on the roof. Then he looked over at Les and asked him what had happened at the grocery store.

Les looked at him while he talked, though sometimes his eyes would drift over his shoulders into the kitchen. "Maybe twenty minutes after you left... There was that diabetic. He started going into a coma or shock or whatever it is that diabetics do. I don't know. He needed some sugar. No one had any food, so we decided he could venture down into the store if he really wanted. But he couldn't. He was weak. Could barely stand. So one of the other guys, a construction worker, volunteered. We let him out and he went down through the meat lockers into the store. We locked the door and watched from the windows. By then the people down there—the sick ones—had left the store. He grabbed some food and was making his way back when one came out of the baler room. He tried to fight him off, but he got bit really bad in the neck. He was holding his neck in one hand and with another swinging a wine bottle. Struck the sick man in the face. Right through the eye. Killed him. He came back to the door, and they were about to open it, but we told them not to. He'd been bitten, we told them. That's a... death sentence. In most cases. And this was really bad. He was bleeding all over the place. We told him to go into the meat

department, get some bandages there, but he was being irrational. It was the sickness. His personality was changing. Mood swings. He got angry. Started pounding on the door. We thought he was going to get in. Then it all stopped. Silence.”

Hannah and Amanda were listening. Hannah was trying to feed her a banana.

Les stared into space, reliving the moment in his mind, replaying it like a game announcer. “We all just stared at each other. Then out of nowhere was a large sound, a big whack and thud. He started hitting the door. One of your co-workers, Mary I think, was standing by the door, asking if he was okay. Of course he didn’t answer. He had turned. The door began to splinter. We were packed like sardines. I opened the hatch to the roof, and we started crawling through. It turned into a stampede. People trying to get out. The lady with the baby... Her baby was trampled. No one cared.” A tear in his eye. “I was one of the last people out safe. The construction worker got in right after I got out, and the guy behind me was pulled down by his legs. And there was that diabetic who couldn’t do anything. And the guy in the wheelchair. And the guy in the wheelchair, the whole time—*the whole time*—he just sat there and watched, disinterested. Then the infected went off on him, and he just let it come. Resigned to his fate, I guess.”

“Made his peace with God,” Hannah said.

“Something like that. And this guy with diabetes, he was just screaming. Couldn’t move a muscle. Really bad diabetic. We heard his screams when we were on the rooftop. And then he wasn’t screaming anymore. But his screams had drawn the infected out from the rest of Clearcreek Plaza, all the way across State Route 73, and even out of Olde Towne. We thought we could handle it on the roof, but they were able to climb on top of a truck and onto the roof. One of the women with us vaulted off the roof and landed on the pavement and broke her leg. She was trying to crawl across the parking lot when they got her. The rest of found a loading truck at the back and jumped on it and went across the cab and down to the ground. We got to the Jeep. There were six of us, packed

all tight. We got out of there. Onto the main road. We hit a few infected. You've got bloody spots on the fender."

"Good," Austin said.

"They can't keep up with the Jeep. It's too fast—by the time they hear it, we're gone. So we made it okay to Clearcreek-Franklin, but that road was hemmed off by police barricades. So we went left to Tractor Supply, past the pizza parlor, then into the parking lot of Wal-Mart, China Garden, Kroger. That strip there. Two of the three other people with us wanted out there. They said Wal-Mart was a safe bet. It had food and guns and blankets. So I stopped and told them to hurry the hell up. They got out and shut their doors. Hannah was riding shotgun and she yelled and right outside her window there was this girl, maybe six or seven. Her jaw was all bloodied up with the skin ripped off and shredded muscle dangling from her mouth and her tongue was swollen. She pressed her palms against the window. We're talking Pretty Pretty Princess gone to hell. I got out of there as fast as we could. Ran over her foot. The others had gotten into Wal-Mart and locked the doors before she could chase them."

"Wal-Mart," Austin mused. "Sounds pretty safe."

"No," Hannah said. "All the supermarkets and places are probably flooded by the sickos. If you want to be safe, go somewhere small. Like a house. Like *here*."

Les said, "All of lower Clearcreek was a madhouse. There were infected in the streets. Walking around with no purpose. Accidents all over. I don't think we saw a single living soul. There were bloody spots on the ground where people fell and then got back up again. We went up that one road with the coffee shop and the tire place and the hotel. Most of the apartments past there were just smoking rubble. We took one of the back-roads through the countryside. There aren't many of them out there. I mean, it was dark, and storming, but we didn't see any of them. You know. That one road. That girl you liked back in junior high—Claire?—lived on that road. But we didn't see any of them." He paused for a moment. "I was thinking, if we could get out

there, into the countryside... The infected seem to stay in urban areas. Maybe we can go to the country, into the woods or something. Get away from all this."

"The North Park woods were—"

"North Park woods is a *tree line*. I'm talking farmland. I'm talking about where the infected won't wander. Where there's not any food."

"You mean 'people' by 'food.'"

"It's grotesque. But you know it's worth a shot."

"What happens when food runs out here, in suburbia? What then?"

"You're thinking they'll migrate into the countryside."

"Yeah."

"That probably won't be for a while."

"How do you expect to get there? Drive?"

"We have the Jeep."

"I was on three quarters of a tank when I went to school. But the gas is leaking. It was a feather above a quarter when we got to Homer's. And unless you have the genius idea of stopping at a gas station to take a spare few minutes to refuel while being attacked on every side, sure, good plan."

"Do you have any gasoline in the garage?"

"Yeah. For the mower. Let's ride *that* into the countryside."

Les bit his lip. "So what's your plan, if mine stinks like shit?"

"I don't have one," he said calmly. "Every time we make a plan, it fails."

"So your plan is to just go with the flow?"

"Stay here. Hole up. Welcome to the Alamo."

"We don't have food."

"More here than in the countryside."

"I don't want to sit here and wait to die and rot."

"You'd rather die and rot outside?"

"How can you just... give up so quickly?"

"Thoreau said, 'Men live quiet lives of desperation.' Or something like that."

"What does that have to do with us trying to survive?"

"It has nothing to do it. But if we run on hot air, we're going to be roaming the streets, too, purple-faced and salivating like dogs."

"This house isn't impregnable."

"We aren't up against an elite army. We're up against animals. This place is fine."

"For now. But what about tomorrow? Or the day after that?"

"Honestly? I suspect we won't live that long no matter what plan we have. So relax. Enjoy yourself. Shoot some pool."

Amanda hopped down from the countertop and walked past them. Her arm was bandaged up and holding. She seemed to be gaining color in the face. "I'm taking a shower. Does the water still work?"

"Water doesn't run on electricity," Austin said.

Hannah sat down on the sofa beside him. "Austin. Do you have any candles and matches for when it gets dark?"

"No," Les said. "Let's not do that. They'll see the light from the windows, even though the blinds are drawn. They might flock to light like moths."

The shower turned on. Commotion upstairs as Amanda got in. The shower door slid shut. Les asked, "Les, you didn't tell me how Amanda got her cut. It looked pretty bad."

Hannah glanced over at Les, and he said, "While we were riving past the burnt-out apartment buildings, the Jeep's trunk door opened. Renee, this one girl, she was in the back. Went right out. Just then some infected were coming from an embankment and ditch. We didn't stop for Renee. Call me cold-blooded, but things change fast. The infected got her. Hannah yelled at Amanda to shut the back door. We were going over a hill when she went back and began to shut it. Right as we crested the hill, there was an overturned truck in the middle of the road with this half-eaten body right on the cab. I swerved to avoid hitting it and went into the ditch. She flopped out the back, landed in the weeds. I stopped the Jeep. Hannah got her. She was pretty banged up. They got back in and I pulled out of the ditch and we were on our way."

"I thought she banged it getting *into* the Jeep?" he asked. "That's what she told me."

Les and Hannah were quiet.

Hannah said, "She's in half-shock."

"Then should she be in the shower with the warm water?"

"She should be fine."

"If we lose her to shock, I'll kill myself," Austin said.

He went upstairs and tried to get into the shower. The knob rattled. Les and Hannah stood at the bottom of the stairs, in the parlor. Austin leaned his ear against the door. "Amanda?" Nothing. He shouted: "Amanda!" A dim echo from the bathroom. "How are you feeling?" he said. "You shouldn't be getting the bandages wet!"

Hannah walked up the steps. "She's okay, Austin. Go relax."

He went down the stairwell past Les and downstairs. He stood before the door leading to the family room and took a deep breath and pushed it open. He looked away from his mom and bent down and picked up the pistol lying next to her cold hand. He left the room and left the door open and put the gun in the hem of his jeans and draped his shirt over it and went back upstairs, past Les, past Hannah, and into his room. He shut the door. He went to his bed and lifted one of the pillows and put it underneath. He changed shirts, throwing the bloody one into the laundry heap, and put on his Nautica long-sleeve. The storm had died down and now there was only the rain and he sat down on his bed and looked about the shadow-laden room. Dinosaur paintings on the walls. A rack of dinosaur books on his bookcase. The fish tank with the swimming fish. Oblivious, uncaring. He lied down onto the covers. He closed his eyes, overcome with exhaustion. He stared at the dripped plaster of the ceiling, frozen in place. So tired he couldn't sleep. Insomnia. He got up from the bed and changed his pants and boxers and put on new socks. He opened the door and went into the hallway.

Hannah was knocking on the bathroom door. "Amanda? Are you okay?"

He heard vomiting from the other side. "It's the shock," he guessed.

"Don't go back into the shower," Hannah said through the door. "Okay? You don't want to pass out."

A muffled reply: "I won't."

He said, "Never should've let her go."

"What are you puking up?" Hannah said. "Bile or blood? Both?"

"It's just... green," Amanda said.

"Hannah," Austin said, "you can't just—"

She glared at him. "I can deal with this, Austin. You're not a fucking doctor."

"And you are?" he snapped.

She thumbed down the steps.

He shrugged and went down to find Les peeking out the window.

"Anything exciting out there?" he asked.

"The road is barren. Completely empty. Has been for about fifteen minutes."

"Okay."

"I think things are quieting down."

"Don't you mean survivors are dwindling?"

"Do you think there are anymore survivors?" he asked, abandoning the window.

"Yeah," Austin said. "Definitely. The world isn't going to fall in a few hours."

"Any survivors here in Tamarack?"

"I'm sure."

"We should try to hook up with them."

"That's the dumbest idea you've ever had."

Austin and Les looked up the stairwell at Hannah. She had stepped away from the door, ashen-faced. Austin ran up the steps with Les behind him. He shook

the knob. Snarled to Hannah, "She'd better not have been in the shower. She could drown." He tried to open the door but it was locked from the other side. "We have a key somewhere. I think it's in my parents' room..." He ran into their room and frantically searched, yanking out drawers and boxes and containers filled with watches and dice and tic-tacs. Some keys to the house, car, truck. He found the key and ran back to the bathroom. He put it in the keyhole and began to turn it when Hannah grabbed his hand. "What?" he said.

"Don't do that," she said quietly.

"What?"

"Don't open the door," she said again, looking at Les, who was quiet.

"Do you *want* her to die?" Austin said.

"She's already dead," Hannah said.

"You can't know that. She could just be knocked out. Shit."

"Austin..."

Les spoke up: "She didn't fall out into the ditch."

He looked at him. "What?"

"We never even hit a ditch."

He didn't say anything for a moment.

Les said, "She was bitten."

He understood the ashen color in their faces. The deep fear in their eyes. He abandoned the key in the job and went into his room and lifted the pillow. The polished gun stared at him with its crooked smirk. One bullet. He picked it up and walked back to the bathroom. Now Les had a knife. He saw the gun and his eyes hardened and he said, "Drop it, Austin."

"We have no choice."

"She's locked in. She can't get out. She's not strong. She's skinny and weak."

Hannah said, "Austin, please. Let's just... wait."

"For what? Wait for what, Hannah?"

"It wasn't a bad bite, it was a small one..."

"You remember the TV. A bite is a death sentence. Size doesn't matter."

They didn't say anything.

"How could you let her in here?" Austin said. "You should've abandoned her the moment she was bitten."

"Would you have?" Hannah said.

Les mocked, "He killed his own father. He wouldn't have trouble with her."

"I just don't want to die," he said.

Les stepped close, brandishing the knife. "Don't open the door, Austin."

Hannah felt pinned between them. She ducked against the wall. "Guys. Please."

Austin pointed the gun at Les. "No. You put down the knife. I'm not the one who let the serial murderer into the house."

"Austin," Hannah pleaded, "she's just a *girl*. It's Amanda! She's like your sister."

"Not anymore. Amanda's gone. She's gone."

The door shook.

Everyone stared at the cheap oak wood. It vibrated again. Something hitting it. Hannah's legs went weak and she took off into Austin's room. The two boys stared at each other, threatening the other to move. The door bubbled outward, flexed back into place. Again. And again.

Austin looked at the door. "Amanda. Tell us something. Say something."

A low, guttural growl. An otherworldly utterance.

He stepped towards the door.

Les said, "Don't open it, Austin."

"I'm not."

He raised the gun and fired into the door.

The gunshot screamed through the house, making his ears ring, but in an instant the echo was a memory. On the other side of the door was a *thump!*, a

crinkling sound, and silence. Hannah crying in his room. He stared at the door, a small hole drilled through the varnished wood.

"She's gone," Les said, half-relieved. "You killed her. You fucking shot her."

"You have to pierce the head," Austin said. "I shot her in the chest."

"How do you know?"

"I aimed low. To hit her in the chest. Less chance of me missing."

"Oh."

"Give me your knife."

"No way. You don't need to open the door."

He swung the gun around, pointed it at his best friend. "Give me the knife, Les." His eyes were wide and maniacal. Les swallowed and tossed the knife at him. He caught it by the blade, almost cutting his fingers. He flipped it up and grabbed the handle. He tossed the gun to Les, who jumped out of the way. The gun clattered on the tiled parlor floor and came to a stop against the wall. Austin took the key in his hand and twisted it in the lock. He kicked the door open with his heel and, holding the knife barred, leapt inside.

Blood had been splattered all over the mirror, and the bullet had fragmented most of the mirror into a webbed masterpiece. He saw his own horrid reflection in the mirror before looking down to Amanda's naked body, sick and twisted, purple and ghastly. A skeleton of death. She opened her jaws, hollered in rage. She leapt up from her position between the toilet and bathtub. The bullet wound in her breast continued to bleed. He ducked out of the way and sliced at her with the knife, carving a deep gash on her upper arm. Blood crawled down her mottled skin. He elbowed her hard in the face and broke her nose. She swung her head back and forth, shrieking, and she turned, the blood from her nose coursing in rivulets around her lips and dripping down like the refuse of a drunken vampire. He drove the tip of the blade into her eye. She screeched once and fell against him. Her body became so heavy. He side-stepped and let her

fall to the floor, her head banging listlessly against the rim of the tub. Blood gurgled onto the shower curtain.

He left the room, clothes only partially stained with blood.

Hannah stood by Ashlie's door, staring with a colorless face.

Les held the gun weakly in his hands. "It's empty," he said.

Austin looked between them both. "Endanger the only family I have like this again, and I swear I'll take your lives."

August 2025

At daybreak a C-130 lands in what had at one time been Ketchikan International Airport. The man stands in the shadow of a hangar with the old and empty terminal buildings far beyond. The airport is located across the channel from the actual town, and as he had waited he kept looking beyond the fence at the lights in town, and he couldn't see his home but he imagined that he could, and he imagined her lying in bed, awake and alone. She hadn't taken the news lightly, had gotten upset and yelled and screamed, but it wasn't his decision, he told her was being taken against his will, which was true; but he had been in Ketchikan for more years than he could count. The cold and the rain and the darkness in winter had been beautiful at the beginning, peaceful and serene; but now it felt like a prison, a cold and dark and rainy prison, and he wished to leave it, if but for a moment. Now he walks across the pavement towards the C-130 and the ramp is lowered and several soldiers come down and greet him and they shake hands and one of them takes his single duffel bag and they go inside. They sit along the refurbished fuselage which is now made to carry only passengers. The airplane takes off and the town disappears and he watches through one of the windows and everything goes dark and then they are through the clouds and the brilliant sun is rising to the east with a carpet of rolling rainclouds beneath it. He asks if one of them has a cigarette and one of them does and they smoke in the silence and the man asks how long until they get there and the soldier tells him at least twenty hours, so he closes his eyes and leans his head against the window and falls asleep.

The man is awakened and the sun is coming vibrantly through the window. He squints and turns away and rubs his eyes and asks how long it's been. One of the soldiers is sleeping and the other is playing solitaire on the floor. The one with the cards looks up and says, "Four hours. Still a ways to go, yet." The man nods and looks out the window. Far below are jagged mountains rimmed with dense forests. In one of the mountain valleys the grass is greener and the trees are smaller and the man wonders if there had been a forest fire and then he

realizes that he's looking at what had once been a town but which has now been completely overtaken by nature.

The soldier with the cards stands and goes to the window and looks out and says, "Aspen. You ever been?"

The man shakes his head, *No*.

"It's nice. I went there with my fiancé a while back. You know. Before the plague. But now." He raps on the window, smirks. "I'll bet our hotel isn't even standing anymore. And if it is, it'd be inhabited by wolves. It's funny to think about, isn't it? Nature owns everything now. We tried to dominate it, but we couldn't. We failed. Everyone bitched and moaned. You know. All those Green Earth types. The tree-huggers. They thought we were destroying nature. But, no, nature was poised, ready to pounce, at the first breath of our absence. Maybe it's judgment for all the carbons we sent into the atmosphere?"

He falls asleep again and then is awakened as the plane shudders and rocks. He blinks in the harsh light and all the soldiers are awake at the windows. He wonders what they're looking at when the plane shakes again, and he hears it. "Thunder?" he says aloud. He turns in his seat and looks out the window. Far below are miles upon miles of plains, and far off in the distance is what looks to be a city. There is a distant flash of light and then maybe a quarter mile off comes an explosion. The shockwaves ripple into the plane. "Are they shooting at us?" he gawks.

One of the soldiers turns and says, "Rebels. Renegades. They formed their own communities during the outbreak. Haven't given up their authority. In their minds, *they* are the governments. They've forgotten that they were once Americans, and now that our government is back up and running... Well, they don't want to go back to being *ruled* by anybody."

Another explosion and the plane shakes.

"Don't worry," the soldiers says, seeing the paleness in the man's face. "Their missiles are out-of-range. And they're lousy shots, too. They don't even know how to work the equipment to make them guide right."

It is already dark by the time the plane lands, somewhere in northern Kentucky. The man takes his duffel bag and gets off the plane. High fences surround the entire military compound. Several armed trucks are parked off to the side, and helicopters sit idly by. Another plane takes off. A soldier comes up to him and takes his bag and says, "Welcome to Fort Mitchell. Well, the *new* Fort Mitchell, anyways. Named after the town. Cincinnati's just over these hills." He points behind him, but the lights from the compound are too bright in the man's eyes and the darkness beyond the fence too dark for him to see any hills at all. "You'll be staying here tonight. We have some quarters fixed up for you something nice. Tomorrow you'll be hitching a ride to the capital. You don't mind helicopters, do you?"

The man shakes his head, *No*.

"Ever been on a military base before?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Then you know the drill. Don't fuck around and you won't get shot."

He nods towards the fences. "Is that to keep people out or to keep people in?"

"Both. There are some renegades in the city. Cincinnati. But they don't venture down here. They're generally a peaceful bunch, but pretty territorial. We stay out of their business and they stay out of theirs. Officially, we're supposed to be doing something about it. But they have their own way of life, you know? And what are we going to do, just walk in there and tell them, 'Hey, we're the government, so you need to disband. Sure, we couldn't do shit for you twenty years ago, and we abandoned you. But all that's past us now.' We left them alone and so they survived. They have every right to exist how they're existing. Sure, one day, we'll have to do something about it. But not right now. Show you to your room?"

The man looks out at the fences. "Do you ever have any... You know."

"Not for a few months now. There was one straggler, could barely walk."

"Okay."

"Down south it's pretty awful, though. They're still all over the place. But the winters here kill them off pretty quickly. You know they're cannibalistic, right?"

"Yeah. I know."

"Should've seen it seven winters ago. We had a bad freeze. It was like the Donner Party all over again, right outside these fences. You could pity them." He smirked. "Almost."

In the morning it is hot and muggy, something the man had nearly forgotten. Alaskan summers only reach about seventy degrees tops in the interior passage. He and several soldiers board a cargo helicopter and make the long flight north. He looks out the window as they pass Cincinnati and sees that the skyscrapers are covered in vines and the windows blown out and entire ecosystems dwell within. A carpet of green covers the streets and the skyscrapers rise like ancient tombs, a cryptic Stonehenge. Many hours later they land at another military base forty minutes from the capital. They disembark and quickly load into Humvees with mounted machineguns. They pass through the gates of the fence that encircles the compound and journey north on a rugged highway and the sun is hot and the man sits cramped and sweating with the duffel bag on his knees. He looks out the windows and sees nothing but green and overgrown fields and dilapidated barns, at least the ones still standing. He falls asleep despite the heat and sees his wife and can almost feel her touch and just when she's about to kiss him he wakes up and they're pulling through a series of gates with watchtowers on either side. Heavy stone walls encircle the small town, the tops lined with crude, circled barbed wire. There are several stone walls they pass through and between the walls are small buildings and tents and soldiers moving about, guarding the town in the towers and along the ramparts. Eventually they pass through the last gate and enter into what looks like a dream-world, a world that has been all but forgotten.

"This used to be Lakeside," a soldier told him. "A small resort town. A gated community." He points to the elegant houses along the road. "People used to own these, vacation in them. Most often they rented them out. Some of them used to be little shops. You know. Selling little souvenirs. Now it's different. Sure, they're still shops. But they sell groceries and oil for the lamps, stuff like that. Only a few buildings have electricity, but we've got some engineers working on that problem. It's not feasible to have generators when all the power-plants are shut down. Look up here." The humvees turn down another road and a park comes into view on their left. "There used to be concerts here. Bike paths, a shuffleboard court. Now it's something... different." The humvees pull to a stop and the man looks out the window, concerned.

A crowd is gathered around what had at one time been a gazebo. The man imagines lovers cuddling in the twilight, families gathered with lunches and the children playing in the green grass with the calm breeze from the lake ruffling through their windswept hair. Now the gazebo's domed roof has been turned into a flat one with stairs leading up to it. Upon the roof is a scaffold, beneath it a trap-door carved into the wood. The man watches as a man wearing a black mask drapes and tightens the noose around a young woman's neck. Her eyes are cold and lifeless, a woman who has already accepted her fate. The crowd gathered says nothing as another man reads the charges. The man inside the humvee can't hear the words for the loudness of the engine. A moment later the trap-door opens and the woman's body jerks down and twitches and her legs squirm and then there is nothing but her cold and lifeless eyes still open but now embracing the fate they had already accepted. The crowd disperses and the man sees little children eating snow-cones.

He turns away and looks at the soldier, who tells him: "She was a renegade. A rebel. Sometimes they'll come up to the walls, throw grenades over, or most often Molotov cocktails. Their own way of striking out against what they perceive to be an imposition on their lives. Anarchy ensued in the last days, and they survived by banding together and creating their own

‘governments’, for lack of a better word. They view the American government as a brutal and pagan force that just wishes to emasculate them. In their mind, it’s unacceptable. We don’t go hunting for them, but when they come to us, and when they do so in violence, well... We react accordingly.” He points at the body still hanging stiff in the noose. “She’s not being hung for treason. We’re very clear about that. At this point, we don’t want to enflame an already too-political situation. It’s open enrollment for anyone who wants to... What’s the right word?... ‘re-enlist’ as an American citizen. We’re not forcing anyone to do so. Only those who sign the papers are held responsible for their actions as American citizens. She considers herself a member of the Eagle Party. It’s just another ‘government’ out there, based out of someplace in Illinois, if I’m not mistaken. But she’s being hung because she attacked a convoy delivering corn to the compound. She killed three people and injured seven more. It may be brutal, but it has to be done. We must show the people that even though the American government is... new... we’re strong and can be trusted to protect.”

The humvees park along a small road beside the shore of Lake Erie. The man gets out and stretches his legs and looks back towards the park and can see them taking down the woman’s body. He guesses she was 23 or 24 years old. He can’t remember when he was that young. He moves out to the rocks along the shore and looks out and can see several boats patrolling. He moves through the spongy grass and sweats in the heat—he certainly doesn’t miss Ohio summers—and then the soldiers find him and ask him to follow them. He asks where they’re going but they don’t answer.

They walk down a crowded street with men, women and children moving to-and-fro. A game of basketball in an alley. A concert hall where a band is practicing. They come to a barricade and the soldiers flash papers and the man shows his identification as a refugee from Ketchikan and the guards ask what he’s doing in Lakeside and the soldiers just hurry him along. Along either side of the road are different buildings with flags flying. The man sees the flags of

Canada, England, Russia, and perhaps Germany, though he can't be sure. *Embassies*. Foreign government agencies. He knew other governments existed, that America wasn't the only one to survive—albeit in a weaker state—but he hadn't known of the cooperation hinted at here. Eventually they come to a small building with a portico and hanging flowers and they go onto the porch and they go through into a small parlor. There is the sound of singing, an old CD, and several candles burn. A man enters from another room and the soldiers salute. The man awkwardly drops his bags and does the same. The newcomer laughs and takes the man's hand and says, "I'm Doctor Arlan Hamilton. The Vice President of the United States of America. Please come with me."

The vice president's office is immaculate. Books on the shelves, photographs hung along the walls. No windows. Several candles and lanterns burn, spreading their eerie light into the room. The man wonders why there's no electricity here, and then he realizes, *Of course. Electricity is limited, and they're probably siphoning it all to the perimeter. The defenses*. The vice president beckons him to sit down and he does so in an overstuffed leather chair marked with cigar burns. The vice president takes his seat behind the sturdy oak desk with eagle-clawed legs and he rifles through a manila envelope and pulls out a file. He flips it open and thumbs through several white pages lined with type-written lettering. He sighs and shuts the envelope and reaches across his desk and opens a small box and pulls out two cigars. He offers one to the man but the man just shakes his head. The vice president puts one back and lights the other for himself. The odor is sweet and almost nauseating, the tobacco probably from some government installation in Kentucky or Virginia. The man knows that cigarettes are manufactured only in a few places, they're like currency; the one who wields tobacco wields power. The smoke rises to the ceiling and the vice president asks, "You're Mr. Hastings, correct?"

The man nods. "Yes, that's correct."

"You changed your name... Shortly after the plague."

"That's right."

"But we don't have your original name on record."

"I had it erased. That person's dead."

The vice president is surprised at the stoicism and detachment in the man's words. "Okay, Mr. Hastings. You're probably wondering why you've been called here, correct? And called here against your will?"

"The question has crossed my mind."

"You grew up around here, did you not? About an hour north of the Ohio River?"

Hastings winces, nods. "Yes."

"You lived in Ohio when it all went down. Somehow you managed to get to the west coast, and you were found... correct me if I'm wrong... by a United States Coast Guard helicopter, five hundred miles out in the open water. You were unconscious, dehydrated, on the verge of death. You were air-lifted to a navy cruise ship and received medical treatment, then relocated to a floating refugee camp on the battleship C. Hester. You were there for nearly six months before you joined up with a team that was commissioned to go back onto the continent and carve out living spaces, immobile refugee camps, right amidst the thick of things. That was how you ended up in Alaska, doing recon work for settlements. The first settlement was in Juneau, but you didn't live there, were offered the firm position but refused. The next settlement was Ketchikan, and by that time you were willing to settle down. You were one of the first to settle there, and you showed all the refugees the ropes. Explained how it all worked, the perimeters, gave them all the rules. You didn't enforce them—that's where the government came into play—but you were foundational in the settlement's establishment. And while you were there, you got married. A schoolteacher, if I'm correct, or at least that's what she became. She was in college when the plague hit. You've remained in Ketchikan your entire life, doing more reconnaissance work for the government, but not for settlements—just trying to find supplies. Have I missed anything?"

Hastings shakes his head, *No*.

“Okay. Good. Now. You’re in Lakeside, the new capital. We would’ve stayed in the D.C. area, but the renegade activity is too hot, and it’s not a central location when, well, let’s be honest, centrality is a big issue. Here, we’re about an equal distance from all the large renovated cities. Centrality is key when there are no telephones, no internet, no cell phones, no damned satellites. Maybe we could send someone up there to get the satellites going again, but the fact of the matter is, the only working space shuttle—thanks to the brilliance of N.A.S.A.—is already *up* there, albeit it with three dead guys—one might be a woman, I’m not sure—in the cockpit.” He manages a quiet chuckle, which Hastings doesn’t acknowledge. The vice president clears his throat and continues. “After the first two months of the outbreak, there were only 3.7 million survivors, mostly military personnel. There were lots of refugees in the government’s care, to be sure—but there were a *lot* more people still stranded and alone. Most of them died. Ran out of supplies, their holdouts weren’t secure, committed suicide out of despair and hopelessness, whatever. Some of them formed anarchist groups, to which they swear great loyalty even when their own government demands they submit to the ruling authorities. Those anarchists who are caught, well, we hang and quarter them, and pose them as threats to others who don’t wish to submit their loyalties to their government when the nail comes to the head. Most of the survivors are from the north, such as northern Alaska and Canada, Yukon territory, the like, where the disease’s spread was slower, and where there weren’t as many people. The coasts had a lot of survivors, too, due to the fact that—as you know—the infected couldn’t—or wouldn’t—touch the water, and those on the coasts fled out to sea. Let me tell you, Hawaii was the place to be. Did you know there were only *three hundred* casualties for the entire island chain? Only *three hundred*, damn it! It’s because by the time the first infections were spreading there—we think it was through an airplane landing, but no one’s sure—the people knew about it. By the time you were on that boat in the Pacific, Hawaii still remained untouched! Another reason to live in the tropics, I guess—as long as it’s not Florida. God. We’re still cleaning up shit down there.”

Hastings looks towards the door, unsure of what to do.

The vice president leans forward. "3.7 million survivors after the first month, Mr. Hastings. And you know how many we have now? Nearly triple that. It's because people are doing what people have always done to cope. They're fucking. And you know what happens when you fill a hole with something? A baby's born. We're reproducing like wildfire, making China look like an amateur when it comes to the sport. Two-thirds of the people who are alive today didn't experience what happened, and they've lived in refugee camps far and removed from the horrors of the outside world, horrors that are disappearing. The word 'zombie' doesn't register for them like it does for us. Oh, I had my own experiences with the infected. I was deployed in Turkey when it all went down. We had them banging down the gates of our air force base, and only a few of us managed to escape, and we touched down somewhere in Germany and spent six years running around, trying to survive. We lost a lot of good men. Germany's pretty small for its population, and when nearly ninety-eight percent of the population has become a murderous hoard... Those anarchists don't have shit on me. I survived, and our government wasn't there to help, but not because it didn't care but because *it wasn't able to do what we wanted it to do*. My loyalties lie with America. Where do yours lie?"

Mr. Hastings sits quietly.

"Well?"

"Oh? Oh, I thought it was a rhetorical—"

"Where do your loyalties lie, Mr. Hastings?"

With my wife. "With the United States of America," he says.

"Good." The vice president stands and walks around his desk, the cigar burning between clenched fingers. "I'm sure you've heard or read the doctor's reports. Well, the scientists' reports. No one knew what the hell this thing was when it started. Within a year, we knew. It was H5N1. Avian flu. A mutated strain. In its first form, it was a non-psychotic in birds. In its second mutation, it was psychotic to birds. Birds started going crazy, started going psycho. You may remember it. It was like Alfred Hitchcock's movie fleshed-out in real life.

Eventually the strain killed the birds. By the time of its third mutation, it was psychotic to humans, and it infected humankind by radiating outwards from bird-to-man contact, then man-to-man contact. And this strain, it didn't eventually kill you. *It kept you going.* And we're not quite sure how, yet. A strain that possesses the body so well that it keeps it going even when bodily functions—like the heartbeat—have ceased? It's fucking wild. But there are frogs that can live for decades encased in ice, and I hear there are insects that can live for years without their heads. All of our presuppositions about human anatomy and the resilience of the body have been torn to pieces, and we're still ruffling through the waste-basket trying to see where, throughout the history of science, we fucked up. But that's a study better reserved for scientists, not mere... politicians... like myself." He is quiet for a moment, turn, looks at Mr. Hastings, smiles. "Everyone flipped shit about H1N1. Swine flu. It was a pussy."

Hastings bites his lip, doesn't know whether he is to speak.

The vice president eyes him. "You say you're loyal to our government?"

A knot forms in his stomach. That question again. He fears what might come next, but he has seen what they do to those who are disloyal—and for a moment he wonders if it weren't staged, an execution timed directly for his arrival, so he would have something to chew on while making a decision regarding whatever he is here for—and he says, "Absolutely," though the shakiness in his voice, he fears, betrays him.

"You've been chosen with 300 other survivors from the initial outbreak. You've been chosen because your experiences are significant to the memory of this event. I've read some of the initial interviews with you, at the refugee camps, when they were working through trying to figure out where to put people. It's quite a story. You traveled across over half the continent in a period of 36 hours with zombies nipping at your heels the entire way. The things you must have seen! And that's why you've been chosen—with 299 others. You have been chosen to write your memoirs, so no one ever forgets this moment in history."

He feels relief flood through his veins and relaxes a bit in the chair. The vice president continues, "Do you remember the Holocaust? Of course you do. But you *don't*. You know the facts. You know about Hitler, the murder of six million Jews, so on and so forth. But *facts* aren't *memories*. They don't convey the same information nor deliver the same impact. You can know about gas chambers, but it won't affect you until you're standing amidst grown and naked men sobbing at their irresistible fates. If you don't feel their bodies against you, if your eardrums don't burst with their screaming, if you can't smell that awful stench of the poison and feel your body tensing up and freezing in the pitch blackness... You see? And, to be sure, we cannot give people memories. It's impossible. But we can give them *stories* so that they won't forget. And if we don't do this, then you know what will happen? This will be but another moment in history, another page in a textbook. Movies will be made about it, and eventually those movies will be *comedies*. Comedies will be made and comedians will make sport of it. Books will be written that analyze it like some sort of specimen, but these books can't capture what it was really *like*. Billions died in 2004, far more than in the holocaust—but that doesn't mean it will be remembered. Yes, remembered—but not *really* remembered, the kind of remembering that moves the heart. In the memory of the fallen, your experiences—*our* experiences—must be recorded. Narratives *must* be written, so that no one can ever too easily forget."

Hastings feels as if the man's words have been rehearsed, but he doesn't care. "When? Where?" is all he asks.

The vice president, secure in the man's decision to commit, walks back around his desk and sits down and ashes the cigar in an ashtray. "You'll be taken to Key West. Down in Florida. Our southernmost military base. There's a resort there. A beautiful view of the ocean. It will be like a vacation. It's really beautiful, I've been there myself. You'll spend a week there writing your memoirs, writing your memories. At least three hundred pages worth. We're

not going cheap here. The others are already down there, have been for two days. You're the last. Your residence in Alaska hasn't helped the situation, getting you here and everything. It's like the fucking Civil War days, when carrying mail took weeks. No, a cargo plane can do it in a period of 48 hours, but you get my point." He stubs out the cigar and takes up the envelope, then stamps it. "I'm glad you've decided to do this, Mr. Hastings. Because, really, you have no choice. You *are* an American citizen, and your nation is calling on you. Consider this a draft, your weapon being the pen in your hand rather than a sword."

"Will my wife be informed of my whereabouts?"

"She will not just be informed, Mr. Hastings. She will be there."

The man blinks. "What?"

"She's on her way right now. There was a fuck-up with the post office, you only got one of two letters we sent you. One was specifically for you, the other was an invitation for her to come along. I'm sure she's on her way right now, though we won't know until tomorrow. Like I said: Civil War era. You see, Mr. Hastings, writing memoirs of this... time... in your life can be... stressful. And we want your wife to be there, to comfort you and encourage you and support you if need be. We're not like the Egyptians, cruel task-masters lording over you. We want you to write your memoirs, but we want you to enjoy your time in Key West. It's beautiful there, after all, and the two of you can lie on the beach and watch the sunset every night. How does that sound?"

"Good," Mr. Hastings says, his eyes glowering.

"Good? I would have expected more... enthusiasm."

"Great," he says. "It sounds great."

The vice president's brows rise. "You're concerned?"

"No. It's fine. I mean, it's great. It's great. Thanks."

MEDIUS:
The Second Twelve Hours

April 23, 2004 Friday
to
April 24, 2004 Saturday

6:00 PM

The awkward silence is penetrated by the sound of footsteps from Ashlie's bedroom. Austin walks past Les and Hannah and stoops next to her door. "Ashlie?" he says, softly, as if not wanting to disturb her sleep. But he knew she was awake. There came no response. Only moving within. A moment later and he had a horrible vision: Ashlie one of them, a soft bite in her arm. *That's why she's been sick since last night.* "Ashlie?" His voice quivered. Les and Hannah shot each other worrisome glances.

And then her voice returned, boomeranging into relief.

"What was that noise?" she asked.

"Did we wake you up? I'm sorry... Les dropped the paint bucket."

"That was a loud noise," she said from the other side of the door.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm getting dressed," she said. "I feel a lot better. I'm not *puking* anymore."

Les and Hannah's faces went pale.

"Actually," Austin said through the door, "Mom wants you to stay in bed."

"Why? I'm okay."

He heard her opening the closet doors in her room, rattling the clothes hangers.

"Mom says you have the flu, and if you start moving, it'll jump back."

"Mom thinks because she was a nurse a long time ago she knows what she's talking about."

The words returned that awful memory. The gun to her head. That hideous, ungodly voice: *Get away from me.* Les shook his head. Hannah made X marks across her throat. "Ashlie..."

"I'll talk to her in a minute."

"She can't talk." *Because she's fucking dead.* "She's fixing supper."

"What's for supper?" Ashlie asked.

"Steak and potatoes." He should've said something like green bean casserole. She hated that. But she really liked steak.

"Can I fix the potatoes?" Ashlie asked. She always made the best potatoes. Creamy and chunky and blasted with butter.

"No. I'm doing them. Mom doesn't want you getting germs all over the food."

"I feel better."

"But you still have germs. Go back to bed."

She shut the closet doors. Ruffling of covers. "*I am* feeling a little sicker," she said. Placebo affect. "But why is the power out?"

"I don't know, but AP&L is working on it."

They stood by the bedroom door until they heard her snoring.

She always fell asleep so quickly.

They crept downstairs, quietly, tiptoeing, not wanting to wake her.

At the bottom of the steps Hannah looked herself over in the mirror. "I need a shower."

Les grabbed Austin by the shoulder. "Remember when we used to fiddle around with the breakers and turn the power on and off?"

"The power's out, Les. It's not the breakers."

"It's worth a shot, isn't it?"

Hannah said, "We could *really* fix some steaks. And potatoes. Have a nice dinner."

"I don't feel like eating."

"Come on," Les said. "Let's just check them, okay?"

They opened the door to the basement level. Down the carpeted steps was the living room door, propped open. And his mom could be seen lying against the wall, eyes contorted, a hole drilled through her forehead. Dried blood on the wall. Blood had seeped from the bullet hole, traveling down her face and dripping onto her clothes. It was all so unreal, so inanimate. Austin still hung

on the verge of disbelief: everything that had happened turned his mind into a blank fog through which he could not sift. His mind had become cold, calloused, hard as stone; stiff, irresolute. Les stood breathless beside him. Hannah hovered behind them, saying nothing. They stood at the top of the steps and looked at her body.

Hannah broke the silence: "She's in heaven now."

"Yes," Austin said. He didn't know if he believed in heaven. Not anymore.

Les said, "Hannah, come down with me. Austin, you can stay up here."

"No," he said. "Let's go."

He was the first to travel down the steps, keeping his eyes from his mom's body. Les followed behind and he closed the door to the living room. In the adjoining room the pool table was dark with the pool balls nestled in the hole pockets like eggs in their nests. His dad's stereo system was up against the wall. A Beatles' CD in the disc-changer. They went into the bathroom and then through another door into the room with the heater and water tank. Behind drapes what looked to be a window was actually the breaker-box. He and Les, Chad, and Drake used to always flip the breakers off when Ashlie and all of her friends were in the showers, especially at night-time. They would always freak out. It all seemed so childish now.

Les pulled back the drapes to reveal the dark metal box. He undid the latch and swung the breaker box lid wide. The switches couldn't be seen in the dark. Les ran his hands over the switches. "Which one?"

"I don't know. Just try one."

He did. Nothing. He flipped it back and did another and another. Nothing.

"It's not working," Austin said.

"I can see that."

"I told you it wasn't going to work."

"Why do you always give up hope so fast?"

"Hope's just not in the cards right now, is it?"

"I'll keep trying."

"I'm going back upstairs. Don't break anything."

"Don't worry."

He went past the closed door to the living room and up the steps into the parlor. Hannah stood there by the front door and said, "No power. Didn't work?"

"No." He rubbed his eyes. The cuckoo clock in the kitchen ticked. Minute after minute. Hour after hour. A breath of wind. Hot air. That's what life was. Right there. No point. Just a candle in the dark to be extinguished by either a blast of cold air or a small puff from a child's lips. Hannah, futile, leaving no trace. All records gone. Heroes become legends and legends become fairy-tales. Nothing remains. So worthless, insignificant, *meaningless*. And as he stood in the parlor, he realized Hannah was talking to him. But he was seeing spots and swaying on weak legs, and he interrupted her with no knowledge of what she was saying, and he said, "I'm going to go sleep for a little while. Make sure Ashlie doesn't do anything. Let's keep her out of the loop."

"We can't keep her out of the loop forever. What if something happens to us?"

"Something? What do you mean, 'Something', Hannah?"

"What if we die. And she's left all alone."

"I won't let that happen."

"You have no control over it."

"If it's inevitable, if this place is attacked and they get in... I'll do it myself."

"You'll kill her?"

"It's better than the alternative. Those 'people' getting a hold of her. And you know it. Does it sound brutal? Too bad. Tough. The world's changed, Hannah. Everything's changed. We can't just walk around being 'nice' and 'non-confrontational' and 'smooth-talking' our way out of things anymore. We can't dream big, because there aren't any mistakes. This isn't a game. It's a life-and-death struggle, and if you question every move, every decision, you're going to be indecisive, unmoving, and you're going to be dead. Or worse. You'll be one of them."

She just stared at him, not knowing what to say.

"So don't lecture me about right conduct or morality or any other thing that seems too distempered or hurtful or contrary to Miss Manners. Miss Manners is probably eating her husband and Mr. Rogers is mutilating children. This isn't the world we woke up in this morning. It might've started in Hartford, but it's here now. It's everywhere. Global. It's the End. We're no special case. We can't run around thinking that if we get to the countryside, then everything will be fine. Because *guess what*, Hannah? In a week, we'll be dead. How and when is our decision, but better sooner than later. And if I'm going to risk turning into one of them, I'll kill myself. And I'll kill Ashlie as well."

"Austin..."

"Don't talk to me," he said, turning to go.

She stood there in the parlor, face blank, eyes seething compassion.

He spun around on the first step. "One more thing. If I ever get bitten, do me in. Pierce my brain. Because the last thing I want to be is one of these fuckers. If you get bitten, you'd better leave or take the knife to your throat, because I swear I'll kill you and Les and even Ashlie if needs be. This is no fairy-tale. All your friends—*dead*."

Tears filled her eyes.

A twinge of horrible guilt struck him numb.

His mouth had run. All the emotions—the anger and malice, the fear and desperation and depression and hopelessness—had taken over. Had controlled him like some feigned robot, and now he tried to remember why he had spoken those words.

But she turned and walked into the kitchen, head lowered. She raised a hand to her face and disappeared around the corner.

Shame crept into his throat and he, too, wanted to cry. Not for himself, nor for Les, nor even for Ashlie or his parents, not for his friends or for humanity. He wanted to cry for *her*. Those feeling he had all but forgotten, those longings and pains, those unquenchable desires to be with her, to comfort her, those feelings all came tumbling down. The load could break and he could fall. But he

was a coward, and he wouldn't go in there and apologize. *She deserves it. You needed it. You're such a jackass.*

He went upstairs as Les emerged from below. He saw Austin's befallen look and heard Hannah's wails. He turned and went into the kitchen. Austin went past Ashlie's door and into his room, shutting it softly and locking it tight. He collapsed onto the bed. He felt the weariness and shame, a burden too heavy to bear, and he closed his eyes.

And sleep overcame.

The walls are a tan and melted yellow. There is a rack of books and CDs, a CD player. It is snowing, gentle and soft. The clock ticks. A fireplace roars in the hearth, spreading seeds of warmth. On the mantle are pictures and statues, and above the mantle is a picture of a light-house with waves crashing all around it. The sweater he wears is warm and soft. He wants to sleep. The smell of ginger and spice and Christmas cookies. She is in his arms, her own striped sweater pressing against his, and her arm wraps around him. One of his arms lies along her side, fingers dangling above her stomach. With each breath she takes his fingers tingle. Her chocolate hair brushes against his cheek, and she smiles and giggles, lies her head on his chest. The fire spreads its warmth over them, and she leans up. Her skin is so soft, eyes piercing jewels, tongue so sweet. Her eyes close. She kisses him. Electricity surges through him. A broken wind on a broken surf. Each kiss more passionate and serene than the one before. She gets up. Grabs his hand. They run outside into the snow. It rains down all around them. So cold. But the heat from her hands touches his fingers and spreads through his body like a raging wildfire. A creek broken by ice-caps, bubbling over and bitten by snow. They sit down on a rock in the flurry of snow and icy wind and she draws him close. She holds onto him but as they watch the rocks and the water and the ice breaking with the creek's surging current there comes a voice, familiar, and she is taken away, stolen. He is alone and he gets up and the snow blinds him but somehow he is able to find his way through the dense woods, the trees laden with snow and dripping icicles. The snow turns gray and becomes ash and the naked trees are skeletons rising up like the risen dead from their graves. He enters into a ravine and the ravine walls become the shells of buildings.

And in the middle of it all Les and Hannah embrace, their tongues entwined. Anger burns within him. He wants to scream, to burst out, to open up all avenues of rage and vengeance. He finds in his hand a gun. Two bullets. When he wakes up the wasteland of ruined buildings and falling ash is gone. He is in his bedroom. He looks down and there is a gun in his hand. He goes downstairs. The front door is open, a soft spring breeze blowing. Mom is spring-cleaning. He goes outside. Birds are singing and the sky is clear. A striking blue. The bluest he has ever seen. Les and Hannah sit underneath the spreading branches of a tree two houses down. Cuddling. He walks across the street and through the lawns with the sprinklers. The grass is springy. They look up as he approaches. They say nothing. He looks at Les. "Hello, Friend." He raises the gun and squeezes the trigger. Les gropes at his stomach and falls into the grass, bleeding over the blades of grass. Hannah shrieks. He turns the gun on her and shoots her in the chest. She flails back and lands beside her stolen lover. She looks at him. She opens her mouth, a hideous—

SCREAM.

He jolted awake and freed himself from the covers and threw himself at the door. The screams drenched the house, floated through the veins of the home. He wrestled with the door, remembered it was locked, unlocked it, raced down the steps, following the screaming. Hannah and Les had vanished. He spun around in the hardwood parlor. He rushed down into the basement, taking the steps two at a time. The door to the family room was open. Mom's graying, stiff corpse stared at him with those lucid, unmoving eyes. He burst into the room.

And there he found Ashlie.

She was on the floor, writhing and screaming, tears lacing her face, staining her shoulders and the neck of her nightgown. Les knelt down beside her and tried to comfort her. Hannah told her to be quiet, to calm down, everything will be okay. Ashlie didn't stop. His baby sister saw him and screamed. She looked at him and the guilt and shame that sleep had deprived burst like a dam and the

waters flooded. Her legs bashed against the wall and floor. His mom's body didn't move, cut off from everything, a mere object, no longer a person.

Les howled, "She's making so much noise! Calm her down!"

Austin hollered, "Let her go! Let her go!"

Les released her. Hannah stepped back. Ashlie jumped up and rushed at her brother. He relaxed his muscles and she hit him hard and he fell into the back of the open door, knocking it into the wall. She pounded him with her fists, in the chest and shoulders and face. He let the blows come, let them bruise and ache his bracken soul.

"Murderer!" she screeched between sobs. "You killed... murdered..."

Les and Hannah did nothing. Didn't react. Shell-shocked.

She hit him harder and harder.

The corpse mocked. *Protect your sister. She doesn't know.*

She kept hitting him but was growing weak and weary. Her muscles fell apart and she fell against him. He wrapped his arms around her, squeezed her tightly, let her tears smother his shirt. He let her weep until her lungs seared in pain with each ragged and choking gasp. Bloodshot eyes and strained face. She retched to the side and fell to her knees and vomited on the carpet. He knelt down beside her and wrapped an arm around her, held her close, whispered in her ear, "I'm here, Ashlie, I'm here..."

She saw the blood on his shirt. Knew it wasn't paint. She tore away from him, her knee splashing in her puke. She sagged against the far wall opposite her mom's body, gaped at the stained shirt—*Amanda's blood, it's your best friend's blood. Ashlie, all over me, look in the bathroom, Ashlie, look in the bathroom!*—and her mom's cadaver, brains and blood and skull fragments draping the wall like a satanic Christmas tree, continued to mock.

Les and Hannah stood by the wall, frozen in time.

Austin looked deep into Ashlie's bloodshot eyes, bled compassion.

Something intelligible came between her quieting sobs. "Why... Why... Why..."

He didn't know why. He really didn't.

She asked again, and he just embraced her, moving his body around so she wouldn't see the body.

She coughed into his ear, "Where's Daddy?"

He shook his head.

She became sterner. "Where is he? *Where is he, Austin?*"

"Dead," he said. His mind took control. His soul had parted. He felt like his eyes were looking upon some scene, detached and surveying.

"How?" she moaned. "How?"

He showed no emotion. "I killed him."

She shoved him away, jumped to her feet.

He fell onto his back, stared at the ceiling with the dripped plaster.

Ashlie spun around in the middle of the room, staring at Les and Hannah.

"What's wrong with you?" she wailed. "*What's fucking wrong with you?!*"

"Ashlie," Hannah said. "Listen..."

"You killed my parents! You killed them both!"

Hannah stepped forward. "Ashlie..."

"Get away from me!" she shrieked.

"Mom killed herself, Ashlie," Austin said, the verity in his voice shocking.

Her defense weakened. She turned and looked at him as he sat back up.
"Why?"

"To protect you."

"To protect me from whom?" She didn't understand, was trying to.

"From herself."

"What about Daddy? Why did you kill Daddy?"

"To protect you. From him."

"Daddy... He wouldn't... There wasn't—"

"He tried..." He didn't know how to say it. "He tried to kill you."

"No..."

"And he tried to kill me."

She looked between them all. The tears flowed to a trickle, emptying. Her face burned bright red, a volcano of eruptions. Suddenly she bolted from the

room, running upstairs. Les and Hannah chased her. Austin wobbled to his feet and followed, closing the door behind him. Leaving his mother to rest in peace—for a while.

Ashlie grabbed the front door.

Hannah intercepted, “No!”, and pushed her away.

Les grabbed Ashlie by the shoulders and pulled her away, restraining her.

She kicked and screamed.

Austin entered the parlor from the steps. “Ashlie.”

She continued struggling against Les.

Austin moved forward, pushed Les out of the way, grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Let go of me!” she screamed, kicking weakly at his legs.

“Ashlie. Calm down.”

“Let go of me!”

“Ashlie!” he hollered, gripping her shoulder-blades. “Fucking stop!”

For some reason that shut her up. She stared at him with wild eyes.

He loosened his grip. “You don’t want to go out there, Ashlie. Trust me.”

He released her. Hannah blockaded the door. Les stood to the side.

“Why not?” she asked, voice hoarse from the crying and screaming.

“It’s hell,” he said.

She just stared at him, demanding to know why.

“This morning,” Austin said, “we were at school. And something happened. I don’t know. But people, they were going insane. Going crazy. Killing each other. Some kind of disease. Or virus. No one knows. But if you get bitten by anyone who has the disease, you get sick. And if you get sick, you die. But you don’t stay dead. You... wake back up. You get up, but it’s not you. You’re someone—*something*—else. Something primal, primitive, murderous. I don’t know if those who have turned, if those who have been infected, I don’t know if they’re alive or dead. But Dad got sick. I don’t know how.” He remembered his dad saying he was going to go to the store. Get some medicine

and soda for Ashlie, or something like that. Maybe he got bit there and returned home only to become one of them. Endangering his entire family. And not knowing it in the slightest. "He got sick, and he became one of them. He bit Mom. And Mom, she knew what was happening. So she killed herself. To make sure she didn't become like one of them. Dad tried to get to you. But I got to him first. But it wasn't Dad, Ashlie. Dad died before any of this happened. Before he became one of them. And Ashlie... This is all over the place. This is happening everywhere."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" he said.

"There's a disease."

"Yes. A plague. A pandemic."

She bit her lip, began to breathe steadier. "And it's all over town."

"Yes," Austin said. "And... It's everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

"All over the world."

"The world?" she said, disbelieving.

"Everywhere. Cities. Towns. Villages. Africa, Europe, Asia. No place is unaffected. It's a global plague. A pandemic."

Her lips quivered. "How do I know you're not making this up?"

"Mom is downstairs. And just look out the window if that's not enough for you."

She walked into the den and went to the window and pulled back the drapes. Everyone crowded behind her. She stared across the street. Saw the broken windows and door of the house opposite them. Above the trees rose several withering columns of smoke. Some patches of blood stained the street. The Jeep was ramped up in the grass, much of the glass broken and smeared with bloody handprints. The front fender was bent and dented and splotted with strips of flesh. The wheels and axles were twisted from running over bodies and from

debris in the road. The doors were wide open. Blood covered the backseat. Ashlie just stared, unbelieving, and closed the drapes. She didn't move.

"Are we all that's left?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so," Austin said. "There's probably millions of people hiding out. But the numbers are dwindling. We've been all over Spring Falls. It's just getting worse."

She ran a hand through her hair. Shock and disbelief overshadowed the sorrow.

"We're staying here," he said. "This part of the subdivision seems pretty deserted."

"What do they look like?"

He shook his head. "I can't describe it. They look like people. Except they're different." He thought of the rest of the world. Seconds crawled by as his heart fluttered in vain hope that there were armies fighting back, cures being found, cities surviving. They were alone here but not alone in the most basic sense of the word. And he felt hope that they would survive—live out the night and taste fresh air. Hope. And it resurfaced with Ashlie awakening. With her he found a new purpose for living. To protect her. To keep her safe. Brotherly love. Familial affection. Sibling loyalty and duty.

"How many are there?"

"They're all over. In the streets. Buildings. Shopping plazas."

She looked straight at him. "Are we going to be okay?"

"Yes," he said. "We're going to be okay."

But even then the hope was fading, replaced with the cold logistics.

"Do you promise?" she asked.

"Yes," he lied. "I promise."

He wondered if she believed him. But he knew she would.

He was her big brother. And that was his only fault.

7:00 PM

Ashlie's eyes glazed and went hollow, and for a moment her brother could look past them and into her soul. He looked at her and the tears returned. Not tears of anger, nor even of sorrow, but tears of desperation. Hope crumbling as her imagination ran circles. Les and Hannah felt awkward and went into the living room. Austin touched Ashlie's arm and pulled her closed, hugged her tight. She cried softly onto his shoulder. The tears were contagious. His throat knotted and memories surged. Mom scratching his head at night. Dad calling on the phone—"What are you guys up to?" Going swimming in Miamisburg: Ashlie on Mom's shoulders and he on his dad's as they played chicken in the pool. Laughter. Love. Security. Simplicity. And then Ashlie was holding him as much as he was holding her, and he was crying into *her* shoulder. Christmas, tearing open the gifts. Mom squealing in excitement. Dad snapping pictures. Gone. All that was over. Dad woke him up in the mornings for school, and before he got his license, his father would take him out to McDonald's and then to school as a special Friday treat. Mom always bought the groceries. Sometimes she would jump behind him and surprise him, making him jump mountains high. She loved scaring him. After time it became route, almost a religious and ceremonial ritual. Saying "I love you" and "Bye" became acts of predetermined courtesy. Hugs were offhand lisps. Nothing spectacular. "Goodnights" served as epilogues to the day and preludes to the next. Dad paid the bills. Mom ran them around. Ashlie watched television. He went to North Park and hung out with Les and Chad and Drake. Dinner meals were home-cooked. Gravy and mashed potatoes. Grilled and seasoned chicken. Macaroni-and-cheese. The tears crawled down his face and his chest felt empty and hollow and yet incredibly heavy. His eyes closed and the darkness was blinding and he saw spots as his lungs heaved and burst and screamed. *It's all a joke, a dream, a nightmare, a night terror—you'll wake up any minute.* None of this could be real. He imagined Dad coming into the room as he slept, about to shake him awake. The birds would

sing and Mom would laugh school would be boring but they'd be alive, so alive, so very—*They're dead. They're dead. They're dead.* His heart beat rebelliously behind his ribs, the throbbing valves echoing in his ears. Never again would Dad wake him up in the mornings or take him out to the buffet breakfast at Frisch's for his birthday even if meant him being late to the office. Never again would Mom play innocent jokes on him and never again would he hear her laugh like a drunken hyena as she watched "Will & Grace," "Family Guy," and "That 70's Show." Never again would he join his friends and jump in the Jeep and celebrate life at Fudd-Ruckers or China Cottage or Applebee's. Life was gone. Crumbled. Friendships torn apart. No more celebrations, no more parties. No more quiet sleep and peaceful dreams. No more playing in the rain or sledding down the trails at North Park in their efforts to ramp the creek (efforts that always failed). No more peace and joy and happiness. Harmony had become a myth and tranquility a dream pierced by poison-tipped arrows.

Hannah stood beside them. "I don't know, maybe you should sleep or something."

He looked at her. He didn't answer.

Les appeared. "Austin?"

He pushed Ashlie away, snarled, "*What?*"

He stood in the entrance to the living room. "It's already getting dark."

"I know."

"Is it supposed to get dark this early?"

Hannah speculated, "It's the smoke and ash from the fires. It's Pompeii out there."

Austin said, "It's raining. There are more storms coming. Of course it's dark."

Ashlie moaned, "Can they get inside?"

"All the doors are locked," Les said.

"What about the windows? Are they locked?"

He nodded.

"The dining room. The bay windows..."

"The shades are drawn," her brother said. "We've checked over everything." He composed himself, wiped away tears. "We can stay here for a few days. We have food. Some water in the garage. Mom went to Sam's Club a few days ago. We have lots of soda. Diet Rite. Diet Coke. Dr. Pepper. And some jugs of distilled water. I say we stick to the sodas, then use the water. And we should turn on the faucets and try to collect as much water as possible..." His head spun as thoughts rushed through him. His heart began to recover, beating heavily now from adrenaline rather than from heart-wrenching sorrow. "Let's get the Tupperware from the kitchen and fill it with water. Ashlie, can you do that? Make sure all the lids match—we don't want the water to evaporate."

Ashlie nodded and quietly went into the kitchen.

"Les: go downstairs. In the utility room by the bathroom there are boxes of winter clothes. Let's bring them up. We'll cover the windows with the thick jackets and coats so *maybe* we can light some candles without the light filtering outside. I don't know if they'll be able to tell a difference. But why not make an experiment of it? We'll sleep upstairs in my parents' bedroom. It has a big bed and a closet."

Les went downstairs.

"What can I do?" Hannah asked. She looked at him with those darling eyes.

"In the kitchen is the knife drawer. Next to the microwave are some more knives. I want each person to have a pair. Take the rest and put them in Mom and Dad's bedroom... And put at least one in each room where it's easy to reach, okay?" He nodded towards the kitchen. "And tell her that you have to pierce the brain to kill them."

"I don't think I can kill anyone," Hannah said.

"These aren't people. The people you knew are dead."

"They're still people. They're just sick."

"I didn't kill my father, Hannah. I killed what stole his body."

She bit her bottom lip.

"It wasn't Peyton, Hannah. Listen to me. Peyton was trampled. *He* didn't get up."

She shook her head. "It was him..."

"What got up wasn't Peyton," he said sternly. "It was something else."

"But *what* was it? That's what I want to know." She went to the window and drew back the drapes and stared out at the abandoned street and the house beyond and the shadows lengthening and the calm rain and the darkness encroaching. "What in the hell *are* these things? What are people turning into? Someone has to have an answer."

"I'm sure someone does. But I don't know." A pause. "You know my dad. He's the most loving and gentle and funny person in the world. And you know Peyton. He loved you so much. The world is changing. Dying. Those people out in the cities, on the streets, those aren't *people*. They're monsters."

She whispered something under her breath.

He didn't catch it. "What?"

"Zombies," she said, abandoning the window. She looked at him, eyes cold and sterile. "They die and come back to life. They're zombies."

All the zombie movies he'd ever seen flashed before him. "Night of the Living Dead." "Day of the Dead." "28 Days Later." "Dawn of the Dead." A shudder swept through him, a remnant of an icy December chill. Hannah's mysterious words crept into his ears, screaming bloody Mary—*zombies*.

"Yes," he said in a low voice. "Zombies."

She went past him into the kitchen. She talked with Ashlie, gave her two knives. She stared at them with saucer-wide eyes. Her hands began to shake and she set them on the counter. Hannah filled a Tupperware container full of knives and walked into the den. She handed him a butcher knife and steak-cutter. He slid them into his pockets, the blades facing up. "Don't forget yours," he said. "Give some to Les. He'll be back up here in a few minutes."

She went upstairs. He went into the kitchen, picked up Ashlie's knives.

She was sitting on the ground, her back against the sink cupboards.

"Stand up," he said.

She didn't move.

"Ashlie."

She stood and he went around her, sliding the knives into the pockets of her nightgown. She began to protest, but he gripped her shoulder. "No. You have to have them. I can't stand to lose anyone else. Especially you."

She stared at the window in front of her.

"Did Hannah tell you where you have to get them?"

She nodded.

"Go for the eyes."

She looked at him. "Is that how you killed Amanda?"

He shuddered. Remembered Amanda clawing at him.

"Is it, Austin?" she growled.

"You don't understand. You haven't seen them."

She turned her back towards him. "It was *Amanda*, Austin. She was a sister to you. Are you saying she tried to kill you? That my best friend tried to kill you?"

"It wasn't Amanda."

"You thought she was sick so you stabbed her in the eye. Is that it?" She turned around. "You pinned her in the bathroom and you stabbed her to death."

A knot formed in his throat. "You can't understand, you haven't—"

"I *know* Amanda! She's my best friend and one of yours!"

Something snapped. He grabbed her violently by the arm. Every nerve impulse in his body screamed for him to take her upstairs, to throw open the door, to show her the hollow shell that Amanda had become—the beautiful princess, the goddess, now an empty, purple-skinned, deep-throated shrieking monster, suspended in death, shot through the chest and with a knife handle protruding from her bled eye-socket. He would throw her into the bathroom and tell her, *Look! Look at your best friend! Tell me what you see!* But despite her

cold and unfeeling eyes, and despite the decrepit resolution of his intemperate heart, he couldn't do it. His hand relaxed. He let her go. His knuckles cracked. She was half-bent over the countertop, pale-faced. He wondered if she had seen the fury and fear behind the veil of her protective brother. He wondered if she had seen in his eyes something she had never before seen in him. Something otherworldly. Alien.

He stepped backwards, into the island smeared with Amanda's blood. He closed his eyes. "You didn't see her. Oh God, you didn't see her, Ashlie... You didn't see her..." His knees were caving in. He slumped against the island and slid to the floor, coiling his legs around him. He buried his head into his knees. "If you would've seen her... It wasn't her... She wasn't beautiful... They change, Ashlie... I don't know how or why... But they *change*. It wasn't Amanda. It wasn't Amanda..."

Ashlie hovered over him, unsure of what to do. She felt the knives in her pockets. His words burned into her like cold iron. Les came up from below, carrying a cardboard box of winter jackets. He saw him on the floor, fetal, and Ashlie looking more lost than anything, and he decided to work on the windows in the bedrooms first—they would be spending the night there.

Ashlie opened her mouth to say something when the noise came.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

Austin looked up.

The scratching came from the garage door.

Ashlie stepped over him and went for the door.

Austin leapt up in an instant. "What are you doing?!"

She stood poised by the door next to the fridge. "It's Doogie."

He wasn't so sure. "Don't open the door."

"He wants in. It's his supptime. Listen. It's Doogie."

He strained his ear to listen. It was seven fifteen. Doogie was always in by that time, sniffing the trash cans and lying down next to the leather couch for an evening nap. So far the infected didn't seem to pay attention to the animals;

they hunted only non-infected humans. He hoped it was Doogie, but he imagined an infected behind that door. He imagined that they'd found them, heard the screaming and the whining and the bickering, heard the trading of shouts, and had moved in for the kill. But he listened closer. The scratching was organized. A few scratches. A pause. Then more scratches. Whatever it was, it was trying to get their attention. Not trying to get in.

He moved around the island and drew the butcher knife from his pants.

"You're not going to kill him!" Ashlie wailed, alarmed.

"No. I love Doogie. I'm just being sure."

"Austin..."

"You haven't seen them, Ashlie."

The doorknob was chilled from the spring night air invading the garage. He twisted it. Locked. Stupid. He unlocked it. Sweat dappled the blade of the knife, dripping down from his palms. He told himself it was just the dog. He twisted the doorknob and cracked open the door. He peered through. The garage was dark, littered with shadows, pitch black. The cuckoo clock chimed — always ten minutes off. Shadows submerged at his feet. He jumped away from the door and Doogie slinked in.

"Oh my God!" Ashlie wailed as Doogie entered.

The dog limped against the counter. Ashlie's face was paler than a full moon, and crazier. His tongue dipped from his mouth, throbbing yellow. His eyes rolled back and forth in their tiny sockets. His mangy golden coat shimmered in the musky shadows. He meandered away from the counter, leaving bloody paw-prints. He turned around the island. A massive gash in his side, still bleeding, drenching his fur in a crimson tide. Ashlie looked over at her brother, and then her face got even paler and she screamed. He spun around, lifting the knife before him. The infected came from the shadows, throwing his body against Austin. He hit the doorframe, lost the knife, staggered into the darkness of the garage, thudded against the side of the van. The figure stood in

the doorway, a hideous silhouette. A stump left for an arm, blood sprinkling down onto the single door step in a cool spring shower.

"Ashlie!" Austin hollered. "Get out of there!"

The infected turned at his voice and faced him.

He didn't care. He just wanted Ashlie safe.

He was weaponless, hands groping at the tinted van windows.

The infected snarled.

"Fuck."

The infected came at him. Austin dropped down to the ground and rolled underneath the van. Tubing and wires bit at his clothes, tearing shreds in the fabric and drawing bloody lines across his back. He could hear the infected pounding against the side of the van. Austin reached back behind his head, pulled himself backwards using backstrokes on the concrete. His fingers brushed against the rubber tires. Something warm and sticky dropped onto his ankles and warm fetid air wafted over his shoes. He kicked upwards as hard as he could. His knees seared, slamming against the underbelly of the van; but his feet connected with something solid, sending it up into the bottom of the van. A horrendous holler. He wiggled himself out from underneath the van and stood between the Transport and Ford truck. He stood and breathed in the undisturbed darkness.

He heard Ashlie screaming from the kitchen: *"Oh my God oh my God oh my..."*

Sharp movements on the other side of the van. A shadow blotted the doorway to the murky kitchen. He thought of Ashlie becoming one of them and then he ran forward, slamming into the smooth azure paint of the Ford truck. He hammered his fists on its hood, yelling and screaming, making as much noise as he could. Frightening even himself. The infected snarled and ran around the side of the van. He jumped into the bed of the truck and crawled out on the other side. He landed on something soft. It imploded a little and something cold splashed on his shoe. He ignored it. He bent down, groping.

Fabric. Not what he wanted. Cold, icy liquid. Thick. Putrefying. Turning to Jello. The infected was behind him, attacking; Austin collapsed under its weight into his father's body.

The infected's acrid breath rolled over him, nauseating. He jammed his elbow into the infected's face, sending him somersaulting over his body and lying beside the bed of the truck. He turned and shoved him into the flimsy garage door. He turned and ran deeper into the garage. Cold late evening air coming from the doggy door. He reached down and found it. It was heavy.

The infected tottered forward, reaching out for him. From the window of the garage door leading to the lawn he could see the glint in the fiery eyes, the wild red hair, blood covering the face, deep-sunken eyes, craters of a soulless void. She had once been a woman with wonderful strawberry-blond hair. Not the hair was frizzy and matted with blood, and her eyes rang with a hollow, incessant death-knell. She rushed forward. He gave out a cry and heaved the axe through the air, broad-siding her across the face. She spun into the wall, her cheek bones broken. He did a 360 and hammered the blade of the axe into her neck. The handle shuddered and the body collapsed. The dismembered head flung against the wall and came to a rest beside the doggy door.

Moonlight piercing the rain-clouds dripped upon the face. The lips twisted back and forth in a grotesque, never-ending scream. The eyes lolled in their sockets. The hewn muscles in the neck twitched. Austin kicked the head out the doggy door. He dropped the axe onto the floor and raced for the door. He was nearly to the kitchen when he cursed and turned to grab the axe. An infected was coming through the doggy-door, almost fully in the garage. It looked up at him and shrieked. Through the blinds on the side door window he could see several shapes weaving back and forth, pressing against the door. "Fuck." The door burst open; the infected coming through the doggy-door was hurled against the wall. The others surged inside, blindly running in the darkness. Austin turned and ran into the kitchen—forget the axe!—and slammed the door and locked it. He could hear their screams and catcalls and groveling piercing the stillness.

The house was deserted. A trail of blood led into the den, where Doogie made his last walk to his death. The Tupperware was spilled everywhere. "Ashlie! Les! Hannah!" His parched voice lacerated with pain.

The door behind him shuddered. He pressed all his weight against it.

He cried out, "Ashlie! Les!"

The three of them came down the steps from the upstairs, Les leading the way, knife in hand. They entered the kitchen.

He pointed at the door, mortified. It continued to shake as they tried to get in.

"Block it!" Hannah shouted, grabbing a chair.

He stepped to the side and she pushed it against the door.

The poundings grew more furious.

Ashlie stared at the wall, disbelieving.

Austin shouted, "This chair isn't going to—"

Part of the doorframe splintered. A hinge snapped.

"The table!" Hannah shouted. "The table!"

She and Ashlie grabbed one of the sides of the dining room table. Austin and Les grabbed the other. They pulled it in front of the door and pressed it against the chair. The infected continued shrieking and bickering on the other side. It splintered in a different place. Everyone backed away from the table. With each pounding, the table and chair slid away from the door a few centimeters.

"It's not working," Les said.

Austin grabbed two chairs and put them together, then put them against the counter, facing the table. The door's last hinge snapped and the door opened, thrusting against the table; the table slid into the chairs and came to a stop. The door could only open about half a foot. Ashlie stood in the empty dining room, staring into the dark gap. Beyond were the dark, sullen eyes and bloodied faces of the infected.

The faces of the zombies.

The contraption of tables and chairs held steady. The zombies threw themselves harder and harder against the door, but it wouldn't budge. The force of their impacts rattled through the door and then through the table and chairs and into the counter, rattling the cupboard doors. No matter how hard they shoved against the door, it wouldn't move.

"They know we're here," Les said, "and they're not going to stop."

"This is it," Hannah said under her breath. "It all comes to this."

Austin shouted, "This is *not* it! This is *NOT* it!"

The table quivered.

The midline snapped and splintered.

The door opened a bit wider.

He stood in the kitchen area. Les, Hannah, and Ashlie stood in the dining room.

The infected shot their arms through the crack. Those filthy, purple-rashed arms, laden with dried blood and bruises and cuts, groped blindly. One wore a watch. Another a wedding ring. Their fingers felt along the wall, the door, the table.

Austin drew the steak knife from his pocket. "Everyone, get to the—"

And then they got inside.

But not through the door. Shattering glass tore his words to pieces. The bay windows burst open, a shower of glass shards raining about the dining room, sprawled onto the linoleum, thousands of transparent shields glittering like stars in a wine-dark sea. They tried to come in, but their limbs became entangled in the blinds. A hoarse wind blew into the dining room as the infected writhed back and forth, caught in the blinds, hands protruding from the blinds, swiping their fingers—claws—through the air. An infected got through, reached and grabbed Ashlie. Hannah drew the knife from her pocket and without thinking swung it, drawing a deep line across the infected man's throat. Blood surged all over Ashlie's arm. Hannah grabbed her by the other

arm and tore her away. The infected turned and faced them, the slit neck spitting spurts of blood onto the blinds with each ragged heartbeat. More infected made it through the blinds. The garage door splintered apart, the chair legs bent and popped and crumbled in, the dining room table split down the middle and imploded on itself; and they came through from the garage, tumbling over the mess of chairs and table. Austin, in the kitchen, saw the three of them dodge fumbling zombies and take off into the living room. He abandoned the kitchen and ran through the den and heard Ashlie's door shut. He was glad she was safe but knew they wouldn't let him in, and he didn't want them to risk that—he couldn't stand being the cause of Ashlie's demise.

He went downstairs instead of up. He shut the door behind him and raced down the steps and into the pool room. He could hear them in the middle level, ransacking everything. "Shit." The downstairs window—the one they'd forgotten, that opened up at ground level—was bent inwards. A zombie with no legs, only burnt stubs, crawled towards him past the pool table. He ran around the other side, grabbed one of the mounted pool sticks. He looked at the slender shaft and gripped it in one hand; in the other was the knife. He heard the door to the basement splinter open, and he looked over to see a pair of infected—a woman and a teenage girl, bloodied and covered with wounds from the bites that had taken them down—beckoned him at the foot of the steps.

The crawling zombie snapped at his feet. He kicked it savagely in the face.

The two at the foot of the steps rushed at him. He leveled the pointed pool stick and faced it towards them. The older woman didn't evade, and the pool stick drove deep into her abdomen. She writhed away, wrenching the pool stick from his hands; she tripped over the crawling one and her head bashed on the rim of the pool table, and her skull cracked and fragments pierced her brain. She went limp and lied there with the pool stick poking out like an unadorned flag-pole. Austin went into the bathroom and shut the door as the teenage girl reached the door. He locked it and went into the utility room.

Cold sweat stained his brow. Frantic clawing on the bathroom door. He went through the utility room to the small storage area underneath the steps.

Winter mitts and boots and scarves lied scattered over the floor where Les had gathered up the winter coats. Austin removed the square wooden crawlspace hatch and wedged himself inside. The rocky floor nipped at his ankles. He lifted the door and set it back in place, enclosing himself in darkness. He could hear them above, their movements echoing in the crawlspace. He then heard the bathroom door break open and the teenage girl entered. He cursed and kicked deeper into the crawlspace.

He inched his way through the perpetual darkness. Brushed against boxes of Christmas ornaments and Thanksgiving decorations and Halloween figurines. His eyes couldn't adjust, the darkness was so blinding. He kept glancing back in the direction of the crawlspace door but couldn't see it in the blackness. He bumped into a concrete pillar, part of the foundation, and moved around it. He felt a cold breeze. He moved towards the breeze. It came from above. From the night air. He found a cold grill laced with mold. He grabbed the grill and popped it out. More darkness beyond. He wiggled up and through, and he lied there in the quiet, wondering where he was. And then he saw a garden rake and a coiled watering hose. The garage. Bare light leaked in from the open door leading out to the side of the house. The open door led to a graveyard of empty death. The trees swayed back and forth in the wind. The rain had stopped for a few moments but lightning continued to flash, sparkling through grim and rolling clouds. The lightning burst illuminated the garage and he saw he was alone. The zombies had entered the house. He could hear them inside the house. The others, he hoped, were still holed up. He hadn't heard any screams. He knew he had to rescue them. Rescue Ashlie. But he didn't know how. He crept forward, close to the door, and picked up the axe. It felt so light. He went around the front of the truck towards the splintered door leading to the kitchen. The single wooden step had broken down the middle. He looked back to the truck and had an idea.

He went to the truck and opened the door. He threw the axe in the back. He slammed the door shut and pulled down the sun visor. A clip fell out. He

caught it midair and withdrew the spare key. He put it into the ignition and turned. The engine sputtered. Light from the dashboard. The gas gauge read 4/5 of a gallon. He locked both doors and threw it into reverse. He looked back to the garage door. He just had to open—

The truck tipped forward.

He turned back around to see a zombie on the truck, shirtless. Deep lacerations on his chest, deep enough to reveal rib-bones. Blood sprinkled onto the truck's hood from the half-decayed wounds. The zombie clambered closer up on the hood and slammed his fist into the windshield. It webbed outwards, shatter-proof. The bones of the man's hands shattered, protruding from the skin, but he hit again, fingers cast oblong. The windshield webbed deeper and blood dribbled into the cracks from his shattered hand.

Austin hit the gas, forgetting it was reversed; he'd wanted to drive him into the wall. The wheels screeched and his head lashed forehead, hitting the windshield. The back end of the truck bashed into the garage door. He fell back into his seat. The zombie had fallen to the ground in front of the truck. He tried to stand. More infected entered the garage from both the outside and from the kitchen, drawn by the sound of the engine. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." He put the truck in drive and pummeled the gas. The wheels spun over the zombie's body, breaking bones and squashing organs. The sides of his body burst, spraying the wheels with blood and entrails. Zombies threw themselves at the truck but they couldn't get in. He put the truck into reverse and hit the gas. The garage door caved inwards. He went forward. He went back again. The garage door collapsed and he barreled through the garage door. The blue paint tore and withered. Shrieking metal-against-metal. The side mirrors hewn off. He was in the driveway, into the night, leaving the infected jumping through the hole in the garage door.

He pulled out to the road, put it in drive, and ramped the curve, going into the grass, underneath Ashlie's room. He revved the engine and honked the horn, calling out to them. The zombies from the garage were almost to the truck.

Shadows down the street as more zombies came from that direction. Les yelled for the others and he jumped. He fell and landed hard in the back of the truck. He picked up the axe. Ashlie jumped, landing next to him. An infected came around the side of the house, leaping onto the side of the truck. Les drilled the axe through his arm, chopping it off. Blood on the scratched paint. The zombie fell into the grass, groping at its wound. Hannah jumped, toppling Les. And then zombies appeared at Ashlie's window, furious and howling. Austin hit the gas and sped away from the house, the wheels kicking up soft earth and grass into the faces of the zombies from the garage.

He was out on the street when Les hit the back window with his fist. Austin glanced into the rearview mirror. Les pointed back, face pale.

Ashlie was in the lawn, getting to her feet. She must have fallen out.

Infected were nearly on her.

He tried to open the door, numb.

Les jumped out with the axe, racing after her.

Hannah shouted through the back window, "Reverse!"

He did, backing up down the street.

Les grabbed Ashlie and pulled her away from the zombies.

He swung the axe, threatening them. They seemed to hesitate.

Austin reached them. Les helped Ashlie into the back of the truck. Les threw the axe into the truck-bed and grabbed the bed's latch. "Go! Go! Go!" The zombie reached for him. He held on for dear life and the truck went speeding down the road. The truck shuddered as it went past the stop-sign and turned left at the intersection. Austin slowed down, the roadsides clear. Hannah bumped into the window. Ashlie slid down against her. She got to her feet as Austin stopped the car and went to the back of the truck and grabbed Les' hand and pulled him up.

Austin threw on the brights. The eyes of several zombies at the intersection caught the beams. Glowing transcendently, specks in the blackness. They scattered into the shadows.

8:00 PM

The tires squealed as the truck went around the corner, fishtailing on the slick asphalt. The trio in the back collapsed into the bed of the truck and stayed there, daring not to stand. The headlights swept over the houses as he turned onto the side streets. Pools of water and tiny rivulets coursing like rivers in the jungle reflected sharply in the windshield. The LCD display on the dashboard glowed neon green: 8:00 PM. A zombie ran across the street. Austin hardly noticed. It was 8:00. He was supposed to work 3:00-8:00 at Homer's Grocery. He'd just be getting off work. He continued driving, surveying the boyhood suburbs he'd know for his entire life now ransacked and ruined, dismantled. Vehicles were parked solemnly in driveways and along the road. Some were overturned. Some had burnt down to their metal frames. One or two had crashed into trees. Another had slid into the living room of a house, caving in the inside stairwell. Most houses were ghostly silhouettes. Some doors were broken apart and windows smashed open. But most of the houses, he noticed, were reasonably unscathed. Quiet. Desolate. Maybe abandoned. But he knew there *had* to be more survivors. Families, individuals, even groups of survivors clinging to hope within the shallow cesspools of human innovation. Tamarack Neighborhood. How many homes would fall before night lifted? How many lives snatched away—or altered?

He turned onto Evergreen Avenue. An accident had piled up, a chewed body dangling from one of the crunched cars. Many of the cars were torn apart, laced with blood. Windows broken. Rubber tires deflated. But there were no infected. He drove onto the grass and went around it, driving underneath a spreading oak tree dripping water from its leaves. He hadn't seen many out on the roads. Only one or two. He wondered where they were. Sleeping? Did they sleep? How could he know? He became lost in his thoughts and nearly collided with an overturned van that emerged from the shadows. He cursed and wrenched

the wheel to the side and the truck went on two wheels and fishtailed and he feared it would fall onto its side but it righted itself and he drove close to another tree and tree limbs scraped against the side. He was driving straight towards the front porch of a house. He wrenched the wheel in the other direction and fishtailed in the grassy lawn, spewing mud and earth and grass onto the porch. He now drove straight towards a parked Malibu. He swung the truck around and dashed through a fence, the wooden planks flinging up and over the hood, dashing into the windshield. Plants wrapped around the axle as the corner of the truck blew through a pile of debris probably meant to be burned that evening. The truck listed towards the middle of the road. A gigantic puddle lied before him. But then he realized it was a swimming pool. He stamped the brakes and the wheels locked and slid across the soft ground. He yanked the wheel and the truck turned and lurched to a stop a yard away from the pool glistening under the moonlight piercing between rainclouds.

Les banged angrily on the back window. Austin slid the window panel to the side and Les snarled, "What the *hell* is wrong with you?!"

"I'm making this up as I go," he said, voice shaking. "You guys all right?"

"Your sister has a sprained ankle."

"What? Sprained what?"

"Ankle."

"How the hell did she get that?"

"You were driving like a fucking madman."

Hannah propped herself up. "It wasn't your fault. She got it when she fell from the truck back at your house. She didn't realize she sprained it till after we left. It's all swollen. It's bad, Austin."

"Okay. Let's—"

"Shhh!" Hannah hissed. "The fence."

She pointed across the pool, to the wooden fence.

Dense shapes moved beyond it, seen through the narrow cracks. No noise.

A hand draped the top of the fence, and another, then an arm.

"Shit," Les said. "They're climbing over."

"Get us out of here," Hannah said.

He put the truck in reverse, touched the gas. The engine revved. Nothing.

"Austin..."

"I'm fucking trying, Hannah, all right?" He pressed the gas even harder.

The zombies were almost over the wall.

"The axle is jammed!" he shouted.

The truck spun backwards, leafy fragments spewed into the air. He spun the wheel. The gears shifted. Zombies dropped over the fence, raced for the truck. Les crawled across the bed, picked up the axe. Austin drove out the way they had come. The zombies screamed and chased, running around the pool and the side of the house.

"That was fucking close," Austin muttered as he reached the road. "God."

He continued down the road. Four or five of them emerged from around the house. He looked into the rearview mirror and saw more. He turned back around and saw a body roll of the side of the truck, landing on the pavement. Les, Hannah, and his sister watched from the back, crunched together against the back of the cab. Evergreen was a straight road. He hit the gas as hard as possible. Twenty, thirty-five, forty-seven. Sixties, seventies, eighties. Ninety miles per hour. The houses whipped past on either side. He blew through a stop-sign, gripped the wheels with white-knuckled fingers. The truck hydroplaned, spinning. The wheels connected with soft earth. The truck bounced and spun in a complete circle several times, and then it continued through the grass. Trees swept past on either side. The headlights flashed over a basketball court, a station wagon, a brick house. The truck blew between the basketball pole and the station wagon. The wheels thudded on the asphalt. They drove into the backyard, dodging trees, a swing-set, a stack of dripping wet firewood. They were out of the subdivision. He didn't know how it happened. Couldn't remember. But they were at a different house along the road. He'd seen this house many times before. There was a pond in the yard

somewhere. He brought the truck to a stop in the grass. Heard only the rumbling of the engine. Zombies nowhere. They'd outrun them.

He sat in the cab, panting, feeling the cold sweat. His arms and hands shook. He opened the door and felt the bitterly cold night air.

Les jumped down. "Well. We're alive."

He ignored him and peeped into the back of the truck. "Ashlie? How's your ankle?"

She said, "It hurts." No emotion.

"Okay. We're going to take care of that, okay? It'll be okay, we're going to—"

"You don't have to baby me."

He sighed. "All right. Yeah. Okay."

Hannah stood up in the back, looked the way they had come. "I can hear them."

"I know."

"They're coming."

"We've got to get out of here," Les said, standing at his side.

"Where do you intend to go?"

"Anywhere. Not here. We stay here, we're dead. Or worse."

"The country," Hannah said. "Please. Let's go to the country."

"That's back towards 741."

"Is it bad?"

"Didn't you see it? Shit, Les. It's a mess. Like drunks stole the road."

"Then we can just navigate it."

"You mean *I* can just navigate it."

Hannah shouted, "Les! Austin! Make up your minds!"

Shadows appeared in the fog several hundred feet behind them.

"Here they come," Les murmured.

Austin looked up to Hannah. "Help Ashlie down. I want her in with me."

"Austin, they're—"

"Just help her down, damn it! I don't want her bouncing around with that ankle!"

They were closer. One hundred fifty feet.

She helped Ashlie down.

"We can all fit in there," Les said. "It has a back seat, right?"

"Fine. Come on."

Everyone crowded into the cab. Les and Hannah in the back. Ashlie up front with her brother. Austin shut and locked his door. "Ashlie. Lock your door." She did. He turned on the engine and hit the gas and the wheels spun.

"You've got to be *fucking kidding me*," Les said.

The wheels gained traction and they lurched forward.

"Back in business," Les said.

Hannah looked out the back window. "There's so many of them..."

He drove around the artificial pond and around the back of the house. The infected continued their pursuit of the truck. More were coming from the entrance to the subdivision in spurts of twos and threes. Austin reached the driveway of the house. Gravel crunched under the tires. Tree limbs dangled above as they turned left onto Pennyroyal Avenue, heading for 741. The infected gave chase onto the street and emerged from a cornfield on their left and from the houses on their right. He pressed the gas pedal to the floor and the truck lurched forward on the road. They drove past a house with lighted windows. Candles. The infected abandoned the pursuit and rushed at the house, throwing themselves through the glass windows. Austin's throat knotted. He kept driving.

Hannah craned her neck behind them to make sure they were gone, then leaned back in her seat and exhaled. "God. They're so ugly."

"It's hard to imagine," Les said, "that they were once *people*."

Silence.

Rain began to fall again, growing heavier. The windshield wipers swiped back and forth. Dark trees on their left, houses at the end of long gravel drives and expensive marble gates. To their right more cornfields, the stalks low and hanging limp like the bowed heads of mourning peasants.

"Austin," Hannah said.

"What?"

"Thanks for... You know. Getting us back there. At the house."

"Okay."

The rain fell harder. Lightning cast arrows across the dark sky, illuminating crisscrossing clouds. The lightning car lied in the ditch, the windshield splintered all over the front seats. Red splotches decorated the interior. No body. The lightning flash faded and the headlights paved the way. The tender rain, the soft sighs of the wind, the sonnet of the engine. It was surreal. A memory of a distant time.

Ashlie leaned forward, turned the volume knob on the radio.

"Why don't you put in a CD? I think Zeppelin is in there."

She shook her head, surfed through channels. Static on every one.

"No one's broadcasting," Austin said.

"I'm just looking."

"Ashlie. There's no one left to—"

A blurb on the radio, then static.

Les tensed. "Go back."

She turned the knob back.

The voice of an AM radio broadcaster registered crisp and clean:

"...suburbs lost. Only known method of exterminating the infected is a direct impact to the brain. Do not panic. Do not leave your homes. Secure yourself and your loved ones. Secure any available weapons and supplies. Do not go outside. Do not go onto the roads. Outbound communications have been lost in major U.S. cities on the east coast. The plague is spreading quickly westward. Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and

Michigan residents have been ordered to remain in their homes. Many cities and suburbs lost. Only known method of exterminating the infected is a direct impact to the brain. Do not panic..."

It repeated itself.

"It's just a recording," Les said. "Probably just before the station was... overrun."

Austin said, "Ashlie, see if you can find anymore stations, okay?"

She nodded and continued flipping through them. Only static.

"This whole region is lost," Hannah murmured.

He kept thinking of the recording. U.S. cities on the East Coast absent of outbound communications. Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan residents ordered to stay in their homes. "Les. Remember when we were watching the television at your house? They said that everywhere was infected. Every continent. Everywhere. Remember that?"

"Yeah," he said, staring bleakly out his window.

"But this recording... Why say only the eastern coast? New England? And why just mention those states around us?"

"Maybe because the station's only broadcasted in this area."

"What station was that, Ashlie?"

"Umm... 700."

"Dad listens... listened... to that all the time. You remember? They had lots of national speakers on there. Heard all over the country."

"National programs play on local stations, Austin."

"What if the initial reports were exaggerated because of the panic? What if it's not as bad as we were told?"

"You're thinking because they just said those states."

"And the east coast."

"Austin. It's a local station. It's sending its signal to *locals*. Those states? They're pertinent to the people who listen to that station. It doesn't mean that

all the other states are better off. You saw the video feeds. It's all over the country. From California to New York. It's everywhere."

"But why mention the east coast? And not the west coast?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe they've gotten a handle on things. In the west. Maybe it's not spreading as bad there as it is here."

"The west is more populated than the east."

"Only before the Rockies."

"That recording was probably made early. Before we watched the television."

He just shook his head. "I'm telling you—"

"You're grasping at straws. We're no more fucked than anyone else."

The road dipped downwards and they came to the stoplight at 741. The lights were out and the intersection was barren. He slowly turned right onto the three-lane state route. They drove towards Olde Towne, visible in the distance through the rain by the fires still burning. He looked out the back window and could see glowing red and orange in the far distance. The area of the Arlington Mall. Olive Garden, Barnes and Noble, Borders Books, ½ Price Books, Waffle House. All the legendary hang-outs of the "good old days." Austin ached to be sitting in the café with Les on those plump couches, sipping their mixed coffees and watching the thunderstorm through the large bay windows. They'd done that before. It had been a wonderful storm. Now a similar storm rolled in, its lightning illuminating wrecks and hazards stretching down 741 to the intersection with 73.

He hit the brakes and the truck rolled to a stop.

Everyone looked at him, wondering.

He said, "We can't go back that way."

"Why not?"

"It's teeming with them. Olde Towne. Clearcreek Plaza. A mile down the road."

Hannah said, "We don't have a choice. It's the way to the country."

"We'll have to take a different route."

"It'll be longer."

"We have the gas."

"Which way do you want to go, Austin?" Les asked. He thumbed behind them, towards the Arlington Mall area. "Do you want to go back there? Do you have *any idea* how bad it's going to be? Any place where there were people close together is completely void of survivors. Towns. Cities. Shopping plazas. And shopping *malls*, Austin, which is back that way. Restaurants. Subdivisions. We have to go to the country. The infected won't go into the country. Not yet. They're sticking around, where it's populated. And the quickest way to the country is down 73. Go to the intersection, turn left, and drive. Just fucking drive."

The engine grumbled.

Lightning flickered.

Rain danced.

The windshield wipers throbbed.

"Austin," Hannah said, leaning up, touching his shoulder. "You know he's right."

He said nothing.

"Where else are we going to go?"

He felt as if he were at a crossroads. Clearcreek and Spring Falls had fallen in what seemed to be less than an hour. The school—they had opened the doors, and it was madness in minutes. This was like nothing else they had ever seen—or even *heard* about. He stared out the windshield into the rain, his thoughts resonating with the tapping raindrops and the systematic slashings of the windshield wipers. He wanted so desperately to go back in time, wanted to be coming home from work to the smell of his mom cooking and his father watching TV with a bowl of ice cream. Right then he would've been taking off his shoes and sitting down in the kitchen to the smells of steamed rice and broiled chicken, petting Doogie as he draped one paw over his leg. But here he

was, in reality—in the *surreality*—, sitting in a truck, suspended in a world of bloodshed and chaos, of death and tears, screams and sobs, and it was becoming *normal*. No longer was he shocked to see the skeletons of cars lining the streets. He wasn't surprised by the burnt-out buildings. He wasn't nerve-racked by driving through peoples' lawns. And he didn't feel guilty about killing another human being. All took on a strange new breed of normalcy. Instead of eating and laughing and worrying about school and his future and how he would win Hannah's heart, he was famished, shaking with fear, worrying about his sister's survival, standing on the edge of an ocean, pondering—how much longer would he live? How much longer until he became one of them? His fingers tightened over the wheel. His eyes grew colder and emptier. He could hit the gas and drive them into a smoking wreck. Kill them all. They'd never be like them.

Hannah's hand was still on his shoulder.

He came back to reality as she gripped his shoulder-blade tighter.

"What?" he said, jerking around.

Ashlie stared at him.

"Let's go," Hannah said. "We're cutting across the field, remember?"

"The field?"

"Yes. Damn it. We just told you. Right there." She pointed to the field to their right. "We can cut through there to that old subdivision. The one with the roads all named after spices? Ginger, Cinnamon, Nutmeg? Were you even listening?"

"Yes," he lied. "Sorry." He had no recollection of any such conversation. "Cut through the field. Reach the subdivision..." It came back to him now, as if it had cemented into his subconscious mind. "Take 73 to the Wal-Mart, turn left, and that'll take us down into the national park." He looked back at her. "Right?"

She nodded. "Yes. We just said that. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, putting the truck into gear.

He turned right and entered the cornfield.

The headlights grazed over the infertile field with the drooping, weather-beaten stalks. The truck lurched up and down as they bounded across the uneven, muddy earth. Water had filled in the shallow drenches, and each lurch sprayed the sides of the truck with muddy water. The static from the radio roared. "Put in a CD," Austin said. Music might take his mind off things. Ashlie sent power to the CD player. Zeppelin. "Black Dog." They drove past a massive cedar erupting from the middle of the field. He wondered why it had never been cut down. He drove parallel to the road and a large, towering fence rose up separating the field from the interstate. He drove a quarter mile and then turned right, heading across the field. Directly behind them beyond the towering gate was the intersection leading to the YMCA and Dorothy-Lane Market and Kids & Tots Daycare Center. Smoldering wrecks cast shadows over figures moving about in the parking lots and inside the buildings. They turned at the sound of the truck and gave chase. He didn't worry. They would be stopped by the fence. They reached the barricade of steel fencing and barbed wire and shook the wire and shrieked and their screams died with the cacophonous thunder. Ashlie turned up the volume on the song. Austin smiled. Les pointed out the window behind them: "Look."

Lights burned in the parking lot of Dorothy Lane Market. Hundreds of infected milled about the front and sides of the store, banging on the windows, trying to get inside. It horrified them—so many! Three hundreds, maybe even four hundred of them, filling the parking lot. They completely encircled the polished, brick-and-mortar building. The large DLM sign hung ominously still. A frozen placard from an unknown time. Beams of light hit the windows, coming from the inside.

"How many do you think are in there?" Hannah said.

"Probably just customers. And workers. Like Homer's."

"Why are they surrounding it?"

"Who knows? Maybe they sense the survivors."

"Maybe they're drawn there out of distant memory? It's a place they know. They're drawn to it. It's still in their minds, even if they don't know it. Their subconscious is controlling them? I don't know."

"I hope not. Because then they have the possibility of conscious thought."

"Not if it's subconscious."

"Everything evolves, Les."

"You're saying—"

"Let's not talk about it, okay?"

"Okay."

A line of trees rose before them, blocking their way to the Spice Racks. They had to find a way around. He turned the truck to the right. Everyone jostled inside the cab.

"I wonder if the ones at the market saw us," Ashlie said.

"They didn't chase," Les said, "so I guess not."

"No. Not *them*. The survivors. In the windows."

The line of trees converged with another line of trees cutting out into the field. A thick, wooded forest, maybe a quarter mile thick. Beyond it Pennyroyal Avenue. "Shit." He stopped the truck in the field. Lightning scattered through the clouds. Puddles all around them. Steam rising from the hood. "Now what? There are trees blocking every entrance to the subdivision. We're pretty much back where we fucking started."

Hannah opened her tiny side door and got out, shutting it.

"Shit," Les said. To Austin: "What the fuck is she doing?"

"Hell if I know."

"She's lost her marbles," Ashlie said. "She's really lost them this time."

He told Ashlie to roll down her window. She did and he hissed, "*Hannah! What are you doing?*"

She looked back at him. "None are around. We're alone out there."

"You don't know that. They could be hiding."

"This cornfield's dead and open. They're not hiding."

"They could be in the trees. Get back in the truck."

She stared at him and then walked away.

Ashlie shook her head. "Her marbles are definitely gone."

Hannah walked around the side of the truck and knelt down at the back.

"What's she doing?" Les said. "*Praying?*"

"She can pray inside the damned truck."

Ashlie opened her door and got out.

"And then there were two," Les said.

Ashlie went around and knelt down beside Hannah in the rain. Wrapped her arm around her.

Austin cursed and opened his door, stepped into the rain.

"You too?" Les said. "This is like the Great Awakening."

He walked around the back of the truck. Hannah was crying. Ashlie was speaking softly to her. Austin looked around, scanned the trees. The only movement that from the wind. But the rain blinded his vision. He felt exposed and shivered, whether from the cold and the rain or from a nauseating fear, he didn't know. He stepped onto the tire and reached into the back and grabbed the axe. Blood on the handle. Strands of hair. Flakes of hewn bone. He stepped back down into the soft earth. Water puddle around his shoes. A dead corn-stalk scraped at his pants.

And then his ears caught something.

Les leaned out the passenger side window.

Hannah went quiet. Both she and Ashlie looked up.

The sound swept across the field, barely heard through the rain.

A guttural yell.

But not one of them.

It came louder.

He gripped the axe tightly, stared past the truck, deeper into the field wreathed in darkness and rain.

Les stepped out of the truck.

The sound came again.

"Les?" Austin said.

"Yeah."

"Can you make it out?"

"No."

They strained their ears.

A person's voice. A man's. He was yelling...

"Is he saying 'wait'?" Les said.

"Yeah. I think so."

"What do we do?"

He looked down at the axe. "I don't know."

"Les," he said. "Get in the truck. Hannah. Ashlie. Get inside."

"You have a plan?" Les asked.

"Not really, no. Just get in the truck. The keys are in the ignition. Leave if something happens. Hannah? Ashlie. Get up, all right?"

Everyone crowded into the truck.

Rainwater matted down his hair, ran down his face, sparkled on the axe blade with each burst of lightning.

Les leaned over the steering wheel, his feet hovered over the gas pedal.

An outline appeared in the darkness beyond the truck. Wailing cries: "Wait!"

He clenched the axe tighter.

The figure grew louder, stumbling across the field, half-tripping over partly-buried stalks, blindly flailing about, drenching his boots and weathered jeans in stark mud. He was large, not fat. Buff. Muscles rippling under a soaked checkered shirt. One hand waved through the air; he held something long in the other hand. More lightning. Beads of light coiled across the field, scattering in the dense trees in the woods. The ground seemed to undulate with the flash. The man's eyes burned a victorious white. On the other side of the field, dark shapes leapt and clawed at the wrought-iron fence. The man was alone. The

flash vanished, and everything dropped into an untouchable gloom. He became almost lost in the blackness.

"Wait!" he hollered, running up to the truck, fully emerging.

He held a shotgun.

Austin gripped the axe tighter.

The man reached the truck and set the shotgun against the wheel. He drew in deep and coughing gasps. His face contorted as he looked at the boy before him, the teenager. Perhaps expecting something... more. Austin said nothing and the man leaned against the truck. His arms were shaking. He dry-heaved into the back of the truck.

"Who are you?" Austin demanded.

His coughing, so rasp, as if his insides were being shredded.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

The man wiped something from his lips. "Who are *you*?"

"My name's Austin. My friends are in the cab."

"You just tore up my field with your damned truck."

"Is that why you're chasing us?" The very idea seemed incredulous.

He smiled. "I'm chasing you because you're not one of them."

Austin felt pity. This man was all alone, with no more than a shotgun, maybe a quarter mile from his house, in a world where death lurked in the shadows, and all just to find out their names, to find out who had driven a truck through his cornfield? "What do you want? A ride? You can ride in the back if you like. We're headed —"

"No. They're all over the place. Even in the woods."

Austin looked back towards the woods. The trees shimmered in the wind and rain.

The man said, "You can't get away from them."

He looked back to him. "Then why'd you come out here?"

"You're trying to do *me* a favor? I'll get killed if I go with you. Come with me."

His insides churned. "How is where you're at any better than here?"

"It's safe. I wouldn't be alive now if it... if it weren't safe."

"Where are you staying?"

Lightning and thunder.

Austin looked at the fence. Dozens of them tried to climb but failed.

"Look," the man said. "I'm staying at my farmhouse. It's all boarded up. Locked tight. No break-ins. And then there's the fence. And right now they don't give a damn about me. They're all focused on the marketplace. Look. Do you want to be driving around here at night? Where you gonna go? Through the woods? You think they're not back there? Oh, they're in the woods. They hear us right now. Right beyond those woods, what do you expect to find? I haven't seen anyone coming out of there—only you heading *into* there. Don't fucking kill yourselves. Stay with me where it's warm, where we've got food and at least wait until morning. Then maybe these things will be so tired that they have to sleep and you can go on your way—if you have any certain place in mind."

Austin had always read people decently well, and he read this man as not hostile. Caring. Sensitive. Compassionate. Friendly. An old farmer who had clung to his property as Spring Falls continued its expansions. A holdout. He had held out against the city. Maybe he could hold out against the zombies. Austin closed his eyes, felt the rain, heard the infected's hollers carried from the fence by the wind. They had barely survived with the sunlight guiding their way. At night... They had planned on holing up at night. The only reason they were in the truck was because that plan had been thwarted thanks to letting in the fucking dog.

The man picked up his gun. "At least give me a ride back to my house. It's cold. And wet. I'm tired. Not in great shape. I don't want to walk back. At least extend that courtesy to an old farmer."

"All right," Austin said. "We'll stay with you. Get in the back of the truck."

He handed Austin the shotgun. It was then that any distrust broke. He climbed into the back of the truck and Austin handed him his gun, crawled in with him. His own face seemed to be regaining color, even in the cold, sleeting winds. Austin knocked on the back window. Hannah, in the back, slid it open. "Turn around. We're holing up." She looked at the man in the back with him. Austin said, "He's got a place. Food and warmth." They were disquieted. He lied, "It's okay, I know him. From the grocery. Les. Just go." He and the man crouched in the back of the truck and the man crossed the shotgun over his legs and Les drove through the mud, tires splashing. He looked back at the fence and saw in a flash of lightning that more infected had reached the fence and were pressing against it. Les continued driving across the rugged field.

The man offered Austin his wet hand. "Austin, you say?"

He nodded, shaking it firmly.

"Morris!" the man said over the thunder. "Glen Morris! Look!" He pushed Austin's hand away and stood, pointed over the roof of the cab. Austin stood, too, legs shaking with the truck's every jostling movement. He wondered if this were such a good idea. Morris pointed forward and the headlights splashed against a two-story, late-1800s farmhouse. And though Austin had seen it a thousand times while driving down 741—a squat building in the middle of the field with a winding dirt road snaking through the trees and to an adjacent road—now with the rain and thunder and the zombies at the distant gate it looked like something out of a classic horror movie. Rain poured off the low, slanting roof in waterfalls, filling muddied pits. Mud cropped against creaking wooden baseboards. Holes had been punched into the moss-enriched porch boards. Wooden timbers draped the windows, but the front door was wide open. Lightning spread its light over the house, casting it in looping shadows. A single window on the top story had its shutters open, facing out across the field and to the fence and the marketplace beyond. A shiver ran down Austin's spine, and he wondered if this weren't such a good idea.

Les touched the brakes. The truck fishtailed. Austin and Morris gripped handholds on the side of the cab to avoid spilling over the sides. The engine silenced and the doors opened. Hannah and Ashlie came out the passenger side as Les fumbled with the key in the rain. Austin jumped out and told Ashlie everything would be okay. Morris joined Les, the polished shotgun resting faithfully in his hands. Les got the key and Morris said, "This way," and he and Les went to the front door and disappeared inside.

Ashlie and Hannah didn't move.

Austin glanced at the fence, back to them. "All right, let's go..."

"She can only hobble," Hannah said.

"What?"

"Her ankle, Austin."

He'd forgotten. He remembered she had wobbled around the truck to join Hannah. It hadn't registered then. "Okay." He faced Ashlie. "Which foot?"

"This one," she said, sticking it out.

He pulled her arm around his shoulder and lifted. "Okay. Just walk with one foot."

They walked to the porch and hobbled up the steps, Hannah behind them.

The farmer came out from inside the house. "What's taking so long?"

Les came and took Austin's place as he said, "Her ankle's sprained pretty bad."

Hannah and Les helped Ashlie inside.

"How?" the farmer asked.

"We were chased from our home."

"I have some medical supplies. It *is* a farm, you know. Shit happens."

"Yeah. Shit happens."

He grabbed Austin by the shoulder and pulled him into the warmth and dryness of the front foyer. He shut the creaky door behind him. He slid a massive iron bar padlock over the door. Austin closed his eyes, heard the rain on the roof, and in the distance, across Pennyroyal, in the Victorian estates, there were screams and sputters of gunfire and the snarls of the zombies.

9:00 PM

Les and Hannah walked through the foyer. Shadows crawled over the elaborate wooden staircase climbing to the second story. Cryptic black-and-white photographs in dusty and lopsided frames adorned the walls. An antique grandfather clock with a cracked glass face stood silent as a guard beside the entryway into the living room; the hands refused to move, dead and frozen in time. The rain on the roof reverberated through the entire woodwork of the house, one of the last bastions in Spring Falls of a bygone era. Every raindrop rattled against flaking shingles. Like nails dropped onto sheet metal. Austin wrinkled his nose. The sulfurous stench of nightly rain crept in through the cracks and boards of the wall, laying down a fog of chill. And it stank—that old country farm kind of stink, the kind infused with vinegar and cattle and pigsty.

“Put her in the living room,” Morris said, moving around Les and Hannah, who still held Ashlie. He went underneath an archway abused with scratches and indentations plowed into the wood over the years. He turned to the side, hunched over, and suddenly the room flared with intense light. He held up the oil lantern. The melting glow spread through the room, dancing silently over the keys of a 1940s fireplace, a simple brick fireplace, a worn sofa and chair. A bookcase with china in the corner. Peeling wallpaper and browning paint. “Just lay her on the sofa. Hold on.” He went back into the foyer, paused, glanced over into the adjoining kitchen opposite the living room, then went up the stairwell, the light from the oil lantern following sluggishly after him.

“Easy now,” Les said to Hannah as they took Ashlie in the living room.

They laid her on the couch and backed away.

“Is your ankle any better?” Hannah asked.

Ashlie shook her head *No*.

“Why would it be?” Les said.

Austin shivered under the wet clothes sticking to his body.

Thunder rumbled outside.

The farmer returned with the oil lamp, setting down a Red Cross medical kit. He opened it on the coffee table beside the sofa, rearranging the oil lamp beside it to shed more light. "What will she need? Sorry. The wife did all the medical stuff. I just tended the field."

"Gauze," Hannah said. "And maybe some Tylenol."

"How's aspirin? We have lots of aspirin."

"That's fine."

He tossed her gauze and a half-empty bottle of painkillers.

Hannah looked to Les. "Water. Get her some water."

The farmer stood. "I can get that."

Les interrupted. "No. You've already done so much. Rest for a little while."

The farmer hesitated, then moved over to the chair, sat down.

He seemed distracted.

Hannah wrapped the gauze around Ashlie's ankle. Austin stood over her. As she was wrapping, she stopped, glared at him. "Give me some room, all right?" He said something smart and she shot back, "I can't do this right with you breathing down my neck." He turned and walked over to the fireplace filled with burnt wood.

Les brought the water in. Ashlie swallowed the pills. She never liked swallowing pills, would bitch and moan about it; but now she didn't complain. She gulped down the water and asked for more. Les took the glass and returned to the kitchen.

The farmer's face seemed dark in the whispering lamp-light. "Austin, right?"

He looked over at him. "Yeah."

"Come with me. You're soaked." He got up from the chair.

He took him upstairs. The floorboards creaked and groaned. Morris said, "My family has owned this farmhouse for generations, ever since but a few years after the Smiths began this small Quaker village. Did you know Spring Falls

started off as a Quaker settlement? Old man Smith owned the whole tract, and his son Joshua owned the land with the creek. Legend has it they would go fishing every evening and catch their fish with nets. The creek was so clear they didn't need to use a fishing-pole. And the fish swam in schools. All the land Joshua owned is the Clearcreek part of Spring Falls. Did you know that?"

"No," Austin said. He tried to trust the flimsy step-boards.

"I wonder what they would think of *this* shit."

They reached the landing.

Morris grunted over the last step. He said, "I imagine they'd call it the end of the world. Armageddon or the Apocalypse or whatever the hell it is to them. Crazy, isn't it?" The landing opened up to a corridor and swept directly backwards to a door. A door to the left and a door to the right, shut tight. Morris fiddled with the door at the back of the hall, said, "These damn locks always get stuck..."

"I take it you're not a man of faith," Austin said.

He laughed. "I know what I see. What I taste and touch and feel. Faith is something that doesn't go over well with me."

"You're a rare breed."

"I *was* rare. I am sure the religious folk will become atheists now."

"No. They'll find a way to deal with it. A way to fit it into their theologies."

He continued with the lock, cursed. "That's foolish, if you ask me. If something happens that totally negates your faith, then your faith is a lie. Just trying to explain it away or fit it into the boundaries of your religion is just an excuse not to deal with the pressing issues."

"Maybe," Austin said. "But everyone does that. You talk like an atheist. When miracles happen, how do you explain it? You rationalize it away by science. No matter's one perspective—atheism, agnosticism, religious faith—one will drop it on a dime if something bad happens. And that's not irresponsible. It's not foolish. It's just trying to... understand from the context of your own beliefs, I guess."

He turned from the door, looked at Austin in the deep blackness. "My wife was a woman of faith. Always went to church. Sturdy Catholic all her life. Communion and alms. Confession. Everything. Don't read me wrong. People always assume they think they know everything. Don't start assuming. I have nothing wrong with faith or religion. I encourage it. Lots of good has come from religion. The morals of her faith were wonderful. Love one another. Live for one another. If the morals of her Catholic faith were really carried out by everyone, then we'd have a Utopian society." He turned and finally unlocked the door.

They entered the room. It was cold as ice. Austin rubbed the goose-bumps popping along his arms. The prickling of nerves. Two dressers sat on either side of the room, and in the middle was an old-style king-sized bed. Covers taught. Pillows fluffed. The paint on the walls was a sharp ruby red, the floorboards polished. An Arabian rug lied on the floor next to the open window. The blinds blew back and forth in the wind and rain puddle on the floor beside one of the dressers.

"Did you leave it open?" Austin asked.

"Yes. I opened it when I heard your truck. I forgot to shut it." He pointed out the window. "Look at 'em. Nasty critters." The infected continued to hurl themselves against the towering fence. Some were even climbing it and tottering over the top. Skin and clothes tore on the barbed wire, but they felt no pain, no emotion, no exertion. They fell over the other side and landed in the mud. They stood and one-by-one began walking towards the farmhouse.

Austin shivered. His mouth glued taught.

Morris just crossed his arms, stared out, shook his head. A man of science and mathematics. "Hard to believe, isn't it? Those things were once *people*. God-fearing, dreaming, wonderful people. Moms. Dads. Children. Hah! Voters. Even liberals. Some good had to come of this. But God. Look at them now. It's awful. Have you seen their eyes? You can be fooled, almost, until you see their eyes. The emptiness. The vacancy. And you know there's no human spirit in them anymore. It changes them. They become someone—something—else."

"Shut the window," Austin said, voice low.

Morris obliged. The rain stopped slashing into the room. He locked the window firm and said, "This place is safe. Those rich peacocks in their rich Victorian homes and their Japanese carts and four-course meals are rotting because they took up arms with French forks and spoons taking from Chinese Tupperware vendors. Hah! Always complaining about how my farm in the spring and supper made their mansions look undesirable. Look at them now, running around, bleeding and foaming, doing God-knows-what all over town." He chuckled. "Maybe the Quakers were onto something—maybe this *is* the judgment, eh? The Good Lord judging all those rich and insolent bastards. God sending them straight to hell." He winked at Austin. "Maybe I am finding some faith after all—don't they say faith is forged in calamity and adversity?" He laughed again. "Oh. I'm sorry, Boy. How silly of me. We came here for new clothes. I've got some." He pulled a plaid shirt from the dresser. "Put that on. See how it fits. I'll be downstairs. Check in on the others. And don't worry. This place is stocked. Food. Water. Heat. It's a wonderful hideaway. They've pretty much left us alone." He left the room, shutting the door.

He stripped off the wet shirt and threw it on the floor and put on the plaid shirt, buttoned it up. The room was dark but his eyes had adjusted. A hand-woven quilt on the bed, stitched with needle and thread. Four pillows, two on either side. He closed his eyes, imagined waking up to the dawn, hearing the wind rustling through the trees, opening the window to see Dorothy Lane Market and the gas station and the drive to the YMCA and the towering fence surrounding the Wright Brother's Airport. The farmer had said he had a wife. Or had *had* a wife. He spoke of her so casually, so flippantly, as if he hadn't really grasped that she was gone. He could imagine the old man with a pint of beer in one hand and a hand-rolled cigar in the other saying, "Yeah, my wife got sick, what could you do?" Austin left the room and walked down the narrow corridor with flanking doors on either side and descended the rickety steps. A certain aura of eeriness cloaked the stairwell, and he imagined a thick-bodied, hairy beast with a lolling hairy tongue and silted amber eyes plodding

after him, its claws rapping upon the wooden steps. He jumped to the last step and turned around and went through the foyer into the living room where everyone else had gathered. He opened his mouth to say something but spun around when the front door began to violently shake, the bolt shuddering and dust flying off the walls. Then what had begun at the door spread around the house as the infected tried to get inside. Bangs and romps and shouts from every direction, the zombies hammering and chiseling away, shrieking like banshees in a fucked-up Shakespearean mid-summer's night dream. Austin turned pale-faced and stared at Morris who stood quietly beside the fireplace running his fingers over a mounted Winchester rifle. Austin yelled his name and Morris looked over at him, said, "Give them six, seven minutes." Les, Hannah and Ashlie were on the sofa, sitting there frozen in place, staring forward, flinching with each thunderous assault. The front door creaked inwards, returned to its place. Dust fell from the rafters in ghostly sheets. Dust caked Austin's eye and he blinked, rubbed it away, cursed and shouted Morris' name. Morris calmly said, "They'll stop for a while and go back to the road. Then they'll come again in fifteen, twenty minutes. But it will hold. You have my word. And my word does not run dry." The boards on the living room window quaked and wavered but didn't lose place. Les' jaw hung open. Hannah stood and moved away from the sofa, into the middle of the room. "Just wait," Morris said; "You'll see." Hannah grabbed Ashlie's small hand. Austin felt dizzy. And then it slowly stopped, fading away. The door was abandoned, the living room window went still. Footsteps over the front porch. And then silence.

Morris grinned. "They know they can't get in. They're trying to draw us out."

"That's stupid," Ashlie said, drawing deep breaths. She reached down and rubbed her ankle.

"Is it?" Morris said. "They're not bright, but they're not dumb sheep, either. They've still got human brains. If anything, they have slivers of logic."

Les said, "Logic doesn't cannibalize. They eat one another."

Morris just smiled at him. "Some of the most royal societies were cannibalistic."

Les said, "I can't believe this. We're being hunted and you're playing philosopher."

Hannah said, "Les. Calm down." Her words were not calm—she still shook. "Whether they're dumb... or smart... it doesn't matter. It's all just speculation. But they didn't get in. Just like he said. They gave up. And I'm not going to spend my time wondering why. I'll thank God that I'm still alive and breathing. Les. Sit down. Mr. Morris? Please forgive him. His brother and best friend are in Kentucky, he has no idea how they're faring. He's winded pretty tight." Les began to speak but Hannah shot him a piercing glare and he went quiet.

"We're all wired tight," Morris said. He moved behind the chair and grabbed some firewood and went back to the fireplace and knelt down and began stocking it. He put in some starter logs and pulled a Zippo from his pocket and lit them. Light curled over the starter logs and advanced onto the firewood. Smoke rose up the chimney. He made sure the chimney vent was open and then placed a grill inside and the room began to heat.

Les sat down in the chair, grumbling under his breath.

Austin looked at the front door and then went into the living room and sat down next to Ashlie, running a hand through her hair. She complained and told him to stop so he did.

Hannah sat down on the sofa arm. "Won't the smoke attract them?" she said.

"Attract them?" he asked, stoking the fire. "I'd count on as much, to be frank." He set the stoker down and stood. "But if they come down through the chimney, they'll get scorched raw and black and we'll brush their ashes all over the bricks. Wouldn't that be fun? But enough with the *morbid* conjecture. Tell me. All of you. How did you end up driving down 741 towards Olde Towne?"

Hannah told her story and about the drama at Homer's Grocery.

"Homer was a good man," Morris said. "I played poker with him every Saturday."

Austin told about his experience at the police station and the chase through North Park. He looked at Ashlie and she looked away and he spoke simply of losing his parents. He told him of Amanda's death, coloring it up to sound peaceful and serene, for Ashlie's sake.

Les spoke of Drake and Chad and of his mother at the Daycare center.

Another barrage on the house came. Everyone flinched but were calmer.

Nine minutes later, the house was quiet.

The only sound the rain, the thunder, their breathing, the crackling fire.

"What about you?" Ashlie asked. "What's your story?"

And he told them.

Morris sat down beside the hearth, the flames warming his backside, drying the rain-clogged fibers of his shirt. "My story? Well. You know that while I'm a farmer, it's only a full-time job in the spring, summer, and autumn. During the winter I have to find work elsewhere. I have a degree in medical coronary art from Pennsylvania. My father was a coroner. I followed in his footsteps. In the winter I assist Dr. Richardson in South Arlington. He's the one who does the autopsies at Saint Elizabeth. Arlington can be rough, especially on the western side, and he affirms death by bullet wounds, strangling, poisoning, car crashes. I take no pleasure in the work, but it's a full-time job that is secure from any economic down-sliding. Dr. Townshend goes on retreat during the winter, goes down to Florida or Alabama or some place like that, and I take his place at Richardson's side. Just helping out. I drove to work this morning. Left around four. Before traffic got bad. The sun was bright this morning. Hartford was all over the radio, but I didn't care. Richardson tells me that he's been getting some phone calls about domestic disturbances to the north; he gets forewarning from the police districts. There was a car crash last night and he's identifying the cause of death of one of the victims—blunt force trauma, I think it was—when the nurse says that the phones are ringing and all the ambulances are going out

on runs. We start getting calls from the police. Accidents all over the northern party of the city, sweeping downwards and into downtown. It's a six-story building, so I go up to the top floor and look out the window. There are fires to the north but most people down on the street don't notice anything, until fingers start pointing and heads are raised. Then cars come screeching down the roads and park in front of the building and *busloads* of people start coming in. All bite wounds. Like they've been attacked by wild animals. But they say *people* attacked them. There's rioting in the suburbs and there are fire engines and ambulances and cop cars everywhere. It's turning into a mess."

He stoked the fire. "A couple of the bite victims die soon after arriving, and Richardson puts them on a lab table. The bite victims are being sent to toxicology, and when they die, they're sent down to the morgue. We strap them down. Basic procedure. Richardson's saying how strange this is, how he's seen nothing like it. We strap them down. Richardson saying how crazy this is, he's seen nothing like it. He puts blankets over the corpses and begins the basic preliminary on one of them when the body fucking tenses and struggles against the straps! Richardson flips shit. Can you blame the guy? The woman on the gurney had become a horrible mesh of human flesh, and she starts screaming and snapping at him, underneath the blanket, struggling against the straps! Richardson tries to subdue her, but the straps break and she grabs him by the head, jerks him down, and takes a chunk out of his neck. Blood is gushing everywhere and he sags against the wall."

His eyes glazed, then refocused. "I try to help him, calling for help. The woman is trying to get free. Then all the other bodies under the sheets start moving back and forth, howling and crying out. Richardson goes limp. I jump up to the phone and try to dial for someone to get down here but when I look out the door to shout for a doctor I see the stairwell flooding with people running, screaming. I turn and see Richardson, the old fool, getting up. At first I'm thankful, the bite must not have been that bad, but then he tries to kill me, and I get in the elevator. Somehow it works, and it opens on the ground floor. I run outside. People are running down the streets, hollering, 'They're coming!

They're coming!' Around a block here come hundreds of people, running full-throttle, except they're not people. They're jumping over cars and throwing people down and beating them to death. Just ugly! I get in my car and somehow avoid accidents on the roads. The freeway is a mess. Accidents are piling up everywhere, from people trying to flee, people succumbing to bites behind the wheel; Arlington is going up in smoke, it's god-awful. The accidents clear and I jet my way south. I shook my head at the people driving towards Arlington, so unknowing. God knows where they are now, or even *who* or *what* they are! By the time I get home it's seven ten or so. I get off the exit and am driving through Clearcreek when I start to see the accidents piling up. There are people beating people at gas stations and K-Mart and restaurants. People running, screaming, into the trees, the woods, only to be chased down like savages. I went up Tamarack, connected to Pennyroyal and got to the farm. By then these guys, these creatures, they're filling the streets, the buildings, there's rioting and carnage. Parents versus children, friends versus friends. Neighbor versus neighbor. How screwed up is that?"

He shook his head at that last thought, then a smile perked across his lips. "But we're better than that, aren't we? We haven't fallen into their hands yet. This can't last forever. It just *can't*. Let me tell you—we stay here, hoard up, become best of friends, rely on one another, sacrifice for one another, and live for one another, and we'll hold out. These beasts, they need *food* to survive. Their attacks on the house get weaker with the hours. They can't feel it, I don't think, but their muscles are growing weak. Without the pain, the body can't tell the muscles to stop. Muscles will tear, deteriorate. These *things* will die of starvation or dehydration, maybe even in a few weeks. And before that, they will become immobile, their muscles shorn. If we can hold out that long..." A wan grin spilt over his face. "If we can live for the next few weeks, we'll be *legends*."

The infected assaulted the house again.

Hannah shuddered. "I *hate* them."

Morris stood, walked over to the couch, sat down beside her. "Don't worry. This place is secure. It's like I said. If we can hold out for the next couple weeks, we'll be fine. We'll help rebuild this world. It will be an entirely new society." He slapped his knee. "We can even make it Utopia! How does that sound?"

The infected continued to strike at the walls and windows and doors.

Growling. Snarling. Howling. The complete antithesis to Utopia.

Ashlie rested her head on her brother and began to sing. Her words floated through the rooms of the farmhouse. The infected chanted their death sonnets and continued assaulting the house. She sang louder. Austin closed his eyes, too, as she sang the Disney classic "A Whole New World." The infected, furious with malicious envy, volleyed even harder. But she sang louder. Hannah joined in, her own chorus rising above the maelstrom outside. Morris, Les, and Austin listened, pushing out the sounds of a wicked reality, longing for the mythic, the enchantment, the beauty—the childlike passions that were lost just over twelve hours ago. And then the assault ended, the infected abandoning the house. Ashlie quit singing and Hannah quieted. Even in the silence, broken only by the thunder outside and the rain drumming on the roof, the words of that beautiful sonnet could still be heard.

"Beautiful," Morris said. "You have beautiful voices. Both of you."

Ashlie said, "Amanda and I used to sing it together when she spent the night."

"Well, your voices are very nice. Did you ever sing as a threesome?"

"No," Hannah said. "I was in choir at school. And at church."

"You kids are religious?" He nods to himself. "Faithful teens. I never saw that one coming. Most teenagers today are brutal, harsh, mean. Disrespectful. Selfish. Caring only about themselves. Sometimes they'd come into my fields and fuck with my equipment. But Catholic teens. Virginia would love it."

"Nondenominational," Hannah corrected.

His eyebrows raised. "Eh?"

Austin said, "Protestant. We're protestant."

"Oh. Most Catholics aren't too fond of you. You heretics." He laughed. "But Virginia, bless her... She had a heart of gold."

"Who's Virginia?" Ashlie asked. "Your wife?"

He nodded. "Yes. Most beautiful thing I ever did lay my eyes on. See?" He stood and walked to the wall with the mounted black-and-white photographs. He pointed to one with a plump lady with twirled brown hair, a gentle smile, a cross necklace. Frilly Sunday dress and a King James Bible. "She prayed three times a day and read her Bible morning and night. Woke up to read her Bible with the sunrise and lied down to read it under the stars with a candle. When it wasn't raining, of course. See those two young ones?" he said, pointing at an adjacent photograph. "Those are my sons. Both are grown up now. One lives in the south, he's an architect for some high-rise skyscraper company. The other moved to England to work with Scotland Yard. The finest cop you'd ever meet. He served in the San Francisco Bay area for quite some time."

They sat in the living room staring at the fire in the hearth. Morris left the room. Les stood and went to the desk. "Hey. Austin. Check this out." On the desk was a sleek ink-black notebook computer. Austin opened it, expecting a black screen. But to his surprise it whirled into action.

"There's no electricity," Les said.

"Batteries?" Austin said, shrugging.

The desktop screen appeared and Austin took a breath and clicked on the internet. It popped up. The Yahoo main page.

"Check the news," Les said, hopeful.

"Wait a minute." He went up to the address bar and typed the address of his online blog. Waited. Something slid against the side of the house. Ashlie and Hannah looked towards the sound but then it was gone. A black and green screen popped up. He looked at his blog. A website holding his most tender thoughts, which tended to be updated every day or so. The one from last night—he had written it nearly exactly 24 hours ago—glared at him as if it were an omen from a lost and distant world.

Sometimes I have to wonder. I sit in silent amazement, and close my eyes, and just feel it—it never leaves. When I close my eyes, the feeling presses against me in the blackness. When I go to sleep, my dreams do not betray my hidden desires. Every moment I walk and every second I breathe, my mind is on fire and no one and nothing can quench the burning longings. Every inch of me wants to bow down, wants to love, to embrace, to cry out and talk and hold and be there to fight for and to be loyal, to sacrifice, to put myself to death even without warrant. I can't explain any of it. All I know is how it is—why, I can't explain and don't pretend to. I cry out for answers. I wail to understand. I beg for it to end—such beauty and wonder is torture on the mind if in the mind it remains.

Is it love? I wouldn't know.

Why can't I forget her?

How come I ever had to meet her?

Why don't my feelings for her leave?

How come my prayers to forget her are left unanswered?

Why must my heart suffer for futile longing every time I see her?

How long must I go through this hostile and agonizing torture?

Why are her words, her laugh, her very eyes so deep and beautiful?

How come I feel this way about her?

Why won't this end?

How come my mind plays games with me?

Why do I reach out and long for someone I can never have?

I want to see her sitting across the table from me. I want to hold

her hand, to feel the blood rushing through her veins. I don't want her to look away, but to look at me and smile. I want to hold her in the rain, under the thunder and lightning. I want to be free and untethered. I want to run wild like the stallion, and be as ferocious as the lion. I want to spend hours driving through the countryside with her by my side. I want all this. I want it simple. I want her.

But it seems I can't have all this; I can't have it simple; and what kills, I can't have her.

Maybe it is just me being a teenager. But after countless prayers and attempts to forget, I am left empty and hurt and thirsty for her. It should take months to get rid of her. But I've been trying for years. She never leaves me. Never leaves. Never.

Les' arm moved around him and he said, "Don't do this to yourself. It's not going to change anything." He wanted to protest but he knew such preoccupations only poisoned his own soul, his own survival, his own existence. Every moment spent in past fantasies was a moment he let his guard down. A moment the water crept up on the dam. And at any moment, given enough time, enough fantasies, enough reflections upon past memories, the dam would burst. He would be gone. Maybe the others, maybe even Ashlie, would be gone, too. He stepped away from the notebook.

Les went to the Yahoo homepage and began to click on the button for the news when the screen went dark and dead. "Fuck."

Morris entered the room. "Les?"

He turned around.

Morris shook his head. "Never mind. Hannah?"

Hannah stood up from the arm of the sofa. "Yeah?"

"Look at you. You're a mess. Let's get you a new change of clothes. Virginia might have some old clothes you can wear, though she was a bit more rounded than you. But we'll see what we can come up with. You look dreadfully cold and miserable. Let's try on... a warm, dry sweater."

Hannah beamed. "That'd be really nice of you, Mr. Morris."

"Follow me, then." He disappeared up the steps.

Hannah followed him out into the foyer and up the creaking stairwell.

"I was looking around while Mr. Morris grabbed you some clothes, and I found something." Les left the room.

Austin looked over to his sister. "Is it okay if I slip away for a few?"

She nodded. "I'm going to try and sleep. My ankle still hurts a lot."

"Okay. I'll be back once Les shows me whatever fantastic find this is."

"He thinks it's fantastic," Ashlie said.

He gave her a thumbs-up and went into the foyer and Les told him to get the oil-lamp so he went back and got it and joined him in another room down the corridor past the stairs. It looked like a den. He lifted the oil-lamp, spreading light through the room. Les grabbed a dusty radio off the shelf.

Austin sighed. "Les. The truck's radio is so much better and all we got was—"

"This isn't a one-way radio. It's a two-way. I've seen this on television."

"So it's like a walkie-talkie."

"Yeah. But it's a walkie-talkie on steroids." He fiddled with the knobs.

"No one is—"

He ignored him and kept turning the knob. Finally the static cleared. Tiny, faint voices.

"Les, turn it up. There. There!" He ran and stood beside him.

He twisted the volume higher. The language wasn't American. "Spanish? French?"

"Russian. Keep looking."

He continued flipping through it. They found Spanish and French broadcasted.

"All the voices are hurried, frantic," Les said. "Nervous."

"Scared," Austin added. "Why aren't we seeing any American—"

"Here," Les said, adjusting the knob. The voice spoke English.

"...prisons across the country have turned into refugee camps. Come to San Quentin and we will quarter you safely. We have armed defenses and machinery that can be used against the infected. Originally intended for rioting prisoners, it has proven effective against repelling the sick."

"Prisons?" Les said. "Who the hell thought of that brilliant idea?"

"Do you think it's recorded?"

"Hell if I know."

"...many western towns especially in the Great Plains have been turned into military reserve bases and are hoarding any refugees who have not been contaminated by the virus. If you have been contaminated by the virus, do you not try to enter the camps. You will be exterminated, due to the orders of the Security of Defense. As of now we are not going to bother giving you names of refugee camps because many have not checked in with airborne control. We believe the less secure camps are falling to the disease. The best advice we can give now is to store non-perishable food items and water, find some blankets and emergency supplies, and gather your loved ones. Stay off the roads, stay away from the cities, towns, markets, and all public places. Lock your doors, lock your windows, and stay away from them. Hole up and wait. Militaries in all countries are combating the disease in various ways. Scientists are working hard to find a

cure as quickly as possible. Remember—the only means of exterminating the infected is by a direct puncture to the brain.”

“Refugee camps?” Les said. “More hold-outs?”

“The militaries are fighting. We haven’t been completely abandoned. We’re not alone.”

“...New England and the Midwest of the United States are, for all intensive purposes, completely overrun by the virus, except for some small towns and hold-outs across the regions. If you lived in one of these areas, you are warned that you are in what the authorities are calling a ‘Hot Zone.’ The disease has taken millions if not billions of lives over the last couple hours. Do not go outside. Do not leave your homes. Do not open your doors or windows. This is not something to be treated lightly. Many people are still dying and will continue to die until we find a cure. The southern United States is over thirty percent overtaken by the virus, and we warn those living in the south to stay off the highways and main roads. Get indoors, get safe. The western United States is only seventeen percent overrun, but the plague is swiftly moving from the east. All westerners are persuaded to get all emergency supplies you need, to find your loved ones, and to prepare for the virus. If it hasn’t reached your area yet, in all likelihood, it will. Schools have been released, businesses have been shut down. Martial law is being enforced throughout the country.”

The south wasn’t overrun and neither was the west. Ohio had been taken over quickly—but the world wasn’t dead. Austin looked at Les and said, “Hope.” A smile crossed his face like twin high-beams.

Les nodded. “They’re looking for a cure. And they’ll find it. They have to.”

"They will," Austin said.
And he almost believed it.

"...We have just received word that Atlanta, Georgia has fallen to the virus. Citizens of Atlanta are ordered to hole up or evacuate if you have a safe means to do so."

"So much for the south," Austin said.

"It's just Atlanta."

"And Atlanta is a fucking huge city."

"The west is still there. We just need to ride it out. Like the farmer said."

"...If you live near the coast, you are urged to get out onto the water as soon as possible. Inhabitants of coastal towns and cities have taken to the water, observing correctly that the infected have a strong aversion to large bodies of water. If you have the safe means to reach such a body of water, and have the means to get onto it without drowning, you are advised to do so. No one has yet had any evidence of infected entering bodies of water larger than swimming pools."

The Atlantic? Too far. They were holed up in the middle of a landlocked —

"Lake Erie," Austin said. "That's where we need to go."

"How in the hell do you expect to get to Lake Erie? It's, what, two hundred miles—"

The transmission swept over with a screaming noise. Austin grabbed the radio from Les' hands and fiddled with the knob. They heard a different man's voice:

"Can anyone hear me? Please. If anyone can hear me, respond! If you can't respond, I'm at the Clearcreek YMCA. I have a plane

next door on the airfield. If you come and get me, I can get us onto the plane. We can get the hell out of here. The virus hasn't gotten to the west yet. I was thinking we could—Oh God! They're coming in!"

Les and Austin drew hasty breaths.

"He's at the YMCA," Austin said. "Only a half mile away."

"Half a mile? That's right past the market. Where there's *hundreds* of them."

"We can go around it. The truck's right outside."

"It's too far."

"It's closer than Lake Erie."

"Oh God, they're going to get in! Please. Somebody! If you can get out here come get me! Anybody! I've got an airplane and keys and we can go to a refugee camp and get out of here. Please! Anyone..."

Austin reached for the transmit button.

Les slapped his hand away. "What are you doing?!"

"He's across the field, Les!"

"Across the field? Across the fucking world."

"He's got a plane. We've got a truck. We pick him up and—"

"And do what?" he interrupted. "Assuming we can even get to him and get to the plane, what happens then? It's fucking *night-time*, Austin. Electricity's out. When the plane runs out of fuel, what then? He won't be able to transmit to anyone. Won't be able to find an airport without a working radio and without being able to see in the fucking darkness. We'll just crash. And if we *do* make it to, say, San Diego, what then? You think we'll be met with tears of joy and smiles and brandy and wine?"

"Your sarcasm is not well-masked."

"It's not meant to be."

"Les. Think about it. We can stay here, if that's what you want. But I don't want to spend every minute in fear of what will happen next! I want to be able to sleep peacefully. And we *can*. But it's not just going to fall into our laps on a silver platter."

"You're crazy, you know that? We'll get killed. We'll turn into *them*."

"We won't."

"How do you know?"

"How do you know we will? Can you sleep an hour from now knowing we could be sleeping twenty thousand feet above all this hell?"

"I'll be sleeping soundly knowing I'm not bleeding from a bite and stalking the innocent."

"Les..."

He grabbed the radio and turned it off. The man's desperate pleas faded. "Austin. Be logical. It won't work. This isn't another one of your video games. They're all around the house. The field is infested with them. You saw how many were at the marketplace. That's right on the road we'd have to take to reach the YMCA, unless you wanted to go five miles out of your way just to come in from the opposite direction. And even if we got past them, we'd have to find this guy and *hope* he's not dead or worse. And if he *is* dead, we might as well just pull the trigger on ourselves. If he *isn't* dead, we have to find a way to get to the airfield without getting killed, and we have to hope to God that the pilot isn't some amateur with a pick-axe and a hot-wiring degree."

"Pick-axe and hot-wiring?" he said. "You're not making any sense, Les."

"No offense, Austin, but neither are you."

The walls of the den shook as the infected assaulted the house once more. "Damn it," Austin said. "It's going to be like this all night."

"But their muscles are weakening," Les said, listening to the barrage.

"Mr. Morris is a quack. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Nice compliments for the man who saved your life."

"My life wasn't in jeopardy when he invited us in."

"I still think they're getting weaker. They're tearing their muscles."

"Does it sound like they're weaker?" he said.

"It's only been twenty minutes. I'm getting a glass of water. Want anything?"

"No. I'm going to go back with Ashlie. She's probably freaking out."

He said, "You're lucky to have her."

"Yes. And I'm not going to lose her."

The two of them left the den. Les went into the kitchen and Austin returned to the living room to find Ashlie lying on the sofa, staring at the ceiling. She jumped when she saw him from the corner of her eye. "It's just me," he said, feeling the waves of heat trickling from the fireplace. The infected continued to throw themselves against the house, trying to find a way inside. She sat up on the sofa and he sat down beside her. He told her, "Les found a radio. Someone on the airwaves said that the military still exists and is fighting, and the western United States is still pretty much intact, so —"

"Do you think they know?" she said, cutting him off. "Know they're sick?"

"No. They're dead, Ashlie."

"How do you know?"

"On the television... Around..." He tried to remember what time it had been. 9:00? 10:00 that morning? "On the television, they said their vital systems end, and then they—no, the virus inside them, or the germ or bacteria or whatever it is—returns. Reanimates them." She shot him an odd look. "Vital systems are breathing, heartbeat, brain processes. When they end, you die."

"How do you know?"

"It was on the television," he said again. "When it first started happening."

"The televisions work?"

"What? No. Not anymore... But these people, Ashlie, they aren't really people. Not in the strictest sense of the word."

"They're not even just a little bit people?"

"Ashlie... They're dead. Okay? I promise."

Les appeared in the archway. "Austin? You'd better come see something."
Ashlie sniffled.

"Not right now, Les."

He hurried to the sofa and grabbed him by the wrist, fingernails digging into his skin. "*Now.*"

The tone of urgency in his voice brought Austin to his feet. He went after Les into the kitchen. The counters were dull and gray cedar, pockmarked and gnawed over time. A single solid oak table sat off to the side with unlit candlesticks in the middle. A toaster oven, a knife display, odd trinkets lining the shelves, memoirs from the farmer's life. The oil-lamp shed dull light over everything. It sat on the counter by the boarded-up window. The room was frighteningly cold and it stank of onions and garlic. Les walked over to the pantry door. "Watch." He gripped the doorknob and rattled it.

Without hesitation something—someone—threw itself against the other side of the door, clawing at the gossamer wood. Austin reached down into his pocket and grabbed the knife he'd brought from home. The blade glinted in the lantern's light. The person behind the pantry sounded huge. Panting came from underneath the door as it tried to escape. He gripped the knife handle tightly. Les rapped the door with his knuckles. A shriek issued forth, hollow and degrading. Shivers traced like a mace into the back of Austin's skull.

Les hissed, "Farmer Brown isn't telling us everything."

The two of them bolted from the kitchen, passed the living room and den, and sprinted up the steps. One of the side doors was open. Les held the lantern up into the room and the light spread over racks of hunting rifles. The hallway seemed to grow longer and narrower, the ceiling bearing down above. They went to the bedroom door and knocked. Light issued from the crack beneath the heavy door.

"Morris!" Austin yelled. "Morris! Get out here!"

Les looked down the hallway, towards the stairwell.

“Morris!” Austin yelled, banging his fists on the door.

Les ran back to the stairs. Austin reeled back, cursed, and swung the heel of his foot into the door. The door creaked and groaned. He kicked it again, and this time he threw all his weight against it. He stepped back and then hurled every fiber of his being into that door. The hinges cracked, busted, the cryptic lock snapped, and the door burst open. Something swung out at him and cracked against his forehead. He fell back into the doorframe and slid to the ground, seeing stars and hearing a siren in his ears. Intense pain shot through his head and he felt blood crawling down the bridge of his nose and spreading across his cheeks. Nausea wrapped around him and he felt as if he were going to vomit.

A shirtless Morris said, “Oh, it’s you! My God! I thought you were one of...”

Hannah ran from the room, crying. Austin caught a glimpse of her from his eye: half-naked, wrapping a sheet around her. He then understood. He forgot the pain and the stars before his eyes and sent his foot into Morris’ shin. The farmer swaggered back, cursing like a sailor, and Austin got to his feet and drove his foot into the man’s stomach. Morris stumbled back but didn’t fall and rushed forward and grabbed the boy and threw him into the dresser. He then went to the door but the boy went after him. Morris clocked him and Austin fell to the ground. He returned to shutting the door. Austin wedged his foot into the crack and the door refused to shut. Morris bent down to remove the boy’s foot when the door burst open, knocking Morris square in the face and sending him into one of the bedroom dressers. Les had thrown himself against the door but tripped over Austin’s foot and landed beside Morris. Morris grabbed him and pushed him away. Les swung at him but Morris deflected and drove his fist into his abdomen. Les fell against the wall, groaning. Austin got to his feet. Morris stood and grabbed Les and lifted him and threw him onto the bed. He didn’t notice Austin was up and went for Les, hands formed like claws. Les drove his two feet into his torso and the man stumbled back. Austin tried to see through the blood sliding down his face and over his cheeks and jaw bones and

pooling in the pits of his eyes and nose. He saw the man launch on top of Les. There came a flash of silver, and as the man fell onto him, Les drove a knife up into the softness of Morris' chest. Morris screamed, leaping back; the blade withdrew from his chest, Les gripping the handle firmly. Morris looked down at his chest to see blood running down his bare skin. He cursed at the boy but Les was on his feet, swinging the knife. It drew a savage cut across Morris' bare arm. Morris swore and reached for the blade. Les side-stepped and struck twice into Morris' side. Now Morris was heaving and bleeding. The punctures on his side spit squirts of blood onto the hardwood floor and onto the dresser and bed as the man circled on the verge of fainting. Morris raised his arm to strike at Les but Les struck first, driving the knife into Morris' armpit. Blood sprayed all over the Arabian rug. Les dropped the knife to the ground and pushed Morris forward. Morris fell to the floor with a groan and blood stained the rug red. His breath came in shallower and shallower gasps and then there was nothing at all.

Les stood entranced over Morris' body. Austin stood by the doorway. Hannah came through the room with the sheet and saw Morris' body and didn't react. She went to the other dresser and dropped the blanket, revealing that she wore nothing but panties. Austin saw her bare breasts but didn't even notice. He stared at Morris' body and Les, breathing in deep breaths with his fingers shaking, standing over him. Hannah put on a shirt and as she did she stared at Les with the blood covering his clothes in swirling spatter.

"Les," Austin said.

He looked over at him, rage in his eyes. "He was going to rape her, Austin."

"Les."

"He was crazy."

"Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "No. A little sore. A little... winded."

"How bad am I?"

"Your forehead is bleeding again."

"Fuck. I keep forgetting about that. Every time it scabs over it opens again."

"Your face is covered in blood. Do you feel weak?"

"No. I'm fine. I'll take care of it." He walked over to the dresser beside Hannah. She looked away from him. He opened the drawers and found some silk stockings and with one he wiped his face down, removing most of the blood. His face remained a ruby red. He wrapped the other around his forehead, wrapping it tightly around the wound. Each heartbeat sent waves of pain shooting through his head. A vicious migraine.

Les joined them.

Hannah thanked him over and over.

"It's fine," Les said. "Thank Austin. When it happened... I went downstairs to get a knife... And he kept the farmer occupied."

She looked at him. "Thank you."

"Yeah," he said.

And that's when they heard screaming coming from downstairs.

Ashlie's screams swept through the farmhouse. Austin led the frantic race downstairs. He hit the bottom landing and saw that the wood above the iron bar on the front door had splintered. The infected on the other side continued to assault with all their might. The walls shook and quivered. He ran into the living room. Ashlie's face was pale and she stood awkwardly in the center of the room, immobile. "They're breaking through the front door!"

"Can you walk?" he demanded.

She wobbled forward.

"Get upstairs," he said. "Hannah! Take her upstairs, into the bedroom!"

Les stood at the foot of the steps, gawked at a bloodied, purplish hand reaching through. "They sound like fucking animals," he said.

"Les," Austin said as Hannah took Ashlie and went for the steps. "The guns."

"In the gun room? Yeah." He turned and ran up the steps past Hannah and Ashlie.

Austin ran into the den, feeling around blindly without the light from the lantern. He found what he was looking for and turned up the volume. Silence. Not even static. The house continued to shake. He carried it out to the front of the stairwell. He hit the transmit button. "Pilot?! Pilot!"

Crackling static, then: "Hello? Hello? Thank God!"

"Where are you?"

The infected shrieked at the doorway.

"The Clearcreek YMCA! Where are *you*?"

"Across the street, Buddy. We're coming for you. Stay put."

"I'm not going anywhere," he replied grimly. "I think there are still some below..."

Another mottled, purple hand shot through the door as a wooden board splintered into sawdust and twisted splinters of wood. Austin ran up the steps.

10:00 PM

Hannah held a hunting rifle in her hands, feeling its weight, eyes moving uncertainly over the stock and barrel as Austin entered the room. Les gave one to Ashlie and pushed one towards her brother. He took it and was surprised at how heavy it felt. Les told them they were loaded. "Just don't shoot one of us on accident."

Ashlie stated matter-of-factly, "They're going to get in. We can't stay here."

For a moment no one spoke. They listened to them downstairs, fumbling at the door. There was no hope in Ashlie's voice. She had been drained down to the marrow of her bones.

Les said, "The truck. We need to get to the truck."

"We can't go downstairs," Austin said.

"The roof. Look." He walked past the farmer's corpse to the window. He slid the window open. Rain lashed out and lightning sent icy shivers through the room, its light massaging the farmer's body. "The roof slopes down from this window. But where's the truck? Other side of the house, right. We're fine. We'll just crawl out, walk over the roof—but be careful," he said, looking back at them, "because it'll be slippery. And then we can jump down to the truck. It's parked right next to the front porch."

"All the while praying," Austin said, "that we can get inside the truck, start the engine, and drive to safety without being killed or eaten first. But... it's a plan. You going out there first?"

"I went out first last time. But, hell, why not?"

"Who has the keys?" Hannah asked.

"I do," Les said, "they're right..." He stopped, thrusting his hand into his pockets. "Wait a minute..."

"Fuck, Les," Austin said. "Don't tell me you lost the damned keys."

"I just had them... I swear I had them..."

Hannah went and shut the bedroom door, locked it. "They'll be inside soon."

"Damn it, Les. Find those fucking keys."

He checked all his pockets twice, looked up with wide eyes. "I don't have them."

"*Fuck!*" Austin screamed, turning and kicking the bedpost.

Ashlie said, "Where did you last have them?"

"Downstairs, and I put them in my... They're on the desk."

"That's great," Austin said. "Fucking wonderful."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, get the fuck down there and get them!"

Les didn't move. "They're going to be getting inside..."

"Shit," Austin said. Holding the hunting rifle in both hands he went to the door and opened it and stepped into the dark hallway. "Shut the door," he snarled. "If you don't hear me calling, don't open it. It might be me—and it might not."

Ashlie looked at him as if he were going to the moon, never to return.

Les stood stoic by the window, avoiding Austin's eyes, looking at shaking hands.

Hannah, for the first time, didn't protest his decision.

"All right," he said, and he left the room.

Hannah shut the door, trapping him in the blackness of the cryptic corridor.

Sweat drenched his palms and his quivering finger treaded lightly upon the trigger. The sounds of the infected at the front door were louder and more frenzied. He descended the steps one at a time. His heart lodged in his throat, choking him, suffocating him. At the last few steps he stopped and stared at the front door. Through the cracked boards he saw two pairs of yellow eyes. They opened their mouths when they saw him. One reached out a hand as if thinking it could reach him. He raised the gun and pulled the trigger. The hand splashed

up against the wall, fingers blown away, and the infected cried out. Another shot and the bullet drilled through its head. Its body slumped down. The other foolishly took its place but Austin made sure he rejoined his comrade. Another infected appeared in their spot and he yearned to squeeze the trigger once more but knew not to waste his time. They surrounded the house. There could be hundreds.

He abandoned the staircase and went into the living room. The walls were shaking and the gunshots seemed only to ruffle their feathers, to incense their rage. Torrents of dust fell from the timber rafters. With every breath dusty flakes tingled in his throat. He glimpsed down the corridor leading to the kitchen and saw the countertops and—He froze. The basement hung wide, opening into the kitchen. The lock had shattered and it lied on the floor. The oil-lamp cast shady ribbons of light into the basement but then it dispersed into the inky darkness.

He looked away and went into the living room. He was there for the keys. The afterimage of the open door remained engraved in his mind. The fire in the hearth burned low, incandescent embers coating the bottom. He went directly to the desk and in the firelight scavenged for the keys. He slid the laptop aside. He found them sitting on a ledge above the desk. He swooped them up and put them in his pocket and saw several pictures on the ledge. These pictures had glass frames. In one black-and-white one he saw an image of Morris' wife, the plump lady who would always be found wearing her cross necklace and clutching her King James Bible. And in the black-and-white of the photo he saw in the reflection the very same woman standing right behind him.

He tore himself around to see the frazzled woman standing by the fireplace. The back of her head was ragged and bleeding. Blood coated her entire face, except for those empty brown eyes. Her polka-dot dress was blanching in blood running like a medieval corset down her side. Their eyes met and she lunged forward, her dull foot kicking the chair to the side. Austin raised the gun to fire but it only clicked when he squeezed the trigger. Jammed. He tried to swing it

around to use the butt of the rifle to hit her but it slipped out of his sweaty fingers and landed on the floor. She was nearly upon him and he backed into the wall beside the desk, grabbed a picture frame and threw it at her. It bounced off her head and landed in the fire. She reached towards him. He slid to the ground, rolled to the side, away from her. The wife fumbled around the desk, knocked over the laptop and sent several glass picture-frames onto the floor. She stepped on the frames and the glass shards dug deep into her feet, drawing welts of blood over her stockings. He shimmied over to the coffee table. She turned and wobbled towards him. He got to his feet and went to the fireplace. She went beside the coffee table. He circled her, arriving at the desk. He knelt down and picked up one of the glass shards. She came at him and he drilled the shard upwards and into her neck. A gurgling shriek blasted spittle of fetid blood over his face and throat. He clocked her across the face. She reeled backwards. He swung his leg into hers, knocking it out from under her; she fell against the chair and onto the floor. Her head rocked back and forth over her slit jugular. Blood sprayed in arcs like a fountain around the room, emanating from the ruthless gash. The blood danced over the walls, the ceiling, the floor and furniture, stained the pictures of her smiling face with her smiling family, shattered memories. Austin tried to move around her to leave the room but she grabbed his ankle and pulled it towards her mouth. He flailed about, frantic, and stumbled over her and fell against the brick of the fireplace. She was crawling towards him. He picked up the fire poker. She neared him and when she was close enough, he slammed the sharp end down into her skull. She gave a grunt and went silent.

He ran out of the room, the keys jingling in his pocket. The infected had nearly come through the door. They shrieked excitedly when he came into view. The noises of chaos came from the kitchen. He glanced over to see them crawling through a window, onto the counters, then falling onto the kitchen floor. He swung around the stairwell banister and took the steps two at a time. The infected burst through the front door, somehow manhandling the iron bar up

and over its holsters. He heard them coming through as he reached the second floor landing. He ran to the door and slammed his fists on the heavy wood. "Hannah! Ashlie! Les! Open the door *now!*"

The door opened. He went inside. Hannah shut it quickly.

"Lock it! Lock it!"

She locked it. The door bent inwards.

"Outside!" Austin yelled. "Now!"

Les took his rifle and stepped out onto the sloping roof through the wide window. He turned and helped Ashlie through, saying, "It's slippery, watch it."

Hannah stared numbly at the doorway. Austin grabbed her hand and spun her around. "Go! Go!" He took her rifle as she went through.

He backed up to the window.

The door bulged, splintered, burst apart.

A man and a younger woman came through, covered in rain-slicked blood. Two shots cried out from the rifle, piercing their chests. They kept coming. He raised the sight and fired off two more shots. The backs of their heads burst apart and they were thrown backwards onto the floor. More came into the room, lurching over their bodies.

"Austin!" Les yelled. "Come on!" He and Ashlie stood on the roof outside the window, guns pointed from either side of the window, into the room. They fired off several shots as Austin crawled through the window. Les' shots were spot-on: he and his father had gone to the shooting range once a week for over two years. Ashlie's gun shook in her hands and the shots sprayed against the wall. Outside on the roof it was windy and the rain seared like tiny pinpricks and the cold was ungodly. The roofing tiles were slick and loose. As soon as Austin had crawled through, Les shut the window and latched it with an outside latch, an old component on Quaker farmhouses. The infected shattered the window but couldn't get a grip on the slippery tiles to crawl through.

"Now what?" Hannah wailed. "We're going to get hit by lightning."

Lightning flashed behind the marketplace beyond the fence. Hundreds of infected still surrounded it, oblivious to those fleeing the farmhouse. Dull lights

burned inside the marketplace's high-rise windows. No more infected stood by the fence and the ground beneath them was clear. They were all rushing inside.

Les moved forward, Hannah behind him, then Ashlie. Austin followed last.

He almost slipped on the loose tiles and then righted himself.

Les cried out, slipped. Hannah reached down to help him but she slipped, too. Les rolled over the roof, groping at the flimsy tiles. He reached the edge and disappeared. Ashlie hollered. Hannah began inching her way to the side. Austin sat down and shimmied to the edge, looked down. Les was pulling himself up in the grass. He looked okay. He waved a hand, beckoning them silently. Austin thought he meant for them to come down, and then he realized what Les really meant. He shifted his position and reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys. He held them up. Lightning illuminated them. Les nodded.

Infected came around the side of the farmhouse.

Hannah shouted, pointed.

Les swung around, raised his rifle, fired.

Austin shouted, "Ashlie!" and tossed her the keys. He raised his rifle and fired. The shots rang out. The infected fell to their feet. He knew more would be coming. He tossed his gun to the ground and slid off the sloped roof. He fell ten feet and landed hard in the soft grass. He crawled over to the gun, grabbed it, stood. More infected clambering over the fallen ones. He joined Les and shot at them. More from the other side. Les swung around and began firing.

Ashlie and Hannah dangled from the roof, then joined them.

Ashlie shrieked as her ankle thudded on the ground. She began to cry.

"Help her!" Austin yelled. "Hannah! *Help her!*"

Hannah picked her up. She continued crying and screaming.

From the marketplace infected began swarming the fence, drawn by the gunshots.

Les ran around the side of the house.

"Hannah! Come on!"

"Help me with her!" she snarled. "I can't carry her by myself!"

He cursed and shouldered his rifle and went over and took Ashlie's other side. Together they half-ran, half-walked after Les. They went around the corner and saw several bodies strewn about in the grass, the blood gurgling from their wounds steaming in the chilled spring night air. The truck was right before them. Les shouted, "Keys!"

Ashlie said, "They're in my... pocket..."

Austin reached in, grabbed them, pulled them out, tossed them to Les.

Les caught them and opened his door and got inside and unlocked all the doors. The others reached the truck. Hannah released Ashlie and opened the passenger door. Austin leaned his sister against the side of the truck and propped his rifle beside her and pushed Hannah out of the way. "Les. Give me your gun." He did. Austin took it and backed away, looked over to Ashlie. "Come on, get in the truck. Ride up front with Les." He helped her inside and shut the door. "Hannah. You're with me, in the back." He handed her Les' rifle and he grabbed his propped up against the truck and they climbed into the truck's bed and squatted down against the back of the cab.

Les put the truck in gear and they drove off, the truck's wheels spitting up mad. Austin and Hannah bounced around in the back and they left the farmhouse behind them. Flashing lightning illuminated the stoic house and the dark figures in all the windows and on the porch and even some crawling on the roof, gutting the house top-to-bottom, and infected chased after them but disappeared when the lightning faded. Thunder echoed over the truck's engine.

Les drove straight for the fence crawling with infected. The truck ramped a patch of dirt, plummeted downwards and tore through the fence. The fence buckled and scraped over the truck's sides and infected were thrown about. The truck slammed into the ditch and kicked up a spray of mud, and for a moment it became stuck but Les was able to thrust it out of the ditch and onto the pavement of 741. Watching from the back Austin saw several dismembered and crushed infected left in the truck's wake. More infected came from the marketplace. Les maneuvered through jumbled messes of wrecked vehicles,

strewn bodies, and infected running amuck. He swerved around a wreck in the middle of the intersection, throwing Austin and Hannah together in the back, and he drove through the grass of the Marathon gas station's lawn. Austin felt Hannah's warm breath on his neck and pushed himself away. The side of the truck scraped against a burning Escalade. He drove onto the gas station lot and between the gas pumps with the overhang above and water spilling down from its edges in cascading waterfalls. Ashlie rapped her knuckles on the back window and Austin situated himself and rose the rifle. He began shooting at the infected but the shots went wild with violent shaking of the truck with its shattered shocks. Hannah began shooting, too. They drove out from underneath the overhang and towards the road that intersected with 741 and headed towards the YMCA. One of Hannah's bullets tore through the cheek of an infected and went into one of the gas pumps. The pump erupted into a ball of flames, engulfing the infected all around it. They writhed about screaming and flailing as the fire consumed them. The explosion lit off another pump, and then another. They were like a line of dominoes falling—exploding—and engulfing the trees and the airport fence and the parked vehicles and the gas station buildings itself. The fires reached down into the earth and into the large underground storage containers and these exploded as well. And it was in that moment that the earth seemed to literally burst, the pavement buckling. The entire gas station became a giant mushroom cloud of orange and red fire laced with black and curling smoke. The infected were caught amidst it and torn apart from the blast, and limbs and torsos and heads fell like rain all around the truck. The unbearable heat reached them like a wall of scorching acid. The shockwave rippled across the ground, buckling trees horizontal, and it swept underneath the truck's tires. The horrendous blast of air sent the truck off the ground, nose pointed towards the fiery sky, and the truck turned in the air and somersaulted. Austin was lifted from the truck's bed and saw Hannah thrust against the cab. She dwindled away and the truck seemed to grow smaller and then the earth took him up and he rolled over the grass and felt the rain on his burnt face and his back throbbed in pain.

He raised his flame-scorched eyebrows to see the truck smash nose-first into the earth. It spun around and rolled and then slammed into an overturned tree. The heat from the explosion died down, leaving only the stench of burnt flesh and burning gasoline. He looked over his shoulder to see the infected on the road whirling about, lit like torches. The infected at the marketplace stood entranced, hundreds of them, just watching. Some of the others on a hilltop, next to an artificial pond bordering the neighborhood next to the marketplace, gawked too at the inferno.

He picked himself up, surprised his legs weren't broken. No sprained ankle. He limped through the grass, feeling the rain on his face, strikingly cold against his burnt cheek. He walked towards the overturned truck, the wheels and the truck's undercarriage facing him. The wheels continued to spin, though they were half-melted with rubber dripping in spools onto the ground. Splintered tree limbs overhung the side of the cab that faced the sky. He went around the truck, moving sluggishly, mind not working. He felt only numbness and the cold logic of what had happened. He didn't think about Les. Or Hannah. He thought only of Ashlie. And he did think of Hannah for a moment, and hated her, because she had been the one to shoot the gas pump. But that hatred dissolved when his mind went again to his baby sister. He went around the truck and expected to see Hannah's remains splattered all over the place.

But she was gone.

He crawled onto the top of the truck, tried to open the door. He could only see vague shapes beyond the shattered glass. He couldn't open the door because the tree's limbs pinned it down. He strained his eyes and through the firelight could see Ashlie covered with glass, bleeding from the face. A shaking hand reached up to him, and he took it, clutching tightly. Lying beside her was Les, crumpled against the door, his head embedded with glass and bleeding profusely. He was pale but breathing. He paid no attention to him because then he could hear Ashlie moaning, *"I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want*

to die..." He held onto her hand, refusing to let go. But then logic gripped him. Holding her hand would do no good.

He released her hand. She began moaning louder but he ignored her. He began wedging the tree limbs away from the door. He was able to maneuver two out of the way but the other was too heavy. Ashlie undid her seatbelt and crawled over Les, who groaned. She tried to orient herself but was stuck. She looked up through the window, the rain dappling her face. Her eyes swam with terror. Several cuts across her face. A deep one over her cheek.

He heard a shriek from the hilltop. He looked over and saw the infected coming.

"Don't leave me," Ashlie moaned. "Austin... Don't leave me..."

He just stared at them coming, thinking only, *Fuck, fuck, fuck...*

"*Get me out of here, Austin!*" she screamed in a bare, hoarse whisper.

"I am," he said, looking back at her. "Calm down. Hold on." He pushed the branches harder, got them out of the way, reached for the door—but the branches swung back over the door, knocking him off the truck. He fell into the dirt. He heard his sister crying. A figure came up behind him. He swung around, weaponless.

Hannah stumbled up alongside him. Her arm pale and limp. Bleeding badly. A bruise covered half her face and it continued to swell. "They're... coming..." she said, faint. She drew in shallow breaths.

"Ashlie's in the truck," Austin said. "Les is in the truck. They're both hurt."

The infected were closer now, to the road.

"Austin, you can't..." She fell against him, her weight pushing him into the underbelly of the truck beside the melted tires.

Ashlie slammed her fists inside the cab. "Austin! Austin! *Don't leave me!*"

But he knew he couldn't get her. The infected were too close, already to the road. Hannah turned and began to walk away, down the grass, away from the truck and the burning Marathon gas station. Austin looked at the truck, heard Ashlie, closed his eyes. Ashlie continued to wail, but now her wails began to be replaced by choking sobs. He knew he couldn't get to her. He knew he couldn't

save her. He looked over and saw Hannah collapse in the grass. He closed his eyes again. The infected, so close... And then without thinking he walked around the truck and went to Hannah and picked her up in his arms. She seemed so heavy. He didn't even know if she was breathing. With her in his arms he didn't look back to the truck, just began to walk, and then to run, his legs carrying him despite the weight. Ashlie's screams chewed through the acrid air, through the dazzling rain, rising above the chorus of the sick, and then they withered like a flower withers under a parching desert sun, and they were no more.

He didn't think about where he was going. He just ran. He almost fell several times but kept going. He remembered her hugging him, refusing to let him go. He remembered her calling him every day when he was gone, wanting to talk. He remembered her crying when she thought about him going away to college. He remembered her boasting to her friend, "He's the best brother in the whole wide world!" Memories. Toxic memories. She had stopped screaming, but he still heard those screams. *Austin! Don't leave me!* He had left her for dead. He had betrayed her, backstabbed her, abandoned her. Hannah in his arms, his muscles burning. The gas station aflame. The truck overturned. Les groaning. Ashlie screaming. He didn't cry. He just ran.

He looked back. The infected had abandoned the chase and were encircling the truck. They climbed over it, silhouetted as black shapes against the burning gas station. They were reaching into the cab, pulling something out. He looked away. Kept running through the darkness, through the rain, feeling nothing. He watched his trips to avoid falling as he ran through a field, through empty and quiet business complexes. Now he heard nothing but his own footfalls and the sonnets of the infected. In time he heard nothing except his own haggard breathing and his heartbeat thrumming in his temples.

And all he could see was her smiling face.

He laid Hannah down on the wet pavement in the business park. The YMCA was nearly a quarter mile away. He tried to open a door to one of the shiny, multi-faced, state-of-the-art architectural masterpieces, but it was locked. He picked up Hannah and carried her past a stone water fountain encircled with stone benches. The water didn't fountain. The rain sprinkled in the oval pool. He found a window in the next building of the office park and set Hannah down and smashed it open with his fist. He pulled glass shards from his skin flipped the window's lock and opened it. Hannah moaned. He said, "Can you stand?"

She nodded and stood, leaned against the brick wall. "Where are we?"

"We need to get through this window."

He helped her through and then he followed, shutting the window from the inside. Not much good it would do, it was already shattered. Wind and rain came in through the broken window. Glass shards clung to Hannah's clothes. She stood in the corner.

"Take my hand," he said. She did. Her was cold, clammy, limp.

He took her out of the room and down the dark hallway, testing doors. Finally one opened. They went inside. He shut the door and locked it. Some sort of lounge with sofas and chairs and a bar with crackers and a coffee pot and a dark mounted television. He set Hannah down on the sofa and wedged a chair against the door. There were no windows in the room, and it was warmer but not too warm—the heater was off and the storm inaugurated a cold front. He looked around the room in the impermeable darkness, his eyes barely adjusting, able to make out some objects.

"It's not the Marriot," he said, "but it works."

Hannah didn't answer.

She had fallen asleep on the sofa.

11:00 PM

He sat down on the couch beside her and leaned into the leather cushions. He closed his eyes and just breathed for several minutes. Hannah breathed quietly, deeply. He began to see Ashlie in his mind so he opened his eyes. He didn't want to fall asleep. He just wanted to stay there, didn't want to move. He knew if he slept he would only have nightmares. And he knew that if they stayed there, they would just be imprisoned. But he began to realize that there was nowhere to go. And he realized they would die. Nothing could prevent that. And the realization was a numb realization, void of feeling. It didn't frighten him. He had already lost his parents and his baby sister. He sat there and felt his heart return to its normal pace. The sweat began to subside. He had slept only once since all this began. Maybe twice. He couldn't remember. All the excitement—is excitement the right word?—and adrenaline and physical exertion had worn him out. His legs burnt with exhaustion. His arms felt like lead. His body had been beaten and bloodied. His bruises and cuts throbbed, especially the one on the forehead, matted down with the wet stocking. He stared into the darkness and listened to his thunderous heartbeat in the still silence. He couldn't even hear the rain anymore.

He looked at her. Her eyes fluttered as she slept. Her fingers twitched. He looked at her arm, the gash. It had looked worse out in the rain. He didn't think she'd need stitches. Dried blood from the cut trailed down her arm to her fingers. Her arm looked bluish-purple. An awful bruise. He stood, saying nothing, and he went to the door and moved the chair out of the way and went into the hallway, shutting the door. The building was a labyrinth of snaking corridors and locked rooms. He'd gone creeping through these buildings as they were being built; he and Chad had escaped from church in the YMCA one day and had gone trekking as noon neared. He walked down the corridor and it twisted to the side and to the right again and windows on the walls let in

firelight. The moon didn't shine through the heavy clouds. Rain tapped on the glass. He entered the lobby and walked around an empty chair behind the receptionist's desk. A potted palm frond scraped at his side and he nearly tripped over a pile of magazines on the floor. He saw his own reflections in the tall glass windows. His dull, lifeless eyes stared back at him. Through the windows the fire illuminated the marketplace and the fence bordering the Wright Brother's Airport. The hundreds of infected had dispersed and smoke rose from the roof of the marketplace. The fire reflected in the artificial lake, its golden glow touching the backs of several suburban homes in the adjacent neighborhood. He looked at the overturned truck, sulking figures moving around it. He just stared and then looked away.

He left the lobby in a different direction and came upon a water fountain. He tried it. Cool water flowed out of the faucet. He drank his fill and searched around for paper cups. He found some and filled two and headed back towards the lounge. He passed through the lobby and there was a figure standing outside of the lobby, on the concrete patio amidst the concrete pillars of the overhang. Their eyes met but Austin didn't turn away. He then moved out of the lobby, the figure nonchalantly watching him. He returned to the lounge and went through the door and set the plastic cups on the counter next to the coffeepot and wedged the chair back against the door. He took the cups in hand and sat down next to her.

"Hannah. I brought you some water."

She didn't move.

He nudged her in the leg.

"Hannah?"

She lied on her side, her legs next to him. Head enfolded in her hands.

"You're really tired," he said.

No response.

"So am I. I can't sleep. You're lucky."

Minutes dripped away.

"I know how you feel now," he said. "Remember when you were talking to me when I was in the shower? You said I didn't know what it was like. To lose someone so close. I know you loved Peyton. I never doubted that. He might have treated you like shit sometimes, but I know you loved him. I know you loved *him*, not... what he became. Not what replaced him. Peyton is safe. His soul is safe. I guess that's the way we need to look at it, Hannah. They aren't our brothers or sisters, they aren't our friends or co-workers. They're... nothing like what they once were. They're not... them... anymore."

She continued to sleep.

"But Ashlie *was* my sister when I left her. You didn't leave Peyton. What happened to you wasn't expected. Me, I knew what would happen. And I still left her. She was crying out my name when I ran. When I ran away, I heard her screaming. And then they were all over the truck. I have to live with that. I have to live with those screams. They'll be with me forever."

He shook his head. Tears began to well in the corners of his eyes.

"She always bragged to her friends... She always told them about how great a brother I was. Whenever her friends would talk about how much they hated their brothers... Ashlie would just say how great *I* was. She always told me I was the best brother in the whole wide world, the best brother ever." He balled his shaking fists, stared into the darkness blurred by his tears. He sniffled. "But how great am I, really, Hannah? Look at me. A coward. See me shake? I see her face now. Smiling. She would come into my room and just want to be with me. I left her. Abandoned her. Forsook her."

He sat in the silence and thought of her.

Thought of Ashlie.

All her quirks, her randomness.

He thought of how annoying she would be.

And that's what he missed.

He wanted her to yell at him. He wanted her to curse at him.

It's those things you hate that you miss the most.

He leaned back in the sofa and closed his eyes.

And all he could see was her smiling face.

And all he could hear were her words: "Austin. Please don't leave me."

He had promised her he wouldn't.

Les' words ran over in his mind: "You always were a pathological liar."

He watched her sleep. So beautiful. So pristine. And somehow she seemed so innocent. "Do you know what I'm afraid of? Hannah, I'm so afraid. I never thought I would say this to you: I'm afraid of being alone. This fear haunts me, eats me, consumes me, day in and day out, judging and liquidating my every move. I fear, so badly, never having anyone. I fear growing old, cold, alone, never tasting love, and dying alone and forgotten in those whitewashed tombs, those nursing homes. I am so afraid I will never taste the kiss of a girl, the warmth of her body close, be the focus of sparkling eyes and tender touch and shy smiles. I fear never being loved, only watching others parade in fashion, hungering and thirsting and crying in my own silence. I can't rationalize my fear away; you can't rationalize the fear of snakes or spiders, and my life's history gives no alternative meaning: 'No one wants you, and anyone who might care is taken from you.' For so long I've lain alone at home in bed as my friends went out with all those who shared affection.

"I don't want sex or making out, Hannah. I want someone to *talk* with, someone to hold close, a girl who doesn't shiver at my sight, but draws close, finding comfort in my arms. When she cries, I want to hold her. When I cry, I want her to hold me. I am a romantic shunned, looking around and seeing sex-mongers cheating the romance out of girls, leaving them hollow, slutty shells—the rape of all good and true. I want a girl so badly, a genuine and authentic, loving and cherished, a beautiful and captivating girl to find refuge in my arms, to cry no more. I want to go to candlelit dinners, to hold her by a fire, to feed off her warmth under the stars, to whisper in her ear, 'It will be okay.' I would give up that cherished dream of college and career just for this that I long for—I would've worked at Homer's Grocery for life just to find the one who would complete my life.

“Did you ever see the movie *Donnie Darko*? Donnie falls in love with Gretchen, and she is killed—run over by a car. This haunts me, sears me, paralyzes me. It comes up in my dreams and nightmares. I am Donnie—weird, socially blundering, wanting the girl. Gretchen is the one I seek; I am the one who has filled her dreams of weddings and engagements and honeymoons. Then she is taken, brutally and savagely, innocent and angelic, battered and bloodied. This I fear, too: discovering the One—and she is taken from me. I fear she will be taken from me.” He watched her sleeping, so soundly, unaware. “I fear *you* will be taken from me.”

He took her hand. Not as cold now. She shivered, breathing shallowly. “Sleep,” he whispered. She continued to sleep. He held her hand and sat beside her on the sofa, watching, knowing how beautiful she really was. His heart stirred and he pushed it down. He wanted to crawl down next to her, to hold her, shield her. He wanted to wrap his arms around her. Her soft skin against his, her breath mixing with his own, pulling close, holding on, fearing to let go for the hell outside the door. Their lips would touch and their hearts would beat as one. No. Not now. He pushed the thoughts away. He focused on how they would get to the YMCA. He wondered how likely it was for the pilot to still be alive. He pondered how to get past the infected. They weren’t like the zombies of the movies. They didn’t lumber around. They didn’t just groan with their arms outstretched like a horde of Frankenstein monsters. They ran. And they jumped. And they could climb. They were humans turned into animals. They had all natural human capabilities. He knew that he would forever hear their screams. He wondered what it would be like when—if—the plague ended. If all this came to a grinding halt. Would movies be made about this? Dramas? Comedies, even? There was a movie that came out a while ago, a spoof on Romero’s zombie films. It was a comedy. People laughed. But who would find humor in it now? He imagined sitting in some warm basement with hot chocolate with Hannah beside him. His arm would be draped over her shoulder. She would lean her head against his chest. And they would watch the

movie. Their friends who didn't experience it would laugh. But he and Hannah would be as silent as the grave. She would start crying. So would he, though he'd try to hold it back. His parents gone. His sister gone. Her family gone. Their friends gone. All they had from that old world was each other. And this was no movie, no fictional novella. He thought about his luck, surviving so long. Almost everyone he knew was dead or one of them. Except for Hannah. And that's why he had to keep her. And maybe that's why he loved her. She was now a part of him. His only link to the past. If he lost her, he lost everything. If he lost her he wouldn't be able to go on. He would leave the security of the building and stride out into the infected and let them take him. It would be a more favorable fate than living disconnected from the world he had once known.

He resumed thinking about how to get to the YMCA. Should they wait for morning? Or would it be too late? Would the pilot even be alive? Or would they show up to those dark gymnasiums and workout rooms to see his corpse chewed and mauled—or assaulting them? Part of him wanted to give up in that moment. To stop thinking about it. To go to sleep and stop worrying. But he kept looking at Hannah, shifting in her sleep. She kept him alive. He didn't know for sure how far away the YMCA was from them. A quarter mile? He'd have to check. "Be back in a minute, Hannah." She didn't hear him. He released her hand, gingerly setting it down on the sofa. He stood and left the room and shut the door behind him.

He discovered a utility room and let himself in. A rack of flashlights on the wall. He pulled one off and flipped the switch. The beam glared and he grunted, looking away. He examined the room. There was odd-looking machinery, a wall holding wrenches and hammers and buckets of nails. Another door with a placard reading "Stairwell." The knob was locked. He picked up the hammer and struck the knob several times. Finally it snapped off, landing hard on the concrete floor. He tossed the hammer out into the hallway

and fingered inside the latch, flipped the lock. He pushed against the metal door and it creaked open. A steel ladder led up to the ceiling, meeting a latch. He climbed the ladder, the flashlight in his hand sending the beam crisscrossing all over the place. He flipped the lock on the latch and opened it. The latch's lid slammed noisily on the roof. A thunderclap drowned out its echo. He pulled himself up into the rain and stood on the barren roof. The gas station fire cast warm light all over his face. He turned around on the roof and in the distance saw the triangulated rooftop of the YMCA. The parking lot littered with cars. The building quiet. No movement. He wondered if there were survivors in there. Images flashed before his mind. An image of a mother holding her two children, trying to keep them quiet, huddled in the dark closet of their home; she prays for countless hours. Businessmen and women in South Arlington, on the top floor of a skyscraper, looking through the windows at the dark and burning city below, tortured by thoughts of their loved ones—wives, husbands, daughters, sons. A lone car sitting in a field somewhere, in the middle of nowhere, the teenage occupants, having escaped the high school, sitting silent in their contemplations, listening to the rain tapping on the hood.

He moved across the roof, stepping into several scattered puddles. He peered over the edge and saw the quiet courtyard fountain. A huddle of more buildings encircled the courtyard. Beyond the courtyard was the YMCA. He couldn't see any infected anywhere, except at the marketplace, milling about in the parking lot and entering through the windows. He didn't feel sorry for the survivors inside. There probably weren't any anymore. He walked along the roof's edge, keeping an eye on the triangular rooftop of the YMCA. Lightning flickered to the south, carrying echoing light over the buildings and reflecting in the fountain and puddles and building windows.

At the far end of the roof a tree spread its limbs overhead. An infected crawled up the tree and onto the limb and dropped down onto the roof. Austin froze. Its bulbous eyes stared at him, hair matted down on its head. Austin ran back to the hatch and descended down the ladder. He closed the latch. Holding his flashlight he left the room and went through the lobby. The flashlight beam

danced across a window and beyond it were four of five bloodied bodies standing outside. They drew their hands across the glass. Mouths opened revealing bloody teeth.

Les' blood?

Ashlie's blood?

One of them smashed its fist into the glass, which webbed outwards.

"Great," he muttered.

He returned to the lounge and went inside and shut the door. "Hannah."

She didn't move.

He set the flashlight on the sofa and knelt down, shook her. "Hannah!"

Her eyes opened. "Austin? Austin, what—" Her voice, so weak and frail.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. We have to go."

"Go where?"

"Not here." He grabbed her hand and pulled her up.

She stumbled against him, twisted around, and vomited onto the sofa. Some of her bile crept down his arm. He didn't let go, felt sorry for her. She spit strings of bile from her mouth and moaned.

"Can you walk?" he said.

"I can walk."

"Can you run?"

She didn't answer.

"Okay. Take my hand. Come on." He took her hand and they moved out into the hallway. It was barren. They went towards the lobby. He released her. "Wait here." He went to the corner and looked into the lobby. "Shit." One of the glass windows had shattered, leaving pieces on the carpet. Bloody footprints led past the chairs and scattered magazines and down a branching hallway. He returned to Hannah and took her hand. "Be quiet, okay? *Quiet.*" He led her through the lobby and past the branching hallway and down the next corridor leading to the utility room. He went inside first. He went through the next door into the room with the ladder and looked up to start climbing to open the hatch.

The hatch was already open.

Rain fell through, tickling his burnt face.

He grabbed a flashlight off the rack and went back into the hallway.

"Hannah..."

She stood there in the darkness.

Directly behind her were two quiet, yellow eyes. Watching.

"*Hannah*," he whispered. "*Don't... move...*" He knelt down, groped along the carpeted floor, found the hammer. Hunched down, he raised the flashlight in his other hand. She started to say something. He raised the flashlight and turned on the beam, shining it directly past Hannah into the creature's eyes. The creature, blinded, shrieked and raised its hands to cover its eyes. Hannah swung around, saw the bloodied hulk cringing in the doorway. It screeched and stepped towards her. Austin leapt up, the flashlight skittering across the floor. He knocked Hannah into the wall and swung the iron hammer, smashing it into the infected's skull, breaking bones and crushing the soft tissue of the brain. The brute grunted and fell against the wall, slid down and then lied on its back. Blood seeped out from the wound.

"Hannah," Austin said.

He had hit her arm when he shoved her. The wound had started to bleed freely again. She gripped it and grimaced.

"Hannah. Get to the stairs. Now."

She nodded and went into the room, through the next door, through the ladder. Austin hoped and prayed the one he'd killed had been the one he'd seen on the roof. She stood at the foot of the ladder. He grabbed the flashlight on the floor and joined her in the backroom.

"Climb, Hannah."

She started climbing, nauseous, woozy. The blood from her arm sprinkled the ladder. Austin clung to the bottom of the ladder, then abandoned it to shut the door. She reached the top of the ladder and peeked her head out, looked around, climbed out. Austin tucked the flashlight under his armpit and climbed after her. He reached the top and looked back, could hear growling and the

tearing of the flesh beyond the door. Cannibals. He climbed onto the roof and kicked the hatch back down.

"Austin..."

"Some were down there."

The latch shuddered. He stood on top of it.

Hannah pointed at the burning gas station. Hordes of infected meandered towards the business complex, drawn by our voices and the echoing of the slamming hatchway.

"You shut the hatch," she said. "It made a big noise. And now..."

Austin cursed.

The hatch continued to shudder. The moment he stepped off, it would open.

Hannah's face had gone ashen. "What do we—"

"Run!" Austin yelled.

The hatch violently shook and he was thrown off.

She ran towards him to help.

"No! No! Just go!" He got up and she ran to the edge of the roof. "Jump! Jump!"

Infected were coming from the ladder, spilling onto the roof. He ran.

Hannah jumped over the side, vanishing.

He didn't even look as he leapt over the side of the roof. He landed in a bed of drowned rose. The thorns nipped at his skin. Mud coated his clothes. He spit brackish water and burnt soil. Hannah grabbed him and ripped him from the flowers. Infected fell from the roof, landing hard on the concrete of the courtyard.

"The YMCA," he said. "That's where..."

They ran between two office buildings. Hannah stumbled and fell. He picked her up. The infected were coming around the sides of another building. They weren't slow, and Austin and Hannah weren't faster. His body ached. She was lightheaded. They continued to run across the grass field, reached the

pavement of the YMCA parking lot. Ran between the ghostly cars. They reached the front doors. Locked.

"Side door!" he yelled.

They ran behind a row of bushes. The infected reached the parking lot, weaved between the cars. The two of them went around the side of the building. They ran along the towering brick wall of the building and came to the employee parking lot. They raced past the dumpsters—hemmed in by fifteen-foot-tall wide concrete walls—and reached the side door.

"The code!" Hannah shouted. "Do you know the code?!"

He did, but he couldn't remember.

"Think, Austin! Think!"

"I'm trying!" he shouted. "Do you think I'm just fucking *standing* here?"

"Try harder!"

Several infected appeared behind them, coming from around the parked cars.

Hannah reached down, picked up an iron bar cast out from the dumpster. She braced up against him as he fumbled with the door's keypad. An infected got close and she swung the bar, clobbering it in the shoulder. Its bones snapped and it tumbled into the brick wall. She shouted, the pain from the cut in her arm overbearing. She kept swinging despite the pain, keeping them at bay. They became hesitant and encircled them, pinning them against the door.

And together, as one, they began to move closer.

"The door, Austin!" she yelled.

He'd tried several different number combinations. "I don't remember!"

"Think!"

"I can't think!"

"Oh my God..."

He turned around. Above the heads of the encircling seven or eight zombies were hundreds more on the hill beyond. They stood there like birds on a wire and then en masse rushed down the hillside. Some tripped, getting

trampled. All soaked and foamed at the mouth, purplish skin shivering, reeking of rotting flesh and stale vomit. Hannah thrust the end of the bar into the eye of one of the encircling infected. It slumped down. The others backed off a few feet.

He began thrusting his finger into the keypad again. Nothing.

"Austin!" Hannah shouted.

She took off swinging, batting the infected to the sides. They tumbled over one another and fell. He cursed and abandoned the keypad, chasing after her. He leapt over the struggling zombies.

"What the *hell* are you doing?!" he screamed.

She ran around to the front of the concrete courtyard of cement walls encircling the dumpsters. There only one entrance, a rustic swinging metal doors. The smooth walls rose fifteen feet high. She tried to open the door, but the brake bar at the bottom was caught in the concrete. She tried to lift it but it was too heavy. He saw what she was doing and helped. The infected from the hill reached the parking lot. Only a few more seconds till they reached them. The door popped open. They ducked inside. He slipped, falling against the green dumpster. Hannah slid the door completely shut and stepped away. Austin lunged forward and pushed her to the side and slid the brake bar into the ground just as the creatures began to tug at the door. Their screams thundered like a stampede. He imagined over a hundred of them pressing against the miniature stone fortress with its fifteen-foot-tall concrete walls and fifteen-foot-tall metal gate, now locked tight.

They were completely surrounded. Completely trapped.

Twisted sheet metal, steel bars, and soaked cardboard boxes surrounded the dumpster. The lid was open, the putrid stink of the garbage blending with the wreath of rain. They sat down against the dumpster, hearing the zombies hurtling themselves against the metal door.

"Wonderful idea," Austin said, staring at the door.

She put a finger to her lips: *Quiet!*

His eyes burnt like sulfur. It stank of death.

The infected continued to harass the gate, but slowly the attacks stopped. They scuffled around the concrete walls, shimmying back and forth. The two of them sat in the rain. He shivered and his teeth began to chatter. Hannah stood and grabbed some wet cardboard and handed a piece to him. She pointed to his mouth. He understood. He ripped off a piece of the cardboard and put it between his teeth so they wouldn't click anymore. She sat down beside him again and they waited.

The more he thought about it, the more he thought that this wasn't such a bad idea. The stench masked their scent. They made no noise. The infected didn't seem to have long-term memories. He hoped eventually they would wander off. He looked over at Hannah. Soaking wet, her chocolate hair matted down over her face. She looked lovely. He looked away and up to the rain. Lightning laced the clouds in stitches. Quiet thunder. They spoke quietly, in whispers.

"Clever trick," he said. "Did you think of this yourself?"

"I guess. I just did it. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Well. Thank you. This time you saved our lives."

"I was just returning the favor."

The rain fell. They didn't speak for a while.

She said, "I don't know how many times I've thanked you... but thank you, again."

"For what?"

"You couldn't have helped your sister. And you *were* a hero. You were selfless. You took me instead." She reached out, took his shaking hands, wrapped them in her own. "I can't thank you enough. I'm alive now because of you. I'm sorry," she said, releasing his hands. He didn't want her to, but he said nothing. "I'm a rambling fool."

"No," he said.

"I just think, if someone saves your life, then that person is a pretty good person. You're a good person. I mean, ever since this began... You've put me

before yourself. Sometimes you were a jackass about it. But you had to be, I guess. You're a good person. And not everyone recognized them. I saw it at school. How people made fun of you. And I feel stupid, because I always just watched. Never did anything about it. You were always the quiet nerd. It's impossible to see it now. I don't know how we ever did. I don't know how I ever did. You're a really good person. You're... one of the best people I know. You're great. I'm rambling again, sorry..."

"No, it's fine."

"You've stuck by me. You stuck by the 'clumsy little ditz.'"

He grabbed her hand, squeezed it. "A ditz wouldn't have lasted this long."

She put her lip, looked into his eyes. She said weakly, "I'm so scared."

"So am I. I'm terrified. But it isn't absence of fear that makes you good. It's the presence of courage."

She managed a quiet laugh. "Now you're a philosopher."

"That's what my dad used to always tell me."

"I think Winston Churchill said that."

"I don't know."

She raised her bruised and swollen arm. "It itches. And it stings."

"I'm sorry."

She went to scratch it. He pushed her hand away.

"Don't scratch it," he said. "It'll just make it worse."

"I know. But it really itches."

"When we get inside... They'll have some medical supplies somewhere. We can get some antiseptic for it and wrap it in gauze."

"We're still going in there? Maybe we should stay here till morning."

"No. It's too cold. We'll get hypothermia or something."

"We can't get in. You don't know the code."

"3-6-9-1-1."

"Damn it, Austin."

"Sorry. I was under stress. And we need to take care of your cut."

"You have a cut on your forehead. On your leg, on—"

"They're not as bad as yours."

She was quiet for a moment. "We're idiots."

"What?"

"The code. The electricity's out. The door won't open."

"No. It's not an electric keypad. When you hit the buttons in the right sequence, it manually unlocks the door. It's power-outage-proof."

"Oh."

"There's a man in there with an airplane across the field. We can get out of here."

"And go where?"

"I don't know. The skies are safe, though. The sick don't fly. We'll go somewhere secluded, out of the way. An island or something. The wilderness. The desert. I don't know. Just not here."

She scratched her cut but stopped. "So what's the plan for getting inside?"

"I'm kind of making this up as I go. Do you still have the crowbar?"

"You want us to fight our way out? Break the glass on the door? They'll get in."

"We can try the keypad again. 3-6-9-1-1. I've got it."

"And the crowbar?"

"I'm sure there are still a lot out there."

She sighed, shivered in the cold. "Maybe we could sleep in the dumpster."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. It'll be warm. And dry. We can shut the lid."

"Hannah. You're hurt. We can't stay here. Okay? You saved us by locking us in here, but we can't stay here. And if we sleep in the dumpster, what do you think will happen to your arm? It'll be infected by God knows what."

They sat in the rain, listened to it drumming on the dumpster, splashing at their feet. There came a distant roar of an engine, faint screams, gunshots, and the engine faded. Clapping footfalls as the infected around the dumpster enclosure sprinted in the direction of the sounds. A peel-out somewhere. Hannah turned her head to hear better. More gunshots. Human shouts—

intelligible shouts. The vehicle seemed to return, get close, then disappear again. And then there was only the rain.

"I wonder where *they* were going?" Hannah said.

"I don't know. But I think they drew all the sick out. Come on."

He stood and went to the door and withdrew the brake bar and opened it. Hannah grabbed the crowbar. He stepped out of the enclosure, looking both ways. It seemed deserted. An infected brushed between two parked cars. It saw him and ran after him. Hannah stepped beside him and handed him the crowbar. As the infected reached them, Austin swung the crowbar and cracked in the side of her face. The teenaged infected fell to the ground and moaned. It was almost pitiful. He drove the crooked sharp end of the bar into the back of her head. She lied still. Hannah walked around the edge of the dumpster. He ran after her and went to the door and fiddled with the key code. She came up behind him.

"No pressure," she said.

"Quiet."

A click. The door unlocked. They stepped to the side. He opened it wide. Warm air threw itself over him. "Hannah, we're—"

Hannah screamed.

He spun around to see her on the ground, an infected on top of her, tearing at her shirt, foaming all over her chest. It leaned forward to bite her in the neck. She screamed his name. He ran forward and kicked the infected in the ribs, knocking him over. The infected lied on his back. Austin jumped over Hannah as she scrambled to her feet, and he stomped his foot into the infected's throat. The infected clawed at his pants as he drove the bar into its skull. Blood seeped onto the pavement.

"Austin!" Hannah shouted. "Above you!"

Two more threw themselves from the roof. Hannah jumped out of the way. Another zombie hunched by the concrete walls of the dumpster enclosure. Another jumped from the roof, landing on Austin, knocking him to the ground.

The zombie hunched over his back, its fetid breath rushing over his neck. The claws groped at his back, the fingernails drawing deep and ragged lines. Austin squirmed out from underneath and kicked the infected in the groin, knocking him over. He looked up to see two infected rushing at Hannah. She cried out. He took the iron bar—he'd dropped it when the infected had landed on him—and chased after her. He swung it into the first infected, shattering the side of her face. She crumpled down. He quickly dispatched the other.

"Behind you!" Hannah shouted.

The one hunched by the concrete wall rushed after them. He swung the bar into its leg, cracking the bones. The zombie fell and tried to stand but the bone punctured through its skin and it tottered to the side. At the crest of the hill beyond the lot dozens more appeared.

"Hannah! Get the door!"

"It's locked!" she said. It must've closed.

"3-6-9-1-1!" he shouted, hammering the crowbar into the back of the infected's skull.

She punched in the code.

The door opened.

He tossed the crowbar to the ground and followed in after her. He tried to pull the door shut, but an infected dashed from around the dumpster enclosure and thrust his hand through the crack in the door. Austin violently swung the door into its hand, breaking the skin and snapping the bones of the wrist. The infected bashed its head against the glass, leaving bloody smears.

Hannah, behind him, shouted, "Austin! Shut it! *Shut it!*"

"He's holding it open!"

"Shut it!"

Now only the fingers kept the door open. "*Hannah! He's holding it open!*"

Hannah drew the knife from her pocket. He'd forgotten she'd had it. She rushed forward, reaching around him and slashing at the fingers. Two fingers dropped beside Austin's shoe. She hacked at the third and last, grinding at the bone. And then the finger was cut off and the door clicked shut.

Hannah stepped back as Austin fell to the ground, shaking, muscles aching. The zombie thrust his fingerless hand against the door, blood squirting against the glass. More zombies appeared at the door. But the glass was shatter-proof. They couldn't get in. Austin looked over at Hannah, who stood above him.

She gripped the bloodied knife tightly in her hands.

Saturday, April 24

12:00 AM

The zombies gawked at them from the window, smearing it with feral blood. Austin remained seated on the floor. Hannah knelt down and helped him. He didn't want to stand. He commented on how ugly they were, beyond the glass. She agreed. She was still holding onto his hand even after he stood. He just wanted her to let go. He stared at them beyond the doorway. It was unbelievable that they had once been people. Maybe some of them had even been devoutly religious.

Everyone wore happy faces. Don't dare walk around with a frown on your face! You'll either be judged super-spiritual or un-spiritual. When you're depressed, it doesn't help when someone congratulates you, seeing your downcast face, saying, "God is blessing you! The Lord be with you!" It made him sick. Made his stomach curl. He would stand and watch them all. There are the older folk, the elderly, who had seen it all. They walk slowly with canes and walkers, admiring and envying the youthful vitality all around them. This is certainly a haven for midlife-crises. Forty-year-olds in every direction, shaking hands and saying, "How are you doing?" and then responding with, "God is good!" even though life is a bitch and their spouses are cheating on them and their kids hate them. "God is good!" A religious mask. Hypocrisy to the highest nth degree.

She released his hand. He just stared watching them. She stared, too. They stood side-by-side in the dark YMCA hallway. The lights extinguished. The silence engulfing. They couldn't even hear the snarls. It was like a silent movie with no cheap soundtrack.

She sits down next to him. He tries not to act startled, though he is. A mix of fear and humiliation and suspicion drapes over him. He thinks she's just sitting down to be the unique one, the one who stands out, who makes her voice heard. It has nothing to do with him. She sits there, and he tenses up. Don't let her get too close. She'll turn you into a fish out of water. But she smiles at him, and he smiles back. The blatant hypocrisy. He can see she feels awkward, too, and he wonders why she doesn't move. He asks, "How are you doing this morning?"

"How're you doing?" Hannah asked.

"God, they're so ugly. Look at them. They were once *people*."

"They won't break through the glass?"

"No. It's plate glass. They won't be able to break it."

"Okay," she answers, smiling even broader. Now the awkward disposition erodes to a foreign yet slightly invigorating feeling of attraction. He hates himself. He hates how this happens. He'll think it's gone, but when it comes back, and he's help captive, he knows that the chains are hope, a hope that is empty and barren. "We have school tomorrow." Now he knows she feels awkward. But he is feeling even more awkward. He laughs to himself that he thought at one time the two of them could date. They can't even carry on small talk, much less an important conversation. In that instant he sees himself proposing, kneeling down, unsure of what to say. And he sees her feeling equally unsure of what to say, and replying, "No." And he sees himself slapping the velvet box shut and all his hopes dashing upon the rocks to be picked apart by scavenging pelicans. He will go home, burn incense, maybe smoke a cigarette. He'll get drunk, listen to depressing songs and ponder the gritty misfortune of his life.

So he proves his genius by saying, "Yeah. That really sucks." For emphasis: "Sucks."

Anyone have a gun? He wants to shoot himself.

They clawed at the door handle. For a moment he feared they would break in. But one-by-one they gave up, retreating, until only one was left, the one with the dripping finger stubs, rubbing his bleeding hand and face all over the door window, bludgeoning it with poisoned body fluids until all one could see was a slight distortion through the red glaze.

She tugged at his hand. "I don't want to be here."

"We're inside." A pool of water had formed at his feet.

"I don't want to be *here*, by this door."

They just look at one another. He's groping for something to say, anything, but nothing comes to mind. A light bulb flashes. They both like Italian food. Yet talking about that would do nothing more than illuminate his desperation to have even a shallow conversation. She would see his attempt at flirting and break away, and he would lose her again, making him happy and sad and distressed and lonely and overjoyed, all at the same time, a whirlwind—a cesspool—of renegade, unfettered human emotions. The moment grows more awkward as they sit there in the lobby, the morning sun filtering through those large front doors. She flexes—is she standing? Operation Talk-to-Hannah has failed. She abandons. He reaches out...

Melanie Prass arrives on-scene, appearing from a river of men and women flooding out the lobby doors. She sparkles in the sunlight, swinging around in blue jeans and an "Every Time I Die" t-shirt. Her wondrous eyes capture the world in a bottle, inclement to the brim, stocked with deception and iron fists. She walks with an elegance unknown to mankind, a creature of Venus, no—a planet all in herself. The world slows. She looks at Hannah, who is standing, and she says, "You don't have to have tan skin to look attractive, Hannah." Ashlie appears on the scene, with Amanda at her side. Amanda is grinning and laughing from a joke he'll never hear. Melanie says, "Look at me and Amanda. We're not tan, and we're the only ones with boyfriends!"

The last zombie moved away from the door. He smeared his own vision of them and forgot. Who was he? A father? A brother? What had been his dreams, hopes, and ambitions? Become a basketball player? A veterinarian? A famous

musician? Austin wondered if he had aspired to be a piano player. And he wondered if one day a cure could be found, reverting the disease, returning people to their rightful states. Would they have any recollection? Would they know of their atrocities? He imagined the man sitting down at a piano, missing four fingers, trying to play. Wondering how he had lost them. Never knowing. Never remembering.

Hannah turns and sulks away, heading down the hallway.

The boy stands, gives Melanie an awful look, then runs after Hannah. "Wait."

She turns. She doesn't want to talk.

He says, "Hey. Don't listen to her, okay? She has a worse dating record than anyone. She doesn't know up from down. She's a relationship mess."

"I know, Austin. Why are you telling me this?"

"I can see it in your eyes. See you're hurt. Hurt by what she said."

She turns and heads down the hallway, past the gymnasium where the kids play basketball. Booths are set up for the women's ministry, the postmodern ministry, the small group ministry, the youth ministry. She enters the gymnasium and he follows her into the next hallway. Down the corridor to the right is the side door leading into the brilliant morning sun. Trash is picked up by the wind and blown from the dumpster enclosure. To the left are several lockers and a hallway.

"Hannah," he says. "Come on. I'm not hitting on you, okay?"

She spins around.

He nearly runs into her.

"Why would you even say that?" she says.

"Everyone thinks I have feelings for you. Every time I talk to you or walk with you they think a romantic relationship is blossoming." He wished. "I don't like you. No, I do like you. I mean, not like that. I mean... Look. You've got a lot of better things in store for you. Don't listen to Melanie, or Amanda, or even Ashlie. By the time they're seniors, it'll be another story. With Melanie, this time next week it will be another story."

She doesn't say anything.

"Just don't let their words cut open any wounds, okay?"

She turns her eyes and stares through two horizontal windows looking into the sanctuary. It is a gym with chairs set out in rows, a stage with musical equipment, a soundboard, lights, a tripod with some film, all being torn down and deconstructed and shoved into a small storage locker. She looks in through the windows and watches the busy worker bees scurrying around and doing bidding for the queen bee yelling orders from the stage.

"Are you listening to me, Hannah?"

She turns. "Austin, just leave me alone," she says.

"Don't leave me alone," she said.

"What?" he said.

"Don't leave me alone. Please don't leave me alone."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"Yeah. I promise."

Her words stun him. He remembers, so vividly, when that voice had come before. They were at this very same place, except not for church. Their mothers had gotten together and brought them here to work-out and explore the exercise machines. Ashlie had come, and so had Peyton. Austin stuck with Hannah, or at least attempted to. They were friends back then, pretty good friends, not like the quiet enemies they had become. They were in Junior High then. Eighth grade. The popularity fest was on tour. Lots of popular kids from their school were there, lifting weights. Some serious weights, too, for Junior High kids. Forty, fifty pounds. He was astonished. Hannah was, too, and when he was talking with her, she said, "Leave me alone." He stepped back, awash in shock. What had she said? She looks at him now with those cold, crimson eyes. "Leave me alone," she says again. And now, in the YMCA during teardown, she has told him to leave her alone once more.

The two of them stood before the large windows gaping into the dark gym, the gym where they had gathered countless mornings over the last five years

for church. The windows were dark so they could only see their reflections. Hannah didn't want him to leave. She remained at his side. She clung to him, and he clung to her. All his wildest hopes and dreams, and the gravest of his relational fears, swirled together in that moment. She held his hand and stood beside him and he looked at them—the two of them—in that mirror. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. A tear caressed her cheek.

"I want to sleep," she said. "Can we find somewhere to sleep? Somewhere safe?"

There were sofas at the other end of the building. Brian led the Children's Ministry there on Sunday mornings, when the church rented out the building. But it was too far to walk. Besides, he knew there was a great possibility of infected being in the building. The pilot had said just as much. He didn't want to go all the way back there. He wanted to find that pilot. But he knew Hannah needed rest. He'd find someplace for her to rest, and then he'd search the building.

"Okay," he said. "I have an idea. It'll be warm, too."

Anger boils in his veins. He turns to leave.

Then she says, "No. Not like that. I meant don't go rummaging through my life."

He turned back around. "I wasn't trying to."

"I know. But you were. I just don't like that. I want respect."

"You have it. Believe me, you have it. I just didn't want you to—"

"Do you think you can control my life?"

Les appears. "Austin, are we getting Chinese for—"

"Not now, Les," he says.

He shrugs and leaves.

Chad and Drake pass, yelling, "Go, Austin, go!"

Hannah blushes in humiliation and anger.

He looks at her. "You don't want to be seen with me, do you?"

"You're just not my type of person, Austin."

They walked down the corridor. She entwined her good arm around his. He knew it was not a romantic gesture. She clung to him as if he were a life-raft. He didn't know why. Maybe she was just scared of being alone.

"Does your arm hurt?" he said.

"Yeah. Maybe if I sleep..."

"That's your fatigue talking. Your wound is slowing you down."

"Stay with me, Austin," she said. "Don't leave me alone. Please."

"Hannah," he said. "I'm not going to leave you, okay?"

"Okay."

"You're just not my type of person," she repeats. "We're really different. Polar differences. You're north, I'm south. You have polar bears. I have penguins."

"What about penguins?"

"I have friends who know more about my life than you do, and when you run around acting all pompous and assuming—"

"Pompous and assuming? Is that what care and compassion mean nowadays?"

"Do I look like someone who wants pity?"

"It's not pity. I don't pity you. You have a life far better than I—"

"How in the world would you know?"

She starts walking away, stepping into the gymnasium.

He pushed open the door to the gymnasium. The silence was deafening. He helped Hannah inside and they shut the door behind them. The room was dark but he knew it was clear: he heard no footfalls, no inhuman shrieks. He felt along the wall, wet sneakers squeaking on the polished gymnasium floor. He found the large door and pulled it open. Here it was too dark for their eyes to adjust. Hannah gripped his hand, and he pulled her inside, searching around. He found some yoga mats and nearly tripped over a pile of basketballs. One rolled past his foot. He released her hand and knelt down and felt around in the darkness, arranging the mats.

"Hannah? Over here."

"I can't see you."

"I know. Just come... There. You're right behind me. Now." He stood, took her hand, helped her down onto the mat. "Just rest here, okay? You'll get warm. Don't leave, either, all right?"

"Where are you going? You said you wouldn't leave me."

"I know. I have to find some medical supplies. For your arm." And he was going to look for that damned pilot.

He heard her moving, she said, "I'm coming..."

"No. Don't. Just stay here."

"What if you don't come back?"

"I'm going to come back. I promise."

"If I fall asleep, I might go comatose."

"Go what?"

"Into a coma."

"No, you won't. It'll be okay. Just lie down there and rest. I'll be back."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. I'm going away for a little bit, but I'll be back."

"You said you wouldn't leave me."

"I'm not leaving you. I'll be back. And we'll be together."

"I want you to stay here."

"We need to take care of that arm."

"I'm coming," she said, standing.

"Hannah..."

"I'm coming or you're not going."

"Fine. All right. Just don't do anything stupid."

She cranes her neck around as they stand in the gymnasium. People are stacking chairs and putting them into storage, avoiding the pile of basketballs, the yoga mats, and several camping tarps from last year's youth retreat. The tarps are still stained with dirt and grime and withered brown grass stalks. She doesn't see who she was looking for and turns, walks right past him. He follows her back into the hallway to the drinking

fountain by the lockers. She drinks and stands. He takes a drink, sees her leaving, runs to catch up.

"Why the... heck... are you following me?" She's careful not to swear in church.

"I thought we were still talking?"

"Stop stalking me."

"I'm not stalking you. God."

She looks at him with those absorbing eyes, those wonderful tan cheeks, those placid lips. Her elegant unspotted church dress clings to her smooth, milk-chocolate legs. She is the very icon of beauty.

She clutched her arm, blood cupping between her fingers. Her own face had spots of blood from an infected, and her clothes were muddy and stank of garbage. They walked down the hallway when he realized that just days before they had been in the very same place, and she had told him to his face, "We're never going to be friends again. Can't you get that? It's over." She had wanted to be as far from him as possible. Now she didn't let him leave her alone. He had wanted her undying affection. Now he had it—sort of—and he wished it had never come. Her skin then had been spotless, smooth as a panther, sweet-smelling as African lilies. Now she reeked of trash and was stained with dirt and grime and speckled with blood. Her hair, then combed and gelled and perfected, lied in a meshed cocktail of water and body fluids. His own jeans and t-shirt had been a social pariah that day with mustard stains. Now he didn't seem to notice the blood on his clothes. Her hand had held a bible. Now her fingers gripped a bloody dagger.

"Everything has changed," he muttered.

She looked at him. "What?"

"It's all changed. It'll never be the same again."

"Don't say that. This will end. We'll be—"

He lashed out, grabbed her arm, squeezed her tightly. She gasped, almost cried out from the pain in her arm. He slapped a hand across her mouth. He

slowly released her, pointed down the hallway. It was barren. He removed his hand. She mouthed, *What?*

One of them, he mouthed back.

He'd been talking, hardly paying attention, when he saw a flicker of motion off to the left. He hoped it was the pilot. She tugged at his arm. *Let's go back to the room. Please.* She needed medical attention. He knew she was still losing blood, and the wound had opened wider, probably from her fall from the rooftop at the business park. She was already losing a lot of blood, becoming fatigued, stumbling around. The adrenaline kept her moving. But if that adrenaline ceased, shock would surely set in, and perhaps, maybe, she *would* go comatose. And he would be alone. He wished he still had that crowbar.

"Go back to the gym," he said.

"What are you doing?"

"Trust me. All right?"

Somehow she did. She broke away and went to the door. He backed up against the water fountain beside the lockers. She opened the door and through. He raised his hand and slammed it down on the fountain, over and over, the noise echoing through the wilderness of manmade machinery, trekking into the weight rooms and lockers rooms and rippling the calm waters of the cold and stagnant swimming pool.

"Hannah," he said, going to the door and opening it. "Give me your knife."

She handed him the knife, and he shut the door and went back to the fountain.

He banged again and again.

Nothing came down the corridor.

That convinced him: it *had* been the pilot.

He went back to the door and opened it. "Hannah? Stay with me."

They crept down the hallway. At the end of the hallway he looked left towards the Health & Wellness Center, the door locked and the windows bare. To their

right was the lobby, the cushioned seats where he and Hannah had sat a week earlier, where a shallow stunt of small talk erupted into a zealous crazy of yelling and condemnation, a hotbed of stagnant emotions swirled to life. The skylight above sent drumming sighs through the building as the rain sprinkled on the glass. The lobby doors were shut tight and locked, the glass unscathed, the cars in the parking lot hidden in the night. The gas station fire burned, sending wan light over the business complex, now small and distant.

"There's no one here," Hannah whispered.

The pilot had gone to the left.

He told Hannah to keep watch. He left her in the lobby, going down the hallway in the direction the figure—whom he hoped to be the pilot—had gone. He walked past several doors with ivory mounted room numbers. *101, 202, 303, 404.* He had taught Sunday School classes in these rooms once upon a time. Hannah had always sat silent and forlorn in the back. Now she covered his ass, and his own heart began to quiver behind the ribs. Down this hallway he and his friends used to chase one another. Now he teetered on the edge of a bloody death and an even more bitter afterlife. He reached the door leading into the Fitness & Wellness Center. On either side of the door were dark windows in which he could see his own reflection. His sunken eyes glared like portals into another dimension.

Movement to his right, down a corridor that led two doors opening to the outside.

He turned around. The figure rushed at him, one arm raised. Something sparkled in her hand. It reached him, and he delivered a swathing punch into the girl's face. He took her arm in his hand and twisted her around. She shrieked, the sparkling object falling to the ground, clattering on the tile. She hit the floor hard. He raised his foot to stomp down on her grizzly face. Hannah hollered out, suddenly appearing, throwing herself into him. She slammed him into the wall. He yelled at her. Hannah stepped between him and the figure on the floor, screeching, "Are you crazy?!" He didn't know what to do. The figure was standing. He still held the knife, and he moved forward, but Hannah

punched him in the gut. Her punch was surprisingly strong, and he buckled over, gasping and coughing.

"Austin!" she said. But the voice was not hers. "You hurt me! You hit me!"

He sat down on the ground, confused, bewildered. "Oh my God, oh my God..."

Ashlie knelt down next to him and embraced him, her shivering body pressing against his. He felt her damp hair touching his face, and it was the greatest thing he'd ever felt. He reached around and embraced her, hugged her close, and a tear streamed down into her spoiled hair. He kissed her softly on the cheek. "I didn't know... I'm so sorry... I didn't know..."

Hannah stood, grinning.

How long they hugged, he would never know.

Hannah, watching them embrace, asked, "Where's Les?"

She pulled away from her brother. "He couldn't get out," she said. "I tried, but..."

Austin didn't let her finish. He held her tighter than he'd ever held anything or anyone. "I thought you were dead. Oh God. I thought you were dead. I left you... I left you..."

"It's okay," she said, looking at him. "Austin. It's okay. Okay?"

"I left you, I left you..." He began to cry. More tears. "I left you..."

"Austin, it's—"

He buried his face into her soaked hair. "Forgive me. God. Forgive me."

"You saved Hannah," she said. "She was hurt. I saw you leaving. You carried her."

"I left you."

"Because you thought it was a lost cause."

"It wasn't, though," he said, pulling away, looking at her.

"You didn't know that," she said, her words so tender. "I'm fine."

Hannah said, "What happened to Les?"

"They got to him?"

"Is he..."

She didn't answer.

Hannah turned away, stared at her own reflection in the mirror.

Austin continued clutching Ashlie as if she were his only child. After a few moments she pulled away and stood. "My face still hurts, though," she said. "You hit me pretty hard."

"I thought you were one of them," Austin said, rubbing his eyes.

"I know," she said. She helped him up.

He stood there looking at her, examining her, as if he were trying to determine if this figure before him were really his baby sister. Her face still bled from several places, but she had pulled out the glass. "How did you... Get out?" he asked.

She told him that she'd been able to pull herself free from the truck. She had stopped screaming, knowing it would do no good. Once she pulled herself out of the cab, the infected were upon her. She rolled off the side of the truck and landed in the grass, and she crawled past their legs and got to her feet and ran off to the left, reaching the airport fence line. The infected didn't pay her any attention, focusing instead upon Les in the truck. She saw Austin and Hannah at the business complexes, and she knew she couldn't make it there in time, not with the infected on their heels. So she followed the fence and kept low to the ground. The fence banked to the left, bordering the YMCA parking lot, and then disappeared into a thicket of trees. She went into the trees and from there saw an infected come out of the YMCA through the broken glass from the children's department. She made her way there, hiding behind the cars, and entered the building. She hid in the YMCA's play-land—one of those contraptions seen in fast food restaurants, with snaking tubes and slides—until she got uncomfortable. She got out and went down the hallway towards the Fitness and Wellness Center, and she saw two figures at the end of the hallway, which turned out to be Les and Hannah. "But I didn't know it was you, I thought they were two of them. I didn't know you guys had gotten inside." She ran to the Fitness & Wellness Center doors but they were locked, so she hid in the corner

beside the locked doors leading outside. When her brother appeared, she got excited and ran after him. "I should've said your name or something. That was stupid of me. You had no reason to question if it was one of the infected or not."

As Ashlie told her story, Austin kept glancing over at Hannah. She stood there with a smile on her face, but the smile never moved. It was too dark to read her eyes. His mom had always told him that eyes are the windows of the soul; if a person is smiling, and they're really not happy, the eyes will betray that smile. Whenever he had been sad, she would know; "Your eyes tell me," she'd say. And now he wondered what Hannah's eyes were saying, and he wished he knew. She smiled, yes; but was she really happy? Or jealous? Jealous that Ashlie had somehow survived, had returned, that the brother and sister were reunited? Jealous because she wanted that so desperately with Peyton but knew it would never be? If she was, she didn't show it. But these thoughts fled him quickly, and he focused upon his sister again. The waves of relief and calm continued to sweep over him like the aftershocks of an earthquake.

"Is there anyone else here?" she asked.

"There was someone," Hannah said, pointing down the hallway.

"Was it one of them?" Ashlie asked.

Austin wiped his eyes some more, coughed, tried to compose himself.

"I don't know," she said. "If it was, they didn't see me."

"How many?"

"Just one. He was walking around. Or she was. I don't know. I just came back here to get your brother, and that's when I saw it was you, and I saw him hit you." She bent down and picked up the knife. "Thankfully he didn't use this."

"Have you found the pilot?" Ashlie asked.

"No. Not yet."

"Maybe that was who Hannah saw? On the other side of the building."

"I don't know. But it's worth a check." He took the knife from Hannah, said, "You and Ashlie go back to the storage room. I'll look around for those medical supplies and see if I can't find the pilot."

Hannah nodded. "Okay."

He looked at his sister. "Make sure she doesn't fall asleep."

"Why?"

"Look at her arm. If she falls asleep, we might not be able to wake her. We need some antiseptic to clean the wound and some bandages to prevent anymore blood loss. This is a YMCA, they'll have that."

Ashlie said, "Can I have the knife?"

"Why?"

"Just give it to me."

He handed it to her. She cut off the sleeve of her shirt and began to wrap Hannah's arm. She finished and handed the knife back to her brother.

"All right," he said. "That should work temporarily."

The three of them walked back to the lobby. Hannah and Ashlie went back towards the gym. He tossed the knife between his hands and then moved towards where Hannah had seen the figure moving about.

With Ashlie alive, he found a new vigor to carry on. A new energy surged through him. He watched them go, a certain peace in his heart. He knew they would be okay. He had Ashlie and Hannah, and that was what mattered. Raindrops sprinkled on the skylight. Beyond the lobby came the bathrooms, and further down the hallway came the great window on the right overlooking the pool, utterly empty. He went further down. On the left was the play-area, and then the hallway opened up to the children's department. Several glass-walled rooms with mats and sofas and blank televisions, pool tables and foosball tables. And then he heard the wind. He followed it to the source. One of the glass windows leading outside had been shattered. But no glass could be seen inside the building. Whatever had broken the glass had gone outside. He felt slight relief until he heard a yell shudder through the complex. He spun

around as the shout dissipated in the darkness. He decided it was time to rejoin the others. Tough luck with the pilot idea.

He was walking past the bathrooms when he heard the shout again. He looked down at the knife and cursed and went into the men's bathroom. The door opened to a small hallway that bent to the left and opened up into a room filled with locker cubicles. He went into the locker-room and saw a bloodied woman in a YMCA work-shirt climbing up one of the stalls. She hadn't noticed him, intent on something within the stall. He stayed out of view and crept up, breathing shallowly, quietly. He entered the bathroom area and stood directly behind her. He went forward and raised the knife and slammed it into the top of her neck, straight into her spinal cord. She went limp and fell backwards, Austin jumping out of the way to avoid her. She lied there with her eyes spinning in their sockets.

The door creaked open.

Austin leapt back, bearing the knife before him.

A wiry man with a long beard stood there. "Boy, am I glad to see you!" he said.

The man looked familiar, and then Austin recognized him. The janitor who worked the night shift. They'd often seen him during youth activities at night, and he would often yell at them for ruining his work. He recognized the boy, and he laughed. All of that was pointless, even funny.

"How are you doing?" Austin asked, lowering the knife.

"Fine, thank you."

"I have a friend here. She's hurt really bad. Are there medical supplies anywhere?"

"Of course. This is a gym."

"Let's take care of that first. Skip the small-talk."

"All right."

They moved around the body. "She's the only one left in the building, I think," the man said. "Most left by breaking the glass. Drawn to some big explosion outside. It shook the whole building. Not sure what it was."

"I know the one," Austin said.

They left the bathroom, entered the main hallway.

"I owe you one," the man said.

Austin eyed him. "Pay me back with a plane ride?"

He laughed, and Austin feared it had all been some ploy. "The keys are in my pockets."

They went into the lobby and hopped over the reception desk. The man began going through cupboards down a back hallway. "What's her problem?" he asked. "Your friend, I mean."

"Nasty cut on the arm. It's pretty deep. Hopefully not infected."

He paused. "Not a bite, is it?"

"No. Thank God. Let's just say it wasn't a walk in the park to get here."

"Weren't you just across the street?"

He laughed. "Yeah. We were."

"Here it is," he said, pulling out a Red Cross kit.

They went to the back gym and to the storage area. Austin opened the door. Shadows beyond. "It's okay," he said. "It's me. Hannah?"

A figure came towards him. "Right here." She saw the man beside him. "Who is—I know you."

The man said, "You're the girl with the nice voice." He raised the Red Cross kit, showed it to her. "I have some gauze here, some antiseptic, needles and thread... I don't suppose you can do stitches?"

"No."

"We can still bandage you up."

Ashlie sat down on the mat beside her brother as the man poured antiseptic into the wound and began wrapping it. Hannah grunted. The wound was now

bone deep, exposing muscle and several layers of skin tissue. Finally he clipped it tight and said, "Just don't take it off. It's going to itch. Don't scratch it. We'll get stitches later."

"Later?" she asked.

"We're going west. The infection hasn't really gotten there yet. I mean it has, but it's not as bad. Not as bad as they made it sound. Everything is under martial law, but they're letting planes in. As long as you're clear, they give you medical treatment and a place to stay. Scientists are working on a cure, or at least on a vaccine so that those bitten won't, you know, not stay dead." He put all his things back in the medical kit and snapped it shut. "Yeah, west of the Rockies things are looking pretty good. The east got slammed something awful. Ha. I should've stayed in Montana, had a job there in automobiles."

Medical attention. A place to stay. Sleep. Vaccines.

Hope.

Color began to return to their faces.

They felt as if they were on the verge of something wonderful.

On the verge of sanctuary.

Hannah asked, "What about the rest of the world?"

"There are sects holding out everywhere, I'm sure, but the news is really sketchy. Most of the stations on the radio are just garbled junk no one can understand. But I guess in Africa the problem isn't so bad, but China and Japan are almost completely gone. Hong Kong. Nagasaki. Beijing. Swarming with the sick. India has no hope. Europe is fighting like we are, especially with a lot of shelter in the mountains where the sick can't really make it. See, they're like us, except they don't feel pain. They can do anything we can do, but they're just as limited as we are. So people have been hiding out on islands, because the sick don't like the water, or so I hear. And they're going into the mountains, because the sick have a hard time climbing up them. I hear Alcatraz is now a refugee camp. South America, no one seems to know, but Mexico is in chaos. Mexico City is wiped out. Canada's doing fine in the northern regions, where there are only a few isolated settlements, but Quebec is trashed, Montreal, too. But as

bleak as it is, there is a lot of hope, you know? The government's still functioning. The military is still active. They've devised plans and continue to devise more to take care of this... happening."

"You have a plane?" Ashlie asked.

"Yeah. Once we get inside it, we take off—and then we're there."

A new energy coursed through Austin's veins. He stood from the mat. "Let's go now."

The janitor frowned. "I don't know if that's really going to work."

"Why not?"

"I've already looked. There are sick people everywhere. And there's a plane burning on the main runway. The garage door to my plane is locked, and only the administrator has a key. I don't know where he keeps them. I have a plane, yes. And I'm going to get us out of here. But things aren't so black-and-white, you know? We need to find a way to get rid of them before we can get to my plane. If we leave right now, we'd just be playing God with our lives. And I don't think we'd pull things off as well as He could."

Ashlie pouted, "Looks like He's been doing a fine job so far."

No one said anything.

The janitor said, "What do you think it is? A virus? An alien invasion? Judgment Day?"

"I don't know," Austin said, sitting back down.

"You guys are Christian kids. Is this Judgment Day? Is this what the Bible talks about? The Day of God's Wrath?"

"I don't know," he said again.

Hannah said, "If it is... we're fucked."

"Maybe God," the janitor said, "is separating the wheat from the chaff."

"My parents are dead," Austin said. "They loved God. You don't know what you're talking about."

"But what are they? They aren't humans. They look like us, sure. Except they're bloody and they stink to high heaven."

Austin's head snapped up. "Janitor Holcomb?" He'd read it off his nametag back in the lobby. "What did you just say?"

"I'm sorry..."

"No. What did you say just now?"

"They look like us, except they're covered in blood. And that vacant stare. And they stink of death."

He grinned, the realization hitting him. "We can go now."

1:00 AM

They demanded to know what ‘clever’ idea he had up his sleeve. He smiled and imagined those beer commercials where the cut-out figures kept saying, “Genius! Genius!” He stood and left the storage room and entered the gymnasium. Everyone followed. He went out into the hallway and brandishing the knife went down towards the lobby. Holcomb, directly behind him, shouted, “What are you doing?!” He didn’t stop going. He went through the lobby, past those yawning windows, the fervent patter of midnight rain on the skylight, and he reached the bathroom. Everyone stood behind him. Hannah asked what he was thinking. “Wait out here,” he said. “Janitor Holcomb? With me.”

They entered the quiet, darkened bathroom. They rounded the corner and saw the woman’s corpse on the floor. He went and knelt down beside her.

Holcomb kept his eyes on the corridor leading to the showers and to the pool entrance. “Please tell me what you’re doing,” he said.

Austin pointed to the woman. “Did you know her?”

“Yeah.”

“Then look away.” He took the knife and stabbed it into her chest. He savagely cut at the skin, then traced the knife down her abdomen, splicing open the innards. A sprocket of blood spit upwards, staining his dirty plaid shirt. A horrible, gut-wrenching stench emanated from her body cavity. Holcomb swung around, staring at the lockers. Austin set the knife at his knees. He closed his eyes and reached inside, felt the ribcage, the warm muscles, the gook and the ooze of the body. He tore at the muscles with his fingers until he opened a larger cavity exposing her guts.

“You’re fucking insane,” Holcomb said, still looking at the lockers.

“Remember when you said that they looked exactly like us, except they were covered with blood and they stank? We can get to that airfield. We cover ourselves with their blood. Make ourselves look stoned—you know, that empty

look in their eyes? And we move like they do, and we make our way to the airfield, climb over the fence—awkwardly, with clumsy precision—and get to the hangars, get the plane, and get the hell out of here. We won't act like their prey." It sounded strange, calling himself and the others their *prey*. "We won't smell like their prey. We won't look like their prey. We will be like them in every way. They're dumb brutes. They won't know the difference."

"You'll get infected, covering yourself with her..." He didn't finish his sentence.

"You only get infected through bites."

"There's blood in their bites. Haven't you seen their mouths?"

"Yes. But it's their *saliva*, I think, because blood alone won't do it. Maybe you could scare yourself shitless with their blood on you and die of fright, or shock, or whatever, but you won't change. You won't become like them. You have to be bitten, because for some reason, the germ or virus or whatever travels through the saliva."

"Is that a fact? Or is it just what you tell yourself?"

"I hope it's a fact," he said. "If I'm wrong, we'll know in a little while."

He stirred. "And what if they don't fall for it?"

He stood, slid the knife into his pocket. "Then we're dead, and we'll know much sooner."

He heard Hannah shouting his name from outside. He grabbed the knife and rushed out of the bathroom. He found them in the lobby. Ashlie ran to him, sobbing. He asked her what was wrong as Holcomb came up behind him; she didn't answer. He looked past her and saw Hannah standing in the middle of the lobby. She looked at him and then pointed to the front glass doors. Holcomb went to look but didn't seem surprised. "Just sit down," Austin said to his sister, pointing to a chair against the wall. The same chair he had been sitting in just last Sunday when Hannah sat beside him. She nodded and sniffled and sat down. He went and stood beside Hannah and the janitor and looked out the glass door. Les stood on the other side, staring at her. Austin moved into his

line-of-sight, and his head jerked and he glared at him. His flesh had gone purple, his eyes had sunken, and his lips furred back to reveal blood-soaked teeth. His chest heaved with each breath, and his face and neck were drenched in steaming blood. His hollow eyes focused on Austin, and Austin said, "Does he remember?" He approached the door. Les didn't flinch. But was it Les? He knew it wasn't.

They stared at one another through the glass. His hand reached up. Austin imitated and pressed his palm against the glass. Les threw his arm against the glass and shrieked, hurling himself into the door. The door shook and rattled but didn't crack. He stumbled back and did it again, drawing deep lines of blood over the glass. He reeled back to assault again but looked at Austin and, perhaps seeing the sadness etched over his face, stopped.

Hannah now stood behind Austin. "He doesn't remember," she said.

"No," he said, looking down at his shoes. He looked up again. "No, why would he?"

Les attacked again, but the glass held.

Austin just watched, not wanting to leave.

"Come on," Hannah said. "I don't want to see this."

He pressed his palm against the glass, felt it shudder with the attacks.

"Goodbye, Buddy," he said.

The four of them gathered in the bathroom. No one really wanted to talk. Holcomb explained Austin's idea to the others. At first Hannah and Ashlie refused, but he convinced her by spinning tales of how glorious it would be to escape. Finally they agreed to do it. Austin went first, kneeling down and cupping blood that had pooled inside the corpse's open cavity. He splashed it over his body—on his arms, chest, neck and face. He cupped some more and poured it on his head, let it dribble down his face. He stepped back and the others did likewise. Then they stood around the body and looked at themselves in the mirror. They could have been taken for zombies themselves. They wrinkled their noses or breathed through their mouths, the stench unbearable.

"Just don't make sudden movements, unless they do. Copy whatever they do. Don't run, don't talk. Only make noises if they do, and make the same noises. Don't stand out *in any way*. Don't cry." He looked at Ashlie when he said that. "They don't cry. The only emotions you should show are blank emotions. Or anger. That's all they really do. We'll cross the parking lot, the lawn, climb over the fence—be careful about the barbed wire—and together we'll slowly make our way towards the airfield hangars. I'll get the key, we'll get in the plane, raise the garage door, taxi out to the emergency runway, and get the hell out of here. Any questions?" None were posed. "All right."

They left the bathroom and walked down the corridor towards the children's department. They passed the play-land on their left. The iron bolts and casts of plastic tubing contorted together in a shadow-laden maze. They went around several tables to the hole in the glass where Ashlie had entered. Rain blew in through the hole and bloody footprints led to the hole and disappeared into the parking lot. Together without saying a single word they filed through the hole and went through the bushes around the window and through the grass, across the sidewalk, and onto the pavement. Their feet splashed through puddles. Several figures emerged from the other end of the YMCA, and seeing the four of them, broke into a run. Alarm rippled through them. Holcomb began moving in jagged, erratic patterns. Everyone else mimicked, wearing blank stares, staring forward, paying no attention to the infected running towards them. The infected slowed down and started moving alongside the building, through the bushes, pressing at the glass windows, sniffing, continuing. The infected broke away from the building and moved towards the four copycats. No one stopped moving or accelerated pace. The infected mingled with them and began to sniff the janitor. Holcomb imitated the, sniffing back. They grunted and continued on their way. The motley crew maneuvered around the abandoned cars, under the rain, under the starless night sky.

Hannah followed right behind Austin and tapped him on the shoulder.

He looked back and she nodded behind her. Several yards back came Les, weaving between the cars, trying to pick up with them. At the same time several more zombies came towards them, moving silently among the parked cars. One came extremely close to them—a young child missing half her neck. And another—an older man without hands. And a third covered in bullet holes and strips of flesh and a crushed arm with bone protruding from the skin. The yellow eyes danced over them, and then they would continue on. The souls of a consumerist society, left blind and numb, wondering what to do in a world not governed by money, entertainment, and mathematics. Austin glanced back to see Les even closer now, only about fifteen feet from Ashlie at the rear.

Holcomb reached the ten-foot-tall fence slick with the rain. He started to climb. The other infected turned to watch. Austin wanted to go last, to make sure Ashlie made it, but he knew that would look odd. So he followed after Holcomb. The infected stopped watching and continued their pointless meanderings. Hannah and Ashlie started climbing. Shelly maneuvered around the barbed wire and dropped down, growling as he landed in the soft grass. The barbed wires bit at Austin's clothes, and he careened off the top, sprawling down to make it appear as if he had no sense of balance. Ashlie and Hannah did the same. They gathered themselves and looked back.

Les was starting to climb, grunting with each movement.

Mimicking them completely.

A chill ran through Austin. Some predators mimicked their prey. But, no, Les didn't view them as prey. He was just copying their actions, learning how to do it by watching others. They still possessed some sort of capacity for learning. That didn't sit right in Austin's stomach.

A shriek came from the other side of the fence, in the parking lot of the YMCA. Austin's blood ran cold. *Impostors disclosed!* But instead he saw two frail zombies yapping and snapping at each other. Zombies encircled them. One of the women lashed out at the other and tried to bite; but the other dodged and grabbed her arm and wrenched it to the side. There was a sickening, fleshly *pop!*

and a spray of blood splattering the watching zombies. The other zombie screamed, perhaps feeling pain. All of the zombies closed in around the wounded one and descended upon it. They were getting hungry. Turning on one another.

Les fell over their side of the fence and landed in the grass. He picked himself up. The others turned and continued their trek through the muddied airport field. Hannah's heart pounded. She now took the rear, and Ashlie walked up past her brother, between him and Holcomb. Les followed about five feet behind Hannah. She shook visibly, but he didn't seem to notice. They moved past the burning plane. It had been a Cessna Citation. The engines continued to smolder. The fuselage had crumpled and shattered. The cockpit glass had fractured and bent outwards. The burnt skeleton, bubbling with human fat, grinned at them from the cockpit. Les reached out and touched Hannah. She made a grunting noise. Austin stopped moving, knelt down, sniffed the grass. Everyone walked past. Les' feet splashed in the grass right beside his hand. He stood after he passed and followed him closely. Several rectangular hangars rose up through the rainy mist. They passed several aircraft out on the tarmac, a refueling truck, an ambulance sitting quiet and desolate. Holcomb moved towards the main building adorned with bold stenciling: Wright Brothers' Airport. He led them around the side of the building, under blooming spring trees now hanging limp with the weight of the rain. Hardly any vehicles were in the front lot, mostly just maintenance and management. One of the cars, Austin assumed, belonged to the corpse in the plane. Holcomb went around the front over the concrete patio. Potted plants, the plants drowning in collected rain. He stopped beside two large bay windows looking into the dark lobby. Rain ran down the glass in rivulets. Ashlie and Hannah stopped behind him. Les ran into Hannah. He grunted, she shivered.

Now what?

Austin knew he had to get rid of Les.

And it didn't even unnerve him that the thought came so easily.

Austin stepped backwards, knelt down next to the rain gutter spout emptying onto the ground. Rain splashed over his hand, biting cold. One of the metal plates of the gutter had fallen off, rusting and jagged. He wrapped it under his fingers and stood. Holcomb and Ashlie looked past Hannah, to Les, and then back at him, a mere shadow, rising up to glory in the dying throes of a never-ending night. Les touched Hannah's arm, then sent one around her chest, to her right breast. He opened his mouth, tongue sticking out, and he moved closer, squeezed her tight, lips moving for her neck. He seemed to be shaking. Austin leapt forward, driven mad, grabbed his hair, pulled it back. He let out a garbled cry as he slid the jagged edge of metal across his throat. Blood sprayed over Hannah and she swaggered forward. Austin wrenched Les around and threw him into the rain gutter. Les looked confused, the blood now curling down his shirt from his neck, bubbling in the rain; and he launched forward, snarling. Austin grabbed him again and swung him around and hurled him through the glass of the bay window. The glass shattered, raining down around him as he fell inside, landing on a chair. He fell off the chair and onto the ground. Austin jumped through the broken window. He snarled at him as Austin descended upon him, pinning him to the ground. "Sorry, Les," he murmured, and he took the jagged end of the gutter plate and thrust it into his eye. His body thumped for a few moments and then went still, blood gurgling from the eye socket and flowing from the slash across his jugular. Austin then stood and looked down at the body, breathing deeply, energy coursing through him.

The others standing in the rain just stared at him, shocked at the brutality.

Holcomb stepped through, glass crunching under his feet. "You all right?"

"He was going to rape her," Austin growled.

Hannah gaped at him.

Ashlie shivered.

Holcomb said, "What?"

"He was going to rape her. I had to kill him."

"That's crazy."

"Did you not see it?" He turned, staring at them all. "Were you not watching? They're driven by primal instinct, right? What's primal? In psychology class Mrs. Myers told us that there are three things animals are driven by: the need for shelter, the need for food, and the need to procreate. We've seen their need for food. And now we've seen their need for procreation."

Hannah looked away, lips trembling. The thought of Les' cadaver impregnating her made her want to puke.

Holcomb said, "You're saying they can... mate? Have offspring? Shit."

"What? I don't know. I don't want to think about it."

"Me neither."

Hannah sniffled. "Can we just get the key and get out of here? Please."

"That's what we're here for," Holcomb said.

Behind the reception desk was a large mounted rack that held around fifty to sixty keys. Holcomb walked around the desk and searched for his in the darkness, found it, took it off the rack. He said, "The plane is in the hangar. I'll have to get to it, open the hangar doors, start the engine, taxi out, and take off. This is the tricky part—maneuvering around all the parked planes and helicopters so we can take off safely. I'm used to flying in adverse conditions, so don't worry about the weather." He paused. "I also need to refuel. I didn't expect to fly today, and if we're going west, we'll need the fuel."

"So we just fill it up, right?" Austin asked.

"It works on power, on a pump. This isn't a big airfield, so there aren't any emergency generators."

"So we have to do it by hand," he muttered.

"Right. Kind of like emptying a water bed, except with gas. We siphon it out of the gas tanks and into my plane."

"How long will that take?"

"Maybe five or ten minutes. We can do it in the hangar. So we're not seen."

Austin looked at the girls. "Don't swallow the gas. If it doesn't kill you, it will shred your vocal chords."

Holcomb said, "For right now, here's what we'll do. Austin, come with me. We'll get into the hangar, open up the fuel lines, gather the tubes. We'll return for the girls. Girls, you need to look around and see if you can find any food anywhere. Also blankets, medical supplies, anything we might need for an emergency. I don't know what to expect. All right?"

The girls nodded.

He knelt down and opened a cabinet on the floor, drew out two radios. He took one, handed the other to Hannah. "Channel Seven. Only talk if you have to. I'll have mine on, you have yours on. Press the red button to talk."

They nodded.

"Okay," Ashlie said.

Austin and Holcomb left through a back door, going out into the rain. They moved between the shadowy bulks of news helicopters and several modern airplanes, even a vintage P-47 from World War II. Austin had seen it flying over Clearcreek once or twice. Holcomb led them to two hangars down, and they entered through a side door. Inside the hangar was pitch black, but dry, and all they heard was the roaring of the rain on the sloped metal roof, drumming like a thousand banjos. There were wooden crates stacked everywhere. Scattered tools here and there. The large Cessna Caravan sat in the middle of the hangar, the three-armed nose propeller nearly touching the hangar door, the four side windows on either side of the fuselage tinted blue. Streaks of brown and black ran down the side of the aircraft, and they could walk underneath the wings.

Holcomb knelt down beside the left main gear and opened a large circular hatch. "This is the gas line," he said. "We can shove four tubes down there and start pumping."

"Where are the tubes?" Austin asked, standing behind him.

"There's a supply room in each hangar. I'll get the tubes. Just stay here." He stood and headed for the door.

"Give me the radio," Austin called out after him.

He turned and tossed it to him.

He caught it. "Where's the fuel?"

He pointed to several 100-gallon drums hidden in the shadows and left.

He slid the radio into his pocket and tried to open the Cessna's door. It wouldn't. He tried again. It opened. He lifted himself inside. There were eight seats in the hold that led to the cockpit, where two seats were surrounded by an endless assortment of readings, dials, buttons, and shifting gear. There was a joystick for either seat and foot pedals for the rudder. The seats in the fuselage were spacious and comfortable, all made of cream leather. Vanilla carpet on the floor. At the back of the plane was a small storage room stuffed with ten life jackets and parachutes. It was otherwise empty. He wondered how a janitor could afford this. Maybe it was a gift, or a time-share or something. Or maybe it wasn't even his. Maybe it was his friends. Could he even fly? A small panic rippled through him.

Someone entered the hangar.

"Janitor Holcomb?" Austin said. He hopped down out of the plane.

Holcomb had returned with four tubes, lied them down beside the plane.

"Why didn't you drag the drums over here?" he asked.

"You didn't tell me to."

"Well. Can you do it?"

He walked over and tried to push the barrels. They wouldn't budge. "God, they're heavy."

"See those dollies?" Holcomb asked, pointing. "Push them on top of one of those."

Austin grabbed the dolly and did it that way. Much easier. He pushed one of the tanks over to him. Holcomb popped open the lid and shoved the tubes inside, started sucking, and when the gas started flowing, he would stick the other end of the tube into the fuel hatch. One-by-one he did them all. He spit

out a dribble of gas and said, "Go get the girls. It'll be about seven minutes, I'm thinking."

He left the hangar and went out into the rain and walked beside the hangars with the closed doors, and he walked around the parked helicopters and airplanes and stood underneath the wings of the P-47 and pressed the red button on the radio. "Ashlie?" No response. "Hannah?" He waited for a moment with the rain falling around him, sheltered momentarily under the wing, and then he left his spot and entered the main building. He went through the rooms but found no one. He returned to the lobby and saw the shattered glass where they had come through and Les' body was gone. "Fuck." He raised the radio and pressed the button, spinning on his heels, surveying the empty lobby. "Ashlie? Hannah? Where the hell are you guys?!" No response. He feared the worst, and then he remembered how he had to teach Ashlie to work the word processor on the computer. She wasn't the best with technology. He spoke into the radio: "Press the red button when you answer."

A response: "Austin... can't..." Hannah's voice. "Almost... different..." Static.

He shook the radio, cursing, pressed the button. "I'm losing you, where are you?"

"... Les... not... didn't kill..."

He glanced back to the empty spot where Les' body had been. "I know." Static.

"Where are you?!" He paced back and forth in the lobby. "Come on!"

"... Les... he's going to kill... oh my God..." That was Ashlie's voice.

He yelled into the radio: "Ashlie! Tell me where the fuck you are!"

"Closet... in the... God!"

"Where's the closet, Ashlie?!"

"Back... storage... he's almost..."

And then he just heard screaming.

He ran down the twisting corridors, shouting their names. He didn't hear them screaming over the radio anymore. He came to a door marked "Storage." He kicked the door open and jumped inside. Empty. "Hannah!" he yelled. "Ashlie!" Silence. He pulled the radio to his lips and then it spat: "He's gone. He just left."

A shriek behind him and then he was thrown forward, dropping the radio. He collapsed to the floor, the heaviness on top of him. Austin rolled out from underneath and looked up to see Les beside him, the dagger still in his eye. He apparently hadn't driven it deep enough to pierce the brain, just enough to stun him. He jumped to his feet as Les charged him. He dodged and Les went into the wall. He swirled around, snarling. His good eye, sunken and shriveled, reflected Austin's own mortified face. Austin knelt down, grabbed the radio, slowly stood. He brandished the radio in front of him like a weapon. With the other hand he reached into his pocket and drew out the knife still soaked in blood from when they had gutted the YMCA worker.

Austin raised the knife before him. "Don't, Man. Don't come near me."

But Les didn't understand. It wasn't Les anymore. He just stared.

"Les. Listen to me. It's me. Austin." His voice shook with each word.

Les cocked his head to the side and blood dripped on the floor from his eye.

"Les," Austin said. "Do you remember your name? Do you remember who you are? Do you remember Chad and Drake? Do you remember Hannah? Do you remember Ashlie? Do you remember me, Les? Your best friend?"

Les just continued staring, foaming at the mouth. But he didn't attack.

He just stood there as if swooned by indecision.

"Your name is Les," Austin said. "Your brother is Chad. We've been trying to—"

Hannah's voice: "Austin!"

Les turned and looked down the hallway, straight at Hannah.

Austin kicked him in the chest, knocking him down. He grabbed at his legs, reaching forward with his mouth to bite.

Ashlie, stepping out from behind Hannah, shouted: "Austin! He's biting!"

Austin kicked Les' head back. He reeled up onto his rear. Dropping the radio, Austin grabbed his hair and lifted his head. Les glared at him and licked his lips, growling. But Austin took the knife and drove it into the untainted eye. He thrust the knife deep until only the ivory handle stuck out. And then he held Les' head taught and pulled the knife out. It made a sickening slurping sound. He released Les' hair and the body fell flat on the floor. Austin rubbed the bloodied knife against his pants.

Hannah and Ashlie came closer.

"You were talking to him?" Hannah asked.

"No. I wasn't talking to Les. He was gone a long time ago."

"We didn't get any food," she said. "Once you guys left, he came back."

"It's all right. Ashlie, look through the room for emergency supplies. Hannah, help her. And for God's sake." He knelt down and picked up his radio, waved it front of them. "For God's sake, *press the fucking button when you talk.*" And saying nothing else, he went back into the lobby.

In the lobby he had seen a soda and food machine. He found it in the corner and broke the glass with a vicious kick and began grabbing pretzels, cookies, candy bars, and chips, holding them tightly in folded arms. He held the radio antenna in his mouth and the knife was in his pocket. The girls returned to the lobby with a bundle of blankets. He told them to set them down and they dumped the wrapped food into them until they had completely cleared the machine, except for the Fritos which no one wanted. "They're not good without peanut butter or chocolate," Ashlie had said; and Hannah had complained, "They're too salty, we'll just get thirsty." Hannah wrapped the bundle of food and drinks in her arms and together they left the building and entered the rain. Soon they would be in the air. Soon all this would be left behind.

Outside they all just stopped and stared. The Arlington Mall area glowed in the night, visible even in the falling sheets of rain. A smoldering inferno. The skyscrapers were gone, probably collapsed. The fires roaring in their

foundations reached into the sky, the flames curling and breaking over one another, coughing columns of inky black smoke that blended into the night. At the farthest end of the airport, on the opposite end of the YMCA, several dozen figures stood on the other side of the fence facing the road and a storage facility. They began climbing the fence.

"Shit," Austin said.

"How many do you think there are?" Hannah said.

"I don't know." More and more appeared. "It looks like... A lot." He guessed forty.

"That's just great," Hannah moaned.

Ashlie faced the other direction. Austin turned and cursed. "That's not the least of our worries. Fucking bastard."

Hannah turned and looked. "Oh my God."

Holcomb was leaving.

The Cessna Caravan rolled down the runway, an array of lights and a roaring engine and propellers slicing through the air. Hannah screamed for him to stop, holding the heavy blankets in her arms. "Give me the blankets!" Austin shouted. She gave them to him. They were heavier than he'd thought they'd be. Together they started running across the muddy field, then over the hard cement of the first and second runways. Holcomb was taxiing his plane, turning for take-off. The infected hadn't seen the three teenagers; they had seen Holcomb's plane, drawn by the noise of its engines and its flashing blue and white lights. They were running across the third runway—the one on which the Cessna Citation had wrecked—when Holcomb reached the end of the emergency runway. Austin ran faster than the other and reached the emergency runway. He stood in the middle and dropped the blanket with the foods and drinks and he waved his hands at the Cessna facing him a hundred yards away. The Cessna picked up speed, rushing towards him. Hannah and Ashlie stood on the side of the runway, waving their own arms, yelling, screaming themselves hoarse. Color drained from everyone's faces. Austin feared

Holcomb would just run straight through him—he cursed the man over and over in his mind—but suddenly the plane pitched forward. Smoke shrieked from the wheels as the brakes shuddered. The plane rolled to a stop. Austin and the girls exchanged looks. The girls dashed for the plane and Austin picked up the bundled blanket and ran after them.

The infected were halfway between the fence and the plane. The three teenagers stood to the side as the Cessna neared them. Holcomb hadn't stopped, had only slowed down. He continued to plod at around fifteen miles an hour. Austin dove away from the propellers and underneath the wings and then leapt at the fuselage and grabbed at the door handle. The door ripped open. Hannah and Ashlie were right behind him. Austin tossed the bundle into the hold and then pulled himself into the cool interior. The door to the cockpit was open, Holcomb yelling at them to get in. The plane rolled over a pothole and Austin collapsed to the ground, fell amongst the chairs. He crawled back to the door, saw Ashlie running alongside the plane, grabbing fruitlessly at the door's frame. He reached out and grabbed her hand, pulled her up and inside. Holcomb yelled, "I can't stop the plane! If we stop, we die! We die!" Hannah couldn't get to the door.

"Hannah!" Austin shouted. "God! Hannah!" She grabbed at the frame and held on. He reached and grabbed her torn arm. She howled in pain but he didn't care. Holcomb was yelling that he had to increase speed or they wouldn't make it off the tarmac. Ashlie sat on the floor, staring at the door, eyes wide in shock. Austin tugged upwards, pulling with every weary muscle. Holcomb but the plane to the maximum speed. There was a grinding of the propeller as it slashed through the infected. Blood and body parts drenched the view screen. Holcomb yelled that he couldn't see. Ashlie began to cry. Austin didn't listen to the pilot, just focused on Hannah. The wheels left the ground. Infected snapped at her legs but then she was dangling, the ground disappearing beneath her. She released her grip on the door-frame and Austin fell forward, now holding

her only by her torn arm. He almost slid out but wrapped his legs around the legs of one of the chairs. She looked up at him, eyes swimming in a sea of hopelessness; and her face had drained of all color, and she closed her eyes. She was giving up. Austin cursed and pulled. Far below the infected circles, staring upwards, reaching. And then they vanished in the darkness. Austin let out a shout and gave one last pull, and then Hannah's fingers grabbed at the bottom of the frame, and she wiggled herself inside, coughing and wheezing. Austin stood and reached out, grabbed the door handle, and pulled the door shut. The roaring of the wind became nothing. The cabin was quiet. The engine mumbled.

Hannah lied on the floor, gasping for breath. "Oh my God... Oh my God..."

Holcomb flashed the windshield wipers over the view screen. The blood dissipated.

The plane shook in the violent storm but Holcomb didn't seem worried.

Austin embraced Ashlie, holding her even tighter than before.

The plane climbed higher into the sky.

2:00 AM

Ashlie sat in one of the seats and Hannah lied on the floor trying to catch her breath. Austin went to the cockpit and sat in the copilot's seat. Holcomb told him not to touch anything. The plane continued to climb. Seen out the side windows were numerous fires outlining the roads and buildings and neighborhoods far below. The fires illuminated wrecks, so small and dwindling, and a line of forest burned despite the rain. In every direction were fires glowing red-on-black in the night. He heard only his breathing and the rumble of the plane's engine. It felt like they were flying over a war-zone.

"Hard to think this could've happened," Holcomb said under his breath.

Austin glared at him. "Why in the *hell* did you just up and leave?!"

The suddenness of the boy's anger caught the pilot by surprise. He stammered for a moment and then said, "You ran off and disappeared. You were gone for about twenty minutes." It hadn't seemed that long to Austin. "I thought something had happened. I wasn't going to wait forever. I sat there in the hangar. You never showed up. I thought the worse."

"Les wasn't dead," Austin said. "We had to deal with him."

He was quiet for a moment. "I didn't know. You took the radio."

"I know."

"Did you think I meant to take off without you? No. I thought you were dead, or one of them. And I couldn't just stop the plane. It would've taken us forever to turn around, taxi back down, turn around, and take off. And I didn't want the infected damaging the flaps or anything."

Austin looked back out the window. Now he could see nothing below. They were too high up in the clouds. Lightning flashed all around them and a burst of thunder shook the plane. He looked back over at the pilot. "Okay, okay. Look. We're all fine. It doesn't matter now. Just keep flying west."

He left the cockpit. Hannah had pulled herself into a seat and sat staring out one of the windows. Austin went past her and sat down in the seat next to Ashlie. She laid her head on his shoulder. "Are we going to be okay?" she asked.

He kissed her forehead. "I think so. Yes. It looks like he knows what he's doing. We're going to where it's safe now. We'll get food. Medical attention for Hannah. And for your face." He didn't like seeing her face cut up and smeared with dried blood from the glass. But her wounds weren't as bad as his. He remembered the cut on his forehead, wrapped in the stocking, and it throbbed in pain at the remembrance. "And we'll get some peaceful sleep. Finally."

"Do you think it's almost over?"

"Yes. I think so." He had no idea.

"When Les attacked me," he told her after a few moments, "I threw him into the wall. And then I started talking to him. And he didn't attack. He just looked at me. Like he softened up." Hannah turned and looked at him. He had their attention. "Why? I can't stop forgetting that. Why didn't he attack me? I think I know. My voice was familiar. He recognized my voice. It comforted him. He felt... recognition. Part of Les was in there."

Hannah said, "You're saying it was Les... Les tried to rape—"

"No," he said, cutting her off. "What I'm saying is that maybe, just maybe, these guys have some memories. Have a slight knowledge of who they are. How are we to know that they don't remember their pasts? How are we to know they don't remember us?"

"He tried to kill us," Ashlie said. "He tried to kill you."

"Maybe the virus makes them crazy. So you know who you are, you just can't do anything about the... craziness. Did you ever read the book series 'Animorphs'? In the book, these aliens invaded you, took over your brain, controlled your body. You knew who you were, except you had no control. The aliens controlled you. So you were left inside your conscious. What if the people

who are infected still have memories and are conscious of what's happening, they just can't do anything about it?"

No one said anything for a moment.

Then Hannah's eyes went cold. "Then you killed your best friend. And you killed your sister's best friend. And you killed your own father."

His own eyes went cold. "Don't talk like that."

"If what you're saying is true, then you *did* kill them. Killed them in cold blood."

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that if they have memories, then—
"

"If they have memories," she growled, "then they're still there. And you took their lives."

Ashlie said to her brother, "You told me they died before they came back. You *told me that*."

"I know."

"Then how can they have memories?"

"Memories are engraved into the brain through neural passageways." He said, "Look, this is all I'm saying. Hannah, I didn't kill my best friend. I didn't kill Amanda, and I didn't kill my father. Ashlie, yes, they die, and then the virus takes over. But the virus rejuvenates them, and it happens in their brain. All thought, primal instinct, motor functions, everything comes from the brain. And inside the brain there are memories, carved into the neural passageways. I know you're my sister, Ashlie, because my brain tells me that. My experiences and memories and my knowledge are all engraved into my mind through concrete neural pathways. When these people come back, the neural pathways are still there. What if they have the memories, they just don't know where they came from? The memories don't make any sense. That's all I'm saying. It's like the bodies are stolen with their memories. And when I was talking to Les, he remembered. Not because it was him, but because whatever took over his body had access to his brain and the neural pathways. That's all I'm saying."

Hannah started to say something but lightning flashed close and the interior went white with light, sparkling over their faces, and then the plane violently shook with a horrendous thunderclap. Ashlie slunk down in her seat and Hannah gripped the leg of the seat next to her. Holcomb shouted out, "Storm turbulence! Nothing to worry about it. I've been through it a hundred times. Even if we get struck by lightning, the sheet metal isn't conductive."

Ashlie curled up with her head against the rain-slicked window. Austin leaned back in the seat and stared at the vanilla ceiling. Hannah got up from the floor and sat in the seat in front of him. She turned to him and whispered, "Do you think we'll ever see our homes again?" He didn't know how to respond. He didn't want to. Spring Falls was no longer his home. His friends were dead. His mom and dad were dead. The only people he had left were Ashlie and Hannah. And there they were, high in the sky, climbing through the thunderclouds. They were leaving their homes, their jobs, their memories behind them, cut up and burnt. Traveling to what might be salvation—or just another damnation in a different locale. Hannah realized she wasn't getting an answer and turned around in her seat. Austin looked at his sister. Her eyes were closed, her breathing becoming deeper. He reached out and brushed strands of wet hair from her face.

His sister began to snore. Hannah sat quietly in her seat. Austin stood and grabbed the bundle of blankets in the aisle between the seats and rummaged through them. He took one of the blankets and draped it over his sister who now slept. He took the other and handed it to Hannah. She took it and wrapped herself up. He took two more blankets and some bags of Doritos and went to the front. Holcomb took one of the bags and ripped it open, ate them quickly. Austin sat in the copilot's chair and draped one of the blankets over himself and offered the other to Holcomb but he didn't want it. So Austin used that blanket, too. He ate the Doritos and watched through the windshield as the clouds broke apart and then they were underneath a beautiful panorama of stars. The plane

continued to climb and then he leveled out and through the windows lightning could be seen dancing through the clouds. Above it looked so beautiful.

They flew in silence for quite some time, finishing their Doritos and dropping the bags onto the floor. Holcomb said, "Being a janitor is a shitty job. It really is. You always have to work nights. Sometimes you get morning shifts, but usually you're cleaning up other peoples' shit when they're sleeping. There's no honor in it, either. Until you actually *see* a janitor, it doesn't cross your mind that there is one." He looked over at Austin. "I wasn't always a janitor, you know."

"No?"

"I was actually going to Harvard. My family could barely afford it, but I was on the roster."

"Harvard, huh?"

"I learned to fly when I was seventeen. My father was a pilot, and my grandfather before him. My other grandfather, on my mom's side, did the navigating for the bombers in World War Two. We have a family history of being airborne. My great grandfather served Germany in World War One as a fighter pilot. He even flew once with Richthofen. You know? The Red Baron? He may have just made that up. A family folk-tale. I don't know. But I know he *did* fly against the British and French in that way. So flying runs in our blood. The feeling of being so high, so free. It's an amazing feeling. When I turned sixteen, my father gave me a card for my birthday, and inside was a picture of a Piper Cub. A small plane. I was ecstatic. I loved riding in planes, and I knew he was going to teach me to fly. I was popular at school. By the time I was eighteen my senior year, I had my license and a plane. Most of the students drove their girls around in cars, but I took mine into the *sky*. I wasn't a stud, though. Some people thought I was a nerd for being a pilot." He chuckled. "They were probably just jealous."

He continued, "I was valedictorian in high school. Centerville. Not far from Spring Falls. I was going to Harvard, and we'd barely scavenged enough money for it. That's when things got really complicated. My friend and I went

into town to some coffee house, and there was this girl behind the counter. Lovely girl, except her eyes. I could see the loneliness in them. We had a little two-piece conversation, but then we just took our drinks and left. Not until we were out on the road did I realize how desperate she was for a friend. Next time I returned, I invited her to drink coffee with me, and so she took our break and we became good friends. A month later, she's pregnant by some jackass—that's the thing about women, the lonelier they are, the worst decisions they make; though I'd be hard-pressed to say that wasn't a condition of humankind, not specific to the female folk—and she couldn't pay for the baby so she was going to get an abortion. She was a wreck. And I really cared for her. I talked her out of getting the abortion—I'm one of those pro-life guys, for better or worse—and I gave her my Harvard money to help her raise the baby. She was thankful and I watched her grow bigger and have the baby, and I loved her, and we got married, and I got this janitorial job to help her raise the baby. I might not have gone to college, I might have worked a shitty job, but this girl, Austin. God! She was *amazing*. She wasn't just beautiful, she was *spectacular*. Her looks, her personality, her laugh, her smile. Borderline euphoric. She was always waiting up for me at the house when I returned from work, even when I worked nights. And the kid grew up. He was so awesome. We named him Danny, after her father." He smiled. "I had a perfect life. Shitty job, but I was willing to have it just for the family I had. Some people would say, hearing about me not going to Harvard, and working as a janitor instead of at some law firm making six digits a year, that I was cursed. I always told them, 'No.' I was blessed."

He put the plane on autopilot. "One night I returned home from work, and there was a policeman there. I asked what was wrong, and he said he needed to talk to me. I let him inside, fixed some coffee. There was fog, it was night, the lights were dim. I already knew what had happened because they weren't home. He told me some drunk had hit them in an intersection as they were coming home from my son's softball game. The car had rolled into a tree and wrapped around it. He asked me if I knew anyone to identify the bodies. I called a friend, and he agreed to go. He told me it was them. I asked how they

looked. He told me he could barely tell. At that point I hadn't cried. I had just been so shocked, stuck in limbo, half-aware and half-asleep. But then I just completely lost it."

He spoke detachedly of it all. "I turned into a workaholic. Harvard crept up into my mind again. All my dreams had been broken. I was a miserable wreck living a miserable life with a miserable job. I flew every now and then, especially since I had the money since I didn't have to support the family, and I was working all the time, and insurance covered all the funeral costs. I got to the point where depression just consumed me. I would play Russian roulette with my grandfather's revolver. Every time I'd go through two or three rounds, then give up, refusing to give up. And I drowned myself in cigarettes and liquor. I would always hear their voices, their laughter. Sometimes I still do."

He coughed, looked over the instruments. "The YMCA kept me grounded. I met a girl named Mary. Not a girl, she was my age, about forty. We hit it off well. Two nights ago she came over and we ate pizza and listened to music. I kissed her on the way out. It felt good, but I still felt as if I were betraying my wife. Even though she's not my wife anymore. She's dead."

Austin didn't know what to say. So he said, "I'm sure Mary's okay."

"She's not. She's dead."

"You don't know that. We're alive. She could be, too."

"I know she's dead, because I'm covered in her blood."

Austin understood. They had sliced through Mary in the bathroom. A pang of guilt coursed through him. He didn't know what to do so he pushed off the blankets and stood from the seat.

Holcomb cursed under his breath. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's not that," he lied. "We've all gone through a lot. And I'm sorry for that."

"Mary's in Heaven."

"Yeah."

"You going to sit back down? Keep me company?"

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm just going to go lie down."

"Okay."

He stood in the doorway, looked over at the janitor. "I'm really sorry. Really."

"We've all been through a lot. And your idea got us to this plane."

"I know. But still."

"Just get some sleep. I'll be fine up here. Keep my eyes on the gauges and shit."

He went back into the fuselage and sat down in one of the seats. The cabin was cold and the light flickered out as Holcomb flipped a switch, dousing the cabin in darkness. Austin looked out the window, the dark clouds below, the lightning. He looked over at Hannah and Ashlie sleeping soundly. He envied them. He didn't think he'd be able to sleep. But he closed his eyes and dreamt.

He dreamt he and Ashlie were inside a house. For some reason they had popped open the window and had jumped out. From the right of the house two eyes peered at them from the bushes, and a person rushed out at them. The window was high up on the house's side. They regretted coming out and wanted to get back in. Zombies came from every direction, and Austin was knocked onto the ground by one. He felt warmth and stickiness on his neck, then a horrible pain, and he knew he was biting him. He felt the blood flowing from his neck, and he felt the saliva coursing through his veins, tingling underneath his skin; and he felt peaceful and serene as he heard Ashlie's screams.

He awoke with a start, startling himself. Outside the window there was only darkness. He leaned forward, rubbed his eyes. He stood on shaking legs and walked through the dark cabin to the cockpit. "What time is it?" he said.

"It's only 2:40. You've only been asleep about fifteen minutes."

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere over Indiana, I think. The G.P.S. is messed up."

He went back to his seat and went back to sleep. He dreamt all of his family was inside their own house, watching out the window as zombies walked down the street. Mom said they should make sure all the doors were locked. Ashlie said there was a party at Les and Chad's, and if they could make it, they could go. Dad heard a noise. Austin went downstairs to see a zombie coming through the front door. He wasn't scared. Just annoyed. He'd just locked that door. He went into the kitchen and killed the zombie and started making popcorn.

Ashlie's voice woke him. "Is there a bathroom?"

He rubbed his eyes. "I don't know... Ask the janitor."

She went up to the front and talked to him and came back.

"There's no bathroom," she said.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"But I have to go."

"So do I. We'll just have to wait."

"Can I just go in the back? Pee in a bucket?"

"I'm sure he won't care."

Hannah woke up, hearing them. "What time is it?"

Holcomb answered from the cockpit: "2:55. Go back to sleep, Guys."

Austin said, "How you doing, Hannah?"

She looked at him. A void in her eyes. "Fine."

"Your arm?"

She squeezed it. "You hurt it more pulling me into the plane."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"We can get it stitched up when we get to where we're going."

Ashlie sat down beside her brother. "I have to pee so bad."

"Just go in the back, okay? He's not going to care."

She went to the back storage room and shut the sliding door and peed and came out. She sat down beside him and fell asleep quickly. He stood and went back there and peed on the carpet, finding it somewhat amusing. He returned to the cabin to see both Ashlie and Hannah asleep. He sat down beside his sister and closed his eyes. Sleep overcame him.

Holcomb tapped on the fuel gauge.

3:00 AM

Austin woke up and looked out the window to see that the clouds had mostly dispersed and in the distance there was a glowing ember, perhaps a burning city, and he wondered where they were. He got out of the seat and quietly walked past the sleeping girls to the cockpit. Holcomb had poured himself over the controls, and he jumped when he heard Austin behind him. He asked where they were, and Holcomb said, "Somewhere in Missouri. But we have a little bit of a problem. It might've happened due to carelessness, but probably, when we were taking off, the fuel line was smashed a little bit, and I think we may have been leaking fuel. The emergency runway wasn't well-paved and had lots of potholes, that might've done it. The plane bouncing around. But the point is, we don't have enough fuel to make it over the Rockies."

"And you're going to tell me we have extra fuel on board."

"No, that wasn't my next point."

"Shit." He rubbed his eyes, suddenly wide-awake. "So what do we do?"

"We have to refuel. We're close to Kansas City International. I haven't been able to pick up any radio signals, but there it is." He pointed out the view screen to shimmering lights in the distance. The lights marked out several airstrips. Two of the runways were flickering with burning wrecks on the tarmac.

"An international airport? Shouldn't we look for something... smaller?"

"I'm practically flying blind here. And we're on an eighth of a tank. We need fuel *now*."

"All right. Kansas City it is."

"Yeah. If the G.P.S. is even *reasonably* correct, that should be Kansas City International. But I don't know. I've never been there before."

"There are lights," Austin said. "So there's power. And that means people."

"You're getting ahead of yourself. Lights means there's a least *auxiliary* power. Big deal. All major airports have them. There are wrecks on those two

runways. And I can't raise anyone on the radio. I can't even get any kind of signal from them." He sighed as he flipped through several switches. The Caravan began to lean forward. "Far as I can tell, the airport's been abandoned. At least the tower has. But they'll have fuel there."

"You're landing?"

"We *have* to refuel. Unless you want to crash somewhere in the Rockies."

"Okay." He crawled into the copilot's seat.

"Are the girls strapped in?" Holcomb asked.

"Seatbelts? No."

"I'd recommend that."

He got up and went into the cabin. He shook Ashlie on the shoulder and she groaned, awaking. "Buckle up," he said. She looked at him, confused, crusts in her eyes. He grabbed the seatbelt and strapped her in. He went over to Hannah. She was awake and she said, "I've got it," and snapped her in. Her face was grim. She stared forward at the seat in front of her. She had heard their conversation. Ashlie asked what was going on. He told her, "We have to make a quick landing. It'll be okay. We just need more fuel." Her face drained of color. "It'll be fine, Ashlie. We won't even have to go inside the airport. We're just going to the refueling station. And if anything happens, we can just take off and land somewhere else." He didn't know anything about refueling planes—nor if there were such a thing as a specific refueling station—but it calmed her down. He rejoined Holcomb in the cockpit and strapped himself into his seat. Holcomb put on his own seatbelt as well. Austin made sure his was tight.

"You can land these things, right?"

"I have a pilot's license. I've done this a thousand times."

"Okay," he said, trying to be relieved.

"But I usually have the tower to guide me."

"You're not helping."

The airport drew closer and closer until they flew overhead. They had descended to about one thousand feet and everything seemed so close. Most of the buildings were intact, except for one with one crumbled wing pitted with flitting fire. Jumbo jets were scattered about the tarmac and mixed within were several baggage carriers and tankers. Holcomb spied a tanker close to one of the clear runways and left the airport behind and began to circle. Below them was farmland, dark and empty, almost serene. He continued to circle and then there were suburbs, and through the windows to the right they could see Kansas City aflame, the fires reflected in the snaking river. He flew over the city and then banked to the left and over the river and back towards the airport. He slowed the plane down and made a final descent and turn in order to land. He extended the flaps and the plane began to shudder and shake. Austin gripped the chair's arms. The runway with the dim lights seemed to rise before them with shocking speed. Austin closed his eyes, preparing for the impact. He bowed his head as if in prayer. The engine whined and screamed. Cold sweat dripped down Holcomb's forehead. The runway seemed to swallow them up and then the wheels touched, bumped, touched again. The nose slid forward, the front wheels touching the tarmac. The Caravan slowed as it rolled down the runway, and then it came to a stop altogether. Austin let out a muffled gasp. Holcomb leaned back in his seat, wiped sweaty palms on his pants. His voice shook as he said, "That wasn't so bad."

Holcomb unstrapped himself and went into the back of the plane. Austin unbuckled, felt nauseous. He followed Holcomb and Hannah and Ashlie were getting up from their seats, leaning against the seats in front of them to regain their balance. Their legs shook. Holcomb unlocked the side door and pushed it open. Warm air swept into the cabin. He took one of the radios sitting in one of the seats and dropped down onto the pavement. Austin followed him outside.

The Caravan had come to rest behind one of the wings of the main building. Lights filled the windows but inside it was barren except for the walls and seats and cavernous glass windows. Far across the tarmac sat an

assortment of trucks. Against the wing of the main building sat a parked Jumbo jet with a baggage carrier underneath its massive wing. There were bags in the carrier and some suitcases strewn across the pavement. Austin noticed it wasn't raining here. A few scattered white clouds caressed the night's stars.

Holcomb pointed to the trucks. "Our tanker is over there. You guys stay with the plane. Don't leave."

"We don't know how to fly," Austin reminded him.

"No. Don't leave *the plane*. Got that? Do you have a radio?"

"Hannah has one."

"Don't run off."

"We won't."

Holcomb nodded and ran towards the trucks.

Austin looked up at the bright, empty windows of the building and felt dread.

Ashlie and Hannah crowded in the doorway above him. He stood under the wing, trying not to feel so exposed.

"Look at the lights," Ashlie said. She waved a hand towards them. "Do you think there are people in there? And they turned on the lights?"

"No," her brother said. "The janitor said they're just auxiliary lights."

Hannah looked at her. "That one was pretty obvious, Ashlie."

"I don't trust him," she said. "I never have."

"Trusted who?" Hannah asked. "Your brother? That's normal."

"No. I trust him. I don't trust the *pilot*. The janitor."

"I trust him," Austin said. "He's gotten us this far."

"He tried to abandon us," she said.

"He thought we'd been bitten."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Good excuse. He just wanted to get out of there. He didn't give a damn about us."

"Ashlie, don't swear."

"You swear all the time."

"Ashlie..."

"I'm just saying I don't trust him. He's selfish. He'd leave us in a heartbeat."

"He's flying us to safety, and you practically hate him."

"I don't *hate* him, I just don't *trust* him. There's a difference, Aus—" She froze.

He eyed her. "What?"

She pointed to the window. "There's people up there. They're waving at us."

He followed her line-of-sight to the window. It was empty. "There's no one there."

"They were there a moment ago."

"You're just tired."

"I know what I saw, Austin. There were people in there waving at us."

He kept his eye on the window. "You're just—" He stopped. Had he seen something? It came again. A movement. A shadow within the building. He squinted his eyes. A dark silhouette rising in the window, the outline of a person. He wagered it was just an infected, watching them haplessly from the window.

And then the figure waved.

Ashlie said matter-of-factly, "See? Zombies don't wave."

Hannah said, "They need help. They're asking for help."

Suddenly Austin's legs were burning and he was running across the pavement, towards the main building, driven by something illogical and foolish but something he couldn't describe. Hannah and Ashlie were left jaw-dropped behind him. Holcomb was driving the tanker towards the plane and saw him running away from the airplane. He stopped the tanker by the fuselage and leapt out of the truck and started yelling at him. Austin spun around and

shouted back, "There's people inside! Survivors!" Holcomb just cursed at him. The towering walls of the main building loomed over him. He reached a door and kicked it open. He stumbled inside and blinked in the brightness of the lights. A door with a glass window looked into a room stocked full of machinery, belts, and baggage racks. A stairway spiraled its way upwards. He took the stairs, feet clanging loudly on the steel steps.

Holcomb burst inside below. "Austin!"

He reached the top of the stairs and barreled through the door. He staggered into the bright lights. Papers scattered all over the place. A knocked-over coffee dispenser. Rows of plain black seats spread before the giant windows, totally empty. A luggage cart here and there. A large display of screens reading "All Flights Cancelled." The terminal was completely deserted. He looked out the large window but saw only his reflection. Blood splashed the window farther down, next to gate C3. He turned around, breathing hard, surveying the terminal. The other side of the wing was deserted as well, and the wide corridor leading towards the heart of the complex was empty. A rectangular light dangled from the ceiling, held taught by loose cords.

Holcomb entered and ran over to him, grabbed him by the shoulder. "What the *hell* are you doing?!" His voice echoed throughout the terminal.

"There are people in here," Austin said, voice low. "I saw one."

"They're infected. This place is empty. Deserted. Except for the infected."

"I *saw* someone *wave* at me. So did the girls. They were calling for help."

"There's no one here," he hissed. "You're just hallucinating."

"Ashlie saw it, too. So did Hannah. Do three people corporately hallucinate the same thing at exactly the same thing? No. What we saw was real."

"I don't fucking care," he said. "Get back to the plane."

"Look..."

"No." He gripped his shoulder tighter, shook him. "*You* 'look.' I'm not going to get fucking killed because of you. I don't know what possessed you to make you come in here. You've seen how deceptive things can be. One minute things are absolutely quiet, and the next minute everything is blown to hell.

And what if it *is* a survivor? Tough luck. There's one of them. Four of us. Do the math, Austin. Are you willing to sacrifice four people for the *possibility* of saving just one more?"

He didn't answer; he was listening to something faint.

"Austin. Austin!"

And then Holcomb heard it, too.

Crying.

"The infected don't cry," Austin said. And he tore away from Holcomb and ran down the hallway. The janitor cursed and followed. Their feet thudded loudly as they ran down the cavernous aisle, the crying growing louder. They jumped over fallen suitcases and passed barren bathrooms. The bookstore door was open, the glass windows shattered, a shelf of books knocked down, the books strewn all over the tiled floor. Tables in the café had been knocked down, chairs thrown about. One of the upright tables held three cups of cold coffee. No one behind the café bar. They turned the corner and faced frozen escalators stretching down to a lower level. The crying was louder, but not downstairs. To their right. They turned and faced a woman's bathroom.

They went inside. A body lied on the couch, the wrists slit. The room stank of putrid rot and defecation. The mirror gathered their reflections. Holcomb began opening the stall doors, Austin behind him. He opened one of the stalls and stepped back. "Oh shit." Austin pulled the door wider and looked inside. On the closed toilet seat was a small cloth blanket placed in a baby carriage; and wrapped in the blanket was a newborn infant, just weeks old. Austin went in and picked up the basket. It was light. He cradled the basket in one arm and pulled the blanket aside with the other. The baby wheezed and coughed. He—or she?—began to wail again.

"Oh shit, oh shit," Holcomb moaned. "Shut it up."

"I can't. It's a baby. It doesn't know any better."

"God, it's so fucking loud."

"It's hungry. Or thirsty. How long has it been here?"

"We can't take it. Just set it down."

"You want to leave it?"

"No. We just can't take it."

"What? Why? We're going out west, where things are better."

"We don't know they're better. They were better hours ago."

"They'll take the baby here. We'll just give it a ride."

"I'm not going to take care of a baby. And I doubt you know how."

"No. But the girls do."

Holcomb looked over at the woman on the sofa. "You think it's her mother?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Fine. Bring the infant. Shit. Let's just get out of here."

The baby continued to cry, its wails resounding in the bathroom.

They left the bathroom and the stench of rotting flesh behind them. They began walking back towards the door they came through when they heard some pattering steps on the escalators. Holcomb said, "No..." but Austin handed him the baby and ran down the escalator. A baby couldn't have waved at them. Whoever had been in the window was at least a child, and they were still there. Holcomb set the baby carriage down and took off after him. The bottom of the escalators opened up to a gigantic lobby. The glass windows at the front of the building were webbed or shattered, and the massive marble pillars rising up to the roof were stained with blood. The service desks were empty, the roped queue lines knocked over. The baggage retrieval belt continued to operate, circling suitcases round and round. Austin moved among the pillars, looking and listening, but heard nothing except the baby crying at the top of the escalators and Holcomb walking behind him.

Austin pointed to the right. "Maybe they went —"

"Oh my God. Austin." He tapped him on the shoulder, pointed.

Twenty feet above them were twenty nooses adorned with bodies hanging limp and still. Their mouths were open and humming with flies. The flesh on

their necks were bitterly purple, bruised and torn. Flight attendants, flight captains, service clerks, a janitor... All employees, taking their lives in desperations. Austin turned his eyes away, to the windows, which were covered with bloody handprints.

Holcomb said, "Can we go *now*, Austin?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah, we can go."

And then they heard the sound of running feet coming from their right.

Austin looked down that direction. "Hello!" he shouted.

The sounds grew louder. Several feet. Running.

"Hello!" he yelled again.

"There's a lot of them," Holcomb said under his breath.

More running feet to their left. Moving between the spaced pillars were flickers of movement. Lots of people. Coming towards them.

"Okay, you were right," Austin said.

They took off, running between the marble pillars, ascending the frozen escalators. They looked back to see the infected swarming at the foot of the escalator, bottlenecked and tumbling over one another. Eventually they narrowed out and began to climb after them. Holcomb grabbed the baby carriage with its shrieking cargo, and the two of them ran around the corner and past the café and the bookstore. Movement in the shadows ahead of them, from the area they'd entered from. Their exit was blocked.

"Oh shit," Holcomb said again.

Austin ran between aisles of seats in front of a large window, Holcomb behind him. They ran down gate C1, the steel accordion encircling them. They ran down the covered gateway ramp. The baby screamed as she was thrown about in the carriage. The gateway locked against the open door of a jumbo 747. Austin leapt through the door and ran down the aisle, empty seats of soft leather and windows with drawn, curtained cloth on either side. Holcomb stumbled inside, nearly tripping and dropping the carriage. Austin ran down the length of the massive plane, searching for another door, but he couldn't find

one. He tried to bust open a window with a suitcase, but the window wouldn't break. He turned and shouted at the janitor: "Shut the door! Shut the door!"

Holcomb set the baby carriage in a seat and shut the door, threw down the lock.

Austin ran up to him. "Are they close?"

The door resounded with banging on the other side.

"Yeah," Holcomb said, "I think they're close."

Austin ran back down the length of the plane. He found doors now but there were no outside stairwells leading to the pavement. He ran back to the front where Holcomb stood rigidly before the door, just staring. He turned and looked at the boy and said, "The door's pretty solid. I don't think they can get in."

Sounds above them. Thudding. Scrambling.

"They're on the roof now," Holcomb said.

Austin went to the cockpit and opened the door.

He returned to Holcomb. "They're on the nose, too."

"They're swarming this plane like flies. They'll find a way in."

"Oh shit' is right."

They continued to assault the door, and eventually the screws holding the lock's latch began to jiggle. Austin stared at the wiggling screws and said, "This shit just got real." He looked back down the empty aisles to the far end of the plane past the stewardess' section, and — "The elevator shaft," he said under his breath. He looked at Holcomb. "This plane has an elevator shaft, right? Leading down to the luggage deck?" He didn't know the proper lingo, but Holcomb understood him and nodded. "I've only rode in a plane once before, I've no idea where it is. And you're the aviator. Give me the baby. And *find it*." Holcomb did, and Austin set the baby down in one of the seats and turned and faced the door. The janitor disappeared at the far end of the plane. The boy watched as one of the screws broke, and then another. And after standing holed-up in the plane's fuselage for ten minutes, the lock broke.

He shoved his back against the door and pressed it back as the zombies tried to get in. Grimy, filthy hands reached out, clawing at his shoulder. Their rancid breath traveled through the widening crack. His legs threatened to buckle. They seemed so much stronger than he remembered. He screamed Holcomb's name over and over, but the janitor didn't appear. Fingertips brushed against his neck and the side of his face and tickled his ear and ran through his hair. Holcomb came running, shouting that he'd found the elevator shaft. He asked what happened to the lock.

"What the fuck does it look like?!" Austin shouted at him.

"The shaft's down there," he said, pointing towards the end of the plane.

"I can't! The door will open, and they'll be inside."

Holcomb cursed.

"Find something blunt! Or something sharp!"

He began going through the baggage compartments. They were all empty. He ran to the cockpit. The crack in the door widened, Austin's feet sliding over the carpeted floor. He blinked stinging sweat from his eyes. Holcomb returned with a 9mm pistol.

"Where the hell did you get *that*?"

"All commercial airliners have them now. Ever since 9/11."

"Oh." Then: "Shoot them!"

"Then get out of the way!"

He abandoned the door, throwing himself forward. The door flung open and several infected stood there, confused, as if they hadn't expected the door to open. Holcomb raised the gun and fired off several shots. Blood splashed against the doorframe and against the accordion shell of the gate ramp. Three or four had fallen when the others charged into the aircraft. Austin had grabbed the baby carriage and was running down the corridor, and Holcomb took off behind him, spinning on his heels and firing shots at the incoming infected.

"Where's the shaft?!" Austin shouted, fearing he would run past it.

“Second stewardess’ section!” He fired another shot, downing a zombie. “On the left!”

He turned left at the next stewardess’ section between two coach seating areas. He saw the ramp open. Five feet tall and four feet wide. He gripped the baby carriage tightly and turned, ducked down, and wiggled through. The last thing he saw was Holcomb standing outside in the hallway next to the station, reloading the 9mm. The elevator shaft sloped down and he emerged in the luggage section of the aircraft. The darkness hovered so thick he couldn’t see. He could hear gunshots above as he pushed through stacks of checked luggage. He saw a sliver of light, seeming so bright, and went towards it. He heard thumping as Holcomb went down the shaft. As he neared the light, he saw that it was only starlight coming in through an open door with a ramp leading down to the pavement where a half-empty baggage carrier sat. He went down the ramp and into the cold night air.

Standing on the pavement, he looked around. He saw the Cessna Caravan sitting where they had left it. The door was shut, and he was thankful for that. In the cockpit’s interior lights he saw two figures waving, beckoning. Holcomb appeared behind him and they started running towards the Cessna. Austin glanced back to see infected emerging from the ramp, and there were others jumping down from the top of the aircraft. One landed and its leg bone twisted and broke, but it continued to chase, hobbling on one leg and dragging the other behind it.

Austin reached the plane and set the baby carriage down and reached for the refueling tubes. Holcomb grabbed the baby and stood beneath the door. “The girls already refueled!” The door opened and Hannah reached down, looked surprisingly at the baby carriage, paused. “Take it!” Holcomb screamed. She took it and then he climbed inside. The infected were nearly to the plane when he reached down and grabbed Austin’s arm and pulled him inside. Holcomb raced to the front of the plane and Austin shut the door. Hannah and Ashlie were sitting down, buckling up. Hannah cradled the baby carriage.

“I’ll explain later,” he said, going to the front.

The baby continued to cry, though its wails were hoarser now.

Holcomb started the engine. The fuel gauge shifted to full. He grinned. Outside the view screen, the zombies were nearly to the plane. Hundreds of them. Air travelers who had lost their hand of cards. Austin imagined the infection entered the airport through a plane landing because of civil disturbance, and the 'civil disturbance' quickly infiltrated through the traveling societies. Now the innocent victims charged the plane as the engine groaned and as the wheels began to roll. He turned the plane around using the rudder.

Ashlie yelled from the back, "Where did you find the baby?"

"Not now, Ashlie!" Austin yelled, strapping himself into the copilot's seat.

As he lined the plane up with the runway, Holcomb snarled, "Don't *ever* run off again."

"We saved a life."

"We don't know that yet."

The infected threw themselves against the plane's fuselage, entangled themselves with the fixed landing gear. The propeller's spun, slicing at the air. Some of the infected climbed onto the wings. Ashlie screamed as they assaulted the window next to her. The plane lurched forward, then stopped, lurched forward again. Austin asked what was wrong. "Something with the gear. They must be on the gear." He accelerated the throttle. The plane bounced again, and then they were moving at a quicker pace. The plane gained speed. The zombies on the wing fell off. Ashlie breathed a sigh of relief. Ahead of them, dozens of infected stood in the middle of the runway, just watching them, the starlight pooling in their eyes. Holcomb didn't slow down. "They'll scatter," he said. But they didn't. And the propellers tore through them and the windshield once again became covered with streaking blood. The wing decapitated one and its head flew up and hit the rudder, bounced off into the night. Holcomb pulled the plane into the air and the wipers smeared the blood. He cursed and ignited

the washer fluid, and the blood washed away. They climbed up into the starry night.

The plane leveled out, the airport vanishing behind them. Austin suddenly gasped for breath, realizing he hadn't been breathing. Holcomb put the airplane on autopilot, turned in his chair, and viciously reached out, grabbed him by the collar, pulled him forward. "Listen to me: I am *not* going to lose my own life because of your foolish antics. When I tell you to stay put, I mean *stay the fuck there*." Austin had never seen such rage in a man before, didn't know what to say. "Next time this happens, don't even *think* I'm going to chase you." He released and Austin pulled away from him. The anger continued to flood through the pilot's eyes. He turned back in his seat and focused on turning the plane around so they were heading west.

Not wanting to be in the cockpit with him, Austin went back into the cabin and sat down beside the girls.

Ashlie cradled the infant. "I *told* you someone was waving at us."

He said nothing. Whoever had been waving wasn't with them.

He got up and went to another seat and sat down, looked out the window, at the wing. Hannah and Ashlie played with the infant, who had stopped crying. She even giggled. He watched them for a few moments, saw the happiness on Hannah's face. He liked seeing her happy. He didn't care what Holcomb said. Hannah was happy and that made it worth it. He leaned his head back on the neck of the chair and closed his eyes and fell asleep and drifted off into a world of nightmares and dreamscapes.

4:00 AM

The house rose out of the mist that had fallen and wrapped the earth in a tender sleep. The headlights barely cut through the fog, and the windshield danced with droplets of moisture. The wipers flicked back and forth. Austin pulled into the driveway, looking into the large windows. Beyond in the cozy warmth people moved around inside. Les sat beside him, Chad in the back. He stopped the car and just sat there, looking into the window, wanting nothing more than to leave. Les and Chad opened the doors, and he followed suit.

"You have to do it, Austin," Les said. "It's the New Year! It's time for change!"

"A time for renewal," Chad chimed.

Les added. "Here's your New Year's Resolution: to stop being a pussy."

"I'm not a pussy," he said as he began walking to the front door. "I'm realistic."

"You are a pussy," Les said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Why can't I make my own resolutions?"

"Because yours are dumb. 'Read a book.' 'Lose weight.' Lose weight? You've lost forty pounds. You're skinny enough."

He touched the soft patch of gut on his belly. "Okay, Man."

He stepped onto the porch and stood stoic before the door.

Les stepped around him and knocked. He turned and grinned at his friend.

The door opened. Rachel stood there, Tyler behind her. "Hey boys!" Tyler exclaimed.

They all said hello and entered.

Rachel shut the door. Tyler touched her arm. They were always all over each other.

"Kind of sickening, isn't it?" Chad whispered into Austin's ear.

Les shot him a look. "You and Ellie made in front of Grandma."

Austin shook his head and went into the kitchen.

The plane shuddered, waking him from his sleep. "Everything all right?" he called out.

"It's fine," Holcomb said. "Just turbulence."

"Where are we?"

"Colorado. I think Denver's beneath us."

He looked out the window. Through scattered clouds he could see a burning city.

"The Rockies are straight ahead. If we hadn't refueled, we'd be crashing."

"Okay." He leaned back in his seat.

The girls continued to play with the baby. Hannah said something about how they needed a bottle. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep, the dream—the replaying of that haunting memory from only four months ago—resurrecting.

Plates of food sat everywhere. Fritos with chocolate dip, star cookies laced with strawberry icing, two dishes of spicy meatballs, chili and bean dip, corn chips and brownies. A dozen two-liters sat like battle armaments on the counter. Melanie and Amanda were pouring their drinks. He grabbed a cup and reached for the Mountain Dew, silently rejoicing. He didn't see her anywhere. Yet the excitement built upon a foundation of disenchantment. The possibilities spun webs through his mind. She rejects him, they remain friends, albeit awkward friends; or she accepts him, and a week later they will be holding hands, cuddling, watching movies together. He stood there and poured the soda into the cup and smiled at the thought of them standing together in a thunderstorm, feeling the rain, enjoying the rapture of their moment under the eaves of thunder.

"Austin," Amanda said.

He turned and looked at her. "What?"

"I've said your name like a thousand times."

"Oh. Ha. Sorry. I just dozed off."

Melanie said Hi and went for some cookies.

Amanda watched her go, grabbed him by the shirt, tugged him into the corner of the kitchen. "So are you going to ask her?" she demanded.

"What?" he stammered. "Ask who?"

"You're such a pussy, Austin."

"So I've been told."

"Les and Chad texted me on their way here. Said you were going to ask her."

"Seriously?" His eyes flared with anger. "How many people did they tell?"

"Are you going to ask her?"

"I don't know —"

"Pussy."

"Is she even here? I haven't seen her."

"She's in Rachel's room."

"What's she doing in there?"

"I don't know. She just went in there."

The baby's crying woke him. He rolled his head over to the side. Ashlie cradled the baby, hopping the infant on her knee. The baby continued to shriek. Hannah slept soundlessly in the opposite seat. Ashlie looked back and smiled at her brother, and he smiled back and looked out the window. He could see white-caps below. The tops of mountains. They'd be safe soon, and that thought made the baby's cries seem somehow less annoying. He closed his eyes and the baby went quiet, cooing, and he fell back asleep.

Pictures and photographs of everyone in Rachel's family hung on the hallway. He found Rachel's room. The door was shut. He pushed it open. It was dark, the shadows culminating in the corner. The shadows melted with the light from the hallway, and he saw a bed, a dresser, a vanity, one of those hanging nets with stuffed animals in the right corner. She sat in the chair facing the glass mirror of the vanity. Tears crawled down her cheeks and she sniffled. He decided he should leave, and he began to shut the door when she said, without even looking up, "Who is it?"

"It's me," he said.

"I'm okay." She sniffled. "Really, I am."

He entered the room and sat down on the bed behind her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he said.

She turned in the chair and glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Does it look like I want to talk about it?" she snapped.

He raised his hands. "Sorry. I'll just get out of your way. Just wanted to help."

He stood and walked towards the door.

"My cousin's really sick," she said.

He stopped in the doorway, turned around, looked at her.

"They don't know what it is. They think it's stomach cancer. The hospitals never reported it. Jerry. He's like one of my best friends. It's like I might lose a best friend. Everyone is celebrating the New Year, celebrating life and love and happiness, and here I am sitting alone in this chair, crying, because all that life, love, and happiness can be torn from my family before the ball even drops. Have you ever thought of that, Austin? Life is so tragic. It's so futile, so... easily taken. One misstep, one bad decision, and you're gone. Someone messes up, and you're gone. You can't control it. I could have gotten hit on my way to work this morning, and I wouldn't be sitting here. What's the point of goals? Of resolutions? The next New Year may never come. And the goals, the things we strive so hard after? It's all meaningless, so empty... It's nothing."

He didn't know what to say.

"There are moments when it ends, moments when we realize that the world doesn't revolve around us, moments when we realize that it doesn't matter what happens to us. And still we keep going, keep hoping, hoping that things will get better. But no one's listening. No one cares, not really. We're just insignificants, surrounded by maybe a dozen or so people who would really be affected by our deaths. The world won't end if we're gone. In fact, it may be better. Less mouths to feed."

She stood from her chair and walked over to him. She took his hand a ripple of fear ran through him. She looked deep into his eyes. She caressed the back of her hand with her fingers, and she leaned forward, and her eyes closed, and the shadows wrapped around them. Their lips touched, and she pulled him close, wrapped her arms around him, squeezing him as if she'd die to never let go. Her body against his sent electricity through his veins; and her lips massaging his, her soft tongue entering his mouth, their tongues entwining in a dance of epic beauty—she breathed so deeply and passionate,

shy yet brave—all this didn't compare to anything he'd ever experienced. He returned the kiss, cupping her face in his hands, and the tears streamed down her face.

And she pulled away, and she cursed herself.

He said her name, but she just went back to the chair and sat down and asked him to leave.

He said her name again, and she said, "Austin. I'm an idiot. Just leave."

His heart sunk in his chest. So close.

All an illusion.

The foolishness of a broken-hearted girl.

He stepped back and pulled the door shut.

He heard them laughing and joking in the other room.

He heard them counting down to the New Year's.

And he wondered if the year could get any worse than this moment here.

She would always deny the kiss ever happened.

And perhaps, to her, it never had.

Holcomb banked the plane. Austin's head bumped against the window and he awoke. His fingers felt like ice. He stood and stretched and went to the cockpit. The stars twinkled above them. A storm far to the right, the lightning flickering amidst thick clouds. He asked where they were.

Holcomb said, "Hell if I know. We just passed over the Rockies, I think. See? Down there, it's just farmland. My geography's a little off. Probably somewhere in Utah?" There were more mountains ahead. "Yeah. Utah. Cause there's a small valley between one part of the Rockies and the other. I'm guessing we're in that valley." They flew over a river far below, tiny and twisting. Probably the Colorado.

Austin took the blankets on the floor and returned to the cabin.

The baby slept soundly in its carriage on the seat next to Ashlie, who slept under a blanket.

Hannah slept in her chair across the aisle, bundled up as well.

Austin sat down in his seat and pulled the blankets over him. He almost felt chilled. He watched her sleep, wondering:

Why did you never tell anyone?

Why did it have to be kept a secret?

What were you ashamed of?

Ashamed of love?

Ashamed of being discovered that you're not the hollow shell that everyone said you were behind your back?

Ashamed of all your popular, cheerleader friends, all those football players, discovering that you're something totally different—something genuine, something wonderful, someone worth spending a life with?

At that moment he didn't care about what was going on. He didn't care about the hell on the ground nor the uncertainty in the air. He just cared about her. And he cared about them. *Us*. He cared about their memories, those memories that he would hold forever, those sacred and wonderful memories he would one day use to slip back into a time when there was no bloodshed, no terror, no screams. Every part of him thirsted to stand, to sit beside her, to whisper in her ear, "You don't need to pretend anymore. Things are different now. The games are over."

And he wanted to return to that dream. Return to that kiss, that fleeting moment, that moment of full passion. He wanted to return to that time when she shivered in his embrace, when she found in his arms solace and escape from the hells and trials of life.

He pulled the blanket tighter over himself and closed his eyes.

The memories were an escape from realities.

In his sleep he dodged nightmares and clung to those memories.

In his sleep he escaped the Alcatraz of the present for the shore of the past.

"My cousin is sick." She sits in the chair, staring out the window at the snow falling outside. "He died last night. They don't know what it was. Rabies from a dog bite, they think."

He tries to touch her arm. She pulls away.

This isn't a memory. He feels cheated.

"I wasn't really close to him," she says. "But it bothers me because... they lost his body." She looks down at her feet. "How do doctors lose a body? It wasn't on the straps in the morgue. It's like someone stole it, but the nurses don't claim anyone left with a body. They would've seen that. God. It's eating me away, driving me crazy. How can that —"

The glass window facing the snow shatters and two hands reach in, a bloodied face shrieking. Glass blows past her and into his face, and he spins around, clawing at his eyes, blinded. The hands grab her. She screams as the arms wrench her towards the zombie's mouth. She reaches for him, but he doesn't move, now watching, petrified. Blood sprays all over the walls, all over the zombie's face, as he bites into her jugular. She screams and kicks and cries as her neck is shredded by his teeth. He lets go and she falls backwards in the chair, and gravity is forgotten as her body is lifted and thrown into the dresser. She rolls over the floor, hands cupped over her throat, blood seeping through like a waterfall. The zombie at the window grins and leaves, walking away, bloody footprints in the snow tracing its path. Austin drops down to the ground and crawls over to her. She writhes back and forth, kicking her legs, blinking her eyes, moving her mouth like a fish out of water. He screams her name. Her eyes glaze over and she lies still.

And then her eyes open. And she looks at him.

Except her eyes are... different.

"Hannah?"

She snarls, her voice torn and jagged, and she scrambles up towards him. He reels backwards and runs out of the room, screaming for help. But now blood drenches the walls. He enters the kitchen. Blood fills the chili bowls and the bowl of potato chips, and the potato chips float listlessly at its surface. Everyone stands in the dining room, their flesh mottled purple, their eyes sunken, their lips furled. They shriek and charge him. He turns and stumbles into Hannah. Melanie, Amanda, Drake, Chad, Les, Ashlie, Rachel and Tyler, rushing after him with crazed bloodlust. He sprints out of the kitchen and runs straight into Hannah. She grabs him and throws him onto the couch, and she

jumps on top of him. The others jump on top of her like a football tackle. They grab his arms and pull, and he can feel the tendons snapping and the ligaments heaving and the muscles tearing as his arms are ripped from their sockets. His stomach is torn open, the innards wrenched out, and they take his intestines and put them on platters and pass the plates around and chase the food with white wine. His eyes roll into the back of his head and all he feels is the pain.

Hannah closes her mouth over his. "Isn't this what you wanted?" she asks.

And then she begins to chew on his lip.

Hannah shook him awake. He wheeled around, gasping.

She looked at him, eyes hesitant. "Are you okay?"

He took several deep breaths. "Yeah. Yeah, of course."

"You were shaking in your seat and you were making crying noises."

"Was I?"

Her eyes were filled with life. He just wanted to hold her and cry.

She nodded and went back to her seat, leaving him alone.

5:00 AM

He didn't go back to sleep. He sat in the seat and listened to his sister sleeping and the infant's muffled snoring. Hannah sat quietly in her seat, looking out the window. He watched her for some time. She kept looking at her arm and grimacing. He went over and sat beside her, asked about her arm. In the dim cabin lighting she showed him, pulling back the gauze. She winced as it tore at the dried blood. Yellow crust had developed in some part of the tear. "It's getting infected," she said. He told her they would be landing soon, medical treatments would be available. She said she knew. He sat there beside her and she looked out the window and he wanted to wrap his arm around her and whisper into her ear something soft, sweet, something delicate. But instead he stood and went back to his own seat and sat down and looked out the window at the mountains below. He kept stealing glances over at her but she never looked at him. He remembered that kiss four months ago and wondered if she remembered, too. He wondered if she would deny it then.

Ashlie awoke and came and sat down beside him. "The baby's really hungry, and we don't have any baby food. And she's thirsty, too. She's probably been without water for hours."

"I know," he said. "They'll take care of it when we land."

"Where are we now?"

"Somewhere over the Rockies," he said.

She leaned her head against him. He stroked her strawberry blond hair.

"I take back what I said," she said.

"What's that?"

"I told you that you deserved better than Hannah. But you don't."

He chuckled. "Thanks."

She turned and looked at him, smiled. "I don't mean it like that, Austin."

"I know."

"I mean my view of her has changed. I kinda like her now."

"So do I," he said. "I guess some things *haven't* changed."

"I think you two would be good together."

"Who knows."

"Maybe after all this is over, you guys will get married."

"I don't know."

"I think she likes you."

He looked over to see if she was listening, but her eyes were closed, head against the window. "I don't know."

"I hope you two end up together," Ashlie said.

"I'm not really hoping for that." But that was a lie.

He wanted to marry her. He never would have told anyone that, but it was true. Ever since he had fallen for her, back when their friendship had been solid and intact, he had wanted to make her his wife. He always thought something was wrong with him. Most boys his age just wanted to mess around, to enjoy the sensuality of a girl. Austin wanted that, too. But he wanted to much more. With Hannah he wanted the sensuality, but he wanted *her* as well. He wanted every part of her, and he wanted every part—the past, the present, and the future—to be with him forever. And he saw her in that wedding dress, the two of them, standing together, hands clasped, lips touching; and he heard the bloom of fireworks and the roar of applause but didn't see it because his eyes were focused upon hers, the two of them united "till death do us part." He could see them running down the aisle and jumping into the car and driving off to their honeymoon. They would lie in one another's arms, their naked bodies entwined, and she would tell him, "Never leave me, Austin," and she would mean it. They would go on walks and share in candlelit dinners and lie in bed at night and stare at the stars through the skylight above and talk about life and how in love they were. They would go to parties and barbecues and retreats with friends and family. They would grow old together, and they would spend their retirement fishing, swimming, walking through the woods, gazing upon the sunrise and sunset, enjoying each new day, each new season, fresh and

alive. They would live a simple life of love and romance, of laughter and joy, the antithesis to all that he had experienced thus far in his life. They would watch their children grow older and bud families of their own, and he would spin stories for his grandchildren and fix them pancakes in the morning and let them taste coffee.

Sitting in that plane thousands of feet above the mountains, that was what Austin wanted more than anything. He wondered what would happen to them, all of them. What would happen to Holcomb, Hannah, Ashlie, himself? He imagined them in a house in Alaska, along the coastline, seagulls perched on the roof of their home as he and Hannah lied awake in bed, cuddling, as Ashlie made breakfast. A fire roaring in the fireplace. Far removed from zombies or the haunting memories of them. He dared to believe that such a future might be possible. Militaries continued to operate. Governments continued to enforce the laws. The disease was being pushed back, or at least held back. He envisioned a future where there were no zombies, and he wanted this future more than anything. More than anything except to hold Hannah and to never let go.

"I wish Mommy and Daddy were here," Ashlie said, breaking his train of thought.

He looked over at her. "I know. So do I."

She began to cry, and he held her.

He felt her tears sprinkling onto his arm as he looked out the window.

The mountains gave way to stretching plains littered with burning fires.

A distant city engulfed in flame.

She fell asleep. He gently laid her head on the seat and stood and went to the front. Holcomb was scribbling down notes in a manila legal pad. "What's that for?"

He jumped upon hearing Austin's voice. A grin over his face. "The radios work."

Austin stood in the cockpit doorway. "You contacted someone?"

"No. National Guard just contacted *me*. They told me to squawk back."

"To what?"

"To squawk means to verify something. I verified that I was in the airspace."

The radio crackled: *Unidentified aircraft, this is National Guard Station Two-Delta-Niner. Please give the information requested, Over.*

Holcomb spoke into the headset. "National Guard Two-Delta-Niner, this is Cessna 208A Caravan 675, N436DN. Fuel is at a quarter tank, approximately 556 pounds. There are three passengers and one pilot. Over."

~Roger that, Cessna N436DN. Please hold while we route your plane.~

Holcomb slapped his knee. "Fucking awesome."

Austin nodded and looked back into the cabin at the sleeping girls.

"It'll all be over soon," Holcomb said.

"I hope so."

The radio crackled again: *Cessna N436DN, this is National Guard Two-Delta-Niner. Report to Shingletown Airport. Fly right downwind, runway one, altimeter 2992. Weather is clear skies, winds calm, visibly 23 miles.*

Holcomb said, "National Guard Two-Delta-Niner, Cessna N436DN is unfamiliar with the area. Request direction to the airport. Over."

~Cessna N436DN, airport is nine o'clock, seventeen miles. Over.~

"Roger that." He fiddled with the controls and the aircraft began to turn, banking south. Now the mountains were to their left, the plains stretching far below them to the west, then intersecting again with more mountains.

On the dashboard the clock read 5:34 AM. He looked out the window to the east and didn't see the sun. Then he remembered that they were somewhere near California now, if not *in* California. What was the time difference? He tried to remember. Around three hours? So it was 5:34 AM in Ohio, and dawn would be breaking. The end to a long night. But here it was only 2:30 in the morning. A long, drawn-out night that never seemed to end.

He went to the back and checked on the sleeping infant and then sat back down beside his sister. She awoke, mumbled something. "It's okay," he said. "It's almost over. The National Guard is on the radio, directing us to some airport." She mumbled something again and went back to sleep. He looked out the window, at the pitch blackness barely penetrated by the stars above. He could see several flashing lights strewn all across the sky, and he realized they were planes. More airplanes from all over the United States, heading west. He wondered how they could all land, and then he figured the National Guard was taking into account the types of planes, the passengers, and the fuel loads and then strategically directing each plane to the most convenient landing site. One airplane drew very close to them, some sort of jet, and then it flew overhead, flying to the north. The Cessna rocked back and forth in the wake of the jet's engine and he heard Holcomb cursing them.

He joined Holcomb in the front. He said, "Roger that," over the radio, then explained to the boy, "Apparently this airfield hasn't been used in years. It's pretty bumpy. And it doesn't have any lights. They've lit barrels of oil on fire up and down the runway so we can see it. Just like they used to do in the Pacific islands during the war with the Japanese in the 1940s. Pretty old-school, but it works. Hey. Look." He pointed past Austin's shoulder and out the window. Austin turned to see several flashes of red-hot light against a mountainside. They seemed so distant. They flared bright and then settled into a monotonous glow. Holcomb said, "Looks like carpet-bombing. Or napalm. Maybe they're holding back the infected? Or killing them where they stand." The sound of a jet grew louder and then a pair of A-10 Warthogs screeched overhead. Austin looked out the other window to see them dropping more bombs down onto the plains. He pressed his face against the window and saw the bombs scatter amongst several homes, entire buildings burst apart and consumed. He wondered if they were bombing the perimeter of the airfield.

"There it is," Holcomb said, pointing. Through the darkness to the south they could see a faint line of spotted red. He began to descend the plane. "All right. Get everyone buckled in. They said four times that the runway was in disrepair. So it could get pretty shaky. I guess things are pretty bad if they have to use abandoned runways, eh?" Austin didn't know. He went to the back and woke Hannah, told her to buckle up, they were going to land. He told the same to Ashlie. They did, and he took the infant and sat down in the seat beside it, next to the window. He buckled up and cushioned the infant's head underneath its pillow. The baby woke and began to cry again, but he didn't care. He looked out the window and in the darkness couldn't see the runway coming to meet them. But then the airplane began to bounce and shudder. It fish-tailed, but Holcomb corrected it. And then he saw the burning barrels of oil on the side of the runway, casting firelight over the fence bordering against the woods. They passed several hangars where more private aircraft were parked. Several Army helicopters, Chinooks, if he remembered correctly, sat beside the runway. One began to take off. In another, survivors were being hoarded up the ramp and into the hold.

Austin unbuckled and set the infant down and went to the front. Over the radio: *Cessna N436DN, contact Ground on 121-niner*. Holcomb said, "Cessna N436DN, going to 121-niner." He flipped the frequency on the radio and then the radio crackled: *Cessna N436DN, taxi to the end of the runway and turn left. Park your plane beside the army truck. Over*. Holcomb said, "Taxiing left of runway." The runway rimmed by burning oil barrels stretched before them. The tarmac was filled with potholes and uneven ground, and the Cessna rattled and shook as Holcomb reached the end of the runway and turned left. Directly ahead were several Army trucks with canvas tops, soldiers standing around with automatic rifles. He parked the plane and cut the engine and the propellers grinded to a halt. He stood and said, "Get the girls. And let's get the hell out of this plane."

Holcomb opened the door. Mounted floodlights mounted along the side of the airfield flooded the plane. He turned away, shielding his eyes. A soldier shouted for them to get out of the plane. He stepped out. A soldier in olive combat fatigues approached him, pointing his M16 right into his chest. Behind the soldier, along the edge of the airfield, were more soldiers huddled together. The soldier approaching him told him to get up against the plane. He moved to the fuselage as Hannah stepped out, then Ashlie with the infant, and finally Austin. The inside of the plane had been stark cold, but here Austin was met with a beloved warmth. They lined up along the fuselage with Holcomb. The soldier said something, but as he did so a Chinook flew overhead, climbing into the air. Once it passed, he repeated what he said: "Give us the infant." The other soldiers came forward, and one of them took the baby and proceeded to undress it. The lead soldier said, "Have any of you been bitten?"

Holcomb shook his head. "No, no. If we would've been bitten, we'd be like them."

"It depends on the severity of the bite and its proximity to major arteries," the soldier said. "We've seen some people get bitten and not get... sick... up to twelve hours later."

Austin said, "We know, we know. We saw the News. Before it went to the emergency broadcasting system."

"Where are you from?"

"Ohio," Holcomb said.

"Ohio fell fast. Most of it did, anyways. In less than three hours. Populated places were wiped out the quickest. New York City went under in less than an hour, though we believe there are maybe hundreds or thousands of survivors there. We know there are survivors everywhere. If we're getting this many on planes, then how many can't fly out? We've already gotten close to five thousand refugees from the air, in this area alone. There are refugee camps all up the West Coast. Canada has a few, and most other countries do, too, despite rumors they've been completely overrun."

Ashlie asked, "Is it going to end?"

"We have some ideas. The government seems to think so."

The soldier undressing the infant shouted, "The baby's clear!" and began to redress the infant.

The lead soldier nodded, yelled over his shoulder, "Daniel! Grays! Vince!" Three soldiers ran over and stood beside him. The lead soldier told the gathered survivors, "All right. We need you guys to strip completely down. Just undress. Please hurry so we can get you guys moving."

Scattered glances between them.

He explained, "We're checking to make sure no one is infected. We have to halt the spread of infection."

Holcomb said, "I told you, none of us are bitten. We're clear."

"We need to make sure." He lowered his M16. "Please undress. Now."

Holcomb looked at the others. "Okay. Let's just do what he says. I understand what he's saying. We'll be happy if they're doing it for everyone else." He began to take off his shirt.

Austin took off his own shirt and started on his pants, feeling embarrassed. Did they have to strip *all* the way down? Hannah was undressing, but he didn't even care. Ashlie slowly took off her shirt. He looked off to the side and saw another plane, some sort of small jet, and along the fuselage were six or seven individuals, crying and broken. Soldiers raised their weapons and without hesitation fired. The people dropped down, the backs of their skulls bursting open and spraying the cement. A shiver ran through him and he undressed even quicker. In moments they all stood naked and exposed. The soldiers went forward and turned them around, inspecting every nook and cranny of their bodies. His face burned, and he saw Hannah trying to cower underneath the wing, but the soldier inspecting her kept grabbing her and pulling her back. He undid the bandage and asked how she'd gotten wounded and she told him. Ashlie lowered her head, staring at her feet.

The soldier inspecting Austin said, "He's clear. Lots of cuts and bruises, nothing bad. The forehead will need looking at. But no bites."

Holcomb received a clear report.

The soldier examining Hannah said, "She's clear. This gash on her arm will need immediate medical treatment. It looks like it might be infected. Not with *Copernicium arretium*, but something... normal."

Ashlie's soldier looked up. "Corporal?"

The corporal abandoned Holcomb and walked over. They whispered together.

The corporal turned. "We need you three to step back."

"Step back?" Austin asked. "For what?" He looked over at the bodies lying on the ground next to the other plane, brains and blood dripping along the fuselage.

"Step back," the soldier said again.

"Just tell me—"

The other soldier grabbed Ashlie's shoulder and swung her around, pointed.

Right along her opposite shoulder-blade was a small bite, already beginning to swell and grow purple at the edges.

She began to cry. Austin's heart began to hammer behind his ribs. He stepped forward. "No, no. Look. Let's treat it. Maybe if we put some antiseptic or ointment on it, maybe—"

"There are no known cures," the soldier said. "You know what a bite means."

"But it's so small!" he exclaimed, his voice beginning to shake.

"It's already beginning to spread out from the bite."

"But—"

"Step back," the soldier growled.

Austin went forward, shouting, "That's my sister!"

The soldier pointed his gun at him. "Don't."

But he just shoved him away and ran forward. The soldier holding Ashlie released her and struck out with the butt of his rifle, hitting the boy square in the forehead. Lightning pain streaked out from the gash on his forehead and he

crumpled onto the pavement, seeing spots, gasping in frightening pain. The world spun back to focus, and despite the incredible agony, he managed to crawl onto his knees, raised his hands, pleaded: "Please. Please. She's all I have left. Please."

Hannah shivered nakedly in the cold.

He didn't even feel awkward lying naked on the pavement. He only cared about Ashlie.

The soldier grabbed his hands and dragged him across the pavement. Dirt and pebbles tore into his back. He kicked and hollered. Ashlie looked at him, pleading for help. He kicked at the earth, got a hand free, reached for the assault rifle. Another soldier ran forward and grabbed him, ripped him away, threw him down onto the ground. He crawled along the ground and tried to stand, but the soldier kicked him in the side. Holcomb and Hannah stood silently, doing nothing, held back by soldiers pointing their rifles at them.

A soldier pressed Ashlie against the fuselage of the Cessna Caravan and stepped back and raised his rifle.

Her brother coughed up blood, spewed, "No! No! Please! Shoot *me*! Shoot me instead!"

The soldier put her in the sights of his gun.

The boy watched in terror as the soldier pulled the trigger.

Ashlie's body fell against the fuselage.

The back of her head splattered like a grotesque painting over one of the windows.

Her body teetered and fell onto the pavement.

A single bullet hole rested between her dead and lifeless eyes.

The blood crawled out the back of her head and matted her damp and knotted hair.

Her empty eyes stared at her brother.

He could do nothing.

August 2025

The flight to the Florida Keys takes several hours, and the C-130 lands around 1:00 in the afternoon on a coral runway east of Sugarloaf Shores, several miles north of Key West. This part of Florida is a string of islands connected by the crumbling Overseas Highway, a bridge and road that had spanned all of the islands and was famous for congested traffic. Now most of it lies under the shallow waters, old and rusted cars strewn about and becoming encased in coral and seaweed. Once they disembark the plane, the soldiers lead Mr. Hastings to a canvas-topped truck and they drive west towards the town of Sugarloaf Shores. The area is marshy with cattails and herrings leaving stamped footprints in the wispy sand. Florida thatch palms line the road and sea grape and black ironwood lace the southern most part of the town, run-down homes and shops long-ago overtaken by nature. Windows are blown out and doors hang off the rusted hinges and sand has inched its way into bedrooms and parlors and the windows have melted down onto their lowermost frames. As they pass through the town, Hastings looks out the window and in the alleyways he can see amidst the haphazard shadows jumbles of skeletons with grinning teeth and empty eyes.

The truck stops beside the Sugarloaf Lodge and Tavern. They disembark and go inside. The lighting by the oil lamps is dim and there are several tables amidst which soldiers sit and drink, and at the bar is a collection of empty liquor bottles: bourbon, vodka, rum. Behind the bar, the bartender—also dressed in fatigues—waves to the newcomers and asks if they want a drink. One of the soldiers tells Hastings to stand back and he goes forward to the bar and speaks quietly with the bartender. The bartender looks around the soldier and stares straight at Hastings, smirks, then points to a door off to the side. The soldier goes through and disappears and Hastings waits and watches the soldiers, mostly young men, maybe around eighteen or nineteen. He imagines they grew up in the refugee camps, the reservations, learning of the horrors of the decades preceding them, now wanting to do their own part—or at least escape the boredom and monotony of reservation life. Some of them eye him, perhaps

wondering if he had seen the chaos and destruction. Hastings looks away. The soldier returns and they go out to the truck and leave the tavern and reach a small port facing the azure blue ocean. Several docks snake out to several old landing craft and water vehicles. They leave the truck and get onto an old PT Boat and Hastings stands at the boat's railing as it goes south, snaking around the islands, and he hears the pelicans and the gulls and feels the sway of the boat on the water and it reminds him of home. He sweats in the eighty-five degree heat and blinks sweat out of his eyes and misses Alaska.

In less than an hour they reach the northernmost tip of the island of Key West. Hastings has never been hear, and he knows of it only through stories. A famous spring break location, boasting beautiful resorts and spas, all kinds of activities, pearl-white beaches and a hustling night-life along Duval Street. Now the island is quiet and the beaches abandoned. Several loggerhead sea turtles scurry amongst the sand, more than he can count: once endangered species, now they have returned with a vengeance. The PT Boat pulls up against a dock and they get out and walk onto the beach and palms hang overhead. They walk into town. Soldiers are everywhere. They board another truck and it takes them south. Soon they reach Fort Zachary Taylor, a Civil War Era fort renown for the numerous Civil War guns, cannons, and ammunition excavated from within. It had been a national historic landmark, but now it has become an operative military base. At the entrance is a barricade and several soldiers with assault rifles. The truck passes through and around a bend, the high stone walls bleached yellow in the sun. They enter a sort of courtyard surrounded by buildings and several more soldiers come forward and papers are exchanged and now they have Hastings in their possession. They lead him through a wide oak door into the dark and cool confines of the fort.

The walls are stone and the floors are stone and the ceiling is stone. Mounted torches burn as they walk down the mellow corridor. The soldiers take him through a door and he enters a room that still carries the stench of gunpowder.

There's an old cannon sitting off to the side with assault rifles leaning against the wheels. Standing in the corner are two old men smoking cigars and talking quietly.

Hastings is left alone and he stands beside the door and listens to the conversation.

The taller one says, "We've canvassed the area seven times, and there's a large concentration of movement fifteen miles north of Sugarloaf. We've had several Pipers with the equipment do flyovers, and they're moving this way. We need to deal with this problem before it confronts our guards at the northernmost tip of the town. We've got enough napalm to do the—" He stops talking, suddenly seeing Hastings in the corner. He excuses himself and leaves. The shorter one with the cigar beckons Hastings over.

"We're just old men telling old stories," he. "You heard much of it?"

"Some," Hastings said.

"You're from Alaska, no? Doing recon and shit like that?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How's the situation there? Where it's cold all the time and rains every ten minutes?"

"The situation, Sir?"

"You know. The remnants. The zombies. The ones that are still fucking alive."

"Oh. Sorry. Not much of a situation, Sir. Most of them are dead."

"You ever see a live one? Recently, I mean."

"Last trip out, yes. It wasn't much to look at."

"No?"

"Emaciated. Malnourished. Weak. It was a borderline mercy kill, Sir."

"Mercy kill?" the man laughs. "Never heard of that one before. I don't know what Alaska's like, but I know what it's like here. They're still strong. They move in packs. I'm not granting them intelligence, just... You know. Flocking behavior. Not surprising, seeing as human beings are, by nature, social creatures. Isolation doesn't bode well for us, and I guess it's the same for the

infected. Instincts die hard. We see them all the time. Mostly up north. But lately they've been coming down, breaching our perimeter. Getting braver, maybe? Who the fuck knows? We use napalm. Shower the shit out of them. The last thing we want is face-to-face fighting with the bastards. If only one of our soldiers gets bitten and 'lives' to tell about it..."

"I understand, Sir."

"Yes. Yes, of course you do. Anyways." He extends a hand. "Mr. Hastings, I'm General Longworth. I run things up here, from this dusty old clap-trap. It still stinks of gunpowder, and I'll bet the cannons don't help." He points to the one in the corner. "But you're here to write, no? You're a late-bloomer, but we have room for you. I've been put in charge of the whole thing—apparently it's *my* duty. Come on. We'll get you unpacked. You have a wife or girlfriend or boyfriend with you?"

"Wife. But she's not here yet."

"That's fine. I'll show you to your place, and then we'll get started."

Longworth personally drives him out of the fort and back into the town. He owns an old Mercedes Benz, perhaps one of the last in existence. They drive to the western part of town to an old hotel. Many of the windows are broken and the weeds are overgrown. Palms hide much of the building. They get out and Hastings grabs his duffel bag and they go inside. More torches and lanterns. They climb a stairwell and Longworth reads a note in his hand and finds the right room. He pushes the door open, revealing a large room with a bed and a desk and a dresser, two chairs, several mirrors, and a wall-length window with a door in the middle leading out to the balcony that overlooks the beach and the sparkling ocean beyond. Hastings drops off his stuff and quickly changes and they get back into the Mercedes and drive again. This time they come to an old house behind a rickety fence. It's two stories with a balcony on the second story, a very flat-faced building with palms and frond bushes pressing up against the cobblestone path leading to the entrance. "This used to be Ernest Hemingway's house," Longworth said as they went inside. "It's appropriate, I think, since

we're now undertaking the greatest literary journey in human history." The rooms are lit with candles and along the walls are several desks with typewriters, and behind the typewriters sit men and women of every shape and height. The room is bathed in silence as they write. Longworth leads Hastings to the back, to a room with five typewriters, and Hastings takes a seat behind one. "The ink's ready to go, the typewriter is in pristine condition, and you have a 500-page pack of paper ready to be consumed. You've used a typewriter before?" Hastings nods. "Good. Then you know what to do. Now. Write." Longworth leaves, and that's that.

Hastings sits for nearly half an hour with his fingers hovering above the keys, the blank page ready to have itself engraved with the memoirs of a time he had all but forgotten despite his attempts to completely forget. Now he begins to think back, to remember, and he winces at the thought, and he pushes the memories away. He looks around the room dimly-lit with hanging oil lamps. It had at one time been some sort of study, a single window overlooking the backyard where a coral pool sits unused and long-drained. He imagines Hemingway swimming in that pool and then sitting underneath an umbrella with a towel over his legs as he writes in a moleskin journal. Hastings looks away from the window and at the faces around him. There are three women, two around his age, the other younger; and there are two other men, both older, with hunched shoulders and scraggly hair and eyes intent upon the pages as their fingers dance over the keys. The men seemed calloused and cold, and the man doesn't blame him; one of the women chuckles quietly to herself, and he glares at her, wondering why the hell she's here. Anger burns within him but he shoves it down. He sighs and looks back at the keys. Where to start with such a story? He looks back at the others, wonders at their former lives. Were they accountant? Librarians? Stay-at-home moms? How many of their loved ones did they lose? By virtue of their being there, they must have at least lost *someone*. Imagining all this he remembers his mother, her sweet laugh, the way she teased him; and he remembers how one time he had made a joke that made

her cry, and she'd gone into the bathroom and wept for nearly an hour, and she wouldn't let him in because she was embarrassed and he just wanted to say he was sorry. He feels tears welling up in his eyes and tells himself to stop — *You're a fucking grown man*. He takes several breaths and gets up and walks outside. He stands beside the coral pool and feels the heat on his neck and face and knows he'll be sunburned but he doesn't care. He sits down and his legs dangle over the lip of the pool, the bare bottom staring back at him. His hands grasp the edge and he watches the sable and buccaneer palms swaying in the stiff wind. In the distance thunderclouds gather and lighting sprinkles down into the flat horizon of the ocean.

He returns inside and sits down. He remembers Arlan—they aren't going cheap, everyone's required to write 300 pages. He curses under his breath and still doesn't know where to start and so he remembers those last moments, the last hours before all hell broke lose, the last hours before his life changed forever. He bites his lip and begins to peck at the keys:

The alarm clock echoed in my ears, pulling me from a dream. In the dream, Hannah's dad found out that I had called her, and called me up. He wanted me to come over. In the dream, I expected him to want to beat me down. But instead he told me that he was very proud I was the one his daughter chose. And Hannah jumped into my arms. We got into her violent-blue Sunfire, and drove to the movie. I let my loose fingers drift off the last tendrils of the dream, and turned over in my covers.

PERACTIO:
The Final Twelve Hours

April 24, 2004 Saturday

6:00 AM E.S.T./3:00 AM P.S.T.

Sprawled on the pavement, wrapped in the warm darkness, Austin felt absolutely nothing. He looked at her body lying there, so quiet, the blood still running from the back of her head. The soldier who had shot her lowered the M16 and looked at the boy. Their eyes connected, and Austin leapt to his feet. He rushed after the soldier, screaming, *"She was all I had left! You killed my only fucking family!"* Two soldiers intercepted him, grabbed him by the arms, pulled him back. His eyes filled with tears as he kicked at the ground, the soldier who had shot her just looking at him, his own eyes filled with compassion. *"I hope you get bitten and die you rotten fuck!"* Austin screamed. The soldiers threw him down next to Holcomb and Hannah, who stood under the wing of the plane. He collapsed at their feet and his head rested against the fuselage, and he wept. Ruthless, bitter, lung-wrenching tears.

"Get dressed," the corporal said.

Hannah and Holcomb quickly dressed. Holcomb helped Austin into his clothes.

"Come with us," the corporal said.

Hannah took one of Austin's arms and Holcomb took the other. They helped him to his feet. His legs barely moved as they half-dragged, half-accompanied him as they walked behind the soldiers. They walked past the floodlights and into a rundown hangar. A dusty crop-duster sat dressed in shrouds. Dozens of refugees were huddled against the wall. The soldiers led the three of them to the refugees and then left back out to the airfield. More soldiers stood watch in the hangar's darkness, broken only by flashlights nestled amidst the shrouds of the crop-duster.

Hannah held the boy in the darkness. The tears kept coming, his body violently shaking. This was worse than Ashlie being bitten, worse than Ashlie being killed by an infected. Being slaughtered by an animal was better than being shot by a fucking soldier. Austin let her hold him but he barely even

noticed. He kept seeing Ashlie's pleading eyes, kept hearing the gunshot, kept seeing the blood gurgling from the hole in the back of her head. He wanted nothing more than to steal that soldier's gun and to shoot him again and again, riddling his body with bullets until it was nothing more than a ragged piece of bloodied, chiseled flesh.

Moments later the corporal reappeared in the hangar, demanding everyone's attention. "We're going to load everyone up into one of our helicopters and fly you out to another airport. McCabe Ranch. There you will receive medical attention if you need it. From McCabe, anyone not being treated will be sent to San Francisco International. From San Francisco International, you will be shipped to one of the many refugee camps in the city. Currently these refugee camps are entirely safe. There will be food, water, and beds. Your internment at these refugee camps will last for an indefinite period of time. Do not expect to stay there forever, though. Currently the military is quarantining and barricading various small towns up and down the western coast. All refugees will be sent to these towns. But right now, we need to get you on the helicopter. All right. Come on."

He stopped speaking and several soldiers appeared with flashlights, beckoning everyone out of the hangar.

"Let's go," Hannah said.

Austin wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I don't want to go."

"I know. But we have to go. Come on."

He refused to move, pulling away from her. "Ashlie's still here."

"There's nothing you can do about that. But she wouldn't you being like this."

"Well she can't do a damn thing about it, can she?"

Holcomb grabbed his arm. "Austin. Listen to Hannah. We need to go."

Most of the refugees had left the hangar.

The corporal walked over to them. "The next helicopter flies out in an hour. I'd recommend taking this flight."

Hannah said, "We are. He just needs some time."

"I understand. But we're not going to hold up the helicopter."

Austin took a deep breath. "Hannah? You guys go ahead without me."

"Austin..."

"I'll meet up with you at McCabe."

"Austin..."

The soldier said, "Make up your minds. You have ten seconds."

Holcomb cursed. "Let him do what he wants. I'm not going to sit on my ass."

Hannah looked out the hangar doors, at the Chinook resplendent with lights. The blades whirring. The ramp at the rear was lowered, soldiers filing refugees into the cargo hold. "I'm sorry, Austin," she said, "but I need to go." And she hugged him tightly. "Please forgive me." She let him go and turned and went with Holcomb out of the hangar, leaving the boy alone with the corporal.

"I recommend you come," the corporal said.

"I want to stay here," he said. "Bury my sister."

"It's pointless..."

"Just leave me alone," Austin said, not looking at him.

"Okay. Fine." The corporal turned and left the hangar.

Austin stood alone in the darkness with the crop-duster behind him.

Standing there alone, he didn't think of Ashlie. He thought of Hannah. She had lost everything. She had lost her family. She had watched her brother become one of them. And she had stuck by him, hadn't let the death of her brother slow her down. She had operated selflessly. She had been beside him through it all. And he thought of her, and he thought of himself. She hadn't abandoned him. But he was abandoning her. The selfish jackass he'd always promised himself he would never be. He cursed and ran forward, out of the hangar. The corporal stepped aside and Austin ran up the ramp into the cargo hold of the Chinook. Most of the seats along the sides and along the center of the hold were open. He

spotted Holcomb and Hannah strapping in and ran over and sat down beside her. She sighed and hugged him and said she was glad he was coming, and then he buckled up and the ramp was drawn up. The windows were high up on the walls so he couldn't see outside, but he felt the helicopter rising and knew they had taken off. He heard muffled conversations, some crying, and he rubbed his teary bloodshot eyes and stared forward into the darkness, listening to the throbbing of the motors and the creaks and groans of the helicopter as it flew south into the night.

He had begun drifting off to sleep, exhausted by the emotional trauma, when he found himself jolted back to reality as screams flooded the dark interior of the hold. Blood-curdling, ruthless screams. Everyone went quiet, the screams coming from the back of the hold. A moment later the interior lights turned on, and then there came more screaming. Austin leaned forward against the straps to see a young woman, maybe 24 or 30, writhing about in her seat, held back by straps. Her flesh had gone purple and her eyes had sunken and she foamed at the mouth, snarling and hissing. Everyone next to her had gotten up and rushed to the other side of the cargo hold. One of the soldiers in the front of the plane came from the cockpit, swore, and shouted for help. Another soldier joined him and they went to the rear of the plane, demanding to know how the hell an infected had gotten onboard. No one knew who she was.

The soldier said, "How the fuck did she pass the inspection?"

His companion said, "Maybe she got bitten somewhere we didn't check."

"We stripped them down completely naked. We couldn't have missed it."

"I can think of one place we didn't check. At least on the women."

"What?" He then understood. "Fuck. That's disgusting."

"That's the only explanation."

"How the hell would she get bitten down there?"

"How the hell should I know? Maybe her lover turned when he was eating her out."

"God. Well. Fucking shoot her."

The soldier pulled out his sidearm and stepped back, raised the gun.

"You idiot!" the other yelled, knocking his hand down. "You could shoot the wall."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Like this." He took the gun and stood up on the seat beside her and pressed the barrel down into the top of her head and pulled the trigger. The gunshot echoed off the walls and her head fell forward. Blood crawled down her mouth, mixing with the foam and splattering onto her pants. The soldier stepped down and handed the gun back. "Now the bullet's lodged somewhere inside her body. And not in the wall of the helicopter. We have to keep these things clean."

"What do we do with the body?"

"I don't know. We'll let the soldiers at McCabe know about it."

"They'll force everyone to strip down. Check again."

"That's fine."

"Including us."

A pause. "Shit. I don't want to be naked before all of them."

"It's procedure."

"Fuck procedure." He shouted, "Everyone strap in!"

Everyone did. He went to the front of the plane and returned. "Steady, now."

The ramp began to lower. It lowered halfway and then stopped. Violent wind blew into the cargo hold. The soldiers remained steady as they unstrapped the corpse, and they carried her to the ramp and set her body down. Her clothes whipped back and forth in the wind. The ramp lowered some more, and then her body rolled down the ramp and off the side, spiraling far below, where she would land amidst the trees, forever forgotten. The ramp was raised and the soldiers made their way back to the front.

Hannah said, "Excuse me?"

The soldier who had shut her looked at her. "What?"

"What was her name?"

"Huh?"

"Her name? The woman's name?"

"How in the hell should I know? It doesn't matter."

And he turned and went back to the cockpit.

The lights were extinguished.

Everyone sat quietly in the darkness. No one said a word.

Austin woke from a deep and dreamless sleep when he heard the loudspeakers announce: "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are five minutes inbound to McCabe Ranch. Make sure you are fastened into your seats for our landing. Once we land, you will be escorted out of the helicopter. If you need medical attention, you will receive it. Everyone else will be loaded onto another refueled helicopter and sent to San Francisco International. Thank you for your time," the pilot mused, "and we hope you enjoyed the flight."

Austin looked over at Hannah. "Now we can take care of that arm."

She was quiet.

"Hannah?"

"They said everyone not needing medical attention will be put on another chopper."

"Yeah?"

"That means we'll be separated."

"What? No. Look." He pointed to his forehead. "I have a nasty cut as well."

"What about the janitor? He's totally fine."

He looked past her to Holcomb, who slept quietly.

"It'll be all right. Even if it's just us... We'll be all right."

"Okay."

"I promised you I wouldn't leave you. Remember? Back at the YMCA?"

"You almost left me back at the other airport."

"I know. But I didn't."

"I would've understood."

"Let's not talk about that right now, okay?"

"Okay."

Five minutes came. Then ten. Everyone expected to land, but the landing never came. It felt as if the helicopter was going in circles. Then the pilot turned on the loudspeaker: "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have encountered a problem. It seems McCabe Ranch is no longer functional. We're being diverted to another airstrip twenty-three miles away. Sorry for the inconvenience. If you must make changes to your plans, feel free to do so once we land." And the intercom went silent.

"What do you think he meant?" Hannah said. "No longer functional?"

"I don't know," Austin said.

"Do you think he meant they're out of helicopters? Or ran out of supplies?"

"No," he said, un-strapping. "I don't think so."

"Where are you going?"

"Just to look."

One of the windows rested directly overhead. He stood on the seat and looked out. He saw nothing but blackness. He felt the helicopter banking, and he grabbed onto the dangling rope netting on the wall to hold on. He pressed his face against the window, and as the helicopter turned, he saw the airfield come into view. It seemed relatively quiet. Chinooks parked beside the airfield. Various private planes in the grass. Burning barrels of oil along the runways, floodlights. It didn't make sense. He kept looking, and then he saw several people walk in front of one of the floodlights. Except they were hunched over, moving awkwardly. He looked away and saw several more hunched over something on the ground. One of them stood, and in its hands was a human arm, the torn flesh spitting blood. All he could see were the distant figures, maybe five hundred feet below, looking like ants, dark silhouettes against the light. And then the helicopter turned again and the airfield was out of view. Nothing but the blackness wrapping around the trees. The sun still refusing to rise.

He sat back down and buckled up.

"What was it?" Hannah asked.

"You know," he said.

She nodded.

He thought she'd fallen asleep. But she hadn't.

"Do you remember when we kissed?" she asked.

He looked over at her in the darkness.

He remembered every minute detail. "Vaguely, he lied."

"It was just... I was hurting so badly. And I knew you cared. You know? And I didn't know I was going to kiss you. It just felt... right. And it was stupid of me. It really was. But not because of you. It was stupid because of me. Because even though I knew that you cared, that you really... valued me... as a person... Even though I knew that, I didn't want to be with you. But I wanted what you were willing to give me even if it meant that I had to be a bitch about it. It was stupid because I was selfish."

"It's okay," he said, not knowing what to say.

"No," she said. "It's not okay. I used you. I used your care for me, your affections for me. I used you to feel better in that moment."

"We all do that when we're hurting," he said, trying to be compassionate; at the same time, he bridled his tongue. She *had* been a bitch. She *had* used him. And in some way, he still cared. It still angered him, frustrated him, saddened him.

"My aunt always told me," she said, "that I need to find someone who really cares about me. And I always told her that I knew that. And you cared, but I wouldn't take it. And then there was Hal. The football player. He asked me out on a date. I knew he didn't care. But I went anyways. And he tried to mess around with me in the theater, kept sticking his fingers down the hem of my pants. And I hated it. And I didn't let him. And he asked me if I wanted to go to Prom with him, and I said yes." She bit her lip. "I said *yes*, Austin. And I knew he would just try to sleep with me. And maybe I would've let him. It's fucked up. It's all fucked up."

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

"My aunt, she was right. I needed someone who really cared about me. And there you were. The one guy who really, genuinely cared about me. But you weren't popular. People didn't like you. And they would joke around about you, and I would laugh, and Austin, I'm so sorry. I feel awful about it. Because they were just a bunch of jackasses and douche-bags. And I was a bitch."

"You weren't a bitch," he lied.

"In high school, it's not about chemistry. It's not about finding someone who you can trust and care about and love. It's about finding someone who will make you feel good sexually. It's about finding someone who will make you more popular. It's about finding someone you can carry around on your arm to make yourself look cooler. It's fucked up."

"It is fucked up."

"And if I would've taken Hal to the Prom, I probably would've slept with him. And you know what I would've been to him? Just another lousy fuck."

He didn't know what to say. She went quiet and sat in her seat just staring forward. He wondered if she was crying but couldn't tell in the darkness if tears were inching their way down her cheeks.

"You're not a bitch," he said.

After a moment, "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"No. You're not a bitch, Hannah. And, yes, you did use me. And you hurt me. But you're still not a bitch."

"Whatever."

"Hannah..."

"I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"Okay," he said.

She broke the silence. "Do you remember when you asked me out two years ago?"

"Yeah," he said. A slight chuckle. "I broke out the non-alcoholic wine."

"It was sparkling grape juice," she said.

"Yeah. It was classy."

"It was sweet," she said.

"Sweet? It was pathetic."

"Do you remember what I said?"

"Yeah. I remember. You said I'd have to lose weight and get rid of my acne."

"No. Not that."

"I remember that."

"I know. Me being a bitch again."

"Hannah..."

"You remember when I told you we'd have to date in secret?"

"Yeah. I remember that, too."

"I wanted to be with you. I just didn't want... the social stigma."

"Okay."

"It's awful, I know."

"Yeah," he said, this time caving. "That was pretty awful."

"I was a bitch."

"That time, yes. Yes, you were."

"But I wonder... What would've happened if we would've dated?"

"I don't know. That was two years ago."

"Do you think we would've made it?"

"Hannah. Since this happened... I don't know."

"I think we would've made it."

He was quiet for a while. He wanted to hold her hand, to feel her fingers quivering in his. Not an awkward, what-the-hell-is-he-doing? quivering, but an anticipation-of-the-moment quivering. But he decided not to.

"Maybe we can still make it," he said.

She said nothing.

He was about to say something to her, excusing his last comment—a cowardly maneuver—when the pilot came on over the radio. "Ladies and

Gentlemen, I am bringing it to your attention that we are running out of fuel and will be unable to make it to the Dolls-Hamlet Ranch. We're going to be doing an emergency landing within the next ten minutes. We've already contacted San Francisco International, and the National Guard is sending another helicopter our way. It'll be about a fifty-minute wait. Please fasten your seatbelts and enjoy the landing."

Holcomb had wakened. "We couldn't make it to McCabe?"

"No," Austin said. "McCabe was overrun. We were going to another airport but apparently they've run out of fuel."

"Looks like my luck follows me wherever I go."

"We're going to be making an emergency landing."

"Yeah. I heard."

"Are you buckled up?"

"Yeah. Are you?"

He plucked at his strap. "Yeah."

Hannah bit her lip. "Where do you think we're landing?"

"I don't know."

"What if there are infected outside?"

"They can't get in."

"How do you know?"

He didn't know. "Hannah. It'll be fine. We're in the middle of nowhere."

Moments later they felt the helicopter descending, and then the descent stopped. They hadn't even felt the helicopter land. Austin undid his belt and stood on his seat and looked out the window. In the lights from the helicopter he could see blades of grass being thrown down by the wind from the propellers. He wagered they landed in a field. The propellers slowly spun to a stop and the grass began to curl back upwards. The darkness cloaked everything so he couldn't see beyond the field. He sat back down. Hannah asked where they were. "We're in a field somewhere," he said.

4:00 AM

A few minutes later the interior lights came on. Several soldiers entered the cargo hold from the cockpit. All had on night-vision goggles (non-activated) and shouldered assault rifles. One carried a massive rectangular box with warning symbols on it. The ramp began to lower. Austin tensed in his seat. The interior lights went out and the soldiers turned on their night-vision goggles. They knelt down and aimed their guns out the widening crack as the ramp lowered. The ramp hit the soft earth and two soldiers exited. They returned a few moments later. "All's clear." The others joined them, except for two, and the ramp raised back up. The loudspeaker came on: "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the United States Army speaking, through the mouthpiece of your pilot. Our excellent, well-trained soldiers are setting up defensive positions to survey the area. When our new ride arrives, they will set off flares and then we will board the other helicopter. We will be waiting approximately forty minutes. Thank you." And then the intercom went quiet.

Austin wanted to talk to Hannah some more but knew she wasn't in the mood. He unstrapped himself and stood and walked around the cargo hold, stretching his legs. Everyone was quiet. No one talked. Perhaps holding their breaths, knowing they were on the ground now and exposed. He looked at their faces, young and old. He noticed there were no young people onboard. He imagined he and Hannah were the youngest. And then he thought of the infant. What had happened to the baby? He had forgotten all about it once Ashlie was killed. The thought of Ashlie made him forget the baby. He felt a knot forming again in his throat. He pushed it away, looking at their faces. He wasn't a special case. Everyone had lost someone. He wondered what their stories were, and he wondered if they would live long enough to tell them. He wondered if anyone would ever transcribe their stories onto paper, wondered if when all this was over, when new generations rose hearing about this, detached from it as they

were, if people would tell them what it was like, make them really try to imagine it. He didn't think it were possible. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of gunfire outside the helicopter.

He ran back to his seat and stood and looked out the window. All over the cargo hold the other refugees had gotten the same idea. Hannah didn't move, just sat still, staring forward. Outside the window he saw two soldiers kneeling in the grass. They could see through their night-vision goggles, but Austin couldn't make out anything in the night's darkness. They were shooting sporadically into the darkness. And then they stopped and stood and laughed and one lit a cigarette.

Austin sat back down.

"How many were there?" Hannah asked.

"I don't know. I couldn't see. It's too dark."

"It should be dawn soon."

"It's light in Ohio. But we're in California. It's only four in the morning here."

"It's like this night will never end."

"I know. But at least it's not raining anymore."

A flash of light from the window. The light danced throughout the room.

"Lightning," Hannah said. "A storm's coming."

"I think it's just heat lightning."

There came no thunder and no rain.

A few more bursts of light but then nothing.

They continued to sit quietly.

"Do you hear that?" Hannah asked.

He did. It sounded like an engine. "Maybe it's the other helicopter?"

"Have they lit flares?"

He wondered if what he thought was lightning had actually been them lighting flares. He crawled back up into the window. How long had it been? Probably thirty minutes. Outside the window he saw that the soldiers were gone, but there were no flares. The sound grew louder. Then the soldiers returned, setting down the box with the warning symbols. They opened it and pulled out what looked like a rocket launcher. One soldier held it across his shoulder and the other loaded a rocket into the chamber. Austin wondered what they would need a rocket for, and—There was a brilliant plume of smoke and the rocket shot out across the field. A moment later there was a burst of blinding light as something exploded. Austin looked away, then returned to the window. Out in the field there was a burning car lying on its side. Pieces of shrapnel rained down all around them, tinkering on the outside of the helicopter. The soldiers exchanged high-fives and set the launcher back in the case and locked it up.

“What was it?” Hannah asked. “Did they light flares?”

“It was a car. They just blew it up.”

“They blew up the car?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know.”

Green light shone in through the windows.

“Are those the flares now?” Hannah said.

He grunted and stood back on the seat, looked out.

In the middle of the field was a giant green flare spitting light and smoke. The light crawled out over the field and touched the edges of the trees. There were bodies sprawled about along the tree-line. Probably zombies the soldiers had shot. He remained in the window until they heard the sound of the helicopter, and then it descended and landed right beside the flare. The ramp lowered and several soldiers ran out. Then the ramp of their helicopter began to

lower, and the pilot came out into the hold with two soldiers and told everyone to get up.

Hannah and Holcomb unbuckled and stood.

Austin kept looking out the window.

"Austin," Hannah said. "We're about to leave."

"Wait..." He thought he saw something in the trees.

"Austin. Everyone's leaving."

He didn't take his eyes off the trees. There was something—

A hand on his shoulder.

He spun around.

The pilot said. "Get moving, Boy. We're on a tight schedule."

He turned back to the window for one last look. And then he saw it.

"Boy!" the pilot shouted.

He got down and joined the others.

As they exited the ramp, Hannah said, "What was it?"

"Nothing," he said, not wanting to frighten her.

He didn't tell her he had seen hundreds of them in the trees.

Watching. Waiting.

The soldiers escorted them to the next helicopter. As they were halfway there, hundreds of shouts and shrieks came from the trees. The soldiers spun around. No longer did they wear their night-vision goggles due to the flares, and they hadn't been able to see them with all the commotion. Everyone froze in the grass and stared as hundreds of zombies poured from the trees on the edge of the field. The soldiers started firing, sending their bullets into the fray, tearing several down. But there were too many of them. Everyone started running. Austin grabbed Hannah's hand and made her keep up. They reached the ramp and flooded inside with the others. All the soldiers entered and yelled at everyone to grab onto something. Austin and Hannah pushed to the side of the hold and grabbed the cloth netting. The helicopter began to ascend with the ramp still lowered just as the infected reached them. They threw themselves at

the ramp and tried to climb inside. The soldiers fired, knocking them back. The ramp raised as soon as it was clear, and the soldiers wiped sweat from their faces and exchanged nervous laughs as the helicopter bore south, everyone taking their seats, the soldiers spread out amongst them.

A new voice came over the loudspeaker. "Pay attention. We are inbound to San Francisco International Airport. Once we reach the airfield, you will be given medical treatment if needed and then taken to one of the refugee camps. There will be soup, bread, and water. There will also be beds. We apologize for the inconvenience at take-off. Hopefully no one was injured. Our soldiers will be doing extensive checks to make sure no one was bitten. Any refusal to cooperate will result in detainment at the airfield. Thank you for your cooperation."

The soldiers went around, person-to-person, having them undress. Austin undressed and stood naked once more, the soldiers looking him over. He was declared clear and told to dress. Holcomb was cleared, as well. Hannah stripped down, and the soldier whom she had spoken to on the last flight made a comment about checking every nook and cranny, and he told her to sit down and spread her legs. She wouldn't. He threatened her with detainment.

Austin stepped forward. "She wasn't bitten there, all right?"

"We need to make sure."

"Really? Because you didn't on that older woman over there."

The soldier smirked. "Would you like to be extensively searched as well?"

A higher-ranking soldier appeared. "What's the hold-up?"

The smirking soldier went rigid. "Nothing, Sir. All complete here, Sir."

"All right." He told Hannah: "You can go ahead and dress."

She dressed. Austin looked away. They sat back down.

"What a perv," Hannah said.

"I know," Austin said.

"I guess he liked what he saw," she said to herself.

"Yeah." And then: "I didn't look. Just so you know."

"It doesn't matter."

"I'm just saying. I didn't look."

"Okay. I know what you're saying."

"Okay."

Hannah fell asleep beside him, her head on his shoulder. He smiled to himself and leaned back in the seat. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arm around her other shoulder. He could feel her breath on his neck. Her hair tickled his nose. The soldiers walked back and forth, talking quietly amongst themselves. The helicopter continued its southwesterly course. He bathed himself in that moment, that moment with the two of them together, and he pretended that they were back at his house, sitting in the living room, watching a movie, with Ashlie and Amanda talking about boys in her room, Dad watching Seinfeld on his laptop, and Mom fixing dinner. And he dreamt that everything was as it had been, as he wanted it to be, as it should've been.

5:00 AM

Hannah woke him around 5:15. “We’re landing,” she said. There came a rocking lurch as the helicopter landed and then the soldiers told everyone to get up and file out. The ramp lowered. Hannah, Holcomb, and Austin joined the fray of people exiting the helicopter. As Austin reached the tarmac, he looked around and saw that the airport had been converted for military operations only. All civilian aircraft were being routed to smaller airfields. Military cargo planes—Starlifters and Globemasters—were simultaneously landing and lifting off. Maybe two dozen Chinooks were scattered about one of the runways. Floodlights bathed the airport in a sterile white light. Various smaller military helicopters were taking off and flying out towards the city, or coming in to land after performing their duties. A canvas-topped Army truck pulled up and everyone got inside. It drove them across the airport to one of the wings with steps leading up into it. A Red Cross emblem had been draped over the side of the building. Everyone filed inside. The waiting area was packed full with men, women, and children. Most were cut, bruised, and bloodied. A lot were crying. No one paid any attention to the newcomers. Holcomb led them to a seat and wondered what they were supposed to do now when a soldier came up. Austin turned and felt the cold rage return: it was the one who had shot his sister.

The soldier summoned a worn, harried nurse over to them.

She said, “I’m sorry, but we’re flooded right now, we can’t—”

“Just take these two,” he said, pointing to Austin and Hannah. “It won’t take but ten minutes. Antiseptic, stitches, gauze. I want to get these people some food and sleep.”

Austin wasn’t thankful. The man was a fake Samaritan.

The woman sighed. “All right. Fine. But only for you, Jason.”

“Thanks, Beth.”

She beckoned them forward. “Follow me.”

Holcomb said, “I’ll be waiting out here.”

She led them through the crowds of people and down a corridor to a room. At one time this had been a locker room for airline employees. Now the benches had been removed and cots erected. There were cries of pain and blood on the floor and assistants pushing trays filled with medicinal tools. She led them to a cot and told them to sit down. A moment later the doctor came and looked at Hannah's wound. He tossed away the old gauze and cleaned it with antiseptic. She winced and whimpered, eyes clutched tightly, her fingers balled into a fist. Another nurse came and unwrapped the stocking from his forehead.

"I bet you didn't know a stocking could make a good tourniquet," he said.

"It doesn't surprise me. We've seen some awful shit coming in here."

"I can imagine."

Her eyes were tired as she cleaned his wound. He gritted his teeth in pain.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know it hurts."

"It's fine."

"We're going to stitch it up."

"Okay."

She stitched up his forehead and then wrapped it in medicinal gauze.

He sat on the cot and waited for the doctor to finish with Hannah.

When he finished, he told her, "The wound's infected, but the antiseptic should take care of it. Try not to move your arm around too much, we don't want the stitches to come out. Keep the gauze on there tight. If you see someone in a white coat walking around with gauze in her hands, tell her to wrap you up anew. Got it?"

She nodded yes and thanked him.

The nurse—Beth?—returned. "Okay. Thank Jason for this."

"We will," Hannah said, glancing over at Austin.

He said nothing.

She led them back out to the waiting area. They went to rejoin Holcomb, but Austin stopped. The soldier was sitting right beside him. Holcomb shook his

head as the soldier stood, walking past Hannah and to the boy. Austin turned to go but the man grabbed him by the shoulder. The boy spun around, and the soldier said, "What's your name?"

He didn't answer.

"Come with me."

He looked to Holcomb, who nodded: *Go*.

He didn't want to, but he followed the soldier through the throngs of people. The soldier said, "The whole city is in a state of martial law. No one's allowed on the streets. Everyone has to remain where they were the moment martial law was established, be it home or work or school. The citizens aren't really happy with it, but it's helping us to keep the infected at bay. When we have people running all over the place searching for their loved ones, it makes the situation ripe for an exponential spread of the disease. You and your friends will be taken to the refugee camp nearest the city. It's the best one out there. It encompasses several hotels. You'll have beds, food, even electricity. Televisions and video games." He led Austin through a steel door and up a flight of metal steps. "I know you don't care. I know you hate me. I don't blame you."

The stairwell opened up to the roof. They went outside and walked to the edge and stood looking out at the military airplanes taking off and landing. Beyond the towering gates encircling the airport, nothing could be seen in the darkness; though Austin could make out points of fire in the distance. There were distant cackling gunshots. The soldier lit a cigarette and offered the boy one. He refused. He took several hits and said, "I'm sorry. I really am. From the depths of my heart. I'm just a kid fresh out of college. I made the mistake of signing onto the National Guard for help paying back my college funds. They called me up right after my spring graduation last year. My family lived thirty miles from McCabe, so I was stationed nearby."

He took another hit off the cigarette. "Before the planes started coming in, martial law was established, and we were forced to go house-to-house in the heart of Colusa County. Anyone bitten was to be put down immediately. There were a few cases of the pandemic spreading here into the heart of San Francisco,

I've heard, but they were put down quickly. A miracle, I know. But back in Colusa, we killed maybe fifteen hundred infected. Some had turned, some hadn't. One of them was my little brother. He was five years old."

A tear dotted his eye. "He had gone to school, and some kid there had turned. My brother had been bitten, but the principal and nurse restrained the kid. Both of them were bitten, too. We put down the infected kid, and then we proceeded to put down the principal and nurse. We then went from classroom to classroom, doing full body searches. Only two others had been bitten. A little girl and my brother. I wouldn't let anyone else do it. I did it myself. I just thought... I thought it was wrong for me to take others peoples' lives, to take other peoples' friends and families, when I wasn't brave enough to do the same for *my* family, no matter the circumstance. I remember my little brother just looking up at me, and I shot him. I've never felt so cruel, so evil, so... hated by God."

The door behind them opened. A soldier appeared.

"Jason!"

The soldier turned. "What?"

"We're heading out. Loading up in a truck and going out to the suburbs."

He cursed. "All right. Be there in a second." He dropped the cigarette and stomped it out with his boot. "I have to go. Again. I'm sorry for what happened. You know the way back, Kid." He left, returning back into the building.

Austin remained on the roof, watching the planes land and take off.

Down below, several trucks appeared and parked. Soldiers flooded out from the building and loaded inside, sitting side-by-side along the sides of the canvas-topped trucks. One of them was Jason. He climbed inside and gripped his M16 close and then the trucks drove forward, turned around, and crossed the airport to a gate that opened, letting them out into the suburbs. The gate slid shut and the trucks vanished in the darkness. Helicopters soared overhead, and they, too, vanished in the darkness. And in the distance he could hear the sound of explosions and of gunfire, and he wondered if they weren't as safe as everyone seemed to think they were.

He returned to the others. Holcomb didn't look up. Hannah began to say something when they heard a gunshot from the medical ward. A scream. Another gunshot. Then silence. Everyone resumed their normal activities. She said, "What did he want?"

"He wanted to make an excuse for killing my sister," he answered.

A soldier approached them. "You guys came from McCabe, right?"

"Yeah," Holcomb said.

"You're being transferred to the Candlestick Refugee Camp."

"Candlestick?" Holcomb asked. "What the hell is that?"

"Candlestick Park," the soldier said. "It's the football stadium."

"Okay."

"It's the next step in your relocation. From there you'll be directed to a more permanent facility. The government is forcing everyone to house refugees. We're still being flooded at the airports with refugees, and we don't have enough space even with the six refugee camps. You're being assigned there, and then you'll be put on a list to be transferred to someone's home."

"Okay," Holcomb said.

The soldier led the three of them through the throng of refugees in the airport wing, and they descended a flight of frozen escalators and passed through a security detail leading out to the airline parking area. There were no airliners, only parked military cargo planes. He led them to two canvas-topped army trucks sitting beside a Globemaster. Flanking the trucks were two military humvees with bullet-proof windows and mounted .50-caliber machineguns. The soldiers sat idly by with grim looks on their faces, some smoking cigarettes. The soldier leading them told them to get into the second transport. They climbed inside and found several other people who had flown out with them from McCabe. Two soldiers with M16s sat in the back, and the soldier who had led them went to the lead humvee and said, "That's the last of them." He stepped back and the convoy moved forward. The first humvee led the way and

the second pulled in behind the second truck. They drove towards the main gates guarded by sandbag emplacements and mounted machineguns. The gates opened and the convoy went through, snaking through the parking lot littered with military vehicles and taking the long road flanked by dwarf palmetto trees on either side. The first echoes of the sun began to spread out across the city as sunrise approached.

The airport entrance connected with a road that led to the highway. All the roads were empty, completely abandoned, except for military vehicles moving in either direction. Sitting in the back of the truck, Austin looked over the soldiers' shoulders at the road disappearing behind them. The many floodlights at the airport bathed all the buildings in a white-washed light, but the sky began to grow pink, the meager light offering some insight into the world around them. Martial law had indeed been enforced. There were parked cars along the roads beside the highway. Houses had boarded-up windows and locked doors. No one walked the streets. It seemed like a ghost town. A loudspeaker somewhere repeatedly declared that martial law was in effect and anyone seen outside their homes would be apprehended and punished to the fullest extent of the law. The highway abandoned the suburbs and went through an industrial park, the factories sitting quiet and sullen, smoke no longer rising from the smokestacks. An eerie quality to it all. The highway then bent west and to the left of the truck was the San Francisco Bay. Hundreds if not thousands of boats—yachts, motorboats, speedboats, sailboats, dinghies and even canoes or makeshift rafts—could be seen in the harbor. People who had fled into the waters prior to the enactment of martial law. He remembered the radio saying that the infected seemed to have a hesitation about the water. He knew he ought not forget that.

As the road continued north, dozens of military helicopters—UH-60 Blackhawks and VH-1N Hueys—roared overhead. They flew so low to the ground that the trucks shook and the blasts from their spinning rotors blew

sideways the pear trees along the highway. Austin stood and moved towards the back. One of the soldiers told him to sit down. He sat down beside an older gentleman and craned his head to the side to see the helicopters fly south, disappearing over the suburbs. The waxing sunlight reflected against the helicopters, and he thought he saw flashes of light from mounted guns, shooting down into the neighborhoods. He was distracted as another flight of helicopters—this time battle-hardened MH-60G Pave Hawks mixed with a smaller contingency of AH-64 Apaches and even a scattered few RAH-66 Comanches—soared overhead. He watched them disappear over the roofs of the industrial buildings, and then there came the sound of cutting wind and then blooms of smoke and fire. He realized they were firing missiles onto the ground, but he couldn't see anything more as the trucks veered northwest around a prominent hill and headed off the empty interstate. The last thing he saw before they left the highway was fifteen or twenty M1-Abram tanks passing by them going the other direction; the tanks broke off from the highway and headed south, towards the fighting. The soldier next to Austin told him to lean back or fall out, so he leaned back and looked over at Hannah who was staring at the canvas roof above. They could hear the throbbing echoes of distant explosions.

The trucks rolled to a stop outside one of the entrances to the Candlestick Park football stadium parking lot. The trucks sat idly there for some time and then they moved forward, passing through a heavy makeshift gate coiled with razor-wire at the top. Seven sentries stood behind sandbag emplacements, monitoring the entrance. The trucks moved through the empty parking lot and drove around the side of the towering stadium and then pulled up beside one of the side entrances. Everyone filed out. One of the soldiers spoke on his radio and a moment later the door opened, revealing a dark and narrow interior. The soldier who had opened the door beckoned everyone inside. The refugees filed inside and into the darkness. The door was closed behind them and they were led through the twisting corridor past empty locker rooms and then out

through a wide opening into the actual playing field. The playing field was riddled with makeshift tents of various sizes, some with Red Cross emblems on the side. Civilians weren't allowed into the bleachers, where soldiers patrolled with a bird's-eye view upon the entire encampment. A handful of reporters stood at a table with their cameras sitting beside them, their badges sprawled out at their feet. Their eyes were worn and haggard. Perhaps two thousand people were crammed onto the playing field. Most were quiet and sullen, some were crying, many bandaged up. The wails of infants could be heard. The soldier led them to a large tent where they were serving food and told them to eat. He left, leaving them alone. Hannah said, "This isn't a refugee camp. It's an imprisonment." And indeed, that's precisely what it felt like.

6:00 AM

The sky above them began to brighten with pink and red hues as the sun prepared to launch itself over the distant Sierra Nevadas. They stood under the canvas tent in line with twenty or twenty-five other people. Several older women ladled soup into bowls. The three of them took their bowls and walked out underneath the tent and stood in the warm breathless air. Plastic spoons were available at a side table and they took them along with Styrofoam cups filled with distilled water. They stood quietly and ate. Holcomb said something about the soup tasting like soapy dish water but no one cared. They ate it hungrily, savoring even the stale taste. Hannah quit eating hers and said she felt sick and Austin asked how her arm felt. She told him it still hurt but they'd given her some sort of painkiller. "It feels numb," she said. Austin finished his soup and Holcomb did, too, and they threw the soup into a large overflowing trash-can. Holcomb suggested they find someplace to sit and it seemed like a good idea. "What else do we have to do?" he said.

They walked through the scattered tents in which sat cots filled with people. In one tent was a Jewish family sitting in a circle, holding hands, praying over a leather-bound copy of the Hebraic Torah. In another tent were dozens of children, orphaned, sitting side-by-side on the cots, most quiet, others crying. In all the tents many people sat in silence, staring blankly forward, oblivious, drowning in their thoughts and worries. Some held pictures of their families in shaking hands, and they would drop their heads into their hands and soil the photographs with tears. Others mingled about holding bowls of soup and looking into the soup observed their muddy reflections. In many tents there were people knelt down and praying, passionately crying out to God with literal tears. Everywhere there were people, hundreds upon hundreds, and weaving through the crowds the three of them had to stick together for fear of being separated. Soldiers patrolled the escalating seating areas. The ones

nearest the top didn't watch the activity below but seemed to intently observe a world the refugees—prisoners?—could not see. Over the din of crying and conversations they could hear the echoes of trucks and the chatter of gunfire and the muffled sounds of distant explosions. Amidst the smell of human refuse there was also the scent of salt in the air, wafting through from the Pacific Ocean.

As they pushed their way through the crowds, a woman appeared before them, and she grabbed Hannah roughly by the arm, weeping, "Have you seen my baby?! Have you seen my baby?!" Austin went forward and grabbed her by the shoulder and gently pulled her away from Hannah, who clutched her bandaged arm with a wince. The frazzled woman asked him if he had seen her baby, and he began to tell her *No*, but she abandoned him and pushed on through the crowd, grabbing others and demanding of them the same information.

At another tent they saw a young man with red hair and forlorn eyes cutting at his arms with his fingernails, whispering incantations under his breath. A woman sat beside him on the cot and watched but said nothing. The three of them went to the next tent, and there were two open cots. They sat down on one of them and just watched the people walking by, saying nothing. Hannah kept rubbing her bandaged arm, and now not even Austin cared to say a word.

Holcomb said something about being uncomfortable and stood and left. Across from Austin and Hannah a man sat down on the empty cot. Austin placed him at about eighty years old. Dressed in ragged clothes with blood speckled on his pants. He smiled at them and his eyes seemed charming as he asked, "Where are you kids from?"

Austin didn't answer.

Hannah said, "Ohio."

"Ohio? Good Lord. You kids are far from home."

"Yes," she said.

"I heard Ohio fell fast. Just like Kentucky, Indiana, Michigan."

"Yes, it did," she said.

"What was it like?"

Austin looked down at his knees, clasped his hands together, irritated.

Hannah shook her head, said, "I don't really want to talk about it."

"No one wants to talk about it. But it's times like these that we need to talk."

"I know. I just don't really want to talk. I'm tired."

"Are you hungry? They're serving soup. By all the entrances."

"We already ate," she said.

"Good," he said.

Austin looked up. "That cot's taken."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Our friend. That's his cot. He got up to go the bathroom."

"Okay."

"So when he gets back, he'll want it. Can you please move?"

"Ah. I see." He sighed. "Sure, sure. Just don't get too comfortable."

"We're on the list for relocation. Yes, I know."

"The list? The list for relocation? That's not what I'm talking about. Tell me, what it like in Ohio? Where did you live? In a city? The country? Suburbia? It doesn't matter, you know. Cities, the country, the suburbs. The zombies got there. That's what they are, don't you know? Zombies. Of course no one's going to be broadcasting *that*. It's too farfetched. But it's *exactly* what they are. And when the cities fall, they say they're overrun. They talk about it like it's a war. I guess it is, though, isn't it? If you listen close enough, over all the sounds of the people around you, you can hear it. Gunshots. Explosions. The army is everywhere. Soldiers on the streets and in the buildings. They have tanks and armored personnel carriers and humvees and helicopters and jet planes. They've got almost the entire Navy stretched up and down the west coast. There are battleships and cruisers right off the coast of this city, I kid you not. I've been here six hours. And all through the night, I've heard them. Heard the

fighting. It's getting closer. These things, they don't have fear. They don't get scared. I was talking to one of the soldiers. A sniper, he said he was. And he tried a little experiment. He shot one of them right in the chest. Center mass. The zombie didn't die. He shot him in the lungs, shot him full of a full clip, and even shot off his legs. But the zombie still didn't tie. It kept crawling towards him. And then he shoots him in the head, and he turns into a wet bag of moss. So he started shooting them all in the head. And he started killing him. But it doesn't matter. Every time you kill one, two pop up in its place. It's like that hobbit dragon thing, where you cut off one head and two grow back. An exercise in futility. That's how these things work. You can't just shoot them all. There's too many of them. The army doesn't have enough firepower. And the zombies, they don't just wander aimlessly. They're being *drawn* here. Closer and closer to the city. And the soldier said that they've surrounded the city, and the army's been trying to hold them back. Creating... what's it called... like No-Man's Land zones. Burning buildings and erecting barriers and creating long stretches of barren ground. And the zombies, they mass together, and just push right through. They light 'em up with machineguns and missiles and tank shells. But they get through the barricades and find a way through. The army keeps retreating. And the noose keeps getting tighter. I'm telling you, Kids, don't have too much faith in our military. Our military is designed to combat *humans*. Creatures who can think strategically, yes, but also creatures who can feel *fear* and who know what it means to *retreat*. These zombies, they don't think like that. They just go to where the food is. And they're coming here, straight for San Francisco. They're on the doorstep. I'll tell you again: don't put your stock in the military."

Austin said, his voice wavering, "San Francisco is secure."

"Secure?" the man laughed. "*Secure*? Ha! So was Salt Lake City! That's where I came from. The National Guard said they had everything under control. Now it's a ghost town, run full of these creatures. The holdouts are vanishing. And I'm telling you, San Francisco will crumble, too. It's just a matter of time. They're getting closer. You can see it on the soldiers' faces as

they return from the suburbs to rearm and refuel. Less come in than go out. They're shell-shocked. Terrified. Mortified. It's like I said: don't get too comfortable. Because the zombies, they'll get here. And we'll be fish in a barrel."

The man stood, gave them both friendly nods, and slipped away.

Holcomb returned to find the boy and girl sitting quietly. He had overheard the conversation—he had gone to the bathroom, and had been near the tent, then retreated when his bowels began acting up again. "Are we being relocated soon? I heard someone say that," he said, sitting down on the cot where the elderly man had been sitting.

"Something like that," Austin mumbled.

Hannah said, "That man's crazy, Austin."

He didn't know if she really believed that or just wanted to believe it.

Holcomb said, "What man?"

"Some guy came by, saying that we're fish in a barrel for the infected."

"He sounds crazy," Holcomb said. "The army's keeping them away."

"Right," Hannah said. It almost sounded like a question.

Austin heard sporadic gunfire in the distance. "It *does* sound louder."

"It's just your imagination," Hannah said. Perhaps trying to comfort herself.

He stood. "I have to check this out. Anyone care to join me?"

"Where are you going?" Holcomb asked.

"I'm going to try to get to the rooftop. See if I can see anything."

"How the hell you expect to get up there? They're guarding it like hawks."

"I have an idea."

He talked as they pushed through the crowds. "You guys saw the reporters when we came in, right? They were at that booth by the entrance. Well here's my idea. I saw this in a movie once. The press can get into places normal people can't, right? Maybe if we pose as reporters, we can get past the soldiers and be

able to see what's going on beyond the stadium." They stopped at one of the large tents and through the crowd could see the one entrance with the reporters' table beside it. The three reporters—two men and one woman—were sitting on the table, perhaps feeling as imprisoned and helpless as everyone else. "See? We steal a camera, grab two badges, and make our way up there."

Holcomb said, "Impersonating a reporter is a crime, right?"

"Who cares? No one cares anymore."

"So we just walk up to them and ask to borrow their equipment?"

"No. We need a distraction."

At that moment Hannah began to scream.

Holcomb and Austin swung around, their hearts freezing in their chests. She winked at them and stumbled through the crowd, gripping her arm, screaming. The crowd dispersed. They watched her stumble past the reporter's desk, complaining about "the nasty bite." The reporters instantly leapt up and chased after her, grabbing only one camera. There began to emerge shouts from the crowd, and soldiers from the bleachers began to un-shoulder their rifles and descend into the chaos.

"She's going to get herself killed," Holcomb hissed.

"Then we'd better move fast."

Amidst the commotion they darted forward to the reporter's table. No one noticed Holcomb grabbing one of the large shoulder-mounted cameras, nor did anyone notice Austin scooping up two of the badges into his hands. Hannah, now surrounded by the reporters and nearly intercepted by soldiers dropping onto the field, saw them and then dropped to her knees, drawing big sighs of relief. Austin and Holcomb slipped inside one of the half-empty tents and draped the name-badges around their necks. Thankfully the badges didn't have any photographs of the actual reporters.

Holstering the camera on his shoulder, Holcomb said, "What about Hannah?"

"She'll be all right. Look. Here's the plan. You're a reporter, right? You're older. You're wiser. And so it makes sense that you're the actual reporter. Here. Give me the camera." He did. Austin said, "I'm your cameraman. If they ask why I look so young, just tell them I look young for my age, and I'm actually a senior in college doing an internship. Got it?"

He nodded, peeking out from the tent. "Where's Hannah?"

"She's fine," Austin said.

At that moment she appeared, brushing herself off. No one followed her.

Austin saw the soldiers returning to their stations, the reporters talking amongst themselves several yards from the table.

"How'd you get out of *that*?" Holcomb demanded.

"I told them I was having a night terror. They checked my arm, saw it wasn't a bite. I told them I've suffered night terrors since I was a kid."

"Have you?"

"I used to dream that there was a giant dragon chasing me in the house. And for like one week I'd always wake up at exactly 1:30 in the morning feeling hands grabbing at my feet. But that was years ago."

Austin said, "We'll catch up later. Let's get out of here before they see us."

"What about me?" Hannah asked. "I want to come."

"No way," Austin said. "You were the diversion."

"I made this possible, Austin, and I want to see."

"The soldiers already know you, Hannah. It's too risky."

She pouted, but she knew he was right. "Fine. I'll wait in here."

"Okay." He could feel the camera digging into his shoulder. He looked to the janitor. "You ready?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Remember our story?"

"I got it."

"Okay."

"Don't act suspicious," Austin said. They reached one of the gated entrances to the seats and simply unsnapped it and walked through. They began ascending the steep stairs leading past the rows of empty seating to the top of the stadium. Almost immediately a soldier began walking towards them. "Keep moving," Austin said. "Pay him no attention." They kept climbing and when they were halfway there, the soldier began shouting at them to return to the field. "Flash your badge," Austin said. Holcomb stopped and flashed his badge. The soldier reached them. He looked over the badge and then looked at Austin and made a comment about him looking awfully young. Austin said, "Fuck you, Man."

Before the soldier could retaliate, Holcomb said, "Don't mind him. He's fresh out of college. One of those arrogant pricks. You know how they are." He turned and glared at the boy. "The name's David Weathers. You can look at my bridge. And this is my cameraman Jack Thomason. He's interning. On an internship from Colorado."

The soldier looked at their badges, said, "All right. You know the rules. Only five minutes at the top. If you broadcast anything, do it on the field. Though I don't see the point. There aren't any stations currently broadcasting."

"Any camera feed will be recorded," Austin said.

The soldier shrugged. "All right. Go ahead." He turned and walked away.

Holcomb grinned at Austin and they continued climbing.

They reached the highest deck. From here there were glass windows overlooking the San Francisco Bay laden with ships, and they could see the sun peeking over the mountaintops, steadily climbing into the sky. In the distance there was smoke climbing into the sky, blocking out the view of the mountains; through this smoke the sun continued to shine, its rays permeating even the densest columns. They could see the San Francisco International Airport, now fully illuminated at daybreak. Military airplanes continued to land and take off, though Austin could tell more planes were taking off than landing. Army helicopters flew overhead. Dozens of them with the doors open and soldiers leaning out with mounted machineguns. Out over the suburbs, the mini-guns

chattered, spraying bullets down into the streets. Hueys dove forward and their noses lit up like fireworks and missiles and gunfire tore through the stacked homes. The suburbs stretched for miles—thousands upon thousands of homes. Yet all of them seemed to be encased in smoke and molten lead.

They moved around to the other side of the stadium, and Austin wondered if Hannah was watching. From the windows facing southwest, out over the suburbs, disturbing sights reflected in their widening eyes.

In the streets a car wreck served as a barricade. Soldiers leaned on the smoldering ruins, firing clips and throwing grenades. The infected swarmed at them from the suburbs, from lawns and from homes, appearing en masse down the streets and rushing at the soldiers. They fell like flies, but more continued to come, climbing over the bodies of their fallen brethren. The army corporal yelled at the soldiers but it was too late—the infected crawled over the wreckage and assaulted the soldiers. A soldier was hit by bursts of friendly fire, and he fell crippled amongst the zombies who beat at him and ripped him apart. Those trying to run were cut off from zombies appearing from the safe zone. They were overtaken, bitten, screaming. They were torn limb-from-limb and their entrails eaten. The survivors leapt into a humvee and drove away, the infected clinging to the sides of the military vehicle.

A flock of Huey helicopters flew over the suburbs, firing into the streets. Infected were thrust about, torn and riddled by bullets, dismembered and gut-wrenched. Blood spilled onto the cement and washed down the gutters into the drains. Unless they were hit in the head, they picked themselves up and continued, crawling along the street with missing limbs, closer and closer to

the heart of San Francisco, closer and closer to the thousands trapped inside the towering buildings.

"Austin," Holcomb said. "The soldiers are watching us."

He just stared out at the tumultuous suburbs.

The man was right: the zombies were overcoming the army, drawing nearer to the city. Salt Lake City had fallen. What made San Francisco so different?

"*Austin*," Holcomb hissed.

The boy swung around. "What?!"

"The soldiers are *watching*. Roll the camera!"

"I have no idea how to even turn this thing on."

"My bet is neither do they. Just flip some switches and look through the lens."

"I can't see through the lens."

Holcomb cursed. "Then take off the damned lens covering."

He did and flipped a few switches and looked through the lens, observing.

A canvas-topped army truck crashed into a wrecked car. The truck's front end crumpled, the engine damaged. Zombies swarmed the truck, emerging from the houses on either side of the road. They crawled onto the hood and then onto the canvas top. They crowded at the back of the truck, attempting to climb in, but the soldiers fired relentlessly into them. They ran out of ammunition and the non-decapitated zombies flooded inside. The truck shook as the soldiers were eaten alive. The driver's side window shattered and a head lurched inside, biting a chunk out of the driver's arm. The driver grimaced and blew a hole into the zombie's head with the 9mm in his other hand. Blood splashed over the window's frame. The driver continued to fire,

though his shots became disjointed. His hand went limp and the gun fell from his fingers. And then his arm began to move, and his eyes opened, and he leaned forward, and he shrieked.

A humvee was pinned on all sides. The top-mounted .50 caliber roared, the gunner swinging around in the turret, spraying every infected that came close. The gunners inside the humvee fired from the windows. They cried for a medivac. One of the soldiers was bitten, and the order was refused. The other soldiers shot their bitten comrade in the head and called again. A Blackhawk soared overhead, circled, came low, hovered. The doors opened and ropes were released. The turret gunner began to climb the rope, and the others followed after him, the zombies encircling the humvee. Before all the soldiers have started climbing, zombies crawl onto the roof—with the top-gunner gone—and begin grabbing at the rope. The Blackhawk pilot began to pull away with soldiers still climbing. One of the zombies bit the lowest soldier in the leg, tearing open his calf muscle. The soldier lost strength and fell. The zombie continued to climb. The Blackhawk flew over the street, the soldiers still climbing with the infected clinging to the rope. A soldier in the Blackhawk released the rope latch, and the rope fell away from the Blackhawk. The soldiers on the rope fell to the street. One landed on the pavement and the other crashed through the windshield of a parked car. The zombie hit the pavement, and—beaten and bloodied—stood again, moving towards the fallen prey.

An A-10 Warthog flew over the suburbs, releasing napalm. The fire stretched down a main road, igniting trees and grass, fences and buildings. An entire section of the neighborhood crackled and tore in the flames. The zombies twisted about, slowly

consumed to a crisp, the brains smoldering. They writhed about in the flames and slowly stopped. Inside a home, a hiding mother and her two young children were burned alive as the house was engulfed in the napalm.

"Can you believe this?" Holcomb breathed. "My God."

"They're getting closer," Austin said, still watching from the camera.

And they were. The army kept retreating, hastily setting up new boundaries.

"Look over there," Holcomb said, pointing.

Austin swung the camera. Down in the parking lot of the stadium, more military vehicles were entering and more sandbags were being erected, more machineguns employed. They were setting up defenses all around the camp.

"It's not going to work," Holcomb said.

"I know."

"They're going to get through. *Shit.*"

He lowered the camera. "I think we'd better find Hannah."

They began their trek back around to the other side of the stadium, then headed down towards the field filled with tents and throngs of refugees. Austin said, "The zombies can't get into the water, right? They're scared of it or something. So we just need to get to a bay and get into a boat, and get out onto the water. The bay is maybe an eighth of a mile east of here."

Holcomb said, "It'll be damn near impossible to find a boat."

"Maybe not," Austin said. "Martial law is in effect, right? So a lot of people probably couldn't get to their boats before the military clamped them down in their homes, their offices, their schools. So there may still be a few out there. We can check at the marinas. Get a rowboat or even a canoe if we have to. Or a kayak."

"Martial law is *still* in effect. No one's allowed on the streets, and that includes us. What do you think happens when we get caught? We'll be put in

confinement. Guarded by those soldiers. And we've seen what good they can do."

"I don't think we have to worry about it. The soldiers will be focused on the zombies."

"And what happens when they mistake us for zombies and shoot us in the head?"

"We can just do something zombies don't do. To distinguish ourselves."

"Oh?" he asked, sarcasm ladling his voice. "Like what? Dance?"

"No. We'll lock arms and move together. In synch. As one."

They reached the field and pushed through the crowds.

Austin looked back at him. "You have a better plan?"

"No. It's better than being pigeonholed in here."

Pigeonholed. Austin remembered the old man's words: fish in a barrel.

They found Hannah standing under the same tent. When they approached, she said, "The reporters are *pissed*. Ditch the equipment before they see you."

Austin nonchalantly dropped the camera to the ground.

"Watch it!" Hannah exclaimed. "Do you have *any* idea how expensive those are?"

"It doesn't matter," Holcomb said. "This place isn't as safe as we thought it was. And the military's doing a pathetic job at keeping the city quarantined. The fighting's moved closer. Embarrassing closer. It's right outside the stadium, maybe five or six blocks away."

Her face drained of color. "That crazy old man was right."

"Maybe he wasn't so crazy after all," Austin mused.

Holcomb told her their plan of escaping to the bay.

She said, "Soldiers are guarding all the entrances and exits. We'll never make it through them."

"So we create another distraction," Austin said. "But one that we can use so *all* of us can evade the soldiers."

"You have another trick up your sleeve?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. Not yet."

"A distraction?" Holcomb said. "Like what?"

At that moment a massive explosion rocked outside the stadium. The bleachers seemed to quiver and the ground beneath them shuddered. Everything went quiet and then people began to cry harder and screams were heard. Panic whistling through the camp. The soldiers in the bleachers rushed to the highest level and began shooting out the large windows overlooking the parking lot, and they thrust their rifles out through the gaping windows and began shooting.

"That'll work," Austin said.

"Come on!" Holcomb shouted. The three of them surged through the crowd and reached the bleachers and began to climb. More people followed them, surging up towards the windows, yearning to see what was happening. The soldiers high above glanced back but then returned to their firing positions. As they climbed, Holcomb said they needed to see where the zombies were so they could formulate the best exit strategy. It seemed smart enough, though Austin just wanted to leave immediately. Along with several other people, they reached the highest level and ran around to where the soldiers were firing. Several windows were still unbroken and they crowded them and watched, the chatter of gunfire roaring in their ears. The barricades that had been erected by the military encircling the stadium were being overrun. The soldiers retreated, firing their assault rifles. Infected flew this and way that, their brains drilled by lead. Gunfire laced the parking lot as the infected began to spread out, their field of invasion growing wider. Hundreds more zombies appeared from the streets, moving en masse towards the stadium.

A voice behind them: "I hate being right."

Austin turned to see the older man who had spoken to them in the tent forty minutes earlier. The man just smiled at him. Austin turned and looked out

the window again. Several trucks were picking up scattered soldiers, driving them towards the stadium.

The man said, "There could be infected in those trucks. Soldiers who have been bitten. See how they didn't check? They're overrun and panicking. It's just like what happened in Salt Lake. The infected soldiers will blend with the other soldiers and then with the refugees, and when they die—and wake up—they start attacking anyone who isn't infected. So this thing, this airborne virus or toxic plague or bioterrorist attack or space-borne microorganism, whatever it is... It's going to fill this entire stadium. And it will reach into the heart of the city. More people will die. More people will rise. The ratios will continue to become even more strikingly unbalanced. It's not like conventional war. You lose one to the enemy there, the enemy doesn't gain one. Here, each one you lose is one they gain. And each one they lose, well, it doesn't matter. Add up the numbers. It'll spread exponentially. There's already too many of them. They've overtaken the suburbs. And they'll overtake the stadium." A muffled laugh. "And then we'll be running Pickett's Charge into the city. We'll be *them*, and we'll be the ones the army will be shooting at."

The soldiers formed a closer perimeter around the stadium, firing relentlessly into the oncoming horde. Zombies fell like flies, but they kept coming. More and more appeared from the suburbs. Some were crawling, some half-charred by flames. Many lacerated with bullets and spurting blood.

"They'll be here in a moment," the man said. "They'll clog the entrances. We won't be able to get out."

Holcomb glared at him. "Then what the hell are we doing just standing here?"

"Waiting for death," the man said calmly. "What else is there to do?"

"Run," Holcomb said. "And keep running."

"I'm tired of running," the man complained. "I'm just going to stay here."

"And die?"

"I won't be dead. I'll be *deadish*."

Austin grabbed Hannah by the shoulder and they took off, running towards the steps leading down to the field now overcome with panicked refugees and toppled tents and infants lost in the maelstrom.

Holcomb grabbed the man's arm. "Come with us," he pleaded.

"No, but thank you. Look at me. Eighty years old. I'm too old to run! Besides, doesn't it fascinate you? What is it *like* to be them? That's what I keep thinking about. It's almost romantic. Some people say these things are dead. Just like corpses, up, walking around. I don't know *what* they are, but I know that's bullshit. These things, they're driven. I've seen them up close. Such a simple life. It isn't complex. Eat, walk, eat, survive. It's romantic, in a Walden sort of way. I'm..." He searched for the right words. "I'm jealous of them."

Holcomb stared at him. "You're senile."

"Who're the zombies?" the man asked. "I think *we're* the zombies. Consumers of everything society thinks is appealing. We don't think for ourselves anymore. We dedicate our lives to the wills of others. It's sickening. We're the zombies. Is this religious? Scientific? Are we to trust in God anymore? Or not believe in God at all? How do you make sense of this when your family is trying to kill you? I don't know all of that, but I believe it is salvation. A baptism of sorts. I'm ready. I'm prepared."

Holcomb saw Austin and Hannah waving at him.

They hadn't descended to the field. They stood beside a door leading to a stairwell.

He looked at the man. "You're not thinking straight. Please. Come with us."

He found it ironic: now he was risking everything for this old man.

Doing exactly what he had condemned Austin for doing back at Kansas City.

"Please," Holcomb said, energy coursing through his veins.

Austin and Hannah continued to plead with him.

At that moment the zombies overcame the guards outside and entered the stadium.

The infected swarmed through the camp, emerging from the various entrances around the field. Men, women, and children screamed, pressed tightly together, shoulder-to-shoulder. The crowd seemed to pulse with waves as people fled for the bleachers. People were trampled under the feet of the panic. The soldiers in the bleachers turned and started firing into the crowd, shooting both infected and non-infected. Zombies flooded onto the bleachers, hunched over with sunken eyes and fingertips and mouths dripping with fresh blood. Holcomb abandoned the man and sprinted to Austin and Hannah, pushing people out of the way. Hannah descended the stairwell, followed by Austin, and Holcomb looked back to see the man standing stoic beside the window, arms raised to heaven. "Into thy hands I commit my spirit!" he cried as an infected knocked him to the ground, biting at his neck. Blood surged over the concrete and he screamed joyous rapture as blood ran down his cheeks and nose, into his eyes, and he clapped his hands as he died, proclaiming, "Redemption is in the blood!"

7:00 AM

They descended the dark and cold stairwell. The door above them opened and they heard feet running after them. At the bottom of the stairwell was a door marked "Utilities 306." Austin opened it and they went inside. He turned to shut the door and saw the pursuer reach the bottom of the steps. It had been the man who had undergone his privileged baptism. Austin shut the door and locked the bolt. The door shuddered and quaked as the man tried to get in.

"Now he knows what it's like," Austin said under his breath.

Hannah, behind him, said, "Who?"

"Our friend. He's the one at the door."

A pause. "I wonder if he enjoys it?"

Holcomb led them through the darkness, sliding his hands over the walls. They passed several dark machines, crouched in the blackness like stone gargoyles. Shouts and screams and gunshots could be heard through the walls. He found a door at the end of the room and shoved it open. Administrative offices with fogged windows. Along the walls were mounted pictures of the stadium from various years. Photographs of the teams for each respective season. One of the fogged doors opened, and a man in a business suit stepped out. "What's happening?" he demanded.

"They're in the stadium," Holcomb said.

"They said it was safe here," he said, shaking his head.

"They said a lot of things."

"But the army—"

"Failed," Hannah said, finishing his sentence. "How do we get out of here?"

"From here? Only through the lobby. There's no other way out. Unless you go back the way you came."

"That won't work," Holcomb said.

"You'd better hurry, then," the man said.

"Then show us the way."

The man shook his head. "No. No, I'm staying here."

Holcomb cursed. "What is it with you people? God!"

He stepped aside from the door. His wife and children huddled inside. He said, "We're just going to... stay together."

He shook his head. "Look..."

"No. This is our decision. It's better this way."

"You know what? Fine. You're funeral. Which way?"

He pointed down the corridor. "You'll come to an intersection. Go right. The first left is the stairs. Hurry." He shut the door and they heard it lock. They could hear him talking to his wife. Muffled voices. The child wept.

Holcomb led the way to the stairwell. They went down the stairwell and at the bottom was a door. They went through onto a landing. Below them was the lobby, filled with service desks and a security depot and queue lines. A statue of a baseball player, a memento from the stadium's earliest use as a baseball park. People were everywhere below, flooding out through the lobby doors, screaming and crying, clutching to family and friends. Soldiers entered through the lobby, shouting orders. They herded the people out the doors. More soldiers bashed out the large front glass windows so people could escape quicker. The three of them ran down the landing to a spiral staircase leading down to the lobby. They went down it, taking the steps three-at-a-time. The stairwell went directly beneath one of the main customer service desks. They ran around the desk and blended with the crowd, lost in a sea of strangers bound for an unknown destination. The shouts and the screams of the infected, guttural and inhuman, resounded throughout the cavernous lobby. Austin looked back to see torn and ragged zombies surging down the escalators leading to the main deck of the stadium.

A bloodied man ran passed them, gripping his arm. He'd been bitten. A soldier spotted him, wrenched him to the side, threw him to the ground, and delivered a quick shot to his head. The man's brains splattered over the soldier's boot. He continued shouting orders to the refugees, telling them to move quicker.

The crowd pushed forward towards the doors and shattered windows. Amidst the panic it seemed the crowd barely moved. Austin stepped on something squishy. He looked down and saw a little child's hand, bruised dark purple. Her head and limbs had been smashed into the marble. It didn't even faze him. He kept moving, clutching onto Hannah's rigid hand.

A zombie came up behind them. Holcomb punched him away. More appeared all around them, blending with the crowd. "Stay together!" Holcomb shouted. "Stay together!" Austin felt like a sardine, squished on all sides, and those around them were quickly dying and then reanimating. The number of survivors waned. They reached one of the windows and crawled over muddied couches and leapt through the window and onto the sidewalk.

Zombies came at them from all direction. Austin, Hannah, and Holcomb ran around parked cars and nearly became road-kill due to a speeding army humvee. "This way!" Holcomb yelled. They followed after him. The road beyond the gate, lined with businesses and shops, seemed to be empty. They rushed past the broken bodies of fallen soldiers. Holcomb reached down and picked up an M16 and then cursed and threw it to the side. An empty magazine. The gate was open and they ran through, straight into the street. Austin turned to see smoke rising from the inside of the stadium. The zombies ran this way and that, consuming anything non-infected. A few more scattered reports of gunfire. Military vehicles flooded from the stadium and turned right and headed towards downtown San Francisco. A soldier in the back of one of the trucks was crying, and another waved at them to seek shelter. The stadium had been abandoned by the military. It was no longer part of the Safe Zone.

Infected ran through the gates, pursuing them. The three of them ran onto the opposite sidewalk and Holcomb opened the first unlocked door. He rushed inside. Some type of shoe store. The shoe clerk stood in the aisles, shouting in a thick British accent, "Out! Get out! You'll bring them in here!" They ignored him. Hannah shut the door and locked it. They ran down an aisle filled with Adidas and Nike tennis shoes and Pacific Sunwear sandals. The shoe clerk intercepted Holcomb, yelling, "Leave! Out of my store!" Holcomb drilled his fist into the shoe clerk's face. The clerk flopped into a shelf of shoes and fell sprawled onto the floor, shoes raining down around him. Holcomb ran into the backroom, Austin and Hannah behind him. They heard the front windows shatter open, followed by the screams of the shoe clerk, then a gurgling sound, and then nothing. Holcomb found a door in the backroom labeled "Emergency Exit" and they went through into an alleyway.

The sounds of carnage seemed more distant. A dumpster surrounded by flies sat thrust against the graffiti-marked stone walls of the alley. Holcomb positioned himself beside it and shouted for help, and Austin and Hannah joined him. Austin told her to back away because of her arm and she did. He and Holcomb pushed the rolling dumpster against the back door of the shoe store. The zombies reached the door and tried to get through, but the dumpster pinned them inside. They hammered against the cold green steel.

"That should hold for a while," Holcomb said.

The alley led to another street. Parked cars were everywhere. An army truck rumbled past. They hid in the shadows, fearing the soldiers would shoot in their trigger-happy anxiety. They ran across the street. The streets to the left and right had opened like corks on a wine bottle, the infected foaming forth. They moved down another alleyway, this one opening up to a wide park with a playground, picnic area, an artificial pond, and several trees. A mark of posterity in a consumerist world. Straddling the treetops was the beautiful skyline of San Francisco. The skyscraper windows glinted peacefully in the

rising morning sun. Army helicopters roared overhead, the mini-guns chattering, spraying the streets that served as arteries carrying the zombies towards the heart of San Francisco.

Birds sang mournful sonnets in the trees, fluttering to and fro amongst the blooming branches, hardly disturbed by the frantic chaos of fallen humanity. The three of them moved through the park, pushing through a grove of trees, their breaths stuck in their throats. Behind them several infected ran into the street only to be smashed by a passing army truck, their brains interweaving with the truck's steel grill.

"Which way?" Austin panted, reaching a mulched path splitting two ways.

"Any way," Holcomb said.

They went left and the path crossed over a gurgling brook. Austin thought it seemed peaceful, and he imagined lovers sitting on the rocky banks, holding one another and giggling and eating chocolates.

They passed a playground with swings, teeter-totters, and a slide. A little girl had become entangled in the chain links of the swings as her infected mother tore her arm out of her socket, spraying the mulch with blood. The three of them bolted down the path, and the mother saw them as they passed, clutching her child's arm, tattered flesh between her lips. The little girl fell out of the swing and landed in the mulch, and her hair fell down over her face as her pupils shriveled to nothing, her quivering lips going still. The woman watched the three of them disappear around a bend, and then she returned to the arm, chewing. She set the arm down and knelt down beside her dead daughter and began to feast on her swollen chest.

The path snaked through another stand of trees and went beside the artificial pond. Hannah stopped and bent over, vomited into the grass. Holcomb kept running, but Austin froze beside her, shouted at the janitor, "Stop!"

He swung around, sweat cascading down his face. "Are you crazy?! We can't stop now!"

"She's sick!"

"So are they!" He pointed to zombies coming towards them from down the path.

Hannah wiped bile from her lips and started running, Austin behind her.

They exited the park, reaching a barren street. They crossed it and went through an alley to the next street, also empty. Police and National Guard barricades had been set up down the road. Infected climbed over the barricades, attacking the soldiers and policemen. A Sedan burst through the barricades and sped towards them. As the car neared them, Holcomb told them to grab on. The car reached them and he leapt onto the back. Hannah and Austin jumped onto the back as well, clutching onto the roof-rack for dear life. The driver didn't even care. Hannah closed her eyes, pressed her face against the cold back window.

"Don't pass out now," Austin said. "Don't even think about it."

She mumbled something about her arm, something about the stitches.

"Just keep it together," he said.

Infected chased after them.

The Sedan swerved onto a side road to avoid more barricades, and Austin nearly lost his grip. Zombies pressed at the car from every side, grabbing at their pant-legs as the car rushed down the street. As the car turned left onto another road, Austin looked behind him and could see fiery mushroom clouds rising from the airport. A humvee burst from a side-road and connected with the front end of the Sedan. The car twisted and everyone was thrown into the air, hurled against a nearby stone wall of some advertising agency. Austin got to his feet and stared at the crumpled Sedan on its side and the humvee with the smoke gushing from underneath the hood. The humvee's doors opened and soldiers piled out, instantly shooting towards the nearby infected. Austin turned and grabbed Hannah by her good arm, helped her up. She was dazed but unhurt. Holcomb gripped his arm, already swelling with a nasty bruise.

They abandoned the accident and began to half-run, half-walk towards the city, only a mile away. Austin didn't know which way it was to the bay.

"Do you think the city's safe?" Hannah panted beside him.

He could see smoke rising between the skyscrapers. "No."

Zombies filled the street. Holcomb fended one off, punching him square in the face. When the zombie fell, the janitor stomped down on its forehead. The legs and arms kicked. They took a stairwell up onto a rooftop, and from there Austin beheld the awful scenes sweeping downtown.

Smashing glass and rolling thunder. Bodies crushed under their own weight, propelled by the forces of gravity. Jumping, muscles propelling, unknowing, diving, whirling, breaking apart over the cement. The skyscrapers were harbingers of the damned—dazed, confused, suicidal, prophets of the last days. Leaping to their deaths from the tallest rooftops, falling with serenity or with screams, blown apart on sidewalks, impaling cars, breaking glass and shattering bones, baths of blood and twisted human frames.

Ghosts out of hell. Leaping, jumping, crawling. The army is overcome, artificial trenches flooded. Pressed against the walls the survivors hide, clutching to their loved ones behind locked doors and barred windows through which could be heard the screams of the damned and the echoes of war. The zombies broke into the homes, and there came pain, agony, ripping flesh, biting, exhaustion, resignation, serenity, reawakening. Eyes rolling and lolling, yellow and bitter. Shouts and cries, all the same, never-ending. The time rapidly approached, dawning, appearing, the horizon red not with the sun but with spilt blood. The streets were echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah: stragglers torn down, ripped

apart, bats out of the dark caves of hell, the earth opening its maw and giving birth to the dead.

Beasts of iron and steel collided. Steam gushed from their organs. The ears open and the inhabitants exit, bruised from the collision. They stumbled about, looking this way and that, see them coming, know not what to do. They were thrown against the car, felt the weight of them behind them, smelled the awful rancid breath. All is fair in both love and war.

The windows burst apart, raining glass into the sprinters. The marathons runners fell, cut up and bloodied, moaning. The fire consumed them while they were still alive. They spun and whirled about. Loved ones fell, burnt, smoldering, flesh melting and bubbling and popping. The air is filled with the sounds and vibrations of an entire swarm of locusts. Cement chipping and breaking apart. The great haven had collapsed. God's wrath had been declared—no one could stop it, the breath of condemnation cold in the whirlwind of the flames.

The zombies seemed to move in groups, Austin observed, assaulting everyone and everything. Men, women, children. No one was exempt, no one with an excuse. Old and young—both met the same fate: flesh opened, their stomachs gutted like fish. Dismembered in the feeding frenzy of the humans-turned-sharks. The deceased, no matter how wounded or emblazoned with near-death, would wobble to their feet, look around, spy a satisfaction for crooked hunger, and act upon it.

Austin ran to the edge of the roof and faced east. Between the alleys of taller buildings he could see the water speckled with boats. The sunlight glinted upon

the water with such ferocity that it hurt his eyes. He turned and shouted for the others, and they joined him. He pointed to the water and said, "That's where we go. If we can get to the water, we should be safe."

"And if we can't find a boat?" Holcomb said.

"Then we swim. It's better than staying onshore."

"Then let's go," Hannah said.

They carefully descended the metal ladder, careful to not be seen. They headed east, going down an alley. They reached another road resplendent with parked cars. Brick apartment complexes lined side-by-side. Wrought-iron, waist-high fences lined along the small front yards beside the covered stoops. No zombies could be seen. They couldn't squeeze past the apartment buildings packed so closely together. They followed the road with the parked cars when they heard shouts behind them: zombies appeared from the alley and gave chase, dozens upon dozens of them. Holcomb led the way, jumping onto one of the cars. The others followed. They jumped from the hood of the car to the back of the next, and in this fashion they kept themselves off the ground. They moved slower, but the zombies just surrounded the cars and reached up at them as they leapt car-to-car like frogs leaping lily-pad to lily-pad. The apartment buildings ended, but the packed buildings continued. Various trinket shops. A door in one stood open and a woman stood there, waving at them. Hannah and Holcomb jumped off a car and sprinted after her. Austin leapt, too, but stumbled in the gutter and fell onto the sidewalk. The zombies were upon him. He crawled to his feet and grabbed the iron gutter lying over the sewer. He grunted and lifted it, and he walked backwards towards the store, Holcomb shouting at him. He felt like a fool, fending off the zombies with such a small shield. When they got close he would bash them in the face, and they would stumble back, collect themselves, move forward. He cursed and threw the grill at the closest zombie, and then he turned and bolted for the door. He rushed inside and Holcomb pulled the door shut, threw down the lock.

He turned and glared at Austin, said, "What the fuck do you think you are, a damned Spartan?"

The woman who had let them in clutched Hannah by the shoulder.

The owner of the store rushed forward. "Jackasses! Jackasses!"

Austin looked around, wiped sweat from his brow. A coffee shop.

"This way," the woman said, ignoring the owner.

They followed her through the small scattered tables and planted pottery and the bags of coffee—ground or whole-bean—on sale. She pulled them around the counter, and sitting in hiding were six or seven refugees. Everyone sat down and the owner cursed and joined them.

"Hide," the woman said, "because they'll forget we're here if they can't see us."

The infected continued to assault the door and the boarded-up windows.

And then they retreated with the sound of a passing vehicle.

Austin surveyed his surroundings. Jugs of coffee syrups. Mixers. Napkins and plastic bags.

"Thanks for almost getting us *killed*," the owner growled at the woman.

"Just stay down," Austin said, "and they won't try to get in."

"Your accent," the woman said. "You're not from around here."

"Ohio," Hannah said.

"I heard that's bad."

"It was pretty bad."

"This is bad, too. My family. They're at home."

"Why didn't you stay with them?"

"This café is 24/7. I was here when martial law was enforced. Couldn't leave."

"You guys were operating even when the disease first started?"

"We're like the Post Office. We're always operating, rain or snow."

"Rain, snow, dead walking the earth," Holcomb said. "It's all the same, right?"

The owner said, "How are you so sure they won't get in here?"

"They're just like animals," the woman told him. "Short attention spans."

An explosion rocked out on the street. The bottles of syrup quivered on the shelves.

One of the refugees began to cry. The woman went over to her, comforted her.

Holcomb leaned his head against the under-counter cooler. "My God."

Hannah said, "I wonder what it's like out there?"

A father turned his head and burst into tears. His five-year-old boy struggled beneath his father's strangling hands, drowning in the bathtub. The man prayed the Lord's Prayer as his son stopped thrashing about. He released his shaking hands. The boy's face was bloated and purple, the eyes nearly blown from the sockets. The father stood, dizzy. The bathroom door splintered. Hands reached after him through the gash in the door. A woman shrieked. He grabbed the knife in the kitchen sink and raised it before him, let it shine in the morning sunlight coming between the blinds. He cursed at the beast in the doorway, said goodbye to his wife who was trying to kill him, and he slit his throat. Blood sprayed the glass mirror and he watched himself, the world darkening, the blood coursing down his collared shirt. He collapsed against the door and slid to the ground. His wife's hands reached through the splintered hole in the door and tore at his hair.

The stained glass of the church shimmered in the morning light. In the sanctuary the priest crossed himself and walked through the huddled congregation. The doors rattled and shook. Bloodied hands smeared the windows. The priest passed out the communion tray. A bit of bread and a cup of juice. The congregants quietly ate the bread and drank the juice. The

stained glass shattered, hands reaching inside, arms tearing against the jagged glass. Sunken yellow eyes, mottled purple skin, furred lips filled the gaps in the windows, foaming and drooling with vile saliva and blood. Jaws stained red with the blood of victims now risen. The congregation crossed themselves and prayed to Mary as the effects of the juice went through their system. They began to twitch and cry out. The faithful worshippers pitched forward, then leaned back, writhed about, convulsed. One by one they dropped to the floor between the pews, kicking and howling, bodies riddled with pain. One by one they went quiet and lied still, their faces frozen in agony. The priest stood underneath the statue of Jesus on the cross, drank his fill from the remaining juice, and knelt down. The priest closed his eyes as the zombies entered the church. They rushed after him, and he saw Jesus and felt their teeth on his neck.

A teenager filled the gun with bullets, fingers moving methodically. Cocaine and cigarettes and rolled marijuana and liquor lied about the room bathed in the smoke of drugs and incense and mushroom candles. Six shells. Six people. One by one they took the gun and pulled the trigger. The psychedelic furniture behind them dripped with blood and skull fragments. Their bodies lied sprawled and grotesque. The last person took the gun from stiff hands, pressed it into her throat, closed her eyes, and pulled the trigger.

They lied in bed, hearing the nightmare unfolding outside the boarded-up windows. He held her hand. A small bite on her arm was bleeding. He didn't care. He kissed her lips. She smiled back at him, so faintly. He didn't care. She will die, and he will join her. They were one in sex, one in marriage—and they will be one

in death. Her skin began to take on that purplish hue. She said she felt sick. He undid her thong and slipped on top of her. She breathed hard. He entered into her. Her eyes were sinking. He kept kissing her lips, her mouth, her ear, her cheek, her forehead. Only a few moments...

"How long are we going to stay here?" Hannah asked.

"I don't know," Austin said.

"They'll get in here eventually," she said, whispering.

"Maybe not."

"You know that's not true."

"I know."

"We need to get to the water, Austin."

"I know."

"We can't stay here."

"Damn it," he hissed, "I said *I know*."

8:00 AM

They sat in the silence, crowded behind the bar, saying nothing, barely making eye contact. Austin looked down at his hands, the ghastly cuts and tears that had accumulated over the past day. Had it only been a day? He didn't know. He had forgotten about the pain in his hands. And as he focused on the pain, the pain from the rest of his bruised and beaten body became strikingly poignant. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the bar and felt the pain and heard the distant explosions and rattling gunfire. The shrieks of the infected and the screams of the dying. He opened his eyes and looked over at Hannah. She sat staring dumbly forward. He wanted to scoot next to her and hold her. He wanted her head to cradle on his shoulder. He looked away. No time for such thoughts. He continued sitting in the silence, hearing muffled coughs and then his own heartbeat and feeling the pain.

There came the sound of a door slamming. The cowering refugees eyed one another. The owner's face, a mask of confusion, turned into a face of horror. "The back door!" he hissed under his breath. Austin pulled himself up and peered over the counter, towards the back. Down a narrow corridor a door was open, morning sunlight filtering inside. And silhouetted against the sunlight stood two frazzled children—a little boy and a little girl. Their eyes swam in their sockets and they seemed to be overtaken with frightened tremors. They moved forward, the back door closing behind them, and they looked straight at Austin, and he feared they were infected, but the little boy exclaimed, "Jesse and James and Christine are chasing us! They killed Danny!" Austin beckoned them forward and they came around the side of the counter, dripping sweat, terribly frightened. "Sit down," he said, and the boy sat beside him and the girl plopped down beside the owner.

Her frilly dress hiked up towards her waist, revealing a bite on her leg. Shivers ran through him, and the woman who had opened the front door let out a muffled gasp.

The little girl moaned, "Christine bit me. I told her to stop. I told her it wasn't a fun game."

Hannah moaned, "Oh my God..."

The little girl began to cry. "It hurts! It's bleeding. It's bleeding and it won't stop."

The owner looked over at the boy. "Are you bitten?" he demanded.

The boy shook his head. "But Jenny needs a band-aid."

Someone said, "We have to kill her."

The little girl's eyes went wide. She looked at Austin, and he felt a knot in his stomach, and she looked out at the others. "Kill me? I just got bit! I'm not like them! I'm not like Jesse and James and Christine!"

One of the figures in the back stood. "Kill her. Kill her now."

The little girl wailed, "This isn't a fun game!"

The woman said, "She's just a baby, Alec! She's just a little girl."

"She'll turn into them," Alec growled. "I'll be damned if it happens." He went towards one of the drawers.

Crouched on the floor, the woman glared at him. "What are you doing?!"

He pulled out a knife used to cut deli sandwiches.

The girl said, "It doesn't hurt that bad! She barely bit me!"

"It doesn't matter," Alec said.

The woman stood and went towards him.

"Angela!" he shouted, waving the knife in her face. "Stay back."

"You can't!" Angela hollered. "It's not a bad bite, it's just —"

"It's a bite, Angela! Damn it! She's going to turn!"

The little boy said, confused, "Mister, is this part of the game?"

The owner grabbed the boy and bodily turned him over, started taking off his clothes. The boy began to kick and scream. The owner hissed, "Don't move, Boy. Let me see you. See if you're bitten. Little boys like to lie, don't they?"

Someone tried to open the front door but abandoned it.

"I'm not bit!" the boy moaned. "They didn't get me!"

Holcomb moved forward and grabbed the boy's arm when the owner finished inspecting him. "Where are they?" he demanded. "Where are your friends?"

"They're outside somewhere!" the boy said, wrenching his arm away from Holcomb and sliding across the floor to a position against the under-counter cooler. "We ran away and lost them! They're probably looking for us."

The man with the knife had been arguing with Angela, and he bodily shoved her out of the way and moved towards the little girl. "Someone hold her!"

Hannah looked away. Austin grabbed her hand and squeezed, closed his eyes.

The woman shed tears. "Alec! Fuck, Alec! You can't—"

He said again, "Someone hold the damn girl!"

A co-worker grabbed the girl by both arms and pulled her against his chest. He looked away, refusing to watch.

The little girl struggled against him. "Let me go!"

He gripped her tighter, bruising her arm

Angela lunged forward and grabbed at Alec's heels, but he just kicked her away. He stood before the girl with the knife gripped tightly in his hands.

The girl continued struggling against her captor. Blonde hair dangled around her angelic face. Tears coursed down her cheeks. "Mister..." she sobbed. "Mister..."

Angela shrieked, "Alec!"

And her pleading became a scream as Alec thrust the knife into the girl's eye. The girl let out a muffled cry and went limp in the man's grasp. The man released her. She slumped forward onto the floor. Her mouth moved open and closed like that of an out-of-water fish. Blood seeped from the wound. Hannah began to cry. Austin felt rage welling up within him, his throat swelling into a concoction of knots. This wasn't right. The little boy sobbed. Angela fell onto

her knees and wept, staring at the little girl. Her body began to go into a rhythmic seizure, shuddering upon the tiled floor. Alec stepped back with the bloodied knife, perhaps suddenly realizing what he had done. The knife quivered in his shaking hand.

The back door creaked open. Alec looked up and just stared, his eyes growing wider, fingers clutching the knife tighter. Austin scrambled to his feet and looked over the counter into the backroom. Three children stood in the corridor before the back door, fingertips and jaws dripping with blood. They looked at him with a façade of disinterested lust. The little boy who had been inspected jumped up and screamed, "He killed her!" But the children didn't respond. And a moment later they rushed forward. Alec rushed forward around the edge of the bar to intercept them, and though the knife flashed through the air, he was no match for their agility and bloodlust. He fell underneath them and blood squirted from his wrist and neck as they tore into him with savage teeth. The owner leapt up, shouting at Alec. Two other refugees rushed past him to help, tearing the children off of him. Alec gripped at his torn neck with his unbitten wrist, blood seeping between his fingers. His eyes darted crazily back and forth, surveying the blurring ceiling. Outside the café, zombies in the windows saw the frenzy and threw themselves against the glass. The glass shattered and they tumbled into the coffee shop, knocking over tables and chairs. They gathered themselves and rushed for the counter.

Zombies came in through the front windows, and the refugees abandoned their refuge behind the counter. Austin barreled past the zombie-children and ran to the back door, throwing it wide. The people behind him knocked him through the door and he stumbled over a lead pipe in the alley and fell onto his face. Holcomb grabbed him and tore him up. The refugees scattered in the alley, some going left, the others going right. The alley was littered with fallen metal trashcans and a dumpster covered with graffiti. One of the refugees opened the dumpster's plastic lid and crawled inside. Austin, Hannah, Holcomb, and three

others ran off to the right. Austin looked over his shoulder to see the zombies spilling from the café's back door. One ran straight to the dumpster—smelling the cowering prey?—and opened the lid and began climbing inside. Off to the left was a branching alley. "This way!" one of the former café workers yelled, and everyone followed after her.

Towering wooden walls ran along the alley on each side. Trash littered the ground. Hannah yelled, "Grab something!" and reached down and grabbed a brick. Austin grabbed a spike that had at one time held a dog's leash. One of the refugees grabbed a hammer with a splintered handle lying in the grass. Holcomb found nothing substantial. The infected continued chasing them as the alley stretched onwards. Several F-16s soared low overhead, the wake of their exhaust kicking up dirt and grass and blowing the trash against the towering wooden walls.

Hannah was behind them when Austin heard her scream.

He spun around to see a zombie on top of her. She'd lost the brick.

He rushed towards her, thrusting the sharp end of the spike into the infected's shoulder. The zombie shrieked and toppled to the side. He wrenched out the spike and drove it into her face. "Hannah!" he shouted. "Up!" The other zombies were nearly to them. Hannah scrambled up and the two of them ran forward to join the others.

The alleyway widened and merged with the back of an apartment complex.

Holcomb tried the nearest door. The knob rattled. "Oh God."

Austin grabbed an empty aluminum trashcan and threw it down the alley. The large trashcan hit the ground and rolled, bumping wildly over the uneven ground, and it took out the legs of several zombies, dropping them onto their faces.

The café employee with the hammer swung at the handle. "It's not working."

Holcomb grabbed the hammer and ran to the closest window, smashed it in.

"Austin!" Hannah yelled.

He turned and saw her grabbing at a heavy tetherball pole.

He helped her and they maneuvered it around and thrust it into the oncoming zombies. The zombies were packed close together in the narrow lip of the alley, and the sharp end of the pole went right through the first one, then the second, and then the third, shearing straight through their bowels. Hannah and Austin dropped the pole and the end they had been holding fell into the ground. The zombies squirmed, impaled, hissing and clawing at one another. They turned sideways, blocking the ones behind them from reaching the apartment complex.

Holcomb shouted, "Austin! Hannah! Stop having fun!"

"Having *fun*!?" Austin yelled back.

"Come on!"

They went through the window after the two café workers and Holcomb. The room was dark and stank of cigarettes. Magazines on the floor. Wooden painted carvings of saints on the walls. A cigarette in an ashtray still burned. No one in sight. Holcomb and one of the café workers grabbed a high-backed chair and slid it against the window. Sunlight bled through the cracks in the barricade.

"It won't hold for long," Hannah said.

"I know," Holcomb said.

Smut magazines stained with cigarette ash and spilt beer covered the floor. Posters of nude Latino women in various revealing poses were hung on the wall. Austin remembered the first time he had looked at porn. He'd been at his friend Shawn's house. It was sometime in Junior High. "Check this out," Shawn had said, pulling the magazine out from underneath his mattress. A pale woman with flowing red hair with her breasts cupped between her crossed arms and her legs spread open. "She's a natural redhead," Shawn said with a smile. Austin had been mesmerized, having never seen anything so beautiful. In all his fascinations with Hannah he had just put her face on the redhead. It had

always seemed so exotic and forbidden, and he had been in a craze for more pornography for weeks afterwards. Now none of it even registered with him.

One of the café employees—his nametag read MARK—led the way out of the room and down a grimy hallway. Peeling wallpaper revealed webbed green mold. At the end of the hallway there was a kitchen. Before the kitchen were open doors along the hallway opening into bedrooms and a bathroom. He checked each one. Hannah and Austin moved directly behind him, keeping close together. Austin spied a picture frame on the wall, the glass webbed, and he rapped it with his bruised knuckles and withdrew a shard and clutched it gingerly.

Mark checked the last room before the kitchen and paused.

"What is it?" Austin said.

"Oh man," Mark said, stepping aside.

Austin stepped in front of Hannah and looked into the bedroom. A kid lied sprawled on the bed, his throat stuffed with model cement. It had hardened in his throat and he had suffocated to death. Metallica and Slipknot posters were hung around the room.

Mark said, "I've never seen anything like that. How could someone do something like that? They'd have to be crazy."

"Who *isn't* crazy," Holcomb whispered somewhere behind them.

Austin stared at the body. He found it surreal. The chest didn't move, the boy didn't breathe. He hadn't noticed such things until the quiet. And the quiet within the apartment building seemed foreign. For the past two hours, they'd been submerged in screams and gunfire and a maelstrom of death and destruction. Civil warfare. Now it was quiet. The war had been won. The humans were the losers. San Francisco had been completely drowned in its own refuse. The subways, the streets, the sewers were teeming with the infected. Every nook and cranny spotted out. Five million people turned into monsters. San Francisco: a ghost town.

"Do you hear that?" Austin asked, the reality of his thoughts hitting him.

"Hear what?" Mark said.

"Nothing."

"No, what did you hear?"

He looked at him. "No. *That's* what I hear: nothing."

He was right: there were no more explosions, no more gunfire.

They strained to listen. They could hear sporadic gunfire, but only muffled pops. There came no longer the streaming sound of explosions. No longer could they hear the helicopters that had been grazing the city and its suburbs. Now there seemed to be only screams. The gunfire dwindled.

"Is the military being overrun?" Mark said.

"No," Austin said. "The infected can't fly. The helicopters have left."

"They've abandoned the city."

"Yes."

Holcomb grabbed Austin by the shoulder. "How far to the coast?"

"Not far," he said, turning to face him. "Maybe a mile. Probably less."

The janitor looked at Mark. "They can't swim. We need to get to the coast."

"Okay," Mark said. He either believed him or didn't have any other ideas.

Mark led them into the kitchen. The bathroom door was open, revealing stacked beer cans and some empty beer bottles scattered over the dirty tile. Cockroaches skittered at the echoes of their footsteps. A card table served as the dining room table. The bay windows were boarded up.

"Let's rest here," Hannah said, sitting down into one of the chairs. Her eyes were exhausted. She gripped her shoulder. Blood could be seen beneath the bandages. Her stitches had ripped open. "Just for a moment."

"No," Holcomb said. "The coast is just a mile away. Maybe not even that."

"The military's leaving," Mark said. "It doesn't matter when we go to the coast. They won't be there waiting for us." He pointed to Hannah. "We can wait here for a little bit. Just a little bit. And hey," he said, opening the refrigerator. "They have beer."

9:00 AM

"We can't stay here," Holcomb said. "We need to keep going."

Hannah spoke up: "To what avail? When can we stop?"

"When we're safe," he said.

"But we'll never be safe. Can't you see that? I say we stay here and wait it out."

"Wait it out? There *is* no waiting it out. Can't you see *that*?"

Austin jumped in: "These are organisms. Living, breathing organisms. They eat. Do you understand? They eat to do what? To survive. What happens when they get hungry? They eat each other. We've all seen it. Remember at the airport? The infected are driven by a need for survival simply because they *have* to survive. They aren't invincible mortals. How long does it take someone to die of hunger?" He looked around at all of them. "Does anyone know?"

No one spoke.

"They eat for nutrients, right?" he continued. "When they don't get the nutrients, their organic bodies will begin to deteriorate. You have to pierce the brain to kill them. That means the brain is like their new heart, however the hell it works. The brain is an organ comprised of soft tissues. It will begin to deteriorate. And when that happens, they'll die." He looked over at Hannah then straight to Holcomb. "The military is leaving. They're abandoning the city. We'll be entirely on our own. Thought we were alone earlier? This is ten times worse." He pointed to Hannah. "She says we wait it out. I agree. We remain silent. Lay low. Spread out our eating and drinking. Survive. I think—no, I'm sure—that eventually these things, when their supply of living flesh runs out, will turn to eating each other en masse. It'll be a zombie civil war. They'll weed themselves out. Those that survive the longest will run out of food and their brains will deteriorate and they'll die. But *we'll* be alive."

"Shit," Mark said. "That could take weeks. *Months*. We can't survive here. If we were in a grocery store..."

Hannah shot Austin a look.

Holcomb said, "What you're saying sounds good on paper. But this place isn't secure. For God's sake, there's a corpse in the next room."

Austin said, "At least it's staying dead."

Hannah said, "That's a pretty good point."

Austin said, "Yeah, it seemed valid to me."

"But the body will start to rot," Holcomb said. "Decompose. The smell will be awful. But the germs and diseases will kill us. We'll be stuck with it. And even if we get it out of here, we'll be exposing ourselves. And even if we do that successfully, this place still isn't secure."

"How do you know?" Austin said.

A thumping sound came from the next room.

A shadow danced over the wall and a zombie appeared at the end of the hall.

"*That's how,*" Holcomb muttered, grabbing a beer bottle.

The zombie let out a shriek and came towards them. Behind it were several more. Austin raced around the kitchen island, clutching the glass shard from the webbed picture frame tightly in his hands. Hannah leapt onto the kitchen island and rolled over, landing down at his feet. She grabbed a beer bottle and smashed it on the counter. A splinter of glass cut her finger, drawing blood. She grunted and held the broken bottle before her, the edges slashed and jagged. Stale beer dripped over her hand. Mark did the same. Mark grabbed a beer bottle and he and Holcomb joined them behind the counter. The form of them stood reminiscent of the ancient Spartans, shoulder-to-shoulder, their glass weapons held taught and at the ready.

The zombies entered the kitchen and rushed the counter. Holcomb drove his bottle into one of their faces, slashing at the cheek. The creature didn't pause and leapt over the counter, knocking Holcomb down onto the floor. More jumped over the counter, swiping and biting at them. Austin drilled the glass shard into their eyes, piercing the brains. Zombies fell at his feet. Hannah

screamed, a zombie pressing its mouth against her neck. Austin knocked a zombie out of the way grabbed the infected's head by the hair and yanked it back just as its jaws clamped in the air. He pulled its struggling body against him and pierced its eye. It shuddered and went limp, and he released and the body sagged to the floor. Another zombie knocked Hannah out of the way and came at him; Austin slashed with the blade and slit its jugular and blood sprayed everywhere. He jabbed the glass into its eye with such force that the palm of his hand became sliced open. He writhed his hand back and gripped it, dropping the glass, blood seeping between his fingers.

Mark had grabbed a zombie by the hair and drove the bottle into its neck, twisting and pushing. The flesh broke and blood gushed over his hand but the creature kept biting.

"The brain!" Austin yelled, still clutching his hand. "Pierce the brain!"

He drew the bottle out, turned it, and drove it through the temple.

The reanimate shuddered and fell against the counter.

The attack was over. The wooden boards of the kitchen walls quaked, dust falling from loose screws.

"Their on the other side of the wall," Hannah said, panting.

Austin looked at Holcomb, who was pushing a zombie's body off of himself.

"You're right," the boy said. "This place isn't secure."

Bodies littered the kitchen. Six total.

"The window is open," Mark gasped. "They'll realize it soon. They aren't geniuses, but they aren't retards either. They learn. They evolve."

One of the boards over one of the windows splintered. Hands pushed through, weaving back and forth. The boards held. They couldn't get in—not yet.

Austin flexed his hand. The palm burned and stung.

Holcomb sagged against the counter, gripping his wrist.

Mark said, "We need to get upstairs. To the roof. Even though the military's leaving, there are sure to be helicopters. Maybe one could land..."

Austin looked over at Holcomb and stopped listening.

The janitor was shaking his head, muttering under his breath.

Hannah looked at him, too. Fear sparkled in her eyes. A morbid sparkle.

"Mr. Holcomb?" Austin asked, stepping forward.

The janitor looked up, said nothing. He released his hand over his wrist and lifted his arm. Blood covered his hand. A round bite mark embedded in the flesh of his wrist. He spoke with a strange clam, his eyes wild and perplexed. "He was too heavy... I couldn't..."

Austin stared at him, the fear growing in his gut.

The infected smashed apart one of the boards on the windows.

Eyes peered in.

Holcomb breathed deeply. "Just go. Just go."

"Mr. Holcomb..." Hannah said.

"A bite is a death sentence, right?" he said, glaring at her. Now the calmness was gone, replaced by a furious anger. "Dirty sons of bitches..." His voice trailed off. He shook his head and cursed again. "It shouldn't end like this. Fuck. I've done too much. So much. I don't deserve this..." He looked at Mark. "The rooftop, huh? Hitching a ride with a helicopter? Good idea. It might work." He looked around at all of them. "You guys go. I'll hold them off. Yes. I'll give you some time. And then I'll kill myself. I don't want to be like them. God. They're so ugly. So *fucking* ugly."

Mark looked at the boy and girl then to Holcomb. "We can't let you come."

He glared at him. "Are you fucking deaf? I'm staying here. Now leave."

Mark paused, said, "Thank you for helping us out."

Another plank fell off the window. "I won't be much help if you don't start moving."

He nodded and went for the door to the apartment.

Hannah turned and went after him.

Austin bit his lip. "I'm sorry..."

"Why are you still here?" the janitor growled.

Austin nodded and went after the others.

Mark had opened the door and disappeared into the hallway. Austin went after them. Mark tried opening the door to another apartment but it was locked from the inside. Dusty windows high up reflected grim morning light. At the end of the hallway a cryptic stairwell meandered upwards, spiraling five or six stories. He led the way up, followed by Hannah and then Austin. They climbed the stairwell, ignoring their faltering breaths. Down below there were snarls and screams, thrashing about. He could imagine Holcomb with his fists raised, never giving in, fighting them off to the bloody end. And Austin knew he would never see him again. He didn't hear Holcomb's screams. His own determination was his death-cry. The three of them continued to climb the stairwell, hoping and praying they'd find a door leading to the roof.

Infected poured into the stairwell below from the ground floor.

They had heard their running feet and had given chase.

The three refugees could hear them coming, their snarls and shrieks echoing.

"We're almost there," Mark said.

The zombies were much faster. Exhausted, fatigued, worn out: the refugees moved their legs as if they were made of molten lead. They reached the sixth floor. Both doors to the hallway were locked. No doorway to the roof.

"No roof," Austin muttered.

"Not here," Mark said.

The zombies stopped beneath beneath them on the other side of the stairwell, staring up at them, eyes drunk with bloodlust.

The refugees had nothing to protect themselves with.

Blood dripped from the zombies' jaws.

Mark cursed and kicked in the door.

The infected continued the chase.

The refugees poured inside the apartment.

Mark tried to shut the door but a zombie thrust its hands in, then his head, biting and snapping. He swiped at Mark. Austin ran into the adjacent room,

grabbed a lamp, ripped it from the couch-side table, the cord unplugging from the wall. He ran back into the foyer and brought it down upon the infected's head. The lamp shattered, the ceramic pieces falling to the floor. The infected writhed backwards. The door shut. Mark slid the double bolt down. The doorknob lock was broken. He stepped back. The infected continued to assault the door.

Hannah went down the hallway, deeper into the apartment.

A sudden voice: "You kids are crazy!"

She spun around and looked into a room. Her face went pale.

Mark and Austin exchanged looks and went to join her.

A man and his wife, both stark naked, stood in the shower. They were each least fifty years old. The man carried a beer gut that covered less extensive parts of his body. The bathtub was full and the shower was on. Water cascaded down their wrinkled and liver-splotched bodies. A battery-operated generator chugged beside the tub. The man held a pair of clips in his hand. Water droplets sizzled and sparked on the prongs. His wife smiled but her breasts shook with fear.

The zombies continued to assault the door.

The old man said, "You kids are running from fate. The youth of today." He shook his head. "They just can't accept it. They can't accept that shit happens in life. You can't keep running forever. You won't survive. You think you're different because you've gotten so far. But can you hear them at our door? You have nowhere to go! You're stranded! I suggest you come in here with us. Step inside. We'll make room. Fear nothing but fear itself, as that great man once said. I fear nothing except becoming like them. And I won't. So the end is here. I can deal with it. You kids, you can't."

The wife kissed her husband on the cheek.

The man said, "The problem, you see, isn't chemical or biological. It's psychological. People are snapping and losing it because of the weight and pressures of society. You kids are the slave drivers of society. You and your new

shoes and your shopping malls and your nice cars and fancy clothes. Look what it's brought." He jabbed his fat finger at them. "You're to blame. I hope it's painful. I really do. I hope you suffer. Both of us do."

The wife nodded at his words, so calm.

"You brought this on us. We're innocent. I worked fifty years at a sweatshop for *this*? No! You complain about expensive fast food and grocery stores with just 40-proof liquor. Spoiled fucking brats. Suffer. Bleed. Rot. This psychological chaos is *your* doing, and there's no undoing, no rewinding the clock."

His hand relaxed. The prongs dropped into the filled water at their feet. Electricity surged through the water and traveled up their soaked bodies.

They screamed and shrieked, suddenly rigid and bursting.

Their noses spit fire and their ears melted.

Their eyes popped out, dangling from their sockets.

Their flesh bubbled and boiled.

Their bowels released and they shivered in the current.

Sparks shot from the generator and the electrocution stopped.

The bodies slumped forward, fell out of the tub, landed on the tile floor.

Water dribbled from their steaming bodies.

Austin and Hannah stared ashen-faced.

Mark rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Fucking crazies."

At that moment the front door burst open, the double bolt failing. They abandoned the bathroom doorway and ran into the back room, shutting the door. In the room was a television and a fake fireplace and a coffee table with *Reader's Digest*. Mark locked the door. The infected tried to get inside.

"They never stop," Hannah said, standing beside the bed.

"There's nowhere to go," Austin said.

"They'll get in soon," Mark said. "This door, it isn't sturdy. One good hit..."

Austin whirled around, pointed at the fireplace. "We could go up the fireplace."

"It's fake," Hannah said. "Upper floors don't have fireplaces."

"Well shit."

Hannah ran to a window and opened it wide. A warm breeze fluttered inside. Zombies littered the clearing below. The three of them—and Holcomb, too—had stood in that very clearing earlier. Now the buildings all around them crawled with those poisoned by the disease. Infected trudged back and forth through the narrow alleys. Hannah leaned out the window and looked down. Zombies below looked up and spied her and entered the first floor of the building through a shattered window. Hannah looked to the right and saw a bolted rain gutter leading to the roof ten feet above the window's frame.

"Guys!" she shouted. "Will this work?" She reached out, grabbed the gutter and shook it. It seemed steady.

Mark stared at the door as it shifted and bulged. The hinges squeaked.

Austin ran up beside her. "It'd better. Is it rusted?"

"No."

He looked back to see Mark standing like a statue before the door.

"So?" Hannah said.

He looked back at her. "Go first."

She crawled out the window, grabbed the rain gutter, shimmied upwards. The zombies beneath her spattered unintelligible profanities. Austin followed after her. He started climbing, felt dizzy and insecure. He was poised at least sixty feet above the ground. Hannah reached the roof and crawled onto it and then leaned over and took his hand and pulled him up. He rolled onto the roof. Mark began climbing and the zombies burst into the apartment's back room and raced to the window and Mark kicked them away and finally reached the roof.

The zombies leaned out the window and grabbed at the rain gutter.

"They'll climb," Hannah said.

"They almost fucking got me," Mark said, brushing at his legs.

Austin kicked at the rain gutter's bolt. It was rusted, just as Hannah had said it wasn't. The bolts loosened and the rain gutter twisted and fell. One of the zombies with its hands around the gutter let out a cry and fell sixty feet below, splattering on the ground. The zombies on the ground leapt upon her fallen corpse and began to eat.

The rooftop was all but flat and bare. Air conditioning pumps were scattered about. In the middle of the roof was a skylight with broken glass and twisted frames. At the far corner was what looked like some sort of greenhouse, the inside windows speckled with dried blood. They were cast in the shadow of a skyscraper. Buildings all around them were burning and a red smoke lifted off from the streets, wrapping around the buildings in a foreign smog. Austin could make out other figures on distant rooftops, looking tiny as ants, having the same idea. Helicopters continued to fly overhead, all heading north. There was more gunfire now, and several blocks away a Thunderbolt streaked overhead, dropping napalm. The napalm lit up the street and the fire enveloped the infected, torching them to burnt crisps. Car wheels melted and the frames burnt to a fine polish. Building windows burst apart and the fire ate away at the superstructures and foundations.

A Blackhawk came towards them.

Austin leapt up and down, waving his hands. Hannah and Mark followed suit.

The helicopter flew so close that their clothes and hair were ripped back and forth.

The soldiers stationed at the miniguns just looked at them with pity.

The helicopter flew on, flying between two skyscrapers.

Hannah wailed, "Where are they going?! Didn't they see us?"

"They saw us," Mark mumbled.

And Austin knew it to be true: the three of them just weren't worth it.

They moved to the other end of the roof. The greenhouse with speckled blood wasn't a greenhouse at all but some sort of pigeon roost. The door was shut and the pigeons flew into the glass, mayhem ensuing. They darted back and forth amidst the potted plants and hanging bird feeders. Several on the ground writhed about and were being pecked apart by their fellow birds.

Austin stared at them, felt a sickening twist in his gut.

Mark voiced his fear: "They're just like us."

"Not us," Austin said. "The infected."

Hannah said, "I thought it didn't infect animals?"

"These birds look infected," Mark said. "I've never seen birds act like this."

"But it only affects humans," Hannah said.

"Apparently not," Austin said, shooting her a daring look.

They heard shrieks and shouts behind them.

They spun around to see a zombie pulling itself onto the roof.

Mark ran forward to deal with the zombie and Austin went around the roost with the maniacal pigeons and looked out and saw the bay. "We're still so close. So fucking close." He looked over at Hannah. "They won't get into the water."

"If they're desperate they might," she said.

"No. Swimming isn't instinctive. Not for humans. It's learned."

"Walking is instinctive. They do that pretty well."

"Even toddlers need to be taught," he said. "Right?"

Mark had kicked the zombie off the roof and ran back to them. "There's more."

"More coming up?"

"Yeah. They're climbing over one another. Like army ants."

Hannah said, "That's not instinctive. That's learned."

"It's instinctive for army ants."

"Not for humans."

"We're stuck on this fucking roof," Mark said. "Shit."

Austin looked to the edge of the roof and instantly thought of jumping. He wondered what was wrong with him. He wouldn't commit suicide. He refused to.

"We're on a fucking rooftop with nowhere to go," Mark said. "Fucking trapped." He spun around, gripping at his hair. "Holy fuck. It can't end like this."

Austin's throat tightened with the realization: "It is."

From the rooftop Austin watched the smoke curling up into the sparkling morning sky. The sky, clear and blue, hung above a world drenched in blood and bullets. The sun continued to rise over the mountain and its orange glow illuminated the wrecked shells of suburban San Francisco. Fire stretched up the sides of a nearby skyscraper, the flames licking upwards; a mouth, a cave, teeth dancing in embers and sparks.

Hannah stared dumbly forward. "We've come so far..."

It didn't feel right—coming so far, journeying through such peril, only to be brought down, wrenched to their knees, upon a rooftop in some god-forsaken state Austin had never even been to before, completely cut-off and alone, in a world that could be borne only from the mind of a seriously twisted and perverted man. It was just so... *wrong*. They had survived this far; and as much as Austin knew it not to be the case, he had thought of himself as special. Special because he had survived so well. Clearcreek was a deathtrap. He'd escaped. Missouri harbored the jaws of death. He'd escaped there, too. And now they were in San Francisco, and salvation—the waters of the bay, the green and cold waters littered with boats—was only about a quarter mile away. A quarter mile teeming with the denizens of death and bloodlust. Austin looked down and stared at his feet.

Mark went over to the shattered skylight and looked down. In the room below, infected were gathered together, jumping and clawing at the smooth walls, trying to get onto the roof. He backed away and walked over to the others and told them the news. They said nothing.

Mark watched the ripe smoke and ash from the burning skyscraper. "This is it."

"This is it," Hannah repeated.

"They're going to get up here sooner or later."

"Yeah," Austin said under his breath. "This isn't right. It's not supposed to end this way."

"I don't think we have much of a choice," Mark said.

"Who says we can't choose our own destiny?"

"Fate. That's who."

"I deny fate. I hate it. I don't believe in fate."

Hannah said, "Then you believe in luck. That's worse. And whether it's fate or luck—fate has positioned us on this rooftop, or our luck's just run out."

A Huey gunship roared overhead, bringing acrid smoke over the rooftop. The smoke swirled around them and filled their lungs like bitter gall. As it lifted, Austin said, "No. No, I refuse. No. This isn't happening." He walked over to the ledge and looked down, the first inklings of madness beginning to set in. "Sixty-five feet. It's a long drop."

Mark, right behind him, said, "Don't. There's no honor in it."

"Honor?" he spat, spinning around. "Where's your precious 'honor' now? What do I have to be honorable for? Killing my two best friends? Allowing my sister to be executed? Killing my own father and watching my mom shoot herself in our basement? Tell me, what do I have that makes me honorable?"

Hannah answered: "You didn't abandon me. You didn't abandon Les. You didn't abandon Ashlie."

"Where are they now, Hannah? They're *dead*."

"They were taken from you. You didn't abandon them."

"I abandoned Ashlie."

"For me, Austin. *For me*. You haven't been in it for your own skin since the beginning. It's always been for *us*. That's how it's always been."

Mark said, "Maybe that's why you're still alive?"

He shot him a glare. "What?"

"You're being unselfish. Maybe God has let you survive this far for that reason."

"So He's been *saving* me? And letting my friends and family die? Great."

Hannah said, "Austin..."

"I'm tired," he said, cutting her off. "I'm fucking sick of running, of being scared, of not being able to eat or sleep. I'm tired of this. I just want to wake up and realize it's all just been some bad dream. That's all I want. I want this to be a dream so I can walk up to you tomorrow morning at school and tell you how much I love you. How I've loved you since I saw you the first time you walked in those doors at church. How I've loved you even deeper since you kissed me at the party. How I've loved you and *wanted* you. And you know what? I abandoned Ashlie because I would've rather had you than her. I abandoned my sister in the hope that I could find a good fuck, in the hope that I could hold you in my arms, in the hope that I could pretend that you love me like I love you. I wish it were a dream so I could just take you and kiss you and just suspend that moments forever, and then not have to worry about what you think because you don't really hear me, because you're dreaming about some boy you took to the movies. I wish it were a dream so that I could have just a *sliver* of paradise, just a glimpse of what Heaven tastes like, as I taste you. I want to wake up and not worry. But this *isn't* a dream, Hannah. People are dying. My best friends are gone. My family is gone. And I can't have you. I can't tell you how much I love you because reality doesn't work that way, and really, what would it matter? We're all going to be dead in ten minutes anyways, right?"

Hannah just stared at him.

Mark didn't move, didn't know what to do.

The skyscraper behind them continued to burn.

She looked away from him.

He turned and walked along the roof's edge and then sat down and dangled his legs. Far below were wrecked cars and blood on the sidewalk. The

infected moved farther down the street, drawn to a bookstore, crowding at the windows. Refugees inside.

He really thought about jumping. Not to die, but to live. To awake from the dream. To fall and fall and then to wake up, to rise in his bed and it be Friday morning. To go to school, to go through that boring, drama-less existence. That was paradise. He wanted to have it again. He'd never appreciated it. He felt cheated, and the thought of jumping—a beautiful thought.

Hannah was then behind him. She didn't say anything.

Austin felt her eyes digging into his neck.

She took a breath, opened her mouth to speak.

And then Mark began shouting.

Austin got up and he and Hannah joined Mark at the other end of the roof. Ten feet below the roof's edge was a rusted balcony with a catwalk jutting out to the adjacent building thirty feet away. The building was red brick and the windows were closed and unbroken and beneath the catwalk was a strip of parking lot with an overhang. The roof of the opposite building was rounded with octagonal spikes jutting out in random increments.

"It's a theater," Mark said. "We can get inside."

The cat-walk was free of zombies.

Austin glanced at Hannah. She bit her lip.

Mark looked at them. "So?"

Austin looked back to see twin zombies crawling onto the farther edge of the roof.

"Must make decision quickly," Mark said.

"Really?" Austin asked, and he pushed Mark to the side, swung his legs over the roof, dangled by his hands, and then released.

10:00 AM

He landed on the catwalk. It shuddered underneath him. He got to his feet and looked up to see Hannah dangling. She fell and he picked her up and then Mark joined them. They crossed the catwalk. Pigeon droppings covered the metal railings. They heard the snarling behind them. They crossed the catwalk and reached the other side next to a locked door with a window five feet above. The zombies appeared at the edge of the opposite building, and in a blind rush they leapt down onto the catwalk and raced after them. Austin pushed Hannah to the side and stood before her, bracing himself—it had been a foolish idea, simply lengthening their survival by mere seconds. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth and then he heard the shrieking of metal and the grinding and popping of rusted bolts. He opened his eyes to see the catwalk collapsing. The zombies spiraled into the air as the catwalk ripped from its opposite moorings and fell vertical. Austin went to the edge and looked down at the dangling catwalk. Three or four zombies had remained, clutching to the railing, and they climbed upwards, reaching for them. Mark began kicking at the rusted bolts and Austin did likewise and then the catwalk snapped and fell. He watched it crash down into the theater's overhang amidst a wash of dust and debris. The overhang collapsed and the bodies of the zombies lied sprawled. Infected from the next street poured down into the narrow lot and fell upon the dead.

"That was fucking close," Mark said.

"And now we're equally stranded," Austin said.

"We can get to the window," Mark said. "Hannah: come here."

He lifted Hannah onto his shoulders and stood. Austin hadn't realized how strong Mark was. Muscles rippled underneath his black work shirt. Hannah fiddled with the window and opened it and crawled inside. She disappeared for several minutes. Austin's heart began to hammer. Then she returned at the window and let down a knotted rope. Austin climbed up and joined her. The

room was dark and stank of mildew and there were crates along the walls. Several odd-looking constructions that he realized were theater props. Mark came inside and shut the window and rolled up the rope.

"So now what?" he said, the rolled-up rope in his hands.

"The bay," Austin said. "It's only a quarter mile away. We can make it."

Hannah groped at her arm. "It's starting to hurt again."

"You pulled the stitches?"

"I pulled the stitches a long time ago."

"You're bleeding?"

"The stitches were pulled, Austin. So, yes, I'm bleeding."

"All right. No matter. We'll fix it up as soon as we get off the mainland."

They left the room and quietly went down a hallway and through a door and they stepped out onto another catwalk with heavy curtains on either side. They went farther down the catwalk and the curtains disappeared and they were surrounded by trusses and hoists and cabled wires with their clamps. Directly beneath the catwalk was the center stage, and beyond it to their left the orchestra seating rose up and a balcony with more seats jutted out over the floor seats. They stopped and heard a piano. Austin looked towards the sound and in the masking shadows—the only light coming from arched windows running halfway up the steep walls to the edge of the ceiling—he saw a piano and behind the piano a man playing. Even in the darkness he could see the old man's hairy hands dancing over the keys, and blood ran down his fingers and spoiled upon the keys. The music put him in a trance, its soft melodies bringing some sort of calm. He looked over at Mark and Hannah, who were listening, too, and he saw the strain in their faces and the stress in their eyes slightly alleviate.

"What's he playing?" Hannah whispered.

Austin didn't know.

"Requiem in D Minor," Mark said quietly. "It's Mozart."

The man continued to play. And that's when Austin saw the others.

Standing amidst the strewn seats and music stands and instruments in the orchestra box were dozens of zombies. They stood together, shoulder-to-shoulder. Men, women, and children. Bloodied and beaten and drooling. And their eyes were closed. They seemed to sway in rhythm with the music. Moving together like a flock of birds. Austin wondered why they had frozen and were not attacking the pianist. He then remembered a lecture in his psychology class. The professor had said something about music affecting the brain in such a way that it literally affected the brain's functioning. This accounted for not only the popularity of music but the moods one experienced when listening to music. Different kinds of music affected the brain by creating different moods. Anger, jealousy, sadness, contentment, peace, elation—all moods created and sustained or destroyed by music. Austin watched the zombies, creatures living fully from their brains, and realized the music was *manipulating* them. He looked back to the pianist. The music was becoming faster. His hands sped over the keys. Austin wondered if he was purposefully manipulating the zombies; and then he figured quite simply that the man was simply playing his last symphony and to his last crowd: the bloodthirsty creatures and the three refugees whom he did not know were there.

The music became faster and faster and then more erratic. Austin knew what was happening: the pianist was transforming. The erratic music spilled into their ears and into the zombies' ears as well, and their eyes popped open as the trance was broken. They blinked and looked at one another, as if they didn't know what had happened. The pianist's music went from erratic to violent, and then he looked up and around from the keyboard, straight at Austin, Hannah, and Mark. His face had swollen purple and the skin had pulled tightly against his wizened and chiseled bones. He looked at them with foreign, inhuman eyes and let out a nauseating shriek: and then he leapt up from the keys and pointed—*pointed*—at them. The other zombies followed his gesture and saw

them upon the catwalk. They instantly bolted forward, stumbling over the fallen chairs and music stands, and they scurried onto center stage.

"Oh shit," Mark said.

The zombies converged beneath them.

"They can't get up here," Mark said.

Austin remembered the rooftop. How they had climbed up like army ants.

"I don't know," he said. "They might be able to."

One of the zombies grabbed a vertical truss and began climbing.

"Never mind," Mark said.

They abandoned the catwalk, entered a dark hallway, went down a flight of steps.

The staircase descended downwards. Along the walls were pictures but in the dark their depictions could not be seen. They reached the bottom floor and heard thundering footsteps above: the zombies had succeeded in climbing up the trusses and had now entered the stairwell. Mark pushed open the next door and they ran into the auditorium. Morning sunlight filtered down from the vaulted windows. They ran down the aisles without looking, and zombies converged upon them from every direction, weaving between the seats and leaping over them in their haste. The three of them reached one of the aisles leading down to the stage and they turned right and ran towards the lobby doors. Zombies raced after them from either direction. Mark threw open the door, bashing in the face a zombie on the other side. The zombie lied sprawled and clawing at its broken nose as they rushed past.

At the far end of the plush lobby floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the street. A car accident smoking. Zombies milling about everywhere. They looked through the windows and saw the uninfected, and en masse they stormed the glass windows. The windows shattered under their weight and the first onslaught fell onto the floor and the others mercilessly clambered over them,

crushing several underfoot. Mark cursed and spun around and dove for an elevator with an open door.

Without thinking they crowded inside. Mark opened a box on the wall and peeled back a cover resplendent with buttons that would glow when the power was on—his hands shaking and fingers trembling—and Austin and Hannah watched as the zombies surged after them. They were trapped and dozens upon dozens of the infected would soon be upon them.

Austin thought, *A fucking elevator? We're going to die in a god-forsaken fucking elevator?* and then suddenly the doors began to creak shut. Mark was operating some sort of lever behind the peeled-back panel. The doors were almost closed as the zombies reached inside, swiping their hands. Mark continued cranking and the doors kept shutting and the zombies' hands and arms got stuck. The doors shut and their bones snapped and the dismembered parts fell at Austin's feet.

They could hear the zombies pounding on the other side of the door.

Hannah fell against the back elevator wall, face flushing with color.

She'd forgotten to breathe. But then again, who hadn't?

"It's an old building," Mark said. "Lots of old buildings used cranks to close the door. They'd have people in the elevators who would greet the riders and crank the door shut and then the elevator would descend. When the buildings are renovated, they're made electrical, but it's too much work to disassemble the old manual components, so they just work over them. Make it electric and stuff."

Austin eyed him.

"I used to work on elevators," he said. "And San Francisco has lots of old ones."

"So we can crank the elevator down, then?" Austin said.

They'd be in the basement. He wasn't sure if he liked that idea.

"No," Mark said. "They didn't disassemble the old parts, but when they renovated it, they overrode some of their functions. Now everything is run on

electricity. And there's no power. I can close the doors, but I can't make the elevator move."

"So we're stuck here."

"Better than being out there."

Austin couldn't argue against that logic.

Hannah sat down on the floor. She began undoing the bandages on her arm.

"Stop," Austin said.

"I want to see how bad it is."

"You can wait. If you unwrap it, it'll just bleed more. Are you feeling faint?"

"A little bit."

He bit his lip.

"I'm tired. And I'm hungry. And exhausted. And physically worn out. Of course I'm feeling faint."

Mark stood on his tiptoes and fidgeted with a panel above the elevator. He maneuvered it in such a way that it fell at their feet. "Give me a lift," he said. Austin abandoned Hannah in the corner and holstered Mark up through the hole. Mark grabbed at one of the metal suspensions outside and pulled himself out. He disappeared and they could hear him walking above. He knelt down and peered inside. "Okay. We can climb down."

Austin looked over at Hannah, thought of her arm. Wondered if she'd be able to do it. No matter what she said, she'd lost a lot of blood. And would continue to lose blood. She had never been strong—like most girls her age—and now her arm would be weaker. But what choice did they have?

"Okay," he said. He said to Hannah: "Can you stand?"

"Yes, I can stand," she said, obviously irritated. She stood.

"I'll lift you up."

They gathered on the top of the elevator.

"So we're climbing up? Or climbing down?"

"It'd be easier to climb down." He pointed at Hannah's arm.

Austin nodded. "Okay. So we're going to the basement?"

"Yeah."

"And then we're going to take the stairs back up to the street?"

"That wouldn't make much sense. They're everywhere."

"Which is why I'm asking."

"We can probably find a route to the subway."

"It'll be dark. Maybe infested with them."

"Maybe," Mark said. "But show me to a place that isn't."

Above them they heard shrieking. They looked up and saw in dim light coming through an open door leading into the elevator shaft several zombies looking down at them. Their bodies were silhouetted against the light. One of them leapt out and fell, swiping at them. It fell past the elevator and disappeared below. A moment later they heard a crash. Another jumped after them, and as it fell past, its arms hit the edge of the elevator and the bones snapped. It moaned all the way to its death. A third came through. Austin and Hannah leapt out of the way and it hit the top of the elevator, crashing through the tiles. It lied sprawled out on the elevator floor with blood seeping from where bones had protruded from its flesh.

"We should go now," Mark said.

"Okay," Hannah said, staring at the broken body.

The corpse's eyes remained open.

They descended along the elevator's metal rigging. Hannah groaned several times but eventually they reached the bottom, stepping into pooled blood. The bodies of the two fallen zombies were lying entangled and bloodied. There was a closed door and Mark leaned against it and listened. He shrugged and stepped back and there came a whooshing sound and they turned to see

another zombie landing on the others. It raised its head from its broken body and looked at them. It snapped its jaws but was unable to move forward. They ignored it. Mark found the panel on the side of the wall and cranked open the door. The stench of mildew hit them and they heard dripping water. They left the elevator shaft and walked through the darkness, feeling along their way. Eventually their eyes slightly adjusted and they could make out vague shapes. Boxes and crates stacked everywhere. Theater props thrown haphazardly about. A door off to the side. Mark opened this one, too, and they stepped out into a dark channel. The subway.

They walked quietly along the subway's rails. The rails no longer held electricity. The only sound was that of their feet falling. Austin found it haunting: in the subway of one of America's largest cities, and they were alone and met only with the sounds of their footsteps, heartbeats, and stagnant breaths. Down the tunnel they came across a subway car. They went around it. The windows were broken. A body lied slumped behind the controls, the window sprayed with dried and crusted blood. They went on.

They started hearing popping noises. Gunfire. They looked at one another and kept going. Dim light ahead. More shooting. The shots were single and sporadic. A gunshot here. A few moments would pass. A gunshot there. Then the gunshots ended completely. The light grew stronger—though quite dim, it seemed vibrantly bright—and they reached a station. Light flooded down the stairs leading up to the street. A steel gate had been dropped down, and zombies crowded the gate. They saw the newcomers and began hissing and growling. Strewn about the station amidst the benches and brick pillars were maybe fifteen or twenty individuals, all shot through the head. They lied in quiet and serene positions, their heads lying in pillows of blood.

"Mass suicide," Hannah said under her breath.

Austin got up onto the station and moved among the bodies.

"What're you doing?" Hannah asked, still standing with Mark in the tunnel.

He didn't answer. He found a map and looked at it.

"Austin?"

He traced his finger over the map. "Fuck."

She climbed up and joined him. "What?"

"We're heading the opposite direction of the bay. We're heading straight downtown."

"Oh."

"Now the bay is like a mile away. And the ocean another mile."

"So we turn around?"

"I'm looking... Here." He jabbed his finger at the map. "It looks like at the next station there's a junction. I didn't know subways have junctions. But if we go left—west—we can move towards the ocean."

"Okay. Let's do that."

They meandered around the bodies, descended back into the tunnel, and went on.

The next station was abandoned except for a subway train. They had to climb onto the station to move around the train and then they got back into the tunnel and headed towards the ocean.

"Can you smell it?" Austin said.

"Smell what?" Hannah said.

"The salt in the air. The ocean."

"I can fucking *taste* it," Mark said.

They continued on. The darkness grew deeper. Hannah kept rubbing her shoulder. Austin tried to help her by supporting her but she pulled away. He cursed himself for his senseless words on the rooftop. But then he consoled himself: *It really doesn't matter*. Farther downwards they spied red eyes staring at them. Mark stopped, Hannah and Austin behind him. He leaned forward,

hunched over, squinting. The eyes seemed to dance. He looked down and saw two red dots on his work-shirt. "Oh fuck."

The twin gunshots rang out and he was thrown back, sprawling onto the rails.

Hannah screamed and Austin grabbed her and pulled her down.

Mark lied on his back, coughing and cursing. He scraped a hand over his shirt and lifted it up. In the dark he couldn't see it, but he could feel the warm blood on his hands. "Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck..."

Austin shouted, "*We're not infected! We're not fucking infected!*"

Footsteps came towards them. Running. The twin eyes danced erratically.

He crawled over next to Mark. "Where are you hit?"

"My stomach... My chest..." He coughed, blood tinting his lips.

Austin could see the blood—a dark black mass—spreading over Mark's shirt.

"Is it bad?" Mark asked, beginning to shake.

"Yeah," Austin said. He wasn't going to lie.

The shooters came up to them. Soldiers dressed in camouflage garb and wearing night vision goggles. They stood silently. Hannah scurried away from them and huddled in the darkness. Austin just looked down at Mark. He said nothing and Mark said nothing and then Mark spit blood and closed his eyes and died.

Austin stood and turned and faced the soldiers. "So now what?"

The soldiers just looked at them.

"You're going to shoot us? Like you've shot everyone else?"

The soldiers looked at one another.

"I'm sorry," one of them said, and they turned to go.

Hannah leapt up. "You can't fucking leave us here!"

The soldiers continued walking away.

Hannah ran past Austin and past the soldiers and spun in front of them.

"Please."

"I'm sorry," the soldier said. "We don't have room."

The other soldier looked at her. "Shit."

The soldier looked at his partner. "We don't have room."

"We can make room." He turned and looked at the boy. "They're fucking kids."

"We don't have room," the other soldier said again.

"We'll make room. They're kids for Christ's sakes."

"Listen..."

"You had kids, didn't you?"

The other soldier glared at him through the night vision goggles.

"Just because yours died," the soldier said, "doesn't mean—"

The soldier lashed out with his assault rifle, cutting into the other one's gut.

The one hit slumped down onto the rails, choking and gasping, gun at his side.

The standing soldier looked between Hannah and Austin.

"You *asshole*," the hit soldier said, standing.

"Check them to see if they're bitten," he said.

The soldier now standing seemed surprised, but said to the kids, "Strip down."

This time they didn't need to be told twice. They stripped down and he inspected them and they got dressed again.

"I'm not making any promises," the one in charge said. "But you can at least come to the headquarters. And we'll take a look at that arm. It's going to get infected."

Now the word 'infected' had different connotations.

11:00 AM

The soldiers led them down the subway tunnel to an elevated station. They climbed onto the station and went through an adjacent door and a corridor led for what seemed like miles to another door. One of the soldiers knocked on the door and a soldier opened it and they went through. Beyond the door was a stairwell leading up into a factory basement. All sorts of odd equipment was scattered about and soldiers moved frantically. The soldier who had searched them called for the medic, and the medic took Hannah away and sutured her wound. Austin walked around, ignored by the soldiers, and then he found Hannah coming towards him, fresh bandages over her freshly-knitted arm. They sat down against a machine and dust clung to their pants and they watched the soldiers moving about.

They sat there quietly for several minutes and then Hannah spoke.

"Did you mean it?"

He looked over at her. "What?"

"What you said on the roof."

"Oh. I was upset."

"But did you *mean* it?"

Her eyes staring at him were filled with intent and... something else. He couldn't quite place it as he wrestled for an answer. If he told her he meant it, all vulnerability returned. If he told her he didn't mean it, then any chances of her reciprocating his feelings were drowned. And either way was the possibility of being fucked. And then he smiled—and she seemed surprised at his smile—because he thought it funny that even now his heart was concerned with the issue of romantic acceptance and rejection. Perhaps romance—or, more specifically, the quest for love—was a human drive that survived throughout

the sweetest and most bitter of life's moments. And he decided to tell her he meant it, he had meant every damn word.

"Hannah..."

A soldier interrupted him, standing over them. "Come on. Get up."

She looked up at him. "Where are we going?"

He told her, "We're getting the fuck out of here. The military's been abandoning the city, and we're one of the last holdouts to be evacuated. The city's been lost, and the infected, they're swarming it from the suburbs. The high-ups are expecting millions of infected to be in the city within the next hour. So everyone's being evacuated—we can't stand up to that. The city's going to be shelled from the ships offshore. They're going to level the fucking place, take out as many of the motherfuckers as they can, because there are still cities maybe thirty to forty miles to the north and south that haven't fallen yet, and they don't want these fuckers converging on those cities, too." He told them they would be heading to the ocean and boarding a police-boat. He told them that all unauthorized boats were being destroyed—"People just took out to sea when they heard the infected couldn't swim. But lots of them were bitten. There's hundreds if not thousands of boats offshore heading in every direction—and they could spread the disease if we don't stop it."

Hannah asked about the survivors in the boats who were not bitten.

"It's a military quarantine," the soldier said. "It's smart. But it's not nice."

They were taken to the factory's old loading dock garage. Instead of trucks there were Humvees parked with soldiers on the mounted .50 caliber machineguns. There were two canvas-topped trucks where soldiers sat squat with their guns at the ready. They were sweating and nervous, the guns quivering in their hands. Mark, Hannah, and Austin were taken to one of the canvas-topped trucks and they pulled themselves inside. They were pushed to the back and sat down on a hard bench. The tension and terror was palpable. Austin began to sweat. There was lots of shouting and then everyone loaded up

and the garage doors began to creak open. Austin's muscles were held taught and rigid. Out the back of the truck he could only see the back of the garage, but sunlight filtered inside, scattered with shadows. And then came the sound of gunfire and the shadows were thrown about. The engines revved up and the vehicles began pulling out onto the street. The truck moved forward, the heavy wheels thudding over the fallen bodies of slain zombies, and behind them two Humvees followed and they left the old factory behind and were driving down the street with decrepit and run-down factories on either side. And zombies were everywhere.

The Humvees behind them fired at the closest zombies. The .50 caliber bodies tore basketball-sized holes in their bodies and sheared off entire limbs. Hannah looked down and stared at her feet. The soldiers in the back fired occasionally, but only when zombies got close to the truck. Saving their ammunition. The rundown city district was left behind and soon they were downtown, skyscrapers rising all around them. The vehicles weaved between parked cars and crashes and took shortcuts when the roads were clogged. As the convoy turned down an intersecting road, Austin saw the glass lobby of a skyscraper with the windows shattered and sporadic fires smoking inside amidst trampled bodies. Zombies moved back and forth in the smoke, barely visible, huddled in groups or moving alone. The soldier on the Humvee behind them fired into the lobby and their bodies were thrown about like ragdolls in a hurricane.

Hannah gripped Austin's arm. He looked over at her. She asked, "Did you mean all that stuff you said back on the rooftop?"

He stared at her in disbelief. *Did she really want to talk about this NOW?*

"Did you mean it?" she asked again.

"Would it change anything?" he said.

"You mean whether we live or die? No."

"That's now what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"You know what I meant."

"But did you mean what you said?"

The truck grinded to a halt. The Humvee behind them slammed its brakes and slowed but hit the back of the truck. Everyone inside was thrown about, shouting and cursing. The driver in the Humvee waved apologies. The gunner atop the Humvee continued firing.

Mark helped Hannah up. "Did you hurt your arm?"

She looked away from him, to Austin, and said, "No. My arm's fine."

Mark grabbed one of the soldiers by the shoulder. "How far are we from the ocean?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Can you guess?"

"Maybe a mile to the docks?"

"Why did we stop?"

"Again, *how the hell should I know?* I'm not the one fucking driving." And then: "If I *were* driving, we'd still be moving."

Infected began climbing over the rear Humvee's hood, which meant they could easily leap inside the truck. Austin, Hannah, and Mark pressed their backs against the back of the truck. The soldiers fired their M16s into the scrambling zombies and they were thrown about. An infected leapt inside and a soldier batted it in the face with the butt of his gun and shot it point-blank in the face; the zombie fell back onto the Humvee's hood and the truck began to move again. The Humvee followed after them. Dead zombies littered where they had stopped like hedgerows.

The convoy went around an oil tanker that had overturned and exploded. Austin figured that had been the holdup. They drove around the corner of a skyscraper and the guns continued firing and then Austin saw bodies carpeting the marble steps of a Pacific banking union. The convoy stopped again. Two

soldiers jumped out and disappeared and then returned with an elderly couple. They'd been locked inside their car and had somehow survived being killed. The elderly couple sat down at the back with the others and the convoy started moving again. A soldier shouted: "The ocean!" The truck turned and between two squat buildings Austin saw a pristine beach with broken umbrellas and strewn lawn-chairs and beyond it the green Pacific littered with hundreds of boats. And then it was gone.

There came the sound of an explosion and twisting metal. The convoy lurched to a halt. A car had been speeding from the beach from a branching road, the driver going fast enough to smash through any obstacles and zombies in her path. The front Humvees of the convoy had crossed the intersecting road and the driver slammed on her brakes but the car didn't stop. It fishtailed and flipped and rolled and crashed into one of the Humvees. The car had exploded and the Humvee had been flipped onto its side, quickly engulfed by flames. The gunner's left arm was broken and he was screaming—trapped inside the vehicle—and he was burning alive. The ammunition magazines within the Humvee began to pop and his legs were peppered with bullets. The intense heat ignited the fuel lines inside the Humvee and they lid up. The hood was thrown off and fire snaked outwards. Two of the soldiers were able to get out and were running to the next Humvee when a secondary explosion tore into them. The one closest to the explosion was torn apart, and the other fell onto his back with shrapnel embedded in his spine. His eyes were lifeless and his fingers twitched on the pavement as if he were playing piano.

Zombies converged on the back of their truck. The soldiers fired into them relentlessly but they kept coming. Unbeknownst to them, amidst the secondary explosion, shrapnel had shot through the truck's windshield and killed the driver and wounded the soldier in the passenger seat. The truck wouldn't be going anywhere. They were stuck.

Mark took the knife off the belt of one of the preoccupied soldiers and stood on the bench and cut away at the fabric. "I'm not dying in this fucking truck," he said. He cut a hole and lifted himself through. Hannah followed and then Austin turned to help the elderly but three infected were already inside the truck, throwing soldiers back and forth. Blood sprayed the canvas as they bit into their necks. Austin cursed and climbed upwards and Hannah grabbed his hand and pulled him up. They stood on the top of the cab and zombies surrounded them. The Humvee in front of them continued to fire and the crash beyond burned and smoke drifted over the street, growing thicker, like a sultry morning fog.

"We can't just fucking stay here," Mark said.

"We'll make a run for it," Austin said. Hard to believe it'd come to that. "I saw the beach over that way." He pointed to the squat buildings. Two clothing stores and a surf shop. "Right beyond them is the beach."

"Then let's fucking do it," Mark said. "If we reach the ocean..."

"We'll be all right."

But he remembered the soldier's words: everyone was being shot.

But they didn't have a choice.

An Apache helicopter streaked overhead, went around one of the skyscrapers, and circled back. And then there were twin flashes of light and bullets began to tear up the street leading up to the wrecked cars.

"You've got to be fucking *shitting* me," Mark growled.

"Jump!" Austin shrieked. "*Jump!*"

They leapt off of the truck and scrambled over the pavement.

Smoke swirled around them and they couldn't see.

A wrecked car emerged from the smoke. A headless driver still gripped the wheel.

He looked back to see Hannah behind him, and Mark beyond her.

The Apache's gunfire tore into the convoy, the bullets tearing through the metal vehicles. Those in the back of the truck were torn apart—infected and uninfected alike—and then the bullets rippled through the engine and hit the fuel tanks and the truck exploded. The blast sent the smoke twirling away, and the street was suddenly illuminated, and Austin saw Mark engulfed in flames and Hannah was thrown to the ground and he was picked up and thrown and the world spun and then he knew nothing and his world was darker than silence.

12:00 PM

She sits in the front of the car and he sits in the back. She is counting change or something. He really can't tell. Her hair is so beautiful. The seat falls backwards and her hair falls into his lap. She looks up at him with those beautiful eyes and starts laughing. He runs his hands through her silky hair and laughs, too.

She looks up at him and bites her lip. "You love me, Austin?"

"Yes. I love you."

"Do you really love me?"

"I really do."

"Then kiss me, Austin. Kiss me. Don't be afraid. What is there to be afraid of?"

"Will you like it?"

"I'm asking you to kiss me, Austin. If you loved me, you'd kiss me."

"You know I love you."

"Then stop being a pussy and kiss me."

He grins and leans down towards her lips.

The dream crumbled to pieces and his eyes opened and he felt dizzy. He coughed, gasping in pain—it felt like iron spikes were being driven into the back of his head. The world around him swam and he closed his eyes, felt as if he were in a fog. His back felt cold. He was lying down. A dull light covered his face, and he opened his eyes again. An open window let in sunlight. There was movement behind him and something cold and wet splashed on his forehead. Frigid water dribbled down his face. He sighed, the water cooling him like rain on an overheated engine.

Hannah sat down beside him.

He stared at the plaster ceiling and then looked around. The room was small and stocked with boxes. There were scattered clothes, a rusted sink, some surfboards stacked against one wall. At the top of each wall was a small

window. He heard the sound of cackling flames, the wind against the building, and silence.

She watched him as he lied there, saying nothing.

He closed his eyes again and felt energy returning him like a trickle of water in a fire hydrant beginning to gush. Muscles awoke and the pain slackened. He propped himself up on his elbows. The pain in his head seemed to wear off.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"Thirty minutes," she said. "Or forty. Something. I didn't know if you'd come back."

"I fell asleep?"

"You blacked out. After the explosion."

"What explosion?" He couldn't remember it now.

"All the trucks."

He had no recollection. He tried to get up but it hurt too much so he lied back down.

"Does it hurt?" she said.

"Slightly."

"You were knocked around pretty badly."

He looked at the walls. "Where are we?"

"Some surf-shop. And a clothing shop. A joint store. In a storage room. It's small, there's water, and they don't know we're in here. The door's locked, too."

"They don't know?"

"The smoke from the explosion covered everything. Even us. I dusted you off when we got back. But the smoke, it veiled our movements."

"Why is your sleeve bloody?" A fear: she'd been bitten.

She bit her lip. "The owner was in here. I got rid of him."

"What happened to the convoy?"

"It's still out there. But it's not a convoy anymore."

"How close are we to the ocean?"

She smiled weakly. "About twenty meters. The shop is on the beach."

"There aren't any boats, are there?"

She fidgeted. "Actually, there's one. There's a dock outside. At the end, there's a rowboat, tied up."

He was back on his elbows. "Can we get to it?"

"There's a few of them on the beach. I watched from one of the windows."

He closed his eyes again, wanted to return to the dreams.

Hannah stood and climbed onto the rusted sink and looked out the window.

Austin lied back down and closed his eyes.

Her voice woke him from the first inklings of sleep: "You never answered my question."

He looked at her. "What? I'm sorry."

"I asked if you meant what you said about me."

"Oh."

"Do you remember?"

"I can't remember the trucks very well." He had only fleeting images.

"Do you remember the apartment building roof?"

That was clear. "Yes."

"Do you remember what you said, about it all being a dream?"

Had he really said all that? "Yeah."

"Well. Did you mean it?"

He licked dried and chapped lips. "I meant it... at the time."

"At the time? What does 'at the time' mean?"

"It means I meant it at that time."

"What about now? Do you mean it now?"

"I didn't say it now."

"If you did, would you mean it?"

"I don't know."

"It's Yes or No. One or the other. What is it?"

"My head hurts, Hannah. I just want to sleep."

"Don't sleep. Answer my question. Yes or No."

"Why do you want to know so badly?"

"We're all we have left. I think I should know."

"Okay."

"Tell me, Austin. Tell me if you meant what you said?"

He closed his eyes again, wanted her to shut up.

She knelt down and grabbed him by the shoulder: "Austin."

He propped himself up on his elbows. "It doesn't change anything."

"Yes. It does."

"How? How in the hell does it change things? What does it change? Look outside that little square window. Are there any walking on the beach right now? Probably. And guess what? They'll kill us. We're either going to die or starvation or die as our bodies are ripped apart. So what does me saying 'Yes, I meant it' change?"

She bit her lip. "So you *did* mean it?"

He lied back down and groaned. "Did you not just hear what I said?"

"I heard it fine. But I want to know Yes or No."

"What is it with you and black-and-white answers?"

"Austin. Tell me."

"It doesn't matter."

Hannah mumbled something under her breath and went back to the window. She looked outside and then returned down beside him. "It's clear right now. So is the dock. There's none of them out there."

"You're crazy," he said.

"What have we got to lose?"

"I can hardly walk."

"It's all psychological."

"No. I am in a fucking lot of pain right now. I can't even stand."

"Get up. Do you want to get to the boat or not?"

"I just want to sleep for a little bit. I just want to breathe and be quiet and dream."

"Well, dream by yourself. I'm leaving."

She got back up on the sink and fidgeted with the window.

He propped himself back up on his elbows. "What? Where are you going? No."

"You want to die of starvation?" she said, looking back down at him. "The longer I wait in here, the more I become convinced that had I gone for it, I could've escaped. So I'm going for it. If I die out there, at least I'll have made an attempt. And you can just lie on the floor and let your insides rot for all I care."

"Hannah..." He started to get up.

She pretended not to notice.

He stood on shaky legs. "Hannah. You can't just—"

But she did: she crawled out of the window and disappeared.

He stood alone in the surf shop, wrestling with his thoughts.

He finally gave in.

He climbed out the window and dropped down onto the beach.

The sand was sparkling white and warm and littered with seashells.

The beach was empty. Umbrellas tossed about, buckets of sand left next to crumbling sand castles, splotches of blood and frantic footprints etched into the sand to be washed away with an indifferent tide. A picnic luncheon swarming with flies. Bologna sandwiches and potato chips. Seagulls fluttered above them, grabbing food from the overturned baskets. Hannah weaved her way between abandoned beach equipment. He followed after her. The waves from the green ocean rolled against the beach, frothing and foaming. Out beyond the shore a fine mist draped the ocean. The mist had grown so they could only see about one hundred meters out. A wrecked sailboat on a sandbar. Distant chatter of gunfire, explosions on the water. Survivors being slain. The dock before them was veiled in the mist. As they moved towards it, Austin looked around—

surprised that he could move when he was forced to—and imagined what it would've looked like when the first infected spawned in San Francisco on April 23.

Children ran back and forth, laughing and building sand castles and throwing sand at one another. Parents watched their children in the shallows. The teenagers went farther out to swim and duck and to see who could swim under the docks without being seen. Seagulls and the laughter of children and the love of family and friends, lives worth living. Umbrellas propped up on the beach; couples crowded on blankets; old men and women sunbathed and read thick novels. A mother pulled out some bologna sandwiches for a picnic, smiling under the bright sun.

She sat on the blanket watching the children rolling in the shallows. The green waves kissed the shore, spewing clumps of seaweed and scattered seashells. She propped up on her arms, elbows sore, and wondered where he'd gone. She picked up her favorite book and flipped to chapter twenty-eight: "In Memoriam." Suddenly he returned, dropping down next to her, gripping his arm. He was cursing and swearing. She dropped the book, seeing blood gushing down his arm and through his hands. He shook all over. He fell onto his side. People all around them on the beach stopped what they were doing and watched. Her husband rolled onto his back, coughing up blood. The woman began to scream: *Someone help! Oh my God! Someone! Someone*—He lied still. She stared at his still body. Muffled whispers flittered through the watching ranks. She hovered over his body and then fell onto her knees, her shadow draping over him, and she began to sob. His eyes then opened. Hope ran through her. But the eyes she looked into were not his own. He

shrieked and leapt up at her, knocking her into the umbrella. It toppled down and she lied pinned underneath his weight as he savagely bit into her cloven breasts. Her shivering screams carried up the beach. No one knew what to think. That was when more screams came from the docks.

They neared the docks, the mist pulling away. Hannah was about thirty feet ahead of him. He felt anger: he'd always slowed down for her, had even *backtracked* for her, and now she was just leaving him behind. But his anger faded when he heard shouts coming from his right, along the buildings facing the beach. He turned and saw several zombies coming from between the buildings. He looked back to Hannah far ahead and tried to shout to her but his voice was rasp and the effort stung his throat.

She whirled around and looked at him and then looked at the zombies.

She turned around and kept going.

He ran harder, and he reached down and grabbed the pole of an umbrella. He gripped the pole in his hands.

Hannah reached the dock and ran across the wooden planks.

A zombie was upon him. He swung the pole out and hit the zombie in the side of the head, crushing in its temple. It silently fell. Another zombie—a girl in jeans and a ripped tie-die t-shirt—fell under the pole as well. More zombies were closer. He couldn't fend them all off. He turned and ran onto the dock and followed after Hannah, who had disappeared into the thickening fog. He ran slower with the pole so he tossed it down into the water along the side of the wooden dock and it quickly sank.

He saw Hannah emerge out of the mist, standing frozen.

She spun around. "The boat's gone!"

He couldn't believe it.

She pointed.

He could see the boat disappearing into the fog, paddling away.

He reached her. "Now what?" He turned and looked back the way he had gone. The dock stretched away, jutting into the mist. The planks beneath them shook and quivered. The zombies were coming, though they were still hidden in the fog. He knew it would soon be over, they'd almost gotten into the —

He turned and shoved Hannah hard. She let out a shout and crashed over the edge of the dock, falling five feet to the water's surface. She dropped under the waves, vanished in the green pallor, then resurrected, coughing and spewing, her hair matted down to her head and neck and shoulder. She gaped up at him. "Austin!" she choked, brushing hair away from her eyes.

He turned and saw the zombies only ten feet away. He leapt out and crashed into the water beside her. The water was shockingly cold. He plummeted under the waves and his hands spun in the green darkness and his hands brushed the barnacle-laden struts and his feet touched the rocky floor. He pushed upwards and opened his eyes and the saltwater stung and then he emerged from the water, gasping and choking.

Hannah was swimming against the current towards the ocean.

Directly above him the zombies crowded the dock, looking down at him.

He kicked in the current and followed after Hannah, leaving them behind.

Hannah kept herself afloat. The zombies followed them along the dock but stayed out of the water. Austin reached her and she was breathing hard. "We're going to drown..." she moaned.

"No, we're not," he said.

"We're going to float out to sea."

"Over there." He lifted his hand above water and pointed towards a far dock.

"They're on the dock, they'll see us."

"Go behind that building." On the edge of the dock was some sort of warehouse. It looked odd spread out over the water. "Go around it and they'll think we kept going. We can get onto the dock from the other side."

They swam towards the warehouse. The zombies on the dock grew smaller and smaller, unable—or unwilling—to enter the water. The city behind them was a blend of red smoke and flames. A smog of epic proportions engulfed every building and street. A skyscraper afire tilted and fell. It didn't seem real. It smashed into a dozen buildings, all breaking apart under its weight. Dust blew out from every direction, swallowing up the nearest buildings. The streets turned an ashen brown and the trees became caked in a thick film.

They swam around the warehouse and then the zombies were out of their line-of-sight. Their hands slipped and slid over the lichen-eaten warehouse walls.

Hannah said, "I can't grab on... It's too slippery..."

"There's a ladder coming up. Just grab that."

She grabbed it and so did he. They were face-to-face.

"Climb," he said.

She climbed up. The ladder led to a door. She opened the door and leaned inside, looked back and forth, and then climbed inside. He climbed up and looked back. He could still hear the gunfire and explosions out to sea, the refugees in the boats being slaughtered by an incompetent—or *too* competent?—military. But the mist clung so low and thick that he could only hear it and not see.

Were he deaf, this would almost seem tranquil.

He climbed up inside and Hannah shut the door and they were submerged in darkness.

"Let's just rest a moment," Hannah said, breathing heavily.

"Okay," Austin said.

He sat down on the floor, shivering and soaked and cold.

He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes and blacked out.

1:00 PM

He awoke some time later, aroused by sounds drifting through a large iron padlocked door. He got up and walked around Hannah who was lying in the corner, and he opened the door, expecting the worst. Wooden crates were scattered everywhere. A tool chest against the far wall. Water dripped from the rafters. The air smelled of salt and granite. Shadow drenched most of the room. At the other end of the cavernous chamber was a tempered glass window, constructed in such a way to look like fogged ice. Dark shadows, the outlines of hands, palmed the glass. Moaning from the other side. They weren't scary or ominous. He just stared at the fogged glass, the hands drawing back and forth. He felt a presence behind him and then Hannah was beside him. They both stared at the glass.

He moved between the mountains of crates covered with a fine layer of dust. There was a dolly and several metal barrels. He pushed deeper into the shadows and found something cold and rutted. He ran his hands alongside it and realized it was a hull. His heart hammered.

He retraced his steps and grabbed Hannah by her good arm. "Come on."

He led her to the boat.

He went around the boat and found a ladder and climbed up, stepping onto the boat's deck. His eyes were adjusting and he saw that it was a motorboat with a cabin beneath the deck. He went into the cockpit and found the gears and wheel. He explored the cockpit and found a chain connected to a lever and pulled it. Blinding light flooded the cockpit and swept over the deck, pushing back the shadows. He kept the light on and Hannah climbed up. He went down into the cabin and flipped a light-switch on the wall and saw a large bed, a chair, two dressers, a small closet, and a tiny bathroom. The bed was made. He went through the dressers. All the drawers were empty. He opened a cabinet mounted on the wall and found some boxed foods and some cans. Hannah joined him and went into the closet and saw stacked gallons of water.

"This is amazing," Austin said. "Hannah. Think. If we can get this out of here, we can just speed offshore. Eat the food, drink the water, wait until these things die out. It's a miracle."

Of course, they'd have to somehow elude the military. But with the heavy fog, they could maybe slip by if they idled the engine.

His fingers twitched in excitement.

They'd almost made it.

"Can you get it started?" Hannah said.

"Bryon taught me how to hotwire a car," he said.

"This isn't a car."

"How different could it be?"

"I'm thinking a lot different."

They went back up to the cockpit. Beside the wheel was a slot for the key. He fiddled with the panel. "If I can get this off, I could try to hotwire it."

"Maybe," Hannah said, "I could look for a key."

"Give me a chance, all right?"

"You'll end up breaking it."

"I won't," he said, fiddling with the panel.

Through the cockpit side window she could see the zombies patting the window.

"This panel is a bitch," he said.

"You're going to break it, Austin."

"I'm not going to break it." He stopped, looked around. "Can you find a screwdriver?"

"Let's look for the key, okay?"

"Have a little faith."

"I have faith that the engine is supposed to start with a key."

"Do you see a key anywhere, Hannah?" he said.

"I'm sure if we look, we'll find it."

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Besides, the zombies are pounding on the glass."

"They aren't getting in."

"I've got this, Hannah, all right?" He continued fiddling with the panel. She sighed and left the cockpit.

He kept struggling with the panel. After several tries, he stood back and stared.

Hannah returned. "Look." She tossed him a key. "It was on a rack in the cabin."

He held the key up in the light. "It might not even be to the engine."

"Let's find out."

He inserted the key and turned. The engine rumbled to life.

They both looked to the fogged window. The patting had ceased. Their shadows lurked behind the window.

Hannah stepped forward and rapped her knuckles on the dashboard. "Gasoline is on Empty. We need more. Damn it. It's always *something*."

"There were barrels down on the floor. I'll put one on a dolly. Find me some tubing. Look in storage."

He turned off the engine and got down off the boat and found a dolly and grabbed a barrel and brought it to the boat. Hannah had found some rubber hoses and they hooked it up to the gas main. Just like they had done with the Cessna Caravan they did with the boat. He sucked on the end of the tube and the gasoline came out and went into the boat's tank.

"Austin," Hannah said. "This boat's not on the water."

"I know. It's on a rolling platform. It'll roll out onto the water."

"Okay. How do we get the hangar door open?"

"Maybe there's a garage door opener or something."

"Hold on," she said, and she disappeared.

He kept fueling. Gasoline bubbled out from the tank. He stopped the fueling and withdrew the tube. Gasoline gushed onto the concrete at his feet.

He held the tube high and the flow stopped. He flipped the latch shut on the boat's gas main and wheeled the barrel, tubing, and dolly away.

There was a grinding noise as the door began to lift. Bright sunshine poured inside, the heavy mist hovering over the green water reflecting the sunlight in a panorama of sparkling diamonds. The scent of salt was overbearing, but he noticed that there were no longer any explosions or gunfire. The light bled throughout the room, illuminating the black-colored motorboat and the piles of crates and barrels and the racks of tools and equipment and the fogged window. Hannah stood by a button panel dangling from the ceiling.

Austin climbed onto the deck and turned on the engine. It roared to life. The propeller slowly spun. Hannah joined him and said, "We need to get in the water."

"Can you give me a push?"

"I can't push a multi-ton boat out of the hangar."

"There's got to be a lever or something."

"It won't be on the boat."

They got down off the boat and searched around the loading ramp. Eventually they found it. He told Hannah to take the wheel and when he saw her above in the cockpit he began operating the crank. The wheels on the boat ramp began to groan. The boat slowly began its slightly-angled descent into the water.

Austin looked up at Hannah.

She was smiling in the cockpit.

He gave her thumbs-up and she returned the favor.

Then the fogged glass windows shattered and the zombies poured inside.

The infected crashed through the shattered window and leapt over the crates. Austin gave the crank one last good kick and the gears groaned and the boat began sliding towards the water. Hannah yelled and abandoned the cockpit. He ran around to the side of the boat and leapt onto the ladder. The boat continued

to roll towards the water. Hannah reached down and grabbed his hands and pulled him up.

The zombies surrounded the boat, throwing themselves at the hull. Several jumped onto the ladder and began to climb.

Hannah went into the cockpit and returned with a broomstick.

The zombies reached the deck as Austin ran for the cockpit.

Hannah fought them off with the broom. One of them grabbed the broomstick and ripped it from her hands. She let out a shout as splinters tore into her hands. She abandoned the fight and ran into the cockpit and shut the door.

The back end of the boat splashed into the water, and then it froze.

"We stopped!" Hannah shouted, staring through the glass window of the door.

"Shit." Austin flipped a switch on the gears. "We had the propeller on forward."

The boat began to slide into the water.

One of the zombies smashed its hand into the glass. Hannah ducked to the side as the glass shattered. It reached through, bloodied hands swinging.

"Austin!" Hannah yelled. "Look for something!"

He opened a drawer, looking for any sort of weapon.

And he found a pistol.

He pulled it out and turned and pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

The two zombies at the window snarled at him.

"I'm an idiot," he mumbled, flipping off the safety.

He aimed and fired.

Holes drilled into their foreheads and they fell back onto the deck.

The boat dipped entirely into the water.

Austin turned and through the front window he saw the zombies crawling over the empty boat ramp, crowded together, refusing to go into the water.

Hannah said, "That's all of them. There were only two who got onto the deck."

He set the gun down on the dashboard. His heart pounded behind his ribs.

Hannah pushed open the door, scooting the bodies to the side. "Help me."

He helped her drag the bodies to the edge of the boat and they tossed them into the water.

They stood together on the deck, the mist wrapping around them.

And that's when the shelling started.

At first there were the muffled explosions coming offshore, the cruisers and destroyers launching their payloads. The mist concealed any view of the ships. The shrieking of the shells tearing overhead was deafening. They went into the cockpit and watched, but from their vantage point all that could be seen was the warehouse and docks. They could hear the city being pounded. Blasts of air swept over the beaches and the docks, pushing away the mist, and they saw for a moment the city burning, explosions bursting everywhere.

Hannah turned, not wanting to look.

Austin sat down beside her in the cockpit.

The shelling lasted several minutes, and then it stopped.

The mist grew thick around them again.

Now they were alone.

Austin stood and put the engine on idle and sat back down.

"Where are we going?" Hannah asked.

"I don't know. West, I guess. Out to sea."

"If they find us..."

"The engine's on idle. They won't be able to hear it. And the fog is blinding."

"What if we run into one of the Navy ships?"

He cursed and stood and messed with the controls again. He put the propeller on forward and turned the boat around and they headed south.

"We'll just follow the coastline for a while," he said. She remained seated on the floor. "Hopefully we'll avoid any Navy ships."

She nodded, quiet, then stood. "I'm going to go lie down."

"Okay," he said. "I'll keep watch up here."

"You can come down if you want," she said.

He wanted to. But he didn't want to risk taking his eyes off the waters.

"You go get some rest," he said. "I'll be down once I think we're in the clear."

"Okay," she said, and she left the cockpit.

The only thing he saw were remnants of destroyed boats. Yachts and speedboats and sailboats. Half-sunken or their debris scattered about over the waters. Burnt and bullet-ridden bodies bobbing on the green waves. He felt sick to his stomach. After some time he didn't hear any explosions or any other sounds except the engine and the wind and the water lapping against the boat. He abandoned the cockpit and walked across the deck with the blood-trails from where they'd dumped the bodies and he went down the steps into the cabin and saw Hannah sitting quietly on the bed.

She looked up at him, smiled weakly. "We're safe?"

"I think so, yes."

"We're finally safe," she said, this time a statement.

He sat down beside her.

They stared at the wall and felt the rocking of the waves.

She leaned her head into his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her.

He didn't know what her movements meant but he didn't care.

They were safe. And that made everything perfect.

August 2025

His wife arrives three days later and he meets her at the refurbished hotel. He stands before the door and takes a deep breath and then pushes it open. The rusted hinges creak and he is hit in the eyes with the bright sunlight coming in through the wall-length windows. He blinks the brightness away and sees her curled up on one of the sofas, exhausted from the long series of interconnecting flights. He stands in the doorway and just looks at her, and for the first time he really *looks* at her. The black hair curling around her shoulders, the paleness that had been so common in bleak Alaska now contrasted with the bright decorum of the room. She mumbles something and shuffles her weight upon the sofa. He quietly shuts the door and walks to the couch. He kneels down and leans forward and kisses her on the cheek. Her eyes open and she looks at him, and a smile crosses over her lips. She sits up on the sofa and rubs her eyes with her kneeling before him, and she reaches out and runs her hands through his hair and then she leans forward too and kisses him on the forehead. He crawls up and sits beside her on the sofa and she leans into him, and their breaths move in rhythm and their heartbeats do the same. "I dreamed that you were gone forever," she says, "and that I'd never see you again. Is this a dream?" He just kisses her on the forehead.

He spends the rest of the day with her and they walk around the town. Nearly all the buildings—the museums, the shops, everything—has been remodeled into the buildings for a military base. They walk down Duval Street and there are soldiers moving to-and-fro, huddled in groups and smoking cigarettes and sweating in the hot summer heat. Thunderclouds rumble in the distance and they walk through the square where bands used to play and fire-breathers would stun crowds and jugglers would juggle knives, but now it is empty except for a humvee sitting empty beside one of the snaking off-roads. He tells her about all that has happened, why he has been brought here, and they reach one of the sandy white beaches now engulfed with seaweed and dead fish and a sea turtle laying eggs. Now there are no children to goggle and no one to take pictures. They walk along the beach and she asks him if it bothers him, what

they're asking him to do, and he says it doesn't matter, because he has to do it. She says it may be good for him, and he tells her, "What good is there in trying to remember what you've spent the last twenty years of your life trying to forget?" She doesn't answer and they reach an old wooden dock now crumbling into the ocean and she sits down in the sand and he sits down beside her. She wraps her arm around his shoulder and leans her head into his. She kisses him on the cheek and says, "At least we get a vacation out of all this." *Yeah*, he thinks. *A vacation.*

The next day he returns to writing, and for seven hours he writes until his fingers hurt and he feels restless so he gets up and walks outside. There are some others out by the pool now, having discovered it. One is knelt down fingering a penny embedded in the cement. Hastings walks over to an old concrete bench and sits down with palm fronds hanging over him. He thinks about her, remembers their time together, those first moments when hell came to bear on a world not ready to confess its sins. He wonders what would have happened had everything just gone on as it was. He would have gone off to college. She would've done likewise. And maybe he would've gotten married, and perhaps she would've gotten married, too. Or maybe they would have both returned home after graduation and being single and lonely away from all their old college friends, maybe they would've started hanging out more and then fallen in love and gotten married and had a family. He shakes away the thoughts and stands and stretches his back and hears it crackle. *There is no point on dwelling on what never was and never will be. Stick to what really happened — that's the only reality here, there, and anywhere.*

That evening they join several other families on "vacation" and get into a PT Boat with several soldiers. The soldiers take them out to the coral reef and they dress in wet suits with flippers, goggles, and snorkels. One-by-one they drop into the water as the sun sparkles on the western horizon. The water cuts through the waves in rivulets. Hastings and his wife stick together, admiring

the beauty of the coral reef. Angelfish, butterfly fish, and surgeonfish don't acknowledge their presence. The coral suspends in a state of anti-gravity, the colors blinding Hastings' eyes. He wonders if there are any sharks but he doesn't care. He snorkels farther out, leaving his wife to admire a colony of crabs fighting amidst the coral. He keeps paddling out, the serenity of the moment enveloping him. He could never do this in Alaska, though he heard that once-upon-a-time snorkeling in the interior passage had been a tourist sport. The coral reef dips below him to a sandy bottom stretching at least an eighth of a mile before another coral ridge reaches to the surface. Amidst the shadows dancing in the failing light he sees dozens of wrecked vessels: sailboats, yachts, fishing trawlers. All of them are encased in rust and falling apart, covered with all sorts of underwater garments. He notices the holes chiseled into the side, and along the ridges of the holes are what looks like bird-shot. He remembers the flight from San Francisco, twenty years ago, and he knows what happened here. The military gunned these boats down. He feels a knot in his stomach and then he sees several reef sharks slithering through the graveyard. He turns and slowly paddles back to the others. His wife points at an eel and smiles. He forces a smile but cannot get the image of those sunken ships out of his mind.

The next evening his wife wants to go swimming. He tells her they can as long as they stick close to the shore. She talks about how much she admired the coral reef and how she wishes they could do it again, and he tells her he saw a shark and suddenly she doesn't want to go back. They go swimming off one of the beaches and he steps on an urchin and curses and feels his foot throbbing in pain. He's wobbling back towards the shore when his wife off to his left shouts his name. He turns and sees her holding something up out of the water, asking what it is. He slowly makes his way to her and he instantly recognizes it. "It's a femur bone." She asks if it's from a shark, and he tells her, "No." She quickly drops it back into the water and bites her lip and says she wants to go back to the hotel. He tells her that sounds like a good idea and they leave the beach. Not even the crystal-clear water of the Keys can hide what happened here.

At the close of the week, Hastings has finished writing his memoirs. He and his wife along with everyone else are treated to a massive banquet held at the old Civil War fort. Tables are spread out in the open area and soldiers serve them all sorts of chicken and vegetables dishes, and they drink orange juice, something Hastings hasn't had in several decades. It doesn't taste as good as it used to. The soldiers grumble about how this isn't what they signed up for but everyone ignores it. The tables are generally quiet, as would be expected, with the writers having relived the nightmares of their past. Hastings feels it, too: the great weight of depression, the anxiety returning, and he knows that his dreams tonight will be worse, more severe. He eats his broiled chicken and his wife pokes at hers with a fork and says she prefers fish and asks, "So what do you think? About all this? Was I right?"

"About what?"

"About this being good for you."

"It wasn't a therapeutic session. I was forced to write my memoirs."

"I know. But sometimes it can be good to... You know."

"Relive it? Good to bring it out and stare at it again? How could that be good?"

"It could bring healing."

"Healing? I don't need healed."

"What happened has scarred you. You're different than you used to be."

"And if this never happened, would I be the same as I was twenty years ago? No. Everyone changes. No one stays the same. Everyone changes, but it's hardly ever for the better. I remember I was told once that the reason old people are usually so grumpy and bitter is because they've spent their entire lives growing used to the way the world works, and grumpiness and bitterness is the only adequate response. They've seen death, evil, injustice, and it's... incarcerated them... to the marrow of their bones. I got lucky. My naivety was broken long before it would've been. I got to see the world for it was. And it's

better to embrace the reality of life than to convince yourself that it's something it's not."

She doesn't know what to say. She looks back down at her food.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"No. It's okay."

They return to the hotel and make love and amidst all of it he doesn't see her but he sees that phantom of the past. When they're finished he lies next to her and says, "There's something I should tell you, something about... Something about what happened... Back then."

She doesn't move, just lies still. "You can tell me."

"I know I can. It's just hard."

She rolls over onto her side, looks down at him. "What is it?"

"I've never told you about her."

"About who?"

"Her name was Hannah. She was... My first."

"She was your first girlfriend?"

"No. We never dated."

"Oh. So she was your first... You know. You lost your virginity to her."

He swallows, his Adam's apple knotted in his throat. "Yeah."

"Sweetie. I never assumed you were a virgin."

"I know."

"By the time we met... It'd been, what, eleven years? We both spent our time on the floating refugee camps. Shuffleboard and ping-pong and fishing grew old pretty quickly, especially when your lines kept getting snagged on bodies in the water... People had sex. It's how we coped, and it's totally understandable. I just figured you did it. I know I did, and you know that. I've told you."

"I've never had sex with anyone except you and her," he said.

"Did you love her?"

"No."

"So why are you telling me about her?"

"Because... I don't know..."

"You did love her, didn't you?"

"What? No. No, I didn't. I loved what she was. My last... connection."

"Okay."

"She was my last link to my old life. I watched my parents die." He doesn't tell her that he killed his father. "I saw my sister... murdered." Saying it makes his blood curl. "I watched my friends die, and Hannah and I, we escaped. But it didn't last long. I lost her, too. And when I lost her... I don't know. It was like, she was my last connection, you know? And when she died, *I* died. I mean, sure, I was still me. But everything about me, except the thoughts in my head and the feelings in my heart and the skin on my bones and the clothes on my back, everything was just... gone. I had hoped... It's foolish, probably, but I hoped that we would get married, that we'd build a family together, because if that happened, then it would mean... It would mean there were flowers out of the ashes."

"That's not foolish," she says. "That's not foolish at all."

He traces his fingers up her bare arm. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she says. "It's not your fault, what happened to her..."

"You probably think I wish you were her."

"No, I don't think that at all."

You should. "Good. Because you shouldn't."

FATUM:
The Final Hour

April 24, 2004 Saturday

2:00 PM

Austin had returned to the cockpit. The mist blanketing the ocean remained as thick as it had been when they left the docks. He gripped the wheel and felt the boat rising up and down and side to side with the waves splashing and gurgling against the hull. Hannah came up and asked where they were going.

"I don't know," he said. "We're going south. But exactly where we're headed, I don't know."

"We're just going into the middle of nowhere?"

"Yeah. I think so. At least for now."

"For now?"

"I was thinking we could go for a while and then drop anchor."

"And if it's too deep?"

"We head east a little bit. Towards the coast. And when we run out of food, we can return to the shore and stock up. Hopefully, by then, they'll be gone. When San Francisco runs out of food, they'll start turning on one another. Or they'll migrate elsewhere."

"And if they migrate south?"

"We'll deal with that when it happens. I'm just making this up as I go."

"I know," she said.

He cut the power, not wanting to spend anymore fuel. He let the boat drift west, towards the sweeping expanse of the Pacific. There was no aim nor resolution. Only gratefulness. Gratefulness that they weren't in constant danger. Grateful that they could now sleep—and sleep well. None of the infected were anywhere close. He walked out onto the deck and looked into the white mist and felt the wind in his hair and let the waves carry them along. Standing on the deck, he felt completely free and relaxed without a care in the world.

He wouldn't realize how lucky he was until later. At the last U.S. Census, there were two hundred eighty-one million, four hundred and twenty-one thousand, nine hundred and six people in the nation. Only 5.2 million would make it to the next census a decade later. Worldwide, it would be estimated that out of six billion, four hundred ninety million, eight hundred and forty-one thousand, seven hundred and fourteen people, only seventy million survived.

At that moment standing on the deck, Austin had no idea how lucky he was. And for the first time ever, he felt grateful for life. Everything seemed so much more beautiful. He physically ached and hurt, but emotionally he felt free and unfettered. A new energy throbbed in his heart. He closed his eyes and stood there. Stood there and thought about nothing. He heard the sound of a plane growing close and then vanishing. It hadn't seen them in the fog. They were refugees and simultaneously bandits. And they were not alone.

Refugees huddled amongst the giant stone pillars, praying and weeping. The sunlight sprinkled them in its wanton glow, and somehow, as they looked up at that sun breaking through the concentric circles of Stonehenge, there in England they knew everything would be okay. Hope flared and they knew their prayers had been answered. They had been spared.

In the dark and cold catacombs, one could see nothing. The men and women remained underground in the impermeable darkness for days, drinking sparse water and eating the beetles that scurried over the dirt floors. One by one they meandered through the limestone mazes and exited into the brilliant sunlight, and their shadows sparkled in the sand as if it were a sign from the sun god himself.

They had remained out of reach for days. They watched as the infected attacked and ate one another. And one by one, they rotted away due to malnutrition. The survivors, weak and shaking, having survived on birds and insects, crept down the winding staircases to the dirt floor. They looked about the crumbling ruins and felt they deserved their place there. Now they were survivors. Heroes. Legends. The silent onlookers cheered and the birds sang.

Austin abandoned the wheel and went down below. Hannah sat on the bed, staring numbly at the wall. He sat down next to her. She acknowledged his presence with a brief nod and looked down at her feet.

"What are you thinking about?" he said.

"Probably the same thing you are," she said.

"Thinking about how we've overcome? Thinking about how we can now breathe and sleep in peace?"

A quiet laugh. "I guess so... I'm thinking about..."

"What?"

"I'm thinking about everything. And everyone. It just floods my mind."

"You're afraid it's not over."

She bit her lip. "I don't think it's over."

"But that's not what you're thinking about," he said. "I can read it in your eyes. You're thinking, '*Why me?*'"

She looked at him and a tear glistened in her eye. "I don't even know why my real parents are," she said. "They abandoned me when I was just a baby. Family members passed me around, and when they got tired of me, they handed me over to someone else. My life was a cycle of being shunned and forgotten. The pitiful orphan under the stairs. My birthdays were barely remembered, and if they were, no one cared. No one really loved me. No one really cared for me. My grandparents wanted nothing to do with me. They called me a bastard child

because my father cheated on my mom and ran off with another woman, cut off all contact with the family. I remember being driven places and left there, told to walk home. I was left at bus stations and train stations, waiting for hours in the rain and snow for some other distant family member to pick me up for my unwanted three month stay with them. It wasn't until my adopted mom took me in that I was really loved. She loved me and cared for me like no one else ever did. She gave me new clothes, she took me with her to her church and country club, introduced me to all kinds of people. I even made some friends.

"She started dating this older guy, and then she started neglecting me, spending all her time with him. I remember being six years old, huddled in my room, hearing them fight, and I hear her scream and then a door slammed. I just stayed in my room and cried. Then an ambulance came and they opened my door and told me to come with them. Mom had called the ambulance because her boyfriend had stabbed her three times. My mom met a doctor and remarried. That was my dad. Who everyone thinks—thought—was my real dad. Everyone thought I grew up in a quiet Christian home. They didn't know the truth."

Austin didn't know what to say. All this was new. So he didn't say anything.

She continued, "I've always wanted to be loved, Austin. I've always hungered for it. My diaries are full with it. I just always looked to the football players, the jocks, the popular kids for it. I slept with them—I *slept* with them, Austin—hoping they would really love me."

His face blushed. He hadn't known any of this.

He had thought she was a virgin, just like him.

She said, "I don't know how many guys... took advantage of that. I didn't like it. I'm not that kind of person. But I needed something more. My desire to be loved controlled me. It took me down so many awful roads. I just wanted someone to tell me, 'You're beautiful,' someone to tell me, 'You're everything to me,' because no one ever has. And all my friendships were superficial. Social-status friendships. Except for a few. Like my friendship with you.

"I was corrupted by the high school society. In high school, everything is about competition. Who's the best fuck? Who's the most attractive? Who's the greatest athlete? It's all driven by competition, everyone trying to up everyone else so they're more popular, more wanted, and more loved—or at least we perceived popularity to be synonymous with love. It's sickening, Austin. Have you ever noticed how those who just go with the swings of life, who don't try to outdo everyone, the ones who take a back seat, are the ones who ultimately succeed? They're the ones who are happy, the ones whose dreams come true. But we thought we had to be better than everyone else. More attractive, more popular. And that's where we girls took the plunger."

"Took the plunger?" He had no idea what she was talking about.

"I mean, that's how we became so shallow. We spent our time doing our hair, painting our nails, worrying about stupid shit, like age lines and ingrown toenails and pimples. Eye shadowing was our god. We worshipped the idol of beauty, dedicated our lives to it. Our own ignorance kept us blind."

Austin cracked a smile. "It doesn't sound like you're too absorbed in all that."

"What happened changes people," she said. "A week ago, I trusted in worthless shit. Put my trust in absolute rubbish. I forsook my family and friends. I backstabbed those who'd helped me in life just so I could stand taller. Every mistake I made wasn't mine. I was perfect. I was a queen, a goddess, a princess, an idol. Everyone wanted to be me. And I was conceited about it. I devoted my life to excelling in my conceit. I slept around, I put out, I did what all the guys wanted me to do. I chiseled my body into the perfect sculpture, what the media says we should look like. I fought for everyone's attention. And I was beautiful. I really was. A beautiful monster. I wouldn't admit I was wrong. I refused to face my problems. It isn't a good game-plan to dig yourself a hole and to keep digging until you can't escape. I never even realized how trapped I had become, not until all this started."

She shook her head. "I was a popular girl, doing everything for acceptance, refusing to admit the fact that I was just a big hoax. My life had become

worthless. My goals were worthless. And I was worthless. I put down others and exalted myself. And Austin? Do you know what we used to complain about? How bad our cuts and scrapes affected the color and tone of our skin. How the rain would mess up our hair. How sometimes we would sweat and it would smear our makeup. We didn't realize how pretentious and ignorant, how stupid we really were. Beauty is fallacy. It's nothing. It's a whisper in time, and then it's gone. Our bodies die and rot and all beauty is within. That's why they say that beauty is within. Because beauty shouldn't fade even when the body withers."

Austin said, "I never thought I'd hear words like that from you."

"Neither did I. And it's not just beauty, Austin. We all jived for popularity. We did everything thinking about how it would affect our reputation and what people would think about us. Our lives were dictated by the thoughts and actions of others. Our own desire for control controlled us and put us in the hands of the observers. It's like being enslaved by freedom."

She lied back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Do you know what I've always wanted? I wanted a simple life. A simple life with a husband. Working as a nurse. Really helping people as much as I could. Watching my kids grow up. Watching them have families of their own. And we would go to barbecues and parties. I wanted a husband who would love me more than he'd ever loved anyone before, someone I loved more than I'd ever loved anyone before."

"That's what everyone wants," Austin said.

"But I didn't realize I'd already *had* that simple life. I was blinded by its simplicity."

"None of us did, Hannah."

"And I didn't realize that that person I desired—the man who would love me like he's never loved anyone before, and the one whom I would love like I've never loved anyone before—was so close."

She looked at him and her eyes were more penetrating than they had ever been. She said, "That night, when I kissed you... I kissed you because even though I wouldn't admit it, I knew you were the one I was looking for. You were the one who loved me. The one who cared for me. I had built a tower and defense around my heart—but not to keep you out, but to keep my heart from being truly alive. I was so obsessed and enslaved by trying to be popular in my quest to be loved, that I refused to accept love unless it came from that enslavement. And you were something entirely different. You weren't trapped in all of that. You didn't care what people thought. You didn't live for yourself. You lived for others. You put others before yourself and suffered hits when you didn't deserve them. And you didn't complain or bitch but just took it. You were genuine. You were real. And your affections for me weren't based upon what I could do for your popularity. They were based upon *me*. You were affectionate towards me because you *loved* me. And all along, Austin... I've loved you. I've dreamt about you. But you didn't fit into the foolish makeup of my life. And that's why I rejected you. I kissed you because I wanted it—because I knew it would be real—but in the end, I was just a shallow bitch yet again."

He didn't know what to say.

He had thought she kissed him because she was being weak and vulnerable and foolish. He had thought she kissed him because she was using his affections for her to make herself feel better. He had thought she used him. And in a sense, she did. She used him to feel loved, but not in a manipulative way. She had manipulated her way to the top of the teenage social class. But in that moment, she was—for maybe the first time in years—being entirely genuine.

"It's okay," he said quietly.

"No," she said, still lying on the bed, looking up at him, tears building in her eyes. "It's not okay. I was a bitch. I perceived love to be something physical. When I thought about the guy who would love me—the guy I would marry—I always envisioned someone who looked like Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp or

Orlando Bloom. Someone hot and attractive and famous and popular. That's what I thought I wanted. But I've realized that what I've wanted—what I *need*—is someone who really cares for me and loves me. Someone's who willing to make sacrifices for me. Someone who's willing to treat me selflessly. And that person is you, Austin. This whole time you've put me before you. You've shown how much you love me. And I've realized, through all of this, that I love you, too. I would just never admit it. But I'm admitting it now. I know you meant what you said back in San Francisco. And I mean what I say now: I really do love you."

He lied down beside her and turned onto his side and faced her. She rolled onto her side and then scooted up against him. Their eyes locked, their faces nearly touching. He looked into those eyes and any feelings of anger—anger at her refusing him all these years while simultaneously loving him—were dispersed by those eyes, those wellsprings of love. And from the oasis of her eyes he drank his fill, deep and heavenly, a celestial paradise.

"Somehow I always knew," she said.

His hand shook as he ran his fingers through her hair.

"I always knew," she said again, and she took his hand into her and wrapped her fingers around his.

"You're not scared?" he said. Her fingers were solid while his quivered.

"I've been so scared, Austin. But not now. I'm not scared, not scared of you."

He smiled.

"I'm not scared of you," she said, "and I'm not scared of *us*."

And their lips touched and their tongues entwined. They held one another on that bed. He ran his hand through her hair and with his other hand he stroked her warm cheek. She wrapped her arm around him and closed her eyes. They were glad for what they had, done with what they'd lost, and their entire lives were laid out—right in front of them.

She was close.

She was there.

His obsession was realized.

She pressed her forehead against his. "I'm not scared, Austin."

"Okay," he said.

They moved atop of one another on the bed, the pillows and sheets twisting around their naked bodies. He moved slowly and steadily on top of her, tender but not rough, and their lips glided against one another. Her hair fell across her bare shoulders as he kissed her neck. She gripped his shoulder-blades between shaking fingers, and her back arched slightly as he made love to her. It was simple and pure and pristine. It was innocent and drenched in true affection. He was not another jackass and she was not another whore. They were two lovers, together, alone, and in love.

He closed his eyes as he enjoyed her and she enjoyed him. And he knew everything would be okay. They would survive. They'd reach others who would survive. And they'd get married and they'd have kids and all her dreams would come true: he'd be the husband she always wanted, and she'd watch her kids grow up, and they'd have bonfires and picnics, and the hell of the current world would be forgotten amidst their undeniable and enflamed love. With her naked body beneath him, her arms wrapped around his chest and her legs wrapped around his waist, he knew everything would be okay. He knew it more than he had ever known anything before.

He lied next to her, breathing hard. Her hair covered her face. She was sweating and so was he.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm so—"

He put a finger to her lips, shook his head. "No. Don't be."

She pulled her lips away from his finger. "I'm so sorry, Austin. I'm so sorry."

He looked at her, confused. He placed his hand between her breasts, felt her breathing. She breathed hard, panting. Her heart raced. "Hannah. It's okay. All right? It's okay."

"No," she said. "It's not okay. You don't understand."

He traced his finger up her chest to her neck, to her chin and to her lips. She kissed his finger. He said, "I don't have to understand. This is all I've ever wanted."

She looked into his eyes, leaned forward, pulled him close.

Once so shy, now so brave.

They kissed again and they rolled amongst the strewn covers and pillows. Then they lied together again. She rested her head on his chest and cursed under her breath. And then she started crying.

He kissed the back of her head and stroked her bare back with his fingers. "It'll be okay," he whispered into her ear.

She kept crying.

"People have always survived," he said. "We will, too. People survived the Romans. The Crusades. The Black Plague. World Wars. We'll survive this. We'll survive, and we'll built a better world. You and me. We'll be together. We'll build our lives together. It'll be beautiful. It's *already* beautiful."

She didn't stop crying. Her tears soaked his chest. "Austin..."

"Hannah," he said. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

She pulled up, her wet hair dangling in front of her eyes. "No. It won't be okay."

He noticed something in her eyes, something... foreign.

"Hannah," he said gravely, his heart beginning to race. "What's wrong?"

She sat beside him, and she lifted her bare leg. She turned it in the light.

And the color drained from his face.

His head spun. He felt dizzy and nauseas.

Hannah turned away, refusing to look at him.

He pulled himself up and sat next to her, refused to touch her.

She continued to cry.

"When?" he demanded.

She looked at him but avoided eye contact. "The surf shop," she said. "That's why I... That's why I had to get you to move. Because I knew that if we waited, then... You know... I had to get you moving, had to get you to a boat, had to save your life, because you saved mine. And now you're safe, and I thank God, every part of my thanks God, my wish... You've been blessed..." She said no more, looked away.

He sat there staring at her.

And he hated her.

He hated her for using him. He hated himself for being so stupid to fall for all her ploys. Everything she had said, that great buildup of empty words and her seduction, all employed to capture him and use him so she could feel loved at his expense. He hated her for being a cold and selfish bitch, a cruel and senseless whore. And yet he felt sad for her. Sad for her fate. Sad for *his* fate: he finally had what he had always wanted, and it was gone so quickly. He was convinced she just used him to have sex one more time before she died, but then he looked into her eyes and saw her chest thundering with each sob, and he knew that she just wanted, for once, to feel loved. And he couldn't blame her for what he did. And in that moment he decided to stay with her. She wouldn't be alone. He would tie her down and watch as she turned. And then he would mercifully kill her. He would wait until she wouldn't possibly comprehend what he was doing.

He watched her as she got dressed. She didn't say anything and left the cabin. He remained naked on the bed and then he got dressed and went back up to the deck. The air was colder and the mist was thinning, but nothing could be seen in any direction. He found her in the cockpit. A gun was in her hands.

He stepped forward. "Hannah..."

She looked at him, bit her lip. "I'm so sorry for what I've done to you."

He wanted to protest, but he didn't.

He knew she didn't want to become like them.

And he knew what he would do.

She said, "I love you, Austin. Please don't hate me for this."

He said nothing.

And she turned the gun in her hand and put in her mouth.

He turned away and heard the gunshot.

He turned back around and she lied on the deck with the gun still in her hand and a pool of blood issuing forth. She lied frozen and immobile, her eyes still open.

He felt nothing.

He knelt down next to her and closed her eyelids and took the gun from her warm hands. He lied down next to her and with his free hand he took her hand in his and then he placed the gun in his own mouth. *I love you, too, Hannah. Please don't hate me for this.* And he pulled the trigger.

The gun clicked. He pulled the trigger again. Another click. He sat up and looked at the gun. No bullets. He began to panic. He dropped the gun on the deck and let loose her hand and went scavenging through the cockpit. There were no more bullets. He searched the entire boat, his world numb and yet afire. He abandoned the search as the sun began to set. He returned to the deck and sat down eagle-spread beside Hannah with the empty gun between his knees and he hung his head in his hands and wept. The fog wrapped tighter around them and the stars nor the moon could be seen.

Eight Months Later

The snow has fallen, and the city lies in an undisturbed peace. It is quiet and sullen, without a breath of life, as empty as the day before it had been founded in 1625. The Statue of Liberty stands tall and forlorn, glinting in stray sunlight that passes through the thick, bruised clouds. Grand Central Terminal, with its cavernous walls, is empty, papers scattered across the floor, benches overturned; the hanging American flag has fallen from one of its moorings and now hangs lopsided, one of its corners sprawled across the dust-covered tiled floor. The three giant windows, one shattered and another webbed with cracks, allow meager light to pass into the Station, long covered with a thick layer of dust. Time's Square is silent, the wind hardly making even a whisper; the digital Chevrolet analog clock has long since gone, and the Hard Rock Café, Times Square Studios, and the Virgin mega-store are abandoned, the doors hanging upon their hinges and many windows shattered, once barricaded with furniture and wooden boards. The New York Library, like everything else, is dead, and books lie on the floor, tattered and worn; half the library has been consumed by fire. Yankee Stadium sits unused, in need of repair, one of the sections still smoldering. The "Spirit of America", one of the Staten Island ferry charters, lies overturned in the shallow water of the bay. The paved paths of Central Park are no longer home to joggers, bicyclists, or roller-bladers; the paths are covered with snow, and the softball fields are overgrown with weeds that poke through the snow-banks and snow-drifts. The many ponds of Central Park are frozen over, but no one skates. In the Central Park Zoo, cages are broken, Plexiglas windows webbed, skeletons of elephants and rhinos, long-since devoured, lie with their sweeping rib cages poking through the snow like flowers among ashes. Crashed vehicles, burned buildings, and abandoned tanks and military vehicles crowd the streets. A line of abandoned cars with broken windshields, some overturned and gutted, others with human skeletons with hollow eyes and grinning teeth, lead inland, vanishing along the horizon.

And on the Brooklyn Bridge, as the sun begins to set, people—or, rather, what had once *been* people—stumble about, hunched over, raggedly breathing, for they now own the city, and soon, they will own the world.

August 2025

The next morning they wake at dawn and walk along the beach. It's their last morning in the Keys. As they walk along the beach she asks why he has tried to forget it all. "Wouldn't you?" he says. She asks him again. "Like I told you last night, everything about me was gone. I had no choice but to start over. To become someone else." He doesn't tell her he changed her name; she never knew that about him. "I had to rebuild myself, you know? And that meant trying to forget everything that happened. It meant trying to forget about my family, my sister, my friends." He purposefully doesn't mention Hannah, and he can tell from his wife's eyes that she notices. "Maybe that means I'm being disloyal, that I'm disowning them, and maybe I am, but... It was the only way to cope. It was the only way that I could keep myself from cutting my wrists, or jumping off the highest deck of the ship where I was cooped up for years with people who were just as cold, detached, and alone as I was. There was no community. We were strangers living together like a family. But that's why I've done my best to forget... And now I have to remember."

"No one starts over," she says.

"What?"

"Your whole premise is built on the idea that you can just start over. But no one can. You tried to forget everything about your old life so that you could begin a new one. Become someone else. You tried to kill the old you—though in your mind, I bet, the 'old you' was already dead, he just needed to be buried—but the reality is, who you are now is a direct result of what happened twenty years ago and everything that followed. The present is built upon the past which is built upon the even farther past. You can't start over. You can redirect, maybe, but you can't start over. And that means you can't kill off the old you, because as long as you're alive, the old you will always be there."

He doesn't say anything, just keeps walking.

She grabs him by the arm. "You're not going to kill yourself, are you?"

He looks at her. "What?"

"I don't know."

"No. I'm not going to kill myself."

"Good," she says.

They turn around and head back towards the hotel. The sun continues to climb in the east and it warms his cheeks. Pale white crabs scurry in the sand. "You asked what this changed," he says. "And you know what? It doesn't change anything. Nothing ever changes. Life just continues. Maybe you're right, that all I've done is redirected my life, for better or worse, but the end result is the same. I learned early on that the most ridiculous thing in this world is hope, because nothing ever changes. Redirection occurs, and the settings may change, and people may come in and out of your life, but nothing ever really changes. We just grow old and become cold and detached people, drowning in the sorrows of reality. Maybe we shouldn't have been surprised at what happened twenty years ago. Maybe if we would've accepted the reality of things, that life's a bitch in every way possible, we could've adapted better."

She swings in front of him. "You don't really believe that, do you? You don't believe that hope is the most ridiculous thing?"

"Hope is just a delusion."

"And what am I?"

"You're my wife. And I love you."

"Flowers out of the ashes."

"One day you'll die, and I'll be alone again. Or I'll die, and leave you alone."

"Why do you have to talk like that?"

"Welcome to the real me," he says.

"I wish you didn't talk like this. I wish you didn't think like this."

"So do I."

He side-steps her and walks down the beach, leaving her alone.

The sun continues to climb.

She looks down at the feet and sees a wedding ring lying in the sand.

also check out the

DWELLERS OF THE NIGHT TRILOGY

by Anthony Barnhart

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The disease comes suddenly, without warning and without mercy. This first installment of the trilogy begins with the breaking of the disease, and it follows one man's struggle to survive. It is about tragedy, despair, and hopelessness. It is about the willpower of mankind, and the great lengths he will take to escape the depths of his misery. Covering the first five months of the disease's rampage, this book explores the nature of "the dark-walkers," the life of The Man amidst the chaos of a post-apocalyptic world, and it begins a series of events that will lead to an epic conclusion. \

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Dwellers of the Night: Book Three.

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