

36 Hours

a tale of the undead by

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BEFORE THE END

“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*

A pearl moon shivered amongst the stars, sleeping in the ink black sky. Its cool glow slithered over the palm trees and ferns adorning the marble walkway. The fronds drooped downwards, perspiring gloom that never seemed to leave, drawing your eyes into a never-ceasing stare. The rapping of shoes against stone echoed between the trees at the side of the path; young and old, couples and singles, men and women, children and grandparents made their way up the path, through the chilled night, into the warmth of the building.

Velvet draperies clung to the windows, pushing back the night, trying to forget that there was an end to the day. People stood in groups amongst the room, talking quietly among themselves, holding briefcases and purses. Some cried, and they were comforted. Against the walls were plaques filled with pictures of a baby; the next plaque showed snapshots of a little girl, six or seven, grinning with mustard on her church clothes. A woman stroked the images and turned her head, closed her eyes, throat quivering. A man placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezed.

Flowers covered the back of the room, where, upon a marble pedestal, sat a small rectangular box made of oak wood with silver lining, velvet insides. The coffin was closed, holding back the young girl. As visitors paid their respects, they shook their head, wondering why such a beautiful young woman would have a closed-casket viewing. The simple answer: “The sickness ravaged her. She isn’t recognizable body or soul.” “What kind of sickness?” Ruffled murmurs, whispers in the shadows and corners, under the ease ways and among the elegant gardens: “The doctors don’t know. It took her slowly over a matter of days. They don’t even know how she contracted it. It’s never been seen before.” The visitors huddled together, staring at the coffin, then exchanging frigid glances over to the mother and father, clutching each other; the wife buried her head in her husband’s shoulder, sobbing desperately. “Taken so soon,” someone said. “So innocent.”

Two men went outside under the cool stars, shedding off their rich jackets. One tossed it over the arm of a bench, and turning away from the building, lit a cigarette. His friend didn’t want one. So they stood out in the cold, one taking drags and blowing smoke into the garden flowers. “Such a pity, a life taken like that. Aren’t there more sicknesses now than ever? It’s like an epidemic.”

The other managed a small sigh despite the pain. “There’s always an epidemic every century. We’re still waiting on ours.”

“It’s about time.”

The friend shrugged. “I wouldn’t worry too much about-“

They swung around, hearing a strange noise from inside the building. A gasp, then silence. They looked at each other. The chain-smoker tossed his cigarette into the bushes, grabbed his jacket, and they trotted in through double-wide French doors. Everyone had gathered around the coffin, staring. The two men pushed their way to the front. The mother and father buried the visitors in their elbows, wedging their way to the foot of the coffin. The tears had stopped; the eyes sparkled. The two men stared at the coffin.

It shuddered.

“Oh my gosh...” the mother croaked. Something in her eyes: Hope.

The two men gawked at the coffin. It lay still. No – it shook once more and lay still.

The mother moaned. The father held her back. Was it all an illusion?

The coffin seemed to jump an inch off the platform, and inside there was movement, pressured squiggling and shoving.

The mother wailed, "She's trying to get out!"

"She's dead," someone said. "This isn't-"

Others yelled, "Open the coffin! For God's sake, let her out!"

The two men jumped forward, answering the call. They clambered over the coffin, grabbing the latches.

The father yelled, "Don't open it! Please! My daughter is dead!"

His wife clawed at him. "She's alive! Our daughter's alive!"

"Olivia! She is *dead*! She's been dead for two days! She laid in the morgue *two days*!"

The two men hovered over the casket. It shook beneath them. One of the men backed away, hands up in defense, eyes wide. No illusion.

The crowd yelled, "Let her out! She'll suffocate!"

"Ginger!" the wife screamed. "Ginger!"

The coffin rattled. A noise from within. It sounded like a cry. The two men stared downwards. The sound came again, hit their ears – their hearts chilled. It didn't sound right, didn't sound natural, didn't sound... *human*.

"My daughter cries for me! Do you hear her? *She cries for me!*"

The crowd hollered, "Let her out!" Those out on the walkway and gardens poured inside.

The two men stared at each other. The coffin quaked. They grabbed the rungs.

"No!" the father hollered, trying to push forward through the throngs of desperate onlookers.

"Don't open it! My daughter is *dead*! Her beauty is scarred!"

They grabbed the rungs.

The chain-smoker said, "She's going to suffocate in there, Mr. Allen."

Clawing from within. She was clawing at the velvet coating inside the coffin, trying to escape. The two men grabbed the rungs. The father threw his wife to the side and launched after them; their hands wrapped around the rungs; he hit one broadside with his fist against the cheek. The chain-smoker's hand gripped the latch as he fell, and the lid popped open; the two men tumbled into the flowers, knocking them over, water and soil and sweet fragrances staining thousand-dollar-suits.

The chain-smoker tried to stand, slipped, and heard muffled screams. The world spun; his jaw ached. His friend kicked him in the groin, and he toppled over; rolling onto his back, he opened his eyes, seeing the plants draped all around him. A bright light stung his eyes. A shadow fell over him, something hit him; he tried to stand as his neck seared with pain; he saw spots and felt his flesh ripping. He could feel his blood gushing all over him. The sounds of screaming died away. The pressure vanished. He lay in the pile of funeral flowers, bleeding all over the stalks, eyes glazing, and he lost consciousness.

Two minutes later, he stood.

ALPHA:

The First Twelve Hours

April 23, 2004 Friday

*And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.
And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon
to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto
him a great sword.*

--Revelation 6:3,4

6:00 a.m.

Ashlie is sick
Conversation with Peyton
The principal knows something

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.

Golden light came in through the open window. Birds chirped. A car drove past down on the road. The tree outside my window spread its frosty leaves. A cold wind rushed over the comforter. A typical spring morning. I couldn't get enough of it. I found myself tempted to close my eyes and drift off to sleep once more. But I refused to do so. The digital clock seemed to race through the numbers, and soon I had slept in seven minutes.

Dad walked in. His eyes were sunken, and he scratched his back. "Are you up?" Groggy.

"I'm up," I lied, lying in bed.

"You're going to miss the shower."

"I'm up."

He grunted something and left. I lie in bed. I heard the shower head start to drip, then pour. Missed it.

I got out of bed and beat Ashlie to the shower. She banged on the door, but I drowned her voice out with the shower window. No shampoo. Oh well. My fault. No one ever showered in this bathroom. A measly half-bar of soap. I lathered it over my body, rinsed, dried, and got out.

I expected Ashlie to be angry, but instead she half-heartily just shoved me out of the way and lunged at the toilet seat. She opened her mouth, face tightened, and green vomit splattered into the toilet. Bile crept up the back of my throat. I turned away. She said, "Austin?" Raspy. "Can you tell Mom I'm sick? I threw up all over my floor last night."

Going into Ashlie's room, I smelt the stench and backed out. I went into my parents' bedroom. The bedroom's bathroom door was shut, but wan light escaped from underneath. I woke Mom under the covers. "Ashlie is sick. Puking in the toilet. And she puked all over her floor last night, too."

"Can you clean it up?"

A prospect short of appealing. "I woke up late..."

But she turned over and disappeared into her sleep.

A glance at the red alarm clock. Mom's snoring. "Sure."

Sighing, I hastily grabbed some cleaning solutions, a towel, and some paper towels. Closing my eyes, breathing through my mouth. Grabbed the stale puke up with the towels and threw

them into her waste-basket. I slid it next to her bed. She would need it. Then I sprayed the stain with carpet cleaner and scrubbed it hard. Light bled through her window. Glanced at her Dalmatian clock. "No." I only had ten minutes to get dressed.

Somehow I made it. Grabbed my keys, wallet, some Axe spray. Doused myself.

Dad came in, dressed in his robe. "My work called. For some reason the South Arlington Municipal Courts have been shut down. I don't have to go to work."

It meant nothing to me, except, "Then you can take care of Ashlie?"

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

"Can't you smell it?"

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

I went for the door. "It's in the refrigerator. Shake it up. The fruit settled."

"Thanks." Almost half-consciously, "I love you." Last time I'd hear it. Ever.

"Love you, too, Dad." But did I mean it? Yes. Yes, I did.

The Jeep was parked on the curb. The windows were glazed with a thin layer of frost. The door opened easily, and I slid inside. Threw in the key, pressed the brake, shifted to *drive*, and sped away from home, gunning down the twisting subdivision streets until I reached the road leading east to the intersection settled by Homer's Grocery and the Clearcreek Plaza. I took a right turn, hitting student traffic through Olde Clearcreek. The time melted away. Considered taking a shortcut, but decided against it. Passed the Junior High School. Parents went in, dropping off kids. Yellow buses lumbered like beasts down the roads, brakes squealing. The High School entrance loomed, and I pulled in. Here at the school the traffic lightened. Found my parking spot. Stepped out of the Jeep. I had enough time. Sigh of relief.

The Sunfire in the dream grilled past, and dove into a parking spot a few spaces down.

I walked over. Through the tinted windows, I saw two friends. And someone I couldn't quite figure out.

The engine cut. The driver's door opened. Hannah stepped out. Her brown hair dripped with the last water from a hasty shower, placid eyes twin torches, her tender build unquenchable. Her smile resonated peace. She looked at me warily. I knew she was somehow afraid of me—not afraid like I was an axe-murderer. Maybe uncomfortable is a better word. Discomfort was written all over her wan grin. "How you doing?" I crooned.

"I'm fine. Tired."

Her brother Peyton appeared at the other end, throwing the book-bag over his shoulder. "Hey, loser."

I fake flicked him off. "Screw you."

Hannah turned away. No! But I said nothing. Peyton came around from the rear of the car. "Flirting with my sister, Austin?"

Hannah's face flushed several shades of red; a glare at her brother.

"Flirting? No."

"Did you know Hannah went to a movie with another guy?"

My heart crumbled. But I wouldn't let it show. I shot a look over at Hannah. "Awesome. Who's that?"

"No one," she said.

"Oh, come on. You *did* go to a movie?"

"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 in the halls." Wanting nothing more to say, she headed for the door with the streaming flood of high school students.

Peyton stood by my side. "She's known you for how long, Austin?"

"What? Oh. Tired. I don't know. Four years. Five."

"And she wouldn't go with you. But she didn't know what's-his-face—"

"Hal," I threw in.

Peyton nodded. "She hasn't known him for a day yet. And she went to a movie with him yesterday."

We strode for the entrance. Hannah jumped into a wave of popular kids. "Do you have a point?"

"You know what this place is?"

"School."

"Yes. And more. It's a game. A game, Austin. You know what game?"

Might as well play along. "No. What game is it, Peyton?"

"It's a game where the losers die and the winners suffer. The dice are popularity and good looks."

If I were to be ranting now I would say 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 had admitted *to Les' face* that she really did like him. They had kissed several times. Seems like a sure-fire win to ask, doesn't it? But he didn't look at the grim facts. Quoting Les, who quotes the girl, she said, "I like your personality and I like you, but maybe lose some weight and take care of your face..." I won't ever get a girlfriend because I'm not popular, not cool and beneficial to a dumb reputation, and I'm not physically attractive. Oh. I know. Forget about what's important. Look at the glossy wrapping paper—screw the present underneath. You may think this twisting of what matters is coming mostly from what I see here at Clearcreek High School. Lo, it's not. Yes, it's here, but you would never believe that it runs *rampant* in the doors of my own Spring Falls Ohio Non-denominational Church. A body of Christ, infected to the core by the world. You might think I hate the girls who are like this. I don't I don't really hate anyone. But I am sorry. Not so sorry for me, but for them. Because when they grow up and marry the jocks and preps and the kids with the money, they will sit alone in their homes, within white-washed walls, and stare into the dreary rain, and wonder, *Where did I go wrong?*

I noticed two police cars in the bus lot. Cops sat inside. One was reading a paper, the other sipping a paper cup of coffee. "You're a weird guy, Peyton." Betraying all I knew. We pushed through the front doors. Some mangled talk of the Hartford situation. Growing. I could've cared less, but kept note for my journal that night. I never could have imagined how terrible the next several hours could possibly be.

Nightmares. Dreamscapes.

"You think I'm wrong?"

"No. You're right."

"Don't count on getting her, man. She's too obsessed with all the other crap."

"Yeah. I know. I didn't mean anything by the movie." I 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 us. "Whatever, Peyton."

The atrium loomed up. 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. We split there. He was a freshman, and his hallway was in the other direction. He offered a hand. "I'll see you at lunch."

Shaking his hand, "You know it. Later, man."

He called over his shoulder, "Forget her, man!"

Never heard that before.

I dismissed him with a wave of my hand.

On the way to class, I happened to steal a glance into the administrator's office. I saw on the principal and vice principal's faces a look I knew not too well—worry. Nervousness. Fear.

7:00 a.m.

The boy in the nurse's office
Conversation at the front desk
Outbreak

I skipped into class several seconds late. I slipped through the door, tried to make it to my seat, but Ms. Hood glanced over her shoulder from the window. Her eyes glazed over. I stood entranced, a raccoon caught in the headlights of a speeding car. She growled, "That's a detention. Get in your seat." So my trek to being on time was another failure. Chalk up yet another detention. I slipped into my seat next to the chalkboard. Freshly-applied chalk dripped off the board.

Hood went to the front of the room. "How was—" The phone hooked onto the wall rattled. She picked it up and started talking.

I opened up my folder, glanced at some Chemistry and World History homework, shut it. The Stephen King book of short stories, *Skeleton Crew*, made my mind salivate. The introduction last night was interesting. I grabbed it and flipped open to the story, *The Mist*. Looked out the window. A thin line of trees separated the school grounds and the Greenview neighborhood behind it. A mist curled around the trees and spilled over the grassy lawn, between picket fences and squat houses in Greenview. Mist. Mist has always been cool. In *The Mist*, the mist was a harbor of fiendish, almost prehistoric—or alien—creatures. However you interpret it. I imagined the mist crawling towards the High School, ominous and—

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

I set my book down. *The Mist* was just getting good. But in this hellish place, a run to the administrator's office was better than Accounting. I said okay and went out the door.

The once swarming halls were empty; the hive dripped with silence. I came to the atrium. The glass windows reflected my figure as I walked towards the door. I had lost a lot of weight. Forty pounds. And building muscle, too. I had decided to get rid of my overflowing love handles and get set for summer. It would be great to be able to do push-ups without choking on my own fat. The door opened easily. I think it had been greased last night. They did stuff like that Sunday nights.

The receptionist was gone. There were several chairs, and an aerial photograph of the school hooked onto the wall. I rapped my fingers on the desk. I would've rang a bell if there had been one. I waited. And looked up at a television. Just a blue screen. Usually they scrolled announcements. Not till about eight or nine, though. When kids started waking up. I rubbed my eyes. The white light from the double doors near the bus entrance burnt brightly. Reminded me of how tired my body really was.

Bit my bottom lip. Then my ears picked up something. From an office. No. The nurse's ward. It sounded like the voice of an angry boy. No receptionist. Waited. A receptionist did not come. Needed the papers. A girl walked the halls, collecting attendance rosters from little posts on the doors. The voices. The papers.

I stuck to the walls and made my way into the corridor. Offices on either side. Glass windows revealed humming computer screens and empty chairs. I went on down the corridor. It bent to the side.

The voice grew stronger.

A sign hung over a door: *NURSE'S OFFICE*. Underneath it was a small square window. I pressed my face against it and 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, and 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 aide medicines.

The voices passed through the door.

Vice principal: "Who was the last person you touched?"

Kid: "My mom when I kissed her good-bye." Anger. Strange fury.

I imagined the kid only an hour or two earlier, going into his mom's room. She lies asleep in bed. Hazel morning light floats in from the one window. He kneels down beside her. One of the blankets falls to the floor; he rests his knee on it. He smiled. The sound of the shower shutting off, and feet scampering in the bathroom. His dad drying. His mom sleeps soundly, eyes closed, lips quivering with every deep breath. Lost in a dream. A whirlwind through a thorn tree. He couldn't know. He doesn't know. He kisses her on the cheeks. They were warm with life. She opens her eyes, and she kisses him on the lips. Nothing sensual—gross—just a motherly-son peck. He stands. "I'm going to school." "I love you." His dad comes out of the bathroom. "I love you, too," he said in a whisper, and scurries away.

The nurse asks the boy, hours later, "Is your mom in an affair?"

"Whose business is that?"

"Did anyone else touch you?"

"No." Malevolence.

"Did *you* touch anyone?"

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

"Sensually."

"What the heck kind of question is that?" Deeper anger. Guttural anger.

"Just answer the question, son."

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

"Is that all?"

"I kissed Ellie Grabeman."

"Isn't she going with Alan?"

"And another kid, I know! Don't give me a dumb sermon!"

The vice principal grabbed the kid roughly by the arm. The kid howled, and ripped away. He lifted his face—and I wanted to jump backwards. His pale skin had gone a deep purple; his eyes had sunken into the back of his head; the lips curled back, revealing yellowing teeth. The veins in his neck bulged. Sweat cascaded down his face. I was horrified, yet entranced. I pulled myself back up to the glass.

The kid's wild eyes darted between the three people in the room. He roared, "Let me out of here!"

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

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

Stepping forward, the principal placed a hand over the vice principal's shoulder. "He's sick." 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 straight at me. "Hey! There's a kid out there!"

I ducked down and scrambled down the corridor, around the bend, nearly running into the receptionist. I swung around her, then remembered. "Ms. Hood left her attendance roster down here..." My voice seemed to strangely dance with an untamed, unprecedented reluctance. "She sent me to—"

"To crawl down the hallways? What've you been up to?"

"Looking for you. I waited."

"Well. You found me."

"Yeah. I did."

She disappeared a moment, then returned, and handed me some papers. I heard shouting. She said, "Get along now."

Remembered the kid's name. I couldn't help asking. "What's up with Matt?"

She frowned. "You know him?"

"He's a friend of mine."

"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. What?"

"Her husband woke up—Matthew's step-father—and found his mom missing. She had slept on the couch downstairs. I guess he got drunk, and she didn't sleep with him when he's drunk. That's what Matthew said."

"Yeah... He's an alcoholic." I didn't know the kid. But it sounded good enough.

"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 bed. The dog was gone, too. And then Matthew broke out in these purplish rashes, and his skin got all tight, his eyes bulged, lips curled. Really something terrible." Under her breath, "I saw something on television. About Hartford. They had found someone roaming about twenty miles northwest—" Our direction. "—and they looked exactly like this kid here. And this woman. 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. Sounds. Hideous sounds. Horrible sounds. Made my blood run cold. They had her bolted in chains. And they said that they had more, and they were all very angry. Then the video-tape cut off."

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

"Yes. Except he seems a lot less—seriously 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, to restrain the victims and call for help."

"I saw some police cars outside..."

"They left. Had other things to do."

I glanced out towards the bus entrance. A patrol car pulled along the curb. "This looks serious."

"It *is* serious. All of Hartford is wiped out, I think."

"From this disease?"

Her face hardened. "From *something*."

The cops were coming into the building. Shouting from the nurse's office, echoing down the corridors. I dipped away and scurried back to class, holding the papers under my arm. Everyone stared at me as I walked in. I suspect my face was ashen white. Hood said, "Did you get the papers?"

I nodded, and handed them to her.

"What took you so long?"

"The receptionist was busy?"

"You're wasting my time."

Why do some teachers just always have to *complain*? Saying nothing, I dropped into my seat. The Stephen King novel just lay there. I didn't want to read it anymore. The boy's angry yells were engraved in my mind. How his mom had disappeared. Why couldn't she have just opened the door and slipped out? Why'd she barge her way out of the house? I shuddered at reasons. None stood unbeaten.

My thought was broken. Some kid said, "Hey! Outside!"

Hood. "What is it, Jeff?"

"An accident! An accident in the subdivision!"

Kids leapt from their seats and crowded the windows. I was slow, and couldn't get to the two windows. And I had been born with short genes. I couldn't see over the tops of their heads. I pieced the image together in my mind. An image I didn't want. An image made up of shocked words from the students' mouths.

The driver looks okay, he just got out of the car.

Why did the one swerve into the other lane?

He's getting out of his car.

What's wrong with him? He looks so messed up.

What're they doing?

Oh my gosh, he just tackled him! He's beating him on the pavement!

He's killing the other guy! He's yelling and killing and beating him!

The trees! The trees! Look at them!
Who do you think they are?
They don't look right.

I stood atop a desk. The caps of the students ran to the windows. I could barely make out the base of the tree line. The mist. *Skeleton Crew*. Out of the mist were foggy shapes, humans, except they seemed to be hunched over, arms dangling, legs leading them this way and that. The figures materialized out of the mist. Men and women. Regular people. Some had blood stains on their clothes. But most were just covered with that purple discoloration, the sunken eyes, venomous teeth. Absolutely awful-looking. They were heading towards the school, through the brown, curling grass of the lawn, between pounds of moss-ridden dirt. They ambled along, with no directive. Aimlessly. Some tilted their heads. Others fell, only to get back up. Drool dripped down their faces. The beauty on the outside replaced with horrible ugliness; the beauty on the inside just stripped away, revealing the dark malice and sin beneath.

I jumped off the desk, barged through the door. Hood didn't even yell at me. I could see students in the hall, talking hurriedly. Some teachers came out, trying to calm everyone down. I jogged over to the atrium and peered down; a cop stood there. In one hand was a 9mm, the other a radio. He held the radio less tense than the gun. Some kids bounced into me. I didn't care. Doors opened and kids staggered out of classrooms.

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 its burning...
There are people down there, coming towards the school!
People?

They don't look right. They look sick.

I half-ran, half-fell down a flight of steps, landing on the ground floor. Kids were here and there, thick as flies over carrion. I thought of carrion. Dead animals. I thought that the people coming towards the school were a lot like dead animals.

There was a crash, a shatter, a scream—horrendous—and a shout.

I looked over.

Kids shouted and hollered and ran. Glass covered the floor from one of the doors leading out to the concrete patio encircling the school. I could see hands reaching through the glass, groping. A hand grabbed the shirt of a football player, but he ripped free. He punched the figure, which I couldn't see, and the hands slithered out. A stampede erupted as another door bent open, and a deranged woman gushed in. She was large and overweight, purple flesh rolling through her shirt. She stumbled into the corridor and wrenched a kid, throwing her against a locker; the girl beat the brute, and the woman smashed her head into the girl's face, bashing it in. Blood flowed over the woman's arms. She sunk her teeth into the girl's broken face, the girl's ragged screams jagged with agony.

I couldn't move, even with all the kids sprinting past, here and there. The girl dropped to the ground; the woman ran down the hall. The other door burst open, and several male figures entered, twitching and flailing. I felt a bulge and streaking pain; my shirt tugged back; I glanced over my shoulder. Through broken glass an elder's face glared at me, the once-happy and comical age lines now replaced with hatred and blood lust. Blood dripped from his lips. I tore away and fell against the water fountain. Collapsed to the floor.

From the floor, I saw feet running past. The door at my feet splintered open. A man rushed in and tackled a kid to the ground, beating him with his fists. I was too paralyzed to help, the youth's bitter screams resounding painfully in my ears. Then I saw the girl who had been mashed in the face getting to her feet. Blood flowed like a river, but somehow she stood, one eye caked in warm blood. She stared right at me, and surged towards my sprawled position; her manicured hands snapped and jolted; her mouth furled back, revealing yellowing teeth. Her eyes locked with mine.

Nightmares

I ripped myself to my feet and surged down the hallway. Kids were pouring down the steps leading to the second story. Some were even going up. Why, I don't know. I doubt they escaped. The atrium was pandemonium; some kids lay trampled, groping at wounds. Others screamed and cried. Several large and muscular kids pinned themselves against the bus

entrance doors; against the doors, several wracking people threw their bodies, clawing at the glass. Infected. Infected. That's what they were. Infected. Like the boy.

The boy.

I spun around to see the boy coming at me. His braids covered his fiendish face. He let out a snarl, a scream, a howl, blood-chilling. He came at me fast. A kid jumped out of the way. I hunched and drilled my foot into the kid's chest, tossing him down. He hit hard and growled—or roared?—at me. He reached for my ankles, and pulled himself to them, ready to sink in his teeth. I remembered the girl. How she awoke. How she had become something so... evil. The kid's teeth glimmered; I stumbled away, but fell, landing on my tail bone. Pain. Didn't care. I kicked Matthew—it wasn't Matthew anymore—in the face, and blood flowed from the shoe imprint. He fell back, scraping at the wound.

I got to my feet and joined the crowd.

Those barring the door were thrown back as the people threw their entire weight onto the door. They fell to the ground, and the infected swarmed over them like bees in a hive. The kids screamed for help, tried to get up, but the infected did not obey, only beat them and sank their teeth into them and clawed at them and ripped at their clothes, their flesh, those mangled screams. Mutilated cries.

I stood near one of the brick pillars of the once-silent atrium. Those holding the doors got to their feet, sluggishly, and their faces went purple, eyes sunken. Infected. They headed towards the crowd. A girl ran after one of them, screaming for her brother; her brother grabbed her and threw her against the wall, then ripped off her arm. Blood gushed all over the glass trophy display, staining the titles. She screamed and cried as her brother murdered her under the effects of the disease.

The crowd tugged me along. Down D Hallway. Into the commons. The infected were everywhere, pouring through windows and doors. I fell between two tables; an infected came at me; I kicked a table over, hurling it at him; the infected fell. I snatched my chair, on my feet. Another came at me, out of the shadows. It was a kid. A teen in my health class. I bashed her with the chair, then stomped down on her throat. She gurgled. Tears. Wanted to cry. Didn't.

The band hallway appeared to be miles away. I ran for it. Somehow I reached it, went through swinging doors. I turned to see three infected humans coming at me. An older man and two teens from the school. One bled profusely from the leg. I kicked the doors outward, knocking them down, and raced down the hallway.

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

"Run!" I hollered, tried to run past.

He grabbed me. The weight-lifting coach.

Coach snarled, "Where do you think—"

The doors flipped open and the infected came through, growling.

The coach's brow creased. "What in the—"

A connecting hallway spilled the female gym teacher. She hollered and ran at us. I pulled free and bolted for glass doors leading to a grassy lawn, which bordered the parking lot. It looked clear. I shook the doors. Locked. The weight-lifting teacher swung at the gym teacher and knocked her to the ground. The other three intercepted, and he swung left and right; he fell, blood flowing from his arm. The infected jumped all over him. Finally he threw them off. But when he stood, he wasn't the gym teacher.

He stared at me.

No... No... I rattled the doors... No.

He came toward, lumbering. I was pinned. The doors jolted back and forth. I let out a scream, hunched back, and kicked the glass as hard as possible. It webbed. I kicked again, and it splintered. I ducked and punched my hands into the glass. Shards cut my hand.

Coach reached for me.

I ducked through; his hands brushed my feet, and I curled fetal outside under the warm sun.

Coach shook the doors, unable to fit through. He roared. The other infected came to the door. One could fit through. I didn't wait to see how long it would take.

I ran across the grassy knoll. Smoke rose above the skyscrapers plastered against the jagged mountains, curling around the towering buildings. I could see the Junior High. Little kids ran, their screams rushing my ears. High School kids gushed from several entrances, running

for their cars. Some already reached the parking lot, gunning for home in terror. Infected beings ran between the cars, from the trees, and came from the surrounding neighborhoods. Horns honked everywhere. Madness. In the distance I could hear the smashing of metal, screams and cries. An explosion shook the ground.

The infected crawled through the hole and ran after me.

I jumped five feet over the grass and landed hard on the street. A car revved right for me. I ran across the street. The infected jumped, landing hard, sprawling. He looked up as the car smashed into him, rolling over his body. Cared not to see the carnage. I ran between the aisles, searching for my Jeep. Fear. My keys. They were there. I found the Jeep Cherokee, the green paint warm under the spring sun. My door was locked.

Some of the infected rummaging the parking lot saw me and started coming towards me.

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

They were near. So near. Too near. They hollered. Blood-curdling hollers.

"God help me..." The key twisted. I jumped in, slammed the door, locked it.

An infected hurled himself against the car door window, spreading drool and blood over the glass. I started the engine, telling myself to calm down, threw it into reverse, and stamped the gas. I jerked the wheel and reversed, swinging in an arch, parallel to the car lane.

And I 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. I didn't see Peyton. I hit the gas, raced forward, slammed the brakes. I reached under the seat, grabbed an iron bar used for installing tires, unlocked the car, jumped out. I shouted at her. She turned, pointed. I ducked just as an infected swung out at me. I jabbed the pointed end of the bar upwards, into the infected beast's stomach. It fell back, groping at the wound, falling against a truck. Blood spread between his fingers.

"Get in!" I shouted.

Hannah raced forward and dove through the front seat. An infected came at the door. It was my Government teacher; she had given me the Gold Coin award because I was, in her words, a "hard-working, determined student with a good attitude, and very admirable." Now she ran towards me, bleeding from the eye, wailing like a burnt banshee. Another came from behind, hunched over and corroding from morality.

I hopped in, slammed it shut, hit the gas. Left both behind me. "What's going on!" she cried.

"I've no idea."

I sped down the lane, out onto the exit road, and hit the gas hard as possible. An infected darted in front of us; I hit it, shocked I had hit a person. The body thumped on the windshield, pulled a cartwheel and landed behind us, bones broken and smeared. I pulled onto the main road. The stoplights were dim. I sped past the Junior High, towards Olde Clearcreek. For home.

Left the High School behind.

Alive.

Hannah gaped at me. "My brother..."

8:00 a.m.

Main Street
25 Rosebud Avenue
Revelation

Main Street was a disaster. Accidents cluttered the roadway; cars burned; vehicles had slid into ditches. Smoke gushed from the burning skeletons of Miatas and Fords and Pontiacs. Vehicles went my direction, shakily swerving ahead of and behind me. Some went the other direction, high-tailing it out of downtown South Arlington. Infected walked the road and roadsides, legs cutting through a shallow morning mist that lapped at the street sides. Hannah hunched over, sobbing, repeating over and over, "My brother, my brother, my brother..." Peyton. I wasn't going back. Sorry buddy. Not a chance. I jerked the wheel and swerved around the collision of a truck and van; a man was crawling out of the truck back window. I stole a look into the glass

window and saw an infected rushing the truck. What had happened to these people? I really didn't know. And still don't. The scientists have never understood; it just sort of ran its course, and for some godforsaken reason, I was spared. Me and a few others.

I felt bad for Hannah. But every time she said, "My brother..." I thought of Ashlie.

I cared more about Ashlie than I did anyone else.

The Jeep shook, an infected jumping onto the top. I could hear his scratching. Hannah looked up. I gritted my teeth. Slammed the brakes. The mutant flailed forward, hitting the hood, grasping at the smooth paint, fell next to my front tires. The Jeep bounded twice, crunching the body into the pavement. The wheels jammed. We were next to the entrance of a subdivision. The infected were pouring after us, running through lawns and backyards and coming right for the windows. The wheels shook back and forth. No. No. The Jeep bounded forward, spraying the blood of the victim all over the sprinting infected.

"Traffic," I muttered under my breath.

Smoke rose from Olde Clearcreek. Some buildings held shattered glass, others were billowing flames and smoke from the windows. Infected ran the sidewalks. Little children ran amok. The two little kid schools were on either side, and they emptied into Olde Clearcreek. The infected grabbed tiny boys and girls and attacked. The kids' screams filled my ears even through the windows. Little kids always had such high-pitched shrieks. A little girl threw herself against the window; blood gushed from her scalp, stringing her clotted strands of hair. She stared at us through Hannah's window, opened her mouth. I stamped the gas and sped away, rolling over her foot with the tires; she just watched us go, then turned on a panicking classmate.

Everyone was panicking.

A cloud of smoke blew over the Jeep, thinned. A seven-car pile-up blocked my way, the road home. I did a U-turn, ramping the sidewalk, nearly missing a light pole. I went back the other direction. A Honda erupted from the smoke, nearly hitting me. I turned right onto a road I knew fairly well. The road twisted and turned into a rolling mass of subdivision.

Some homes coughed smoke. I went around an accident in flames, the broiled body of a human flailing about, writhing in fire. People ran out of their homes. Infected wandered and attacked all who moved. One tried to get to us, but we were too fast, leaving him dwindling behind. I saw with my own eyes horrible things. Men and women beaten down by infected; some walking without arms, crawling without legs, moving despite the loss of blood; little children from the schools wondering like zombies; accident victims feebly fighting off vicious assailants; infected coming out of homes, drenched in blood. So terrible. I wanted to cry. Husbands killed by wives, children tearing at their parents.

I want to cry now.

We pulled down another road. It was mostly quiet. *Quieter*. Another turn. People stood outside their doors, watching us, saw blood plastered over the wheels and staining the forest green paint. The confusion from Main Street had not reached them yet. I yanked the Jeep to a halt, pulling up into the driveway of Les' home. I opened the door.

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

"I have to get Les." Les was home-schooled. He should be there.

"No..."

I slammed the door and raced up the steps to their front door. Rang the doorbell. Why not just go inside? Strange how one reacts under pressure. Tried the handle. Locked. Heard shouts and shrieks and horns and the roaring fire. Smoke leaked into the sky. The sky-scrapers in the distance were wearing smoke, ashes, fire and brimstone like the crowns of hell.

A neighbor yelled, "What's going on!"

"Get inside!"

Several infected appeared down by the street. They saw an older woman and ran for her.

I looked to Hannah and motioned for her to come.

She shook her head.

The door opened. I barely noticed. An infected clambered down a fence next door, came right at me. Les opened the door. I jumped inside. Saw Hannah. She was locking the Jeep doors. I slammed the front door and locked it with haste. Les stared at me in ultimate confusion. It was silent in his home. The walls were sound-proof.

Falling against the wall, I gasped for breath. Afraid I would slip into shock.

"What are you here for?" Les asked. I guess he saw the fear in my crystalline eyes. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head no. "Les... Have you heard—"

"Heard what?"

"Outside?"

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

I slapped his hands away. "No. You can't go out there!"

"Why not?"

"Because *they're* out there!"

The large bay window shuttered. Les peered over, and recoiled in shock. The neighbor I had talked to just moments before sprayed the window with blood from a wound on the neck. Rabid eyes. I shuddered to look. The palms pressed against the window. The eyes stared at us. Chest heaved. Blood dripped down the shirt.

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

"No." I 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 went closer. "Austin! It's Hannah."

"She's in the Jeep." I looked down at my legs and arms. They shook so hard I thought I'd fall.

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

I ran over to the window, standing beside him. Infected clambered over the car. An older man and woman. The spots of blood on the clothes implied Mr. Smith had killed his wife, and the two of them became infected and exploded from their little retirement home. Smith was atop the Jeep, pressing his head, hands, knees and feet against the cold top. His wife—what was left of her—squatting next to Hannah's door, wrestling the door-jamb, snarling into the window. More infected swarmed from the homes.

"Are all your doors locked?" I breathed.

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

Honking, a car crash, shearing metal. Down the street. The floor rocked.

"We have to get her out of there."

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

"Les, just shut up and look at them! Here's my plan—you have a paintball gun, don't you?"

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

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

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

"I know. Do it."

He rolled his eyes and raced up the steps. I stood by the front door, unlocking it. Grabbed the knob. Rested my shoulder against the door in case anyone—*anything*—tried to get in. Clattering and shuffling upstairs. A pause. Creaking. The upstairs window opening. Then I heard the pops from upstairs, and through the window heard the screeches of the infected as they scattered off the Jeep and ran for cover. I flung open the door and raced out there, to the Jeep. Hannah looked terrified, ashen-faced and red-eyed. I grabbed the doorknob. "Unlock it!" She shook her head. The infected were out on the street. Les was still shooting, sending them this way and that. Paintballs splattered everywhere. "Hannah! You have to open the door!" She did, and I grabbed her arm, yanking her out. The paintballs ran out. The Smiths cocked their heads and stared at us; one revealed a maw of yellow teeth.

They charged.

"Hannah! Faster!" We ran up to the door. I shoved Hannah inside.

The Smiths ran past the Jeep, barreling right for us. No longer the innocent grandparents.

Monsters.

I dove inside and slammed the door shut, locking it. The door shook as the Smiths threw themselves against it. Dust fluttered off the hinges. I feared the hinges would snap and they'd stumble inside. But the door stopped shaking. Hannah had fallen to the ground. I went to the window. The Smiths meandered around the Jeep. A man was running down the sidewalk,

running with no direction. The Smiths growled and ran at him. I turned my head and went over to Hannah.

"You okay?"

She nodded, curled upon the ground, holding back more tears.

My heart pounded. Les came running from downstairs. The paintball gun was in his hands.

"Thanks," I said. "Disaster avoided."

Les said, "It's not safe down here. That glass could break. Upstairs. Jack's room has about fifteen hundred locks on the door, bolted windows and a bathroom." We followed him up the twisting staircase and into Jack's room. Les shut the door, twisted the lock. A desk, a dresser. Television. Bed. Jack was off at college. Left that morning. Windows overlooked the side yard and the street. The door to the bathroom was on one hinge. That window peered into the backyard. A toilet, a shower, some cabinets, a sink.

Water.

I ran some into cupped hands and drank it down greedily. Les stood by the window, looking down at the street, the neighborhood homes. Hannah sat on the bed, staring at the wall, no doubt listening to the muffled sounds of Hell on earth. Dried my hands, exited the bathroom. Les said over his shoulder, "The Smiths are gone. There's others, though. They look like demons out of hell."

"Don't let them see you."

"They can't get in here," Les replied.

Shattering glass downstairs, hollers floating to the door. Hannah stared at the door-knob.

I croaked, "Sure about that?"

Les ducked away from the window and sat down next to Hannah, pointing the gun at the door. I stood near the bathroom. It was comical, a paintball gun. What were we thinking? Silence. Then the sound of pots falling from the downstairs kitchen. Les' dog started barking. Another sound in the barking. The barking stopped, cut off by a rising squeal, then tapering off in a mangy gurgle. Les' eyes glazed over, and his Adam's apple bobbed. Scuffling feet. Sweat dripped down my face. The fan overhead hung low, turned off. I yearned so much for its breeze. Hannah was whimpering; Les held the paintball gun and pointed it at the door. So scared.

Someone was moving around downstairs. Suddenly I looked over to Les, and mouthed, *Your mom?*

He didn't notice. I returned my gaze to the door. It seemed to loom bigger and bigger.

The feet tampered downstairs, then began coming up the steps. *Creak-creak-creak*. Each step resounding, sending fear riveting through us. Hannah's whimpering was growing louder. Tears swelled under her eyes. Who could really blame her? She opened her mouth, dragging for air. Les stared at her in horror. I rushed forward, lightly, and threw my hand over her mouth, muffling a cry. The footsteps stopped.

Silence. Eternity.

Then the person came for the door, and stopped right outside it. A jingling. The door-knob bent down, then rattled. The lock kept it from opening. It rattled harder, harder, harder. Quiet. The footsteps trotted backwards, and vanished. We listened for ages, for anything, ears drowning the noise outside the windows and jumping at every crack and nuisance outside Jack's door.

Minutes passed. I removed my hand from Hannah's mouth. She dropped her head into her hands.

Les swallowed. His face was pale. I think his dog's dwindling screams ran the treadmill in his mind. "Do you think he's gone?" he whispered in a hoarse voice.

"How should I know?" I 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 danced here and there, crawling like animals, along the sides of houses, but it seemed they exited down the street corner, heading towards the gut of Spring Falls—No, I thought. They were heading for Downtown South Arlington. Where my dad worked. But he was at home. So was my mom and sick sister. I suddenly yearned so strongly for all of them. "We need to go."

Hannah finally spoke. "Are you insane?"

"My family is at home. My dad has probably protected them. They're worried about me."

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

"For how long?"

Hannah wailed, "It's death out there!" Why did she need to be so loud?

I went to the other window. The keys were in my pocket. The Smiths had vanished. The Jeep just sat there in the driveway. "My Jeep has enough gas. The sick people" but were they *people*?—"seem to be leaving." My fingers curled around the cool keys, running along the spliced grooves and ridges.

"Going 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 said. He looked at the door. "Or the person in the house." He gripped the paintball gun even tighter. White knuckles.

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

"Not me," Les said.

Hannah said the same.

I only shrugged. "Well. You guys are smart, I guess. But to all his own." I went for the door.

Les jumped in front of me. "No."

"You can't make me stay," I said.

"Look. There's someone or something out there. Maybe just outside the door."

"They left."

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

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

"Look out the window," I 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. No organization."

"Stop talking. Just stop."

I pushed him out of the way, but he shoved me back. I fell into the dresser. Pain streaking along my back. He towered over me, suddenly taller. I kicked him in the groin and shoved him down onto the bed; Hannah leapt out of the way. Fuming, I ripped open the door and ran into the dark hallway. Hannah raced forward, shouted, "Austin! Get back in here!" I kept my back to her. *SLAM*. Turned. The door was shut. *Click*. She locked it tight. She was crying again. I could hear it through the door. Les was saying something under his breath.

I tottered down the steps to the front door. I grabbed the cool handle. But I couldn't go out. I thought of the two of them upstairs, refusing to move. Stubborn. And dying up there. Someway, somehow. And their bodies rotting, leaving retired skeletons. The bones yellowing with age. And me sitting at home drinking and eating, surviving the outbreak, and knowing I left them just to die. I let go of the door. Divorcing myself. I went into the kitchen. Can't tell you why I didn't go upstairs. But I opened a drawer and withdrew a dull steel butcher knife. When I headed back to the stairwell, I looked into the living room, and saw a stream of blood flowing from around the bar. The blood went past my feet. Such a dark red.

Now I went towards the bar. Curiosity drew me. Perplexed. The dog's nuzzle pointed from around the bar, mouth slack. The fur glowed dark red, matted down with blood. The tongue, thick and swollen, lay splattered over the bloody tile. The knife held rigid in my hands. Then the dog's head pulled back a moment, then returned to where it was. The fur had a dent where its head had been resting. Now the angle was different. I peered over the counter.

A teen from across the street wore nothing but shorts, and had three ragged slashes down his mottled back. Hair drenched with sweat and blood dangled down his scalp. I let out a muffled cough. The head snapped up. Flesh, fur, meat and muscle hung from his jaws, blood dripping down his chin and running down his neck. Those sunken eyes stared at me as if in wonder, then the jaws opened in a gruesome screech. He straightened up and lunged at me; I backed away from the bar, but he fell over it. Bloody claws scraped at me as his legs kicked. I drew the knife out; he hollered at me, and I sunk the blade down into his neck, pressing down with force and feeling the flesh and tissue shear under the tip and blade of the dagger; blood squirted all over my shirt. He twitched once, then lay still. Blood gushed up and around the knife. I let it there and collapsed onto the couch, breathing so hard I felt my lungs would burst. The blood smeared all over my hands and shirt when I found the stupidity to try and wipe it off.

Sunlight from the window caressed my face. It was broken, a gaping hole looking into the room. Glass shards covered the floor, glittering like jewels in the morning light. A fine wind breathed in, and I welcomed it. The street was deserted. I saw a man run down the sidewalk, obviously in fright. But he was not chased. Why was he running? Then I knew. We all had to run. No one was safe. Hartford was a nightmare. It succumbed. And I had a thought, a fear, a revelation: *we will succumb, too.*

All of us.

9:00 a.m.

Chris King no more
Dead are not dead
What happened to Hannah's brother

So I went back upstairs. What else to do? I didn't feel like waiting for death by the broken window. The door was locked. I felt fear ripple through them when I jiggled the door-knob. They got the message when I knocked and let me inside.

Hannah looked at me. "Did you change your mind?" Then she saw the blood spattered over my clothes, her hand flashed up over her mouth, and she fell back against Les. Les just gaped at me in shock. Hannah turned and dropped back to the bed, and started to cry again. Hands folded over her head, tears dripped between tender fingers.

"What in the name of everything sacred happened?" Les mouthed, jaw dropping as if all the muscles suddenly popped loose.

My breath still came in ragged breaths. The blood was warm on my hands. "You were right. There was someone out there." My own voice surprised me—my soul was churning, mind screaming, and all that came was a detached drone.

Les nodded. "Is the person still there?"

Shook my head. "No."

"Do you want some water?"

"Yeah." I allowed myself into the bathroom, ran water over my hands. The light above me bobbed. Surprising, with all the accidents and fires and mayhem, the electricity was still running. Then I remembered that Spring Falls was hooked onto a back-up electricity generator. It had a couple of hours of electricity stored on it, so we had... I looked at my watch. Only about another two hours and the electricity would short out. By noon, we'd be without power. And night. I pushed it from my mind. Didn't want to worry about that. My stomach growled, and bladder cried. I relieved myself.

Knock knock on the door. Les. "Is it safe to go downstairs?"

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

"Why?"

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

When I washed my hands and left the bathroom, only Hannah was there. She stood before the window. The door was shut and locked. I went over to her and stood beside the window. We peered between the branches of a splendid oak. Fresh leaves blossomed and swayed in the wind. The street was deserted. Sirens in the distance, with honking. The faint whisper of screams. I didn't understand why we were so alone. Then I figured, we weren't. Survivors – more than just us! – had to be out there.

"Do you know why," Hannah said, surprising me, "do you know why my brother wasn't with me?"

I didn't answer.

"Do you think I would've left Peyton?" Her eyes bore into me, dangerous. "Do you think I would have abandoned my brother?"

"No."

"I loved him. I loved him so much. I don't care how many times he hit me, knowing that I didn't like it. I always complained about how much it hurt, and how I hated it." She rubbed her

arm. "I didn't like it. But it didn't hurt, not really. He never would hurt me. He didn't do it to hurt me so much as 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* it drove me, I always loved him. I missed him on school vacations." She shook her head, tears swelling. She looked directly at me. Voice choppy, choked. "I loved my brother, Austin. You know I wouldn't have left him behind."

"I know that," I said, not knowing 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, but the cries overcame her, and she went over to Les' navy beanbag chair and dropped down, curling into a fetal position facing the wall. Tears crawled down her face, stained the wooden panel flooring. I saw her shivering under those clothes, shaking in mourning, I heard her choking wails and cries. I saw her stringy hair sticking to her face as her eyes bulged and throat rasped and tongue swelled. My heart melted.

Knocks at the door. At first I didn't move, but I walked over and opened it.

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

"Who?" The name was unfamiliar. "Outside? For God's sake, let him—"

"No," Les told me. "He's downstairs."

A hoarse whisper. "Oh."

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

"And leave her?"

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

So we shut the door, left Jack's room, and walked down the hallway, into Les' room. An XP sat dark and sullen against the wall. The digital clock slowly ticked its red neon numbers. Les' clothes hung from a hook, and the bed was a gnarled mess of twisted blankets and thrown pillows. Les shut the door and locked it tight.

"Did you lock Hannah in?"

"Yeah." He peered out the window. "It's a ghost town."

"It doesn't feel right."

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

I rolled out the leather computer chair. Dropped onto the cushions. "I've no idea."

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

I remembered the school. The never-ending nightmares. Those who were bit became the demons, became the killing machines, devoid of humanity. Bodies without souls. "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 join them?"

"That's not possible. I think this is a disease or something."

"Then what've you been rambling about?"

"It's a disease. A communicable disease. Through saliva. Blood. I don't know."

"Body fluids?"

"Something like that."

"So if you get the body fluids in you... Then you become them. Right?"

I cocked an eye. "Tell me again, Les, how in the world should I know?"

He sighed. "It's just—"

"Do you hear that?" I raced to the window. He was right behind me. 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 flung into the air; the infected fell backwards, flipped over the back rail of the truck, fell to the street. The barrel pulled back into the cab and the truck went down the road, out of sight. Over in seconds.

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

"We can't let our guard down."

"I wonder if the phones work." We went downstairs. I turned my eyes from the carnage. He dropped the phone. "Just silence. Not even static. Nothing."

My nose wrinkled. "That smell."

"It's the scent of death."

"Nice parody. Didn't need it."

"I know."

"Please stop."

He crossed his arms. The blood ran beside our feet, through the kitchen, into the dining room. The blood seemed to turn to jello, becoming thick in spots, like the glazed film over spoiled milk. Except it smelt worse. Les rubbed his eyes and went into the family room. I rummaged through the cup-boards, looking for a snack. Screw my diet. I discovered a box of Cheezits, popped a few in my mouth. Stale. I swallowed some more. Les went into the front room, peering out the bay window, shaking his head. I dropped the box and stepped over the river of blood.

And I looked, followed the river, into the living room.

Blood stained the bar in dripping torrents, splattered like wet paint.

And it was bare.

Heart pounding. Heart racing. Heart thumping. No. No. Impossible. No. The knife. Falling. Into the throat. Blood gushing. Gushing. Body falling. Chris King is no more. No. No. Chris King *is not here*. Terror. I don't know how I did it. I don't know how my body wasn't literally paralyzed with fear. But my foot stepped out. And the other followed. The walls to either side slid past, too fast, yet morbidly slow. And the room opened. It was empty. The dog's head lie there, tongue lolled out past its teeth, blood drenching the fur. The bar stank of vomit and urine and feces, blended with the sweet and sour odor of drying blood.

I walked around the bar, bracing myself, running it over and over in my mind: the swift attack, me falling, as King's claws rip me to pieces. I walked around the bar. And looked down. The dog's side was torn open, as if hands dropped in and pulled. Flesh ragged at the sides. Blood formed a pool within the cavity, bones smeared and sticking out; organs open and spilling yellow puss. I swiveled away.

And saw a bloody trail leading back to and out the window.

My own legs yanked me towards the window, and I stood leaning out between the shards. The wind ruffled my hair. The street was deserted except for the infected who had caught five shotguns hells in his chest, turning it to mauled meat. Back to the bar. King was gone. How? How did a dead body rise up and just walk out? How? How?

How?

I turned to go, swung my gaze by the window.

The infected in the street wobbled to his feet, hunched over, bleeding.

"What the—" The blood stained his clothes as he turned around in the middle of the street. Blood gushed from the wounds in his chest, dripping down his pants, splattering on the pavement. The head on the stocky shoulders turned back and forth in the middle of the intersection, eyes alive. *Alive*. The dead were alive. I had seen the bullets. I had seen them tearing through him. I had seen his body ruptured and broken. I had seen him fall from the truck. I had seen him die.

And now he was getting to his feet.

Swallowed. Perspiration littered my forehead. I felt weak. My arms shook. Knees knocked. And my muscles turned to milky mush, slush like the snow after it fell and became soiled by the exhaust of tractor trailers and snow plows. I always thought that the rubbery sensation was a lie—an exaggeration, a metaphor. A twist on the truth. But, no. I teetered backwards; grabbed a light for support. It crashed against the wall, the bulb shattered. The noise roared. I regained my balance, ears burning.

The infected in the street stared right at me. Those awful eyes. *Alive*.

The mouth opened. Stained teeth. Blood dripping down the maw. Feral eyes.

It knew.

"Oh no..." I turned and ran for the steps. My feet slipped on the blood and I fell face-first, bashing my forehead over the door-frame. Stars floated in front of my eyes. My feet twisted,

losing traction in the blood. I fell backwards, landing hard. Blood trickled from a swelling on my forehead, staining my eyes, burning like acid. I tried to blink it away, saw red. One arm groped at the wall, the other reached for the lip of the bar, to pull myself up. My elbow brushed the rigid dog head; I let out a scream, guttural and wicked. My feet slipped and tore through the heavy blood. The light from the window blew over me, and it went dark, the shadow of a hunched figure throwing itself against the glass. Shattering. It was in the room. I propelled myself against the back door, lifted myself up.

The infected came at me. An old man. Not Mr. Smith, or Mr. Gray. No one I knew. Didn't care. He was after me.

He was going to kill me.

My hands flailed against the doorknob to the back door, and I ripped myself up. The infected loomed. I pressed myself against the door and kicked my legs out, catching him in the chest. The infected flung backwards and tumbled over the couch. My hands tore frantically at the back door behind the bar; it was locked, so I pulled harder. It tore from the moorings and I sprinted onto the deck. Birds flapped away. I ran down the deck. The door came open. The infected was at the door, looking left, then right at me.

I slapped bloody hands against the kitchen window. Les appeared in the kitchen. Saw my terrified face, rushed forward and opened it. The infected came at me, snarling, heaving like an ape. I jumped through the open window head-first, bashed my already-battered hand on the table. I twisted over, pain, cramps. My legs dangled out the window. Les shouted; the infected grabbed my foot, clawed; I fell to the floor, escaping the creature's grasp. Les stood over me; he swung a pan out and bashed the infected in the face as it tried to come through. It tottered back out on the deck.

"Shut the window!" I hollered, lying on the floor.

He tripped over me and fell against the wall. We both tried to stand, but fell back, butting heads.

My voice sounded hoarse. "The window!"

"I got it!"

I threw myself against the kitchen counter and scrambled to my feet, shocked I could now stand without falling over. I drew a knife from the knife holster; a slender iron bar tapering into a point. Les reached for the window; the infected's arms wrenched in and groped at him. "Les!" I yelled; he flung back, flipping over the dining room table, back tenderly cracking. He rolled over on his side and fell to the floor as I stepped around and drove the tool deep into the infected's face. Blood surged all over the windowsill. He let out a grunt and fell back, landing hard on the deck, the knife poking from his eye-socket. Tendrils of steaming blood oozed out over the deck, dripping between the cracks between the boards. I remember Les and his brother Chad had helped their grandpa lay out the boards for the deck two summers ago.

Les shut the window hard.

"Lock it."

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

"No. Don't count on it."

He squinted out the window. Sunlight reflected sharply into his eyes. "I don't know. You got him good."

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

Les looked at me weird and went through the kitchen, into the living room, returned. "Where is he?"

"He left. He just got up and left. See the guy out the window? Yeah. He was the one shot with the shotgun. Came back to life. *I saw it*, Les. Saw it with my own 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."

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

"Blood's all over your shirt. I don't know how to wash it."

"Yeah. I'll change shirts, if that's okay."

He tensed. "Did any get in you?"

"What?"

"Did any body fluid get in you?"

No. Shook my head.

"Sure?"

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

"Let's get you changed."

As we walked from the room, I cast a risky glance back out the blood-smeared window; the man still lie there, the tool in his face, blood gently oozing along the aged contours of his face.

We trudged upstairs. Hannah stood by Jack's door. "What happened?"

"They don't die," I said. She followed me with her eyes. Looking at all the blood. I still quaked.

Hannah went with us into Les' room. He grabbed me a shirt and I changed. It felt good to be in something clean. When I changed my pants, Hannah turned and faced Les' open closet. We threw my bloody clothes onto the floor. No one really cared.

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

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

"It's in your hair, too."

"Does the shower work?"

"At your own risk," Les said. He locked the door, paused. "Before things heat up... Hannah, when he's showering, can you watch the window? Make sure no one comes at me."

I was halfway into the bathroom, said over my shoulder, "Where do you think you're going?"

"I don't want to go downstairs to get food when night comes. We'd better stock up. I'm gonna grab anything I can. Mom—" He paused for a moment at the thought of his mother. "She usually keeps big boxes in the downstairs closet. I'll fill one to the brim. That should last us a day or two."

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

"Sound good, Hannah?"

She shrugged and went to the window.

Les left and I locked the door. Going into the bathroom, I shut the door and tried to lock it, but it refused to lock. The jam was all out of whack. I stripped out of my new clothes—carefully, not wanting to get them stained with any traces of infected body fluid—and covered my hands with toilet paper, and folded them neatly over the barred window. I gazed into the backyard, standing in my skivvies. Fences enclosed the Whites' yard, where their little Chihuahua barked at the commotion next door, infected running through a home. A house to either side, and one behind. One was empty, the other had some dogs moving about. The next door neighbor's dogs were gone. The chains lie sprawled in the waving grass. In the lawn behind us, an infected stood on the back porch, just standing there, hunched, arms drooping, staring into space; the door was open, and another was prancing about inside, tearing at the furniture and gutting out the cup-boards of the kitchen and dining room. I ducked away. They didn't need to see me. How did they not hear the wild racket moments ago?

Mold crusted over the edges of the shower. I opened the fogged door and stared at the mold for what seemed to be hours. I thought I saw a cockroach scurry into the drain. A gut fear gripped me, and I almost turned away, but I sent a hand to my scalp, ran it through my hair, felt knots and clots of blood. Drew my hands away—smeared with red. That did it. I stepped inside and shut the fogged door. The knob turned lazily, as if it were never used, and cold water sprinkled out, dazzling. I pressed myself out of the spray, but it stung at my legs. Stupid! Let the water get warm first. But then it did, and I felt so much better, letting it run over my body. And I stood there for nearly five minutes, just letting the soothing water rain down all over me, for a moment forgetting.

For all I knew, Chad and Drake were dead—or worse—and Jack wouldn't be coming home this time. Blood clotted my hair, and my mind would never forget, for as long as I lived—my death approaching sooner or later, though I preferred later—and would haunt my dreams.

The water ran into my eyes. I rubbed them and searched for shampoo. None. I opened the door. "Les!" Downstairs. "Hannah!" The door opened, and I shut the fogged door. She sauntered inside. I could vaguely see her form behind the fogged glass, and I knew she could see mine, just as fogged, yet knowingly nude. My face reddened. She couldn't see anything. My heart loped down. "I need some shampoo or something. To get out the knots." I meant, *to get out the blood*, but I didn't want to upset her.

"Okay," she said, and vanished.

My eyes fell to my chest, and I saw the water running from my scalp was stained red. Nasty.

She came back in. "I couldn't find any. I guess they're out. Here." She tossed a wrapped bar of Ivory soap over the shower door.

It slipped through my hands. I bent down, scraped around the mold, picked it up. Mold crumbled, soggy in my fingers. "Thanks." My fingers unwrapped the package and dropped the wrapping to the ground. I lathered my hands with the soap, but the suds washed out. I just rubbed the soap all over my scalp, felt it tugging and shearing at my hair. Bubbles rose up over my head. I bent down and rinsed. It fell in a splatter of red. So-

"Austin." She was still in the room.

Acting not surprised. But she scared the crap out of me. "What?"

"I loved my brother."

"I know."

Pause. I ran the soap through again. "You know I tried to save him."

My hands stopped moving. The soap bar rested on my head. I took it away. "Hannah? What happened?" I could tell she wanted to tell me. But she wouldn't. Not until I asked. That was how she was. And Peyton was *her* brother and *my* friend. We both knew him. I would go over and play basketball with him. Ashlie and I would go over, and the four of us would hang out. Hannah would make the food, Ashlie the drinks, and Peyton and I would clean up. I wanted to know what happened to my friend. But she didn't answer. "Hannah?"

"I was in Food and Nutrition Class." She had always liked to cook. She planned on going to medical school. Become a nurse. "Then we heard the doors downstairs breaking open, and we heard the screams. Ms. Hamlin tried to keep us in class, but we opened the door and saw people running around." Her voice seemed detached. Just as mine had been when recalling driving a knife into poor Chris King's neck. "Then one of the sick people came in. Ms. Hamlin tried to help her. She was just an old woman. She ran towards the woman, and then the woman clawed Ms. Hamlin so hard she tore out her cheek. Ms. Hamlin screamed and the woman jumped on top of her. The rest of us, we were so confused. People started running out. I grabbed my things, but then I dropped them. Because Ms. Hamlin got up, and she was different. Bleeding, alive, but at the same time dead. She looked right at me, and she came after me. I got out of there fast. I ran through the halls." I couldn't wash my hair. "I found Peyton in 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; then one of those sick people came at us. I got out of the way, but Peyton, he couldn't move. He was knocked over the railing, and he fell down, into the crowd going down the steps. Some people were hurt, but they left him. He was trampled under their feet. I ran down to help him, but blood, it was flowing out of his ears and his nose and his mouth. His body looked crushed. I couldn't help... couldn't help..." I heard the sniffing. "I would've saved him, you know?" she begged of me. "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. He was going towards him... I should've stayed..."

From the shower, "What could you have done? Nothing."

"I guess I was too evil..."

"No."

"Not a good sister..."

"No. Hannah. No."

I felt the warm water running over me, and ran my hands through my hair, silently grunting as knots and tangles were ripped apart.

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

Clumps of hair came out with my hands. "It isn't your fault."

She said nothing.

"Hannah?"

I heard the bathroom door shut, and I was alone.

10:00 a.m.

Emergency Broadcasting System
Funeral March
The fall of 25 Rosebud Avenue

The water trickled to a stop and I got out of the shower. From Jack's bedroom I heard a sound that made my heart jump circles: the muffled echoes of a television. I quickly dressed, feeling fresh and right, and joined Hannah and Les in the room. Les had dropped a box of food on the bed, everything from chips and crackers to bread and canned foods and fruit punch juice boxes, thrown haplessly together. His shoes had trekked blood into the room, in the outlines of footprints. Les had turned on the television—how it escaped our minds, I can't fathom—and Hannah sat entranced on the edge of the bed. Les leaned against the dresser. I 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?" I asked, hopeful.

They didn't answer; Les just shook his head.

Hannah breathed, "It's all over the place."

I stepped closer and knelt down beside her, head level with the television set. My mind caught the powerful images:

A view from a news station, a harried reporter shaking with the troubling news, saying that the city was falling to the disease. He pointed down from a rooftop and one could see people running for their lives as the wild infected whisked through the crowds like a dying October breeze. There was a large crash, and the camera-man turned skyward to see a helicopter smashing into a skyscraper. Reporters on the rooftop were crying; he said, "That was one of the helicopters carrying people out of the city, I don't know how it crashed..."

The view from a helicopter flying over the beaches. Boats were streaming out to sea in the hope of escaping the bloodshed of the mainland. The infected could be seen everywhere down below, running in and out of buildings and over the boardwalks. None seemed to run into the water. Many running to their boats were trampled underfoot or victims to the infected.

London, England. Big Ben slowly ticked as a bus overturned and erupted into flame, metal blasting everywhere. The infected ran through the fire, flailing about as they burned. Britons and tourists ran helter-skelter for their lives. In the background, one of the many bridges spanning the great river had collapsed and the infected and healthy mingled in a shower of screams.

Baghdad, Iraq. American troops were 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, and rushed at the troops. Legless victims crawled towards the barricades. Huey helicopters took off into the air, soldiers clinging to the struts to get out of there. Shouts and screams as the infected swarmed over the barricades, clawing and tearing and ripping at the soldiers. The camera blacked out.

People ran out of the subways and into them, trying to escape the carnage in Paris. The Eiffel tower stood grisly quiet, yet bodies could be seen plunging from the roof, humans deciding to lose their lives in the fall instead of falling to the gruesome monsters that had once been loving mothers, hard-working husbands and happy go-lucky 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, and infected could be seen walking the barren fields, staggering towards the farm with no direction or goal—the only desire being death. The reporter said the small town had virtually fallen, except for some pockets of brief resistance and some who had cleverly hid from the attackers.

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

"The Army is involved," Hannah breathed. "Maybe they'll come for us."

I ran over to the window, looked down on 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," I said, "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."

"We don't even know if there are soldiers. It's a lost cause."

Hannah stared at the screen. "It's hard to believe."

Yeah it was. My peaceful morning had turned into a nightmare. "We can't expect help."

A reporter stood before the television and 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 these animals that are killing. It is the belief of many that it is merely psychological. For others, they see it as biological. The Army is dwindling, as many of its members are becoming infected themselves throughout the battles in the towns and neighborhoods and cities. It is as if Hell has risen from the depths and is consuming those who touch its power. Generous grandmothers are killing their grandchildren; their grandchildren are killing their parents; the parents are killing the neighbors; and those killed become just as terrible, if not worse. The disease is spreading." Those words were haunting: the disease is spreading.

I went back into the bathroom. Out the window, the infected were crawling around in the neighbor's yard. They had pinned a little Chihuahua who was yapping away. I turned my head as they closed in on it. The television still whined.

"We urge all of you who are still safe—still alive—to get somewhere safe. The infected do not touch the water, and if you can get out onto a lake or in a river or on the ocean, you will not, if their traits do not change, become a victim. But please know that all the major islands of the ocean, from Hawaii to the Philippines, are fighting just as hard against the outbreak. The entire world is fighting—and losing. If you cannot reach any bodies of water, we desperately urge you to lock yourselves in your homes, offices, in your cars, or get away. Protect your family. And if someone—even a friend or family member—contracts the following symptoms, kill them and/or escape: these symptoms are purplish swelling of the skin, sinking eyes, folding lips, discoloration of the eyes and teeth, a hunched posture, and, psychologically, fluctuating emotions raging from amazingly passionate to gruesomely vicious before death. None have been known to go through the symptoms and win against it; you must get away.

Les scratched his chin. "This is unbelievable. This can't be happening."

I croaked under my breath, "Worldwide? This is happening everywhere?" Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia... Everywhere. No place was safe. Spring Falls and its little counterpart

Clearcreek, Ohio were crumbling before our eyes. Our friends and brothers turned into beasts from Hell, and we could only pray we weren't next on this terrible hit-list.

The reporter flickered out to a camera feed from a barren, undisclosed location. A man in a black suit frowned into the camera, asking if he was on. After some muffled nods, he said into the camera, "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, since the spread began in areas such as South America and Africa. Cases of 'unknown' illnesses have been filed over the last couple weeks, sparse, and not until now have they been severe. Doctors stating these cases say the symptoms are reminiscent of Epiglottitis, a disease found most often in young children.

"Symptoms to look out for are as follows:" He held up a slip of paper and began to read it methodically. "In the face, there is a bluish-gray pastiness. The blood has thickened and veins are partially visible through lucent flesh. The eyes lack depth; the eye socket is somewhat sunken due to physiological reformation, resulting in a fixed stare. Dark rings directly below the eyes give subject an exhausted appearance, and the eyes have turned yellow due to the decaying of rods and cones, and have sunken into the sockets. In the mouth there is a visible thickness of tongue and darkening of the gum tissue, and there is an overly amount of drooling due to excessive salivary production; we believe the venom is passed through the saliva and into the bloodstream via the bites. In the chest the organs can somewhat be seen due to a thinning epidural layer above the rib cage. Dark, subcutaneous lesions can often be seen running along the arms and legs of the victims, then slowly to the rest of the body. The flesh of victims slowly takes on a purple haze and often excretes hormones in body oils. The reason for this is not known.

"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' only occurs after their passing. Reanimation is caused by the virus overtaking the dead brain and revitalizing it via electrical impulses, which bring to surface primal instincts and some decaying unconsciousness. This causes them to take on non-humane and unethical traits. The infected exhibit no signs of emotional response or memory of their former life. Do not be lulled 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 reanimates. If none are available, improvise a weapon sturdy enough to pierce the skull or sharp enough to sever the head completely. Always aim for soft entry points: ear canal, eye socket, nostril, mouth, or underneath the chin."

Les walked over to me. "Chris King left, remember? Didn't you get *him* in the head?"

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

He glanced at the door. "The man you hurt with the tool, he's still there. I think it's because you pierced the brain."

"He didn't get up?"

"He's still lying there."

"What to expect if bitten: depending on the severity of the bite, it may be 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 have to do with all body fluid, 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 unconsciousness unless they were killed in the biting attack. Once the victim reanimates, he or she must immediately be killed. If it is a friend or family member, do not hesitate – they are gone. Only the virus remains.

“If you yourself have been bitten, it 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 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 are religious, your friends and family are most likely NOT IN ANY WAY the reanimated. Nevertheless, if you have been bitten, the resolution is yours to decide. We recommend you take your own life, but this is entirely up to you.”

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

Hannah eye-balled us. “What are we going to do?”

Did I have an answer? Did Les have 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 America. This is a minor, containable situation expected to be resolved in 24 hours or less. State and local authorities, also, are urging neighborhoods to form clean and sweep teams to overcome any infected and down them immediately with a direct impact to the brain.”

“That’s why Dylan was called up,” Hannah breathed.

“Dylan was called up?” Dylan is Andrea’s brother; he’s been in the reserve for a few years, recently got back from Iraq – I wonder how things were holding up in Baghdad? By the look of earlier scenes, not too well.

Throbbing echoes of an airplane careening overhead. A few moments, then it was gone. Fleeting.

“What if this lasts forever?” Les breathed.

I shook my head. “No way. No way.”

The reporter continued talking, but then there were screams in the background. The camera-man swiveled around just in time to catch the doorway spilling infected; people ran this way and that, knocking over equipment, hollering, crying. The infected charged a woman and knocked her down, biting at her savagely, tearing flesh. An artery broke, and blood sprayed against the camera. She screamed as an infected business-man gouged out her eye; they ripped off her head and the screams stopped. An infected rushed the camera, it fell, and static. The screen changed, showing a harried news-anchor in what was the CNN News Broadcasting Station. Tears rolled down his face as he said, “I’ve just been informed that we and all other stations will be switching to the Emergency Broadcasting System. God bless you.”

The screen instantly changed to a grayish background with a yellow triangle plastered over it; resting over the triangle were three bold letters, EBN; underneath the letters was the simple yet horrifying transcription: Emergency Broadcast System.

I can’t tell you how long we gawked at that screen, the length of time—eternity, forever, never-ending torture. I guess each and every one of us had things going through our minds. I don’t know what Les felt, or Hannah, or anyone else who happened to stumble upon a television, but I know that for the first time I realized how terribly pinned we were, how far from escape we had come, how, as we cowered inside the stout home on 25 Rosebud Avenue, how mercilessly close to death we were. And how our world was crashing. I could think only of one thing. We couldn’t expect help. The United States was floundering, from coast to coast, Atlantic to the Pacific, from the border on Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico to the icy wind-falls of Canada. I could imagine terror—nightmares—in Las Vegas, San Francisco, Chicago, New Orleans, New

York City. And then England was gone. All of Europe was waist-high in the swarming waters. Africa was being swept up in the tornado, and I imagined the densely-populated Asia, Australia, Japan and the Philippines were sinking like a stone in the sea. And here we were, in the small, unknown Spring Falls, Ohio, a Friday morning school day transformed into a bloody cascade of will verse fate.

Les turned off the television, knocking me out of my morbid trance. "Hannah's right. We can't just hole up here. The TV said this was happening all over the place. There isn't any help coming."

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

"Because we'll starve here."

"Out there, Les, we'll be murdered. Which sounds worse?"

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

Hannah murmured, "What about your family?"

Mom. Dad. Ashlie. Even the dog Goldie. My stomach flipped. I wanted to believe they were alive. They were all inside. Yes. They probably locked themselves in. My dad is 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. "Has to be. We can't be the only ones."

"It happened so suddenly..."

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

Not alone. What a lie. "Yeah."

Hannah got up and went to the window. Her hair gracefully flowed behind her. So beautiful.

"This is so unreal," Les said.

She stared out the window, and her face fell even deeper. She didn't say anything. Les ran over to her window, and I peered between the bars of the other one. The bars were very thick, and wrought-iron, too. I was suddenly very happy Jack had been so paranoid all his life. Maybe he saw this coming? Down the street my own eyes saw something. Dozens of the 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*," I snarled.

Les and Hannah ducked away from the window and slid against the wall, sitting down. I didn't move.

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

"They can't see me."

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

The infected drew closer. Something ran over and over in my mind: *Funeral march*. It looked like 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 was true. They weren't out to mourn the dead, but to kill the living. And that's when one snapped its head around and stared right at me, those fiery, sunken eyes ablaze with blood-thirst. My heart shimmied into my throat and I fell away from the window, crashing over a green trunk and falling to the ground with a large *thump*. The walls and floor vibrated.

Hannah's eyes widened. Les growled, "Austin. Stop messing around."

I 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 now, voice watery: "Austin, stop screwing around!"

I muttered something under my breath and crawled over to the wall, scrunching up, holding my legs to my chest. Heart thundered. Sweat dripped down my face, tracing dark lines. I stared at Les and Hannah side-by-side, and imagined them holding hands. Him leaning over, and kissing her lips; her eyes fluttering, she returning the kiss, passionately, and my heart turned sour, and my mind switched over. Anger. Jealousy. The vision remained stark in my mind, and it worried me. Don't know why. Les already had a girlfriend, and Hannah had never shown interest in him. But the very *idea* that they could be together made my insides churn spoiled butter. Romances forged under the heat of battle, right?

Silence.

The wind rustling against the windows. The tick of a grandfather clock downstairs.

Glared at Les, mouthed, *Are they gone?*

He raised his hands and shrugged.

Legs numb. *I'm going to check.*

He shook his head. *No.*

It'll be fine.

No.

What did he know? I was the one who opened his eyes to what was happening, anyways. I moved against the wall, the muscles in my legs burning from being positioned so awkwardly for so long. The numbness faded, and a tense burning warmed my limbs. I stood against the wall, the window next to my right shoulder. Deep breath. I swung around and gazed out the glass, barred window. The street was empty. The car crash continued to smolder. The sun rose over the roofs of the house down the drive. A smile creased my lips. We had-

I leapt back, heart screaming wildly, as a bloodied face jerked up by the window. The sunken eyes glared at me, the pupils widening with lust. Torn flesh hung in ribbons from the cheek 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 and a red smear. Hannah and Les jumped. They'd seen me fall back and knew something was up. A hand rose next to the window and hurled against the glass. It shattered and blew between the bars. The hand wrapped around one of the bars; I bashed it with my knuckles, and the infected howled, ripping back his arm; and his body fell away, landing with a *crash* in the overgrown weeds below.

I stared at the blood-smeared window.

The sound of crunching glass, then the breaking of a window. A creaking door.

Hannah shuddered. "They're... inside..."

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

"We've got to get the *heck* out of here," Les exclaimed, leaping to his feet, enraged with me.

"Why'd you have to look out the window!" Hannah wailed.

Her voice meant nothing to me now, not with my heart hammering in my chest. "They're going to—"

"*Listen.*"

Footsteps. Up the stairwell.

Les said, "They know we're here."

I ran into the bathroom, feet clattering over the tile floor. I threw open the latch on the barbed window, and pulled the glass pane away. My hands gripped the bars. The backyard was empty. The infected gushed out in the front, and maybe the sides. We'd have to somehow escape out the back. Maybe over the fence. Remembered the infected in the yard behind us. Then I thought of two instead of about thirty, and my heart did grinding twists. I'd take the two. We were three. We'd outnumber them.

"Les!" I screamed. "Les!"

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

"How do you get these bars out of the way?" I asked from the bathroom window.

"Are you insane? It's a twenty-foot drop to the ground, and it's concrete. We'd die. Or break our legs."

"Just tell me."

He ran in and grabbed two, pulling in a certain direction. The bars popped loose. Clattered on the floor.

I could hear the violent banging outside. Hannah crying. Thinking of her brother: was he out there?

"They're going to get in here."

"Where do you expect to go?"

"Does the bathroom door lock?"

"No."

"Get Hannah in here." He ran out and I looked around the room. Everything bolted down. Hannah came in with Les.

"Les. Grab Jack's chair. We need to hold this door close."

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

"Long enough."

He rolled his eyes and vanished.

Bang. Bang. Bang

He returned, dragging the chair. It got caught in the door. "It's stuck!"

"Pull it in!" I eyed the window.

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

"Then pull it out and shut the door."

Scuffing feet as Les tried. "You don't understand. It's *stuck*."

I leaned out. The deck below was clear. "Sure we can't make the jump?"

"Chad tried when he was ten. And he half-floated down with a blanket like a parachute. Broke a leg."

"Just get the chair out."

"Les—"

"Get the chair out! Hannah! Help him!"

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

"Hannah! *Help him!*"

"No... No... Please..."

I 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. My eyes flickered with insane anger. "*Help him or we leave you!*"

She looked at me with fear—those eyes had never read me with such genuine fear—but I didn't care. She got to work. I tried to figure out what to do. With Hannah's help, the chair popped loose, and folded over in the room. They positioned it against the door, then Les crawled through and shut it tight. He leaned against it to hold it taught.

"Austin..."

"Hey. Can we get onto the roof?"

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

"You're the most elastic of us all."

Bang. Bang. Bang came the echoes from the other side of the hallway door.

"You go first," I finished.

He took a deep breath. "Okay."

I stepped aside.

Bang. Bang. Bang

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

I looked over to Hannah. She was at the door. "Your turn," I said.

She evilly glared at me and ran past, to the window. I took her position. She easily made it through, and Les helped her up.

Bang. Bang. Crash!

The door to Jack's room splintered open. Snarls. Growls. Snorts. They were in. Cowering behind the bathroom door, I heard their feet running about the room, tearing at the walls and furniture, knocking stuff down. They hadn't grabbed the door yet. I looked at the window, ten feet away. So far. So long. From the rooftop, Les yelled at me to hurry up, the noise resounding in the bathroom. The infected in the other room, I imagine, heard the noise and ran to the door, grabbing the knob and viciously tearing with incredibly rage. I could hear the doorknob rattling, and could feel the door bulging. The window.

So far.

Les: "Austin! Where the heck are you! Come *on!*"

I bolted for the window. I don't know how I did it. My feet just carried me. It's like when you don't really want to do something, but know you should, or that you'll be mad at yourself if you don't, and without any reason or rhyme, you just end up doing it. Like you're on auto-pilot. I

think this is what happened to me. Because I don't remember running across the bathroom floor and because I don't remember climbing into the window, I think this must be what happened. And I don't remember the door splintering apart as an infected busted a hole through it with his head, arms dangling out, torn and bloody, screaming through those mangled, yellow teeth. I just remember them coming at me. And I kicked them. Arms grabbed my arms and pulled. But I kicked too hard, and my body twisted. Their arms came loose and I fell, flailing. The window fell away, and I could see Hannah and Les on the roof, gaping down at me as I fell. And I can remember watching them dwindle, and thinking, *I'm falling. I'm going to hit. This is going to hurt. What a suck-filled way to end it all.* Then I thought, *Typical.* And my back smashed into the deck, pain streaking through my body like pulsating lightning; and I caught the sensation of deck boards snapping all around me, splinters flying; then darkness, cool earth. Rolling.

And I found myself bleeding all over, hiding underneath the deck. I had rolled away from the hole. I didn't know if I could move, didn't want to try. The pain was so intense. Warmth covered my back, and I knew it was blood. Because the soggy dirt under the deck was chilly. Light came down in a shaft from where I had broken through, illuminated rolling dirt and mud, some brambles, a large spider crawling through the sheared splinters and chunks of wood. The spider was big. I didn't care. Closed my eyes. Just wanted it all to end. Pain. Pain. Pain.

I could hear Les and Hannah's voices, shouting down.

And hurried footsteps over the deck. Right above me. The planks quaked, and dust fell down on me in currents. I kept completely still. It wasn't that hard. I didn't want to move at all. Light came down through the cracks, and several cracks across the deck blurred and shimmered as people walked across. The infected were looking for me. It wasn't long at all until they found the hole. They knelt down next to it, and I could see hands sweeping down. I began to shake. The pain intensified. But I couldn't stop. The hands swayed back and forth, pulled up. The blurred light faded, the footsteps disappeared, and the infected were gone.

But I didn't move.

And I didn't hear Les or Hannah's voices.

Had they fallen? Had they been killed? Had they met a violent end? I could see them, a splinter in the mind's eye, running around, drunken with the disease, with sunken eyes and curled lips and a vehement aura. Only wanting one thing: to kill. I saw Les, one of my best friends, turned into a monster. And Hannah's beauty transformed to disgust, her peace-loving and gentle touch now shaking with a lust for murder. Those thoughts. Tears swelled. I sniffled. They began to crawl down my face, then came down in streams, and then I was sobbing. Just like Hannah.

I remember people saying men need to be open with their emotions; I thought men who cried were just pansies. Then my youth minister—was he infected, too?—did a message on men and women; how guys were made to be warriors, and how women were emotionally sensitive. And how both men and women carried the blueprint for the same emotions God had—anger, sadness, jealousy, happiness.

He said that it was okay for men to cry. Because God cried, too. He cried on the cross when he yelled out, *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.* Which means, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* I felt forsaken. Forsaken by God. And I wondered: was this the all-talked about and much-admired End? The End Times? If so, then everyone fell short of the mark of the horrors involved. And I thought it must be. God was coming back. Alpha and Omega's Kingdom Come. This filled me with a peace. But I still cried. And the peace dissolved. I was still alone.

Somehow I found myself crawling through the darkness, away from the light. I came to the soft brick of the house. I remembered going into the cellar once. The memory from a year past reflected in my eyes, and I crawled around blindly, feeling the cold brick wall. A spider scurried over my hand. I flicked it away, head bashing against the deck above. It barely missed the long tip of a nail. Close call. What a sucky way to die. Impaled by a nail because of a dumb spider. My hand brushed grimy glass: the window. I couldn't see inside. I wrestled with the window, but it didn't budge. So I just slammed my fist into it as hard as I could. The glass was weak, and easily shattered. I heard footsteps above, going towards the gap. Had to get in before they saw me! I squirmed my way forward, into the window. My stomach brushed over broken glass, tearing at the skin. I didn't care. I kicked with my feet, sending clouds of dust up to massage the

under boards. And I fell through, tumbling, landing hard on several boxes, arm dangling down to the side, fingertips brushing the cold floor. I made it.

The room stunk of old garbage, and carried a rotting odor that made my nose wrinkle. My eyes slowly adjusted, and I saw again, so freshly, that evening so long ago. When everything was normal. How I wanted so bad to go back to those times. Remarkable, even more so, is how I wanted to be in school right now sitting through Study Hall. The walls were grimy and filthy, tugging close, seeming to shut on you like eerie mandibles. I got to my feet, and had to duck to avoid bashing the ceiling. I feared more nails. My feet padded cautiously over the cool floor, reaching several wooden steps leading up to a hatch. The hatch, I knew, ran into the parlor closet. Hidden from view. A nice hiding spot. The infected hadn't found it yet, and I hoped they wouldn't.

I ran back to the boxes, climbed over them, and looked into the darkness. The light shone through the cracks in the board, and the hole bled warm sunlight. They weren't coming after me. I had escaped.

I had escaped. Relief first. Then physical pain.

I sat down on the boxes, noticing how bad my legs and arms hurt. I touched them lightly. Not broken, just swollen in places. Bruised. A hump was swelling over the top of my head, and there was a nasty cut next to my eye. I am guessing it was caused by the splintering wood. Splinters had cut into me, leaving dark welts, but none stuck into my skin. Some clung to the clothes, but I pulled them off, arm muscles aching, fingers sluggish. Then a hand went up my shirt, to the back, and I felt warm, sticky liquid. Blood. I probed my back, and found several rough areas where skin had been broken as if beaten with electric sandpaper. So it wasn't a puncture wound. Just skin shredded off the surface, and bleeding. Nothing bad. Remarkable how I hadn't broken my back. Though my head hurt like nothing else. Migraine and a half. Oh, and the neck! How could I forget the neck! To move it sent shivers of pain scolding up my spine, a barbed mace revolving round and round inside my skull.

I stood and went over to the steps, legs throbbing. Burning. Some steps had broken through, and all were rotting in the gloom. I took them cautiously, and reached the hatch. I pushed on it, but it didn't budge. They stored their Christmas gloves and boots in a box, and put it over the crawlspace hatch. I pushed harder and the box flipped over in the closet, spilling its contents against a vacuum cleaner. I pulled myself through, and stood rigid against the closet door. Quiet out there.

I opened the door, and stepped into the parlor.

The grandfather clock ticked.

Bloody footprints and shoeprints drenched the carpet.

A couch was overturned.

The front parlor window had been broken in many places, glass covering 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. I could join them.

A hand fell and brushed the keys on my belt. *The Jeep.*

I could go home. I could just leave this hellish place. I didn't want to go upstairs. I didn't want to leave them, but what if they had *changed*?

I stared into the mirror against the far wall, and saw my weary, haggard face.

The mirror reflected the wall behind me. A shadow draped the wall.

I swung around just as an infected woman walked out from around the corridor. She glared at me in surprise, as if to say, *You!* She charged. I dove out of the way, rolling over the floor, body complaining. She skidded into the wall and screeched. Blood dripped from her jaws. *Les. Hannah. Their blood.* Anger. She came at me again. This time I stood, and grabbed a lamp on a small couch table. Her clawed hands reached for me. I side-stepped and swung the lamp, smashing her hard in the back of the head. She stumbled into a bookcase and fell, sprawled over the ground. She stared up at me, still thirsty for my flesh. Blood formed a pool underneath her head. *King was alive.* I hurled the lamp down and bashed in her face. Her arms still quivered. I grabbed the bookcase sides with both hands and yanked it hard; it fell, books

spilling, and collapsed atop the woman. Her arm stuck out from the side, and continued to reach for me. I stepped aside. Blood spun webs from underneath the book-case.

Then I realized she wasn't alone. More shadows coming towards me from the living room.

The Jeep.

The blood in her mouth.

The shadows, so much resembling a hunched duo of Les and Hannah.

I ran for the front door, jumping through, and to the Jeep. An infected stood on the other side of the Cherokee, another crawling through the living room window. He turned and watched me. I grabbed the driver's side door and wrenched it open. He snarled and came after me; the girl on the other side rushed at me. Down the street, more infected turned towards the fray. The door opened. The man swung at me. I had done some Tae-bo lessons, and I utilized it; I kicked him squarely in the chest, sending him to the ground. I jumped into the Jeep and shut the door. Locked it tight. All the other doors were unlocked. The infected were coming fast. I leaned over and locked them, shockingly swift, for how scared I really was.

I unlatched the keys off my belt and shoved them into the ignition, turned. The Jeep engine sputtered. The dashboard came to life. $\frac{3}{4}$ tank of gas. More than enough. I threw it into reverse. And somehow I could hear them. The frantic cries. I reversed, rolling backwards, wheels thudding over a crouched infected. The frail garage door filled the windshield, and I looked up, and saw Les and Hannah on the roof, waving their arms, yelling at me to help them. But how could I? The urge to run filled my bones.

Les.

Hannah.

Infected banged at the windows; one fumbled at the back door latch. *It was unlocked.* Then one jumped on the hood, howling at me, and raised a fist, and slammed it into the windshield. The glass webbed out and chunks of glass fell. The infected grandma raised her bleeding fist to strike again. I threw the stick back into *Drive* and hammered the gas pedal. The Jeep lurched, the front end smashing into the garage door; the flimsy door broke apart and fell, meaning no more than to keep out animals. The infected was thrown forward, into the collapsing garage door, and caught under the tearing linoleum. I reversed and ran over her head, sending brain matter and blood gushing over my tires.

Les and Hannah got the point, and jumped. They landed on the hood, looked at me with shock, and climbed onto the top. Reverse. Pulled out of the driveway, slowly to make sure they didn't fall off. The infected from down the street were almost to us. Those in the driveway reached up from the sides, scratching at Les and Hannah. One grabbed Les' leg and tried to pull him down. I didn't see it, until Hannah leapt down and punched the infected violently in the face, sending him to the pavement. Another infected came forward and Hannah grabbed the woman by the hair and bashed her face hard into the Jeep; the infected stumbled back. Les opened the trunk door and jumped in. Hannah followed. It hung open; we never could get it to close from inside the Jeep. Infected reached through at them. I hit the gas and the Jeep bounded forward, leaving them in a crowd of spitting dirt and pebbles. I weaved around the smoldering accident and accelerated down the road. Past fallen lamp lights and bodies, taking a wild turn and driving like a madman. The street was narrow. Sometimes I had to go up into the lawn. I ran over a dog, the Jeep shaking. Not even Hannah complained. And when I hit an infected 8-year-old meandering in the street, no one said anything, but only smiled.

The infected disappeared behind us and I stopped us on the curb. Reaching back, I unlocked one of the back doors. "Shut the trunk door and get in."

Hannah did so, and got in. Les crawled up with her.

"Austin, they're coming." He pointed between two houses on our left.

About a dozen infected lumbered over a wooden fence and came after us, snarling and gurgling. The front door to a quaint little cottage opened and a teenage girl, stripped naked and covered with blood, ran after us. Oh, their horrible eyes. I drove away, gritting my teeth. Les and Hannah breathed hard in the back.

"Thank God you came," Les said, panting, out of breath. "They had gotten onto the roof. The satellite ladder."

"That place was like the fall of the Alamo," I murmured.

No one said anything else after that.

11:00 a.m.

AmeriStop
Homer's Grocery
I ♥ My Mom

The pandemonium that had engulfed the streets just hours before had been erased, leaving nothing in its wake but the footfalls of disaster. Telephone wires lay sprawled over the ground, hissing sparks; light poles had fallen over the road, bulbs shattered; cars had flipped over and crashed, gone into houses; doors hung open, windows busted; dead littered the lawn and street and sidewalk; several houses had rotted down to nothing, charred by flames, and some still burned; smoke rose in coughing pillars, far in the distance; one of the skyscrapers, barely discernible above the roofs of homes, could be seen belching acrid smoke, reminiscent of September 11. I couldn't go above thirty, for I had to dodge fallen poles and wrecks.

I went around a wreck and saw with my own eyes a woman hanging from the window, head and one arm gone, leaving bloody stumps and a thick pool of blood running over the street. I turned my head and turned right, throwing on my blinker. I sighed. Why did I need a blinker? I turned it off and drove towards the intersection. A seven-car wreck formed a ring around the dark stoplights, a crown of death and smoke.

Hannah gawked out her window. "Where is everyone?"

Probably inside where it's safe, I thought. Where they know they stand a better chance of living. Where they can sleep and eat in relative safety, even if their dreams are fraught with nightmares. Where they board up the windows and doors, thinking it will keep them out, though eventuality will eventually draw them from their seclusions, or starve or dehydrate them to the point of death. And I imagined that many had committed suicide. Suicide. Who could blame them? It seemed half-appetizing right now. And I thought that we probably weren't the only ones who had fled by vehicle, seeing all the wrecks.

The Jeep pulled up the hill towards the intersection. AmeriStop gas station came up on our left. The intersection was utterly cluttered. Couldn't get through. I pulled into AmeriStop and went slowly. A car had been abandoned at the pumps, and several filled the parking spaces. The front panel windows had been shattered, strewn glass all over the magazine and utilities racks. There were no infected to be seen anywhere. From AmeriStop, we could look in every direction. Franklin was quiet, and no cars came; the earlier sirens of police cars and fire engines had vanished. Instead it was only the chugging of the engine and the brisk spring wind. While I couldn't see the Chickapeek Wildlife Reserve, I imagined many had fled into its depths, into the rolling wilds, to escape the carnage. They would starve, I knew. Not many animals lived there, just forest. Beyond the reserve, thick clouds of smoke rose from the stretching farmland that bordered Caesar's Creek. South, I imagined Carter Lake glistening under the sun, a false haven. And all the subdivisions, dozens and dozens, thousands of homes, were no better off than the one we had just left, known as the Royals (thought there was another Royals Subdivision just north of AmeriStop). The cruisers from the police station across the street were gone, and one had crashed in the intersection. The front door of the station was wide open, and blood streamed out from the door. And the horrendous sight, the skyscrapers and towering buildings of Downtown Arlington stood up against a sky of swirling clouds and striking blue; some had gaping holes, others burning fires. Smoke rose, twirling amongst the buildings, rising from the streets of Downtown Arlington. The highway, I imagined, was a bloody mess of never-ending car crashes. And here we were, in a small part of Clearcreek, Ohio, knowing that this was but a taste of the horrors spreading like wildfire across the Globe.

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

I stopped the car in front of the doors, warily eyed the area. Quiet. "Looks safe."

"What if they follow us?" Hannah asked.

"How will they know we came up here?" Les remarked.

I stopped the engine, began removing the keys, but decided against it. Kept them in the ignition. Hope the infected couldn't drive. I got out, tense, and felt the breeze ruffle my hair.

Hannah and Les opened their doors, and before they shut them, I said, "Keep them open. Just in case." They read my mind. Didn't want to get caught out.

"Les. Don't lock your door this time."

He nodded.

I went in through the doorway; Les and Hannah stepped through the tattered glass windows. Les picked up a magazine and flipped through it. The place was completely empty. The small eatery was vacant, the tables and chairs unmoving; a chair was flipped over. No one behind the desk, no one serving ice cream. I peered in through the glass display case, down into the buckets that held the ice cream. All were melted. I shook my head and went down the frozen food section. Some of the doors to the freezers were open, and the electricity had shorted out anyways. I guessed the electricity had finally drawn its last breath.

Hannah went down an aisle, grabbing candy and chips and pretzels and seeds. Some boxes of Oreos and Pringles. Some dry cereal. She stuffed it under her arms. Les continued to leaf through some magazines.

I opened a freezer door and grabbed a Jones bottle, popped the cap, chugged it down. Still somewhat cold. And refreshing. Like stealing. But who was there to arrest me? All the cruisers were gone. A bitter laugh. Morality flown out the window.

I went down the aisle Hannah was in. "Let's load these up in the back. We'll make as many trips as we can manage."

"Okay." She didn't look me in the eyes. Maybe she was still frightened of the way I had manhandled her. And to be honest, I was starting to feel bad. She talked to Les. I dropped some soda I was carrying and instead grabbed some crates of water. She returned. "He'll keep watch. He's looking at magazines, and he said he didn't want to help." Lazy. "So I told him to read his magazine by the window, and to make sure none of those diseased peoples comes after us."

I saw Les go around the bar and disappear into the eatery. "Okay. Let's go."

We took our stuff outside and opened the trunk, putting our loot inside the Jeep. We made several trips, dumping in everything we could. I handed Hannah a Jones. "It's warm, but still a little cool. It's good, though." She liked Jones, too, and popped the cap, and just like me, chugged. "What's your fortune?"

She read the back of the Jones bottle. And laughed. "'Good days are ahead of you'. What a lie."

I managed to smile. "We'd better load up some more."

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

"Yes. If no one is there, we can go somewhere else."

"No. I don't mind. Anyplace is good. Well. I mean, no place is better."

I went to get some more dry cereal, and found energy and protein bars. I searched and found some red buckets for carrying items next to the coffee stand. I saw some coffee crème packs, and thought of Chad. He always drank those. Thought they tasted really good. How was he faring down in Kentucky? Was he alive? Was he dead? Was he one of them? And how was our good friend Drake? How was he doing? Was he alive? Was he dead? Was he one of them?

"Austin," Hannah said, walking up. "Oh. Good. Energy bars." She took one off the shelf, unwrapped it, ate it. I took some more and threw them into the bucket. She said, "No, no. You're doing it wrong. Like this." She grabbed the box, hung it over the bucket, and dumped it. She grinned. "Who knows when they're going to show up? We can't stay here forever. Go faster." A natural-born shopper. I couldn't help but to laugh.

Taking all the bars I could, I went to the Jeep and sat them in the back. Left the bucket there.

Hannah was by the window, going by the utilities. "Austin. We could use some of this stuff. They have lighters, butane. Fire. Nice. They have some multi-tools. Here." She tossed me one. "Do you have a bucket?"

"By the coffee machine."

"Thanks." And she was gone.

I entered the eatery, found Les reading and watching the window. "What are you looking at?"

He leaned over, showing me the article. "It's in the Globe magazine."

"What's in the news today? Bat baby returns? Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden are bed buddies?" I'd seen it all. We sold Globe and World News magazines at Homer's Grocery, where I worked, and feared—well, maybe not feared, but knew—I would never work again. When we weren't busy, and when Richard and I got tired of throwing erasers at the ceiling fans and throwing plastic wads at each other, we'd grab them and read up on all the current myths, legends and folk stories.

"No. They were right. It's the end of the world."

He showed me the cover. It read, *Satanists Declare the End of the World is Coming Soon*. I couldn't help but laugh. "They were bound to be right sometime."

Hannah called, "Austin. Stop slacking."

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

"I know."

I went into the store. She showed me her catch from the utilities. "Got us some more knives and lighters, and some butane. It squirts out. Squirt it all over something, light a match, and it goes up like an inferno. Alex showed me how, once." Alex? Jealousy. Anger. "Candles, for if we survive to nighttime and need to see. A couple locks, if we need to lock something, some nails and a hammer. Some tape. Duct tape. Always need that. Oh, and—"

"Austin!" Les roared. "Hannah!"

We eyed each other and ran into the eatery. Les was standing, pointing. Between the blooming trees lining the AmeriStop parking lot, the murky images of infected rushing up the street could be seen. The same ones we had escaped. Right on time.

"Game's over," I said. "Let's go. Drop the magazine!"

We ran out to the Jeep, jumping through the broken glass. An infected fell from the roof, landing atop of me. I was thrown to the ground, felt him on top of me, the warm, awful breath tingling the hairs on my neck. Les kicked the infected hard in the face, sending the dread-locked fiend over on the ground. Hannah stamped her shoe into his face, breaking his nose and spilling blood. I clambered to my feet.

I got behind the wheel and shut my door. Hannah began emptying the bucket.

"Throw the bucket in! Hurry up!" I shouted, twisting the ignition. The engine sighed to life.

She did and shut the trunk. But it popped back open.

"Oh. Dang it." Les jumped out and slammed it shut. It popped open. The infected came into the lot. "Something's in the way! All the stuff is sliding out!"

"Forget it! Forget it!" I yelled.

Les slammed it hard and it caught. They got in. The infected reached us. Before they even shut the doors, I pressed the gas down to the ground.

And went nowhere.

Their doors slammed shut. They locked them. Hannah yelled, "Austin! It's in Park!"

So dumb. I put it in drive and hit the gas. We peeled out of the lot, scraping off my right mirror on a fuel pump. The Jeep swerved out into the road, nearly colliding with a vacant SUV. Infected came from over the ridge of a hill, coming down atop of us, from around the police station. As if they all converged at once. More up the road, blocking my path home. I choked down an utterance of surprise and turned the Jeep in the other direction, ramping the curb, throwing infected off to the sides. They clawed at the windows.

I peered through the webbed windshield, went around the smoking remains of the intersection accident. Two infected were eating the flesh off a dead police officer. I vomited all over the seat, green bile covering the cloth. My face muscles tensed, throat ravaging, eyes splitting. The Jeep swerved into the other lane. A car right ahead. Les and Hannah screeched. I jerked the wheel and went down a road, a smaller subdivision. And I knew exactly where we were. The old pumpkin farm rose to our right. Infected stood in the barren patch and loped over the walk-around porch.

"Hold on!" I shouted, and wrenched the car up a gravel drive. The wheels ran dry, friction lost, but caught, just as the infected from the farm house scraped at the trunk. We were all pale in the face. The Jeep rocketed past the farm house, swinging around a ramshackle shed, underneath several overhanging trees, and exploded into the bright morning sun. Light glinted off the forest green paint on the hood, blinding me. I wove through the parking lot. An accident here and there. A few bodies. Spring Falls Plaza. A dance studio and photography shop to our

right; a furniture store to our left; ahead of us a parking lot; on one side was Spring Falls Hardware, a vacant building, and then the Spring Falls Salon, Plaza de Spring Falls, and the Spring Falls Tanline. A large road cluttered with abandoned cars far ahead, up against a bank and subdivisions. To the right of the parking lot was my former hell's gatekeeper, now a haven: Homer's Grocery.

"They're coming from the farm house!"

I turned right, and we were in shadows, blowing into the Homer's Grocery drive-thru. "Everyone out!"

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

"Trust me," I said, and jumped out of the Jeep. The front desk was empty.

Hannah and Les got out. Les ran to the entrance. "Better have a plan!"

I grabbed the glass door that said *Homer's Grocery Employees Only* on it in bold red lettering. It was locked. No. I banged my fists hard on the glass, turned to see Hannah staring at me. A shadow against the wall, and a good friend of mine rushed after her. Lennie, who ran the drive-thru on Fridays. Her eyes had sunken down, turned grossly yellow, as blanched as her bared teeth. She swiped her hands to grab Hannah. I screamed, "Hannah! Down!" She did as I told, probably because of the fear, and Lennie stumbled over her. Then she came at me. My hand fell down instinctively. There was always a bar next to the door to prop it open when ferrying big orders. She snarled. My fingers grabbed the cold steel of the bar, and I swung it up; she jumped up to fall atop of me; I collapsed against the door and drove the sharp end of the pole up into the soft part under her chin; she shrieked as the pole bloodily tore through her chin, mouth and eyes, finally exploding from the top of her skull. Blood sprayed all over the neck of my shirt as her body crumpled down, going into seizures, wracking against several crates of sodas.

Les ran towards me. "We're screwed, they're--"

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

I turned and saw George and Diane against the glass. Cashiers. They saw me, and their faces lit up. Hannah pleaded, "Let me in! Please!"

They opened the door and we rushed inside. Les was the last one in. Diane calmly shut the door and slid the bolt back over it, just as an infected threw himself against the door, growling, clawing. The woman on the floor writhed in a bath of blood. I watched in horror as the infected turned from the door and jumped upon the woman, tearing her flesh and biting her neck. More infected ran around the Jeep and dove atop the woman, hungrily tearing her apart.

George said, "They eat their own dead. And if the dead aren't eaten, they return from the dead." 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 just stared at the feast in the Drive-thru.

Weakness took over me, and I sat down atop some wooden crates containing raspberry clutches. "Thanks, George. Diane. How you guys doing?"

Diane saw the blood on my shirt. My weakness. The cut on my forehead. "Better than you, I imagine."

Hannah demanded, "Is this place safe?"

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

"She didn't mean anything by it," I told him. "Back off. She's just scared. We're all scared."

She polished my words, telling George, "Thank you for letting us in."

He nodded his *you're welcome*.

Les stared out at the infected eating their comrade alive. "Can they get through the glass?"

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

"Yeah," I said, as if my words meant anything. To Diane, "Is it just you guys?"

"No. We have some customers upstairs. In the lounge. We've barricaded the doors leading down here. Those darned diseased swept into our store like a strong south wind. Tore down shelves and turned the deli into a madhouse. Dairy was taken over. A lot of our guys were infected. I think it's in the bites. A lot of customers fell, too. We were able to round up the customers who weren't infected, and we lobbied them back here. Boarded up the doors to the store with boards, nail gun 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, 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, a role I took up in the afternoons and evenings. "Kenny?"

George shook his head. "You know Kenny. Ever since the second Great War and Vietnam, he's had that fighting spirit."

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

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

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

I reminisced on my thoughts under the deck, and the magazine Les had been reading before we were overtaken at AmeriStop. I pushed it out of my mind. "I don't like standing here by the door."

"To the lounge we go, then."

We walked between aisles of storage. Bananas, green peppers, onions. Stacks of soda. Cereal. Paper towels. Les spoke up. "How'd you know we were down there?"

I said, "They have some windows up there, poking over the roof. Probably saw us, right?"

"Yep," Diane said.

"And you knew the Jeep was mine."

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

We went up a ramp. I had gone up the ramp a million times before, each time looking at my watch to see how much longer until I could clock off and take a spin to freedom, to drop into bed and fall asleep, Dad coming in to say good-night, Mom scratching my back and pecking me on the cheek, Ashlie lost in the hardcore music floating from underneath her door, sometimes mixed with the curling smoke of incense. My eyes watered, as they often did when incense burned too long, but this time it was sorrow. I wanted to see my family. Wanted to know if they were okay. Wanted to embrace them, and hold them. And I prayed they were safe.

George said, "Saw how you did in that woman. Want another shirt?" He pointed to the blood stain.

"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 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 was hooked onto that. From the first steps down you could look up and see a grill, and behind the grill was a fan, which blew cool air into the lounge. I could see brief figures and some huddled conversations, a few tears. George took me in the other direction, to a storage room next to the employee bathrooms.

He rummaged around. Stacks of paper, some manila envelopes. Some paper bags filled with folded plastic sacks for bagging. "Ah. Here." He pulled out a red envelope and tore it open. A Homer's Grocery shirt slid out. "What size are you?"

"That'll work," I said.

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

"Perfect."

"All right. Well, you know the way."

"I do—did—work here."

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

"When did that happen?"

"Half an hour ago."

"Oh."

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

"It's all over the place," I said, nodding. "The world is getting caught up in the disease."

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

"Yep."

He swallowed. "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 the stomach—that this may be the end."

"George," I said. "Can I change? The blood is seeping through."

He nodded and left. I quickly changed, and threw Les' shirt against the wall. I loped up the ramp, down the steps, up the other flight of steps, through the meat department, through the door to the lounge, up a flight of steps, and knocked on the door. There was a pause, then a panel in the wall above opened. It was another one of Homer's paranoia installments. Mary's eye glowered down at me, vanished. The sound of scraping furniture, a lock unlocking, and the door opened, spilling light all over me. Mary stood there, grabbed my hand, and helped me through, though I didn't need it. Mary is just tender like that.

My eyes adjusted to the dim light. One of the two light bulbs wasn't working. Several Homer's Grocery employees milled about, and customers clung to each other. 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—I later learned—had been lost in a tractor-trailer accident. A young woman with several young children, crying so hard her chest seemed to heave out, revealing ribs underneath a tear-soaked shirt. A police officer whose car had crashed, he told us later, and who had barely escaped the infected; his partner had not. And several teens from school who had escaped, only to crash near the main Clearcreek 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 golden light over their profiles.

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

Then a voice came over me, and I swung around with joy. "Amanda!"

Amanda stood there, beaming. I had met her through my sister Ashlie, and we became good friends. "Hi, Austin. Les and Hannah were telling me about what happened. I'm so happy to see that you're fine."

"I'm happier about that," I said with a smile. "How'd you end up here?"

"I jumped in the back of a truck leaving the High School. It crashed at the intersection, and I jumped out, completely unhurt. A miracle, I know. And so I ran across the street, and people were leaping on people and tearing at them, eating them. It was so horrible. I got into this store just before they closed the doors. And I saw Bryon here, too."

"Bryon's here?" I gaped.

She nodded. "He's in the restroom."

"This is great," I said. "Wonderful." And it was. I could almost forget the nightmares outside the store.

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

I swallowed. "I can't."

She seemed on the verge of collapse. "She didn't become one of—"

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

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

I winced. Les hadn't heard Hannah's story, but had gotten the picture from her tears. Hannah violently turned away and stared through the blinds, though her eyes were stony, deep, focused on nothing but the memories. A tear trickled down her swollen cheeks. Amanda needed no more and backed off, literally backing into the chained and leather-jacketed Bryon Hunter coming through the door.

His face exploded in brilliant excitement when we locked eyes. "Oh my gosh! Austin! Les! Hannah! When did you get here!"

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

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

A smile creased my lips. "For once. And if this clears up, I doubt it should happen again."

"It's madness all over. I was at Sinclair. 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 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. Heck. 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-struck by a truck coming through a field—you know, the one across the road, by the bank, with the neighborhood in the background?" I knew—one of those houses always lit up like a blow-torch during Christmas. "My car rolled into this parking lot—the Clearcreek Plaza lot—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 are 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. I hadn't noticed it before. I'd never been up there till then. "So here I am. And Amanda is here, too. And now you three." He embraced us all. He was one of those rough-love kind of guys.

He tried to hug Hannah, but she gave him the shoulder. He asked us, "What's wrong with her?" No sarcasm—pure compassion.

I opened my mouth. Amanda beat me to it. "She lost Peyton."

"How?"

She shrugged. I answered, "He was infected."

Bryon's illuminating eyes fell, glowering. "This sucks. It really, *really* sucks."

Les asked, "What's the plan?"

Mary appeared from the shadows. "None so far. No rescue teams are being sent out. No hope to be found. It's all-for-one and one-for-all. A shoot-out with no winners."

"Mary? Let me onto the roof."

"Why?"

"I want to see."

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

Les said, "It is. I don't know what he wants to see, though."

"Okay. Well. Whatever." She pushed some people out of the way and opened the latch. Dazzling morning sunlight filtered down. A ladder descended. "This is where the technicians and roofers got up. It's kind of rickety. Watch your step. There you go."

I climbed the creaking steps and pulled myself onto the roof. 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 as if the world had emptied. Except for the sound of crackling flames, distant combustions and the occasional chirp of a bird, it was eerily silent. "Ghost town," I said under my breath. The clouds cast forlorn shadows over the earth, and were building into a coming storm. I remembered watching the weather forecast this morning. Showers and thunderstorms late in the day. I looked at my watch. Nearing noon. I needed food. But it was so *quiet*, so *empty*, so... *unreal*. I turned on my heels, and looked over the low-rimmed, almost antique buildings of Olde Clearcreek. Olde Clearcreek had once been a peaceful Quaker settlement, and a fiery station for the Underground Railroad. Nearby Franklin had been a coffee-pot of slave traders and slave-catchers. Some scholars thought *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written in the setting of the Clearcreek-Franklin area, with names changed because

of the times. Now the streets of Olde Clearcreek were trashed with overturned and smoking vehicles, a few stray bodies here and there, on the sidewalk and streets. But empty. No. A flicker of movement. A little girl walking between the buildings. Innocent? No. Hunched over. Arms wrapped over her chest, fingers hunched over like tiny claws. A blood-sprinkled shirt that read in big block letters, *I ♥ My Mom*. Wild eyes.

And then she looked straight at me; my muscles went limp and I ducked down, bruising my knees and the palms of my hands.

"You okay?" Mary asked from below. "What do you see?"

"Nothing. I'm coming down." My voice danced.

I peeked my head up. The girl was going down the street. I stifled an urge to laugh. I had been frightened by a little girl. I descended back into the lounge, and Mary folded the ladder and set the latch back right. "What was that about?"

My stomach rumbled. "This place is dog-empty. Nothing." Except for an infected kindergartner. It didn't make any sense – thousands of people in Spring Falls, and right at the heart of the town, none are to be found?

She had heard my stomach grumbling. "You hungry?"

I nodded. "What do we have up here?"

"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, and we don't have any electricity except for this battery-powered lamp, a relic, so who knows how long that will last."

"We ought to get some food." I pointed to the window.

George shook his head. "No. The doors burst open. They could be in there."

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

"No one."

"See? It's safe."

"But it might not be."

"And we might all die if we don't get food. And that diabetic will be needing more in an hour or so."

Mary sighed. "Who is to go?"

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

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

"This isn't the sixties anymore, Diane. I know. But men will bust under pressure if something happens up here. You guys won't. Sound good?"

Running a hand through her hair, "Fine. 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! Hi-ho, let's go."

Mary peered through the slit in the wall, eyes gazing down the steps. "Careful," she said as Diane opened the door. George, Daniel slipped through, then me, and then Louis. We descended quickly, a rancid stench burning the insides of our noses. The stairs bellied out into the meat department; slabs of warm beef and chicken, red with blood and staining the counters, covered with thousands of swarming flies. The smell was overwhelming. I imagine that if the flesh were of humans, I would have puked all over my own shoes. 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 of us to move the contraption away. Louis looked through the twin glass windows in the swinging metal doors, saw nothing, and pushed through. The rest of us followed, emptying into the store. The eyes of a dozen people tore into us from above, where friends and companions watched from a honey window with flimsy blinds.

"Hurry," Daniel told us, especially me. "We weren't able to board off this place. There could be some of those killers roaming around here. In the aisles. Be careful."

We split up. I went past the soda bins, stacks of fresh deli bread, and an overhanging sign that read *Hot Deli; Meats and Cheese; Sandwiches Prepared Fresh For You!* I hopped the counter of the deli, landing hard on my feet. I bent over and opened a sliding panel to reveal buckets of chicken and potato wedges and mashed potatoes and macaroni-and-cheese and even some salmon. Don't forget gallons of tuna and ham salad, chicken salad, deli cheeses

and sliced meats. Honey-suckle ham and smoked turkey bacon. Oh, and ham wraps and the delicious but cold potato skins.

My mouth salivated; I reached inside and grabbed some potato wedges. The panel had been shut. They were still warm. Crunching my teeth into it, I nearly puked at the taste of chilly potato filling. I spit it out at my shoes. The chicken was still warm. I probed the inside of one with my finger just to make sure. It was fine.

I drew the bucket out and put it in a solitary cart flipped over in the produce aisle. Gave me a chance to get some bananas and apples and pears. Bagged nuts and seeds covered stand-alone basins, also littered with garlic and pickles, some apple cider, all-natural honeycomb honey and molasses. The far wall was lined with bottle upon bottle of all sorts of cheap wine from across the state.

George ran up. "Hey!"

I spun around, half-terrified.

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

"It was in the aisle."

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

"I didn't plan on it."

"Grab some Lunchables and stuff like that. Oooh. Chicken." He grabbed a piece and bit into it. "Nice choice."

"I thought you might like it."

He slapped me hard on the shoulder; I winced. "Maybe some snacks, too, eh? I have to keep Daniel and Louis from spending too much time in the alcohol section. You know how they are with booze. Hurry up, okay?" He trotted off.

Pushing the cart, I wove out of the aisle, past the movies section, and around the registers. Pausing, I took a spare moment to look over the registers, the quiet paper and plastic bags, out the large panel windows. How many times had I stood here, doing nothing but counting away the time till I was able to escape. Feet aching, crying; hands swimming in all sorts of foods and drinks and methodologically filling bags *Paper or plastic?* And that parking lot. How many times had I looked out to see sparse cars, a cozy, setting sun, girl and boy scouts and churches selling cookies or wreaths or Christmas trees? Normalcy. Shot out the window in only a few hours.

And how many hours had it been? It seemed like ages. No. It was only 11:47 a.m. Almost six hours since I rose from my bed, thinking it would be just another boring Friday afternoon. Friday. Laughter. Inside, at least. My face remained stonily cold. Friday. I always worked Fridays. Curiosity drew me to the schedule. Ryan—was he alive?—, Jason—and him? Where was he?—, Ashlie—a wonderful girl, had she turned to a beast?—and on down the list of names, till *Austin*, with my phone number below, reflected into my eyes. 3:00-8:00 tonight. When I was supposed to work. Oh, how I yearned so bad to come in at three o'clock and work. To know my family was fine; to know Chad and Drake were okay; and to know Peyton went home only to skip open gym and watch *Seinfeld*.

Normalcy.

Out the window.

My eyes drifted over the service desk. Trojan condoms. Lighters. Butane. Batteries. A sign advertising the week's sales, video rental information, dark computers. Fans that were held still, motionless, without a breath. The commons on the registers did not glow; no one was there to operate them. Blood stained the floor near the end of a register, some sprinkled over the wrinkled plastic bags. Never could have imagined. Displays of all kinds of cheap, fatty snacks. Butternut. Little Debbie's. Hershey's—two stands for Hershey's—and Homer's Grocery off-brands.

Normalcy.

Gone.

I feared—forever.

Crash

Ripped from my trance, I glared towards the sound. It had come from the soup aisle. I set my cart still and ran for it, fearing someone might have gotten hurt. God forbid Daniel and Louis get drunk and mess something up too bad. I wheeled around to see the soup aisle empty—except

for a few cans rolling on the ground, one split at the seal and leaking a colored, murky gook. I only then noticed how hard my heart had been beating; I patted my chest, trying to calm it down. Just an accident. They happened all the-

Running feet. I peered down the aisle just in time to see Daniel's body half-running, half-falling past. Then gone to the other side. I ran forward and dove into the corridor. The large swinging doors leading to the dairy were rocking back and forth. Hands with needle-like fingernails dug into me; I whipped around, bashing the attackers in the face. Daniel staggered back, blood seeping from his nose. I read terror in his eyes. He was pale and shuddering, losing control.

I grabbed him by the arm, gripped. "Daniel. Daniel. What's wrong? What happened?"

He was babbling under his breath.

Shaking him, "Daniel? Daniel. *Daniel!*"

The store manager managed, "I told him not to... He might still... But he didn't believe... didn't... listen..."

"Daniel, what are you-"

A horrendous screech. I released Daniel and spun around. The doors were thrown back and George fell from the dairy, landing hard on the concrete flooring. A deep gash gushed blood from his wound, an artery or something slashed. He cried out in pain, groping at the wound as it bled all over the concrete. Over the din of his cries I could hear *bang bang bang* from the windows of the lounge. I looked over George and saw them at the windows, yelling. Pleading.

No.

Warning.

Warning.

"Daniel..."

He sagged up against stacked 12-packs of Pepsi. "Austin... Austin..."

"I have to help him. Stay here."

"Austin..."

I ran away and fell next to George, the doors looming over me. Blood covered his arm. His eyes flickered back and forth as he faded in and out. I felt for a pulse. Very weak. The blood welled out of his arm like a spring. The flesh was sliced open from the shoulder to the wrist, tearing cloth and ligaments, splintering bone. Strands of muscle lurked from the wound. Blood trickled over my hands, and a sudden burst sprayed my legs. I didn't care. George's eyelids fluttered. "George... George, man..." He reached up and grabbed me by the shoulder, choking. "George..." His grip tightened; he leaned forward, purple tongue bulging, and his eyes slid shut; his grip loosened, and he fell back, gurgling; his hand draped down to the floor and blood trickled from his mouth. He was gone.

Feet coming for me. I turned my head. It was Daniel. He wailed, "Austin! Run! Run!"

"How did this happen?" I ordered, not thinking straight. "What happened to him!"

"No! Run! Run!"

"Daniel!"

Daniel stood over me, and he said, "It was Kenny. Kenny did this." And he sprinted away.

I leapt to my feet. "Daniel! Kenny? I thought-"

He whirled around, shouted, "Run! He's in the aisles! Somewhere in the aisles!"

And he vanished into the meat department.

Shook my head, knelt down next to George's corpse. "Sorry, buddy." I don't know if it was a warning, or something natural, or maybe something completely off-the-mark. But the hairs on my neck rose and shivers climbed my spine. Literally *climbed*. I felt terror grip me, and could almost feel icy-cold fingers wrapping—no, clenching—around my heart, my chest, filling it with lucid evil. I gazed down the corridor, to the alcoholic beverages. Completely empty. *Bang bang bang*

Warning

And it hit me. I looked down. George's skin had turned purple-gray, his eyes sunken; the lips unfurled before my eyes, revealing yellow teeth. His closed, sunken eyes ripped open, and he glared at me. But it wasn't George. It was... something else. He snarled and wrenched upwards, snapping at me with his teeth. I reeled backwards; he caught me in his arms, fingers clawing at my back. I swung him against a display of canned goods, sending the cans crashing

to the ground. George's hands unclenched and he fell with them, tumbling down, blood covering everything. My feet dragged me around, and I bolted down the aisle.

Bang bang bang

They were still banging

Kenny

Somewhere in the aisles

Run! Run! Run!

I almost ran right into the grocery cart with the bucket of chicken. I looked down the aisle and saw Kenny, hunched and decrepit, staring at me. He opened his mouth and shrieked. Grabbing the bucket I tore my feet towards the meat department. Kenny's own legs raced forward, giving to a chase. I wheeled past the hot deli and the soda display. Louis, neck spurting blood, stood there, now nothing close to human. He ran after me, blocking my way. I side-stepped as he neared and tripped him up; he landed hard and slid, knocking Kenny over as he rounded the corner. I bashed through the double metal doors and ran up the steps; Mary swung open the door and I hurled inside, bashing the bucket of chicken against the wall, tripping over someone's feet, and taking a dive into a couch. Mary slammed the door shut and locked it tight; the chair was wedged back against it. My heart jumped to and fro. I spent a moment on the floor to get my breath back.

Everyone stared at me. Daniel was bawling in the corner. Two of his best friends had gone.

"Well," I said slowly, still finding it hard to breathe. "I got the chicken."

12:00 p.m.

Lunchtime
The Passion of Insanity
Good-byes

Lunch. Just in time, too. The cracked LCD on my watch said it was right at noon. I still lied against the foot of the couch, breath coming to me in awkward spasms. The world went fuzzy for a moment, my head swam, but it came back to me, surreal, and I felt as if I were being loaded into a coffin and laid to rest six feet into the ground. Then the scene became clearer, and my eyes sparkled. My lungs inflated, and my head surged with a new burst of oxygen. Amanda helped me to my feet.

"We tried to warn you," she said.

My knees knocked together under the jeans. "I didn't understand until it was too late."

Diane glowered, "Kenny ran into that back room. We saw it happen, but didn't see him leave. We didn't think he was still there."

Thanks for telling me. Oh, by the way, one of our day employees is infected and trying to kill people, he might be down there in the dairy, but, sorry, I guess it didn't cross my mind. But I didn't show my cursed disapproval. I was okay. Daniel was, despite his choking sobs—and who is to blame him—, was fine. But George and Louis were gone. Bryon and Les watched from the window. Hannah stood silently in the corner, staring at me, and I imagined she might have been thinking, *He could have been one of them. He could have tried to kill me.* And I wondered what went through the infected's minds, and I shuddered at the grim thought of knowing first-hand.

"At least," Diane said, "you got some food. And chicken. Nice job."

"Don't mention it," I said, kneeling down, grabbing one of the floor. My muscles quaked. I picked a strand of hair off the cold, wrinkled skin, and sank my teeth into it. My hunger had all but evaporated, and now it didn't taste so good—cold, chalky, greasy. But I ate it anyways, and my stomach found no complaint.

The others grabbed chicken from the floor and bucket, and quietly ate. Daniel even started eating, chewing and swallowing between sobs. A baby refused to eat, crying, eyes bulging and cheeks swelling red with blood under the faint skin.

I grabbed the bucket and looked inside. One left. I prepared to eat it—a trophy—when I realized Hannah hadn't moved. I walked over to her, and tried to give it to her. "Come on."

"I'm not hungry."

"Neither was I. But your stomach will be thankful."

"No." She turned her eyes.

"Don't famish yourself. You need all the strength you can get."

"I have strength."

I set the piece of chicken on the window sill. Between the blinds, I could see dark splotches of crimson blood and a knocked-over stack of cans where I had ran from the savage George. I had to laugh at that last thought. It was dark in the store because of the power outage, but I could still make out faint swirls and shadows over the stocked aisles. I remembered stocking some, especially the baby food aisle—I had small fingers, so I was always given that task. A hunched shadow caressed the baby foods, then dispersed to nothing. I took Hannah's hand. It was cold. And shaking. "You lie," I said with a wan smile. "Eat the chicken."

She pulled her hand away from me, almost repulsed. Anger. Choked it down. Sigh. "Hannah..."

She denied looking into my eyes.

"Okay. Can I see your arm?"

Her eyes seemed to go livid, but flared down. "It's fine."

"No." I took it, and she didn't protest. Her skin was soft, smooth, yet cold. I rolled up her sleeve. Her tan skin faded to a mottled white after a tan line. A deep bruise was swelling over her bicep. A pit of grief and shame and guilt clenched my gut. I wanted to cry.

"My leg is bruised, too."

"I'm sorry."

"Take the chicken."

A knot in my throat. I left the chicken there, but retreated back to the couch, sitting down at its foot, next to Les and Bryon. They teathed the frail chicken bones. Amanda had bit through the bone and was sucking out the marrow. Smart. My eyes nonchalantly trailed up to the ceiling, and I looked at the hatch, and saw nothing but freedom and doom. Temptation. Know the end result, go through anyways. Can't live without it, your mind says. Who is it going to hurt? Me. It won't kill you. Yes, it will. Come on. You know you're going to do it. Why even wrestle with it? Face the facts. Don't look like a hypocrite and wander around the cones, but always reaching the end of the line! Be hot or cold, Austin, not lukewarm. You're not hot. Might as well be cold. So be cold. No. Be cold. It's inevitable. No.

Do you love them?

Dropped the chicken bones to the floor. My stomach half-revolted with the disquiet meat. I didn't know how to say it. *Mom Dad Ashlie*. Even the dog. The dog? So I just said it. "Guys. I have to leave. Have to get out of here."

Bryon and Les gawked at me. Amanda looked up. Some of the surrounding customers and employees turned their heads. Hannah watched from the corner by the window. Bryon mouthed, "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! And probably crawling with—"

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

"So you're walking into hell?"

"Les. I have to go back. 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, so he's probably locked all the doors and covered the windows. He's smart like that. They're all at home. I have to go to them."

Amanda glared at me like I was a sick disease. "You're serious?"

I nodded. "Yes." I was going. And they all knew that. This was no joke. My voice, my face, the severe anxiety grappling at my very nerves was more than enough to convince them of this hideous truth. Then, as if begging to make matters worse, "It will be hard. Les, you're right. This place is probably crawling." *I ♥ My Mom*. "And it will be especially hard. I think they are

attracted to sounds, and the last thing I want to do is herd a crowd of them—thousands of them—to my front door. So I can't take the Jeep. It is too loud. I can't take anything but my own feet."

Entire silence. Even the baby stopped crying, surprised at the dead-fall in the room. The baby's eyes widened.

Amanda mustered, "You're going to *walk*?"

Yeah. Walk streets overflowing with the dead. Try to run three miles without being cut down by thousands of them. Outrun them. I could run. Oh. I had the path all worked out in my head. Cut through the Clearcreek Plaza, past the old pumpkin farm, through the line of trees, behind all those 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. A path I had walked many times in the summer with my cousins from Kentucky. "Yeah. I'm going to walk."

"That's insane," someone muttered. "Shoot yourself and get it over with."

Another: "They'll be on you before you step out."

I ♥ My Mom The little girl leaping onto me, tearing me apart with claws and teeth. A silent scream tickled at my throat.

Les read my mind. "And you want someone to *go* with you? Are you out of your mind?"

Silence.

"No one? No one?"

Bryon glowered. "I didn't come here all the way from Sinclair just to step outside and be killed."

"And what, then, are you waiting for? To starve here? What happens at dinner? You gonna cut up that frozen microwave dinner, toss it about yourselves like wild animals? Because you won't go down there! Kenny stayed! And he's still there, now with two companions who want to eat you all alive! All the chicken in the bucket is gone. What? Are you guys going to start eating each *other*? Like *them*?"

No one spoke.

"Well. I'm going." And I leaned back, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep.

Nothing. Who was I kidding? I couldn't sleep. My eyes opened. No one moved. I started up.

"I wonder," Amanda said, "if we'll ever see a winter here again?"

Winter would come; the seasons continue; and when it comes, will we be dead—or worse? Will the freshly-lain snow glimmer with hope, prosperity, and happiness, or be maroon with blood and death and a devastated planet? What will be left of the earth? What will be left of us? That time would come, I knew. It would. But would I? Would I last to see it?

"No putting it off," I said, standing. "I want to get there before dark."

"You have hours," Les said quickly.

"Yes. But I don't know how many snags I will run into."

"Hopefully none."

"Hopefully."

Les let out a hand. "Good luck, man."

I shook it. "Here." I unlatched the keys on my belt and gave them to him. "I won't be needing it. This place won't hold for long. You know how to drive, even if the driving lessons cost too much. You know where the Jeep is. Just shimmy down there and get in." He held the keys up to the dim light from the battery-powered lamp. The keys shone and glinted. "Don't lose them. Life is in those keys."

Bryon hugged me tight. "Take it easy."

He had a reckless spirit. "Sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm sure."

Amanda embraced me. "Don't do this. But be careful."

"You know I will." I turned to Mary. "I'm not too tall; bring the ladder down, will you?"

And it was then that the understanding of what I was doing hit me full-force.

I was walking into the arms of death, under the blow of the reaper's scythe.

Mary obeyed, and bright light flooded the room. I pressed my feet on the lowest rung, turned my head. To the others: "See you later, much later than sooner I hope."

"Wait," a voice rung in the darkness. The cop came forward. "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, and there is water downstairs, but you have to brave the dead-and-alive to get to it. Let me come. I have a gun." He patted his belt. "Fully loaded and unused. A 9mm."

I grinned. Thank you, God. If you're there. "Yes. Of course."

Bryon, never to be outdone by a cop, lurched forward. "Count me in. I can't let you walk alone."

"How noble of you," I sneered, without contempt; praise drooled from my lips.

The cop went up first, Bryon said his byes, and went up. I followed, but retreated.

Les said, "Backing out?"

"No. Don't forget: you have to brake before you can shift it into drive."

"I know. Of course."

"Your mom always says you forgot. And if it gets thick, sometimes people forget stuff."

"I've got it."

"Okay, then. Don't forget." And good-bye. I won't see you again. Because either I will die or you will.

I pulled up on the ladder and rose towards the brilliant square looking up at the fringe of a storm cell. Then someone tugged on my jeans. I looked down, half-expecting to see Les asking me which key went to the Jeep—it says *Jeep* on it, fool!—but I saw Hannah's weary eyes. She stared up at me and said, "I can't be mad. You saved my life. You only did what you had to do. Don't be sorry. I'm sorry. I saw the pain—the guilt—in your eyes. And I am sorry I forced you to feel that. Please don't feel it again. I'm sorry." A tear trickled down her frosted cheek. "Austin... Really. Watch out. They're all around."

I didn't know how to reply. Here was the girl my heart longed to hold, to touch, to kiss. If I bent down and held her, touched her, kissed her, everything sane yelled that she would respond smoothly. My mind flashed—funny how real time is denied and the world can slow to a steady pulse—and I imagined myself jumping down and embracing her; the two of us falling against the wall, kissing, oblivious, forgetful of the world and the nightmares; she would shiver beneath me, and she would cry, and I would wrap my arms around her, and run her silky hair through my fingers, and taste her bitter tears, comforting her as best I could, before I walked off into certain doom. I would feel her body against mine and get lost in time. All my dreams and fantasies, all my longings and throbbing desires could come true. I just had to step down off that ladder. Step down off the ladder and grab the bull by the horns, and inhale her honey scent, the running roses whispering on her breath. Just step off the ladder.

But instead I said, "Try to find some lotion to put on the bruises. Ben-Gay or something. And stick close to Les. He has the keys out of here. I didn't mean 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." I pulled myself out of the hatch, and stood on the roof, immersed in the dimming light of noon as a menacing storm rolled towards Spring Falls, Ohio.

1:00 p.m.

Out of the silence
The Police Station
The chaining of Taylor

The jaws of the storm twisted and turned, somersaulting above our heads, casting wicked shadows over the rooftops and leaving murky fog in the corners and crannies. We looked backwards, over Olde Clearcreek, and I could see the High School, seemingly abandoned. Vehicles littered the parking lot, and smoke and flames gushed from the shattered glass dome of the atrium. The countryside rolled south to Franklin, with stripped spring fields and pockets of dangling trees. We couldn't see Franklin from here, but our eyes reflected lightning coursing down over the hick town, stabbing through the green clouds and disappearing over the forested

mounts. A few quiet homes stood stagnant on the hilltops, all but shadowed from view in the gloom; one had been completely burnt down, and sparse fires lit up its charred foundation.

Bryon looked all around, amazed at the silence. Thunder growled.

The hatch beneath us swung shut, the latch ringing loudly in our ears. And we were alone.

The cop said, "We'd better get moving before the storm hits. If we make good time, we can be there in twenty minutes."

"I somehow doubt that," I said under my breath.

Bryon walked across the roof to where broken tiles slanted downwards, hovering seven feet off the concrete. "You guys coming?" But the cop elected to go first, and jumped down, landing nimbly. He held the 9mm in his hands and surveyed the destroyed parking lot. I used to go on cart checks to the employee parking lot and drive down here to get out a minute faster. I was so lazy back then. Bryon slid over and landed next to him. They muttered something and ducked into the shadows. I ducked down just as a hunched man in a *Spring Falls Hardware* uniform sagged from the building, wheezing against the wooden stilts plastered against the face of the store—Spring Falls Construction had been remodeling, re-facing the fronts of Spring Falls Plaza. A sign in the foyer of Homer's Grocery showed Homer's Grocery's plans. Plans never to be completed.

The man stood there for what seemed hours. My lungs burnt. The clouds tumbled overhead, casting sputtering shadows over all of Spring Falls Plaza, shadows lurking, moving, lurking between the cars and smoking wrecks. Then the figure moved around the side of the building and vanished. I waited until the cop and Bryon egged me on. I dropped down, landing hard on the balls of my feet, pain sprinting up and down my legs. The window of the deli was abandoned. Kenny, George, Louis were in there. The thought made my shoulders cringe.

The cop said, "You know the way."

"Yeah. Stick to the building. Follow me." I moved along the brick siding, and passed the drive-thru. An urge overcame me, an urge to use the Jeep—so much faster, maybe I had been wrong, it would be—but, no. I didn't have the keys. We passed, I knew it was for the better. We reached the end of the building, where the lot ran down to the street. Flames illuminated the path before us. It was so dark, but not black; green clouds made the air thick with tension, and cut off light, throwing us all in a dim gloom. I looked both ways a few times and quickly crossed, keeping low, until I was against the glass panel windows of *Dance with Terri*. The glass was broken, and in the next room I could see patches of pink satin thrown about, some slick with dried blood.

"This way," I said, sliding along the building.

Suddenly a pain burnt through my back and I fell; Bryon had elbowed me in the small of the back, paralyzing me for a second; I fell down onto the concrete and rolled over; he jumped back and the glass window next to me shattered, raining glass all over my clothes. A ballerina lunged out, snarling and swiping with bloody hands. Bryon grabbed the girl by her frizzy hair, wrenched her hair back, drew a switch-blade, popped it open, and shoved it into the girl's eye; blood gushed out and she gave a last shriek. He withdrew the blade, and the little girl's body crumpled to the ground. Her head landed next to mine, a gouged and glazed eye staring at me. I writhed to my feet, completely repulsed. Glass fell from my clothes, tinkering on the concrete.

Bryon held the knife in white-knuckled hands. "Sorry. I saw her coming."

"Thanks."

We went around the building, and I was still shaking from the encounter. A deep weariness overcame me, and I just wanted to sleep. The draping, green-leafed branches of the trees hid shadows and murky holes leading up to the farm house. We slid between them, keeping into the grass. The porch was abandoned, broken in some places; the oversized doll house Ashlie used to gawk at had been sheared down to nothing, splintered in several pieces. We stuck to the line of trees until we ran into an intersection. Ahead of us were several businesses and restaurants, the library; and right was a subdivision. I had seen the subdivisions. Peaceful mommies and daddies turned to bloodthirsty monsters; we all looked down the road and saw nothing, all quiet, but knew, we knew, it was all a deception.

The cop muttered into my ear—I jumped—, "Let's get going. We can't stop. The storm."

It hovered right over us. Lightning shot down into the subdivision, and thunder echoed in our ears.

"Yeah. Yeah."

I ran across the street, and they followed. Our feet padded over the concrete and we passed the A.T.M. machine, several cars, and forlorn buildings. SpringPark Cleaner's. Subby's. Ron's Pizza and Sub's. 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 lay sprawled here and there. Several shirts and pants and some Prom dresses and suits had been blown out of a hole blown in the side of the Cleaner's, lacerating the waving slope leading down to a gutter, and the street. A strong gale tugged at our clothes as we descended the slope and crossed the street, not looking back and forth. No reason-

The cop: "Stop."

We froze, sucking in our breaths. My eyes fogged as I scanned the area. Desolate. Thunder.

The cop knelt down, and felt the ground. Then he stood, and gazed down the road. His ears perked, and I chuckled to myself, despite the madness, because he reminded me of a puppy from the Towne Mall. I followed his gaze and peered into the first tendrils of a snaking neighborhood. Quiet. The houses seemed to loom out at us like ghosts, spirits. And then my ears tickled, and I heard it, too.

Bryon swallowed. "It's a car."

"It's coming towards us," I muttered.

The cop said, "I don't see it. Where is it?" The noise grew louder.

"It's not on the-

The trees to our right, spindly and young, bent over and the wheels of a Ford Bronco spun over them, shredding leaves and spitting soil. The Bronco lurched forward, sliding down the hill and ramped the curb of the road. The bulky driver within yanked the wheel around and barreled right at us. The grill rose at my face and somehow my legs jerked me to the side; the brakes squealed and the Bronco half-fishtailed, the motor roaring. Exhaust fumes gushed from the pipe; it smelt acrid and distasteful. I found myself lying on the ground, dirt caking the side of my face. And my back ached. The driver's side window rolled down, and the driver glared at us. Heavy jowls, deep yet pearl eyes, a sonnet of a voice.

He looked over us, at the cop, kept on the cop. "Officer Jamison. Didn't expect to see you out here." The cop launched to his feet, jaws dropping. The man laughed. "Not gonna give me another citation for reckless driving are-"

"You fool!" Jamison roared. "Turn off the engine!"

"It's okay. I refilled it before all this came-"

"No! No! The noise! They're attracted-"

Bryon hit me in the shoulder and pointed to the trees. The flattened brush had been righting up, but was flattened as infected swarmed after us, a skeleton crew. They seemed amazingly fast and yet surprisingly slow. My muscles zipped into shock and adrenaline pumped. My legs carried me up off the ground. The driver peered through his rear-view mirror. "I thought I lost them."

Bryon choked, "All of Spring Falls is overrun! You can't lose them!"

"Jump in the back!" the driver exclaimed. "Jump in the back!"

What else were we to do? They were attracted to the sound, God knew. But *what else to do?* Where to hide?

Jamison jumped into the back. Bryon hurled himself in. I jumped up, clambered over, but slipped and fell. Clumsy. My muscles weren't-

Bryon roared, "What are you *doing!* Austin! *They're right there!*"

I didn't falter the second time; legs dangling upwards over the edge of the bed, the truck screamed away; I feared I would fall out, but Bryon wrenched me into the back. I thudded around several barrels of insecticide and fertilizer. One had opened and purplish-gray crystals spilled out everywhere; Jamison bumped his arm into the fertilizer, reeled backwards. "It burns!" His feet slipped over the bed and he tripped backwards, hitting the edge of the bed and tumbling overboard. The truck jumped; "He fell! He fell!" I banged my hands on the rearview window of the cab.

But it was too late. Jamison's arm had been crushed under the tires; he withdrew his pistol and fired several rounds into the beasts, shattering their skulls and tearing through chests. The futile humans fell, but his magazine emptied; he screamed for help as they overcame him,

ripping at his flesh and biting at his veins. We saw the red of blood before the mutants completely engulfed him, a swarming, sickening mass.

My hands weakened and I slumped down, abandoned banging on the window. Too late.

We were nearing the intersection. Bryon turned around. "At least he took some down with—"

My mind doesn't recall what happens next. I guess it is like all accidents. In the movies they happen in slow-motion, and can take up to minutes to end. But in real life, the truth is much quicker. I estimate it all happened in about two seconds, maybe three—at the most. I was watching the mass of infected over the body of the cop—was he to become one of them?—when the death-throes of metal, the shredding of rubber and the bursting frenzy of squelching air filled my ears. Then my vision tilted, and my stomach leapt into my throat. The barrels rushed at me and hit me head-on, ramming into my chest; I flipped over and one bashed my hand pretty bad. Grunting in agony, I saw the foreboding storm clouds replaced by bright green, and suddenly the dirt erupted all around me in a storm, and I heard nothing but roaring and screeching metal. Pitch darkness. Then the darkness lit up with an incredible brightness, and I saw the sky again, and my chest heaved as I lay on the grass, next to a tree. I heard the crunching of metal and tires and then complete silence. Birds fluttered out of the tree.

Disoriented, confused, I climbed to my senses, found I was on a slope. Deep tire marks gouged the earth, and pockets of dirt had been torn up. I loped up the hill, all too aware of the pain I was in, the bruises and brakes of my body mending a web of pain in my mind. I grabbed the tree for support and reached the flat lawn. The police department to our left, library to the right. And the wrecked hulk of the Bronco right in front of me, flames gushing from the cab, where the engine had caught fire and exploded.

"Bryon!" I called and raced towards the wreck.

A figure crawled up from the shadow of the disaster. Bryon's scrawny figure. I felt the heat of the flames, and knew we could be engulfed in a fireball any minute. "Bryon..." I knelt down next to him and grabbed his hand. Memories of George flashed through my mind, but I shoved them away. Not this time. His hand was warm. Hadn't George's been cold? I ripped him towards me, and he cursed under his breath. But he stumbled with me, away from the wreck. He fell against a tree and stood, breathing hard. A large gash ran the length of his triceps, leaking blood in torrents. He tore off part of his shirt and wrapped it up.

"What about the driver?" he asked.

The flames. "I don't think so."

"Geez. No mercy."

"What?"

"They're coming."

The infected ran across the street towards us, leaving the cop's location. The cop was gone.

Bryon muttered something under his breath. "I can't run... I can hardly walk..."

"The Station. Come on." I grabbed him by the arm, brushing tender flesh. He slapped my hand away. "Whatever. Just *come on*." We jostled over the lawn, onto the hard concrete lot of the police station, over the sidewalk. The infected ran after us from the entrance to the Station. We wheeled around the corner and a police-man rushed at us, swinging a club. We both ducked, and the cop looked startled, then yelled, "Inside! Inside!"

We hopped through broken glass and into a lobby. Potted plants had fallen over. The desk was empty.

The cop came in after us. "To the back. The back!"

"Where!"

Bryon led the way. He'd been here enough. We reached a barred, iron, padlocked door. The cop drew a key and unlocked it. It took several tries. He was shaking so bad. The infected jumped through the glass, some falling over *clumsy* and they bashed down the front door. The cop pushed us in and shut the iron door, locking it tight. We backed up from the bars just as the infected hit it like a hammer. The door shuddered, but held. They drooled from the lips, wild eyes rolling in the sunken sockets. Blood covered their hands and mouths.

We stood behind the cop, watching. The cop drew a pistol, aimed, fired. The infected clawing at the door was thrown backwards as the slug tore through his forehead and exploded through the back in a spray of blood and brains. The other infected snarled and raced the door. We flinched. The gunshot echoed. Another fell, and he fired again as they fell back. The victim fell

against the desk, groping at anything as blood covered the shirt on her back. The others raced back out the door and window, hollering in inhuman wails. Bryon and I shivered, the fright taking over. It was dark in here, and cold.

"It scares them off," the cop said, unmoving. "I don't know. Maybe it's their buddies falling dead. Or the sound of the gun blast. I don't know. But whatever it is, it scares them away."

"Thanks," I said. "Thank you. Really."

"Don't mention it." He turned, sliding the gun into a holster. We all shook hands. He said, "Welcome to our little fort. We've got good ammunition and good fortification. We have withstood all attacks. Can't leave, though. They're like hornets out there. Before long, all of Spring Falls—the world—will fall. But I am happy to see two fine young boys alive. How are things?"

The question rang in my ears. *How are things?* "How do you think they're going?"

"Badly. Very badly. Tell me. Are you hungry? No? Thirsty? Ah. Yes. We have water. And lots of it." He led us down a corridor to an open room. Several desks filled the room, some covered with papers and lamps and computers. The walls were drenched with *Wanted* posters and maps and a bulletin board—*Staff Donuts and Coffee Tuesdays and Thursdays*. A coffee pot dripped stale coffee, forming a pool of crust over the bottom of the pot. The cop swung open a storage door and revealed a deep room lined with stocked goods—everything from food to water, to radios and weapons. Cheap weapons, but weapons. He lugged out a five-gallon water bucket and thumped it on the desk. "We don't have cups, so... Think of it as an upside-down water-fountain."

I went first. The water gushed into my parched mouth, swollen tongue—a river-dance of life.

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 said, we tried."

"We?"

The cop nodded. "The captain. And two others. They're in the back."

"I thought *this* was the back."

"Back back."

Bryon was silent. I wondered if he knew something we didn't. I stopped drinking, handed it over to him. Bryon was wary, and drank with an eye constantly on the cop. I didn't have such quarrels. I collapsed into a cheap couch against a wall. "So what's the plan, man?"

"Plan?" the cop returned with a smile. "Our only plan is to survive. To live. Is there anything else now?"

No. I guess there wasn't. Darwin would've been happy. Survival of the fittest.

The cop headed for a door labeled *Staff Only*. "Don't you guys wander off. I'll be back. With some food. Calm down. You'll get hungry." He went through the door and it swung shut. An audible lock, and it was bolted tight.

Bryon stopped drinking, stood. "This isn't right, man."

"What do you mean?"

"Something's wrong. He's hiding something."

"Hiding something? He just saved our life."

"Keep an eye open. That's all I'm saying."

Frustration. "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?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he heard the crash?"

"No. 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 back up.

"Sorry," the man said. "Here." He dropped some canned tuna onto a desk. "Good protein."

"Got a can opener?" I asked.

He miraculously fished one from his pocket and dropped it into my hands. "We used to have a cat run around the Station. Fed it 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 on the couch; Bryon watched him warily, and I popped open a can of tuna, peeling back the lid, and wrenching chunks out, chewing the bitter meat. "What're you guys doing out here?"

Bryon gave me a glare. I ignored it. "I was trying to get home. I've been halfway across town. We were doing just fine until some guy came down the subdivision, engine so loud. See, I think they're attracted to the noises. They hear something, and go after it."

"Like hunting," the officer ventured.

Pause. Contemplation. "Yeah. Hunting." A chill ran up my spine.

Hunting

Continuing, "So this guy comes at us, and those people—the sick people—are right behind him, and they're swarming like those cicadas coming this spring, and since we couldn't outrun them—don't they ever get tired?—we jumped in the back of the truck. One of us slipped and fell, and was killed. I don't know how it happened, but I guess the truck flipped over, carrying us with it, and me and Bryon, we escaped without too much bashing and bruising, but the cab went up in flames, and the driver—probably—didn't make it out. So we just ran the other direction, and that was around the police station—*this* police station—and that's when you ran into us." I took a moment to swallow down some fish.

"Where'd you come from?"

"The grocery store down the street. There's about twenty people holed up in there now." And I'm afraid I'll never see them again. Then, "So your plan is to just sit tight?"

He laughed. "What do you think? What can we do?"

"You're just hanging out?"

"We're not going on suicide missions. Look. Just lay low. We have enough food."

"Enough food? For how long? You're going to starve to—"

He silenced me, cutting the air with his hand. "You were at a grocery store, right? Did you see any of these monsters eat?"

Monsters. People. People degraded into monsters. Wasn't it the truth, though? "Yes."

"What did they eat?"

Morosely, "Each other."

"Did the ones who got eaten, did they get back up?"

"No."

"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 is 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 number of survivors won't be too high, but no matter—we'll be among them. We all will. Because we're going to survive. When they're dead, we are 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."

Wiping away what needs to be wiped away

Survival of the fittest

They don't die—they come back **to life**

"What makes you so sure," I 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, at a friend's house. 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 over and over in the street and fell from a truck. The infected was dead on the ground. And then he was gone when I looked again. I think these things have a tendency to come alive again."

"Reincarnation."

"Yes. I guess. I don't know."

Bryon shook his head, hostilely remarked, "What does it matter? Austin, we're not staying here."

My parents. My sister. My family.

The police officer went rigid. "Are you joking? You mean to leave?"

Bryon snapped, "You saved our lives. And we're happy for that." Grateful. "But we can't stay here. You're a stepping stone. A good one. But we have to go on."

The cop found himself standing. "No. You can't leave. It's not safe out there."

Bryon rose to meet him. "We're going. Thank you, for everything. The rescue, and the food."

"No."

My eyes flashed between them.

The cop snarled, "You *cannot* leave!"

"What is it to you?"

"I don't want to see—"

"You sly liar. You're hiding something from us. You want to keep us here, for something you're afraid to mention through your own bloody lips."

The cop swung at him; Bryon blocked and drove his knee into the officer's crotch; the cop fell backwards, over a desk; Bryon came at him again; I screamed, "Bryon!" The cop writhed away and Bryon slammed over the desk; the cop drew the 9mm and bashed the handle against Bryon's scalp; Bryon gave a grunt and slid to the ground. Blood trickled down the side of his face, a nasty cut and bruise sweltering over his temple. The cop cocked back the gun and aimed the sights over Bryon's face.

My legs took control. I wrenched upwards and rammed my shoulder into the cop's back, sending him barreling into the wall; the gun discharged, the slug echoing past my ear. I stood over Bryon's body and held my arms out in front of me, the fear in my face silently pleading. The cop glared at me and lowered the gun. My breath came ragged and worn. Bryon moaned.

The door swung open and two other cops dashed into the room. One was heavysset and sweating, jowls glistening like diamonds. The other was lanky but strong, and had a buzzed cap and sunglasses. The large one held a 9mm too, the other a small-arms machinegun. I feared they would unleash on me, but they didn't.

"Everything all right, Pacino?" the lanky one asked.

"Yes," the first cop said. "Everything's just fine." He rubbed his groin. Cold sweat popped on his brow.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. No, he's fine. He's not dangerous."

"Then what happened?"

"The one on the ground attacked me. I laid him down."

The cop had started it all. I opened my mouth to protest; Bryon gripped my pant leg.

"What do you want us to do with him?"

Pacino licked his lips. "Throw the one on the ground in a cell. I will talk alone with the other."

The officers rough-handedly tossed me to the side and grabbed Bryon, lifting him up, and taking him through the door. Blood still smeared his face. I watched his feet, then the officer carrying his legs vanish behind the door, and it swung shut, latch snapping. My eyes fell upon the cop—Pacino, was it?—who now came towards me, suddenly more ominous than ever. And yet I found the energy—the courage—to say, "You took the first swing. He was defending—"

"I've been a cop for years. I knew he was about to strike. I was on the defensive. Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"That bullet, it didn't hit you, did it?"

"No."

"Graze you?"

"I'm fine." One could almost fall for the guy's lying sense of compassion. No compassion was there. You could see its absence in his eyes, where they shone with a vivid *excitement* and *hatred*.

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. I didn't mean for the gun to go off."

"Did you mean to plug Bryon if I wouldn't have knocked you across the room?"

"No. It was a display of force." Then, "Before my friends got here. Are you thirsty?"

Parched. "No."

He holstered the gun. "Okay. Whatever. Look. I need to show you something. Come on."

"Where are you putting Bryon? A cell?"

"They're nice. It's not like Alcatraz or anything."

"What about his head? You bruised his temple."

"Don't worry! We'll clean him up. Alvarez is a licensed physician."

He took me through the door, down a corridor with offices, the computer screens blank, doors open. Blood covered one of the panels of glass, flecks of human flesh branded into the drywall. We went through an electronic door, which was half-wedged open with a night-stick. The hallway bent around and we passed several high-plated glass windows overlooking the road leading towards the highway. Tractor Supply, McDonald's, Burger King, K-Mart, China Garden, Kroger, and the infamous LaComedia Dinner Theatre were all down that road—and a road branching ran up to my subdivision. A hill and several homes forebode us the view, though we could see the general, quiet mayhem of the streets. And I saw AmeriStop All the windows were shattered and the shelves were knocked over; a gas pump had burst apart into flame, and fire still ravaged the lot, leaving the front of the building charred. Through the smoke I could see several figures moving about within the gut of the gas station department. We went on through a door, into a foyer. And he stopped.

"You wanted to know how long until one of these guys starves? We're learning." He reached for the door, looked over his shoulder at me, and added as a precaution, "Don't get close. The chain could come out." And he opened the door, and the darkness of the hall filled with that scourging light, and my eyes made out several potted plants, some trees, a bench outside, surrounded by towering brick walls, with barbed wire at the top. A Wendy's fast food tray brushed inside the doorway, pushed by a delicate wind. A courtyard. Pacino took the 9mm in his hands and went through; I followed.

Almost immediately I saw him. Or her. I couldn't tell. All I could see was its back; it was crouched in the corner, with a chain around the neck. Blood soaked the back of the shirt in rivulets, and its chest heaved in and out with every breath. I don't think it had heard us come through. We went behind the bench, feet softly padding over the tiled rock. My blood pressure surged, and I suddenly felt so fearful. Bryon's paranoia. Conspiracy? I eyed the cop warily, almost with fright; but he didn't look at me, and instead—clapped his hands.

The man/woman in the corner turned, and I saw the face of a once-beautiful police sergeant, now turned into a ghoul from hell. Her short brown hair was caked this way and that, a concoction of mingled sweat and blood. Her purple skin meshed with the light, and her sunken eyes swiveled in the sockets. Her yellow teeth knocked together and she ran towards us, reaching out with hands in a death-grip. She screamed—I fell against the cop; and then the 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 hemlock. She got up and came again, but fell back. She did this over and over, eyes betraying all love, and finally she went back to the corner, hunched down, and cowered.

"They don't learn," the cop said. He spoke in a whisper. "She's forgotten about us."

Clap clap clap

She whipped around, hissed, and launched at us again, falling back several times. Returned to the corner.

"We've guessed 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 someone 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 almost 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 physicals; Taylor tried to grab her arm, we were going to put her down with some sedatives—not kill her, mind you, just paralyze her—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. Then we had to lock the doors, and 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.

I looked at her now. Yes. She did have a chunk missing out of the arm. And she didn't see me.

She'd forgotten.

“It's the bites,” Pacino told me. “They bite you, and you become one of them. And you—gosh.”

Thunder crackled. She jumped up again and rushed us. Pacino grabbed me by the shoulder and dragged me to the door. It began to sprinkle, some drops splattering on my head. Pacino opened the door wide as the rain began to intensify; lightning flashed above us, the courtyard growing even dimmer, until Taylor—or was it Taylor? No, I didn't know; couldn't know—was just a shadow retreating to the corner, making guttural noises with the rain.

“She's gone,” Pacino mumbled. “It's not really her. Her body has been stolen.”

And we went back inside. He locked the door behind us. Rain drummed on the roof.

2:00 p.m.

Sadists forevermore
The courtyard
The green mile

Darkness grew over us again and we walked down the corridor. “You didn't chain her just because she liked to spend her break out there, *did* you, Pacino?”

He could read right through me, and I through him. “You're a bright kid. What's your name?”

“Why didn't you kill her? Shoot her?” I remembered the blood on the office window. What led these officers to save the girl, and not the one who had been killed? A horrible idea crept up, an idea only very lonely men could conjure up in their sleep. His reply soothed the ache on my mind.

“She will tell us when it is safe to go,” he answered. “She will die of starvation. And so will all the others, within a bare few hours.”

They were starving her. Seeing when she would die. Seeing how long it would take until the infected were cleansed, not through serums or I.V.s or treatment, but through a grueling and agonizing death. I 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. Writhing in the garden, her wails shaking the Station walls.

The windows looking over the street passed to our right, revealing heavy rains pounding the grass and trees and slopes and buildings. Sheets of rain swam over the street, between the wrecked vehicles, and fires were smothered, choking dying flames. The thunder shook the building foundation. Mist rose up from the grass, scratching over the window panes. One of the windows held a jagged crack, the panes on either side held taught and tense, on the verge of breaking. But the windows were gone and we went back into the hallway with the offices. Surprised he didn't take me back to the desk room, he dragged me in the other direction. The air grew colder. Another set of electronic doors, wedged open with a crowbar. He put his foot in and took out the bar, then with muscles rippling slid open the doors, ducking inside. The doors swung shut behind us, smacking together with a loud crackling.

A blank television set lay on the ground, the screen broken. Chairs were scattered about the room, and several mounted video feeds on the walls and ceiling hung like a ghostly fog. The two other officers saw me and turned their heads, muttering to themselves. Laughing. The big one slid a hand over his mountainous stomach.

"Take it easy, boys," Pacino said. "I just need to show him."

The skinny one—Alvarez, I think—jumped in front of another door. "Whoa, whoa. I don't think so."

"Come on. He needs to know."

"Why? Why does he need to know?" He glared at me. "Is he not content with living?"

"Stand down, Alvarez," Pacino growled. "Or I'll lay you down."

Alvarez's hand draped down to the 9mm in the holster. I flinched. Pacino 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?"

"Plans change, my man."

Alvarez stepped aside and we went through. The carpeting turned bare and cold. Concrete. My eyes adjusted. It was much darker. Shadows loomed out at me. Barred shadows. Iron bars. Cells. But my ears caught it before my eyes—deep, ragged breathing, shuffling feet. I cocked my head towards the sound; Pacino was walking away, but I tore off, walking over towards the sound. Under my breath, not wanting Pacino to hear, I breathed, "Bryon?" I peeled through the darkness. No windows to let even the gracious light of the storm. Thunder. "Bryon? Are you—" I felt something run into me, cold and hard. I jumped back, almost falling, then cursed myself. Just a cell. I had ran into- The attack came out of the shadows, and I saw the barred teeth; the naked man threw himself against the bars, bleeding from several places, enclosed like a lion, only more vicious. Drool fell down from swollen, blistered lips. His eyes rolled as clawed hands, the fingernails ripped off, coated with blood, came at me through the bars. The bony fingers touched my Homer's Grocery shirt and I ripped away, tumbling and falling hard on my rump. I could still see the figure grabbing through the bars at me; Pacino came from nowhere and took me up, grabbing me under the armpits. He lifted me to my feet, and I stumbled back, into the wall. My heart sprinted a marathon.

Pacino said, "We're keeping them in here." We both watched as the infected man leaned against the bars, lacerated chest quivering with each torn breath. His yellow eyes looked us over. He didn't move. I feared the bars would break. He opened his mouth and made some horrible, almost inhuman noise, and he several resounding calls echoed through the chamber. The cells were full. Full with those whose only desires were to kill. Nothing more. Just to kill, and to spawn killers. "Test subjects."

"We stripped this guy here down. His name is Alan Schmidt. We took fingerprints when we tranquilized him earlier today. He is a business manager of human resources at Delphi Automotive." Now he was a monster. "Father of four, divorced twice. Member of the Atheist's Club, a long-time chairman. Do you believe in God?"

I swallowed. "Yes."

"It is good. To believe in God. Especially now. Because God is all you have."

"Do you believe in God?"

He paused. "I believe we'll need a miracle to live."

He led me through the darkness, then light burst forth. He had grabbed a flashlight off the wall. "I am a fool," he told me, 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 messing around again, okay?"

Chaining friends in a storm. Performing tests on a business manager. Why would I *want* to go messing around?

"He's in here."

"Who?"

"You're friend."

He unlocked a cell and opened the door. I heard grunting and metal-against-metal. He lowered the flashlight over a bed against the brick wall. Bryon lay there, strapped in. Drool dribbled down his face and he stared up at us with the look of anger and hate in his eyes. I never would have imagined the rebellious Bryon being strapped down like this. His arms and legs pushed against the wrought-iron chains. I had seen such a table before. Surfing the web

once, I had gotten to the San Quentin website—they used gurneys like this when executing an inmate via lethal injection. No. Don't tell-

Pacino knelt down next to Bryon, stared into his oval eyes. "I have told your friend here everything you wanted to know. He hasn't run. He isn't dead. And I imagine he is more comfortable here than ever." What a shot off the wall. "Promise me you won't try any tricks again, and I'll let you free of this, and give you some water. The tranq often makes people thirsty."

His voice was raspy. "You—"

"*Promise me.* That's all I need. And you'll be freed. And you'll get water."

In the cell next to us, something moved. The beam didn't touch.

Bryon's eyes were wide.

"Do you wish to see?" Pacino asked, smiling crookedly. "We will leave then. Do you wish to see?"

Bryon stared into the cell next to us, the darkness cloaking anything beyond.

Pacino whispered into his ear, "Do you wish to see?"

His eerie words made my blood sour.

And he stood, rolling the flashlight in his hands, and swung it over the floor, knotted and cracked, over the moldy iron bars, and into the cell. Several hunched figures—an old woman, a beautiful damsel turned into Satan's child, and two boys and a girl—threw themselves with a shriek at the bars. The entire room shook as they snarled and screamed, wincing in the bright light.

Bryon's body thudded against the gurney, terror gripping him.

In the cell beyond, more figures danced in the shadows, aroused. The shouts of the infected echoed through the brick and concrete room.

Bryon shivered. Goose-bumps spread over my arms, and I edged towards Pacino and the gurney.

Pacino whirled the light around, focusing it on Bryon's face. Bryon's eyes snapped shut. His breath came out in wisps of warm air. The sounds died down, but we all knew—they were there.

Watching

Hunting

Pacino rose and told me, "Let's go. I am sure you are thirsty."

He moved past me and to the door. I glanced back at Bryon, mentally pleading, *Come on, don't stay...*

The cop snapped, "Do you want to stay here, too?"

I backed out. Pacino was shutting the door, and danced the flashlight beam into the next cell (cage). The infected hurled up against the iron bars. A screw popped out of the ceiling, falling through the air, clinking over the concrete, rolling next to one of the gurney legs. Pacino grinned and flashed the light off.

Bryon hollered, parched, "Okay. Okay. I promise. Just let me out of this *freaking cell!*"

Pacino went back inside. "Good choice. I don't know about those bars. They've held up so far. But weird things have happened. We all know." He undid the clamps and helped Bryon up. Bryon turned his eyes away and hurried out of the cell, a somewhat sluggish hurry, as his numb legs didn't carry him so poignantly. Pacino shut the cell and led us through the jail room, and the door opened, and brilliant light—no, not light, darkness, except the windows let in light that burned like angel's fire compared to the dank cells—blinded us. We rubbed our eyes and went in.

The other officers hissed and jumped up.

Pacino said, "Sit down or you'll be in the cell."

They lowered back down.

He took us to a room we hadn't yet seen. It held two stuffed chairs, a bookcase and a computer. He threw us in, said, "See you," and locked the door tight. We were left alone in the superb darkness. But it was warm—and we weren't surrounded by the creatures born of hell.

"This is an improvement," Bryon said, rubbing his stiff muscles.

I pulled a lighter out of my pocket. Hannah had given me one at AmeriStop I flicked it open, and the lighter burned sharp, twisting its golden beams over the room. We spotted some scenic

candles and lit them. Never-before used. The wicks burned solid. I slid the lighter back into my pocket and fell into one of the chairs. My eyes drooped. What time was it? My watch read twenty after 2:00. Unbelievable. My stomach growled. Chicken and tuna didn't quite rub me full. Bryon paced back and forth, peering at the shelves. Dusty books, stacks of magazines. Police reports, some medals. Pictures of a smiling family at some lake house somewhere, dressed in fishing gear and holding tackling. He went through the drawers, picked something out, and shoved it into his pocket. I couldn't see what it was.

"So you made a new friend," he finally said. "That cop. Nice guy."

I 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, we're not friends."

"Do you think this room is tapped?"

"Even if it is, power's out."

"They could be listening behind the door."

"So? Who cares?"

Bryon brushed some papers and a pen aside on the desk and sat down, legs dangling. "What'd he tell you?"

I took a breath. "He showed me."

"What?"

"Showed me."

"No. What did he show you?"

"They chained up one of their officers. A woman. She's in the courtyard, in the cold rain. I'm not saying give her mercy. It's a good punishment. But they treat her like a whore. Treated her, I should say. And do you know why she's in the courtyard? They're starving her. They have this theory that all these sick don't eat food, and they're right, and they say that they're going to see how long until they starve to death. Noble, maybe. 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, when they all starve to death?"

"They're sadistic."

"I think. They're all, like, twenty years old and horny as heck. The woman in the courtyard..."

"If you even mention it, I'll slit your throat."

"Then I don't need to."

"Why do you think they locked us up?"

"I shudder at the thought."

"We should've just kept running. Right on past this place. Maybe to the library or something."

"Maybe we could."

He laughed. "How could we? You're insane. We're locked up. How we gonna get out, Sherlock?"

"We've got to do something. Call it soul-force, call it premonitions, call it whatever the heck you want to, but I'm getting the vibe our being locked up is a great comfort compared to our future."

"You got that right."

I looked up at the ceiling. Tiles. "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. Bryon. The ceiling."

He obeyed, and a smile crossed his lips. "I'm glad I did. I didn't get paid. Not till now."

"You're tallest. Go first."

"No. You. If they come, I can fight them better than you."

That was for sure. I stood on the desk and leaned up, grabbing one of the tiles. It shook under my hands. Drywall fluttered down, flaking over my work shirt. I wrestled the panel free and handled it down to Bryon. He set it against the bookcase. "Give me a push." He did, and I was raised up, and squirmed through the opening in the ceiling. It was dusty and old, stinking of

mildew and age. Of bones. I crawled over the tiles. They held. Bryon told me he could see me moving on the tiles. They bulged. Not good.

He said, "Look for a wooden beam. There should—"

"I see it." I crawled through the darkness, crouching on top of it. Dust filled my lungs. I coughed.

Light from the candles barely pushed through into the ceiling cavity, but blotted as Bryon stepped onto the desk. He pushed the tile up and disappeared. There was a loud crash, the splintering of wood. My heart skipped a beat. I heard the door swinging open. Silence. Footsteps below. Sweat stung my eyes, turning the dust on my face to a ruddy powder. Bryon then appeared, gracefully joining me in the cavity. He pushed the tile back down over the opening, so no one would imagine a thing. He sat on the wooden beam, the bulge of his body on the tiles vanishing just as running feet burst into the room below us. Pacino, Alvarez, the fat man. All cursing. Screaming. Shouting. Bryon and I held out breaths; I swear even now that somehow—in the impermeable blackness—I could see Bryon's wacky smile. He was enjoying this. And so was I. Somehow. I guess all boys would. After all, didn't God create us wild and adventurous and passionate and embedded with a warrior's spirit?

Alvarez breathed, "They're gone."

Foul words. Pacino: "I can tell that! Where the heck did they go!"

"The door was busted open," the fat man mumbled.

"We didn't run into them," Pacino said. "They must have gone the other direction."

"They're trying to leave through the front doors," Alvarez said, swearing. "Let them go."

"No! No!" Pacino howled. "We need them! How else are we to be sure about the disease communication?"

So that was it. They were to use us to discover how the disease transfers from infected to healthy.

Lab rats. That's all we were. Lab rats. Soul-force. Premonitions. Whatever. But I was right.

"Shoot them if you see them! Don't kill them! The dead can't be struck with the disease."

They ran out of the room, slamming the door. Silence.

I said, as lowly as I could, "They're going to find us. They're gonna block our exit."

"We're not leaving," Bryon said. "Not yet."

"What? We're just going to roost here till hell walks?"

"No. No. You understand, don't you, Austin, that no one messes with Bryon and survives?" There was a mad—deranged, even—twinkle in his eye. I thought gruelingly to myself, *Is he enjoying this?*

"You're insane."

"Just follow me."

We moved over the beam, then slid onto the tiles, placing our weight carefully as not to fall through. Something didn't make sense. We weren't going the right way. Not at all. We were going back. Back. A shudder ran through me. *Back to the cells.* I wanted to turn around, to return to the front, but I knew deep down that the cops weren't dumb enough to overlook a clever little scheme Bryon set up, and would hunt for us. But they wouldn't go into the cells. No. They would never *imagine* us going there, especially not Bryon.

"There's no way to get out from the jail," I said.

He didn't flinch. "I know."

"So where are we going? The courtyard?"

He stopped, and I nearly ran into him. He placed his ear to a vent, then turned his head, and peered below. 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, but strained the girders supporting the tiles; I gave a shout as the tile under my right arm gave way, and I pitched forward, bashing my head on a pole, then flipped around and fell, spinning wildly; I landed hard on the ground, in the darkness, body stinging.

I lay crumpled in a fetal position, against something warm and hard. Wood. Bryon landed next to me.

Then something came at us from the shadows, swiping, growling; a woman who stank of garlic and dried blood. I writhed back, seeing her shadow sweep towards me; a bright flash of light, a clap of thunder so loud it sent lightning into my eardrums, and blood burst out back

behind the woman's skull, spraying the wall. She tumbled down and collapsed to the ground. Bryon lifted me up; I smelt the acrid reek of gunpowder.

"Found it in the office," he said, and turned to the lock. He raised the gun and blew it away.

We moved out from the cell, and I took a flashlight off the wall, turned it on. The figures in the cells threw themselves against the bars, screaming at us. Bryon made sure there were no more in the cell we had escaped from, and then he moved to the back. Away from me. I protested, and he told me to get close to the door.

I did as I was told. I could hear voices behind the door. Footsteps towards us. *Oh no...*

Gunshots came and light danced over the grimy walls. "Bryon!" I yelled over the screams of the infected.

He wheeled around, racing at me, screaming, "Go! Go! Go!"

"They're coming!"

"I know!"

I spun around and dove for the door; but it burst open, swinging wildly, hitting me in the forehead, opening up the brutal wound that had clotted. Blood streamed into my eye, stinging. I fell to the floor as the cops blew through; they tripped over me in the dark and sprawled out over the floor. Bryon grabbed my hand and ripped me to my feet. The flashlight beam spreading from my shaking hands flew over the grounded officers, then up into the room, where the infected were rushing at us like zombies from hell.

"Austin! Austin!" Bryon was already running; my feet followed.

One of the cops got to his feet, pointed the gun at my back.

"Austin! Down!" Bryon fired a shot as I threw myself into a chair. The bullet cackled over me and hit the cop in the shoulder, throwing him down. The cop's gun skittered into darkness. I got to my feet and ran after Bryon. He had disappeared down the hallway. I gave one last look back to see the infected swarming over the cops, tearing them up alive; their screams shook the Station and blood covered the floor. Vomit at the back of my throat. And I was in the hallway. Bryon nowhere.

I fell against the wall, breathing hard. "Bryon? Bryon!" My wails echoed back to me.

The bloodstained office window.

No. I was not going to end up like that. I wasn't going to get shot in the head.

Bryon whirled around the corner. "They're coming in the front! We're trapped!"

"The courtyard!" I took him through the doors and down the corridor. Bryon locked the doors and followed.

"They're coming in through the entrance," Bryon said. We neared the windows. "I don't know what—"

Something slammed against the windows next to us. We fell back to see infected smearing blood and bile over the mirrors, pressing up against it. I recognized one of them as a regular IGA customer. A nice, aged old man. Funny. Cracked lots of jokes. Made us laugh. Now blood dribbled from his mouth and an eye dangled from the socket, drenching that entire side of his face a deep red, lacerated by raindrops from the raging storm outside.

Bryon choked, "They're surrounding us..."

They threw themselves against the glass again. The pane with the webbed crack groaned.

"It's going to break," I said.

So we took off, through the door into the courtyard. Rain hammered down. The plants were matted under a small network of muddy fingers, and the tree rocked back and forth, ominous in the dashing lightning. Taylor turned to face us and ran towards us, screaming; Bryon raised the gun and shot her in the head; her head flipped back, the back of the scalp blown to the ground. The chain wrenched her back and she turned as she fell, revealing the bloody hole.

I couldn't help it, and vomited all over the mud. Bryon went past and stepped onto a picnic table, grabbing a rain gutter, and pulling himself onto the roof. I followed, and he tugged me up.

We stood up there in the rain, and I thought to myself, *This is great. We're going to get struck dead by lightning.*

Bryon stared at the library across a wide quarter-mile stretch of green lawn. The remains of the Bronco smoked in the cold drizzle. Rain dripped down his face as he said, "I guess we can go to the library now."

"We should go to the park. Into the woods."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"There'll be people in the library. Maybe infected. Look at all the cars by the entrance."

"The woods, eh?"

"We run past the library—" I had to pause. Thunder droned out my voice. "Run past the library, then back behind the subdivisions, and we're at north park."

"It's a long way to run."

"It's what I'm doing. You volunteered to come."

"All right. Whatever, man." And he jumped down to the ground without giving it a second thought. He sprang lightly to his feet and took off across the lawn, becoming a shadowy figure in the rain, then disappearing to the falling sheets. I was alone. Shivering.

It was so far down. At least ten feet. "Screw it." I didn't think. And I found myself falling. The ground rushing up at me. *Should've stayed on the roof...* I hit hard and rolled, feeling the wet grass sticking to my flesh and clothes. My right knee burned like sulfur. I came to and ran across the lawn, through the rain; behind me I heard several shouts and cries, one sounding like the scream of Pacino, but didn't dare to look back. I emerged into the parking lot and Bryon appeared next to the bushes that lined the library. It was dark inside the windows.

"Still want to go through the park? It's unlocked. The doors."

"If anyone in there was worth thinking about, they would have locked the doors."

I could hear the shouts of the infected from the Station coming closer.

"Sounds like you drew a crowd."

"They're only going to arouse more. Come on."

We took off into the rain.

3:00 p.m.

North Park
The woods
Chelsie's dad

The moist earth squished beneath our shoes as we made our way around the back of library. The wide-branched oak tree with the benches underneath it—my old Spanish teacher would come out here and read after school, on the benches, under the tree, warming in May sun—came out of the dreaded rain, drenched in fog. One of the benches had been knocked over, and at the base of the tree, the mulch had footprints filling with water. Bryon took us past, and the tree and the library vanished. The cries of the infected were gone with it, too, and soon we came upon several houses, cryptic, and abandoned. One was half-burnt to the ground; a woman lay sprawled on the ground, a revolver in her hand, and a hole through her head. She had taken the easy way out. Crossing between two homes, we jumped a fence. A dog came out of a doghouse, shivering and pale, watching us with droopy eyes. He cowered back into the doghouse when thunder shook the earth. Bryon scaled the fence, and I followed, cutting my pants on the pointed scaffolds lining the wooden boards. A line of trees rose out of the mist, and by now we were soaked and cold and covered with goose-bumps. Clothes stuck to our skin.

"North Park is just beyond these trees," I said.

The pine trees sheltered us from the rain, and we walked over a browning bed of fallen pine needles. Birds called to each other in the branches above, and soon we exited onto a road. There were no vehicles, as the road was barely traveled, but a tree on the median had been torn down and left dappling over the right side of the road. The road banked right to our right, leading to several apartments and to the mutilated avenue that ran south to our school and Franklin, and north to Downtown Arlington. Left was more packed homes in a packed subdivision. We ran across the road, mere shadows in the drenching rainfall—ah, spring showers, never better—and came to a low mound. We lumbered over it and slid down the other side, coming to an empty parking lot.

No one visited North Park in the morning hours—it was for students and white-collar joggers. It was decent, and while not the best, it was the talk-of-the-town when it came to places to hang out. It sported a never-before-used amphitheatre, basketball and tennis courts, a pond overflowing with frogs and tadpoles—no fishing, please!—and a skateboarding enclosure. Oh. And for you white-collar folk, a concrete path that wound its way around North Park—a shred under a mile.

Rain ran in rivers over the pavement, but then we were in the grass, ascending a hill, the steep sides covered in runny mulch. Down the other side. The amphitheatre came at us, plastered against the thick woods that ran down to the wooden bridge, then jutted right into my subdivision. From there, over the gravel pathway, up the crooked steps, past the Gazebo, down and up the street, past St. James, and my house would be there. I was nearly there. My heart leapt. Almost there... Almost there...

“Are we going through the woods?” Bryon asked.

“Yes. How many times have you been here?”

“Once or twice.”

“I’ll show us the way.”

The amphitheatre rose to our left, and then I found the trail, even though it could hardly be made out in the heavy rain. I knew this place like the back of my hand. Chad, Drake, Les and I had hung out here hundreds of times—no exaggeration—in the last two years. The ground was filled with rainwater, and stuck to our feet, making sucking, slurping noises as we walked. The trees formed thick, overgrown barriers to our sides, and the path wound through the forest, and what with all the rain reminded me of the Congo. I could feel the eyes of a tiger, or a gorilla, prancing over me. Except tigers and gorillas weren’t our worries. No. Not at all.

“We’re almost—”

Bryon grabbed my shoulder, fingers digging into my like hooked claws. “Quiet.”

My leaping heart fell to my stomach, then up into my throat. “What?”

“Listen.”

Just the rain. The rain falling through the canopy, sprinkling on the path before us, on the newly-sprouting leaves of the trees and woods and plants, the rushing creek bellowing like an ancient blow horn somewhere down the trail. It would be gushing with water. But the creek. And the rain. I turned my head and looked at him—his eyes were wide, and his face was pale and covered with goose-bumps under dripping rainwater.

He looked down at me. “They’re all around us. In the woods.”

They’re all around us. In the woods...

A horrendous shriek shook the heavens to our left, and one called out to our right. Another behind us. Then all at once, lost in the thunder. Bryon shoved me down and bolted down the path. I fell and landed hard in the mud, ankle and elbow searing with pain. I grunted and got to my feet. The screams, the screeches, all around us. The woods shuddering as they moved forward. Bryon shouted. I saw him vanish down the path, and then I, too, followed. I slipped and slid over the mud, but somehow didn’t fall. The screams made me want to join, but my mouth was clenched tight, jaws crying. Then they stopped. The shrieks quit.

Just the rain.

I came to a stop, breathing hard.

Just the rain.

And I saw it. Blood splashed the tree to my right, and was all over the ferns and leaves. Blood on the other side, too. Dripping and smearing in the rain. Footprints at my feet, some filled with maroon water, came to a halt, then were dragged into the woods. I swallowed and tried to peer through the dense foliage. Couldn’t see three feet in. *The Congo. People died in the Congo.* And weren’t there cannibals in the Congo? Oh, this was all too-

Something emerged from the woods forty or so feet behind me, on the path. I 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 were sunken, and his goose-bumps were purple-red. His lips unfurled, revealing golden teeth, golden with hatred. His fingers came into claws, and he hunched over, foaming at the mouth. He stared at me. Then rushed.

I swiveled and ran down the path. I could hear him coming towards me, slipping and falling in the rain. I dove into the woods in the hope of escaping. Bryon was trying to kill me. I saw

figures in the woods, all around; they screamed and shouted, but were held back by the dense network of dangling and coiled foliage. They were trapped in weeds and brambles, caught by vines, tripped over roots poking from the ground. Bryon ran into the woods, following me, trying to wind his way through the woods. I came out of the trees, onto the path.

The creek roared, and the bridge loomed up. I ran to the bridge, and over the wooden planks, resounding hollow beneath me. A man came at me from across the bridge, growling and snarling. I hit him with my shoulder, grabbed his shirt, and through him against the railing; he fell back, swiping at me, and I grabbed his legs and threw them over; he flailed and fell, landing in the runny waters, bashing his head on a rock, leaving a blood smear.

Bryon and the other infected swarmed from the woods, onto the bridge.

I bolted across, to the gravel pathway, up the crooked steps, past the empty gazebo lost in the drilling rain shower. I had never run so fast. I had never felt my legs burn so bad, my chest collapsing with the energy sapped from my muscle. I was too close to give up, to become like them. Too close, too close, too close. I had always ridden my bike down the street to North Park; it was steep, and so I had always walked the bike. If I only had the bike now. Or my Jeep. I would rush away so fast, and leave them behind me. A glance over my shoulder. They were still following, rounding the corner from North Park.

I tore onto the road that led right to my house. A car had slammed into a patio window of a home, and the glass had been blown out onto the street. Shards crunched under my shoes. St. James appeared, the crooked sign hanging limp as ever, sparkling with rain drips. The infected were gaining on me. They couldn't feel pain, couldn't die—my energy was sagging, I was about to fall over and just go to sleep, to give up all hope, but no! I pushed on. And then I saw more of them. Blocking my way from around the bend to my house.

"Mother." I turned onto St. James. The two groups merged and followed. The street made a radical change. These guys weren't too smart, right? So I went off into a lawn—Chelsie's house, I remembered—and jumped the fence, landing hard on the other side. Saw spots. Rain covered me. My entire body ached. Vomited blood all over the grass.

My own house was on the other side. I stood, and peered through the gaps in the fence. The infected had come to a stop on the street. They noticed I was missing. I watched, then told myself I didn't have much time. They'd go looking eventually. I had to get home before that. I carried myself to the back porch of Chelsie's home; the back door was locked. A figure appeared behind the glass—her dad. Her dad came to the door-window and opened it, looking at me in the rain. I looked back. He smiled at me. Relief.

"Have you seen my daughter, Austin?"

"No." I rushed for the fence.

Her dad came out into the rain. "What are—"

But I climbed the fence and fell over, landing on my back. Why couldn't I just climb fences like a normal person? I ran underneath several poplars, and was in my backyard. The house rose after me. I heard the shrieks of the infected, the breaking of wood, and I heard Chelsie's dad screaming, and gunshots shaking the land, and I heard his scream cut off under the screeches of the infected. I sprinted up my lawn and to the small door leading into the garage. I twisted the handle. Locked. Slippery with rain. I hunched over and crawled through the doggy door.

I was in the garage.

4:00 p.m.

"Get away from me."

My father

Reunion

The sweet smell of gasoline enveloped my senses. Our garage always smelt of gasoline, ever since our dog had knocked over a gallon and let it seep into the wood of the shelves. The garage door was down, but hazel light came in through the door window. Rain thudded dully on

the roof. The Malibu and Transport came out of the darkness; I ran my hand over the cold metal of the vehicles, making my way to the door into the house.

The doggy door flipped back; I spun around and the dog ran in. I cringed back. But he wasn't infected. He jumped up on me and licked my face, his wet tongue trailing drool all over my clothes. I pushed him down, stepped up and tried the door. Locked. I rummaged for the key under the step, after a few tries pushed it into the lock, twisted. The door swung open, a cool draft from the kitchen overpowering me. Hard to believe that just hours before I had left without a thought in the world—not a word to death or nightmares or even Hartford, the heart of it all. How appropriate. All because of Hartford, and the world was tumbling down.

"Stay," I told the dog, keeping him in the garage. I shut and locked the door. He'd bark if anyone came close. A good warning. "Mom? Dad?" My own voice moved through the rooms. The grandfather clock ticked back the seconds. Ice clattered in the refrigerator. I moved over the tile, into the den. Dad kept his NASCAR memoirs in here, not to mention the filing cabinet with all our records, and the computer. We never turned off the computer. It's dark screen seemed odd. "Mom?" I called. "Dad?" My feet took me into the parlor.

Rain on the roof. Never-ending rain.

I peeked into the living room. The furniture lay quiet. Like tombs.

Steps led up to the bedrooms, two baths and the closet with the washer and drier.

"Mom? Dad?"

Another stairwell went down into the basement. But no one ever went down there. I headed up when I heard something move about down in the basement. I snuck back down, opened the door to the basement, and crept down the steps. The workroom with all of Dad's tools was barricaded by a shut and locked door—he didn't trust Ashlie—or me—with his tools. In the room to the right, the pool table sat with the balls all swash-buckled over the green felt. My friends and I always held tournaments, goofed off and hung out around the table.

Was Les alive? Hannah? And Amanda? Was she okay? Or were they infected too?

Was I alone?

Light floated from the door to the family room. The television was in there. It was a small, packed room. It had been my room once, but I had moved back upstairs. The lights were out with the power—what was pushing light under the door? My heart hammered in my chest. I reached out for the doorknob. Shuffling beyond. Pushing open the door. A magna-flashlight glared at me, stinging my eyes. I stepped into the room, around the flashlight; too bright to see. And then my eyes cleared, and I saw Mom in the corner, her back to me; something was in her hands.

"Mom?" I croaked, too happy to see her. She wasn't attacking me. She was—

She turned her head towards me. I saw purple rashes on her skin, and her eyes were sinking. Her lips quivered, reflecting horribly in the light from the flashlight between her crossed legs. She glared bullets at me and hissed, "*Get away from me.*"

I had never heard that terrible voice from her before. I stepped away, too frightened to react.

She showed her hands. A revolver. She loaded a bullet into it. Small caliber. And another. "There's only two, Austin. Only two. One for me. And one for your father."

"Mom..."

No.

No.

No.

"It was meant to be," she told me. "This was supposed to happen. I don't want to be like them."

I just stared at her.

"I'm sorry it has to end 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 I kissed every morning before school. I stepped towards her. "Don't, Austin. Don't get close. Please. I don't have much time. He bit me." She squeezed her eyes shut, the revolver to her head. "I love you. Don't get too close. Protect your sister. I don't think he knows."

"Mom!"

The revolver barked; the back of her head splattered all over the wall and she pitched to the side, landing hard. The pistol rolled out of her hands. I screamed and dove for her, landing next

to her. But her eyes were vacant. Blood gushed all over the carpet. Those terrible, awful, loveless eyes stared at me, blank and unrevealing. I shuddered and tore away, lunging for the door. I spewed vomit all over my pants and fell out of the room, swinging the door shut. I fell to the ground, cowering, pulling my knees up to me. She was dead. She had killed herself. I had seen it. Tears fell down my face. Now I knew how Hannah had felt.

A sound from upstairs. I got to my feet and ran up the stairs, faced the door. I could imagine them coming in. Oh well. What was the point anymore?

Protect your sister.

I don't think he knows.

The front door splintered, then burst open, tearing the screen door down. Figures were coming inside. Abandoning the door, thinking only of Ashlie, I sprinted up the steps and burst into Ashlie's room. Dad hovered over the bed; Ashlie was sleeping.

"Dad!"

He whipped around and screeched.

He was one of them.

My own father—kin, flesh-and-blood—came at me, swiping. I ducked out of the room and ran down the steps. People were coming in the front door. I ran into the den, bashing my knee on the desk. Dad appeared at the top of the steps, howling a blood-curdling scream. I yanked at the garage door; locked; yanked harder. The lock popped and I ran out into the garage, into the darkness. Around the back of the vehicles. And I found it. The axe that Dad used to cut firewood and to hack up the trees he would fell at his brother's house. I took it off the rack.

Dad stood in the doorway, staring at me. He saw me moving and came down the step, around the vehicles.

I ran towards the doggy door. Suddenly the doggy door flew back and Chelsie's dad's head appeared, foaming, yellow-toothed. Without a second thought I swung the axe down; the blade slapped into the soft tissue at the neck and his head fell to the floor. Les told me skin was like toilet paper compared to wood. Now I knew what he meant.

Dad was behind me, rushing. I pulled the axe up and whipped around, swinging it wildly.

The broad of the axe connected with his shoulder, throwing him against his truck. He snarled and fell to the ground, squirming to stand. Energy sapped from my arms and legs. I swung the blade down, chopping off part of his leg. Blood sprayed up at me. Dad howled—but it wasn't Dad, it wasn't Dad!—and he leapt towards me, but fell to the ground, writhing. I stepped back, gasping for air. "Sorry, Daddy." And the axe went down, into his forehead; his cap fell back and blood and brain matter stained the cold concrete flooring. I let the axe be and sauntered away, seeing spots.

Mom committed suicide.

I killed my own daddy.

I went back inside. Goldie was nowhere to be seen.

Les, Hannah and Amanda stood at the kitchen entrance. Amanda's side was covered in blood. She held onto her arm tight. Hannah looked at me and started crying. Les dangled the keys from a limp hand.

I shut the door, leaned on it. "What happened to you guys?"

"You were right. It was overrun."

"Only three of you?"

"There was nine when we left. The guy in the wheelchair never even got on the roof. Are you okay?"

"Mom and Dad are dead." The words were numbing. Surreal. Unbelievable.

Les took me into the living room. I fell onto the leather couch. Listened to the rain outside.

"Do you want to play some pool?" I asked him.

5:00 p.m.

The Story of the Seasons
The Escape from Homer's Grocery

What's that noise in the bathroom?

"Stay away from the windows," I said as I sat on the couch. I could hear Les and Amanda moving about, hastily, digging through the cupboards. Les stood over me and watched them; from where I sat, I couldn't see. I turned and looked out one of the windows. Mom always opened the blinds in the morning to let in the sun and the songs of birds. Spring had come. I love Spring. The beautiful colors and the blossoming trees and all that is sacred coming to light. The seasons, they remind me of the Story. The Story I find myself in, the Story *all* of us find ourselves in. A Story of summer. A Story of a wonderful creation, a Story of love and acceptance, joy and happiness. A Story of discovery and excitement. Then summer fades; fall is on the horizon. Trees go bare. Leaves crinkle and crack, crisp, fall to be trampled. The grass browns. The world dies. Winter. A time of mourning, shivering in the cold, longing, desiring the return of summer. Then Spring! Wonderful spring! Joy! Laughter! Colors! Cooling, refreshing, cleansing rain. A magnificent circle of a Story; we're in winter; on the verge of spring? "Is this the first flower opening?"

Les took a shot at me: "What's that?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Never mind." Is this the End? The Apocalypse? Coming of Alpha and Omega? Tyler's words ran over my mind: *I just have this deep and innate feeling that the End is here, and I'm excited. I am excited about being here.* "Excited now, Tyler?"

Les stared at me as if I were crazy. *What's going through your head, boy?*

"Austin!" Hannah yelled. "Do you have any bandages? Gauze?"

I stood, divorcing myself from my thoughts. I brushed away from Les, muttering, "Close and lock all the windows. Draw the blinds. Lock the doors. Don't go downstairs." I didn't tell him why. My shoes clattered over the tile flooring. The garage door was unlocked. I locked it tight. They'd come from the front door; Les checked to make sure it was locked. Amanda sat on the kitchen island, clasping a hand over her arms. Faint trails of blood echoed between her fingers. Her face was a contorted mask. Several soiled towels lay next to her, clothed in blood.

Hannah put another one on and said, "We need something permanent. We're running out of towels."

"Did it touch the artery?"

"It hurts," Amanda said.

I remembered Pacino: *it's the bites... it's the bites that kill you...* I looked her in the eyes, trying to hold my fear, trying to keep the color and blush in my face. *It's the bites...* "How did you get hurt? Did you get bitten?"

A moment of silence. Then Amanda said, "No. I got hurt getting in the Jeep."

"How did it get overrun?"

Hannah snapped, "Bandages, Austin."

I nodded, in a daze. Nothing made sense. All the stress and overwhelming anxiety clouded over me, and although I could see, more sharply than ever before, the world was a mist, a fog, and I felt detached. Rerunning in my mind was a tape reel, and I kept seeing my father, standing over Ashlie's bed. I kept seeing the axe in my hands, bloodied; and I saw Mom, eyes sinking, glowing; her tan skin burning, and I kept hearing the gunshot, over and over and over, the sound echoing, and I could see so vividly her body falling backwards and deep wells of blood stained the wall. This ran over and over in my mind, and the cloud lifted, somehow, I can't imagine when, and I stood upstairs, standing over Ashlie. My shirt was covered with blood. The world was going to Hell. And Ashlie slept soundly, cuddled up in her covers, oblivious. *So peaceful.*

I felt someone behind me, the way you can tell when you're being watched. I didn't react; through the reflection in the window, I saw Les standing behind me. I looked back down to Ashlie. Les looked out into the hallway and shut the door. He locked it and walked across the room. Ashlie's Christmas lights ran the rim of her room; a television turned to station 18, now only static, sat on her dresser beside her PS2. *Crazy Taxi, Kingdom Hearts, The Haunted Mansion.* A striped 1970's chair sat by her two-door-closet, and on a table beside it was a half-used plastic container of fake nails and glue, some opened and drying-out nail polish. He sat in the chair, staring at a wall of Kodak pictures. Ashlie would take pictures from CIY and youth events, from camps and just pictures of hanging out with friends, and would paste them on the

wall. I turned my own head towards them and saw pictures of Drake and Chad, Andrew and Les, Hannah and Amanda. Amanda is Ashlie's best friend. All the pictures were sunny, laughing. In one my father laughed with a bunch of her friends. In another my mother was fixing lunch as I emptied the dish-washer.

Les' voice cracked as he talked. "Where are the rest of them?"

"Rest of who?"

Pause. "You know?"

I closed my eyes. "She's all. Dad is in the garage. Mom is downstairs."

"How are they?"

"Dad was sick. I killed him."

He was curious, but didn't want to press. The tension, so thick.

"Mom killed herself. Dad had bit her. I saved Ashlie before he got to her."

Les lowered his head, then raised it. "What happened to Bryon?"

"There were a lot of them in the woods. I'm lucky to be here." I faced him. "And thanks, too."

"Thanks for what?"

"Thanks for coming here. For being here for me." I pointed to Ash. "And for her."

"There's no place I'd rather be."

I nodded, and leaned over Ashlie, shutting her window and locking it tight. Through the branches of the maple tree I could see columns of parched smoke rising from the stretching suburbs and Main Street. The door across the street was thrown off the hinges, and one of the windows was broken. I drew the blinds tight, wanting to close it off. Anything to forget, to play like it wasn't real. I could do it nowhere better than here, in my own home.

Ash stirred, rolled over, opened her eyes. She looked at me, half asleep. "Austin? What time is it?"

Les didn't move.

I knelt down next to her. "How you feeling? Your sick bucket is empty."

"I feel like puking. What's that on your shirt?"

I shook my head. *Dad's blood, Ash! I killed him! I hacked him to death!* "We're painting the living room."

"Les?" She leaned up in bed, looking at him. Les looked at her with deep-pitied eyes. She said, "What are you doing here?"

He managed a fake smile. His voice crackled. "Helping."

"I didn't know we were painting."

"Dad..." I choked up, closed my eyes, pushed it down. "Dad's been wanting to do it for a long time."

"Where are Mom and Dad?"

I pulled the covers back over her. "Go back to sleep."

She nodded and rolled over. I ran a hand through her hair. She muttered, "Scratch it." This time, I didn't protest, but scratched her head. She grunted and fell asleep. I stepped back, to Les: "Let's go. Let's let her sleep."

We left the room and shut the door. I went into my parent's bedroom, into the closet. Rummaging between my dad's work shirts and mom's blouses, and opening boxes filled with photo albums and alumni awards from college and wedding gown and tuxedo. It was shoved against the corner of the closet. A red cross covered the vinyl sides; opening it, I told Les, "Mom used to be a nurse. She worked in downtown Arlington." I opened it up and searched for some gauze. A white bundle was rolled up; I took it in my hands and left the closet. Les ducked in and grabbed some antiseptic. His hands slightly shook, but I didn't say anything. We went back into the hallway, down the steps. A mirror on the wall reflected my face, and until then I hadn't noticed how haggard I looked. Bags formed under my eyes. My hair – had it grayed? – was thrown this way and that, a storm in the sea. Red-brown splotches of dried blood covered my t-shirt. I saw this, and tiredness swept over.

"Give me the gauze," Hannah said. She took it and said, "Ams, open up the wound." I stood by the pantry and watched as Amanda removed her hand. Les side-stepped in front of me, blocking my view. Amanda grimaced as Les dumped some antiseptic into the wound. Amanda said something low under her breath; Les shook his head, said, "It's okay..." That I heard, but everything else was in harsh whispers and stale growls. I touched Les on the shoulder: "Move."

He numbly stepped aside as Hannah drenched the wound in gauze, swinging it over and over Ams' arm. Red stains already dribbled on the gauze; the cloths were soaking in blood, and a pool of blood trickled on the island counter-top. Ams' arm was streaked with blood, as were Hannah's hands. It looked like a scene from a Vietnam-war movie.

"How much blood has she lost?" I asked.

Hannah responded, "She's fine. A lot, but not bad. See, there's still color in her face. She's not paling. Do you feel faint?"

Amanda shook her head *No*.

"See?"

"I'm convinced," I said, turning around. "You're the nurse expert. Does she need sugar?"

"Food would be nice."

We hadn't eaten since the cold chicken in the grocery store. Now as I opened the pantry door it stood out like a gold mine. Hannah and Les crowded beside me. We hadn't realized how *hungry* we were. Seeing the Hoe-hoes and Twinkies, the strawberry pop-tarts and chocolate mini-brownies. My eyes fell to my stomach, still a little round, but not a blimp as it *had* been. What was the point of dieting now? I grabbed a Twinkie, nutty-bar, and two packs of strawberry pop-tarts. Ams just sat on the counter. Hannah rummaged through the fridge, but everything was lukewarm. She opened up a container of ice cream, smirked, and threw it in the trashcan.

I opened the silver pack of pop-tarts, said to Amanda, "Not hungry?"

She shook her head. "The chicken made me sick. Too cold."

I shrugged. "Fine by me."

I didn't notice till later how both Les and Hannah had frozen when I asked Ams if she was hungry. Lots of things didn't come to me later, outstanding anyway. Like how Les had blocked my view of Amanda's wound, and how Hannah worked so hard to convince me she was okay. None of this registered. I just walked through the dining room and into the living room, sitting on the couch, facing the fireplace. Charcoal logs draped the inside. We'd had a fire a few nights ago, something special. Ashlie wanted to cook hot dogs, but it was raining, so Dad had dragged in fire logs and lit the place up.

Hannah stayed with Ams in the kitchen. Les came out to me and sat down with a sandwich.

"Isn't the cheese and turkey warm?"

"They're warm when I pack my lunch."

"Packed," I reminded. *It won't ever happen again.*

We didn't talk forever. Then Les asked, "When did you get here?"

"A few minutes before you."

"What took so long?"

As I ate the pop-tarts and the nutty-bars, I told him of the chase to the police station, the horrors we there observed, and I told him of the holocaust at North Park, and the vicious chase up St. James, where Chelsie's dad was consumed – half due to me, sadly – and I made a frantic escape to my own house, crawling through the doggy door to safety – and I didn't forget the nightmare I encountered downstairs and the beast salivating over my sister. Could all that have happened? It was all so surreal, so unbelievable. I woke up this morning at six o'clock, a suicidal Mom shaking me from the last peaceful sleep I'd ever taste. "Les... what would I have seen, had I stayed?"

He looked at me while he talked, though sometimes his eyes would drift over my shoulders and into the kitchen behind me. I know now what he was looking at. "Maybe twenty minutes after you left, there was a diabetic. He started going into coma or shock or whatever it is diabetics do. He needed some sugar – the levels were low. No one had any food, so we decided he could venture down into the store if he really wanted to. He couldn't – he was very weak and could hardly stand. So a construction worker volunteered. We let him out and he went down through the meat lockers, out 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, going through the broken bay windows. He grabbed some food and was making his way back when one of them came from the baler room. He tried to fight him off, but he got bit really bad in the neck. Blood was spraying all over the shelves, the wine bottles, the dairy products. He finally grabbed a wine bottle and smashed it against the infected's head. But the sick didn't go down. He – well, *it* – came at him again; the construction worker took a piece of the shattered glass and drove it

into the infected's eyes. He ran back to the door; they were about to open it, but we told them not to. He'd been bitten, we said. That was a... a life 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 and get bandages, but he was being all irrational. It was the sickness. His personality was changing, his emotions swinging. He started hammering on the door. We thought he was going to get in. Then it all stopped. Silence."

Ams and Hannah were listening; Hannah was trying to feed Ams a banana, but Amanda wasn't buying.

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 was hitting the door! One of your coworkers was standing by the door, asking if he was okay. No response. Just hitting the door. He had turned. No question about it. We started crawling out from the roof. The door splintered; I was one of the last people out, and got my legs onto the roof just before the door came down. Someone else tried to escape, but the infected bit into his leg. He screamed and let go and fell down on top of the poor guy in the wheelchair. He tried to fight off the infected, but the infected tore chunks of flesh out of him. And the whole time – the *whole time* – the fellow in the wheelchair just watched, almost 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 from the living room.

"Something like that," Les remarked. "And the guy with diabetes, he was screaming. Couldn't move a muscle. Really bad diabetic. We heard his screams as we ran across the rooftop, then the screams were cut short. The infected got him. Well, the screams drew infected from the rest of Clearcreek Plaza, across State Route 73, and from Main Street. We thought we could handle it on the roof, but they were able to climb on top a truck and onto the roof. One of the women with us vaulted off the roof and onto the pavement, running for her life into the buildings of Main Street. I don't know how she's doing. Probably not too good. We jumped down from the rooftop as the infected were closing in. We got inside the Jeep and started the engine. There were five or six of us, packed all tight, and I got us out of there, onto state route 73. We hit a few infected; you've got bloody spots on the fender."

"Makes me happy," I said.

"The infected 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 Clear creek-Franklin, but that road was hemmed off by police barricades. Maybe it was one of the first sources of infection here in Clearcreek? So we went left to Tractor Supply, past Papa John's, where we used to get pizza all the time with the toppings that would slide right off, then into the parking lot of Wal-Mart, China Garden, Kroger. Two of the three other people with us wanted out there. They said Wal-Mart was a safe bet – had food and guns and blankets, everything you could want for survival. I stopped and told them to hurry the heck up. They got out and slammed the door. Hannah was riding shotgun and she shrieked. I looked out her window and there was this girl, maybe six or seven. Her jaw was all bloodied up with skin ripped off and shredded muscle dangling from a mouth and swollen tongue. Her placid eyes stared at us and she pressed blood-stained tiny palms against the door. We're talking Pretty Princess gone to Hell. We hit the gas as hard as we could and I think we rolled over her foot. But she just watched us leave; the other two people got into Wal-Mart and locked the doors before she could follow them in."

"Wal-Mart," I mused. "Sounds pretty safe, now that I think about. Guns are nice." I didn't tell them about the pistol. Had they seen it? I don't think so. I didn't want them getting their caution-friendly hands all over it. It was *mine*. One bullet left.

"No," Hannah said quietly. "All the supermarkets and places are probably flooded by the infected. If you want to be safe, go somewhere small. Like a house. Like *here*."

Les: "All of lower Clearcreek was a madhouse. There were infected on the streets, walking around, rambling with no purpose. Accidents all over the place with broken windows and twisted wrecks. I don't think we saw a single living soul. There were bloody spots on the ground where people fell – then got back up again. We went up that one road with Tom Katz and Grasser Tire and Holiday Inn. Most of the apartments were smoking rubble, probably from a fire earlier. We drove through the country – there aren't many of them out there." He paused,

chewing on his words, then, "I was thinking, if we could get out there... We saw some homes, and they were locked up and barricades... the infected tend to stay in the urban areas, and maybe if we can get to the country, into the woods or something, maybe then we can get away from all this..."

"North Park woods were-"

"North Park woods is a tree line," Les energetically proclaimed. "I'm talking farmland. I'm talking out where the infected won't wander, where there isn't any food."

"Don't you mean shortage on people?"

Les shrugged. "It's grotesque. But you know it's worth a shot."

"How do you expect to get there?" Flicked the nutty-bar wrapper to the floor. "Drive?"

"We have the Jeep."

"I was running a dash above empty on the way to school." So long ago. An eternity. Hours were eternities. "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' eyes steamed and he mentally pulled his hair. "We have to have a plan!"

"We don't," I calmly said. "Every other plan has failed. So we stay here. Hole up. Welcome to the Alamo."

"We don't have food."

"There's a whole lot of that in the countryside."

Les glared steel magnolias. "I don't want to sit here and wait to die and rot."

"You come over three times a week. We have three doors out. You know where they all are."

"How can you give up so quickly?"

"It was Thoreau who said, 'Men live quiet lives of desperation.' Or something like that."

"What does that have to do with a plan!"

"Has nothing to do with 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 savage 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 the plan. So relax. Enjoy yourself. Shoot some Pool."

Amanda stood from the countertop and walked upstairs. "I'm taking a shower. If the water still works."

"Water doesn't run on electricity," I said.

Hannah sat down with us. "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 they're covered. They might flock to light like moths. How do we know?"

The shower turned on. Some commotion upstairs as Amanda got in. The shower door slid shut. I asked, "Les, you didn't tell me how Amanda got her cut. It looked pretty bad." No cleverness in my voice. Not now. I hadn't a clue – too brain-dead from all the hoarse and unfettered 'excitement.'

Hannah glared at Les, but Les didn't notice: "While we were driving past the burnt-out apartment buildings, the back door popped open. All the food spilt everywhere, and so did Renee. She was the last one of us to go. We hit a curve, the trunk popped, and Renee and all the AmeriStop junk went out the back. Just then some infected were coming from an embankment and ditch. We didn't stop for Renee. Call me cold-blooded, un-Christian, but things change fast. The infected got her. Hannah yelled at Ams to shut the back door. We were going over a hill when she clambered back and began to shut it. Suddenly, over the hill, there was an overturned truck with a half-eaten corpse sprawled over the cab; I swerved to avoid hitting it and rolled into the ditch. She flopped out the back, landing amongst a bunch of weeds. We rolled off the side of the road, too. I stopped the Jeep, Hannah grabbed Amanda, she was pretty banged up. We loaded up, stepped on the gas, pulled out of there using a trick I learned in driving ed, and we were on our way, deeper into the rural."

"I thought she banged it getting *into* the Jeep? 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 warm water? You're a nurse?"

"She should be fine."

I shook my head. "If we lose her to shock I'll kill myself." One more bullet. I went upstairs and tried to get in. The knob rattled. I leaned my head against it. "Ams?" Nothing. I called again: "Ams!" A dim echo from within the lighthouse-style bathroom; I returned, "How are you feeling? You shouldn't be getting the bandages wet!" She said it was fine.

Hannah walked up the steps and said, "She's okay. Go relax."

I nodded and went into my room, shutting the door. The pistol sat on the computer desk. The computer was dark. I took the pistol and slid it under one of the pillows of my messy bed. I changed shirts, throwing the bloody one into the dirty heap, and pulling on a Nautica long-sleeve. From the light of the window, shades drawn, the room was held in a fuzzy glow, soft illumination reflecting off dinosaur paintings mounted on the wall, a rack of Bibles in my bookcase, with some dinosaur encyclopedias alongside. The fish tank was quiet, and the fish swam along happily. With the door shut, in the silence, I could get a moment's rest. I crouched down on the bed, fell into the covers. *Sleep. Sleep.* I closed my eyes – but it wouldn't come. Exhaustion. So tired. But unable to sleep. Insomnia. I got back up, changed my pants and boxers, threw on new sox, and took off my shoes. I opened the door and went back into the hallway.

Hannah knocked on the bathroom door. "Amanda? Are you okay?"

Puking, groaning from inside. I said, "Shock."

"Don't go back into the shower," Hannah said. "Okay? You don't want to pass out."

A muffled reply: "I won't."

"Never should've let her go," I said matter-of-factly.

"What are you puking up? Bile or blood? Both?"

"It's just..." Vomiting. "Green."

"Hannah, you can't just—"

She snapped, "Get out of here! I can deal with this. You're not a doctor. Get."

I raised my hands and tromped downstairs. Les was peeking out the window; "Any news?"

"Roads are barren," he said. "Completely empty. I think things are quieting down."

"Don't you mean survivors are dwindling?"

"Do you think there are many more survivors? Holed up?"

"Yeah. Definitely. The whole world isn't going to fall in a couple hours."

"Any survivors here in Tamarack?"

"I'm sure."

"We should try to hook up with them."

"Stop dreaming, it's going to—"

THUMP. From the bathroom. Both Les and I looked up at Hannah. She had stepped away from the door, ashen-faced. We sprinted up the steps. I shook the knob. Snarled to Hannah, "She'd better not have been in the shower. She could drown." I tried to open the door. "We have a key somewhere, I think it's in my parents' room..." I ran into their room and frantically searched, pulling out drawers and boxes and containers. Watches. Dice. Tic-tacs. Some keys to the house, car, truck. I then remembered we also had the van and truck to drive if we wanted. There! I found the key and ran back out. I put it into the keyhole and began to—

Hannah touched my hand: "Don't."

Gawking at her as if she were crazy, I spewed, "Do you want her to die?"

"She's already dead," Hannah said.

"You can't know that. You haven't even *seen* her."

Les hallowed, "She didn't fall out into a ditch. We never even hit a ditch. She was bitten."

Then I understood the ashen color in their faces, the deep fear in their eyes.

I turned and went back into my room, ripped up the pillow. The polished gun stared at me, crookedly smiling. I picked it up and walked back to the bathroom. Now Les had a knife. He saw the gun and his eyes hardened. "Drop it, Austin."

"No. We have to put her out."

"Let's see if she gets out."

"You said she is dead."

Hannah stammered. "Yes, but... It wasn't a bad bite..."

"You remember the TV. A bite is a death sentence. That's why she's been sick, had no appetite."

They didn't say anything.

"How could you let her in here? You should've dropped her the moment she was bitten."

"Would you have?" Hannah growled.

Les mocked, "He killed his own father. He wouldn't have any trouble with her. He's a danged good hero." The sarcasm dripped thin as honey.

"I just don't want to die," I said.

Les stepped close, brandishing the knife. "Don't open the door, Austin."

Hannah felt pinned; she ducked back against the wall. "Guys. Please. Let's--"

I pointed the gun at Les. "No. You put down the knife. This is stupid. I'm not the one who let the serial murderer in my own home."

"Austin," Hannah pleaded, "she's just a *girl*. It's Amanda! She's like your sister."

"Not anymore. Amanda is no more. Nevermore. She's gone."

The door shook. We all stared at the cheap oak wood. It vibrated once more. Something hitting it. Hannah's legs went weak and she took off into my room. Les and I stared at each other, threatening the other to move. The door bubbled outward, then flexed back into place. Again. Again. She was trying to get out. I called loudly, "Amanda. Tell us something. Say something." A low, guttural growl, a sort of otherworldly menace. I stepped towards the door.

Les flexed: "Don't open it!"

"I'm not." Raising the gun, I fired once into the door. The gunshot screamed through the house, making my ears ring, but in an instant the echo was a memory. Beyond the door was a distant thump, a crinkling sound, and silence. Hannah started crying in my room. My glazed eyes glared at the door, a small hole drilled through the middle of the varnished wood.

"She's gone," Les said, half-relieved. "You killed her. You shot her."

"No. You have to pierce the head. I shot her in the chest. Give me your knife."

"No way. You don't need to open that door."

The gun's sights reveled over him: "Give me the knife, Les." He tossed it through the air; I caught it by the blade, almost cutting my fingers. I took it by the handle and tossed the gun to Les. He jumped out of the way; it clattered on the tiled foyer and came to a stop against the wall. I took the key in my hand once more and twisted it in the lock; I kicked the door open with my foot and holding the knife barred, jumped right in.

Blood had been splattered all over the mirror, and a bullet had fragmented most of it into a webbed masterpiece. I saw my own horrid reflection in the mirror, yet was drawn to Amanda's naked body, sick and twisted, purple and ghastly, a skeleton of death, opened its yellowed jaws, hollering in rage. She leapt up at me, springing agile; I ducked out of the way and sliced at her with the knife, slitting open her chest. Blood sprayed all against the wall; I elbowed her hard in the face, breaking her nose. Blood trailed down to her mouth; she reeled at me, jaws gaping, teeth dripping with malicious poison; I drove the tip of the blade into her eye; she screeched once and fell still against me. Suddenly the body was so heavy. I side-stepped and let it fall onto the counter, and then into the floor, where blood began to form an ocean on the white-washed tile.

I left the room, my clothes only partially stained with blood. Hannah stared at me and Les held the gun.

He said, "It's empty."

To both of them: "Endanger the only family I have left like this again, and I swear I'll take your lives."

EPA: The Second Twelve Hours

April 23, 2004 Friday – April 24, 2004 Saturday

The kings of the earth, the rulers, the generals, the wealthy people, the people with great power, and every slave and every free person – all hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they cried to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who will be able to survive?”

-- Revelation 6:15-17

6:00 p.m.

No story, no fairy-tale, no movie
Winter Wonderland
Awakening

Footfalls from Ashlie's bedroom. I tore the uncomfortable silence apart, striding past Les and Hannah and stooping next to Ashlie's door. "Ashlie?" I called in, softly, as if not wanting to disturb her sleep. But I knew she was awake. No reply. Just moving within. A moment and I had a horrible vision: Ashlie turned, a soft bite in her arm; *that's why she's sick, she's been turning since last night...* "Ashlie?" My voice quivered; Les and Hannah shot each other worrisome glances.

Then her voice returned, boomeranging into relief: "What was that noise?" "Did we wake you up? I'm sorry." Mind reeling: *answer!* "Les dropped the paint bucket." "It's okay," she said. "I'm getting dressed. I feel a lot better. Not *puking* anymore." Les' and Hannah's faces went pale. I coughed, "Actually, Mom wants you to stay in bed." "Why? I'm okay." She opened the closet doors in her room and we heard the rattling of coat hangars.

"Mom says you have the flu, and if you start moving, it'll jump back. Need to sleep it off."

"I'll talk to her in a minute..."

Mom. The memory hurt. Again, seeing her, gun to her head. That hideous, ungodly voice: *Get away from me...* Les shook his head; Hannah made X marks across her throat. "She can't talk. She's fixing supper."

Hannah mouthed, *What???*

"What's for supper?" Ashlie asked.

"Steak and potatoes." Thinking back, I should've said something like green beans. Unappetizing. She really liked steak.

Ashlie: "Can I fix the potatoes?" She always made the best potatoes. Creamy and chunky and blasted with flavor. My mouth watered.

"No, I'm doing them. Mom doesn't want you getting germs all over the food. Go back to sleep."

A pause. She shut the closet door. Ruffling of covers. I let out an emotional sigh. She said, "I am feeling a little sicker..." Placebo. "But why is the power out?"

"I don't know, but DP&L is working on it." *DP&L doesn't exist.*

We stood by the bedroom door until we heard Ashlie snoring. She always fell asleep so quickly. We crept downstairs, wary to wake her. Hannah looked herself over in the mirror, muttering under her breath. "I need a shower."

Les spun me around. "Remember when we used to fiddle around with the breakers and turn power on and off?"

"I don't know, man. I don't think they're meant for this kind of thing."

"It's worth a shot, isn't it?"

Hannah turned. "We could *really* fix some steak. And potatoes. Have a nice dinner."

"I don't feel like eating," I countered.

Somehow Les got a hold of me. Opening the door to downstairs, my eyes ramped down the carpet steps, over the downstairs patio, and through the family room open door. Mom's body lay sprawled against the wall, eyes contorted, a hole smeared through her forehead. The back of her head had splintered all over the place, and dried blood caked the drywall. Blood had seeped from the bullet hole, traveling down her face and dripping onto her clothes. It was all so surreal, so inanimate. On the verge of disbelief. So stiff, irresolute. Les stood breathless beside me; Hannah hovered behind, saying nothing. We all just stared at the body. She was gone. A break in the silence – Hannah:

"She's in heaven now."

Is there a heaven? "Yes. Of course."

Les detected the shallow depravity in my voice. He said, "Hannah, why don't you take Austin's place?"

"No," I said. "Let's go." Remarkably, I was the first to travel down the steps, working hard to tear my eyes from my mom's body. Les followed behind, and I heard him close the door. A wave of rotten relief took over me, but didn't hold. The pool table glowed dark, the pool balls scattered from me playing Dad the night before. Before he... Before he wasn't Dad anymore. His stereo system was up against the wall; a Chris Tomlin CD was in the disc-changer. It seemed so farfetched and cut-off to listen to worship right then.

Les, Drake, Chad and I used to always flip the breakers on and off to Ashlie and all her friends when they were in the showers, especially at night time. They would always freak out. "So childish."

Les pulled back the drapes; where a window should be was a silver metallic box. He undid the latch and swung it wide. We couldn't see too well in the dark; Les ran his hands over the switches. "Which one?"

"I don't know. Try one."

He did. Nothing. He flipped it back and did another. And another.

"It's not working."

"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 think he gave me an angry glare, but I'm not sure. After all, it was very dark. I said, "I'm going upstairs."

"I'll mess around down here."

As I left the bathroom, "Don't break anything."

"Oh, don't worry."

Thank God the door to the family room was shut.

Hannah was waiting for me in the foyer. "No power. Didn't work?"

"No." I rubbed my eyes. The cuckoo clock in the kitchen ticked, minute after minute, hour after hour. A breath of wind. Hot air. That's what life is. 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 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 I stood in the foyer, I realized Hannah was talking to me; but I was seeing spots, and swaying on my feet, and so I just matter-of-factly told her, "I'm going to go sleep for a little while. Can you 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 falling apart like the Alamo—" *Welcome to the Alamo, Les!* " , then I'll do it myself."

"You'll kill her?"

"It's better than those things, those 'people' getting a hold of her, and you know 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, Hannah, and if you question every move, every decision, you're going to be *indecisive, unmoving*, and you're going to be dead. Or worse, *one of them*. 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 mutilating children. This isn't the world we woke up in. 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 we'll be fine. Because *guess what*, Hannah? In a week, we will be dead. How and when is our decision, but better later than sooner. And if I'm going to risk turning into one of *them*, I'll kill myself, and I'll kill Ashlie as well."

Hannah just stared, knowing not what to say. I turned to leave, then swung back around.

"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 freaks. 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. This is no story or movie or passing dream. It's reality. People are dying. Your brother is dead. Your mom is dead. All your friends – *dead*."

Tears filled her eyes, and I felt so bad. My mouth had run; all the emotions, the anger and malice, but mostly the fear and desperation and depression and hopelessness had taken over, body and soul, controlled me like some feigned robot, and now I tried to remember *why, why, why had I 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.

Guilt crept up in my throat, and I, too, wanted to cry, not for me, not for Les, not even for Ashlie or my parents, not for my friends or for humanity. I wanted to cry for *her*. Those feelings I had all but forgotten, those longings and pains, those unquenchable desires to be with her, to comfort her, all came tumbling down. The load could break and I would fall.

But I'm a coward. I couldn't go in there and apologize. *She deserves it. You need it. You're such a jerk.* Cowardice is a demon. I crawled upstairs as Les emerged from below. He saw my befallen look, and he heard Hannah's wails. He looked at me then tramped into the kitchen. I fumbled past Ashlie's door and into my room, shutting it softly and locking it tight. Collapsing onto my bed, I felt the weariness and shame, a burden too heavy to bear, and I closed my eyes.

Sleep overcame.

The walls are tan yellow. There is a rack of books and CDs, a CD player. Outside, 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 was soft and warm, and I could fall asleep. The smell of ginger and spice and Christmas cookies. Hannah was in my arms; her own striped sweater pressed against mine, and her arms wrapped around me. One of my arms lay on her side, fingers dangling above her stomach; with each breath she took, the tips of my fingers tingled. Her brown hair brushed against my cheek, and she smiled and moaned, laying her head against my chest. The fire spread its breath over us, and she leaned up; her skin so soft, eyes piercing jewels, the scent of her body stirring emotions: joy, happiness, exhilaration, laughter, happiness. Lips so tender, tongue so sweet; eyes closing; she kissed me. Electricity surged through me, a broken wind on a broken surf, coming together in the heels of brilliance. A lightning storm tore through me, and my heart hammered, each kiss so much more passionate, and at the same time so much more serene. She gets up, grabs my hand. We run outside, into the snow. It rains down all around us; it is so cold, but the heat from her hands touches my fingers and spreads through me, a raging wildfire. A creek broken by ice caps, bubbling over and bitten by snow, treads upon us. We drop down upon a rock, in the flurry of snow and icy wind, and she draws me close, and holds on to me, and we watch the rocks, the

water, the ice. A voice, familiar; and she is taken away, stolen. I get up. The snow blinds me, but somehow I am able to find my way through the dense wood; the trees laden with snow become skeletons covered with ash. Ravine walls become shells of buildings. And in the middle of it all, Les and Hannah embrace, tongues entwined. Anger within me; I want to scream, to burst out, to open up all avenues of rage and vengeance. In my hand, I look down, and there is a gun. Two bullets. When I look up, the wasteland is gone; now I stand in my bedroom, gun close. I go downstairs. The front door is open, a soft April breeze blowing. Mom is spring-cleaning. I go outside. Birds are singing and the sky is clear, a piercing blue like none other. Les and Hannah sit two houses down, cuddling. I walk across the two lawns, through a sprinkler. The grass is springy. They look up as I approach. They say nothing. I look at Les: "Hello, friend." I raise the gun and squeeze the trigger. Les gropes at his stomach and falls to the grass, he is bleeding on the grass. Hannah shrieks. I turn the gun on her and shoot her in the chest. She flails back and lands beside her stolen lover. She looks at me, opens her mouth, a hideous-

SCREAM!

Jolting from my bed, I strangle myself from the covers and throw myself at the door. Screams are drenching the house, floating through the veins of my home. I wrestle with the door, unlock it, race down the steps, following the screaming. Hannah and Les are vanished. I wheel around at the foot of the steps, in the foyer, and rush downstairs two steps at a time. The door to the family room is open; Mom's graying, stiff corpse stares at me with those lucid, unmoving eyes. I burst into the room.

Ashlie is on the floor, falling apart, writhing and screaming. Tears lace her face, stain her shoulders and the neck of her nightgown. Les fights to hold her steady; Hannah tells her to get quiet, to calm down, everything will be okay. She doesn't stop. Ashlie sees me and screams – roars – maybe out of anger. She looks at me and the guilt and shame that sleep erased burst like a dam and the waters gush. Her legs bash against the walls and floor; Mom's body doesn't move, cut off from everything, an object, no more a person.

Les howls, "She's making so much noise! Calm her down!"

I holler, "Let her go! Let her go!"

Les and Hannah release; Ashlie jumps up and rushes me. I lax my muscles; she hits me and I fall into the door, knocking it into the wall. She pounds me with her fists, in the chest and shoulders and face. I let the blows come, let them bruise and ache my bracken soul.

"Murderer!" she screeched between sobs. "You killed... murdered... you took her life!"

Les and Hannah did nothing, so shell-shocked. I didn't react.

She hit me harder and harder.

The corpse mocked.

Protect your sister... She doesn't know...

She kept hitting me, but was growing weaker, weary. Her muscles fell apart and she fell on top of me. I wrapped my arms around her, squeezing her tight, and let the tears smother against my shirt. I let her sob and wail and howl and just let her lungs dry out. Blood-shot ears and strained face; the tears spun her around and she puked all over the floor, falling to her knees. I knelt down next to her, wrapped an arm around her, held her close, whispering in her ear, "It's okay. We're fine. Shhh. It's okay."

She sees the blood on my shirt. Not paint. And she rips away from me, her knee splashing in the puke; she falls against the far wall, gaping at the stained shirt *Amanda's blood, it's your best friend's blood, Ashlie, all over me, look in the bathroom! Haha!* and the motherly cadaver, brains and blood and skull fragments draping the wall like a Satanic Christmas tree.

Les and Hannah stood beside the couch, frozen in time. I just looked deep into Ashlie's eyes, searching. Searching for what, I don't know. Hope, maybe? A forsaken word. A meaningless mutter.

Something intelligible came between the wails: "Why... Why... Why is she..."

I didn't know why. I really didn't. You just don't *know* these things. They aren't book facts or Bible verses you memorize. I just crawled up to her. She asked again, and I just embraced her, moving my body around so she wouldn't see her. She coughed in my ear, "Where's Daddy?"

I shook my head.

"Where is he? *Where is he Austin!!!*"

"Dead," I said. My mind took control; soul had parted. I was gone. It felt like my eyes looked down upon the scene, surveying; a wicked, twisted movie of some sort.

"How? How?"

"I killed him."

She hurled me away, ripping to her feet. I fell back, head lolling, watching the ceiling. No cares.

Ashlie spun around in the middle of the room, staring at us all. *"What's wrong with you people! What's wrong with you!"*

"Ashlie..." Hannah tried. "Listen..."

"You killed my parents! You killed them both!"

Exasperated, Hannah stepped forward: "Ashlie..."

"Get away from me!"

Mom: *Get away from me!* The carcass laughed.

"Mom killed herself, Ash," I said; the verity in my voice shocked me.

Ashlie weakened her defense and cried, "Why?"

"To protect you."

"To protect me from who?"

"From herself."

"What about Daddy? Why did you kill Daddy?"

"To protect me. From him."

"What did he try to do to you?"

"He tried... He tried to kill me. And he tried to kill you."

Ashlie looked between us all. The tears flowed to a trickle, emptying. Her face burned bright red, a volcano of emotion. Suddenly she bolted from the room, running upstairs. Hannah and Les chased her; I wobbled to my feet and followed, closing the door behind me.

Ashlie grabbed at the front door.

"No!" Hannah yelled.

Les grabbed Ash and tore her away, restraining her. She kicked and screamed.

I stepped into the foyer. "Ashlie! Calm down!"

She started hollering, wailing again, wailing against Les. Hannah didn't know what to do; neither did I.

"Ashlie! STOP IT!"

For some reason, that shut her up.

Les tightened his grip.

"You don't want to go out there, Ashlie. Trust me."

Les let her go; her feet touched the ground. Hannah blockaded the door. Les was ready to grab her if she ran again, ran to the garage door, or back door, wherever. "Why not?" a hoarse voice issued forth.

"It's Hell."

She shot me a look begging to know *how come*.

"This morning, 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, I don't know. But if you get bit, 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 – no, *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, he died, and he turned. He bit Mom, and Mom, she knew what was happening, so she killed herself. Dad tried to get to you, but I got to him first. But it wasn't Dad. Dad was gone long before this new thing, this new creature, beast, fiend, whatever, came. And they're all over the place."

A pause. Incredulous. "All over Clearcreek?"

"All over the world," Les said in her ear.

"Not just here," I added. "Everywhere. Cities. Towns. Villages. No place is unaffected. It's a global plague, an epidemic."

"How do I know you're not making this up?"

"Mom is downstairs. Look out the window."

She slowly walked into the study, pulled back the drapes. She stared across the street, saw the broken door and windows of the house opposite us. Above the trees rose several withering columns of smoke into the air. Some patches of blood stained the street; the Jeep was ramped up in the grass, much of the glass broken and smeared with handprints and blood. The front fender was bent and dented and splotted with strips of flesh, and the wheels and axels were twisted from rolling over bodies. The doors were wide open, and blood covered the backseat. Ashlie just stared, unbelieving, and closed the drapes. She didn't move.

"Are we all that's left?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "There's probably millions of people hiding out, I imagine. But the numbers are dwindling. We've been all over Clearcreek. It's just getting worse."

Ashlie ran a hand through her hair. Shock and disbelief, I imagine, overshadowed the sorrow.

"We're staying here. We don't have a plan. But this is the longest we've survived any one place, and for the most part the subdivisions seem pretty deserted, at least for now." *Weren't so deserted when you ran through North Park, though.* "But I'm sure... I'm sure they're nearby."

"What do they look like?"

I shook my head. "I can't describe it. They look like people – except they're different. Horrible." Yet I had no idea, I had to admit, of the condition of the rest of the world. Seconds crawled by as my heart fluttered in vain hope – hope only to be dashed, I dare imagine – that there were armies fighting back; cures were being found; cities surviving; we were not alone. We would survive – live out the night and taste fresh air. HOPE!

"How many are there?"

"They're all over. In the streets, buildings, shopping plazas. Nowhere is unaffected."

Ashlie turned her gaze from the drab drapes and said straight to me, "Are we going to be okay?"

"For the night, I think so." *You hope so.*

Hope – so alluding.

You hope so.

But honestly, I didn't think we'd survive that long.

Why? One reason -

No one else had.

7:00 p.m.

No More
Prison of my own choosing
Zombies

Ashlie's eyes glazed, went hollow, and for a moment I could look past them, into her soul, and felt sharp twangs of grief and shame wash over me. Tears waddled up in her eyes again, and they came. Not tears of anger, not even tears of sorrow, but desperation seeping through. Hope failing. Les and Hannah, feeling awkward, went into the family room. I touched Ashlie's arm, and pulled her close, hugging her tight, letting her cry into my shoulder. The tears were contagious: my throat knotted and all of a sudden memories, memories I didn't even know I had, swept over me. Mom scratching my head at night. Dad calling on the phone – "What are you guys up to?" Going swimming in Miamisburg, Ashlie on Mom's shoulder and me on Dad's as we played chicken. Laughter. Love. Security and simplicity. I honestly can't remember when the tears first crawled down my cheeks, but I *do* remember Ashlie holding onto *me*, and me crying into *her* shoulder. Christmas, tearing into the gifts, Mom squealing with excitement and Dad snapping pictures. Gone.

It's too late now. Tears run down my face. Too late. Dad woke me up in the mornings for school, and before I got my license, would take me out to McDonald's and then to school as a special weekend treat. Mom always bought the groceries, and would sometimes jump behind me and surprise me, making me jump mountains high, just to see me freak. After time you begin to take it all in as some routine, a religious, ceremonial courtesy; saying, "I love you," and,

"Bye," become acts of predetermined grace, not passion. Hugs were offhand lisps; nothing spectacular; goodnights preludes to yet another monotonous day. Dad paid the bills; Mom ran us around; Ashlie watched television. I went to North Park and hung out with Les, Chad and Drake. Supper meals were home cooked, with gravy and mashed potatoes, steak and macaroni-&-cheese.

Tears now gushing down my face. Chest empty, hollow, incredibly heavy. Eyes closed, blinding, seeing spots as my lungs heaved and burst and screamed. *It's all a joke, a dream, a nightmare, a night terror – you'll wake up any minute. They're dead! They're dead! They're dead!* None of this could be real. Dad is coming in the room, he's about to shake me awake. The birds will sing and Mom will laugh and school will be boring but we'll all be alive, so alive, so very- *They're dead. They're dead. They're dead!* Heart screaming, tearing at my ears, pouring forth as a guttural cry of anguish, unheard since Golgotha.

Never again will Dad wake me up in the mornings or take me out to breakfast for my birthday, even if it meant his being late to the office. Never again will Mom play innocent jokes on me and never will I ever hear her laugh like a drunken hyena as she watches *Will & Grace* and *That 70's Show* in her bedroom. Never again will my friends and I jump in the Jeep and drive to Fudd-Ruckers or China Cottage or Applebee's just to celebrate for no reason other than life, love and friendships – life was gone, love crumbled, and friendships torn apart. No more celebrations, no more parties. No more quiet sleep and singing. No more playing out in the rain or dancing through the woods. No more peace and joy and happiness; harmony but a myth, tranquility a dream pierced by searing arrows.

Hannah suddenly overshadowed me. "I don't know, maybe you should sleep or something."

I already slept. I didn't answer her. Why should I? What was the point? We're all dead men anyways.

"Austin?"

I pushed Ash away and snarled, "*What?*"

Hannah just stared at me, and I realized the voice did not belong to her. Les stood on the stairs. He said, "It's already getting dark. Is it supposed to get so dark this early?"

Hannah threw up, "It's the smoke and ash from the fires. It's Pompeii out there."

Ashlie moaned, "Can they get inside?"

"All the doors are locked," Les replied. "We've checked them so many times. I don't think they'll come in here."

"What about the windows? They're locked?" Nods. "The dining room. The bay windows–"

"The shades are drawn," I said softly. "We've checked over everything. We can stay here a few days. We have food. We have water in the garage. Mom went to Sam's club and bought lots of Diet Rite and Diet Coke, Dr. Pepper, and some water. I say we stick to the colas, then the water. And we should turn on the faucets and try to conserve as much water as possible–" Head spinning, thoughts seared through me. My heart began to beat again. "Let's get the Tupperware in the kitchen and fill it with water. Ash, want to do that? Make sure all the lids match – we don't want the water to evaporate."

Ash nodded and went into the kitchen, hunching next to the counter, digging within.

"Les: go downstairs, and 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 if light is coming out of the windows, but why make an experiment of it? We'll sleep upstairs tonight, in my parents' bedroom. It has a big bed and a closet."

Les skipped downstairs. I turned around. We needed to fortify the place. Make it the modern-age Alamo.

"What can I do?"

Hannah looked at me with those darling eyes. Pausing, I answered, "In the kitchen is the knife drawer. Next to the microwave are some more knives. I want each person to have a pair of knives. Take the rest and put them in Mom and Dad's bedroom." I bucked my head towards Ash who was scrimmaging through the cabinets. "Tell her that you have to pierce the skull."

"I don't think I can kill anyone."

"These aren't people. The people you knew are dead. I didn't kill my father. Dad had passed before."

She bit her bottom lip and tears began to well.

"It wasn't Peyton, Hannah. Listen to me. Peyton was trampled. *He* didn't get up. *Something else* got up."

She shook her head. "*What* got up? That's what I want to know! No one has an answer!"

"Neither do I. But you know my dad – he's the most loving and gentle person in the world. And Peyton loved you to death. The world is dying. Those people out in the cities, on the streets, those aren't *people*. They are monsters."

She whispered something under her breath. I didn't catch it.

"What?"

"Zombies." Her voice was grave. "They die and come back to life. They're zombies."

All the horror zombie flicks I'd ever seen hit me. *Day of the Dead. 28 Days Later. Dawn of the Dead.* I had seen *Dawn of the Dead* in the theatre with Chad, Drake and Les. We had all watched *28 Days Later* at 25 Rosebud Avenue, where Chris King fell. We laughed. Great fun. Good stories. *These aren't stories, Hannah. These aren't fairy-tales. This is no movie.* A shudder swept through me, an icy December chill. Hannah's mysterious words crept into my ears, screaming bloody Mary – *zombies*.

"Yes," I agreed. "Zombies."

She ducked past and went into the kitchen. She talked with Ash, and handed her two knives. Ashlie stared at the steak knives with global eyes. Her hands began to shake and she set them on the counter. Hannah filled a Tupperware container full of knives and walked through the den; she handed me a butcher knife and a steak-cutter. I slid them into my pockets, points up. "Don't forget yours. Give some to Les. He'll be up in a few minutes."

She traveled upstairs. I entered the kitchen, picked up Ash's two knives. "Stand up," I commanded. She didn't move. "Ashlie." She stood and I went around her, sliding the knives into her pockets. She began to protest, but I 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. Day was growing dim, and she could see her bare reflection. Shadows began to seethe in the corners of the kitchen and a façade of kismet settled over, a quiet October breeze. "Did Hannah tell you where you have to get them?" She nodded. "Go for the eyes."

"Is that how you did Amanda?"

I shuddered. The memories. Amanda clawing at me. "You don't understand. You haven't seen them."

Her back was towards me. "*Amanda*, Austin. She was a sister to you. Are you saying she tried to kill you? Amanda tried to kill you?"

"It wasn't Amanda."

"You thought she was sick so you stabbed her in the face, is that it?" Her heels whipped her around and she stared at me. "You pinned her in the bathroom and you stabbed her to death."

A knot withered in my throat. "You can't understand because you haven't–"

"I know Amanda! She's my best friend and one of yours!"

I grabbed her violently by the arm, every nerve screaming to take her upstairs, throw open the door, throw her the hollow shell that Ams had once been – the beautiful princess, the church-goddess, now an empty, purple-skinned, deep-throated shrieking fiend, suspended in death, shot through the chest with a knife handle sticking out of her skull. I would throw her in the bathroom, scream, "*Look! Look at your best friend! Tell me what you see!*" But despite her cold eyes, and the cold revolution of my intemperate soul, I couldn't do it. My hand relaxed, and I let it go. My knuckles crackled. She was half-bent over the countertop, pale-faced; had she seen the fury and anger and fear behind my veil of seniority and disguised trepidation? Had she seen the horror and the hopelessness?

I stepped backwards, into the island, smeared with flakes of dried blood. My head swirled. A tear popped. "You didn't see her," I wheezed. "Oh Gosh, you didn't see her, Ashlie... You didn't see her..." Knees caving in, I slumped against the island and slid to the floor, coiling my legs up around me. I buried my head in my knees and croaked, "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..."

Ashlie hovered over me, unsure of what to do. She felt the knives in her pockets. My words burned into her. Cold iron. Les came up from down below, carrying a box of winter jackets. He

saw me on the floor, fetal, and Ashlie looking more lost than anything, and he decided to work on the windows in the bedrooms first – we would be spending the night there.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

My head popped up. Ash went around me for the garage door. I leapt up in an instant. “What are you doing!!!”

She stood poised by the door next to the refrigerator. She eyed me. “Goldie.”

The hope, the newfound glory, of my heart faded as one does eyeing the Roman army before him. “That’s not the dog.”

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

“He wants in. It’s his supertime. Listen to it. It’s Goldie.”

I strained myself to listen, and not only listen, but *reason*. It was seven fifteen. Goldie 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 hit the animals; they thirsted only for the blood of humans. My skipping heart prayed that she not open that door, believing with everything that it was an infected, that they’d found us, heard my whining and Ashlie’s bickering, heard our trading shouts, and moved in for the kill. But the heart, while full of glory, is deceitful, too, and I forced my head – my mind – to take on the track and do a lap of logic. *Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.* Organized scratching. Not frantic like the assaults of the infected. Placid, uncaring; whatever – whoever – was scratching did so every few moments, hoping for someone to come. Not trying to break in.

I moved around the island and drew my knife.

“You’re not going to kill him?” Alarm laced her tone.

“No! I love Goldie. I’m just being sure.”

“Austin...”

“You haven’t seen them.”

The doorknob was chilled from the spring night air. I twisted it. Locked. Stupid. I quickly unlocked it. Sweat dappled the blade of my knife. *Just the dog. Leave him outside. He’ll be fine... But Ashlie will cry and cry and open it up when we sleep... She hasn’t seen them...* I twisted the doorknob and opened it wide. The garage was dark, littered with shadows, pitch. My heart screamed. The cuckoo clock chimed – always fifteen off. Shadows submerged at my feet, shuddering; I jumped against the door and Goldie slinked inside. My heart calmed down. Just-

Ashlie jumped back, hands flailing. “Austin! Look at him!”

Goldie limped against the counter. Ashlie’s face was paler than a full moon, and crazier. Goldie’s tongue dipped from his mouth, throbbing yellow. His eyes rolled back and forth, the mangy coat shimmering in the musky shadows. He meandered away from the counter, leaving a bloody smear. He turned around the island and I saw a massive gash in his side, drenching his golden coat in a crimson tide.

Ashlie looked at me and launched backwards; I spun around, drawing the knife high; he came at me from the depths of the garage, throwing his body against mine; I hit the doorframe, the knife dropping away, and fell into the inky darkness, head banging against the side of the van, screaming, seeing spots. The figure stood in the doorway, a hideous silhouette. A stump was left for an arm, blood sprinkling down onto the concrete like a cool spring shower.

“Ashlie! Get outta here!” I hollered.

The infected jumped at me; I rolled sideways and went underneath the van. Tubing and wires snapped and crackled at my clothes, tearing shreds and drawing bloody lines across my back. I could hear the infected scrambling against the side of the van, a high-pitched wail filling the garage. My hands groped back behind my head; pulling backstrokes on the concrete, my fingers brushed against the rubber tires. Something warm and sticky dropped onto my ankles; fetid, warm air wafted over my shoes. I kicked upwards, as hard as I could; my knees seared, but my feet connected with something solid, sending it up into the bottom of the van. A horrendous holler.

Wiggling myself free, I stood against the van and went rigid, daring not to breathe. My heart roared.

Silence.

“Les! Hannah!” Ashlie screamed inside. *“Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my-“*

Sharp movements on the other side of the van. A shadow blotted the doorway to the kitchen. *Ashlie. Les. Hannah. You'll lose them all...*

I ran forward in the darkness, slamming into the smooth paint of the Chevy truck. I hammered my fists into the frame, yelling and screaming, making as much noise as I could, and frightening myself. The infected snarled and ran around the side of the van; I jumped into the bed of the truck and out the other side, landing on something soft. It imploded a little and something cold splashed on my shoe. I ignored it, falling downwards, groping. I felt fabric, but that's not what I wanted. Cold, icy liquid, thick, putrefying, turning to jello. The infected launched at me; he hit me hard and I slammed down into the body of my father.

The infected's acrid breath rolled over me, a stench from Hell. My elbow backed into his face, sending his head reeling backwards. I spun around and threw him – how, I don't know, the adrenaline was surging – into the sports box. I pushed myself backwards and felt cold night air coming from the doggy door leading outside. My hand brushed something solid. I picked it up. Heavy.

The infected tottered forward, reaching out after me. From the window of the garage door leading to the lawn, I saw 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-blonde hair; now the hair was frizzy and matted with blood, and her eyes rang with a hollow, incessant death-cry. She came after me, fingers – some had fake nails glued-on, but most were broken – rushing at my throat. I gave out a cry and heaved the axe through the air, broad-siding her across the face. She spun into the wall; I did a 360 and hammered the blade of the axe into her neck. The handle shuddered, and the body collapsed; the head flung against the wall and came to a rest beside the doggy door.

Moonlight covered the face; the lips twisted back and forth, in a grotesque never-ending scream, and the eyes lolled. Muscles in the neck twitched. I kicked the head out the doggy door. Never thought I'd do that. I threw the axe to the floor and raced for the door. My body emerged into the dim kitchen light when I thought, *Keep the axe...* I turned to go get it but saw an infected coming through the doggy-door, almost out. When it saw me, it shrieked. Not only one. Through the blinds on the door window I could see several shapes weaving back and forth, pressing against the door. "Oh my-" The door burst open; the infected coming through the doggy-door was hurled against Goldie's doghouse Dad had built and the others gushed in.

You know those nightmares when you stand at the door of salvation, and Hell is on your footfalls, but you just can't quite make it? Your legs freeze up and all you can do is watch as the Hell-mongers bent on your distraught corpse? That's exactly what I felt like. The haven I had known as home was a step back; shut the door and leave it shut; they poured into the garage, becoming lost in the darkness. Their shrieks and catcalls and grovel pierces shattered the stillness. I somehow fell back into the kitchen, into the counter, and subconsciously threw the door shut, locking it.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

The house was deserted. A trail of blood led into the den, where Goldie made his last walk to his death. The Tupperware was spilled out everywhere. "Ash! Les! Hannah!" I roared, screaming. My parched voice lacerated with pain. No response. *BANG. BANG. BANG.* "Ash! Les!" The three of them came down the steps, Les leading the way, knife in hand. They came into the kitchen. I pointed at the door, mortified. *BANG. BANG. BANG.*

"Block it!" Hannah shouted, grabbing a chair. She handed it to me and I pushed it against the wall.

The poundings grew more furious. Ash stared at the wall, disbelieving. To Les and Hannah, "They got in at Les' place! They'll get in here! A chair isn't going to-"

Part of the doorframe splintered.

"Table! Table!" Hannah shouted.

Hannah and Ash grabbed one side of the table and Les and I grabbed the other. We dragged it in front of the door and put it against the door. The infected shrieked and bickered beyond the door. It splintered some more. We backed away from the table. With each pounding it slid backward some.

"It's not working," Les smothered.

I grabbed two chairs and put them together, then put them against the counter, facing the table. The door splintered and opened a little, a small gap peeking through. Ashlie stood against the wall, gawking into the gap, where light from the kitchen illuminated the dark, sullen eyes and bloodied faces of the infected *zombies*. But the table pushed against the chair, and the chairs pushed against the counter, and it held sturdy. The zombies threw themselves harder against the door, but it wouldn't move. The force of their impacts was sent through the table into the chairs and into the counter, into the frame of the house. My physics teacher would love this.

"They know we're here," Hannah cried. "They're not going to stop..."

"This is it," Les said under his voice. "It all comes down to this." He stared at the knife in his hand.

"No! This is *not* it! This is *not* it!"

The table quivered; the midline snapped and splintered and the door burst farther open. I stood in the kitchen area, and Les, Hannah and Ash stood in the dining room. The infected lurched their arms through, mottled purple with dried bloods and tears and cuts. The fingers groped along the wall, the door, the table, sliding this way and that. *Animals. Pack hunters.* Were we fighting zombies? Running from monsters? Or are we battling people? Injured, sick people?

I drew the knife out of my pocket. They'd be coming in... "Everyone, to the--"

Shattering glass tore my words to pieces. The bay dining room windows burst open, glass flying into the air, over the walls, onto the floor, thousands of transparent shields glittering like stars in a goddess sea. Arms and legs tangled in the blinds, the infected screaming. A hoarse wind blew into the dining room, ruffling the shirts of my friends. The infected writhed back and forth in the blinds, but more stumbled through at their feet, swiping into the air. Les took off into the living room; an infected got through, grabbing Ashlie; terror! Hannah drew her knife and swung it, drawing a deep line across the infected man's throat. Blood gushed all over Ashlie; Hannah grabbed her by the arm and tore her away. The infected spun around, slit neck spurting blood all over the wall. The infected swarmed from the bay windows; the garage door splintered open; the chair legs bent and popped and crumpled in; the table overturned; they clambered over our obstacles, driven by instinct and willpower, bloodlust.

I took off through the den. Goldie's blood trail went upstairs. I heard Ashlie's door shut and knew they wouldn't let me in; forgive them, but they were too frightened. I would've done no better. I took off downstairs. The infected tore through the den and living room, ransacking everything. I sprinted down the steps and into the pool room.

The downstairs window – the one we'd forgotten – was broken inwards. A zombie with no legs, only burnt stubs, crawled towards me past the pool table. I ran around the other side, grabbing a pool stick. I looked at the slender shaft and gripped it in one hand; in the other, the knife. A pair of infected, a woman and a female teenager, both bloodied and covered with wounds from the bites that drew them down, beckoned me at the foot of the steps.

I kicked their partner in the face, and he shrieked at me, snapping. The other two rushed me; pointed the narrow end of the pool stick at them and shoved it forward; the woman shrieked as the stick pierced her gut; she writhed back; the stick yanked from my hands; she turned, knocking the infected teen to the floor. The woman went around the pool table; I leapt into the bathroom and slammed the door shut, locking it tight.

Sweat dripped from me, stained my clothes, ranked in my pits, ate my breath, stung my eyes. My whole body quaked in morbid terror. The one place of hope, of utter abandon and recklessness, fell like a stack of distant cards.

Frantic clawing on the door. Pounding. Trying to get in. I went into the utility room, through two doors, and into a small storage area. Winter mitts and boots and scarves lay scattered over the floor where Les had gathered up the winter coats. Everything had been so simple then. I removed the crawspace door and wedged my way inside. The rocky floor tore at my ankles. I lifted the door and set it back in place, enclosing myself in darkness. An echoing, futile *crash*; the infected had broken into the bathroom.

I inched my way, so slowly, through the perpetual darkness, brushing against boxes of Christmas ornaments and Thanksgiving decorations and Halloween manicures. My eyes couldn't even adjust, the darkness was so blinding. Above me I could hear footfalls and

scurrying as the infected swept through the house; dry tears wallowed, but they refused to come; fear had the upper hand and beat them down. My only concern was ashamedly my own skin. I stared at the door back into the utility room – or where I *thought* it was, as I couldn't see – and could take note of the zombies searching. They never grabbed at the door. Finally they left the utility room, and I crawled my way into the deep recesses of the crawlspace.

What a place to get trapped in. No food, no water, no light... You'll rot and die and never be found...

A cool breeze hit me; bumped into concrete. I felt towards the breeze; it came from above, it was the breeze of night air. The infected scurried at the other end of the house; I had no idea what was above me, but I pressed my ear against what felt to be a grill, and heard nothing close save for the wind and the rustling of tickling cobwebs in my ear. *Where was I?* I grabbed the grill and pushed it away, not really thinking, just wanting to get out of that suffocating prison. *Should've tried upstairs...*

I wiggled into the darkness, having no clue where I was. Then it came back to me.

The garage.

Dad had cut a hole for wiring a long time ago and covered it with a grill. I had been in sixth grade back then; it had completely slipped my mind. Bare light bled into the garage, reflecting dully off the hides of the van and truck. The door leading to the outside world was open, a graveyard of empty death smiling back at me. The trees swayed back and forth in the wind; the rain had stopped for a few moments, but lightning fell, sparkling through grim, rolling clouds, vomit-black and putrid-green, coiling about within the sky. The burst of light wafted through the garage, and I saw I was alone; the infected had gone into the house, which by now wasn't much brighter. I heard their frantic poundings and surging within the house; the others were still holed up. *Rescue them.*

How?

Creeping forward, close to the door to the lawn, I picked up the axe. Now it was light. I went around the front of the truck towards the doorway. *Kill them all. Kill every last one of them. You're a Braveheart – a William Wallace, a Maximus Meridious...* Wait. I turned and looked at the truck, the insect-splattered grill speaking volumes.

I excitedly raced around to the door, hoping beyond all odds – it was unlocked. I opened the door and threw the axe in the back. It resounded with a large *clang!* I slammed the door shut – *wham!* – and pulled down on the sun visor. A clip fell out; I caught it midair with the spare key. I threw it into the ignition and turned. The engine sputtered. Light fell over me from the dashboard; the gas gauge went to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a gallon full. I locked both the doors and threw it into reverse. "Eureka!" I exclaimed jovially, looking out the back window. I just had to open the-

The entire front of the truck pitched forward; I whipped around to see an infected man on the truck, shirtless, revealing deep lacerations on his chest. Blood sprinkled from the half-decayed wounds onto the hood of the truck; he raised his fist and hammered it into the windshield. It webbed outwards, shatter-proof; the bones on the man's hands shattered, erupting in a spout of blood and bruise, but he hit again. The windshield webbed even deeper, blood dribbling in the cracks from his broken hand.

I slammed on the gas, forgetting it was in reverse, wanting to drive him into the wall; the wheels screeched and I lurched forward, forehead smashing onto the windshield. The back end of the truck bashed the garage door; I flew back into the seat. The man had fallen to the ground when I revved backwards, and tried to stand. More infected entered from both doors at the sound of the engine. Could the others hear me? Could others hear the faint whisper (lie): hope?

I put it in drive and pummeled the gas. The wheels spun over the infected's body, breaking bone and squashing organs; the sides of his body burst, spraying the wheels with guts and blood. Infected threw themselves onto the sides of the truck, pounding and screaming; they couldn't get in. They tried the door handles, but they were locked. How did they know about handles? Inquisitive? Curious? Smart? Or was the brain's subconscious showing through? Was the disease a revival of the unconscious – or primitive, unheralded lusts forgotten since the cave man?

Reverse roared; the garage door caved inwards. I ran over someone's foot as I went forward; going back again, the garage door began to shred apart. I drove up close to the wall, put it in reverse, and slashed my foot on the pedal as hard as I could. Infected tore off the sides of the

truck as the back end barreled through the garage door; paint tore and withered; screeching metal filled the air; the side mirrors were torn off; but I peeled into the driveway, into the night, leaving the infected jumping through the hole in the garage door.

I pulled out into the road, put it in drive, and ramped the curve, going into the grass, underneath Ashlie's room. The window was open and the three of them stood there. I revved the engine, calling unto them as deep calls to deep.

The zombies rushed from the garage towards the truck. Shadows down the street beckoned more to join.

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 truck; Les drilled the axe blade into the infected's arm, chopping it off. Blood stained the paint. Hannah jumped, toppling Les. Infected appeared at Ashlie's window, furious, howling. I ramped the gas and spawned forward.

Someone hit the glass. I glanced into the mirror. Les pointed back, face pale.

Ashlie was getting to her feet. Infected were nearly on her.

I tried to open the door, numb.

Les jumped out with the axe, racing after her.

Hannah mouthed, *Reverse!* through the back window.

I did so, and zoomed up to them. Les helped Ashlie into the back of the truck and swung the axe wild; the infected that were upon them stepped back to avoid the blade. He threw the axe into the bed and grabbed onto the back, yelling, "Go! Go! Go!" The infected reached after him; he held on for nothing else and the truck sped through the soft earth, spewing mud all over the zombies. The truck shuddered as it went over a curb; Hannah bumped into the window and fell on top of Ashlie; Ashlie got up, crawled over to the back end of the truck, grabbed Les' hand, and pulled him up.

I threw on the brights. The eyes of several zombies at the intersection caught the beams and they scattered into the shadows.

8:00 p.m.

Leaving Tamarack
Cross-Roads
Whispers in the Rain

Tires squealed as the truck whipped around the corner, fishtailing on the slick asphalt. The trio in the back collapsed to the bed of the truck and stayed there, daring not to stand. The lights swept over the houses as I turned, then onto the road. Pools of water and tiny rivulets coursing like rivers in the jungle reflected sharply in the windshield; the wiper thwacked back and forth. The LCD display on the dashboard glowed neon green and read *8:00 PM*. 8:00. An infected ran across the street; I hardly noticed, bearing allegiance to a thought in my head: *I'd be getting off work right now. Ah, only if times were so good and gracious...* That almost made me laugh. I'd never thought I'd salivate to go into Homer's Grocery and bag for five hours.

The darkness peeled against the truck, and I could only see my reflection out either rain-slicked side window. It felt as if I were driving in a cave, blindly; the only things I saw were those the headlights rushed over, and the scenes were not so comforting. The boyhood suburbs I'd known only 24 hours before had been completely dismantled. Vehicles were parked solemnly against the road; some were overturned, burning, up on the curb, in the grass; one or two had smashed into trees, another had collided into a house's window, caving in at the inside stairwell. Most houses were ghostly silhouettes; many doors had been broken apart, and windows smashed open. One or two had completely burnt to the ground, smoldering in the past whispers of rain. But most of the houses, I now noticed, were reasonably unscathed. Quiet. Desolate. Maybe abandoned? But I knew there *had* to be survivors; there *had* to be families, individuals, maybe even ten- or fifteen-strong societies cleaving for 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, however you looked at it?

I shook my head. How could this have come? The same thoughts that had come through so many times came once more. My eyes gawked at the devastation as I turned onto Evergreen. An accident had piled up, and a body hung from one of the crunched cars. Many of the car windows were smashed apart, laced with blood; imagining the infected breaking through the windows, biting and tearing and clawing at screaming little children and frantic mothers and mortified businessmen made my stomach cringe – but not as much as knowing those children, mothers and businessmen were prowling the suburbs.

Yet I hadn't seen too many. Ever since we escaped home, the only ones I had seen were few and far between. They had darted out of the intersection. And one or two had crossed the road. But the neighborhood was a ghost town. Where were they? Sleeping? Did they sleep? How could I know? Never-the-less, I didn't care. The less of them, the happier I-

Oh No!

Gnarled hands tore at the steering wheel and I ramped onto a driveway. The overturned truck had come out of nowhere, and I'd been going thirty, not enough room to slow down. Water splashed all over the windshield as the wheels leapt – bounded! – over the curb, and when we came down I lurched forward, chest connecting with the wheel. Tree limbs scraped the side of the truck; the front steps of a ranch house rose to swallow us whole; I braked and turned, only to have a van come up in my sights at the house next door. The wheel turned again, axle grinding, wheels moaning; the truck slashed through a fence, the wooden planks flinging up and over the hood, smashing into the windshield. Plants wrapped around the axle as the corner of the truck blew through a pile of debris, probably collected to be burned this evening, and the truck listed towards the middle of the yard.

A gigantic puddle lay before me, looking as a puddle would in the limelight of the lamps; but I horrifically realized it was a pool and stamped the gas harder than ever. The wheels locked, but the soft earth didn't give way to my pleas. I gave the wheel yet another hard jerk and we avoided the pool, coming to a stop right next to it.

Someone angrily banged on the back window. I leaned over and rolled it down. Les snarled, "What the heck is wrong with you!"

"I'm making this up as I go," I responded, voice shaking. "Are you guys okay?"

"Your sister has a sprained ankle."

"What? Sprained what?"

"Ankle. She got it when she fell from the truck."

Sprained ankle? Matter of life and death now. "Okay, let's-"

Hannah rose up. "Shhh! The fence!"

She pointed across the pool, to the wooden fence. Dense shapes moved beyond it, seen through the narrow cracks. They made no noise. A hand draped the top of the fence, then another, and another, and then an arm. *Climbing over.*

Les hissed, "Get us out of here! Move!"

I put it in reverse and touched the gas. The engine revved, but no movement.

"Austin!"

I pressed the gas even harder. They were almost over the wall. "The axle is jammed or-"

The truck spun backwards, spewing leafy fragments all over. I spun the wheel, pulling up alongside the pool. The gears shifted. Zombies dropped over the fence, racing after the truck; Les crawled across the bed, picking up the axe with steeled fingers. I drove out the way I'd came. The infected screamed and rushed after us, running around the pool and the side of the house.

I hit the road, avoiding the overturned truck, taking off down Evergreen. Four or five of them gushed from around the house, yelling and hollering. I looked into the rearview mirror for a split-second, saw them chasing; the truck shuddered; I turned around in the seat and saw a body roll off the side of the truck, landing on the pavement. Bloodied brain matter smeared the hood. The pursuers ignored the fallen comrade and didn't give up. The three watched from the back. I knew now how desperate we were – how wherever we went, there they would be. Whatever nook and cranny we could imagine, it wouldn't be safe. They were a walking plague; get bitten, you're out of the game.

Hannah and Ashlie were talking to each other; Hannah pointed to the left.

More were coming from the sides. Ashlie bashed her hand on the back window and I took off, gunning it. Twenty. Thirty-five. Forty-seven. Sixties. Seventies. Eighty! I'd never gone through the subdivision so fast, but the zombies were beyond us, lost in a confusing mass chasing the blue streak. Evergreen hit Pennyroyal and I blew past the stop sign; even though I gripped the wheels with white-hot knuckles, the truck hydroplaned, spinning; the wheels connected with soft earth on the opposite side of the road, spitting up dirt and grime. The truck bounced up and down and I tried to make sense of the spinning world before me. We were off-roading, blazing through the grass; trees swept past; 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 thudding onto the asphalt; but we drove into the backyard, dodging trees, a swing-set, a stack of dripping-wet firewood.

Slowly I depressed the brake, and the wheels ground to a stop. I sat in the cab, panting, feeling the cold sweat. My arms and hands shook. *They almost had you.*

I opened the door, and felt the bitterly cold night air. Les jumped down. "We're alive."

Ignored him. Peeped into the bed of the truck. "Ash? How's your ankle?"

She said, "It hurts." No emotion. *Please don't turn into one of them.* Emotion was a strictly human characteristic. Anger. Fear. Hatred. Love. They possessed none. "Except maybe hatred," I muttered. Ashlie murmured, "What?" I shook my head.

Hannah stood up in the back, peering from where we'd come. "Austin? Listen: I hear them. They're following."

"We've got to move," Les said, standing by my side. "We stay here, we're dead."

"Where do you want to go?"

He beamed, "The country. Let's go the *country*."

"Austin! Les!" Hannah hollered. "Make up your minds!"

"Country," I said, murmuring. "That's back towards 741."

"Is it bad?"

"Didn't you see it? It's a mess. Like drunks stole the road."

"Navigate it!" Hannah yelled.

Shadows in the fog appeared several hundred feet behind us. "Here they come," Les murmured.

I opened my door. "Help Ashlie down and *get in here*."

Hannah grabbed Ashlie; Les jumped up, and they helped her down. The pulled at the passenger door. "Austin!" I unlocked it. The three of them jumped in. Ash beside me, then Les, and then Hannah beside the window. I ignited the engine. It roared to life.

"Lock yours doors," I muttered, checking mine. Hannah snapped hers locked.

We turned around, driving past an artificial pond, around the house. The infected rushed past where we had been, and pursued the truck. More were coming from the subdivision in spurts of twos and threes. We reached the driveway. Gravel crunched under the tires. Tree limbs dangled above as we turned left on Pennyroyal, heading for 741. They rushed onto the street, giving a chase as we drove past a cornfield to our right and several sturdy houses to our left. They eventually tired and ran towards a house that had several lit windows. My throat knotted. Those in the that house wouldn't be lasting too long.

Hannah craned her neck to make sure they were gone, then leaned back in her seat, exhaling. "They're so ugly."

"Hard to imagine," Les said, "that they were once *people*."

Silence. A light rain began to fall. The windshield wipers got to work.

"Oh," Hannah said. "Thanks for getting us back there."

"No problem."

No one said anything. *So ungrateful.*

The rain began to fall harder. Lightning flashed across the sky. A car lie in the ditch, the front windshield lying all over the front seat. Red splotches decorated the leather seats, but there was no body. The flash faded, and the headlights carved our way. Lines of spacious houses to our left passed by in a blur; I often drove this road to school. It was odd, though – the tender rain, the soft sighs of the wind, the soft sonnet of the engine. It was so—surreal. So yesterday – no pun intended.

Ashlie leaned forward; we were packed, but no one complained. She turned up the volume; static.

"Why don't you put on a CD?" I offered. "Dad's got Zeppelin."

She shook her head, surfing through channels. Static on every one. Then a blurb, and she passed it.

"Go back," Les pleaded.

She turned the knob back. 700 WLW. Billy Cunningham's voice came over crystal clear.

Hannah put a hand over her mouth. "Oh my gosh..."

Hope flared within me. I unconsciously slowed down as we all listened:

... suburbs lost. Only known method of exterminating the infected: direct impact to the brain. Do not panic. Do not leave your home. Secure yourself and your loved ones. Secure any available weapons and supplies. Do not go outside. Do not go onto the roads. No end to the crisis in sight. Outbound communications have been lost in major U.S. cities on the East Coast. The plague is spreading quickly eastward. Ohio residents have been ordered to remain in their homes. Many suburbs lost. Only know method of exterminating the infected: direction impact to the brain...

It repeated itself. Hope dashed again.

"It's just a recording," Les breathed. "Probably just before the station headquarters was... overrun."

Do not go outside. Do not go onto the roads...

"Ash, why don't you see if you can find some more stations?"

She nodded and began flipping through them, but there was static on all of them.

"This whole region is lost," Hannah murmured.

The road dipped downwards and we came to the stoplight. The lights were out; the intersection was barren. I slowly turned right onto the three-lane state route. As we drove towards Franklin, I looked out the back window and could see orange flames in the far distance, the Arlington Mall area. Olive Garden. Barnes and Nobles. Borders Bookstore. ½ Price. Waffle House. All those legendary hang-outs of the 'good old days.' How wonderfully sweet it would be to sit down with Les and drink coffee in Borders, reading magazines and sitting on the plump couches, watching the thunderstorms pass through. We'd done that before. It had been a beautiful storm. Lightning danced, illuminating dozens of wrecks and hazards stretching towards the 73 and 741 intersection.

I pressed on the brakes and the truck came to a stop.

Everyone looked at me, wondering *What?* "I can't go back that way."

"Why not?"

"It's teeming with them. Olde Clearcreek. Clearcreek Plaza. Are you guys blind?"

Hannah said, "We don't have a choice. It's the way to the country."

"Isn't there any other-"

Les thumbed towards the Arlington Mall area. "Einstein, do you want to go back there? Do you have *any* idea how bad it's got to be? Any place where there were people close together is gone. Towns. Cities. Shopping plazas – shopping *malls*. Restaurants. Subdivisions. We have to go to the country. The infected shouldn't go into the country – they're sticking around where it's populated."

The engine grumbled. Lightning flickered. Rain danced. The windshield wipers sang.

"Austin," Hannah whispered. "Austin, you know he's right. Where else are we going to go?"

I felt like I was at a crossroads. I had no idea where to go, what to do. I didn't know how much longer we had. Clearcreek 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 ever seen before. I stared into the rain, lulled by the rain and wipers, wanting so desperately to go back in time, wanting to be coming home from work to the smell of Mom cooking and Dad watching TV with a bowl of ice cream. Right then I would have been taking off my shoes and sitting down in the kitchen to the odors of steamed rice and broiled chicken, petting Goldie as he draped one paw over my leg. But no – here I was, in a truck, suspended in a world of bloodshed and chaos, of death and tears, screams and sobs, and it was becoming normal. I

wasn't shocked to see the skeletons of cars lining the streets, many burning; I wasn't surprised by burnt-out buildings or nerve-racked by driving through peoples' yards. All took on a strange breed of normalcy. Instead of eating and laughing and worrying about school tomorrow, I was famished, shaking with fear, standing on the edge of an ocean, pondering – how much longer will I live? How much longer till I'm one of them?

One of them?

My fingers tightened over the wheel. Eyes grew colder. I could wreck the truck. Kill us all. We'd never be like them. We'd never fall to-

Hannah was grabbing my shoulder, reaching over Les and Ash's laps. She yelled, "*Austin!*"

I turned my head, eyes glazed. "Yes?"

"What's wrong with you? Let's go. We're cutting across the field, remember?"

Had I blacked out? I shook it from memory and planted on the gas. I meandered the truck between the pillaged wrecks, then took a dirt road into an infertile cornfield. The headlights grazed over brown, bent stalks and the wheels jumped up and down as we treaded over the uneven, muddy surfaces.

The static from the radio roared.

"Put in a CD," I ordered.

Ash put in Zeppelin. *Black Dog*.

We drove past a massive cedar; it sat against an intersection, the intersection leading to the YMCA and Dorothy Lane Market and Kids & Tots Daycare. Through a clash of thunder and brazen display of lightning, I could see the wrecks at the intersection. Figures moved between the wrecks, hunched, forlorn. They watched us drive past, then launched in for a chase. I didn't worry. They were stopped by a rising barricade of steel fencing and barbed wire. They shook the wire and screeched, and we could barely hear them. Ashlie turned up the CD. I smiled.

"Guys!" Les shouted, pointing out the window.

We followed his gaze. Lights burned in the parking lot of Dorothy Lane Market. Hundreds of infected humans milled about the front and sides of the store, banging on the windows, trying to get inside. It horrified me – so many of them! Three hundred, maybe even four hundred of them, filling the parking lot! And they surrounded the polished, brick-and-mortar building. The large *DLM* sign stood ominously still, a frozen figure from an unknown time. Beams of light hit the windows, coming from the *inside*. Hope burned. Survivors.

Trees moved into our view of the Market.

"How many do you think are in there?"

"Probably the customers and workers," I said. "A lot like Homer's Grocery"

"Why are they surrounding it?"

"Who knows? Maybe the survivors? A bloodlust?"

"Or," Hannah said, "they're drawn there out of distant memory. It's a place they knew. They're drawn to it. It's on their subconscious, and their subconscious is controlling them? I don't know."

"Sounds good to me."

A line of trees rose before us, blocking the way to the Spice Racks neighborhood. Had to find a way around. I drove off to the right. We jostled around inside the cab, sardines on a harbinger for Hell.

"I wonder if they saw us?" Ashlie spoke. "Saw us driving through the field?"

"They didn't give chase, so I guess not," Les answered.

"No. Not *them*. The survivors. In the windows?"

I offered up a silent prayer for them. Then a prayer for everyone still alive. Was I supposed to believe in God with all this happening, with the world falling apart? I don't know if believing in God or a deity or a superpower found any credibility now, but while every part of me silently, vehemently loathed God and his 'good and perfect plans' for us, another part surrendered to Him. If anyone was going to get us out of this one, it was Him, and *only* Him.

The line of trees converged with a line of trees coming before us, forming a thick wooded forest. I let the truck run idle. "Now what?"

Hannah opened her door.

"What are you doing?"

"None are around," she said, stepping out.

"So? What are you doing?"

She stared at us and crept away, around beside the truck, and knelt down. She clasped her hands.

I rolled my eyes. "Not *now*. Is she crazy?"

Les hissed, "Pray inside the truck, Hannah! He can still hear you!"

Ashlie slapped him, glared at me. "What's wrong with you guys?" She jumped out, kneeling beside her, joining her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

Les answered, "Well, we want to live, for one thing."

I opened my door, cold wind and rain hitting me.

"You too?"

"I'm keeping watch," I said, and my feet splashed in the mud. I manhandled a curse, then climbed into the bed of the truck. As I scanned through the darkness, heart racing, looking for the slightest trace of movement, I found it more than ironic that I was standing tall in the middle of a field during a thunderstorm. Yet I'd rather be electrocuted than fall into *their*-

My ears perked. Les leaned out the passenger side. Hannah and Ashlie stopped praying. It floated across the field, through the faint drizzling sighs of rain.

A guttural yell.

But not one of them.

It came across us, louder: *Wait!*

I bent down, picked up the axe. We stared into the darkness. Les stepped into the showers.

It came again, bouncing over the rutted field, desperate, frantic, winded. *Wait! Wait!*

"Les?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Get in the truck. The keys are in the ignition." The truck was still on. The bed rustled. "Hannah, Ash, get inside. Go if they come. I'll stay in the back. I'll be fine."

Everyone crowded inside; rain matted down my hair, ran down my face, sparkled on the axe blade.

Les leaned over the steering wheel, foot hovering over the gas pedal.

An outline in the darkness, wheeling cries: *Wait! Wait!*

Did the infected talk? No! Why was I worried? Another survivor! I clenched the axe tighter. Instinct scorched me, hollering, *Swing the axe, you can never be too careful...* Wouldn't his screaming attract attention? The figure grew louder, stumbling across the field, half-tripping over partly-buried stalks, blindly flailing about, drenching his boots and jeans in stark mud. He was big, but not fat – buff, muscles rippling under a soaked checkered shirt. One hand waved through the air; he held something long in his other hand. Lightning flashed; beads of light coiled across the field, burning into the forest, yet not piercing its inky depths; the ground seemed to undulate with the flash, and the guys' eyes burned a victorious white; on the other side of the field, dark shapes leapt and clawed and beat at the wrought-iron fence. The man was alone. The flash vanished, and everything dropped into an untouchable gloom.

"Wait!" the man panted, running up to the truck. I still held the axe. I saw what he held – a shotgun. He leaned the barrel up against the truck and, breathing hard from exhilaration, looked up at me. His face contorted. What did he expect? Without a doubt probably *not* a teenager. I said nothing. He leaned against the truck. His arms were shaking; he turned to the side and vomited all over the field.

My throat shook. "Who are you?"

He coughed so rasp that it sounded like his insides were being shredded. He then rose up, back cracking. "Who are you?"

"My name's Austin. My friends are in the cab."

"You just tore up my field."

"Is that why you're chasing us?"

He shook his head and a smile creased his lips. "I'm chasing you because you're not one of them."

Pity swept over me. This man was all alone, with no more than a shotgun, maybe a quarter of a mile from his house, in a world where death lurked in the shadows, all just to find out our names? I had compassion but wasn't without incredulity. "What do you want, a ride? Want to come with us? You can ride here in the back if you like? We're headed-"

"No, no. They're all over the place, even in the woods. You can't get away from them."

"So why did you come?"

"You're trying to do me a favor? I'll get killed if I go with you. Come with me."

"How is where you are any better than where we are?"

"It's safe. I wouldn't be alive now if it... if it weren't *safe*."

"Where are you staying?"

Lightning and thunder. My eyes swept over to the fence. Dozens of them beat and hammered at its base.

"I'm staying at my farmhouse. It's all boarded up, locked tight. No break-ins, and... 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? You're rubbing up against Cassano's Pizza and Clearcreek Plaza. I haven't seen any survivors come running this way – only you *going in*. Don't kill yourselves. Stay with me where it's warm and we've got food and at least wait until morning. Then maybe these things will be so tired they have to sleep and you can go on your way – if you have any certain place in mind."

Driving in the storm, through a ruined wasteland of Hell didn't seem too appetizing. Yet I couldn't speak for the others. He seemed like a nice man, not too hostile, caring and sensitive. I closed my eyes, feeling the rain. The sounds of their banging and harassing and shouts and hollers floated from the fence line. I knew the man – was he a farmer? He said this was *his* field – was right. We were kidding ourselves. Surviving was hard enough when it was *light* out; we'd been too overridden with desire to live that we'd thrown our foots into a bear trap.

The man picked up his gun. "Please."

I nodded. "All right. Here, get in."

He handed me the shotgun and right then I felt at ease. A boulder lifted off my shoulders and I felt like I rose four feet off the ground. He climbed up into the truck and I handed him his gun. His own face looked to be regaining color, even in the cold, sleeting winds. I knocked hard on the back window of the truck and Ashlie rolled it open. "Turn around. We're holing up." She looked at me with bare wonder. I shook my head. "He's got a place. Food and warmth." The idea of warmth aroused me. "Come on, Les, move it!"

The man and I crouched down in the truck. It slid around in the mud, splashing the tires, and ambled across the field. I looked at the fence and in a flash of lightning could see that more than just a dozen had gathered. They were coming from the suburbs, drawn, no doubt, by our voices and the truck engine, a relic of old times.

We bounced over the rugged field. The man offered his wet hand. "Austin, you say?" I nodded, taking it firm. He yelled over a clash of thunder, "Morris! Glen Morris! Look!" He pushed my hand away and leaned up, pointing over the roof of the cab. I followed, and the headlights tore through the rain, dancing over a two-story late-1800s farmhouse. "There she is."

Rain poured off the low, slanting roof in pits and waterfalls. Mud cropped against creaking wooden baseboards; holes had been punched into the lichen-enriched porch boards. Wooden boards draped the windows, but the front door was wide open. A lightning bolt etched across a rolling spring thunderhead spread over the house, casting it in looping shadows; a single window on the top story had its shutters open, pointing out across the field and onto 741. He'd probably heard our truck engine and threw them open. And, yes, the infected were still banging and jumping all over the wrought-iron fence. I remember driving past that fence on the way to school and work. Good days.

Les touched the brakes; the truck fishtailed; we held on to avoid spilling over the edge. The engine silenced and the doors flew open; Hannah and Ashlie came out the passenger door as Les fumbled into the rain. I hopped over the ledge, telling Ash everything would be okay for now. The man joined Les, the smooth shotgun resting faithfully in his hands.

"In here," he said, running up onto the porch. He went through the door. Les tramped after him.

Hannah said, "She can only hobble."

I spun. "What?"

"Her ankle, Austin."

I took Ash by her feet. "Lift." Hannah put her hands under her armpits and we raised her up into the rain. Ashlie groaned. "Am I hurting you?"

"You're squeezing it too hard."

"Which one?"

"The left..." She spit rainwater from her mouth.

I readjusted. "How's that?"

Hannah had been looking over her shoulder. The sight of those once-human corpses ringing their death mallets against the fence sent shivers up her spine. She blurted, "Austin, forget it, let's go. Please." I saw the fear in her eyes, amidst the rivers of tranquil sadness – she was thinking of Peyton, thinking, *He could be with them. Banging on that fence. Trying to get me... Trying to get me like he did at the school...*

"Yes. Okay. Let's move." We sloshed our feet through the sucking mud, around the front of the truck.

The farmer came out the front door. Les' shadow behind him. "What's taking you so long? You don't want to stand around out here!"

We tramped up the porch. Les took my place and I told Morris, "Her ankle's mashed pretty bad."

"How?"

"We were chased from our home."

His eyes flashed a burning crimson. "I have some medical supplies. It is a farm, you know."

I nodded, drawing a deep breath of rainy air. Smelt like iron. He grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me into the warmth and dryness of the front parlor. The door creaked shut behind me; there was a grinding noise and he slid a massive iron bar padlock over the door. I closed my eyes, hearing the rain on the roof, and in the distance, across Pennyroyal, in the Victorian estates, there were screams and sputters of gunfire and the whimpering snarls of the psychotically dying.

9:00 p.m.

Legends Starbucks and Short-Wave The Pantry Door

Les and Hannah shimmied through the parlor, shadows crawling over the elaborate staircase climbing to the second story. Cryptic black-and-white photos adorned the walls. A grandfather clock stood silent beside the entryway into the living room; the hands refused to move, lazy – dead. A sentry standing guard before a futile world. The rain on the roof reverberated through the entire woodwork of the 1800s farmhouse; every drop rattled against flaking shingles like nails dropped on sheet metal. I wrinkled my nose; the sulfurous stench of nightly rain crept in through the cracks and boards of the walls, laying down a fog of chill. And it *stank* – that old country farm kind of stink, the kind mixed with vinegar and cattle and pigsty.

"Put her in the living room," Morris said, moving around Les and Hannah. "Come." 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 over a 1940s piano, a simple brick fireplace, a couch and chair. A cupboard in the corner. Peeling wallpaper and browning paint. "Just lay her down on the couch. Hold on." He went into the parlor, paused, glanced into the kitchen, then went up the stairwell.

"Easy now," Les said to Hannah as they lowered Ash onto the brown-yellow-striped couch.

Hannah backed away. "Is your ankle any better?"

Ash shook her head.

I hadn't noticed how cold it was. The water on my clothes made them stick to me. Everybody was wet.

Thunder outside.

The farmer returned, setting down a red cross kit. He opened it up on a coffee table beside the couch. "What will she need? Sorry. The wife did all the medical stuff. I just tended the corn."

"Gauze," Hannah said. "Maybe some Tylenol?"

"How's aspirin? We have lots of aspirin." He tossed her what she wanted. She unrolled the gauze.

She said to Les, "Water. Get her some water?"

The farmer stood. "I can get that."

Les beat him to it. "No. You've already done so much. Why don't you rest for a few moments?"

The farmer hesitated, then moved over to the chair, sitting down. Distracted.

Hannah wrapped the gauze around Ashlie's ankle. I hovered over, incredulous. As she was wrapping, she stopped, glared at me. "Can you give me some room?" I said something smart and she said, "I can't do this right with you breathing down my neck, Austin." I raised my hands in surrender and backed off, backing into a desk.

Les brings the water in. Ashlie swallows the pills. She never liked swallowing pills, but this time, she didn't complain. She gulped the glass down and asked for more. Les shrugged and returned to the kitchen.

Morris looked over at me. "Austin, right?" A nod. "Come with me. Let's get you a change of clothes."

I looked over at Hannah and she seemed to say, Go. I nodded. "All right."

He took me 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 Clearcreek started off as a Quaker settlement? Hah! I wonder what they would make of *this*." We reached the landing. He grunted over the last step. "I imagine they'd call it the end of the world. Armageddon or Apocalypse or whatever the heck it is to them. Crazy, isn't it?"

The landing turned into a corridor and swept directly backwards to a door. There was one door to the left and right, shut tight. Morris fiddled with the door at the back of the hall. "Lock always gets stuck..."

"You're not a man of Hannah, Mr. Morris?" I asked him.

He laughed. "I know what I see. What I taste and touch and feel. Hannah is something that doesn't go over well with me."

"You're a rare breed."

He finally opened the door. Thunder. "That I know – my wife, she... She was a woman of Hannah. Always went to church, she did. Sturdy Catholic all her life. Communion and alms and the whole shebang. Don't read me wrong. People always assume, think they know everything. Don't start assuming. I have nothing wrong with Hannah or religion. I actually encourage it. Lots of good has come from religion. The morals are wonderful. Love one another. Live for one another. If they were really carried out as the writers intended, then we'd have a Utopian society."

We entered the room. An icy chill swam over me and goose bumps scaled my arms. I rubbed my arms, felt the prickling nerves. Two dressers sat to either side of the room, and in the middle was a classical King size bed, made perfectly, covers taught, pillows fluffed. The paint was a sharp ruby red, the floor polished wood; and an Arabian rug lay on the floor next to the open window. The blinds blew back and forth in the wind and rain came through, forming pools of water on the floor. My heart shimmered – for a moment I thought I saw watery footprints leading to the other side of the room. Morris strode right through, up against the window.

"Did you leave it open?"

"Yes. I opened it when I heard your truck. I got excited and forgot to shut it. Ran right out the front door."

"Kind of foolish."

He smiled. "Even a man of realism is dumb when the heat turns on. Come over here."

I joined him; he pointed out the window. "Look at 'em. Nasty little demons." The infected were climbing the fence, 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 splashed through the mud, running towards the farmhouse. Arctic chills screamed through me. A more-than-strange noise popped out of my throat. Close the window! Close the window! My mouth glued taught. Morris crossed his arms, staring out, shaking 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. Look at them now. God. It's awful. Have you seen their eyes? You can be fooled, almost, until you see their eyes, see the emptiness, the vacancy – and you know there's no soul anymore. It changes them. They become something – someone – else."

My voice cracked. "*Shut the window.*"

Morris obliged. The rain stopped slashing at my clothes. He locked the window firm and said, "This place is safe. Those rich peacocks in their rich Victorian homes with their rich Japanese cars and four-course meals are rotting because they took up arms with French forks and spoons taken from ancient Chinese Tupperware ornaments. Hah! Always complaining because the ruddy farm in spring and summer made their mansions look undesirable. Look at them now, running around, bleeding and foaming, doing God-knows what all over town. Hah! Maybe the Quakers were onto something – maybe this *is* judgment, eh? God sending those poor suckers to Hell. Hah! Maybe I am finding some Hannah after all – don't they say Hannah is forged in calamity and adversity?"

He chuckled to himself. "Oh. Sorry. How silly of me. Austin. Did you want some new clothes? I've got some." He pulled a plaid shirt from a 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, I've told you. Food. Water. Heat. It's a wonderful hideaway. They pretty much leave us alone." A glint in the corner of his mouth. "Pretty much. Hah! Dress up!" He ran out of the room, slamming the door. The man was, let's admit, *odd*.

I stripped off the wet shirt, having a hard time – it kept sticking to my body. I threw it to the floor and slid my arms through the plaid sleeves, buttoning it up. The room was dark, but my eyes adjusted; a hand woven quilt covered the bed, stitched with needle and thread. Four pillows, two on either side. I closed my eyes, imagined waking up to the dawn, hearing the wind rustling through the eaves, opening the window to Wright Brothers Airport and 741. Did he say he had a wife? Where was she? Gone. Yes. He spoke so casually of it; blocking off the memories, turning it into a bank of information – yeah, I had a wife once, but she got sick, and what could you do?

The house threw off a wave of eeriness, and I felt myself racing down the steps, skin prickling. That feeling you get when you're all alone running up or down the steps, imagining a thick-bodied beast with lolling purple tongue and silted ember eyes plodding after you, clawed hands dripping with fresh blood reaching out.

I turned at the foot of the steps; the others were all in the living room. My foot went forward when the door shuddered and a screech rippled through the house; I fell to the floor, writhing around; the door shook, the bar clattering; dust filtered from the hinges. All at once more bangs and romps and shouts came from all sides of the house, hammering and chiseling away, shrieking like banshees in a midsummer night's dream.

"Morris!" I yelled. "Morris!"

He calmly stepped from the living room, a ghostly smirk on his face. "Give them six, seven minutes."

The door creaked inwards, then returned into place. Dust fell from the rafters. "Morris, they're–"

"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, Austin, does not run dry."

I clambered to my feet and rushed around him, throwing my body into the living room. Les stood by the chair, gaping at a boarded window. The boards quaked and wavered, but didn't move. His jaw hung open. Hannah stood behind the couch, white knuckles gripping the rim of the sofa; Ash propped up on the couch, Adam's apple bobbing.

Morris shadowed me in the doorway. "Just wait. You'll see."

Les gazed at the window. In a trance. Hannah gripped Ashlie's hand. Dizziness came over me.

And then it slowly stopped, crumbling away. The door was abandoned, living room windows still.

Silence.

The rain mixed with distant quells of thunder.

Morris beamed. "They know they can't get in. They're trying to draw us out."

"How do you know?" Les spat, turning. "We don't know anything about them! No one does!"

"They're not that bright, but they're not dumb sheep, either. They've still got human brains – if anything they have slivers of logic."

"Logic doesn't cannibalize!"

Morris grinned. "Some of the most royal and utopian societies were cannibalistic."

Les smeared, "I can't *believe* this. We're being hunted and he's playing philosophy professor."

"Would you like to go–"

Hannah snapped, "Guys! Calm it! Whether they're dumb or smart doesn't matter. Whoever is right – it doesn't matter. It's all just speculation. But they haven't gotten in. We have *that* much. They gave up. I'm not going to spend my time wondering why – I'm thanking God we're still living and breathing. Les: sit down. Mr. Morris: forgive him. His brother and best friend are in Kentucky, and he has no idea how they're faring."

Morris shrugged. "We're all wired tight." He moved through the room and knelt down by the fireplace, opening the grate; tossing firewood in, he took some starter-logs, a Zippo out of his pocket, and lit them up. Light stretched over the logs, coughing smoke up the chimney. He shut the grill; warmth floated out. Les grumbled and fell into the chair. I looked at the front door, then slid down next to Ashlie, running a hand through her hair. Hannah sat down on the sofa arm.

Hannah asked, "Won't the smoke attract them?"

Morris opened the grill, took a fire poker, stuck it in, moving things around. "Attract them?" A maniacal laugh. "I'd count on as much, to be frank. Yes! Hah!" He dropped the poker and stood. "But if they come down through the chimney, they'll get scorched raw and black and we'll dash their ashes all over the bricks. Isn't that a pleasant way to go? But enough about that *morbid* stuff. Tell me. You guys. All of you. How you get to driving down 741 towards Olde Clearcreek? What drives you so?"

We looked at each other. Hannah told her story, and about the insurrection at the grocery market. And I threw in my bit about the police station, and the chase through North Park. Stomaching my nerves, I spoke of my mother's suicide and my father's rampage. I spoke of how I had to dispose of him, and how I had to dispose of one of my best friends. I choked up, but I held my head high. My story was different, but the emotions were all the same. Hannah cracked at the mention of Peyton, and when she pondered aloud how her parents were faring, she started crying. Les watered when he spoke of Drake and Chad, and his mother at the Daycare. Another barrage on the house came, but we believed Morris, and even Les didn't blow up with the tension. Nine minutes later, the house was quiet, walls untouched.

"What about you?" Ashlie dared. "What's your story?"

Morris leaned against the hearth, flames warming his backside, drying the rain-clogged fibers. "My story? Well you have to know that while I'm a farmer, it's only a full-time job in the summer. I have a degree in medical coronary art from Pennsylvania. My father was a coroner, and I followed in his foot-steps. In the winter I assisted Dr. Richardson in Arlington. He's the one who does the coronaries at the Saint Elizabeth hospital; Arlington can be rough, especially on the west side, and he affirms death by bullet wounds, strangling, poisoning, car crashes. I take no pleasure in the work, but it's a 24/7 job. Townsend goes on retreat in the winter, and I take his place at Richardson's side. I drove to work this morning, leaving around four in the morning, before the traffic gets bad. The sun was bright. Hartford was all over the radio, but I didn't care. Why should've I? I had no idea! Richardson tells me that he's been getting some phone calls about domestic disturbance to the north (he gets forewarning by the police districts). There was a car crash last night and he's identifying the cause of death and affirming the deceased when a nurse says that the phones are ringing and all the ambulances are going on runs. We start getting calls from the police – accidents are popping up all over in the north, sweeping downwards towards downtown. It's a six-story building and I get a good look out a window."

He coughed. "There are fires to the north and car wrecks all over. Most of the people on the streets don't even notice anything, but then fingers start pointing and heads are raising. Then cars come screeching down the roads and we start getting *busloads* of people coming in the front doors! 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 everywhere. It's turning into a mess."

He rummaged the poker through the embers. "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 we're just lolling about with two or three bodies coming through the doors. 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 all of a sudden the body tenses and struggles against the straps! Richardson freaks out. Can you blame the guy? The woman on the gurney has become a horrible mesh of human flesh, and she starts screaming and snapping at him, 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 writhe 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 thanking God, 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 corner here come hundreds of people, running full-throttle, except they're not people. They're jumping cars and throwing down people 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 vs. children, friends vs. friends. Neighbor vs. 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, in a few days. If we can hold out that long..." A wan grin spilt over his face. "If we can live for the next few days, we'll be *legends*."

The infected came at the walls again. Hannah breathed, "I *hate* them."

Morris walked over to her, 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 days, we'll be fine. We'll help rebuild this world. It'll be a whole new society... Hey! We can make it *utopia*! Hah! How's the sound of *that*?"

The infected continued to hit the walls, roaring and wailing outside in the rain.

Ash leaned back on the couch pillow, opened her mouth, and began to sing. Her words floated through the room, wafting delirious throughout the rest of the farmhouse. The infected chanted their death cries and threw their fists and arms and legs and bodies against the walls, but she only sang louder. We closed our eyes, too, drowned in the ecstasy of it, and 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 hell storm outside. Morris, Les and I just 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. Then the assault ended, the infected abandoning; Ash quit singing, and Hannah bellied out.

Morris opened his eyes, drew a succulent breath. "Beautiful. You have a beautiful voice; both of you."

Ash said, "Amanda and I used to sing it together when she spent the night."

Ams. No. Don't think-

"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?" Nods. "Hah! faithful teens. Never saw that one coming. Most teens today are brutal and harsh and mean. Oh. Don't read me wrong. Most teens have hearts of gold, they just don't... express it in the *right* way. Catholic teens. Virginia would love it."

"Nondenominational," Hannah corrected.

His eyebrows raised. "Eh?"

I said, "Protestant."

"Ah. Most Catholics aren't too fond of you, but Virginia, bless her – heart of gold."

"Who's Virginia?" Ash asked. "Your wife?"

He nodded quietly. "Yes. Most beautiful thing ever. See?" He stood and threw an arm out, waving at the mounted pictures on the fireplace mantle. "Isn't she wonderful?" A plump lady with swirl brown hair, a gentle smile, and a cross necklace. Frilly Sunday dresses and a Bible in her purse. "She prayed three times a day and read her Bible morn and night. Woke up to read the Word with the sunset and laid down to read under the stars – when it wasn't raining. See those two young ones? Those are my sons. Both are grown up now. One lives in the south, he's an architect for some high-rise skyline company; the other moved to England to work with Scotland Yard. He was the finest cop you'd ever meet. Served in the San Francisco Bay area for quite some time."

We sat there in the living room, staring at the twisting fire. Morris stood, left the room. Les crackled his legs, said, "Hey. Austin. Check this out." He stood by the desk, beside a sleek ink-black notebook computer. I popped it open, expecting a blank screen; but to my surprise it whirled into action. Les and I exchanged glances, and he glanced down, looking for a chord. Nothing. "Batteries?" I shrugged. Guess so. Internet flared up on the screen; the Home page was www.yahoo.com.

I went up to the address bar and typed up the address of my own blog. Waited. Something slid against the side of the house; no one paid any attention. Morris seemed to have things under-

A black and green screen popped up. My blog peered me in the eyes; a website I posted thoughts on whenever I felt deemed to, which tended to be every other day or so. One from just last night glared at me as if an omen from a distant, lost 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 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 me and he snapped the notebook shut. Tried to protest, but he cut me off: "Don't do this to yourself, Austin. It's not going to change anything." I wanted to argue but I knew I was only poisoning my own soul, my own survival, my own existence. Every moment spent in past fantasies was a moment I let my guard down, a moment the water crept up on the dam, and at any moment, given enough time, enough fantasies, enough allusions and painful memories, the dam would bust. I'd be gone. Maybe others. Maybe even Ash. I stepped away from the notebook, wanting nothing to do with it. Suddenly it seemed so... evil.

Morris ducked into the living room. "Les?" Les turned. He shook his head. "Never mind. Hannah?"

Hannah stood up beside Ash. "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 rounded than you. But we'll see what we come up with. You look dreadfully cold and miserable. Let's try on... a warm, dry sweater! Aha!"

Hannah beamed. "That'd be really nice of you."

"Follow me, then." He disappeared.

Hannah followed him out into the parlor and upstairs.

Les said, "I was looking around while Mr. Morris grabbed you some clothes, and I found something." He left the room.

Turning to Ash, I said, "You okay if I slip away for a few?"

She nodded. "I'm going to try and get some rest anyhow."

"Yeah. Good idea. I'll join you once Les shows me whatever fantastic finds this is."

"He thinks," Ash said with a smile.

I gave her a thumbs-up and went into the den. Les held the oil lantern in his hands and grabbed a dusty radio off the shelf. I sighed. "Les. The truck's radio is so much better and all we got was—"

"This isn't a one-way radio; it's short-wave. Two-way. I've seen this in Technology and Business."

I searched for words. "So it's like a walkie-talkie?"

"A hyped-up walkie-talkie. A really powerful walkie-talkie."

"I never saw one in Technology and Business."

"Mr. Cane brought it in one day to boast about it. Showed us how it worked..." He fiddled with the dials, and in a few moments we caught the sound of popping static.

"No one is—"

He ignored me and kept turning the knob. Finally the static cleared. Tiny, faint voices.

"Les, turn it up. There! There!" I ran over and hovered beside him.

He twisted the volume; the language wasn't American. "What is that? Spanish? French?"

Les twisted his neck. "Russian." He flipped through the channels, and we did find Spanish and French being broadcasted.

I commented, "All the voices are hurried, frantic. Nervous."

"Scared," Les added. "Why aren't we seeing any Americ-

"Les! There! That's English!"

He twisted the knob even higher. A voice said, *"...prisons across the country have been turned into refugee camps. Come to San Quentin and we'll quarter you safely. We have armed defenses and machinery that can be used in case of a riot..."*

"Recorded?" I ventured.

"Not this one, no, I don't think..."

"...many western towns especially in the Great Plains have been turned into military reserve bases and are hoarding any refugees that have not been contaminated by the virus. If you have been contaminated by the virus, do not try to enter the camps. You will be shot to the head immediately! 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 plague. The best advice we can give now is to store non-perishable food items and water, find some blankets and emergency supplies, gather your loved ones. Stay off the roads, stay away from cities, towns, markets, 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 plague in various ways, and scientists are working hard to find a cure as fast as possible. Remember – the only means of exterminating the infected is by a direct puncture to the brain."

"Refugee camps?" Les said, voice carrying. "Hold-outs?"

Hope! "Militaries are fighting. We haven't completely gone under. We're not alone."

"New England and the Mideast of the United States are almost completely overrun by the virus, except for some small towns and hold-outs across the regions. If you live in one of these areas, you are warned that you are in what the authorities call a 'hot zone.' The disease has taken millions of lives over the last couple hours. Do not go outside. Do not go away from 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 discover a cure. The southern United States is thirty-seven percent overtaken by the virus, and we warn you to stay off the highways and main roads. Accidents have been reported all over and the number of infected keep growing. 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. It is coming. Schools have been released, businesses have been canceled. Martial law is being enforced in several areas."

The south isn't overrun, and neither is the west. Ohio was taken over fast – but the world wasn't dead.

I eyed Les and murmured, "Hope." My smile crossed my face like high-beams.

Les nodded. "They're looking for a cure. Any time now."

"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 the safe means to do so..."

Hopes felt smashed against a brick wall. Countenances fell.

Les argued, "The west is still out there, man. We just need to *hang on*. Like Morris 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 and villages have taken to the water, observing that the infected have a strong aversion to large bodies of water. If you have the means to reach such a body of water, and have the means to get into it without drowning, you are advised to do so. No one has yet had any evidence of infected entering bodies of water larger than big swimming pools..."

The Atlantic? Too far. We're holed up in the middle of a landlocked-

"Lake Erie," I muttered under my breath. "That's the answer."

Les swore. "How in the world do you expect to get to Lake-"

The transmission swept over with a screaming noise. I clenched my hands over my ears: "Down!"

Les wrenched the volume down and we heard a male's voice:

Can anyone hear me? Please, if anyone can hear me, respond! Please! If you can't hear me, I'm at the Clearcreek YMCA. I have a plane next door on the airfield and if you come get me I can get us into my plane and out of here. The virus hasn't gotten to the west yet, I was thinking we could- Oh God! They're coming in!

We drew hasty breaths.

"He's at the YMCA," I said. "Only a half mile away. So far."

"Closer than Lake Erie."

Oh God, they're going to get in here sometime. 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 this hellhole. Please. Anyone...

I reached for the *transmit* button; Les slapped my hand away. "What are you doing?" he shorted.

"He's across the field, Les!"

"Across the field? Across the world!"

"He's got a plane! We've got a truck! We pick him up and-"

"And do what? Make a magic run and fly over the zombies until we land in his plane and take off and fly on a magic carpet to San Diego where we'll be met with tears and smiles and brandy and wine?"

"Your sarcasm isn't well-hid."

"It's not meant to be."

"Les. Think. 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 the next! I want to sleep peacefully for once! We *can*! But it's not just going to fall on our laps on a silver platter, Les!"

Les breathed, "You are one crazy kid. We'll get killed. We'll turn into one of *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 the earth?"

"I'll be sleeping soundly knowing I'm not bleeding from a bite and stalking down the innocent."

"Les..."

He turned off the short-wave. "Austin. Careful. Be logical. It won't work. This is no video game. They're all around the house. The field is infested with them. Remember how many were at Dorothy Lane Market? That's on the road we'd have to take to reach the YMCA. And then we'd have to *find* this guy, *hope* he's not dead or worse, and if he *is* dead, we might as well pull the trigger 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 hot-wiring degree."

"Pick-axe and hot-wiring? You're not making any sense."

"Neither are you."

The walls of the den burst into a million sounds, shoving icy cold darts of fear through my body. A hand fell over my chest. "Dang it. It's going to be like this all night."

"Their muscles are weakening," Les said, listening to the barrage.

"Morris is a quack. He has no idea."

"Nice compliments for the man who saved your life."

"Arrogance kills, Les. Does the assault sound weaker? No."

"Fine. But it's driving me insane. I'm getting a glass of water. Want anything?"

"No. I'm going to go check up on Ash. She's probably freaking out."

"You're lucky to have her."

"Yes, and I'm not going to lose her."

The two of us left the den; Les branched away and bounced into the kitchen; I maneuvered past the stairwell and found Ash lying on the couch, staring at the ceiling. She jumped when

she saw from the corner of her eye me coming in. "It's just me," I said, sitting down in the chair, feeling the waves of heat trickling from the crackling fire.

The infected kept throwing themselves against the house, trying to find a way inside.

"Ash... There's still hope. Les found a short-wave radio, and someone said that the military still exists and is fighting, and the western United States is still pretty much intact, so—"

She cut me off, not removing her eyes from the pitted ceiling. "Do you think they know? Know they're sick?"

Dad chasing me. "No. They're dead, Ashlie."

"How do you know?"

"Their vital systems end, and one to five minutes later they — no, the virus within them, the bacteria or disease or whatever the heck it is — returns." Odd look. "Vital systems are breathing, heartbeat, brain processes. When they end, you die. These people, they aren't really people, in the strictest sense of the word."

She rang her hands together. "Not even ninety-nine per—"

My voice rose, shouting; veins throbbing; *Dad coming after me, Mom cursing, "Get away from me..."* My subconscious took over and my throat rasped; I exploded, "They're dead, Ash! What the heck is wrong with you? Why can't you just *get* it? Dad is *dead*! Mom is *dead*! Your best friend is dead! They're not coming back! What the heck is wrong with you!"

Ashlie refused to look at me, but rolled over on the couch. The banging on the walls dripped to a cease fire, and in the silence I could hear her soft crying. Throat knotted. Heart turned to stone. Soul clammed up.

Les stood in the archway. "Austin?" I didn't answer. "You'd better see something."

"No, not right—"

He hurried to the chair and grabbed me by the wrist, fingernails digging into my skin. "*Now.*"

Urgency lacerated his tone, and I stood. Glancing over at my crying sister, I plodded after him into the kitchen. The counters were dull and gray, wooden cedar; a single solid oak table sat off to the side, with candle-sticks in the middle. A toaster oven, a knife display, some rather interesting old trinkets a cooker would never find use for dotted the shelves and counters. The oil lantern shed dull light over everything, sitting on the counter by the boarded-up window. And the room, it was — frighteningly cold.

Les walked over to the pantry door. "Watch." He gripped the doorknob, twisted.

Without hesitation something — someone — threw themselves against the other side of the door, twisting and clawing on the gossamer wood. I shoved my hand down into my pocket and drew out the knife I'd taken from home; the blade glinted in the lantern light. The person behind the pantry sounded big, huge, heavy; panting came from under the door as it tried to escape, scraping the door. I gripped the knife handle tightly. Les rapped the door; a shriek issued forth, hollow and degrading. Shivers traced like a mace into the back of my skull.

Les hissed, taking the swinging lantern, "Farmer Brown isn't telling us everything."

The two of us bolted from the kitchen, raced around the stairwell baluster, and sprinted up the wooden steps. One of the side doors was open; the lantern in Les' hands danced over racks of hunting rifles. The hallway seemed to grow longer and narrower, the ceiling began to close in all around us. We came to a halt and I knocked on the bedroom door; light issued forth from the crack beneath the heavy door.

"Morris!" I yelled. "Morris! Get out here!"

Ashlie is downstairs alone with that thing in the pantry!

"Morris!" I banged even harder.

Les leaves fast, bolting back the way we came; I reel back, curse, and swing my foot into the door. It creaks and groans. I hit it again, throwing all my weight against it. Swearing, I leaned back and hurled every fiber of my being into that door; the hinges cracked, busted, the cryptic lock snapped, and the door burst open; something filled my vision and pain bit through me like a cracked whip; stars floated before me and I was thrown against the wall, sliding down to the floor; nausea grilled me and I wanted to vomit. I opened my eyes, but they burned, and all I saw were splotches of black and color. I pressed a hand against my face and felt warmth spreading down from my forehead.

Morris said, "Oh, it's you! Oh my gosh! Hah! I thought you were one—"

Hannah howled from the room, crying out. Anger blushed through me and I sent my foot into Morris' shin. He swaggered back, cursed like a sailor, and drove his foot into my stomach. I pitched forward, spraying bloody puke all over the wall; my insides ripped like toilet paper and a second hurl lit me up like fire.

Morris stepped back, tried to shut the door; I rolled onto my back and shoved my foot into the opening. Morris stood behind the door, pushing hard, but my shoe kept the door from closing. Les bounded over me, blasting into the door; it reeled to the side, hurling Morris into one of the bedroom dressers; Les swung around; Morris cracks one across his chest and Les stumbles back, toppling onto the bed. Morris came at him; Les drove his two feet into his torso, and the man doubled backwards. I meagerly found my way to my feet, warm liquid sliding down my face, over my cheeks and jaw bones and the pits of my nose and eyes. The man launches atop Les; a flash of silver light, and as the man falls atop of him, Les drives the knife blade up into the soft flesh of Morris' chest. Morris screeched, leaping back; Les followed through, swiping the blade through the air, drawing a vicious cut over Morris' arm. Terror filled Morris' eyes, and he reached for the blade; Les side-stepped and struck twice really fast into Morris' chest; he went around Morris, who was heaving and bleeding and on the verge of fainting, and drove the knife into his armpit; blood sprayed all over the carpet. Les released the blade and pushed Morris forward; Morris toppled to the floor with a groan, and blood stained the carpet red, moving in a rippling sea of body fluid.

I entered the room, dazed. I rubbed my eyes and opened them, and saw Les hovering over the farmer's corpse; Hannah stood in the corner of the room, sobbing, shaking, pulling on a shirt. Blood drenched Les' clothes in swirling arcs. "Les!" I shout. "Les!"

He shook his head, staring at the body. "He was going to rape her, Austin."

"Les."

"He was crazy."

"Les, are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "No. A little... winded."

"How bad am I?"

He looked at me. "You've got a bad cut on your forehead."

Les ran over to Hannah; she praised him, thanked him. I opened a dresser drawer and pulled out some of Virginia's stockings, and wrapped them around my scalp as tight as I could to prevent the bleeding. Groaned. Each heartbeat sent waves of sulfuric agony shooting through every nerve of my brain, a migraine like none other, making me want to spit, scream, vomit, die and sleep all at the same time. Hannah continued to thank Les over and over, and as I watched Les accepting it with the humblest gratitude, rage and envy, jealousy and resentment flooded me and I forgot the pain of the physique for the pain of the heart.

Our thoughts were shattered; Ashlie screaming downstairs. I led the cavalry charge down the steps. I hit the bottom landing and saw that the wood above the iron bar on the front door had splintered, reaching inwards, the infected snarling and beating it with all their might. The house shook with their rage. I ran into the living room.

Ashlie's face was pale. "They're breaking through the front door!"

"Can you walk?" I demand.

She gets to her feet and wobbles forward. "Get upstairs. Hannah! Take her upstairs, into the bedroom!"

Les stood at the foot of the steps, gawking at a bloodied, purplish hand reaching through, feeling the air. "They sound like animals."

I muttered, "Morris was crazy. This place is no better than Willow or Wellington. Les. Hannah and Ash are on their way, get some guns, and get to the bedroom. The guns—"

"In the gun room, I saw them." He ramped up the stairs.

I bolted into the den, feeling around blindly without the lantern. Suddenly I found it, turned up the volume. There was silence. I picked the short-wave radio up in my hands and carried it out to the front of the stairs. I hit transmit and said, "Pilot? Pilot!"

Moments of silence, then: *Hello? Hello? Thank God!*

"Where are you?" The infected screeched at the doorway.

"The Clearcreek YMCA! Where are YOU?"

"Across the street, buddy. We're coming for you. Stay put."

A dry laugh. I'm not going anywhere. I think there are still some below..."

A hand shot through the front door as another part splintered into sawdust and twisted knots of wood; it brushed through my hair and I danced away, up the stairs.

I'm not going anywhere. I think there are still some below...

10:00 p.m.

Reflections
Her Smiling Face
The Business Complex

Hannah took the gun in her hands, feeling its weight, eyes moving uncertainly as I entered the room. Les handed one to Ashlie and pushed one towards me. I took it, and was mildly surprised at how heavy it was. Les told us they were loaded, don't shoot someone by accident. Ash stated matter-of-factly, "They're going to get in. We can't stay here." For a moment no one spoke; we just listened the beating of the farmhouse. There was no more hope in her voice, no rising to the occasion of a better life. She was drained, marrow-dry.

Les snarled, "The truck. We need to get to the truck."

"We can't go downstairs."

"The roof. Look. Let's open this window..." He passed the farmer's corpse and slid the window open. Rain lashed out and lightning sent icy shivers through the room, wanton light massaging the farmer's decrepit body. He leaned out. "The roof slopes down. But where's the truck? Other side of the house. It's okay. We're fine. We'll just crawl out, walk over the roof – careful, they're slippery, not fitted too well, either – and jump down to the truck."

"All the while praying," I muttered, "that we can get inside the truck, start the engine, and drive to safety without being killed or eaten first. Okay. Good plan. You going out there first?"

A hesitant sparkle in his eye. "Yes."

"Whoa," Hannah jerked, tugging on his shirt. "We can't drive without the keys."

Les cursed. I'd never heard him curse. "I don't have them."

"Where are they?" Ash ordered.

Shrieks downstairs.

"Down there," he muttered.

No one moved.

Finally I gripped the gun tight and went out the door, leaving them behind me. "Shut the door," I hissed. "If you don't hear me calling, don't open. It might be me – and it might not." Ashlie looked at me as if I were going to the moon, never to return. Les was stoic at the window, feeling guilty for leaving the keys. He told me they were on the desk in the living room. Hannah shut the door, trapping me in the blackness of the ancient hallway.

Sweat slid down my palms. I was shaking. My finger rattled over the trigger, but not tight enough to spew a shot. Struggling and banging and frantic hollers echoed at the foot of the stairs; slowly I descended, one step at a time, telling myself, *Hurry up*, but only going slower. I choked on my own heart it was lodged so thick in my throat. At the last few stairs I looked at the front door and saw two pairs of yellow eyes, two once-human figures trying to break their way in. They opened their mouths when they saw me, and everything in me told me, *Just go upstairs... They won't get in...* No. Lies. I raised the gun. One reached out a hand, as if to touch me; the gun coughed, burning my ears; the hand splashed up against the wall and the beast cried out. Another shot and a bullet drilled through both of their heads; the two bodies slumped down and another infected soul threw itself at the door, working furiously.

Don't waste your time here.

I wheeled around the staircase, keeping an eye on the door. How long did I have? A shudder went through me. The walls were shaking as the infected threw themselves against them; the gunshots only riled their rage, and they tried all the harder. Dust flittered down from the rafters; with very breath some tingled at the back of my throat and I wanted to puke or scrape it raw. The icy kitchen counters hovered in a transcendent stare; I turned my eyes, but froze. My feet

came to a halt. The roaring noise around me faded into a bitter, screeching silence, and my mouth burnt with bile.

The basement door was open.

The lock had shattered, and it lay on the floor. An oil lantern cast shady light down into the doorway, but it melted into pitch blackness.

Go. Go. Just the next room. Get the keys. Get out of here. Safety.

All hinges on *you*.

I forced myself to move into the family room, but the afterimage of the open door remained shocked in my mind. The fire burned low, almost in ashy embers; bare whispers of warmth emanated, but my frost-bitten hands felt it as if it were the first tastes of ecclesiastical paradise. I turned to the desk and hunched down, looking for the keys. I slid the laptop aside, thinking Les might have set them down when we were online. But – There! They were sitting on a ledge above the desk. I swooped them up, relief biting; I stared at several pictures on the mantel. Many were black-and-white, dating to 1800s days, when the farm was still built. But most were pictures of the farmer, snapshots of the kids, and his wife, growing heavier through the years, though once a beautiful maiden. In one picture the farmer stood with his wife, the kids in front of them, under a bright sky, shining tall, and smiling as much, the wind against their skin. The keys. I kept staring at the picture; my eyes zoned out, looking *past* the image, and suddenly through the reflection of the glass cover I see the wife in the reflection: behind me.

I swung around. The frazzled wife stood by the fireplace. The back of her head was torn and bleeding, and blood coated all of her face, except for those empty brown eyes. Her polka-dot dress was blanched in blood as well, running as a medieval corset down her side. Those hollow eyes locked with mine and a cold whisper of something benign and evil took over. Our eyes met – a clash of righteousness against a shield of brazen wretchedness – and she lunged forward, a dull foot kicking the chair to the side. I backed into the wall, grabbed a picture frame, threw it at her; it bounced off her head; she reached towards me; I slid to the ground, rolling, her thick body sweltering all around me. The cackling of the infected all around the house poured into my ears, a waterfall: the wife fumbled around the desk, knocking over the laptop. Her feet smashed the glass pictures, shards drawing deep welts of blood over stockings.

My hand wrapped around a glass shard. She bent over, mouth gaping for me. I drilled the shard upwards, into her neck. A gurgling shriek blasted spittle of fetal blood all over my face and throat. It burned like cold embers. My other hand balled into a fist and struck her across the face; she reeled back, and I kicked out my leg, throwing her fumbling into a chair, collapsing onto the floor. She writhed her head back and forth, blood spraying in wavering arcs, dancing all over the walls, ceiling, floor and furniture, staining the pictures of her smiling face with a beaming family: shattered memories.

I swaggered to my feet. Lightning flashed, and the shadows of the infected at the door sprinkled all over the fireplace. I found myself much closer to the fireplace as the woman lurched up, grabbed me, and hurled me against it. The brick thudded loud and I slid to the ground, aching like a twisted ocean liner. The woman barreled for me; my hand groped at the wall, found something cold and sharp; my fingers entwined, and it came around; she lunged; the fire poker drove upwards, jutting into the soft flesh of her chin. She gave a grunt and fell, her head landing in the coals of the fireplace; the end of the fire poker protruded from broken skull fragments, a mess of blood and brain tissue.

“Oh my gosh...” I get to my feet and ran out of the room, the keys jingling in my pocket. The infected were almost through; they saw me and hollered. A crashing, shattering sound, followed by crunching wood; they had broken into the kitchen! I swung around the stairwell banister and took the steps two at a time; the infected broke through the front door, falling over each other. They were congested like flies out on the porch, and gushed inside, famished and intent on the food. The stairs seemed to never end; finally I hit the landing and reached the doorway. I slammed on the door: “Hannah! Ash! Les! Open the door *now!*”

The door wrenched open; I fell inside; Hannah shut it quick.

“Lock it! Lock it you dumb-”

She slid the lock down. It bent inwards.

“Outside!” I yell, getting to my feet.

Les was already there. The window creaked open, rain lashing inside. Lightning flickered, and his stocky silhouette with the hunting rifle in his hands met my eyes. He stepped out onto the roof, turned, helped Ash throw: "It's slippery, watch it!" Hannah gaped at the doorway; I grabbed her hand and spun her around. "Go! GO!" I held the gun at the ready, against the wall, watching the door. Hannah got through. I backed up against the window. The door splintered, bulged, burst apart. A man and a younger woman came through, covered in rain-slicked blood. Two shots cried out from the guns, piercing their chests. They kept coming. *The heads! Shoot them in the head!* I raised the sight and fired off to more shots; the back of their heads burst apart and they fell to the floor. More flooded.

"Austin!" Les yelled. "Come on!" He and Ash stood at the window, guns pointed out the sides, shooting, covering me as I crawled through. The rain was cold and unbearable. The roofing tiles were slick and loose. Deadly. As soon as I escaped, Les threw the window back and latched it with an outside latch, an old component on Quaker farmhouses. The infected shattered the window, but couldn't get past the bars.

"Now what?" Hannah panted. "We're going to get hit by lightning."

Lightning flashed behind Dorothy Lane; the infected were still surrounding it, and dull lights were burning inside. No more infected stood at the fence; the ground beneath us was clear. They were all going inside. Les started to move for the front, Ash behind him, then Hannah, and me pulling rear. I almost fell, thought about laughing on it, decided not to. Knock on wood.

Les cried out, fell. Ash reached down to help him, but she fell too. Les rolled over, groping at the tiles. He rolled down the roof and fell off the ledge, careening to the earth. Ashlie hollered. Hannah tried to run over, but slipped; I made it. Les was pulling himself up in the grass; he looked OK. He waved a hand, calling silently, *Come on!* No. No, too- *The keys!* I pulled them from my pocket. Les nodded, beckoning me. The truck was just around the other side of the-

Infected came around the side of the building, whooping; Les shot off his gun; I fired off mine. The shots sang out all over Clearcreek, through desolate homes and abandoned streets, the last pitfalls of a dying race. Infected fell to their feet; I jumped from the roof, felt the wind and rain, and landed hard on the balls of my feet; lightning pain streaked up through me. Ashlie and Hannah dangled for a moment, then joined us. We ran around the side of the house, guns at the ready. Infected from Dorothy Lane had reached the fence at the gunshots, and were beginning to discover what climbing means. The truck came into view, but two or three infected lurked around it. Les popped five or six rounds and they dropped; he ripped open the door and hopped inside. Hannah opened the passenger door.

I yelled, "Ashlie! In shotgun! Go!"

"Aus-"

"Ash! Come on!"

She pushed Hannah out of the way and got in.

"Hannah! Up here!" I climbed into the bed; she did, too, just as infected came from inside the house. I leaned against the cab and fired blindly into the masses as they poured like sardines through the farm's front door. I don't think I really hit anything. Hannah fell to the bed of the truck, gun skidding from her hands. I dropped down next to her, refusing to fall out. That was a death sentence, writing on your tombstone. She looked at me with wild and confused eyes. Lightning burnt across us; my own wild, rage-filled eyes cackled and I made a maniacal laugh, for no reason. She eyed me but didn't smile.

The truck shot up spits of mud, bouncing all over. The high-beams flickered over the fence at highway 741, the infected's eyes glaring white, frozen in time. The truck ramped a patch of dirt, kicked downwards; the fence tore and burst apart; the truck fishtailed through a ditch of mud, ramped up onto the road, leaving several disembodied creatures strewn in the wake. More from Dorothy Lane and around the 741 area came for us. I peeped my head out, saw the fires from car wrecks, blending gloomily with the rain. The truck engine gurgled. We were turning 180 degrees; Les hit the gas and I bent forward, buckling over. Now Hannah laughed, mocking. Les weaved through jumbled messes of cars and trucks, strewn bodies and infected running amuck.

The truck lit through another fence; the barbed wire reached down into the bed of the truck as it twisted with impact; barbs tore Hannah's shirt and ripped deep lines into her skin. She let out

a yelp and covered the wound with her hand. The truck bounced and she rolled over, gritting her teeth. I wanted to help her so bad but I didn't dare flinch.

We bounced as Les drove the truck up a curb; the side of the truck grinded against burning Escalade, showering sparks all over us. They burnt; I rolled over, rolled right into Hannah. Her warm breath touched my neck; I pushed myself away. We passed underneath the refueling pumps at the gas stations; I nodded my head forward, looking out, to see them – them, them, *those creatures* – on our tail, and gaining. Then I heard Ashlie rapping on the window, pointing. How long she'd been rapping, I don't know. I never asked. I pulled up my gun and started shooting; Les drove the truck down the entrance to the gas station. Hannah fingered her own rifle; a shadow to my right; I swung the gun around and blasted point-blank; the infected's face blew apart; the bullet ricocheted outside the scalp and burst into a gas container; it erupted into a ball of flames, warming my face. I wanted to cheer.

The explosion lit off another container, and another, a line of dominoes engulfing trees and Wright-Brothers airport fence and cars, all in a haze of scorching fire and sweltering smoke. All of this happened in a split second. The truck was pulling onto the road when the explosions swallowed up the gas refueling pumps; in a blast that seemed to rival Hiroshima, the earth ruptured, splintering; fire pushed upwards, scorching the infected, sending limbs hurling through the night. Trees bent backwards at the blast; fiery heat touched the side of my face, burning like acid; Hannah, on the bottom of the bed, felt nothing, except for the shockwave getting underneath the truck tires. I felt gravity sink away as the truck was pushed into the air, twisting and turning; the world turned into a fray of a million colors, shaded in a blue shadow. The truck somersaulted; I saw the bed, with Hannah sucked to it, dwindling away, and suddenly the earth took me up, and I rolled over wet grass and felt the rain on my face and my lower back groaning.

I raised my sun-scorched eyebrows to see the truck smash into the earth, rolling, then slam into an overturned tree. The heat from the explosion died down, leaving only the smell of burnt flesh and burning gasoline. I looked over my shoulder to see the infected spinning around, screaming, lit ablaze. The infected at Dorothy Lane stopped, just watching, not noticing me; some of the others on a hilltop, next to an artificial pond bordering what was left of Settler's Walk, gawked at the raging inferno.

I picked myself up, somehow conscious, surprised my legs weren't broken; a sprained ankle was to be expected. I limped through the grass, feeling the rain on my face, strikingly cold. The truck grew larger; it was overturned, the wheels facing me; they were still spinning, except the rear wheels were half-melted. Splintered tree limbs overhung the side of the cab that pointed into the sky. I went around the truck, not really wanting to; the desire to curl up into a fetal ball and wait for the sinking teeth of the infected was becoming more desirous every moment. I feared I was left alone; my only remaining family dead, Hannah dead, Les dead, all killed in the crash. I expected to see Hannah's remains splattered all over the place – she was gone.

I crawled onto the top of the truck, trying to open the door; the tree limbs pinned it down. The glass window was broken; I peered inside. By the firelight I saw Ashlie, covered with glass, bleeding in the face; a shaking hand reached for me and I took it tight, holding so hard. She was held from falling by the seatbelt. Les was crumpled against his door, head mashed against the ceiling; a line of blood coursed down his cheek from a ghoulish head wound. He was breathing, shallow and ragged, very pale. I didn't really attention to him, because Ashlie was screaming: "I don't want to die, I don't want to die, *I don't want to die!*" So I held onto her hand, refusing to let go. I'd stay with her. No matter what.

Something inside me stirred. I released. It was painful, but I used my hand to begin shoving the branches out of the way; they were too heavy. Ashlie undid her seatbelt and fell on top of Les. Les groaned. She tried to orient herself, but she was stuck. Every move she made sent pain streaking through her. She told me herself. Then she asked, "How's Hannah?" I told her I didn't know; I hadn't seen her. She had to have been killed, thrown out. Yet I survived. Nevertheless, I didn't want to think about it.

Then I heard a fiendish yell. They knew. They were coming from the fields, from the artificial pond, Dorothy Lane.

Ashlie cried, "Get me out of here!"

"I am! Calm down! Hold on!" I pushed the branches harder, got it out of the way, reached for the door – the branches swung back, smacking me off the truck. I fell into the dirt. Ash began to cry hard. A figure came up behind me; I spun around, having nothing, my gun disappeared. Hannah sagged up alongside me; her arm looked pale and limp, was bleeding bad, and a bruise covered half her face, and it was swelling even more. "They're... coming..." Faint.

"Ashlie. Ashlie's in the truck. Les is in the truck. They're both hurt..."

She grabbed me, weakly. "Austin, can't you-" She fell against me. I fell against the truck.

Ashlie banged inside the cab. "Austin! Austin! Don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

The infected were so close, so close. I couldn't get her. Hannah turned and began to walk away, down the road, away from the truck, the inferno, absent-minded of the infected bearing so near. I looked at the truck, heard Ashlie, closed my eyes. *I love you. Don't ever doubt that. I'm sorry. Hannah is here. If she wasn't, it'd be different...* I turned and picked Hannah up in my arms. She was so heavy. I began to walk away, then began to run. Ashlie's screams ate me away, withering me like a flower withers under a parching desert sun. *Austin! Austin! Don't leave me! Don't leave me!*

I ran. I left her, abandoned her.

Memories. Her hugging me, refusing to let go. Calling me every day when I was gone, wanting to talk. Her crying when she thought about me going away to college. She told all her friends, "He's the best brother in the whole wide world!" Now her screams burned through me, but I left her. I left her for dead. I betrayed, back-stabbed, left her alone. Hannah in my arms, my muscles burning. The gas station aflame. Truck overturned. Les groaning. Ashlie screaming.

I looked back. I don't know why. I looked back, and I saw them. They were climbing all over the truck, silhouetted by the gas fire. I heard Ashlie's screams dwindle to nothing as they reached into the cab. I turned away, kept running through the darkness, through the rain, feeling nothing but overwhelming sorrow and helplessness. *Where are you now, God?* I roared, ashamed at my own betrayal of my Hannah, but not as much as the overwhelming shame of leaving Ash alone. Morals, values, trash. I watched my feet to avoid tripping as I ran through the soggy field, through empty and quiet business complexes, hearing nothing but my own footfalls – the infected assaulted the truck and left us. I heard nothing except my course breathing.

But all I saw was her smiling face.

I lay Hannah down on the cold, wet pavement. I tried to open a door on one of the shiny, multi-faceted, state-of-the-art twentieth-century architecture masterpieces, but it didn't open. It hadn't opened before the infections started spreading. None of the workers had ever arrived to work. I picked up Hannah and carried her past a water fountain encircled with stone benches. The water didn't gurgle; the rain clashed with the pool. I found a window and smashed it open, pushed Hannah through. I crawled through as well, into the warmth, the dryness. Wind and rain came in through the broken window. Glass shards clung to Hannah. She tried to stand.

Her smiling face.

"Come on. Can you stand?"

She nodded and stood, leaned against the wall. "Where are we?"

"Come on. Hold my hand." It was cold and limp. I took her down the hallway, testing doors. Finally one opened. We went inside. I shut the door and locked it tight. Setting Hannah down on a couch, I grabbed a soft chair and positioned it against the door. There were no windows in the room, and it was warm, but getting colder – the heater was off. Even in spring, heaters were needed. I looked around the room. A whiteboard, several couches, a coffee machine. It was a conference room.

"It's not the Marriott, but it works."

Hannah was asleep.

11:00 p.m.

The rape of all good and true
The Dumpster

Coffman Family YMCA

We were submerged in complete darkness, but my eyes had adjusted. I sat down next to the couch, leaning against it, breathing deep and shallow, deep and shallow, for many minutes. Hannah's ragged breath ran through my hair, tickled my hair. The dark closed tighter and tighter around me. Every time I closed my eyes I just saw Ashlie's face; I had to open them. I didn't want to fall asleep. Just stay here, where it's safe, and dream not – nightmares sure to come.

I had only slept once or twice since all this began. All the excitement – is excitement really the best word? – and the adrenaline and the physical exertion had worn me out. My legs burned with exhaustion, and my arms felt like lead. I stared dully at the whiteboard; it was covered with frantic scribbles expounding on a business venture for XG Corp., whatever that was. XG Corp. I smiled. Such a nice office room. It meant nothing now. And the silence. You can't imagine it. So silent it roared in my ears; every heartbeat was thunder in a prairie.

I coughed. It hurt. My throat was so dry. I looked at Hannah. Her eyes fluttered as she slept. Her fingers twitched. My eyes grazed down over her arm, the gash she'd received as the truck barreled through that barbed wire fencing. The cut was deep and ragged, and dried blood clotted the wound and the fingers of her opposite hand. The edges of the tear peeled over, revealing deep skin tissue, and the area around the wound was growing a bluish purple. Standing, I said nothing as I moved the chair away from the door and went out into the hallway.

The building was a labyrinth of snaking corridors and locked rooms. I had gone creeping through these buildings as they were being built; Chad and I had escaped from the YMCA and had gone trekking at night. He had played a little hide-and-seek in the construction, and it scared the crap out of me. Now I moved silently, hearing nothing but my heart and footfalls. *Never thought you'd be here again. My, my, my, how things change.*

Firelight bled in through the windows, refracting, splintering over the walls and furniture. The moon wasn't out and rain fell, tapping on the glass. I walked around an empty chair and desk for the receptionist, felt a palm frond scrape my side, and almost tripped over a pile of new magazines on the floor. I saw my own reflections in the tall glass windows, and my dull eyes stared back at me, imprinted with the burning fire off to the side of Dorothy Lane. The fire raged, tearing apart the gas station from every angle. The fire cast its warming glow in every direction – over the fresh fields bordering Wright-Brothers Airport, to Dorothy Lane, where sulking figures moved about abandoned cars. Smoke rose from Dorothy Lane's upper bay window on their mezzanine. The fire reflected off the artificial lake, and its golden glow touched the backs of several suburban houses of neighboring neighborhoods. The fire reached over the wrecked dump of 741, past a torn fence, over rutted crop fields, and to a farmhouse now being torn apart top-to-bottom.

And the light hit the overturned truck.

I turned away, refusing to look. I didn't want to see what was happening.

They've been killed, bitten, turned. Your sister. Your best friend. They're-

"Water," I said, rekindling my focus. I left the lobby in a different direction and came upon a pair of water fountains, one shorter than the other. I almost walked off, thinking they wouldn't work because of the power outage. Then I remembered: the water doesn't flow with the power. I tried it, and cool water gushed out of the faucet. Drinking my fill, I searched around the fountain for some paper cups, filled one or two up, and headed back towards Hannah.

Lightning flashed as I drew past the lobby, sprinkling over the sidewalk and concrete pillars just outside. A figure stood at the door of the lobby, just staring inside. Our eyes met, and I didn't turn away. His own eyes stared right back; he shrugged his shoulders and walked out of view, around the side of the building. *This place is no safer. There is no Alamo. They can smell my heart-beat, they can smell the lifeblood inside me.*

Hannah was asleep as I sat down next to her, having shut the door and pressed the chair against it. The paper cups sat on the conference room desk, and I pulled up a chair next to her. "I brought you some water," I said, nudging her. She didn't wake. "Water, Hannah." She lay on her side, head on the couch cushion. Why did a conference room have a couch? "You're really tired, aren't you?" Nothing. "So am I. I can't sleep. You're lucky."

Minutes dripped away.

"I know how you feel now. Remember when you were talking to me when I was in the shower? You said I didn't know what it was like, losing someone so close. I know you loved Peyton. I never doubted that. He might have treated you like crap sometimes, but I know you loved him. I know you love *him*, not the monster that's replaced him. He's 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 and co-workers. They are beasts out of Hell." A pause. "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 left her, I left her, Hannah. She was crying out my name when I ran. I ran away, and I heard her screams as they climbed all over the truck. I have to live with that. Those screams."

I shook my head, tears swelling in my eyes. A horrendous flood of turbulent emotions overtook me. My hands began to shake; balling them into fists, I said, "She always bragged to her friends about how great of a brother she had. Whenever her friends would talk about how horrible their brothers were, Ashlie would say how great I was. She always told me, 'You're my best friend in the whole world,' and 'You're the best brother ever.' 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."

A loud noise rattled: my fist burned. The wood table shuddered.

Hannah didn't wake up.

"Do you know what I'm afraid of? Hannah, I'm so afraid. I never thought I would say this to you: I am 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 bad, never having anyone. I fear growing old, cold, alone, never tasting love, and dying alone and forgotten in those whitewashed tombs: 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 who might care are taken from you.' I am left alone, unwanted, watching my friends and their girls, watching the object of my passion for so long taken by a best friend – and he forgets me. 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 bad, 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 work 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. It is very tragic. 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's 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."

I leaned forward, whispered, "*It will be okay.*"

And I took her hand, cold and limp. She shivered, breathing shallowly.

"Sleep," I said.

She slept. I sat in that chair, watching her, knowing how beautiful she really was. My soul stirred, and I pushed it down. I wanted to crawl onto that couch and shield her, hold her, I wanted her to wrap her arms around me. Her soft skin against mine, her breath mixing with mine, pulling close, holding on, fearing to let go for the hell outside the door. Our lips to touch, our souls to entwine.

None of that now. I had too many other things to think about. We had a free ticket out at the YMCA – but how to get there? We couldn't just walk out the door. At *least* one of those things was lurking around the complex.

They weren't like the zombies of the movies, either; they didn't lumber around, they didn't groan and gurgle. No, they *ran*. They could jump, too. They were humans turned into animals, with all natural human capabilities. And they screamed, they screeched, it was nightmarish, ghoulish. If you listened hard enough, maybe you could hear them. I still hear them. I hear them all the time, in my sleep, walking around.

Wouldn't it be interesting if, one day, all this was over? If one day it all ended, the plague just stopped? Wouldn't it be interesting if a movie was made about this? A comedy, even? I laughed. Who could find humor in it? I would watch with new friends and Hannah. Hannah and I would be sitting together; my arm would drape around her and she would lean her head on my chest. We would watch the movie. Our friends who didn't experience it would laugh. We'd just be silent as the grave. She would start crying. So would I. My parents gone. My sister gone. *Her* family gone. Our friends gone. We were all we had left.

This was no movie. This was no book. I wanted to puke. How had I survived so long? Almost everyone I knew was dead, turned, become something otherworldly. All except Hannah. That's why I had to keep her. That's why I loved her. She was now part of me; if I died, she died. If she died, I died. She was the only thing on this earth who knew who I was – and cared. Everyone else was dead. *Everyone else was dead*. The pen hovers. I never thought I would write that – and be serious.

How could we get to the YMCA? Should we wait for morning? Or would it be too late? Would the pilot even still be alive? Would we show up and be left alone in those dark gymnasiums and workout rooms and children's daycare? Part of me wanted to give up. Go to sleep. Stop worrying. Just give up; if they come, they come. So what? Maybe it is better to be like that anyway. Any tempting, however, soon found itself corrupted: Hannah kept my attention. She kept me alive.

Hannah shifted on the couch, but didn't wake.

I had to at least see how far away the YMCA was. How? Was there a roof? I had to check.

"Be back in a minute, Hannah." She didn't hear me. I left the room again and meandered through the hallways, searching. Eventually I discovered a utility room and let myself in. A rack of flashlights sat on the wall; I pulled one off, shook it, flipped the switch. The beam glared and I grunted, looking away. My eyes shrank and I looked about. There was odd-looking machinery, some tom-foolery of all sorts, wrenches and hammers and buckets of nails. There was another door; stenciled on the front in nice letters it read, *STAIRWELL*. The knob was locked. The hammer was heavy in my hands, but I delivered several blows to the door handle, and finally it snapped off. The hammer clang loudly at my feet; fingering inside the latch, I flipped the lock open. My shoulder pushed against the steel, and the metal door creaked open. A silver stairwell led up to the ceiling; a latch.

The ladder shook back and forth under my feet. I pushed hard on the latch. It took a few moments, but eventually it popped open. The lids slammed onto the roof surface, ringing loudly. A thunderclap drowned it out. *Thank God*. I pulled myself into the rain and turned around on the roof; it was barren. The gas station inferno cast warm light over my face; I spun until I saw the triangulated roofs of the YMCA. The parking lot was littered with cars, but the building was very quiet. Hope surged within me – what if there were survivors inside? What if all those in the cars had escaped the plague? What if we were to join them, get to a plane... Looking at the YMCA, I felt a new surge of hope.

We had survived through this, there *had* to be survivors. All over the place. Hundreds, in Clearcreek alone! Cooped up in homes, businesses, cars out in the middle of nowhere. I stood on that rooftop and I saw a mother holding her two children, trying to keep them quiet, huddled in the closet of their home, drenched in darkness, praying countless hours. Businessmen and women in 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, daughters, sons. A lone car sitting in a field somewhere, in the middle of nowhere, the teenage occupants, having escaped Clearcreek High School, silent in their contemplations, wondering what to do, listening to the rain drumming on the hood.

Water splashed from scattered puddles as I ran over to the side of the roof. The courtyard fountain sang as rain slid into its foaming waters. A huddle of more buildings encircled the courtyard; beyond the courtyard was the YMCA. It looked so close, so far away. I wanted to go down, get Hannah, and make a run for it. We could. It was so close – but how close was close enough? Toes curling, I walked backwards from the roof's edge, keeping an eye on those triangle roofs. Lightning burst down to the south, carrying echoing light dancing over the buildings and reflecting in the fountain and puddles.

A hump appeared on the edge of the roof, thirty feet away. It grew larger, sprouted some roots, and dropped down over the roof. A moment later the head peeked over, the hair matted down by rain. Bulbous eyes watched me, and the figure crawled closer. The steel lids clanged together as I hurriedly descended the ladder. I followed the flashlight set before me, out of the room, past the lobby; I swung the beam against the window, blinding the eyes of four or five creatures huddled together. They banged their hands on the glass, smothering their bloodied faces against the windows. Mouths opened, revealing bloody jaws, dripping with the blood of *Ashlie Les*

I burst into the conference room. "Hannah! Hannah!"

Her eyes opened. "Austin? Austin, what-" Weak and frail.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Look. We've got to go."

"Go where?"

"Not here." I grabbed her hand and pulled her up; she stumbled against me, twisted around, and vomited all over the table. I jumped backwards, shocked. She fell to the floor, landing on her wounded arm. She let out a cry and rolled over. Fresh blood trickled down her bare skin. Wide awake now, she groped the wound, blood oozing between her fingers. The cut was down into the bone. "Hannah. Come on. Get up. Get up!"

She grabbed onto a chair to pull herself up, but the chair toppled on top of her. I yanked it off. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm... dizzy." She turned pale, green, and spewed all over the couch. Gunk dribbled down the satin cloth, ran along the edges of her chin.

Shattering glass somewhere down the corridor.

"Hannah. Tell me you can walk."

She stood on wobbly knees. "I can walk."

"Run?"

She didn't answer.

"I can't believe this. Stay with me." Again I took her hand, cold and clammy. We moved out into the dark hallway. It was barren. I dragged her towards the lobby; "Wait here." I peeked around the edge of the wall leading to the lobby. One of the tall glass windows had shattered, leaving pieces clinging to the carpet. Bloody footprints led their way into the lobby, past the chairs, scattered magazines, and down a branching hallway where our destination did not lay. I beckoned Hannah forward and we crossed into the right hallway, reaching the utility room.

Going inside first, I shone the flashlight. The metal door was still open. I ducked inside, tucked the flashlight under my arm, prepared to open the latch.

It was already open.

Rain fell through, splashing on my face.

"Hannah," I muttered, turning off the flashlight. I went into the utility room. She stood there in the darkness; behind her two quiet, yellow eyes watched her.

I bent down, slowly, groped on the cold concrete floor, found it. I lifted the hammer in one hand, the flashlight in another. I raised the dark flashlight. Hannah began to say something. I flashed the light on and off real fast, blinding the creature behind her; the creature shrieked, raising its hands. She whipped around, seeing the bloodied bulk cringing in the doorway. It roared and stepped towards her. I leapt forward, swinging the iron hammer; it smashed into the skull, breaking bones and crushing into the soft tissue of the brain. The brute grunted and fell backwards into the hallway wall, sliding to the floor.

"Hannah," I said again. "The stairs!"

The stairs rose up to the open latch. Had he been the one I'd seen on the roof? Pray be it so. "Go up there. Now." She started climbing, nauseous and woozy. I half expected her to fall on top of me. She peeked her head up, looked around, and crawled out. I started on the ladder. As

I climbed, the light tucked into my armpit, the beam hit the fallen corpse. I looked over and stopped climbing. Two other zombies ripped and tore at the corpse, drenching the floor, walls and ceiling in guts. They hungrily ate it all, ignoring me for their feast. Hungry.

I pulled up onto the roof, kicked the lids back down. The sound roared.

"Austin—"

"Some were down there."

The latch shuddered. I stood on top of it. Now what? My own eager foolishness cost us.

Hannah pointed to the bonfire. "You shouldn't have done that!"

Hordes of infected rushed towards the business complex, drawn by our voices and the clanging latch.

Hannah's ashen faced tinted in the glow of the fires. "What do we—"

"Run!"

The latch flipped open; I was thrown through the air, landing hard on the roof, rolling. Hannah ran towards me. "No! No! Go!" I helped myself up and she ran to the edge of the roof, nearly falling over. "Jump it! Jump it!" Infected were coming from the stairwell, covered in fresh zombie blood. Hannah leapt over the side, vanishing. I didn't even look. Running as hard as I could, I took the last few bounds and pressed up on the balls of my feet; the wind tore at me, and the ground vanished. I flew twenty feet above the concrete of the courtyard, flailing my arms. Hannah's figure beneath me was running for the YMCA. I landed off to her right in a bed of drowned roses. The thorns twisted at my skin, and the mud coated me. I spit up brackish water and burnt soil.

Hannah grabbed me and ripped me from the bed. The infected fell off the roof, landing hard, tumbling over one another.

"The YMCA," I gasped. "That's where—"

She ran beside me. We went between the two buildings. Faster. Faster. I looked back; infected were coming from around the sides of the complex, blending together, running flat-out. Most were covered in blood, gashes, bites and tears; some were missing limbs. Still they ran. Men. Women. A little child, shrieking, sending shivers up my spine. They weren't slow, and we weren't faster. My entire body ached; Hannah was lightheaded. More than once I almost slipped and fell. We reached the tarmac of the YMCA, running between the ghost cars. We slammed into the front doors, ripping at them. Locked!

Hannah cried out. I said, "Side door!"

We ran behind a row of bushes, sides scraping against wet bricks, shoes sucking and tearing at grimy mud. The infected reached the parking lot, weaving between the cars, jumping over cars. We spun around the side of the building; two infected launched after us; I dodged, Hannah dodged, and the two hit the side of the building. We ran into the employee parking lot, to the side door beside the dumpster. Infected were coming from the surrounding neighborhoods, appearing over a hill and racing down.

"Austin! The code! Do you know the code?"

I did, but I couldn't recall; the fear and suspense and nail-biting nausea enflamed my mind.

"Think, Austin! Think!"

"I'm trying! Do you think I'm just standing here!"

"Harder!"

The infected were at the dumpster and going strong. Only split-seconds to spare.

Hannah reached down, picked up an iron bar cast out from the dumpster. She braced against me and swung it out, clobbering the first of the dozen infected to reach us. The zombie spun into the wall, buckling over onto a comrade. She whirled the bar again and again, cutting through the air, bashing the creatures in the head as they ran after. They kept falling and picking themselves up. Shaking fingers danced over the keyboard, finding no refuge; a lot of times we were unable to get the door to open with the *correct* code; my mind was a tumultuous waterfall of careening fear and emotion to concentrate.

"Get the door!" Hannah cried, her own muscles beginning to fail.

"I don't remember it!"

"Think!"

"I can't think with their screams!"

... "Oh my gosh..."

I glanced over. At the crest of the hill across the employee parking lot, nearly a hundred of the monstrous creatures appeared, running down at full-speed. I watched them coming; some tripped, getting trampled; all soaked and foamed at the mouth, shivering in their purplish flesh, reeking of rotting flesh and stale vomit. Hannah thrust the bar into the eye of an elderly woman and sent her to the ground. The other infected were picking themselves up. This was it. My hand went limp, pressing against the keypad. It all came down to this.

"Austin!" She took off towards the oncoming horde.

Filled with passion, I abandoned the pad. "What the heck are you doing!"

She spun around the side of the dumpster; I followed, feeling so foolish for heading into the mob. Hannah was opening the dumpster door, but the brake bar at the bottom was tearing at the concrete. I tried to lift it, but it was too heavy. Hannah joined. The infected came at us. The door popped open. We both ducked inside; I slipped, falling against the dumpster; Hannah slid the door completely shut and stepped away. I pushed her to the side and slid the lock into the ground just as the creatures began to tug. Their screams thundered like a stampede.

The dumpster was enclosed by fifteen-foot-tall concrete walls and a fifteen-foot-tall wooden gate, now locked shut. Twisted sheet metal, steel bars, and soaked cardboard containers surrounded the dumpster, the lid open, the smell of putrid garbage blending with the wreath of rain. We slid back against the dumpster, hearing them thrusting their bodies against the wood. The gates were reinforced with steel bars, vertical, horizontal and diagonal. My geometry mind said, *They won't be coming in*. My no-nonsense, common sense mind said, *That's bullcrap*.

"Wonderful idea," I hissed to Hannah. She ignored me, put a finger to her lips.

She would later tell me my eyes burned like sulfur as I fumed, "It stinks of death."

She nodded, and hissed, "*Shut up*."

The infected continued to harass the gate, but slowly the attacks began to stop. They died away. We heard their scuffling outside the dumpster, shimmying back and forth, wandering around, smelling for life to suck it out through venom-laced teeth.

The rain fell over us. I shivered. My feet began to chatter. Hannah knelt down, grabbed some corroding cardboard, and handed it to me. I eyed her. She pointed to her mouth. I mouthed, *What?* She tore it from my hand and shoved it into my mouth. My head reeled back, but I understood. My teeth didn't click anymore.

It was then I realized how genius the girl was. The stench of the garbage masked our smell. We made no noise. These creatures, they didn't seem to have long-term memories. They didn't remember their past lives, as was demonstrated by Amanda and Dad attacking me. So if long-term memory has been degraded, then what about short-term memory? They could easily keep up a chase for hours. But what happens if we hide, make no noise, and they can't smell us? Two minutes later, they have no memory of our existence. So they wander around, thinking nothing. We don't exist to them. I smiled and looked at Hannah. Even in the soapy rain she was lovely. She smiled back, and I gave a thumbs-up.

We sat down, backs against the green dumpster, listened to the rain. The infected were spanning out. Our voices were drowned out in the rain, refusing to carry beyond the concrete and wooden walls as we whispered in the night: "Clever trick. Did you think of it yourself?"

"I guess. I just did it. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Well, thank you. You saved our lives."

"For once," she grinned. "You've been carrying the weight."

"Les was carrying the weight."

"No. *My* weight. I heard you, too, in the building. You couldn't have helped her. And you *were* a hero. You were selfless. You took me instead." She touched my shaking hands, wrapping them in her own; heat melted the raindrops. "I can't thank you enough. I'm alive now because of you. You even stuck with me when I was holding you back on our way through the fields here. Hah. I sound like a rambling fool..."

"No, no."

"I just think, if someone saves your life, they were pretty good people. You're a good person. And I know that people haven't always treated you like a gem. I've seen it at school. And I feel so stupid, because I always just watched on and didn't do anything. You were always the quiet nerd. It's impossible to see it now. I don't know how we ever did. How *I* ever did. You're a really good person. You are... one of the best people I know. I'm just a clumsy little ditz."

I squeezed her hand, and whispered, "A ditz wouldn't have thought of deceiving them by locking us in here."

"I wasn't thinking. I was scared."

"And truth is? So was I. So *am* I. I'm terrified. But it isn't absence of fear that makes you good, that makes me good. It's the presence of courage."

"Wow, that sounded really professional."

"Some famous person said it. Winston Churchill, I think. It was in a free calendar once. Let me see your arm."

She pulled back her sleeve. It was growing more purple. "It itches," she told me. "And it stings at the same time." She reached to scratch it, but I stopped her.

"Don't scratch it. It will 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 and gauze on that. Well, you can. I only know band-aids."

"We're still going in there? We should stay here until morning."

"No. We'll be too tired. And when we start snoring, we're discovered. We'll pass out and be unable to react. Once the body is up more than 24 hours, it will start hallucinating. That means we might start going crazy and get ourselves killed. Our minds will mess with us, and we might end up turning on each other."

"Who taught you that?"

"Psychology, Hannah. Mr. Parker."

"I don't think we can make it in there. You don't know the code."

"3-6-9-1-1."

"Dang it, Austin," she breathed.

"I was under stress. We can't wait until morning, either, because of your cut."

"You have a cut on your forehead. On your leg, on—"

"Not as bad as yours."

She was silent.

"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. These guys 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."

"So what's the plan for getting inside?" She groped at her wound.

"I'm kind of making this all up as I go. Are there any crowbars or something around here?"

"You want us to fight our way out?"

"Break the glass on the door?"

"They'll get in."

"You spoil all my ideas."

"Why don't we just sleep in the dumpster? I'm not joking."

"Hannah. You're hurt. We can't stay here. Okay? You saved us. But we can't stay here."

We sat in the rain, listening to it drum on the dumpster, splash at the feet. I heard the distant roar of a gun engine, faint screams, gunshots. Clapping footfalls at the infected around the dumpster enclosure sprinted in the direction of the sounds. A peel-out somewhere; Hannah was turning her head to hear better. I leaned forward. Gun shots. Human shouts – intelligible shouts. The vehicle engine thundered in our ears and then slowly died down. Just the rain.

Hannah groaned, "I wonder where *they're* going?"

I stood and pressed my body against the wooden door, grabbed the lock.

"Austin," she hissed, leaping up.

I yanked the lock and pushed the door open. Hannah grabbed something beside the dumpster. I stepped out of the enclosure, looking both ways. A figure brushed between three parked cars; it ran around the side of the car. Hannah stepped out and tossed me an iron bar. I caught it and hurled it around, bashing the creature in the side; she fell against the door. It was a teenager I'd never seen before. She snarled. I slammed the bar into her face, twisting it into a mess of bone and blood. She quieted and slumped down.

Hannah walked around the edge of the dumpster. I ran past and fiddled with the key code.

"No pressure," she said.

"Quiet."

A click. The door unlocked. We stepped back; I opened it wide, warm air throwing itself all over me. "Hannah, we're--"

Hannah screamed. I spun around to see her on the ground; an infected tore at her clothes, foaming, leaning forward for her neck. "*Austin!*" I kicked the animal in the chest, knocking him down. My foot punched his face in, and I sent the bar into his face, grinding it down through the brain and into the back of the skull. Blood seeped all over the pavement.

Hannah was standing: "Austin! Above!" Two more threw themselves off the roof. Hannah jumped out of the way; her own bar had fallen, and was out of reach, blocked by a hunched zombie.

The other fell on top of me; I twisted to avoid impaling on the bar; the fetid breath washed over me like a fish-barn, claws groped at me; the maniacal, sunken eyes spoke hell and bloodshed. Blood dripped from his jaws. I thrust my hand into his throat and pushed him to the side. He tried to bite my arm. *A bite is a death sentence.* No. No! I kicked him in the groin and he rolled over, against a yellow pole jutting from the earth.

The infected attacked Hannah, knocking her against the wall. She cried out. I yanked the iron bar out of the infected's head and cut it through the air; it bashed against the woman's skull, breaking it wide, sending a spray of blood all over Hannah's face. She swaggered to the side; the body fell; she stumbled over the body, falling on top of it, the warm blood fire on cold skin. Her hands, drenched in blood droplets, sparkled like Arabian incense.

The other jumped after us; I punched it in the face. My knuckles burned and cackled. I groped my hand, dropping the bar. The beast shook its head and screamed. Suddenly figures in the distance stopped, shimmered, turned – and bolted for us. "Hannah! Get the door!" I yelled, throat rasping, trying to hold off the assailant.

Hannah wasn't responding.

The infected came again. I swiped the legs out from under him. He landed on my iron bar.

"Hannah!"

She came out of it, hobbling over to the keypad.

"3-6-9-1-1!"

She punched it in.

The infected was getting to his feet.

The door opened; I ran forward, pushing her in. She sprawled over the floor. I whipped inside and grabbed the door handle, trying to shut it. The infected stuck his purple hands inside; the door wouldn't shut. I bashed the door open and close, breaking the skin and snapping the bones. The infected bashed his head against the glass, leaving bloodied marks. The others would reach, pull – and we'd be doomed.

The alarm began to sound; the door open too long.

Hannah rolled over. "Austin! Shut it! Shut it!"

"He's holding it open!"

"The alarm!"

"He's holding it open, Hannah!"

Hannah got to her feet, pulled something out. I'd lost mine, and forgotten she'd had hers. She rushed forward, slashing at the fingers. She rattled it back and forth; blood gushed all over the door handle and frame. The infected continued to bang his head. Two fingers dropped to my feet. The third's bone grinded, flaking, and suddenly it fell. I was jarred backwards; the door clicked shut.

Hannah stepped away as I dropped to the floor, landing hard on my rear, shaking, muscles pouting. The infected now bashed not only his head, but a fingerless hand against the glass. More infected smashed at the glass, roaring and glaring at us, prizes eluding their tastes.

The bloody knife dangled from her hands.

Saturday, April 24, 2004

12:00 a.m.

Bibles and Daggers
Only child
The stink of death

Everyone wore happy faces. Don't dare walk around with a frown on your face, you'll either be judged super-spiritual or unspiritual. When you're depressed, it doesn't help when someone congratulates you, seeing your down face, saying, "God is blessing you! The Lord be with you!" It makes me sick, it makes my stomach curl. I sit down and I watch them all. There are the older people, those who have seen it all. They walk slowly with canes and walkers, admiring the youthful vitality surrounding them. This is certainly a place for the midlife-crises. Forty-year-olds in every direction, shaking hands and saying, "How are you doing?", then responding with, "God is good!" even though life sucks and their marriage is going down the tubes and their kids hate them and yet they say, "God is good!" It's all religious masks, hypocrisy to the highest mark.

The zombies gawked at us from the window, smearing it with fetal blood. I felt like rolling into a fetal ball and falling asleep. I know Hannah did, but this time she picked me up. I didn't really want to stand, but I did anyways. They were so ugly. I told her so. She said, "Yes, they are." She's still holding onto my hand. I just want her to let go. The only thing I can think is, *How can they be so ugly?*

She sits down next to me. I try not to act startled, though I am. A mix of fear and humiliation and suspicion overcomes me at the same time. I think 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 me. She sits there, and I tense up. Don't let her get too close. She'll turn you into a fish out of water. But she smiles at me and I smile back. The blatant hypocrisy I had vehemently discharged now swarmed over me like a plague. I can see she is feeling awkward so I betray everything I know and say, "How are you doing?"

"How are you doing?" Hannah asked.

"Gosh, they're so ugly. Look at them. They were once *people*."

"They won't break through that glass?" Sounded like a question.

"No. It's plate glass. They won't be able to break it."

"Okay," she answers, and she smiles even broader. Now the disposition erodes to a foreign yet slightly invigorating feeling of attraction. I hate myself. I hate how this happens. I'll think it's gone, but then it comes back, and I'm captive, but the chains are hope, hope that is empty and barren. "We have school tomorrow." Now I know she feels awkward. Who says that? I would've. But then, I am feeling more than awkward now. Hah! How could I ever see us going out? We can't even carry on small talk, much less an important conversation. In that instant I see myself proposing, kneeling down, not knowing what to say, and I see her feeling just as awkward, saying, "No," and I slap the key box shut and all my hope is diminished. I go home, burn incense, smoke a cigarette, get drunk, listen to the female vocals of Straylight Run, and ponder all the gritty misfortunes of this death-deal life.

So I prove my genius by saying, "Yeah. That really sucks." For emphasis, "Sucks."

Anyone have a gun? I want to shoot myself.

They clawed at the handle. For a moment I 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 window, bludgeoning it with poisoned body fluids until all you could see was a slight distortion through the red glaze.

Hannah tugged at my hand. "I don't want to be here."

"We're inside. Better to be at the dumpster?" A pool of water forms at my feet.

"I don't want to be *here*, by the door."

We just look at each other. I'm groping for something to say, anything, but nothing comes to mind. For a moment a light bulb flashes. We both like Italian food! Yet talking about that would do nothing more than reveal my desperation to have even a shallow conversation. She would see my flirting attempts and break away and I'd lose her, making me happy and sad and

distressed and lonely and overjoyed, all at the same time – a whirlwind, a cesspool of human emotions. The moment is growing more awkward as we sit in the lobby, the morning sun filtering through those great doors. She flexes – is she standing? Operation Talk-to-Austin has failed. She abandons. Austin reaches out...

Melanie Prass arrives on the scene, appearing from the river of men and women gushing out the lobby doors! She sparkles in the light, swinging around in blue jeans and a 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. She opens her mouth. The world slows. Takes a breath, awaits the wisdom. “You don’t have to have tan skin to look attractive, Hannah.” My sister appears on the scene, with Amanda at her side. Amanda is grinning and laughing from a joke I will never hear. Melanie says, “Look at all of us. We’re not tan, and we’re the ones with boyfriends!” Her expression of awkward silence fades to one of solemn condemnation.

The last infected moves away from the door; he smeared his own vision of us and forgot. Who was he? A father? A brother? What were his dreams, hopes, aspirations? Become a basketball player, a famous musician, a veterinarian? Was he religious? 24 hours ago was he praying to the Creator of the Universe, now a heap of gnarled flesh and primeval instinct?

She stands and heads away. I shoot Melanie an awful look and tramp after her. “Hannah. Wait.”

Hannah turns. She doesn’t want to talk. How can I surrender now? Black spot on my record. I always act without thinking. Stupid, stupid, stupid... “Hey. Don’t listen to her, okay? She has a worse dating record than anyone. She doesn’t know up from down, boy from girl. She’s a relationship mess.”

“I know, Austin. Why are you telling me this?”

“I can see it in your eyes, you’re hurt. Hurt by what she said.”

She turns and heads down the hallway, past gymnasiums where kids play basketball and run around. Where booths are set up for the women’s ministry, the postmodern ministry, the small group ministry, the youth ministry... We cut around it, loping over the cloth tiers trying to keep people out. Actually, Hannah lopes over it. I almost trip just trying to keep up. We round past several short lockers, walking down the hallway leading to the side door, where parked cars and birds and sunlight awaited, a world of beauty and mystery, spring coming alive, crying tears of grace and mercy.

“Hannah,” I said. “Come on. I’m not hitting on you, okay?”

She spun around. I nearly ran into her. “Why would you even say that?”

“Everyone thinks I have feelings for you. Every time I talk to you or walk with you they think a romantic relationship is blossoming!” I wish. “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 didn’t say anything. “Just don’t let their words cut wounds, okay?”

She turned her eyes and stared through two horizontal windows looking into the sanctuary. It was a gym with several cushioned 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 thrown into a small storage locker. She looked in and watched the busy worker bees scurrying around for the queen bee yelling orders from the stage.

“Austin, just leave me alone.”

We stood before those windows now, but we only looked at our own reflections. Hannah didn’t want me to leave. She clung to me, deeply. I clung to her. All my wildest hopes and dreams, and the gravest of my relational fears, swirled together to the here-and-now. She held my hand and rested her head on my shoulder, and I saw us both just standing there as I looked at the reflection in the mirror, shrouded in darkness from the dark gymnasium on the other side of the glass. She closed her eyes and drew deep. A tear caressed her cheek.

“I want to sleep,” she told me. “Can we find somewhere to sleep? Somewhere safe?”

There were couches at the other end of the YMCA. Brian led the Children’s Ministry there on Sunday mornings, when Southwest Church rented out the building. But it was too far to walk. Who knew what lay there? And yet the alarms had gone off, and no one – nothing – had come.

I was tempted to go looking for the pilot now, but he hadn't come, either. What if he had died? What if he had turned? I didn't want to go gallivanting about, risking life and limb in this impenetrable darkness.

"I have an idea," I told her. "It will be warm, too."

Her own reply stunned me. I remembered, suddenly, when that voice had come before. We were at this very same place, except not for church. Our mothers had gotten together and brought us here to work-out and rummage around on the exercise machines. Ashlie had come, and so had Peyton. I stuck with Hannah, or at least attempted to. We were friends back then, pretty good friends, not like the quiet enemies we've become. We were in Jr. High then, 8th grade, and the popularity fest was on tour. Lots of prep kids from our school were there, lifting weights. Some serious weights, too. Forty, fifty pounds. It was crazy. I was astonished. Hannah was, too, and when I was talking with her, she told me, "Leave me alone." I stepped back, awash in shock. What did she say? She'd looked at me with those cold, crimson eyes: "Go, Austin."

I began to turn. Then she said, "No. Not like that. I meant, don't go rummaging through my life."

"I wasn't trying to."

"I know. But you were. I just don't like that. I want respect, okay?"

"You have it. Believe me, you have it. I just didn't want you to-"

"Do you think you can control my life?"

Les popped in: "Austin, are we going to-"

"Not now, Les," I growled.

He shrugged and dipped away. Chad and Drake passed, yelling, "Go Austin! Go Austin!"

Hannah blushed in a blemish of humiliation and anger.

I said, pulling the ropes, "You don't want to be seen with me, do you?"

"You're just not my kind of person, Austin."

"Does your arm hurt?" I asked her.

"Yes. Maybe if I sleep..."

"That's your fatigue talking. Your wound is slowing you down. I'll find you a place-"

"Stay with me, Austin. Don't leave me alone. Please."

"You're just not my kind of person, Austin. We're really different. Polar differences. Your north, I'm south. You have polar bears, I have penguins."

"What about penguins?"

"Austin. I have friends who know more about my struggles than you, 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 desiring pity?"

"It's not pity. I don't pity you. You have life far better than I-"

"How in the world would you know?" She started walking away, stepping into the bright gymnasium.

I pushed open the door to the gymnasium; the noise was so loud. The quiet roared. The darkness screamed. I drew Hannah inside with me and shut the door behind us. The room was clear; I could tell because there were no venomous shrieks and the sound of running feet. I felt along the wall, wet sneakers squeaking on the ground. I found the large door and pulled it open, bracing myself for anything. Hannah tensed, too. But there was nothing. It was too dark for our eyes to adjust. Hannah gripped my hand and I searched out some space. I found some mats, almost tripped over a pile of basketballs, and finally found the tarps. I pulled Hannah around to them. "Wrap up in these. It will make you warm. Don't leave, either."

"Where are you going?"

"To find medical-"

She pushed off the tarp. "I'm coming."

"No. Don't. Just stay-" I felt like I was talking to the very blackness enclosing me.

"If I fall asleep, I might go comatose."

"Go what?"

"Into a coma."

"Really? Oh. Fine. Okay. Just don't do anything dumb."

She craned her neck around as we stood inside the gymnasium. People were stacking chairs and throwing them into storage, avoiding the pile of basketballs, the gymnastic mats, and several camping tarps from the last youth trip, still stained with dirt and grime and brown grass stalks. She didn't see who she was looking for and turned, brushing past me. I followed her to the drinking fountain. She drank. She stood; I took a drink, saw her leaving, ran to catch up.

She whipped around. "Why the heck are you following me?"

"I thought we were still talking?"

"Stop stalking me."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. I'm not stalking you, okay? Gosh."

She looked at me with those absorbing eyes, those wonderful white cheeks, the placid lips. Her elegant, unspotted church dress clung to her smooth legs. She was the very icon of beauty.

She clutched her arm, blood cupping between fingers. Her own face was drenched with the blood of another human, and her own clothes were muddy and dirty and stank of garbage. We were walking down the hallway when I realized we had been here just days before, standing here, when she told me to my 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 me as possible; now she didn't dare me leave her alone. I had wanted her undying affection; now I had it, and I wished it had never come. Her skin had been spotless, smooth as a panther, sweet-smelling as African lilies. Now she reeked of trash, was stained with dirt and grime, speckled with blood; her hair, then combed and gelled and perfected, lay in a meshed cocktail of water and blood. My own jeans and t-shirt had been a social pariah with mustard stains; now I didn't seem to notice the blood on my clothes. Her hand had held a Bible; now its fingers gripped a bloody dagger.

"Everything has changed," I muttered.

She looked at me in the silence as we peered down that dark 200-foot hallway. "What?"

"It's all changed. It will never be the same again."

"Don't say that. This will end. We'll be—"

I lashed out, grabbing her arm, squeezing tightly. She gasped. I smacked my other hand across her mouth, my own eyes flickering with fear and anger. I pointed down the hallway. It was barren. I removed my hand; she mouthed, *What?*

One of them.

I had been talking, hardly paying attention, when I saw a flicker of motion going off to the left. I prayed it was the pilot. That's why we were here. She tugged at my arm. *Let's go back to the room. Let's wait until morning.* She needed medical attention. Part of me knew walking down that hallway could be entering the gates of Hell on earth – but if I didn't, she would die. She was already losing a lot of blood, becoming easily fatigued, stumbling around. The adrenaline kept her moving. But if she relaxed, and the adrenaline eased, shock would surely set in and she would go comatose. And I would be alone. I wished we'd had that bar.

"Get back by the gym door."

"What are you doing?"

"Trust me."

She broke away and went to the door. I backed up next to the drinking fountain. She opened the door. I raised my hand and *slammed* it against the fountain, over and over. The thunderous noise echoed through the wilderness of manmade machinery, drooling into the weight rooms and locker rooms and rippling the calm waters of the cold pool. All color drained from Hannah. I raised my hand, staring down the hallway, expecting the creature to come running. I was not armed. There was nothing to puncture the head with. What was I thinking? Stupid! Stupid moron!

Nothing.

It was the man.

"Hannah. Stay behind me."

We crept down the hallway, the whole time hearing her whisper: *No, no, no...*

At the end of the hallway, I looked towards the Health and Wellness Center, the door locked and the windows bare. To the right was the lobby, the cushioned seats where Hannah and I had sat a week earlier, where a shallow stunt small talk erupted into a jealous craze of yelling, a hotbed of stagnant emotions. The skylight sent drumming sighs through the building as the

rain sprinkled 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; I couldn't believe we'd been there.

We saw no one.

The pilot had gone left.

I motioned Hannah to keep watch, saying nothing. My feet tapped on the tiles as I walked past several doors, all locked, painted with ivory numbers. 101, 202, 303. 404 – I had taught Sunday School there many a time. So distant, so long ago. Hannah would always sit quiet and forlorn in the back. Now she covered my own back, and my own heart pounded, and now it was a matter of life and death. We used to run up and down this hallway careless and carefree; now each step was one teetering on the edge of a bloody death and a bitter afterlife.

My own reflection stared at me through Health and Wellness Center windows. My own fear, ruby red in the dried crusts of blood, held sunken eyes glaring like portals into another dimension. I froze. Movement to my right. Hannah was shaking all over. I looked at myself in the reflection, and saw my nerves were not behaving any differently.

Movement flared; the creature rushed after me, one arm raised; something sparkled in the arm; I delivered a swathing punch to the woman's face, taking her arm in my hand, twisting the ankle. The creature shrieked; the sparkling object in her hand collapsed, falling to my feet, clattering, metal-on-tile. The figure hit the floor hard, back crackling. I raised my foot to stomp her grizzly face in, seeing the purple and the sunken eyes and the yellow, hollow, vacant eyes, the primal bloodlust.

Hannah hollered out, throwing herself into me. I slammed against the wall, thoughts knocked into a frenzy. I yelled at her, imagining the fiend jumping up and driving her down, beating her and tearing at her flesh, hearing her screams, and killing the brute, I would be left alone in this god-forsaken temple. Hannah threw herself at me, screeching, "Are you crazy! You imbecile!" I didn't know what to do; the creature was standing! I tried to move but she punched me in the gut; I buckled over, gasping and coughing, retching phlegm all over the tile, seeing spots, lungs fighting for just a taste of cold oxygen.

"Austin," she said, but the voice was not hers. "You hurt me! You punched me!"

I rolled over, confused, bewildered, world spinning. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh..."

She knelt down next to me and embraced me as I lay there, her shivering body pressing against mine. I felt her damp hair touching my face and it's the greatest thing I've ever felt. I reached with burning arms and embraced her, hugging her close, and a tear blended with her spoiled hair, and I kissed her so softly on her cheek, then vigorously in her hair. "I didn't know, I didn't know..."

Hannah was grinning. We hugged for I don't know how long. Then Hannah asked, "Where's Les?"

She pulled away, and her color dripped to snow. "He couldn't get out. I tried, but..."

I didn't let her finish. I gripped her as I have never gripped anything or anyone. "I thought you were dead, oh gosh, I thought you were dead, I left you, I left you..."

"It's okay, Austin, it's okay, okay?"

"I left you, I left you..." I couldn't let it stop. "I left you..."

"Austin, it's-"

I spoke into her hair. "Forgive me. Please! Forgive me. I'm so sorry."

"You saved Hannah," she said. "She was hurt. I saw you going away. You were carrying her."

"I left you, though!"

"Because you thought it was a lost cause."

"It wasn't!"

"You didn't know. Austin. I'm fine."

Hannah said, "What happened to Les?"

"They got to him."

"Is he..."

She didn't answer. Hannah turned away, staring at her reflection in the mirror. I clutched Ashlie like she was my only child. In a way, some weird and awkward way, she was.

Finally I allowed Ashlie to pull away. "Is there anyone else here?"

"There was someone." She pointed towards the other end of the building.

"Was it one of them?"

"I just ran. If it was, they didn't see me."

"How many?"

"Just one. He was walking around. Or she was. I don't really know. I just hid."

"We saw you running," I said. "That must be our guy. He didn't chase you. He had to have seen you."

"Then why didn't he come?"

Hannah answered, "He probably thought *you* were one of them."

She swallowed. "That's scary to think about."

"I'll have to check," I said. "Hannah, take Ashlie back to the storage room, just in case."

Hannah nodded. "Okay."

"Ash, don't let her fall asleep."

"Why?"

"Look at her arm." She did and turned away, revolted, stomach turning. "If she falls asleep, she's as good as dead. We need some antiseptic and some bandage to prevent anymore blood loss."

Ashlie tore at her sleeve, and began to wrap Hannah's arm. Hannah said, "Genius."

"Guys, go, okay?"

Ashlie was still doing the bandage as she and Hannah headed back up the hallway.

Taking a breath, I moved through the lobby, quiet and dead, hearing nothing but the raindrops. The bathrooms. The great window looking in at the pool, utterly empty. All those cars, no one was here. I entered the play area. Several glass-walled rooms with mats and couches and blank TVs, pool tables and foosball tables. And then I heard the wind; I followed it to the source; one of the glass windows in the play land was shattered, and the door of play land was wide open. *We're exposed.*

I wanted to run. Wanted to return to those two I had left. But I reasoned, *There's no glass on the inside of the play land. They broke it leaving. All the infected piled out of here.*

Who had Ashlie seen?

A yell shuddered through the complex. I spun around as the shout dissipated, waning in the darkness.

I ran past the bathrooms, towards the lobby – it had sounded like a girl's shout.

It came again. Behind me. I spun, nearly slipping in my wet tennis shoes. The noise was coming from the men's bathroom. I turned and grabbed a chair off the floor, the same chair Hannah had been sitting in last Sunday during that oh-so-awkward few moments.

The bathroom door jerked open as I barreled through, wheeling around the corner and past the lockers. A bloodied woman in a YMCA work shirt was climbing up one of the stalls. I let out a shriek, ran up; she turned her head, hissing at me; a deep bite wound had been delivered into the back of her neck and it bled all down the back of her shirt. I smashed the chair into her back; she released, clumsily falling down. I beat the chair down on top of her; she yelled and hollered, clawing at the chair; she grabbed the legs and held on. I fell backwards into a weight scale.

The woman threw the chair into the wall, pushed by muscles unknown. She launched upwards, hurling her arms at me, knocking me and the scale down. The scale pinned my arm, sending shockwaves of pain rustling through me. She punched me in the face, my jaw bellowing. She raised her arm again, delivered another; I spit out blood. Her head came down; I tried to block it with my hand, wrenching at her curled hair.

The stall door opened; a man came out, and he kicked the woman in the rear, hurling her over me. He grabbed the chair. I pushed the scale off of me. The woman was getting up. The man said something about a girl named Mary, and slammed the chair down on her head. The woman fought it off, but his own muscles growled and he hurled the chair into her face over and over until blood soaked the carpet and her skull shattered. She lay still; I watched from a sitting position, hand wrapped over my mouth. He dropped the chair next to the still corpse.

I removed my hand. Mucus mixed with blood trailed after my palm. I spit out a tooth.

The man offered a hand; I took it, and he helped me up. "Boy am I glad to see you," he said.

He looked familiar, and I placed him. The janitor who worked the night shift! We often saw him during our youth activities, and he would yell at us for ruining his work. He saw me and he laughed. All of that was pointless, funny even.

"How you doing?" I asked, breathing hard. My lungs still hurt from Hannah.

"A lot better than you. She jacked you good."

"I'll be okay. My friend is hurt a lot worse. Is there medical supplies anywhere?"

"Of course. This is a gym."

"Let's take care of that first."

"All right." We moved around the body, for the door. "She's the only one left in the building, I think. Most left through breaking the glass. Drawn to some big explosion, I don't know what that was."

"Really. Interesting."

"I owe you one."

"Pay me back with a plane ride?"

He laughed. I feared it had all been a lie. "Of course. The keys are in my pocket."

He took us over the desk in the lobby, into the back, through some cupboards. "What's her problem?"

"Nasty wound to the arm."

He paused. "Not a bite, is it?"

"No. It was cut by barbed wire."

"How'd that happen?" He found a Red Cross kit.

"It wasn't a walk in the park to get here."

"Weren't you just across the street?"

I laughed. "Yeah. It was."

I led him into the back gym, and we entered the storage room. "It's okay, it's me. Hannah?"

A figure came towards me. "Right here. Who is- I know you."

"You're the girl with the nice voice. I have some gauze here, some antiseptic, some needles and thread... I don't suppose you can do stitches?"

"I never got to medical school," she said.

"We can still bandage you up."

We all sat in the storage room as he poured antiseptic in the wound and began rapping it. Hannah grunted as the cloth rubbed her skin back and forth. The wound was 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 can get stitches later."

"Later?"

"We're going West. The infection hasn't really gotten there yet. Everything is under martial law, sure, 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 a vaccine so that those bitten won't, you know, not stay dead."

"So the West is fine?"

"For the most part. West of the Rocky Mountains things are really looking bright. The east got slammed. Hah. I should've stayed in Montana, I had a job there in automobiles. This is like a walk through Hell."

Medical attention, a place to stay, sleep, vaccines, hope! I looked around. Color was returning to faces. We felt like we were almost home, on the doorstep to Heaven. "What about the rest of the world?"

"There are sects holding out everywhere, I'm sure, but the news is really sketchy. TV programs and radio are mostly 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. Swarmed with the infected. No, it was impossible. "India has no hope. Europe is fighting like we are, especially with a lot of shelter in the mountains where the infected 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 limited as we are. People have discovered this, and so they've been hiding out on islands and such, where the infected won't be able to get because of the water. I hear Alcatraz is now a community resort. South America, no one knows, but Mexico is falling apart as we speak. Canada is doing fine in its northern regions, where there are only a

few isolated settlements, but Quebec is trashed, Montreal is burning. The world is crumbling. But if we can get to the West, things will be fine, I think."

"You have a plane?" Ashlie asked.

"Yes. We get inside it, we take off – we're there."

A fire ignited within me. "Let's go now!" Reasoning had left me empty. I stood.

The janitor frowned. "I don't know if that's really going to work."

"Why not?"

"I've already looked. There are infected everywhere. The roads are trash. 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 they are. It's not so black-and-white. If we just ramped up and left, it'd take an act of God to get us through. We'd be playing God with our lives."

Everyone was silent. The West, so beautiful, an ideal of salvation, out of our reach.

The man said after a while, "What do you think they are? Think it's a virus? Alien invasion? Judgment Day?"

"I don't know," I said, suddenly so mellow.

"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," I said again.

Hannah remarked, "If it is, we're screwed."

"Maybe God is separating the weeds from the wheat."

"My parents are dead," I said. "They loved God like nothing else. 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 cryptic."

Mom: *Get away from me.*

I looked up. "Janitor Shelley? What did you say?"

"Sorry."

"No. What did you say?"

"They look like us, except they're covered in blood and that vacant stare. And they stink of death."

I grinned. "We're flying."

1:00 a.m.

"He doesn't remember."

Primal Instinct

The Airfield

They demanded to know what foreign and god-forsaken 'clever' idea I now had up my sleeve. A grin covered my face. I imagined those beer commercials where the cut-out figures are saying, "Genius! Genius!" at the Miller-lite draft, and that's how I felt, running down the hallway, oblivious to the fact that a zombie might be around any corner. Ironically, that's what I was looking for; one moment avoiding certain death, another moment praying for its grisly encounter.

Janitor Shelley croaked, "What are you doing???"

I spun around, breathless. "Hannah. Give me your knife."

She handed it over. I turned and kept running, knowing they wouldn't leave me. I ran past the lobby, those yawning windows, through the patter of fervent midnight rain, and reached the bathrooms. I looked at the bloody knife. Hannah asked what I was thinking.

"Wait out here," I told her. "With Ashlie. If anything happens, give a shout-out. Shelley, with me."

We entered the quiet, darkened bathrooms. I was used to seeing naked men – what a gross sight! – in towels changing, hearing the patter of kids' feet as they slipped and slid to the pool. Now we rounded the corner and saw instead a woman's corpse, still bleeding, on the floor. I hunkered down next to her, with the knife.

Shelley peered towards the pool corridor, and muttered, "Please tell me what you're doing."

Pointing to the woman, "Did you know her?"

"She was my friend."

"Look away." I drove the knife down into her chest, ripping it downwards, splicing open the innards. A sprocket of blood spit upwards, staining my dirtied clothes. A horrible, gut-wrenching stench shot out of her guts, and I wanted to vomit. Shelley launched backwards, turning, staring at the lockers. I took a breath and set the knife at my knees, and reaching inside, closing my eyes, felt the ribcage, the warm muscles, the gook and ooze of the body, and tore at the flesh until I ripped open a huge cavity exposing muscle and tissue.

Shelley didn't know what to say, so astonished. I said, "Remember when you said that they looked exactly like us, except they were covered with blood, empty stares, and that god-awful stench? We can get to that airfield. We cover ourselves with blood, we look stoned, and we move like they do, and make our way to airfield, climb over – awkwardly, with indefinite precision – and get to the hangars, get in the plane, and fly off. We won't act like their prey." It sounded strange, calling myself and others like me *prey*. "We won't smell like their prey. We will be like them in every way. They're dumb brutes, they won't know the difference."

"No. You'll get infected."

"You only get infected through the bites."

"There's blood in their bites – haven't you seen their mouths?"

I looked at him hard. "Yes. But it's their saliva, I think, because blood alone won't do it. You might die through a placebo effect, but you won't change. No, you have to be bitten, because for some reason, the poison or virus or venom, whatever, travels through the saliva."

"Is that a fact?"

"I hope so. If I'm wrong, we'll know in a little while."

He stirred. "What if they don't fall for it?"

"Then we're dead, and we'll know much sooner."

Hannah's shout: "Austin! Austin, quick!"

I grabbed the knife and we rushed out of the bathroom, rounded to the lobby. Ashlie was turned towards me, crying. I asked her what was wrong, and she didn't answer. Hannah stood in the middle of the lobby. She heard us coming and said, "Look." She pointed at the window.

Les stood behind the glass, staring at her. I moved into his view, and his head jerked, and he glared at me. His flesh was purple, eyes sunken, lips furled back. His chest heaved with each breath, and his neck and face were drenched with blood, still pulsing down onto his shoulders and shirt, steaming in the drizzling rain.

His hollow eyes focused on me, and I said silently, "Does he remember?" I approached the window; Les didn't flinch; but was it Les? I knew it wasn't.

We stared at each other from either side of the glass. His hand reached up. I followed, and pressed my palm against the cold glass. He threw his arm against the glass and shrieked, hurling himself against the window; it shook and rattled and he fell back, did it again, drawing deep lines and welts of blood over the clear surface. He reeled back to do it again, but seeing the mourning expression on my face, seeing he wasn't getting through, he stopped.

A presence behind me. Hannah said, "He doesn't remember."

"No," I said, looking down at my shoes. "No, why would he?"

He assaulted the glass again, but it held. I just watched, not wanting to leave.

"Let's go," Hannah said. "Come on."

I pressed my hand against the glass, felt it shudder with his blows. "Good bye, buddy."

I don't remember walking away. I just remember suddenly standing in the bathroom, the three other souls around me.

None of us really wanted to talk. Shelley explained to the others my idea, and knowing our past histories of being overrun, after some dry debate, we finally agreed. I did it first, cupped blood from the corpse's cavity, splashed it over my body – legs, arms, chest, neck and face. I even cupped some and splashed it on my head, letting it dribble down, a hot shower, a sacrifice.

The rest did the same, 'dressing up' for the show.

Shelley said, "Just don't make sudden movements, unless the rest do. Just copy them, I guess. Don't run, don't talk. Only make noises if they do. Don't stand out *in any way*. Don't cry,

either. They don't cry. The only emotions you should show is blank emotions, or anger. That's all they really do. We'll cross the parking lot, the lawn, climb the fence – careful around the barbed wire – and together we'll slowly make our way towards the airfield hangar's. I'll get the key, we'll get in the plane, taxi out to the emergency runway, and get out of here. All right?"

I closed my eyes, lifting up a silent prayer. *Disguise us. Please. Just this one more thing, okay?*

To play-land we ventured.

We all entered play land through the open door. The iron bolts and casts of plastic tubing contorted together in a maze above us. Rain blew in through the hole in the glass, and bloody footprints led up to the hole, disappearing into the parking lot. I looked at the spiraling tubes above, remembered a day when my greatest concern was how to get to the top fastest, and then stepped out into the rain.

Exposed. That's how I felt as I stumbled past the bushes, through the grass, feet tapping on the sidewalk, clapping in a puddle on the asphalt. Several figures came from the other end of the YMCA, running helter-skelter. My heart flooded. I began walking jagged, erratic, keeping a blank stare. They slowed down and started moving along the sides of the building, pressing at the glass, sniffing, continuing.

Hannah, Ashlie, Shelley followed. For a moment Shelley mingled with the infected moving along the side of the building. They began to sniff him, and sensing disaster, Shelley sniffed them as well. They continued on their way, and Shelley swaggered to join us.

We looked like a motley crew fumbling about between the ghost cars, under the rain, a starless night sky. Hannah's voice, a bare whisper: "*Austin.*" I didn't respond, just glanced back; she was looking back to, seeing Les' decrepit resurrection making its way between the cars, following us. She mouthed at me, *What to do?* I replied, *Follow me.*

Zombies milled about the parking lot, dozens of them. A young child missing half his neck, an older man without hands, one covered in bullet holes and strips of flesh. The yellow eyes flashed over us, tearing into us, without direction, hope, resolution. The souls of a consumerist society, left blind and numb, wondering what to do in a world not governed by money and mathematics. Les didn't stop following us, either. He was actually gaining, trotting along.

An ivory fear: *What if he remembered us inside the YMCA? What if he knows something was up?* Then I reassured myself: *Only short-term memory. Only short-term memory.*

Shelley went past me, reached the ten-foot-tall fence, slick with rain. He started to climb. The other infected turned to watch. I started after him. They kept watching, but resumed their blind wanderings. Hannah and Ash started climbing. Shelley maneuvered around the barbed wire and dropped down, growling as he hit, soaked in muddy water. The barbed wires bit at my clothes, and I careened off the top, sprawling down to make it look like I had no originally human sense of balance. Ashlie and Hannah did the same. Les started to climb.

Hannah mouthed, *He's following us!*

I know!

A shriek blended with thunder. I whipped around, fearing the worst: *impostors disclosed!* But instead I saw two frail human skeletons yapping and snarling at each other. The creatures around them did it, too. One of the women lashed out at each other and tried to bite; the other grabbed her arm and wrenched it to the side; there was a pop and a spray of blood drenching the fiendish onlookers. The other zombie screeched, maybe feeling pain. The other zombies howled and jumped on top of her, ripping her to shreds, feasting on the carrion. *Eating each other.*

They were getting hungry and turning on each other.

They hungered.

Pacino was onto something.

Les didn't join in; he fell over the top and followed us through the muddy field.

Hannah's heart was pounding. Les was right behind her, breathing down her back. We moved past the burning plane wreckage. It had been a Cessna Citation; the engines were aflame, and the structure was crumpled and shattered. The cockpit glass had fractured and bent outwards; the burnt skeleton, bubbling with human fat, grinned at us from the cockpit. *Someone just trying to survive. It could be us here in a few moments.*

Les reached out and touched Hannah. Hannah made a grunting noise. I stopped moving, knelt down, sniffed to look like the twisted demons. The others all walked past. I stood after Les had passed. He hadn't paid heed to me. I followed him closely, felt the warmth of the burning jet against my bloodied and wet clothes. Several rectangular hangars rose up through the rainy mist, and we passed several aircraft out on the tarmac, a refueling truck, an ambulance lying quiet and desolate, and Shelley moved towards the main building, adorned with bold stenciling: *WRIGHT-BROTHERS AIRFIELD*.

He maneuvered us around the side of the building, under blooming spring trees, now hanging with the weight of the rain. There were hardly any vehicles in the lot, mostly just maintenance and management. One of the cars, I assumed, belonged to the corpse in the plane. Shelley stopped beside two large bay windows, a door, the lobby on the other side of the glass. Ash stopped behind him, and so did Hannah. Les ran into her; she shivered.

I stepped backwards, kneeling down next to the rain gutter. Rain splashed over my hand, biting cold. One of the metal plates had fallen off, rusting and jagged due to time. I wrapped its cold flesh under my fingers and stood. Shelley and Ashlie looked past Hannah, past Les, and saw me, 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 breast. He opened his mouth, tongue flaking out, and he moved closer, squeezing her tight, lips moving for her neck. He seemed to be shaking. I launched forward, driven mad, grabbed his hair, pulled it back. He let out a garbled cry as I slid the jagged edge of metal across his throat. Blood sprayed all over Hannah and she swaggered forward; anger drilled through me and I threw him against the glass; the glass shattered, raining down around him; he fell inside, landing on top of a chair, sprawling on the ground. I jumped through the broken window; he screeched at me, but I drove the steaming blade down into his eye, his body thumped for a few moments then lay still, blood squeezing from his eye socket, pouring from the rip across his jugular.

I stood above his riddled body, breathing deep, energy running through me, a spring of life.

The others just stared at me as hatred washed out through my eyes and took physical form in the body at my feet.

Shelley stepped through, glass breaking at his feet. "Are you okay, man?"

"He was going to rape her," I growled.

Hannah gaped at me. Ashlie shivered. Shelley said, "What?"

"His corpse was going to rape her. I had to kill him."

"That's crazy."

"Did you see it?" I turned, staring at them all. "Were you not watching? They're driven by primal instinct, right? What's primal? In psychology class we learned the three things that all animals are driven by, in some way or another: hunger, fear, and lust. We've seen the hunger. We've seen the fear – they group together. And we've seen the lust."

Hannah swallowed hard. The thought of Les' cadaver impregnating her made her want to puke.

"Why Hannah?" Ash asked.

"Why? I don't know. He was attracted to her, I guess."

My sister looked hurt. Somehow I'd known all along. The way he looked at her, I guess.

Shelley felt the persevering tension. "Let's get that key, guys, okay?"

He entered the door leading to the closed-off, glass-plated office desk. A large rack on the wall held almost fifty, sixty keys. He searched for his in the darkness, took it off. 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 that we can take off safely. Someone didn't really look at all the precautions, as we saw." Grim faces. "I also need to refuel. I didn't expect this, and if we're going West, we'll need the fuel."

"So we just fill it up, right?"

"It works on power, on a pump. This isn't a big airfield, so there aren't any emergency generators."

"We have to do it by hand," I muttered.

"Exactly. Kind of like emptying a water bed, except with oil. We siphon it out of the tanks and into my plane."

"How long will that take?"

"Maybe five, ten minutes. We can do it in the hangar, so we're not seen."

"Ash, Hannah, don't swallow the oil. If it doesn't kill you, it'll shred your vocal chords."

Hannah, whose biggest aspiration was to be the next Christian Brittany Spears – ick – hated that.

"They won't have to worry about it. It only takes one person to get it going."

Shelley said, "For right now, here's what we'll do. Austin, you come with me. We'll get into the hangar, open up the fuel lines, gather all 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 for an emergency. I don't know what to expect. All right?"

The girls nodded.

Shelley opened a cabinet on the floor, drew out two radios. He took one, handed the other to the girls. "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," Ash said.

Shelley and I left through a back door, out into the rain. We moved between the shadowy bulks of a news helicopter and several airplanes, even an old World War II vintage P-47. I'd seen it flying over Clearcreek once or twice. I used to be really big into that stuff. Shelley led us to two hangars down, and we entered through a side door. It was completely black, but dry, and all we heard was the roaring of the rain on the metal roof, drumming like a million tropical banjos.

There were several wooden crates everywhere, completely empty, some strewn tools here and there, but the room was otherwise bare, except for the large Cessna Caravan. The three-propped propellers were nearly touching the hangar door, and the four side windows on either side were tinted blue. Streaks of brown and black ran down the side of the aircraft, and we could walk underneath the wings. Shelley walked over to the tail of the aircraft, knelt down, loosed a hatch, swung it open.

"This is the gas line," he said. "We can shove four tubes down there and start pumping."

"Where are the tubes?"

"There's a supplies room in each hangar. I'll get the tubes. Just stay here." He headed for the door.

"Give me the radio," I said.

He tossed it over.

"What about the fuel?"

He pointed to some 100-gallon drums hidden in the shadows. I'd missed them. He saluted and left.

I slid the radio into my pocket and tried to open the Cessna's door. It wouldn't. I tried again. It opened. I lifted myself inside. There were five seats leading to the cockpit, where two seats were surrounded by an endless assortment of readings, dials, buttons, joystick and shifting gear. So confusing. I prayed nothing would happen to Shelley. All the seats were spacious and comfortable, leather interior, vanilla carpet. It was warm, too. I couldn't wait to be three thousand feet above all this. A small storage room rested in the back, stuffed with ten life jackets and parachutes. It was otherwise empty. I 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, just a friend's. Hopefully he could fly. Small panics rippled through me.

Someone entered below. "Shelley?" I hopped down. He had returned with four tubes, and was shoving them into the fuel lines.

"Why didn't you drag the drums over there?"

"You didn't tell me to."

"Well, can you do it?"

I walked over and tried to push the barrels. My bones cracked. "Gosh. It's heavy."

"See those dollies? Push it on top of that. That's how I do it."

That way was much easier. I pushed it over to him; he popped open the lid and shoved the tubes inside, started sucking, and one-by-one, sent gasoline down into the belly of the plane. He spit out a dribble of gas and said, "Go get the girls. It'll be about seven minutes, I'm thinking."

I ran out into the rain, past several dark hangars, hiding myself under the silent aircraft, and entered through the back door of the main building. Silence. "Ashlie?" I called out, voice surprisingly loud. "Hannah?" I moved through the rooms, discovering no one. It was completely empty. "Ashlie? Hannah? Hello!" The radio! I took it out and pressed the red button: "Hannah? Ashlie? Where are you guys?"

Nothing.

"The red button, guys. Press the red button!"

Static, then frantic voices: "We're in the closet! In the back..." Static.

I shook the radio. "I'm losing you!"

"... Les... not... didn't kill..."

I gripped the radio and ran into the lobby. Only a spot of blood lay on the floor where Les had been. I stepped around the overturned chair and stared at the puddle of whisking blood. No... I knelt down, glanced behind me, and picked up a shard of glass. It was slippery in my hands from the rain. The radio raised to my lips: "Where are you? Tell me."

"...Les... He's going to kill... Oh my gosh..." Ashlie's voice.

"Ashlie! Tell me where you are! I'm coming!"

"Closet... in the... God..."

"*Where's the closet?*"

"Back... Storage... Hall..."

I ran down the hallway, saw a room marked *Storage*. I kicked the door open and jumped inside. It was empty. I yelled, "Hannah! Ash!" Silence. I pulled the radio to my lips.

The radio spat: "He's gone! He just left!"

A shriek filled my ears and I was thrown forward; the glass blade twisted in my hand and drove up across my palm, splitting a gash. Blood seeped onto the floor as I thrust my hands forward to avoid breaking my head on the floor. I sagged forward on the carpet, Les' blood dripping down all over me. The dagger was still in his eye; it hadn't pierced his brain, just stunned him. I threw him off against the wall and stood; the glass stuck in my hand. I yanked it out with a sickening sound.

Les turned at the wall, snarling. His other eye, sunken and shriveled, reflected my own mortified face.

I raised the glass before me. "Don't, man. Don't come near me."

He didn't understand. It wasn't Les anymore.

He just stared at me.

"Les. Listen to me. Don't do anything stupid. It's me, Austin." My voice shook.

Les cocked his head to the side. Blood fell to the floor.

"Les. Leave us alone. We need your help." Bordering on insanity. He seemed to relax at the sound of my own voice. "Do you remember your name? Do you remember who you are? Do you remember Chad and Drake and Southwest? Do you remember Hannah? Do you remember Ashlie, your girlfriend? Do you remember me? Your best friend?" Nothing. But he didn't attack. He just... wavered. "Your name is Les. Les, your brother is Chad, we've been trying to—"

Hannah: "Austin!"

Les turned his head, screamed at Hannah in the doorway.

I kicked him in the chest, knocking him down. He grabbed at my legs, reached forward with his mouth.

Ashlie yelped, "Les! Biting! He's biting!"

I knocked his head back with my hand and with the other drove the blade into his other eye. He sagged down. I stomped on his face, drilling glass and knife deeper into his brain, until the tips poked and jabbed from the back of his skull. I stepped back, breathing deep.

Mesmerized, Ashlie wondered, "You were talking to him?"

I shook my head. "No. I wasn't talking to Les. Les is gone."

Hannah said, "We didn't get any food. Once you guys left..."

"All right. Ashlie, look through this storage room for emergency supplies. Hannah, help her. Again, shout if anything happens."

I went into the lobby, where I'd seen a pop and food machine. I broke the glass of the pop machine with a vicious kick, and started grabbing pretzels, cookies, candy bars, chips, holding

them tight. Hannah and Ash returned with a bundle of blankets. I told them to set one of the blankets down and we dumped the wrapped food into it, until we had completely cleared the machine. Hannah wrapped the bundle tight and held it.

"Mr. Shelley is waiting."

We ran outside. Going around the edge of the building, we all stopped and just stared – the Arlington Mall area glowed in the night, a smoldering inferno of flame. The fires reached into the sky, curling and breaking over each other, coughing columns of inky black smoke. Several figures huddled against the fence at the end of the roadway, on Austin Turnpike, by the storage shacks. One by one they let out ghoulish howls and climbed over the fence, dropping. They began to run towards us.

"Crap," I muttered.

Ashlie shouted. "He's leaving!"

We spun around to see the Cessna Caravan rolling down the runway, an array of lights, roaring engine, propellers slicing through the air. Hannah screamed for him to stop. I gripped the blankets I was carrying tight in my hands and sprinted across the muddy field, over the hard cement of the first and second runways. Shelley was taxiing, turning for take-off. The infected hadn't seen us – they'd seen Shelley's plane. Hannah and Ash ran behind me, much slower, but daring not to drop their payloads. Numbing caution overrode all of us.

The Cessna began to pick up speed as it pivoted at the beginning of the emergency runway.

I ran onto the runway, dropped my stuff, raised my hands, shook them back and forth, screaming. The Cessna roared towards me. Hannah and Ash were yelling, too. A chorus of frantic voices, crying out, our Hope vanishing. The Cessna's engines roared in my ears. *If he didn't stop, he's going to run into me, and I'll be killed by the propellers – and the girls will be alone.* Yet I didn't move, just waved my hands and hollered.

The Caravan pitched forward. Smoke screeched from the wheels as the brakes shuddered.

The infected were halfway across the field, sprinting.

The Caravan was rolling at twenty miles an hour. I thrust myself against the fuselage and grabbed the door, ripped it open. Hannah and Ash were right behind me. I lifted myself into the cool interior; Shelley yelled, "Get in! Get in!" from the cockpit. I fell over the floor, twisted amongst the chairs, and reached out, taking Ashlie's hand, pulling her inside. Shelley: "I can't stop her! If we stop, we die! We die!" Hannah couldn't get to the door.

"Hannah! God! Hannah!"

She grabbed at the frame and held on. I grabbed her torn arm. She howled in pain, but I didn't care.

Shelley yelled, "I have to go! I have to go!"

Ashlie was sitting on the floor, staring.

I tugged upwards, pulling with every muscle. Shelley put the plane to full-speed. There was a grinding as the propellers slashed through the infected. Blood and body parts drenched the view screen. Shelley: "I can't see! I can't see!" The wheels left the ground; Hannah's feet dangled; she looked up at me with tears in her eyes. Underneath the plane, the infected swarmed in a circle as we grew higher and higher. They vanished in the darkness. I gave Hannah a final tug and we sprawled inside the fuselage.

All of us felt like we were getting sucked out through the door; the wind was unbearable. I gripped my seat. Hannah yelled; Ashlie slid over the floor, lifted her legs, braced herself against the doorframe from falling out.

Shelley: "The door, Austin! The door!"

I leaned over Hannah and slammed the door shut. Everything in the cabin quieted. The engine mumbled.

Shelley drenched the view screen with wiper fluid, and the blood dissipated. The rain buffeted the plane.

Hannah was breathing hard. "Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

I embraced Ashlie, holding her even tighter than before. The plane climbed higher into the sky.

2:00 a.m.

Memories
An empty shell
Shelley's Story

Ashlie crawled into a seat; Hannah just lay on the floor, trying to catch her breath. I shimmied up to the front, teetering back and forth, and slid into the copilot's seat. Shelley told me not to touch anything. I peered out the window. Through the rain I could see numerous fires, outlining roads and buildings, neighborhoods. The flames illuminated wrecks and burning forests. It was unbelievable. In every direction were fires, glowing like white-on-black in the night. It was so quiet, except for the engine, and I looked on as if I were flying over a war zone.

We flew over the Arlington Mall, and I could see that it was caving in, crumbling, under numerous fiery outbreaks. Chad, Drake and I used to sit outside the side doors, drinking pop and swinging our legs, watching people going in and out, wondering about their stories, wondering what kind of tale their lives were telling. We flew over that same spot; once serene, now it was blackened, charred, overhung by smoke and flames. My heart threw up – there were people down there, and the only way I could see them was because their bodies were on fire, running around, between the cars. I imagined them screaming and burning and writhing, hearing the distant plane's engines. How many infected were down there that I couldn't see because of the darkness? Sometimes the warm glows of a fire illuminated flickering shadows of moving figures. The infection had cleaned that area out.

I turned my head. Shelley said, "Hard to think this could've happened."

I glared at him. "Why the heck did you just up and leave?"

He bit back, "You ran off and disappeared! You were gone for about fifteen minutes!" It hadn't seem that long. "I thought something had happened, and I wasn't going to wait any longer. I sat there in the hangar forever, but you never showed up. I thought the worse."

"Les wasn't dead."

He said nothing, except, "I didn't know. You took the radio."

My face blushed in humiliation. "Sorry."

"Did you think I meant to take off without you? No way. And I couldn't just stop the plane. The infected would be all over us, and we wouldn't be able to turn around and taxi, wouldn't be able to take-off."

"Okay, okay. Look. We're all okay." I handed him the radio. "No excuses?"

He pushed it into his pocket. "You have a deal."

I got up and moved towards the back of the plane. Hannah had pulled herself into a seat and was dazedly looking out one of the windows. "All the fire," she said. "Everything's burning."

I sat down next to Ashlie. She leaned her head on my shoulder. "Are we going to be okay?"

I kissed her forehead. "I think so. He seems like he knows what he's doing. We're going where it's safe. We'll get food, medical attention, some peaceful sleep, finally."

"Do you think it's almost over?"

"Yes. I think so." I have no idea.

I said, without lead-in, "When Les attacked me, I threw him into the wall. Then I started talking to him. And he didn't attack. He just looked at me. He softened up." Hannah and Ash were both looking at me. I continued, "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."

"Are you saying Les tried to rape me?" Hannah coughed.

"What? No. No! 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*?"

"Why would he try to kill us?" Ash countered.

"Maybe the microbe makes them crazy. So you know who you are, you just can't do anything about the lust. Did you ever read the book series *Animorphs*? I don't think it was really that good, but in the book, these aliens invaded you, took over your brain, and controlled your body.

You knew who you were, except you had no control. The aliens – they were called eerks – controlled you. So you were left inside your conscience, screaming and crying and yelling for help, but acting like everyone else. I know these guys don't act like 'everybody else,' but the point is the same: what if they are trapped inside their bodies, controlled by the microbe?"

No one said anything. I just fumed over the idea. "It's like they have memories..."

"Then you killed your best friend," Hannah snapped. "And you killed your sister's boyfriend. And you killed your own father."

My eyes glazed. "Don't talk like that."

"If what you're saying is true, then you *did* kill them all. Killed them in cold blood."

"That's not what I'm saying. They have the memories, but—"

"If they have memories," Hannah growled, "then they're really there. And you took their lives."

"They're dead before they rejuvenate! You've seen it!"

"Then you killed your dad, Austin!"

"No."

"Your dad tried to kill Ashlie!"

"My dad *didn't* try to kill her!"

Shelley roared, "Guys! Enough! Shut up! No one killed anyone! These things aren't people! They are animals! I covered myself in one of my friends' blood, Hannah! But it wasn't her! I covered myself in an *animal's* blood, so the animal's wouldn't sniff me out and kill me. So *what* if they have memories? Really? So what? Just because you have memories doesn't mean they're your own. My grandfather was a navigator for a bomber during the second world war. He used to tell me stories all the time, before he died. I remember them like I was there. But I wasn't. So what if you are familiar to Les, Austin? So what? It isn't Les! It's like recognizing an actor in some movie you can't remember the name to. These are animals. Your best friend died long before I first saw him at the YMCA. Your father died long before... long before any of that happened. They're safe somewhere. Wherever it is, they're not here. Consider them blessed, okay?"

Hannah just looked out the window. Ashlie pulled away from me and leaned back, closing her eyes.

Hannah whispered, "Do you think Rachel is okay?"

I had forgotten. Hannah's best friend – Rachel Graham. They had met each other before Junior High, and rose in friendship all through high school. She and I had been friends once, but things were cut short. She sang for our church, and she was dating one of my best friends – how was *he* doing, I wondered? Him, too, I had forgotten. Her boyfriend Tyler was going into youth ministry in Tennessee at Lee University, and Rachel was headed west to sing with the Young Americans – a world-renown musical group that could get her an easy ride through college. We would always sit at lunch and talk about college, about our futures, when school would end. Such futile and empty conversations now. I would never see Rachel or Tyler again.

Everything I trusted, everything I'd built my life upon, all of that was just an empty shell. Those I'd poured countless hours of friendship into were just memories. Chad and Drake ran down to Kentucky for an Ichthus concert – I could imagine it there. No, actually, I couldn't. My mom had killed herself, I'd killed my dad. The church I loved was a scattered array of corpses running the life-void streets of Ohio. The only people I had left was my sister and Hannah. We were leaving our homes, our jobs, our memories behind us, cut up and burnt, and traveling to what might be salvation – or just another damnation, in another time and another place. Ash asked me if all was going to be okay. I looked out the windows and saw the fire stretching everywhere, through homes and businesses, neighborhoods and urban blocks – and I struggled to say, with all honesty, "Yes, it's going to be okay."

Ashlie began to snore. Hannah didn't want to talk. I got up and rummaged through the blankets we'd thrown in as the plane took off. I took two and put one on Ashlie. She groaned and wrapped her fingers around it. The other I placed on Hannah. She took it and wrapped herself up, but said nothing. I took two more blankets and some Frito's bags and moved to the front. Shelley took one of the Frito's bags and ripped it open, scarfing some down. I dropped into the co-pilot's seat, listened to the engine, leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and munched on the chips. Never before has anything tasted so good.

Shelley played with the controls, placed it on autopilot, and stared out the view screen. Lightning flashed, so close, bathing the cockpit in light. None of us said anything. I hoped we didn't get- Thunder boomed and I almost fell out of the seat. The entire plane shook as rippling air waves rocked through the atmosphere. The plane stopped shuddering and I looked back; the girls were wide-eyed. Shelley said, "Storm turbulence. I've been through it a million times. Nothing to worry. Even if we get struck by lightning, the sheet metal isn't conducive." They decided to trust him. I guess I would, too.

The pilot broke the silence. "Being a janitor is a sucky job. You always have to work nights. Sometimes you get morning shifts, but usually you're cleaning up other people's crap when they're at home sleeping. There's no honor in it, either. Until you see a janitor, it doesn't cross your mind that there is one. 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? You must be a genius." I finished the bag of chips and tossed the wrapper in a little wastebasket.

"I learned to fly when I was seventeen. My father was a pilot, and my father before him. My other grandfather rode in planes, did the navigating for the bombers. We have a family history of being airborne. I just love it. The feel of being so high, so free. It's quite an amazing feeling. When I turned sixteen, my father gave me a card for my birthday, and inside was a picture of a Skyhawk, a small plane. I was ecstatic. I loved riding in planes, and the idea of flying one just excited me. I was the top kid at school. Some kids drove their girls in cars, but I took mine into the sky! It was great. I wasn't exactly a stud, though. Some people thought I was a nerd for being a pilot. Oh well. Stereotyping sucks."

I wondered, *How could a janitor ever be so cool?*

He said, "I was valedictorian at my high school – Centerville, actually. I was going to Harvard and we'd barely scraped up enough money. That's when things got really complicated. My friend and I went into town for some coffee, 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 my friend and I drank our coffees. Not until we were out on the road did I realize how desperate she was for a friend. Next week I returned, invited her to drink coffee with me, and we just started talking, became friends, and things went uphill or downhill, I'm not sure. A month later, she's pregnant, refusing an abortion, and I have to pay for the baby. Harvard's dead. But the girl's not. Now, I may look like the sleazy janitor, but I'm a romantic at heart, and I don't just screw the next girl walking down the sidewalk. I loved her. So I got a janitorial job at the school, made some money, and we raised the kid. I was happy. I might not have been in college, I might have a sucky job, but this girl, gosh, Austin, she was *amazing*! She wasn't just beautiful, she was *spectacular*! Her looks, her personality, her laugh, her smile, it was incredible! She was always waiting for me at the house when I returned from work, even when I worked nights. And the kid grew up. He was so awesome. He was a toddler and he just loved me." He was grinning. "I had a perfect life. Sucky job, but I was willing to have it just for the awesome family I'd gotten. Some people would say I'd been cursed – I thought, *Blessed*."

The Caravan went through a patch of turbulence; I gripped white-knuckled on the chair.

"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. It was really depressing. There was fog, it was night, the lights were dim. I already knew because they weren't home. He told me some drunk had slammed them in an intersection; the car had rolled into a tree and wrapped around it. He asked me if I could find anyone to identify the bodies. I phoned a friend, and they agreed to go. When they returned, I asked if it was them, and he said, 'I couldn't tell.' I just lost it, completely lost it.

"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, not having to support the family and working all the time. It got to the point where the depression just ate me away. I would play Russian roulette with myself. Every time I'd go through two or three rounds, and then I'd give up, refusing to give in. And then I'd drown myself in cigarettes and beer, listen to depressing music, and hear the

rain outside, the mist on the doorstep, and just imagine what it was like when they were here. Imagine my kid's laughter, my wife's touch. Nevermore.

"The YMCA landed me. I met a girl named Mary. Not a girl, she was my age, about forty. We hit it off well. Last night she came over and we ate pizza and listened to music. I kissed her on her way out and I felt sky-high, like my life was coming together."

We rode in silence for what seemed hours.

"I'm covered in her blood."

I pushed the blanket off and stood.

Shelley: "I'm sorry."

"It's not that," I said. "We've all gone through a lot. I just don't know if... if I can stand anymore. I just want to forget it all."

"Maybe you should sleep."

"I think I will."

I crawled into the back of the plane and took one of the leather seats, dragging the blanket along with me. The cabin was cold in the sky, and the lights flickered out as Shelley flipped a switch so we could sleep. I gawked out the window, looked at dark clouds, the lightning, heard the thunder and the rain, the engine massaging me to sleep. We passed over a big city because all I saw was massive burning in every direction, reaching out from the heart of this city, spreading through suburbs and neighborhoods. The vision vanished as Shelley took us higher to avoid the sight.

I fell asleep. I don't remember nodding off. You never do. But I *do* remember my dreams.

In one, my sister and I were inside a house. For some reason we had popped open the window and I had jumped out. Suddenly, off to the right, two eyes peeped out of the bushes and a person rushed the fence, jumping over, running towards me. The window was high up on the wall; Ashlie was screaming for me to get in, and I kept jumping, but I couldn't get to her. The person hit me and I fell over, and I felt warmth and stickiness on my neck, felt a horrible pain, and knew he was biting me, biting through the flesh; I could feel his saliva working through me. The blood gushed from my neck, but I felt peaceful and serene, hearing Ashlie's crying screams, hearing the roaring of the infected, feeling my body slowly die as blood splashed all over me. Even the pain wasn't too bad.

I awoke with a start, startling myself. Outside the window was darkness. It wasn't raining anymore.

I leaned forward, rubbed my eyes. "What time is it, Mr. Shelley?"

He answered, "Only 2:40. You've only been asleep about fifteen minutes."

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere over Indiana, I think. GPS is all messed up." He tapped a dial.

I slid back to sleep, this time dreaming that all of my family was inside our own house. We were watching out my bedroom window as the infected walked around the street. Mom said we should make sure all the doors were locked. Ashlie said there was a party over at Les and Chad's, and if we could make it, we should go. Dad heard a noise. I went downstairs to see an infected hobbling through the door. I wasn't scared – just annoyed. I had locked that door. He went into the kitchen and started eating popcorn.

Ashlie's voice awoke me: "Mr. Shelley, is there a bathroom?"

"No," he answered. "Sorry."

She moaned and rolled over. I had to go to the bathroom, too.

"What time is it?" Hannah asked, awake. Her own voice startled me.

"2:55. Go back to sleep guys."

I looked out the window, glanced over my seat. "How you doing, Hannah?"

She looked at me. There was nothing in her eyes but void. "Fine."

"Your arm?"

She squeezed it. "It just hurts. It doesn't itch."

"We'll get stitches on it here in a little bit, okay?"

"Okay, Austin," she said, exasperated with my parental insights.

"Ashlie?"

She was asleep. I had to sleep, too.

"Wake me when we get there, Shelley."

He was quiet, thinking about his family. Harvard didn't matter anymore.
Sometime between 2:55 and 3:00 I dozed off. Shelley was tapping on the fuel gauge.

3:00 a.m.

Missouri Emergency
Cries & Echoes
The cost of desperation

What woke me, I haven't the slightest clue. I remember leaning forward and staring out the window, seeing a burning ember many miles off, and wondering where we were. I got out of the seat, stood, wobbled about. The girls continued to sleep. In the cockpit, Shelley was nervously looking about, and he kept glancing over at the fiery city. I asked where we were; he said, "Missouri. But we have a little bit of a problem." Tell me, I said. "It might've happened due to carelessness, but probably, when we were taking off – the fuel line is smashed a little bit, and we've been leaking a *lot*. We don't have enough fuel to make it to our destination – San Francisco. We can't even get over the mountains."

"And you're going to tell me you have extra fuel on board."

"I wish."

I rubbed my eyes. "Is it safe?"

"We're safe now. It's when we land that I'm worried about. We're close to the Missouri International. I haven't been able to pick up any radio signals, but there it is." He pointed out the view screen and I picked up shimmering lights in the distance. The lights ringed several buildings, and marked out several airstrips. Two of the airstrip lights were flickering, with burning wrecks smashed over the tarmac.

"There are lights," I said. "So there's power, and that means people."

"Getting ahead of yourself. Lights mean there's at *least* auxiliary power. Big deal. Most airports have them. Look at the wrecks. I can't get anyone on the radio." He sighed as he began to flip some switches; the Caravan leaned forward, splicing through the chilly spring night. "It's abandoned. But we have to refuel. Hold on to something."

"You're landing?"

"Austin. We *have* to refuel."

I got into the co-pilot's seat.

"Are the girls strapped in?"

"Seatbelts? No."

"That would be a good idea."

Nodding, I stood and approached Ashlie. I shook her on the shoulder and with a plastic groan she awoke. "Buckle up," I said. She just looked at me, so I snapped her buckle shut for her. When I went over to Hannah, Hannah said, "I've got it." She'd been listening the whole time, and now, wide awake, gawked at the back of the seat in front of her. I rejoined Shelley in the cockpit; he strapped himself in and I did the same, making sure mine was tight.

"You can land these things, right?"

"Usually I have the Tower to guide me. But we'll see."

"Comforting."

The airport drew closer and closer until we screamed overhead. Most of the building was intact, except for one crumbled wing pitted with flitting fire. Jumbo jets were scattered about the tarmac, and mixed within were several baggage carriers and tankers. Shelley spied a tanker, marked the closest airfield, and soared away, banking. Below us it was just farmland in every direction, dark and empty, almost serene. So quiet. Nothing like Clearcreek. When we flew over the airport, I hadn't even seen any of 'them.'

Shelley slowed the airplane down, rotating around the airfield, and finally began his descent, banking sharp. The gear grinded as it descended; he extended the flaps and the ride became a little bumpy. I pressed myself deeper into the seat. We seemed to be spiraling towards the airport; my stomach lodged in my throat; I could imagine us just crashing into the runway, ending it all right there. My stomach churned in disobedience to that thought. I closed my eyes.

Ash and Hannah were gripping their seats; Ash's head was bowed, praying? Hannah shook her head. The engine whined, screamed. Shelley's face beaded in sweat. We swooped down over the airfield; his fingers frantically danced among the controls and finally the plane flared, bucking a little – the wheels touched, bumped, touched again, and the nose careened forward, the front wheels smashing into the earth. A muffled gasp escaped my lungs. A screeching roar echoed amongst us, reverberating in the cabin, and the feeling of free falling vanished; I felt sick, but happy as the Caravan lurched to a halt.

Shelley released a breath, leaning back, wiping sweaty palms on his pants. "That wasn't so bad."

I just looked at him. *You're insane.*

He got up and went into the back. I unbuckled, stood, felt nauseous, but ignored it. Hannah and Ash were getting up from their seats. Shelley unlocked the door behind the seats and pushed it open. Warm air reached inside the fuselage, wrapping around us. He disappeared. I moved past the girls and dropped to the pavement beside him.

We had come to a rest behind one of the wings of the main building. Lights filled the windows, but inside it was barren, except for walls and seats and cavernous glass windows. Far across the tarmac was an assortment of trucks; against the wing of the building was a jumbo jet with a baggage carrier beneath it; there were bags in the carrier, and some suitcases scattered about the tarmac. It wasn't raining here; a few scattered white clouds caressed the night stars.

Shelley pointed to the trucks: "Our tanker is in there. You guys watch the plane. Don't leave."

"We don't know how to fly," I reminded him. Those bright, empty windows filled me with dread.

"No. Don't leave the *plane*. Got that, Austin? Do you have a radio?"

"Hannah has a radio."

"Don't run off."

"I won't, okay?"

He nodded and ran across the pavement.

Ashlie and Hannah crowded in the doorway above me. I stood under the wing, trying not to feel so exposed. Ashlie said, "Look at the lights." She waved a hand out towards them. "Do you think there are people in there? The lights on?"

"No," I said. "Shelley says it is just emergency lights."

"What does Shelley know?"

Hannah looked at her. "Obviously enough."

"I don't trust him. I never have."

"I trust him," I said.

"Why?" my sister spat. "He tried to abandon us, don't you remember?"

"He thought we'd been bitten."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Pretty much."

"Good excuse. I can't see him owning up to his own cowardice."

"Ash..."

"Why couldn't he have waited longer?"

Pouting, "I don't know. The human psyche can't be measured all the time."

"That's garbage. He's a selfish coward. He'd leave us in a heartbeat."

"No, he won't. He's flying us to safety, and you hate him."

"I don't *hate* him, I don't *trust* him. There's a difference, Aus-" She froze.

I spun around. "What?"

She nodded to the window. "I see people up there. They're waving! Waving at us!"

I snapped around towards the window, but it was empty. "There's no one there."

"They were a moment ago."

I thought I saw something. A movement, a shadow, in the building. A hand waving: *come*.

Hannah breathed, "They need help. Someone in there needs help."

I looked off towards the huddle of vehicles. Shelley was climbing into a tanker and trying to hotwire the engine. *They need help*. It would take him a little while. *Someone in there needs help*. My legs burnt and I was running across the pavement, towards the main building, heart

hammering, muscles pumping. The building looms. Hannah and Ash are left jaw-dropped behind me. Shelley is driving the tanker over to the airplane; he stops it by the fuselage, yells at the girls, then starts yelling after me, cussing and swearing as he shouts, "Stop! Stop!" *Someone in there needs help.* I spin around as I run and yell, "There are people in there! Survivors!" He retorts, "You're crazy! Austin! Stop!"

I kick open a door against the building. Stumbling inside, I blink in the brightness of the lights. A door with a glass window peers into a room stocked full of machinery, belts, and baggage racks. A stairway spiraled its way upwards. I took the stairs, feet clanging loudly on the metal.

Shelley bursts inside, panting, hears me running upwards. "Austin! Come back here *now!*"

I reached the top of the stairs and blew open the door with my shoulder. I stumbled into the bright lights. There are papers all over the place, a knocked over coffee dispenser; the seats before the giant bay windows were empty, with luggage left here and there. A large display of screens read: *ALL FLIGHTS CANCELLED*. The terminal was completely deserted. I looked out the large window, but saw only my dim reflection. Blood splashed the window further down, next to gate C3. I turned, breathing hard, looking around – the other side of the terminal was deserted as well, and the wide corridor was completely empty. A rectangular light dangled from cords, hovering effortlessly midair.

Shelley threw himself inside, grabbed me, shook. "What the heck are you thinking!"

I ripped away. "There are people in here! I saw one!"

"They're infected! This place is empty! Deserted!"

"I saw someone. They *waved* at me. They were calling for *help*, Mr. Shelley!"

"There's no one here!" he screamed. "You're hallucinating!"

"Ashlie saw it, too! Do two people hallucinate?"

He was about to respond, but he heard it, too. I turned and gazed down the corridor, ears perking.

Crying.

"The infected don't cry," I said.

Shelley ran ahead of me. I followed behind him. Our feet thudded loudly, echoing through the cavernous hallway. We jumped over fallen suitcases, passed barren bathrooms. The bookstore door was open, its glass window shattered, a shelf of books knocked everywhere. Tables in the coffee café had been knocked down, chairs strewn; one of the upright tables held three cups of coffee, two upright chairs, and one knocked over and twisted around. No one was behind the counter. We turned the corner and faced frozen escalators stretching down to a lower level. The crying was louder, but not downstairs.

The women's bathroom.

We ran inside. A body lay on the couch, the wrists slit, blood everywhere; it stank of putrid rot. The mirror gathered our reflections. Shelley opened one of the stall doors and backed away; waddled in clothes and a small cloth blanket, placed in a baby carriage, was a newborn baby, just weeks out. I told Shelley to move and picked up the basket. It was light. I rolled away the blanket and saw the baby wheezing, coughing. He – or she – began to wail again.

"Shut it up," Shelley fumed.

"I can't. It's a baby. It doesn't know any better. It's hungry. Or thirsty. How long has it been here?"

"We can't take it."

"You want to leave it?"

"No. We just can't take it."

"Why not? We're going to San Francisco! You say things are better there."

"They are, but–"

"They'll take the baby in California, Mr. Shelley. We'll just carry it for the ride."

"I don't know how in the world to take care of a baby. I imagine you don't, either."

"No... But the girls do."

Shelley looked over at the body on the couch. "You think it's her mother?"

"Or his mother. Yeah. I'm guessing. She slit her wrists in desperation."

"Can we leave now?"

I looked down at the basket. "Yes."

We left the bathroom and the stench of rotting flesh behind us. We began walking back towards the door we came through when I heard some pattering steps down the escalators. Shelley began to tell me, "No," but I handed him the baby and took off down the stopped escalator. He set the baby carriage down and trumped after me. As I hit the bottom, I saw that I was in a gigantic lobby. The glass windows at the front of the building were webbed or shattered, and the massive marble pillars holding up the roof choked me in. The service desks were empty, and the rope lines were knocked down. The baggage retrieval belt was shut off, and some suitcases still littered the machine. I moved among the pillars, looking and listening, hearing nothing but my own footsteps.

Shelley was behind me. I looked down to the right, said, "I heard someone, but there's—"

Shelley stammered: "Oh my... Austin..." He tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned and followed his gaze. A ball rose in my throat. I fell against one of the pillars, weak in the legs. About twenty nooses hung from the rafters, bodies swinging back and forth. They hung silent and still, hovering in the air, mouths open, humming with flies. The flesh on the necks was bitterly purple, bruised and torn; flight attendants, captains, service clerks, a janitor... All employees, taking their lives in desperation. Bloody handprints covered the windows and for a moment it flashed through me: the infected smashing against the windows, the employees staring, knowing it was all ending, knowing there was no escape now; they strung up the nooses in a hurry, defiant — they would not turn into those monsters. They hang themselves just as the infected smash through the glass. Over the roar of the screams and breaking windows the employees twitch and twitter as the lives are choked from their veins. Driven to insanity by desperation.

Shelley took a deep breath. "Can we go *now*, Austin?"

"Yes," I mustered. "Yes, we can go."

Then the sound of running feet echoed off to our right.

"Survivors?" I asked aloud.

Shelley's face paled. "There's too many of—"

More running from the other direction. Between the spaced pillars were flickers of movement. Lots of people. Coming towards us.

"Time to go," I said. Shelley and I took off, running between the marble pillars, ascending the stopped escalators. I looked back to see the infected swarming at the foot of the escalator, snarling and screaming, coming after. Shelley took up the baby carriage and ran hard. We spun around the corner, passed Borders Books and Starbucks Coffee. Movement in the shadows before us, and more infected came from the area we'd entered. Our exit was blocked.

"Not good," Shelley breathed.

"This way!" I ran between aisles of seats in front of a large window and was suddenly enclosed by an accordion of steel. My footfalls echoed like thunder as I ran down the ramp. Shelley was quick on my heels. The baby screamed. The gateway locked against the open door of a 747. I jumped through the door and ran down the aisle way, the empty seats, the soft leather and curtained cloth. Shelley stumbled inside, bumped into the wall, almost dropped the baby. I was looking for steps downwards but didn't find any. Tried to bust the window. It wouldn't. "Shelley! Shut the door!"

He did drop the baby. He ran back and slammed the door shut, locked it tight.

"Are they close?" I panted.

The door shuddered as they hurled themselves against it.

"They're close," he said.

I searched for a stairwell, running to the front of the plane and back. Shelley told me, "They're going to bust through!"

"There's no way out! We're pinned in!"

"Check for the elevator shaft!"

"The what?"

"Elevator- Watch the door!" He brushed past me and ran towards the front of the plane.

I picked up the baby and stood by the door. The zombies smashed and bashed at the door, screaming, trying to get in. We'd been locked in for five minutes when the lock broke. The door flashed open, smashing me in the forehead. I reeled backwards, dropping the carriage; the baby rolled out against a seat. I pressed my legs against the wall and pressed the door

backwards. Grimy, filthy hands reached out, clawing at my clothes. Their breath traveled through the air.

"Shelley!" I screamed. "Shelley!"

One tried to bite me; I smashed my bruised forehead into his own and his head snapped back. I turned; the door opened a bit; I tried to shut it, pressed hard; one of the zombies stepped back and the door smashed on three pairs of arms. The hands dangled, clawing at the air.

"Shelley!"

He appeared. "I found the elevator- What happened to the lock!"

"It broke! What does it look like!"

"I found the shaft!"

"I can't! The door will open! Find something blunt! Or something sharp!"

He began going through the compartments. They were all empty. He ran for the front of the plane. The infected's hands kept trying to get me. How could they not feel pain? Shelley returned with a 9mm Army pistol.

"Where the heck did you get *that*?" I yelled.

"All commercial airliners have guns now, ever since 9/11."

"Shoot them!" I launched off the door. It flew open; several infected popped inside. The gun roared, drowning the baby's wails. Blood splashed against the doorframe as heads exploded. Shelley fired right into the hulk of incoming bodies, nailing them right in the heads; the back of their skulls burst open and sprayed either the doors, walls or each other.

I wrenched the baby up in my arms and ran past Shelley. "Where's the elevator!"

"Screw the elevator!" he said. He ducked away and ran after me. The infected ran through the aisle.

He stopped next to an emergency door, shot the lock, and kicked it open. A rubber emergency exit chute descended, flapping, to the ground. "Go! Austin!" The infected swarmed us; Shelley fired a few more rounds, began to reload. The infected had dropped back a little at the gunshots, but now came again full-strength. He finished reloading, raised the gun, and rolled out the slugs. Blood splattered everywhere as zombies fell to their second deaths.

Holding the baby tight, I jumped into the ramp. That free fall feeling came again and I careened down to the ground. My feet hit the pavement and I flipped over, landing on my back, the baby safe in my arms. I swaggered up, saw flashes of light in the Jumbo jet, and then Shelley leapt down onto the ramp, falling fast. He got to his feet; the infected stood inside the doorway, not understanding what to do. One of them stepped out and fell to the pavement, breaking her bones. She screeched, crawling towards us.

"The girls refueled!" Shelley yelled.

We raced towards the plane. The doors of the building flashed open and infected rushed the airfield.

Ashlie and Hannah helped us into the quiet of the plane. I handed the baby to Ashlie. Hannah looked out, saw the zombies; Ashlie yelled, "Shut the door!" Hannah slammed it tight and locked it. Ashlie held the crying baby against her chest.

Shelley: "Did you guys refuel like I said???"

"Yes! Yes!"

He jumped into the pilot's chair and started the engine. The fuel gauge shifted to full. He grinned. Outside the view screen the infected were rushing towards the plane, hundreds of them, all travelers who lost their hand of cards. The infection entered the airport through a plane landing because of civil disturbance, and it quickly infiltrated through the traveling societies. Now those innocent victims charged towards the plane as the engine groaned and the wheels began to roll; he turned us around, working hard with the controls so we could just take off the way we came. Tricky.

Ashlie gripped the baby. "Where did you find it?"

"It's mom killed herself," I said. "Left the baby alone."

Shelley roared, "Buckle up!"

Ashlie sat in a seat with the baby and locked the belt. Hannah did likewise. I slid into the co-pilot's seat and strapped myself in. Shelley fumed, "Don't ever run off again."

"We saved a life."

"We don't know that yet."

The infected threw themselves against the gear of the plane, against the fuselage. The propellers spun, slicing the air. The infected jumped on top of the plane, beating at the windows. Ashlie screamed as a fist came through the window by her seat; it reached out, grabbed her hair. Hannah unbuckled and jumped up. A face came through the window, snapping at Ash; Hannah drove a fist into the face, knocking it back.

Shelley: "Cover the window! Cover the window!"

Hannah grabbed a seat cushion and pressed it against the window. "Will that work???"

"We'll see," Shelley mumbled, thrusting the plane into full power.

The engine cackled; the propellers spun faster. An infected climbed onto the view screen. Shelley swore. "If he breaks that, we're dead!" I just fell deeper into my seat. The plane gained speed. Most of the infected slid off the smooth surface, tumbling over the pavement, getting up, chasing.

Some infected ran across the field and into the path of the Caravan. The propellers cut through them, slicing them to pieces; bloodied body parts and buckets of body fluid covered the nose and view screen. The infected on the nose raised a fist to smash in the window. Shelley wrenched back on the yoke and we careened into the air, against all gravity, the engines breaking all physics laws. The infected vanished off the side of the window, drawing bloody prints on the window; he disappeared below, smashing into the fields. Shelley flashed the view screen with wiper fluid and we saw the stars again as the Caravan, freshly fueled, carried its way back into safety.

The plane leveled out, the airport vanishing behind us. I gasped for air, not realizing I hadn't been breathing. Shelley reached over, grabbed me by the collar, hissed, "Listen to me: I am not going to lose my own life because of your stupid antics. When I tell you to stay, *stay!* Next time this happens, don't think I'm going to chase you." He released and I pulled away from him. Anger scoured his eyes. I didn't want to sit in the cockpit anymore, so I moved back into the cabin and sat next to Ashlie and Hannah.

"The window's holding up," Hannah said to me.

Ashlie: "Now do you believe me?"

I said nothing, just moved to another seat and looked out the window. I closed my eyes, and somehow, over the cries of the newborn, drifted off into nightmares and dreamscapes.

4:00 a.m.

Sing to me...
It's better, now that it's done
Ruin of the sacred

The house rose out of the mist, the mist that had fallen and wrapped the earth in a tender sleep only hours before. The headlights barely cut through the fog, and the windshield danced with droplets of moisture; the wipers sang back and forth. I pulled into the driveway, looking into one of the large windows, people moving inside. Chad sat beside me, and Drake behind me. Les was coming with his mom. The car came to a stop and I just sat there, looking at the window, wanting to leave. I felt like I was at the awning of Hell, and stepping through was a choice – Chad and Drake opened their doors and I followed suit, half mad at myself for caving in so easily.

"You're going to have to do it, Austin," Chad said. "It's the New Year! It's time for change!"

"A time for renewal," Drake chimed.

Chad added, "Here's your New Year's resolution: stop being a coward."

"I'm not a coward," I grumbled. "I'm realistic."

The front door loomed so close.

"You are a coward," Drake said, patting a hand on my shoulder.

Another car pulled in as Chad knocked on the front door.

"Why can't I make my own resolutions? Is there something wrong with that?"

"All yours are dumb. Read a book. Lose weight. Lose weight? You've lost seventy-five pounds. You're skinny enough."

I touched a soft patch of gut. "Okay, man. For all I know, everyone just says that and laughs behind my back."

Drake laughed. "No, man."

The door opened. Rachel stood there, Tyler behind her. "Hey boys!"

We all said hello and entered. She shut the door. Tyler touched her arm. They were all over each other.

"Kind of sickening, isn't it?" Chad said.

Drake shot him a look. "You and Ellie made out in front of your grandma."

I shook my head and went into the kitchen.

The plane creaked. I awoke. "Shelley?"

"Turbulence. We're passing through a storm cell. We're somewhere over Idaho."

The moment I shut my eyes, the dream – the memories – returned.

Plates of food sat everywhere. There were Fritos with chocolate, star cookies with strawberry cream, two servings of spicy meatballs, chili and chili dip, corn chips and brownies. A dozen two-liters clung to the counter. Melanie and Amanda were pouring their drinks. I grabbed a cup and reached for the Mountain Dew, looking around for her. Part of me rejoiced – is she not here? – and another part crumbled. If you've experienced it, it is an odd feeling. A sort of excitement; your mind races through all the possible conclusions, especially elaborating on the successes. She disses me, says no, we just become friends – or we're holding hands, kissing, watching movies together. As I stood there with the cup in my hands I smiled: standing outside in a thunderstorm, feeling the rain, just sitting together, and just enjoying the rapture of the moment under the eaves of thunder.

"Austin," Amanda says. "Hello?"

"What?"

"I've said your name like a thousand times."

"Oh. Hah! Sorry. I just dazed off."

Melanie said hi and drifted off.

Amanda watches her go, grabs me by my shirt, and tugs me into a far-fetched corner. "So are you going to ask her?" she demanded, gazing into my eyes.

"What? Ask who?" I pretended.

"Dang it, Austin. You're such a wimp."

"I don't know-"

"Wimp, wimp, wimp, wimp-"

"How many people know?"

"Are you going to ask her?"

"Who the heck told you? I've only told three people!"

"Your sister told me."

I slapped myself in the face. "But I didn't tell her! You'd think secrets would stay secrets in church!"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't tell..."

"Quiet, you tell Hank everything. Is he coming?"

"No. He's at a party in Arlington. Are you going to ask her?"

"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 me up. I rolled my head over to the side. Ashlie was cradling the baby, hopping the boy or girl on her knee. The baby was wailing. I looked over to Shelley – he just kept a stoic glare out into the night. Hannah slept soundlessly. Ashlie looked at me and smiled. I smiled back and rolled over. We'd be safe soon. I knew it.

The hallways were dressed in pictures, photographs, of everyone in Rachel's family, especially her little sister, only six years old. I searched a few rooms, found the one that had to be Rachel's, and pushed it open. It was dark, the shadows culminating in the corners. They swept away at the light from the hallway, and my eyes flew over a bed, a dresser, make-up set,

one of those nets with stuffed animals in the far corner. I entered and then I saw Hannah sitting in a chair, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She was crying. Bad time? Part of me readied to leave, but another part flooded with compassion and love, and I entered the room.

She felt my presence: "Who is it?"

"It's me," I said.

"I'm okay," she said. "Really, I am."

I sat down beside the chair, looked at my own reflection. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She looked at me with a blood-red eye. "Do I look like I want to talk about it?"

Raising my hands in submission, I stood. "Sorry. I'll get out of your way. Just wanted to help."

"You'll help when you leave and shut the door. I just want to be alone."

I walked towards the door.

Her voice: "My cousin's really sick. They don't know what it is. They think it is 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 a chair, crying, because all that life, love and happiness can be ripped from my family before the ball even drops. Have you ever thought of that, Austin? Life is so tragic. It's so futile. It's so... easily taken. One misstep, one bad decision, and you're gone. Someone slips, and you're gone. You can't control it. I could get hit on my way to work in the morning, and I'd be gone. What's the point of goals? What's the point of setting New Year's 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.

"There are moments when I know it ends, moments when I realize the world doesn't revolve around us. And still we're keeping it, keeping going, hoping the day will get better. No one's listening, Austin – no one, really, cares. We're just insignificant, surrounded by maybe a dozen or two people who would really be effected by our deaths. The world won't end if we're gone. In fact, it may be better. Less mouths to feed.

"So I keep a tight grip like a child on a swing set. Waiting and hoping to find what I can't figure out yet. Please don't try to convince me this is something new, another nightmare instead of a dream, better left alone."

She stood and walked over to me, grabbed my hand, and stared into my eyes. My heart was beating. "Sing me something soft, sad and delicate, or loud and out-of-key, sing me anything. We're glad for what we've got, done with what we've lost, our whole lives laid out, right in front of us. Sing like you think no one's listening."

She touched me, rubbed my hand, and leaned forward, eyes closing, darkness wrapping us in its tender embrace. Our lips touched, she pulled close to me, wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me like she'd die to let go. Her body against mine was pleasure, and her own lips massaging mine, her soft tongue entering my mouth, our tongues entwining in a dance of epic grace, she breathed hard and panted, so shy yet so brave, and she moved her lips, groaning. I returned it, with both hands on the soft skin of her face. She shook.

She pulled away, looking at me with those dove eyes, and left the room.

She would always deny it ever happened.

Shelley banked the plane; my head bumped against the cold window and I awoke. My fingers felt like ice. Getting up, I scrounged around for one of the blankets and sat back down, wrapping myself up. I turned in my seat, drawn by memories, and saw her sleeping. *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 a hollow shell as you make it out to be? Ashamed of all your preppy friends discovering that you are something different – something genuine, something wonderful, someone worth spending a life with?*

At that moment I didn't care about what was going on. I didn't care about the Hell unfolding all around me. I just cared about her – and me. I just cared about our memories, those memories that I hold onto even now, so sacred and wonderful, the memories I use to slip back into a time when there was no bloodshed, no terror, no screams. Every part of me thirsted to get up, to sit beside her, to whisper in her ear, "You don't need to pretend anymore. Things are different. The games are over."

I wanted to return to that dream. Return to that kiss, so passionate and full, so real, to feel her shivering in my embrace, forgetting the wilds and cares of the world. I eagerly gripped the

blanket and closed my eyes, a refugee from the world of reality, running from nightmares in hope for a dream, escaping the Alcatraz of the present for the shore of the past.

"My cousin is sick." She was sitting in the chair, staring out the window. "He died last night. They don't know what it was. Rabies from a dog bite, they think."

I tried to touch her arm. She pulled away. This wasn't the memory. Cheated.

"I wasn't really close to him. But it bothers me because... because they lost his body." She looked down at me where I sat beside the chair. "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. Gosh. It's eating me away, driving me crazy. How can that-"

The glass windows before her shattered, two hands reaching in, a bloodied face screeching. Glass rained down all over me and I fell backwards. The hands grabbed Hannah. She screamed as the arms wrenched her towards the little boy's mouth. She reached for me, but I didn't move, was too petrified. Blood gushed all over the wall, all over the boy's face, as he bit into her jugular. She screamed and kicked and cried as her neck was shredded by his teeth.

He let go and she fell backwards in the chair, flying into the dresser. She rolled on the floor, cupping hands over her throat, blood seeping through, a waterfall. The boy at the window smashed at the glass, trying to enter. I crawled over to Hannah, yelling. She writhed back and forth, kicking her legs, blinking her eyes, moving her mouth like a fish out of water. "Hannah! Hannah!" Her eyes glazed and she lay still.

The boy smashed at the window.

Hannah's eyes opened. She looked at me, except they were... different. "Hannah?"

She snarled, her voice torn and jagged by the throat wound, and she scrambled up towards me. I reeled backwards and ran out of the room, yelling. Blood was all over the walls, in the food of the kitchen, and everyone had mottled purple flesh, sunken eyes, furled lips. They screeched and ran after me. Melanie, Amanda, Drake, Chad, Rachel and Tyler, rushing me with a bloodlust. I turned and stumbled into Hannah. She knocked me down and jumped on top of me. I tried to stand but the others jumped on top, too. My arms split in pain as they were ripped from the sockets; my stomach was torn open, the innards wrenched out, eaten by my friends. My eyes rolled into the back of my head and all I felt was that pain, like a million daggers churning in my guts, and I heard those screams, and-

Hannah shook my awake. I wheeled around, gasping.

Hesitant, she asked, "Are you okay?"

I took several deep breaths. "Yes. Yes, of course."

"You were shaking in your seat and you were making crying noises."

"Was I?" Her eyes were filled with life. I just wanted to hold her and cry. "Thank you."

She nodded and lay back in her seat.

Shelley announced, "Look at that, guys!"

We all scrambled to the cockpit, Ash holding the baby. We had already passed over the Rocky Mountains and were descending to a city full of lights. Lights. A city, breathing and alive. My heart cackled with joy.

The radio rumbled: "This is San Francisco International Airport, 52CDB4E. Your aircraft has been spotted on our radar. Please tell us your situation immediately."

Another voice! It was wonderful!

Shelley grabbed the radio. "San Francisco, it's great to hear your voice! We are flying from Clearcreek, after a small delay at Missouri International."

"Missouri International is out of service."

"We know," he said. "But we're all okay."

"How many passengers?"

"It's me and three teenagers. And a baby."

"A baby? We have planes flying all over, but since you have an infant, you've got first priority."

Shelley gave me a thumbs-up. I grinned.

San Francisco: "Descend to Emergency Runway Seven. You will be assisted upon landing."

"Buckle up, guys," Shelley said. "It's over. We're going to eat and sleep good the rest of the night!"

If we would've known, I imagine we'd have stayed in the air.

5:00 a.m.

No restitution
"I hate you."
Morning

Army and National Guard trucks littered the sides of the runway; the Caravan came to a stop and we popped open the door. Shelley went out first; the moment he dropped to the ground, he was approached by a soldier wearing a steel black M16. Behind him were several more soldiers, huddled together. A plane rumbled overhead, landing further down the strip.

The soldier told Shelley, "Up against the plane, sir. Please cooperate."

Shelley beamed, "Of course," and stood against the Caravan's fuselage. Hannah dropped out, then Ashlie with the baby, and I was the last one out. The inside of the plane was stark cold, but here it was warm. Palm trees lined the edges of the main building, glowing in the night. Trucks rumbled past, bearing several people, tired and worn, some bloodied and beaten. The soldier took the baby from Ash and handed it to another soldier, who took it to the truck and lay it in the back, and proceeded to undress it. The soldier had us line up and said, "Tell me what happened. Everything."

We told him our story, from Clearcreek High School to 25 Rosebud Avenue, the trek to the grocery store, then the stop at the police station, the overrun hideout at 430 Wellington Way, the experiences at the farmhouse, the escape from the business complex, our dumpster story from the Coffman Family YMCA, and finally our take-off and deluge at Missouri International. Shelley spoke of how he'd gone in for work; how one of his co-workers had been bitten, was feeling sick, and really agitated, saying, "I saw some woman walking around, she looked dazed, and she had gotten in a car wreck, so I got out of my car and tried to help her, and she bit me!" He got really sick and Mary attended to him, then he turned and Mary was fatally bitten, turned, and it spread through the employees readying for an average day of work; Shelley had been the only survivor.

"Has any of you been bit?"

Shelley shook his head. "No. If we would've been bit, we'd be turned."

"That depends on the severity of the bite and its proximity to major arteries."

"We know, we know," I interjected. "We saw the News. Before it went to the emergency broadcasting system."

"Clearcreek fell fast. Most of Ohio did. In less than three hours. Populated places were wiped out fast. 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, and that's just here in San Francisco. 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 soldier said. "We think so."

One of the soldiers near the truck shouted, "The baby's clear!" and began to dress the infant.

The soldier nodded, yelled over his shoulder, "Daniel! Grays! Vince!" The three soldiers ran over and stood beside him. The first soldier – the Captain or what-not of the band – said, "All right. We need you guys to strip completely down. Just undress. Please hurry so we can get your plane off the runway."

Scattered glances between us.

He explained, "We're checking to make sure no one is infected. We have to halt the spread of infection."

Shelley rolled off, "I told you, none of us are bitten."

"We need to make sure. Please undress." He lowered the weapon.

Shelley looked at us all. "Okay, guys. Let's do what he says. I can understand what he's saying. We'll be happy if they're doing it for everyone else." He began to take off his shirt.

I took off my own shirt and started on my pants, feeling more than embarrassed. Did we have to strip all the way down? Hannah was undressing, but I didn't even care. Ashlie was slowly taking off her shirt. I looked at the plane that had flown over us to land. About fifteen soldiers were facing about four people; they raised their weapons; the people were crying, broken – the guns fired. The people dropped down, backs of their skulls bursting open and spraying the cement. Shivers ran through me.

We all stood naked, exposed. I felt so humiliated. The soldiers came forward and turned us around, inspecting every nook and cranny of our bodies. My own face burned, and I saw that Hannah was trying to cower into a corner, but the soldier inspecting her kept pulling her back. Ashlie lowered her head, staring at her feet. The soldier looking over Hannah unwrapped the bandage on her arm; the cut had gone yellow, issuing puss; flakes of dried skin and gunk littered the ragged flesh and torn muscle. She gasped in pain as he inspected it.

The soldier inspecting me said, "Clear! Lots of cuts and bruises, nothing bad – no bites."

Shelley got the same report.

Hannah's soldier said, "She's clear, too, but 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. "Captain?"

He abandoned Shelley and walked over. They whispered together. The captain closed his eyes and turned. "We need you three to step back, please."

"Step back?" I asked. "For what?" *The people being shot.* "No, tell–"

"Step back," the soldier said again. He turned Ashlie around and pointed to her shoulder blade; there was a small bite, already beginning to swell and grow purple at the edges. Ashlie began to cry.

"No, no, look, let's treat it, maybe if we put some antiseptic or ointment or something on it, maybe–"

"There are no known cures," the soldier said. "Did you watch the news? A bite is a death sentence."

"It's so small!"

"It's already infecting. *Step back.*"

"That's my sister!" I yelled, stepping forward.

The soldier guarding me pointed his gun at me, growled, "Don't."

I shoved him away and ran forward. He struck out with the butt of his gun. Spots danced before my eyes and I fell onto the pavement, head cracking and searing with pain. The soldier pointed the dangerous end of the assault rifle at me. I raised my hands, sobbed, "Please. She's all I have left. Please."

Hannah shivered in the cold. I felt awkward lying naked, exposed, but Ashlie was going to–

The soldier grabbed my hands and dragged me across the pavement. Dirt and pebbles tore into my back. I kicked and hollered; Ashlie looked at me, pleading for help. I kicked at the earth, got a hand free, reached for the assault rifle. More soldiers ran forward, beating me down; I crawled on the ground, tried to get up, but was delivered a kick in the small of my back. Shelley and Hannah were driven back by the soldiers.

Ashlie was pressed against the fuselage. The soldier pointed his M16.

"No! No! Please! Shoot me! Shoot me instead!"

The soldier didn't hear me. Ashlie looked past the gun, right at me, the soldiers kicking me down.

Curses and swear words spew from my mouth, raining down condemnation and damnation on the soldier as he aimed the gun at Ashlie's face. I cried out to God, cried for his deliverance, cried that he would make it all better, intervene with his angels, anything! But there was just the wind, the rumble of trucks. Ashlie cocked her head to the side, looked up to heaven. God!

A single gunshot; the back of her head splattered all over the fuselage. Her body teetered and fell to the pavement. The soldier lowered the M16.

"Murderer!" I screamed. "Murderer! She was all I had left you dirty %#\$*! You %*\$&ing a\$\$!"

The soldier said, "Take them away. Get the girl to the ward. Get them beds and hot food."

I was ripped to my feet. The smell of death lingered in my nose. "She was all I had left! You killed my only #*\$&ing family! I hope you get bitten and die you rotten @#^\$!" I couldn't say

anymore, just cried and sobbed as the soldiers threw me into the back of an Army pickup truck with wooden rails. Hannah and Shelley crawled in next to me. I cowered in the corner. The soldiers got inside. I whispered more curse words under my breath as the truck left the Caravan behind and an Army pilot began to taxi it to an unnamed hangar.

Hannah held me in the darkness, hung head over me, and I shook all over. This was worse than Ashlie being bitten, then Ashlie being killed by one of them. Being killed by an animal was a lot better than being shot by a cocky soldier. I looked at that soldier with the most hate, the most vehemence, the most thirst for revenge I'd ever experienced. I considered just taking one of those guns and shooting him, shooting him so many times until his body was just tattered rags and flesh and bone in a bath of blood.

The soldiers tossed us our clothes, "Get dressed."

We dressed in the truck as it rolled to a stop beside a building with a Red Cross logo on the awning. The soldiers pushed us inside. The waiting room was filled with men, women and children. Most were cut, bruised, and bloodied. A lot were crying. Had they lost friends and family members due to the 'safety measures' too? No one connected eyes. We were all survivors, but we were all disconnected. We all had stories, we all had experiences – sleep would bring us all nothing but nightmares. No one wanted to talk. No one wanted to reach out. You were alone? Big deal. So was everyone else.

The soldier *murderer* took Hannah up to the desk, said, "We have an urgent one. Risk of infection."

The receptionist said, "We're stocked full right now..."

"Just take her. It's just antiseptic, stitches, gauze. It won't take but ten minutes. I want to get these people some food and sleep." Fake Samaritan. Trying to look good? Your 'beloved conscious' won't save you from your murderous acts. There is no restitution.

The receptionist nodded and allowed the soldier to take her into a backroom.

Shelley and I sat on the floor. There were no seats. Shelley didn't say anything.

I looked up at the ceiling, at the swirling fans that groaned and creaked. I heard the aches of those around me, those with sulfurous memories, those with another life, shattered and torn dreams and hopes. The fan rocked back and forth. *Why do you refuse to help? How come, no matter how much I cry, no matter how much I plea, no matter the passions and energy, you just watch on and do nothing? Do you get some sort of perverse pleasure out of watching me suffer? Is my barely scraping through in life entertainment for you? Is that why I exist? So you can watch me, throw me bad luck and misfortune and tragedy, and just laugh as the world burns to Hell? Your so-called Bible says you really care – well, I'm seeing lots of your care around here! Yeah, you sure do love everyone! You sure did love my sister whom you let get shot in front of my face! You sure do love my mom and dad who dedicated their lives to you! You don't care. I don't believe that anymore. You may say you care, just to get our obedience, but do you really care? No! You're sitting in a box seat and clapping as we go through troubles and problems and pain! You think our lives are grand stories of Macbeth or Hamlet! Life is a roll of the dice – you don't have any good and lovely plans. That's suck a crock. You lay out rules for us to follow, then watch as we stumble around. All I wanted was a simple life. A small home, a simple job, a wife who loves me, a family to call my own. I didn't dream of anything big or spectacular. I didn't want to change the world. But you can't even give that to me, you've taken all of it away from me, tore it from my hands! And you ask me to follow you? Why do you think I would ever follow you? Let me tell you something now. I hope you're listening, because I want you to hear this forever, even after I'm dead: I hate you. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.*

The soldier returned. He approached me and Shelley. "She's getting the stitches. Once she's done, you will be taken to the refugee camp, and then you'll be redistributed. The whole city is in a state of Marshall law; no one is allowed on the streets, everyone has to remain where they were the moment the martial law was established, be it home or work or school. We have several families offering to take in refugees for a warm bed and some food. We will be redistributing you three together, but that might take a few hours. You'll just have to lay low."

Shelley nodded. "Okay."

I was silent.

The soldier looked down at me. "What's your name?"

I didn't answer.

"Come with me." He went outside.

I didn't want to go, but I went. My anger drove me. We went outside the doors and stood against the building. I leaned against a palm tree and we watched the airplanes landing, the trucks moving back and forth, distant cackling gunshots. The soldier lit a cigarette and began smoking. He offered me one. I refused. He took several drags, then 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 on to the National Guard for college funds. They called me up right after my pre-spring graduation. My family lived here so I was stationed here. I don't blame you for hating me. I hate myself."

He took another smoke. "Before the planes started coming in, Marshall law was established and we were forced to go house-to-house, building-to-building. Anyone bitten was to be put down immediately. There were a few cases of the pandemic here, but we ousted it quickly. It is a miracle, I know. 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 face. "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, then proceeded to put down the principal and nurse. We then had all the kids locked in their classrooms, and did full-body searches. Only two others were 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 other peoples' lives, to take other peoples' friends and families, when I wasn't brave enough to do the same no matter the circumstance. I remember my little brother just looking at me, and I shot him between the eyes. I've never felt so cruel, so evil, so... hated by God."

A truck rolled around the side of the building. Several soldiers sat in the bed, gripping their rifles and sweating in body dress uniforms. The soldier *not so murderer* jumped on as it passed, not even looking back, and crawled into the bed of the truck. It joined several others as it drove into the darkness. I went back inside.

Shelley looked up, said nothing. I didn't brief him. I felt bad for yelling slander and curses at the soldier. I wasn't special. I wasn't an exclusive case. I looked about the waiting room. No one talked. They were either silent or crying. Silent because they knew it was over, and couldn't get the past 24 hours – had it already been 24 hours? Yes, it had – out of their heads. Crying because, on arrival with a hope of another world, their friends and loved ones had been cut down to 'halt the spread of infection', a technical phrase that meant killing the unlucky.

There was a gunshot inside the medical ward, an echoing scream. I hung my head.

Hannah came from the doors she'd entered through. Her arm looked the same, except with new gauze. Soldiers flanked her. She pointed to us and the soldiers said, "Come with us, please. We'll get you some food and a nice bed."

He led us out a back door. Before us, in the middle of the courtyard of San Francisco International Airport, were hundreds of large tents, each sporting dozens of beds. There was another tent holding a soup kitchen with a huge line. Most people, though, had already eaten, we're hungry, or just sat together under the tents. The soldier said to find us some beds, to get some food. One bowl and one piece of bread per person. He vanished back inside the building.

Over the rims of the tents, the sun began to rise, spreading rippling light between the towering skyscrapers and pushing away a night that would forever be remembered as one the world won't ever forget. Unbeknownst to my eyes, several trucks ladled with soldiers were speeding towards the inland suburbs. Unbeknownst to anyone, this newly discovered paradise was simply the harbinger of Hell.

Omega: The Last Twelve Hours

Saturday, April 24, 2004

"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to now be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother..."

-- Luke 12:49-53

6:00 a.m.

The Suburbs
Redemption is in the blood
The playground

A Jewish family sat in a circle, holding hands, praying over the Holy Torah. Children, orphaned, sat in faraway corners, crying. A baby, left alone, sobbed and screamed over the ruckus of moving around, eating, more crying. People sat in silence, staring into space, oblivious, drowned in their thoughts and worries. Some held pictures of family, hands shaking, and would drop their heads into their hands, tears running down the arms. Some who ate just threw it up. Others held bowls of soup in their hands, staring at their muddy reflections, suddenly not hungry anymore. Some went up for seconds. Several had knelt down and were praying, passionately, crying and sobbing, yelling. Hundreds upon hundreds of people, tightly packed, shoulder-to-shoulder.

Shelley said, "I'm getting something to eat. Do you guys want me to get you some soup?"

Hannah said yes. I shook my head no. Shelley walked off. I said, "Let's find a place to sit. Reserve a cot for Shelley." The place was flooding. More and more people kept being landed inside, and only every now and then a truck would show up to ferry people to new locations. Soldiers patrolled the rooftops. The rumble of trucks echoed beyond the buildings. The sun was coming up, peeking its frosted eye, and the palm trees quivered in a westerly breeze. The smell of salt lingered in the air.

We pushed our way through the unfamiliar faces, the scattered accents. A woman came up to us, grabbed us, cried, "Have you seen my baby?" We just looked at her, dazzled, and she continued on to another person, and another. Someone sat on a cot, slowly cutting himself with his fingernails, muttering incantations under his breath. No one tried to stop him. Nothing was odd anymore.

Hannah spied a trio of cots, and we took two of them, just watching the people, saying nothing. Ashlie was gone.

A man sat down beside us. He was about eighty years old, and wore ragged clothes. Blood speckled the pant legs. He said, "Where you kids from?"

I looked at him, not wanting to talk. Hannah answered, "Ohio."

"Ohio. That fell fast."

She nodded. "Yes it did."

"What was it like?"

I closed my eyes. This man was pressing.

Hannah shook her head. "I don't really want to talk about it. Is that okay?"

"No one wants to talk about it. But it's times like these we need to talk."

"I know. I just don't really want to talk. I'm tired."

"Are you hungry?"

"Our friend is getting food," I interjected. "You're sitting on his cot. Could you please move?"

He didn't budge. "Don't get comfortable."

"We're on the list, yes, I know."

"The list? The list for relocation? That's not what I'm talking about. Tell me, what was it like in Ohio? Where did you live? In a city? The country? Suburbia? All fell, you know. All were overrun. Overrun. We talk about it like it's a war. I guess it is, though, isn't it? If you listen hard enough, over all the sounds of the people, you can hear it. Distant gunshots and explosions. The Army is everywhere, soldiers on the streets, in the buildings. But guess what? I've been here six hours, through the night. I watched from the rooftops. Flashes of light in the distant, balls of flickering fire, silent because they were so far away. They aren't silent anymore. These people, whatever they are, they don't fear. They don't get scared. I tried a little experiment a few hours ago with a sniper rifle. I lit up one of them, right in the heart, center mass. Nothing. Shot in lungs, gave him a full clip, shot off his legs, nothing! But I shot him in the head and he turns into a wet bag of crap. So I started shooting them all in the head, didn't work. Every time you nail one, two popped up in its place! It's like that hobbit dragon thing, where you cut off one head and two grow back - an exercise in fertility. That's how these things work. You can't just shoot them all. There's so many of them! We don't have enough firepower! And they seek us. They seek living flesh, more victims. They're coming *here*, right to San Francisco. Don't get cocky. They have no plan, creatures of instinct. Eat our food, wear our clothes, use our stuff; we're just the holdouts. Holdouts. The world is the freaking Alamo - it'll fall. It's just a matter of time."

"San Francisco is-"

"Secure? Hah! So was Salt Lake City! That's where I came from. National Guard said they had everything under control. Now it's a ghost town, run full of these creatures. The holdouts are vanishing. San Francisco will fall, 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. Shell-shocked, terrified, mortified. Fewer return than go in. So don't get comfortable. That's all I'm saying. Because they'll get here - and we'll be fish in a barrel. So eat up. Energize! You'll have to run again. Don't want to faint."

He stood, giving us friendly nods, and slipped away.

Hannah looked at me as if wondering, *Is he right?* I didn't answer.

Shelley returned with some soup. "I tried some. It sucks. Potato and cheese, or something."

I spooned some into my mouth, taking it in, savoring the somewhat stale taste.

Hannah splashed some on the grass at her feet. "It tastes like soapy dish water."

"Better eat, kiddo," I said. "Don't get comfortable."

Shelley swallowed. "What? Are we being relocated soon?"

"Something like that," I mumbled.

Hannah: "The man's crazy."

"The man?"

"Some guy came by, saying that we're fish in a barrel for the infected."

"The Army is keeping them away, right?"

"Right," Hannah said, but it was almost a question.

Sporadic gunfire in the distance. I set the bowl underneath the cot and said, "I have to check this out. Anyone care to join me?"

"Where to?" Shelley asked.

"The rooftop. Trying to see what this guy is talking about."

"Sounds good. It's so crowded here. I don't like crowds. An introverted guy, I think."

We abandoned the cots and sifted through the crowd, discovered a rickety stairwell leading to the roof. A soldier guarded it. I approached him. "Can we go up there?"

"For what?"

"It's stuffy down here," I said. Pointing to Hannah, "She's nauseous. The cramped conditions are murdering her, wearing her down psychologically."

"Never heard of that before."

"Never heard of claustrophobia?"

Hannah panted, "I just want some... openness."

The man shrugged. "I guess. Don't go anywhere, though. It's not safe."
It's not safe.

"Don't worry. We've had enough... excitement."

He allowed us to pass and we climbed onto the roof. The man we'd met was already there, and part of me wanted to go back down the steps. But the man saw us and waved us over. From the roof we could see across the airfields, the airports landing, taxiing, the trucks ferrying people back and forth, the bloodied and thankfully sparse executions. Beyond barbed-wire fencing were the suburbs. Smoke rose in columns, blood red in the morning sun, and between houses, some burning, there were flashes of movement, running, soldiers, trucks, gunfire. Much of the distance was clouded in faint smoke.

"It's moved several miles," the man said. He pointed off to the right. A side-road revealed Army trucks driving towards the dense suburbs. "The neighborhoods stretch for miles, all the way to the mountains. Millions of homes, millions of alleys and backyards and streets. Each infected finds new ways to come towards us. They can smell us. Every now and then one slips past the defenses. I saw one or two reach the fences this morning, but soldiers shot them in the head and they fell into the grass."

Helicopters flew overhead. Dozens of them. Blackhawks with soldiers hanging out the open doors, gripping M16s; the soldiers on the miniguns opened up on the streets below, blazing between the houses. Huey gunships rocketed over us, the front ends lighting up like fireworks, drenching streets and homes and backyards in molten lead. We sat on the roof for about ten minutes, just watching it all, seeing what we could. It was mayhem. We could barely see it, but from all the constant gunfire, the distant yells and screams, the explosions – things weren't going well. A turn in my stomach – maybe the man wasn't so crazy. Or he could be senile.

A car wreck serves as a barricade. Soldiers lean on the smoldering ruins, firing clips, throwing grenades. The infected fall like flies, but more appear from the courtyards and alleyways. The captain yells, "Retreat!" but it's too late – the infected crawl over the wreckage and assault the soldiers. A soldier is hit by bursts of gunfire, crippled, falls, is beaten and ripped apart by the monsters. Those trying to run are cut off and overtaken, bitten, screaming, as they are clawed up and eaten alive. The survivors jump into a truck and drive away, the infected clinging to the sides.

A Huey gunship roars over a main street, blazing the lanes between the cars. Infected thrust about, torn and riddled by bullets, dismembered and gut-ridden. Blood gushes onto the cement. Unless hit in the head, they do not die – and so they pick themselves up and continue, crawl along the earth with missing limbs. Closer and closer.

A truck crashes into another car; the engine is damaged. Those within are trapped on all sides by the infected. The infected crawl onto the roof. Soldiers in the back fire into the infected crowds, dropping piles at the back of the truck. They run out of ammunition and the infected scramble inside; the truck shakes as the soldiers are eaten alive. The driver's-side window is shattered and a head lurches inside, biting a chunk out of his arm; he leans to the side, screaming, and with a 9mm blasts away the skull of the biter. Blood gushes all over the leather seats; his world grows faint and quiet. He shoots lazily out the window, and his world goes black. The gun sinks from his grip. He falls over in the seat. Blood continues to gush as his eyes open, he leans forward, and he shrieks.

A Humvee is pinned on all sides; the .50 caliber roars, the gunner swinging around in the turret, spraying everything that comes close. The gunners alongside the Humvee scream for a medivac. Someone is bitten. They are refused the order. They shoot the fellow soldier in the head, try again. The Blackhawk flies low, hovers, releases rope. They begin to climb. The .50 caliber gunner goes first, and the infected charge, realizing the gunfire has ended. They

assault the Humvee, and begin to climb the ropes. The Blackhawk pilot begins to lift away with soldiers still climbing; one of the soldiers is bitten in the leg, his calf ripped to shreds. He loses strength and falls. The other soldier is almost there as the infected reach him; his friend turns his head, prays for forgiveness, and releases the rope latch. The soldier screams as he and the zombie fall through the air; his body smashes in a car, shearing metal and breaking the windshield. The zombie, beaten and bloodied, stands again.

A Blackhawk roars overhead, releasing tons of napalm. The fire stretches down a main road, igniting trees and grass, fences and buildings. An entire section of neighborhood crackles and tears in the flames. The infected twist about, burning alive, slowly burnt to a crisp, brains fried. They writhe about in the fire and slowly stop. Inside a home, a hiding mother and two babies burn alive as the house is engulfed in fire.

"Can you hear it?" the man asked. "It's getting louder."

Infected appeared from the woods beside the airport, dozens of them. They ran up against the barbed wire and began to climb. A truck roared from beside the building, the soldiers loading guns. The infected dropped onto the airfield and began to spread out. Another truck sped towards the invasion. Gunfire lacerated the airfield, lead spitting in every direction. The infected fell. Any security was a sham as hundreds of infected appeared from the trees, rushing the fence, and climbing in mass. The soldiers in the truck shot into the fence; infected landed on the other side and rushed the truck, climbing all over it; the truck took a wild turn and collapsed, soldiers spilling from the rear. They used their rifles to butt the infected but were overcome. They stood, bloody and bitten, ignoring their rifles, blending in.

The man snarled, "I hate being right."

The... animals... swarmed the airfields. Those disbanding the airplanes were rushed into trucks and the trucks sped towards the main buildings.

The man said, "There could be bitten in those trucks. See how they didn't check? It's all working out like it did in Salt Lake. The infected in the trucks blend with the crowds, get sick, die... and they rise again, and the virus or bacteria, or whatever, it spreads, and more people die – and they get up again. So this thing, this airborne virus, toxic plague, bioterrorism, space-borne microorganism, whatever it is... It reaches through the city. More people die. More people rise. Ratios change. It's not like real war. You lose one to the enemy, the enemy doesn't gain one. Here, each one you lose, is one they gain. Add up the numbers, and it doesn't work."

The infected were coming towards the buildings. Hannah was leaning forward. Shelley looked about.

"What are we doing here, then?" Shelley lurched.

"Waiting for death," the man said. "What else is there to do?"

Hannah swallowed. "Run? Again?"

"I'm tired of running," the man said. "I'm just going to stay here."

"And die?"

"I won't be dead. *Deadish*."

The infected reached the airfield closest to us.

I turned and ran across the roof. Hannah followed. Shelley grabbed the man by the shoulder: "Come with us."

"No 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 bullcrap. 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 kind of way. I am... jealous of them."

"You're crazy."

"Who're the zombies? 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 are the zombies. Is this religious? Scientific? Are we to believe in God more?"

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."

The infected attacked a group of refugees outside the doors, beating them down and spilling blood.

Baptism.

Shelley reeled away and ran to join us. The infected rounded the edge of the building and overcame the gate guards. The guards fired away but fell under the beatings and the savage snarls. The infected ran through the refugee camp. Men and women and children screamed, pressed tight, shoulder-to-shoulder. The food distributors fled as the infected smashed through the tables, knocked over the soup and bread, the drinks. People fell under the infected, only to stand again and lashed out. The Jews praying didn't move; the infected beat the prayer and assaulted the others. The only exit, too small for the multitudes, bulged at the edges as people flooded into the building. Innocents were trampled under the panic and screams. I looked down from the rooftop and saw all of this. Tents were shredded, torn down, trapping people underneath, only to be crushed underfoot. The soldier at the foot of the steps fired blindly into the crowd; and infected crawled all over him, and another monster joined. They rushed the staircase to the roof, snarling at us.

The man raised his arms. "Thank God!"

The infected turned, saw him sitting cross-legged, raising his hands towards Heaven. He yelled at us, "Run, fools! Run!" We bolted.

Hannah looked back and later told me that he screamed, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit!" as the infected ripped into him, biting him in the neck. He screamed joyous rapture as blood ran down his cheeks and nose, his eyes, and as he died he clapped his hands and praised, "Redemption is in the blood!"

As we climbed a ladder to the roof of another building and entered through a door, I looked behind me and saw the man stand, swivel, arms drooping, looking back and forth. He spied us and ran towards us. We shut the door and locked it tight, suspended in the darkness of a utility corridor.

The door reverberated with bangs and hisses.

Salvation.

Shelley pushed us forward in the darkness, blindly running his hand over the walls. We passed grunting machinery. Shouts and screams and gunshots echoed in the back of our minds. He found a door at the end of the corridor and shoved it open. Administrative offices with fogged windows lined the wall.

A door opened and a man exited. He saw us standing in the hallway and asked, "What's happening?"

Remembering the words of the man, I said, "It's the Alamo."

"Overrun?"

"Just like the other cities."

"How is that possible? The Army..."

"Failed," Hannah said. "Is there any quick way out of here?"

"Only through the lobby! That's the only exit!"

Shelley breathed, "We'd better hurry. Show us the way?"

The man paused. "No. No, I'm staying here."

"What? It's being overrun, you can't-"

He opened the door wide. His wife and children huddled inside. He said, "We're just going to... stay together."

Shelley nodded. "Okay. God's blessings go with you."

"And with you," the man said. He shut the door.

I knocked on the door. He opened it. I asked, "Which way?"

"Left," he said. "You'll come to an intersection, go right, first left is the stairs. Hurry. I can hear them."

He shut the door and we bolted. We followed his direction and reached the stairwell. Below was a door. Shelley busted it open and we stepped out onto a landing. Below us were the baggage claims, the service desks. It wasn't quiet and empty like Missouri. People were everywhere, flooding out the lobby doors, screaming and crying, holding onto family. Soldiers

entered through the lobby, shouted orders. They were pushing people out the doors. Soldiers opened fire on the glass windows, shattering them, so people could escape faster. People fell under the panic and were trampled.

Shelley discovered the stairs down. "Guys!" We raced down to another level, turned, took a stairwell down to behind the service desk. We blended into the crowd, holding tight to each other, lost in a sea of strangers bound for an unknown destination. The shouts and screams of the infected, guttural and inhuman, rang through the cavernous lobby. I looked back to see them coming down the moving escalators, torn and ragged, jumping on the stragglers. A bloodied man rushed past us, gripping his arm. He'd been bitten bad. A soldier spotted him, wrenched him to the side, and delivered a shot to his head. The man's brains splattered over the soldier's boot. He dropped him and yelled, "Out! Out! Out!"

The crowd pulsed forward, barely moving. Everyone tripped over everyone.

I stepped on something mushy, looked down, and saw a little child's hand, bruised dark purple. Her head and limbs had been smashed into the marble.

A mother wailed. *Where is my child?*

Pushed on by the crowd, left her forever. An infected came up behind us; Shelley punched him away. More were on all our sides. People fell, shrieking. "Stay together!" Shelley yelled. "Stay together!" I felt like a sardine, squashed on all sides, and slowly those around us were becoming infected, dying, and reanimating. The numbers of survivors dribbled. Infected lashed out after us.

We stepped over some muddied couches and crept through a shattered window, landing on the sidewalk.

Infected were pouring from the sides of the airport, racing into the street. People were being thrown down and ravaged by groups of once-humans. We clambered over parked cars, nearly got hit by a few speeding ones, and reached the other side of the road. The infected came from the front entrance, flooding the airport, rushing the street. They climbed over cars, ran between the cars, into the street. Cars smashed their horns and blasted through the oncoming zombies. A car slammed on its brakes, thinking the zombies were innocents, and the zombies attacked the car. One jumped on the hood, raised his fist, and smashed it through in a spray of blood. His hand was drenched with glass and he ripped his palms tearing glass from the windshield. He reached inside, grabbing the driver, pulling her up against the straps; she screamed and beat at his face, the windows, but he bit into her face, ripping off her cheek. Blood danced on the steering wheel.

Infected spotted us and came.

Shelley opened a shoe store door and ran inside. The shoe clerk yelled, "Get out! Get out! You'll bring them in here!" We ran past aisles of Adidas, Nike, Pacific Sunwear sandals and Everlast. The owner jumped in front of Shelley, yelling in a British accent, "Leave! Leave!" and Shelley drilled one into his face. The owner flopped into a shelf of shoes and it all tumbled down, him landing sprawled. Shelley jumped over the counter and ran into the backroom. Hannah and I followed; the door opened and infected ran inside. The owner tried to stand but the infected grabbed him, shredding him to pieces as he screamed; his blood mingled with the strewn shoes.

Shelley opened an *Emergency Exit* door and we stepped into an alleyway.

The sounds of carnage sounded distant now. A dumpster surrounded by flies was thrust against the graffiti-marked walls, but it was lightweight. Shelley grabbed it and began to push it on the wheels. We got behind and shoved it against the back door of the shoe store. The infected came through the backroom and tried to get us; we could hear their yelling and hammering on the dull green steel.

The alley led to a street. Parked cars were everywhere, a few moving this way and that. An Army truck rumbled past. We hid in the shadows, fearing they would shoot us in thick anxiety. We ran across the street. The streets to the left and right opened like corks, spilling the infected. People were running from the swarms.

Before us lay a wide park, riddled with a playground, picnic area, artificial pond, several trees, a mark of posterity in a consumerist world. Straddling the treetops was a beautiful skyline of skyscrapers, the tinted windows glaring in the rising morning sun. Helicopters soared overhead,

blazing through the streets falling to the blending enemy. Doors of buildings were locked, people cowering in fear, praying into the morning.

The city was falling.

The man – as insane as he was – hadn't been wrong.

The green dumpster shifted and the infected began to crawl over it. We ran across the street and onto a concrete path winding between the trees. Birds sang sad in the treetops, fluttering to and fro, hardly disturbed by the frantic mess of a fallen humanity. Our breaths stuck in our throats, our legs burned with exhaustion. Behind us the infected continued the chase, running through the alley, onto the street – and were slammed by a busload of soldiers, their heads bashing against the steel grill, giving off sprays of acrid blood. Salvation.

"Do you know the way?" I panted. The path split in several directions.

Shelley kept running. "Away. Away."

The path passed over a gurgling brook. So peaceful. I imagined lovers sitting on the banks, kissing and feeling each other.

We passed a playground. Swings, teeter-totter, slide. A little girl lay crying on the floor as her infected mother ripped into her, yanking off her arms and sending rivers of blood spreading through the wood-chips. She looked up at us as we ran, red cloth and tattered flesh in her lips; the little girl's hair, stained with sweat, grime, dirt and blood, fell over her face as the pupils shriveled to nothing and her quivering lips went still. The woman stared at us, kept chewing, looked down at her once daughter, lifted organs from her chest, and ate. Hannah ran, bent over, puked all over the concrete.

"Stop!" I yelled at Shelley. I grabbed Hannah's hand.

Shelley: "Are you crazy! We can't stop now!"

"She's sick!"

"So are they!" He pointed to infected coming across the stream.

Hannah started running. I ran after her.

We exited the park, reaching a street. We crossed the street, barren. Police and National Guard had set up barricades between the park and the parallel streets. The infected climbed over the barricades, swatting the soldiers and policemen down. The officers of the law assaulted each other, and the soldiers fell to the ground, dropping their guns, gripping at wounds as their bodies were torn into. Infected rounded the edge of the park and came after us. The infected behind us were coming on fast.

A car was driving past us. Shelley jumped on its back. Hannah and I chased and we jumped on, too. The infected burst from the park entrance, chasing after the Sedan; we clung for our dear lives. The driver didn't even care. Hannah closed her eyes, pressed her face against the cold back window. I said, "Don't give out now. Don't even think about it."

7:00 a.m.

Rivers of blood
Rain or snow
Children of the Corn

Smashing glass, rolling thunder. Bodies being crushed under their own weight, propelled by the menace of gravity. Jumping, muscles propelling, unknowing, diving, whirling, breaking apart over the cement. The skyscrapers are harbingers of the damned – dazed, confused, suicidal, prophets of the Last Days – leaping to their dooms from the tallest rooftops, falling on sidewalks, landing on cars, breaking glass and shattering bones, baths of blood and twisted human frames.

Ghosts out of hell. Leaping, jumping, crawling. The cars are overcome, artificial trenches flooded. Pressed against the walls, locked doors, barred windows, turning, howling, crying. Pain. Agony. Ripping flesh. Biting. Exhaustion. Giving up. Serenity. This is the End. Eyes rolling, lolling, yellow and bitter. Shouts, cries,

all the same, never-ending, you're not spiritual, you're them, the time is coming, dawning, appearing, the horizon is blood red, not with the sun, but with the blood. The streets are Sodom and Gomorrah. Stragglers ripped down, torn, appalled, granted matrimony for the beings of Hell, bats out of the dark caves, the earth opens its dead – and the dead walk.

Beasts of iron and steel collide. Steam gushes from the organs. The ears open and they exit, heads bruised from the collision. They stumble about, looking this way and that, see them coming, know not what to do; pressed against the car, feeling the weight, the rancid breath, all is fair, love and war – but war is Hell.

The windows burst apart, raining glass into the sprinters. The marathon runners fall, cut up and bloodied, moaning. The fire burns them alive. They spin and whirl about, wondering, *Why, why, why?* Feeling pain. Seeing nothing but fire. Loved ones fall, burnt, smoldering, flesh melting, bubbling, popping. Odors like nothing else. Roar of locusts. Cement chipping, breaking apart. This is the End. The great haven has collapsed. God's wrath has been declared. No one can stop it – the breath of condemnation is cold in the whirlwind of fire. Baptism.

The car swerved onto a side-road. Infected reached up at us, grabbing at our pant legs as the car weaved through the innocent and infected. We held on for everything, every fiber of our being. To fall off was damnation. Great balls of riveting fire rose behind the airfield – tanker trucks and airplanes lit apart by the carnage.

A van jetted from a branching road, smashing the Sedan; the metal beneath us shook and twisted; the car fishtailed, the sides wrapping around the front of the bent van; we were thrown through the air, landing hard on the cement. Infected ran after us.

A truck came from an alley, moving fast, turned – bearing down on us. The driver slammed his brakes; the wheels locked; he twisted the wheel to avoid hitting us and the back end flew out; the wheels left the earth and the truck tumbled, crushing three infected underneath. The truck lay on its side, smoldering. The driver released his seat belt, reached for the door; an infected broke the windshield, reaching inside; a comrade joined him and they grabbed at the driver, bloody hands wiping all over his clothes. He screamed for help, but the infected pressed against him, biting his scalp, scalping him with their teeth.

Hannah got up, took my hand. I could see the man's hands pressing against the fogged windows as blood sprayed all over the place. Hannah yelled, "Austin! Don't!" I got up. Shelley gripped his arm, bruising dark blue. He said nothing and we dragged ourselves down the street as infected rounded the truck, glancing back and forth, spying those who were hurt worse, those who were slow, and taking them down. Doors on the stores were locked, emptied. Down a side street the situation was nothing better – fire gutted several buildings; infected writhed, aflame, smoldering, shrieking like banshees from the pits of Hades.

There was nowhere to go. Infected surrounded us, assaulting everyone and anything. Shelley fended off an infected, punching him in the face; when he fell, he stomped in the forehead hard, sending skull fragments into the brain. The legs and arms kicked. The infected moved in groups, attacking people left and right. Men, women, child – no one exempt, no one with an excuse. Old and young – both met the same fate: flesh opened, gutted like a poisoned fish, screaming and shrieking as arms were torn off and chunks of flesh removed in vicious bites. The deceased, no matter how wounded or emblazoned with death, would wobble to their feet, look around, spy a satisfaction for crooked hunger, and act on it.

A father turns his head, bursts into tears. His two five-year-old twin boys struggle beneath him, drowning in the bathtub. He prays the Lord's prayer as he does it. They come to a stop; he removes his hands. Their faces are bloated, purple, eyes wide. He stands, dizzy. The bathroom door splinters apart; hands reach after him, a voice shrieks. He raises the knife, lets it shine in the moonlight, swears at the beast in the window, says goodbye to his wife, and slits his throat.

Blood sprays the glass and he watches himself, dizzy, and collapses against the door. The hands tear at his hair.

A church. The stained glass shimmers with the heat of the killing. The priest crosses himself, walks out through the huddled congregation. The doors rattle and shake. Snarls emit from the darkness. The confessions box is empty. The glass windows shudder. The priest passes out a communion tray; a bit of bread, some juice. They quietly eat the bread. Glass shatters to pieces; hands reached inside, arms tearing against the jagged glass. Yellow eyes, mottled skin, sunken eyes, furled lips fill the broken gaps, drooling with vile saliva and blood. Jaws stained red with victims now risen. The congregation crosses themselves, pray to Mary, and drink the communion juice. Immediately they begin to twitch, cry out. The glasses drop, breaking on the floor. They pitch forward, lean back, spit up, convulse. One by one they drop to the floor, kicking and howling, bodies riddled with pain. One by one they silence and lay still, sprawled with faces drenched in sterile agony. The priest stands underneath the statue of Jesus on the cross, drinks his fill, kneels down. The glass windows break and the infected rush inside; they spot him, the only one remaining, and rush him. His muscles begin to tremor but he doesn't experience the pain. He sees Jesus, and feels the teeth on his neck.

A teenager fills the gun with bullets, sluggishly. Cocaine and cigarettes and beer and rolled pot lie everywhere. The room is bathed in the smoke of drugs and incense and mushroom candles. Six shells. Six people. One by one they take the gun, pull the trigger. The furniture behind them drips with body fluid and skull shells. Their bodies pitch back. The next person takes the gun from stiff hands, rolls the clip, presses it into their throat, closes their eyes, and pull the trigger.

The earth is spread beneath her. She feels the ground beneath her, then nothing. A pit wells inside her. She falls, free-style, letting the wind catch her, flying. Spread beneath is fire, running, hollering, a bloodbath. It grows closer. She thinks this is nice. So much better. Infected look up at her as she falls on top of them. She feels the impact tear through her; she is shifting, each movement breaking organs and bones, and she sees sky, hits her head, and then nothing.

They lie in bed, hearing the nightmare unfolding. He holds her hand, and his other arm is on her arm. A small bite is bleeding. He doesn't care. He kisses her lips. She smiles back at him, so faintly. He doesn't care. She will die, and he will join her. They were one in sex, one in marriage – they shall be one in death. Her skin is beginning to turn. She feels sick. He undoes her thong and slips on top of her. She is breathing hard. Her eyes are sinking. He keeps kissing her. Only a few moments...

We climbed on top of the cars, leapt from hood to the back of the next car, like leaping from stones. The infected groped at the sides of the cars. Don't fall, don't fall, don't fall... There was someone in one of the buildings. Shelley jumped down, so did Hannah. An infected reached up at me as I stood on the Beatle. I kicked her in her face and she fell backwards.

I jumped down on the other side, landing on a gutter. I grabbed the grill and lifted it; infected came at us; I fended them off with the grill, a small shield, but it worked. It kept their mouths away from me. One grabbed the grill and hurled it to the side. Hannah appeared at my side with a branch from one of the tropical trees; she bashed the beast in the head, sent him to the ground. I grabbed my own branch; the dead wood cracked easily.

Shelley pounded on the door, begging to be let inside the Starbucks coffee shop. The scattered refugees inside shook their heads no. He banged louder, cried, "Please, dear God, please!" Someone had pity and ran towards the door. The owner shouted No!

"There's too many!" I yelled, swinging the stick. One of them grabbed it, tore it from my hands. I turned and saw them coming from around the Beatle.

The door flashed open; Shelley: "In here!"

We raced inside; the infected smashed at the door; together, the three of us and the good Samaritan shoved the door shut. He locked it tight and we jumped back. The infected banged at the window. It was soon to break.

The owner shouted, "Morons! Morons!"

We raced between the small tables, the planted pottery, the coffee bags on sale. We jumped behind the counter. I yelled, "Hide! Hide! If they don't see us, they'll forget we're here!" There were about six or seven other refugees, including the owner and the one who had opened the door. We all crowded behind the counter, surrounded by jugs of coffee flavoring, mixers, napkins and plastic bags. The infected continued to harass the windows. Someone muttered, *Sure about this?* No. But I didn't say that. There was a rumbling sound and the banging ceased. They were diverted. The sounds of the murders and reawakening were muffled beyond the door. Shelley gave out a splendid thanks.

"Thanks for almost getting us *killed*," the owner growled.

"Just stay down," I said. "They'll forget."

"Your accent," a woman said. "Not from around here."

"Ohio," Hannah said.

"I hear that's bad."

"Not as bad as this."

She sighed. "This is bad. My family is at home."

"Why didn't you stay with them?"

"Starbucks is 24/7, rain or snow," someone barked.

I glared at the owner. "Rain, snow, dead walking the earth... It's all the same, right?"

"How are you so sure they won't get in here?" the owner spat.

"I'm not," I retorted. "But they seem to only possess short-term memory." Les. I said nothing.

"Oh my gosh, I hope my family is okay," the woman muttered.

An explosion outside rattled the windows. Boxes and bottles quivered on the shelves.

The sound of a door slamming. Everyone looked at each other. The owner: "The back door!"

A shadow flitted around, and two little children ran inside. We gawked at them behind the counter. They were frazzled, a little girl and a little boy, their eyes swimming. The poor things were quaking like an earthquake.

They saw the compassion written all over our faces and cried out, "Jesse and James and Christine are chasing us! They killed Danny!"

No one knew what they were saying; one of the workers grabbed the kids and pulled them down beside them. The girl's frilly dress rolled up and there was a bite on her leg.

She moaned, "Christine bit me! I told her to stop! I told her that it wasn't a fun game!"

Hannah gasped, "Oh my gosh..."

The little girl wailed, "It hurts! It's bleeding! It won't stop bleeding!"

The owner yelled at the boy, "Are you bitten?"

He shook his head. "No. She is, though. She needs a band-aid."

Someone said, "We have to kill her."

The girl said, "Me? I just got bit!"

"Kill her. Kill her now!"

The woman with kids yelped, "No! She's just a baby!"

"She'll turn into one of them! We have to kill her!" He scrambled towards a drawer.

"What are you doing?" the woman cried out.

He opened the drawer.

The girl said, "It doesn't hurt *that* bad! She just bit me! She barely cut me!"

"It doesn't matter," the man by the drawer said. He pulled out a stirring knife.

The woman yelled, crawling after him.

The man fished, "Stay back! Angela! Back!"

"You can't! It's not a bad bite, it's just-"

"It's a bite! She's going to turn! She's going to become one of them!"

The little boy said, "Mister, is this part of the game?"

The owner grabbed the boy and held him back. The boy tried to weave away. He held him tighter. "Don't move, boy. Let me see you." He began inspecting his skin. "Little boys like to lie, don't they?"

Someone tried to open the front door, but abandoned it.

"I'm not bit!" the boy said. "They didn't get me!"

"Where are they?" Shelley asked. "Where are your friends?"

"They're outside somewhere! We ran away and lost them! They're probably looking for them. I'll go find-"

The owner gripped him tight. "Stay here! Don't move!"

The man with the knife edged towards the little girl. "Someone hold her!"

Hannah turned her eyes. I pressed my head underneath the counter, counted to ten.

The woman was shedding gallons of tears. "Brian! Gosh, Brian, you can't-"

He wedged past her. "Someone hold the girl!"

A co-worker grabbed the girl, but refused to look her in the eyes. The girl said, "Let me go!" She only gripped tighter.

Angela grabbed at Brian's heels. Brian shimmied past me, raising the knife before the girl.

The girl pushed away at him with frail arms. Her blonde hair danced around her angelic face. "Mister..."

"Brian!"

Her cry turned to a scream as he drove the stirring knife into the girl's eye. The little girl let out a muffled gurgle and fell over onto the floor. Her body thumped on the ground. She opened her mouth, letting it open and close like a fish's mouth. Blood seeped from the wound. Hannah began to cry. My own throat swelled. This wasn't right. The little boy was crying. Angela was crying. Brian fell backwards, shaking all over. The little angel's body went into a rhythmic seizure, bashing on the concrete. She let out guttural sounds. Brian fell back, gripping at his hair. The owner held the boy tight, just stared at the girl's shaking body.

A shadow fell over him. He swirled around. Three children stood there, fingertips and jaws dripping with blood. They looked at him with a façade of disinterested lust. The little boy wailed, "He killed her!" But the children didn't respond. They jumped at the man, biting and ripping at him. The owner screamed, crying for help. Everyone fumbled away; someone fell on top of the little girl's body, blood from her eye staining her work clothes. The children snarled and hissed; blood trickled down the owner's face as he cried, groping at the air, weighted down by the weight of Jesse, James and Christine.

I wrenched to my feet, mortified at these children of the corn. Infected outside the front windows saw the sudden movement and hurled themselves against the glass. It shattered and they fell inside the coffee shop. They ran towards the counter, knocking over tables and pottery; the pottery shattered, the plants falling out and dirt spreading everywhere, blending with the blood on their shoes.

We all ran past the owner who was being gutted by the children. Following the way the children had come, we discovered an open back door leading a backyard surrounded by wooden fencing, holding a dumpster, fallen metal trashcans, a gritty trail and overrunning plants. Angela, stunned, was silent as the infected clawed at her, peeling away the skin of her youth. Brian tried to escape but tripped on the little girl's bloody; he fell right into the arms of an infected rounding the desk; he pushed at the fiend but more jumped over the counter and joined in the feast. His arms waved in the air as his sides split and burned and his guts flipped all over his feet. He tripped over his intestines, fell against the wall, felt dizzy, light-headed; the agony felt distant, and he slipped into the netherworld, surrounded by blurry shapes and shallow pain striking every corner of his body.

We ran through the overgrowth. Infected poured from the back of the building. It was me, Hannah, Shelley, and three other employees. One of the employees crawled into the dumpster; the infected spotted him and crawled inside. The dumpster shook. A chain crossed the ground. One of the other works tripped and fell on top of a spiral spike; the spike shot through her chest and out of her back. Her hands smacked the ground and she groaned, spitting up blood. The infected rushed past her, running after us.

The other co-worker turned, ran backwards: "There's an alley!"

He led us between two towering wooden walls. The infected were right behind us. We kept getting snagged in the foliage. Trash littered the ground.

"Grab something!" Hannah yelled, picking up a brick. I grabbed a spike for holding a dog's leash, cast over the wooden walls, I imagine. The Starbucks employee snatched a hammer; Shelley fumbled around in the long grass but couldn't find anything. Hannah was trailing; an infected hit her and she smashed the brick in the girl's face. The brick smashed the front of her nose, but she wasn't stunned.

Running backwards, Hannah's heels snagged on a snarl of weeds and she flailed backwards, dropping the brick. The woman jumped to fall on top of her; I shoved the spike outwards, pointing up, and her head fell on top of it. The tip of the spike poked through the skull. Her body was heavy. "Go, Hannah." She writhed from underneath. I dropped the spike. Infected climbed over the body. I grabbed the brick and threw it at them, and ran after Hannah to join the others.

The alleyway widened and hit the back of an apartment complex. Shelley tried the door. "God, no..."

"Back up!" the employee yelled. Shelley obeyed.

I picked up a trashcan and hurled it at the dozen infected coming through the narrow alleyway; it pushed them backwards, and they fell over each other. Hannah patted me on the back. "Nice one."

"I work out," I said off-hand. Weird.

The worker smashed at the handle with the hammer. "This isn't working."

"The window," Shelley brightened.

The infected climbed over the trashcan. There were no more. I grabbed some beer cans and started throwing them. I hit one in the head and he stumbled, dazed. It was almost comical. Hannah: "Austin! Help!" I turned. She was grabbing at a tetherball pole laying in the grass. I picked up the other end and we turned it around, the sharp end for the ground pointing into the narrow alley. The worker was smashing a window. Glass was falling everywhere.

"One, two, three!" Hannah yelled.

We ran the pole into the alley; the sharp end drilled through the gut of one of the creatures, out the other end. We kept going; the infected were packed tight together and the pole pierced the stomachs of four of them. "Drop it!" Hannah yelled. We dropped it and stepped back. Blood covered the pole from the torn guts. They pushed and touched the pole, moving back and forth. The infected behind them tried to pass, but they were blocking the way.

Shelley: "Stop having fun!"

"Having fun?" I breathed.

He and the worker crawled through the window. Hannah and I ran up. "You first," I said. She went through. I looked back. The infected weren't going anywhere. I joined her inside the apartment. Shelley and the Starbucks guy grabbed a high-backed chair and shoved it against the wall, then took the TV and sat it on top.

"It won't hold for long."

"They're pinned up for now," I said. "Can we take a moment to breathe?"

The worker peered out of the smoke-and-beer-rank room, into a hallway. "I don't know."

8:00 a.m.

Shelley's Downfall Simply Suicide Waters of Salvation

Stained porno magazines covered the floor, and Playboy posters drenched the walls. Now I had no attraction to any of it; my hormones were drowned in fear and panicked adrenaline. The Starbucks guy paved the way through the grimy hallway; there was a kitchen at the end of the corridor, but there were several open doors and rooms along the way. He checked each room. Hannah and I moved behind him, keeping close together. I grabbed a piece of broken glass from a pitted picture frame, held it nimbly in my hands.

The first room was a bathroom, completely empty. Then a bedroom. The next room-

The worker stopped, even cut his breathing.

Shelley pushed him away. "Oh man."

I shadowed behind them. A kid lay on the bed, his throat stuffed with model cement. It had hardened in his throat and he'd suffocated to death. Metallica and Slipknot posters drenched his walls. The Starbucks fetish grunted, "I've never seen anything like that. How could someone do something like that? They'd have to be crazy."

"Who isn't crazy?" Shelley whispered in his ear. "Tell me *that*."

It was strange, not seeing the kid's chest moving. You don't notice those things till you're in the quiet. And the quiet seemed foreign... For the past two hours we'd been submerged in screams and gunfire and car accidents. A roaring noise of clutter and death and civil warfare. Now it was quiet. The war had been won. We were the losers. San Francisco had completely drowned in its own waste. 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 was a ghost town.

The worker led us into the kitchen. The bathroom door was open, revealing stacked beer cans, some empty ones scattered the dirty tile. Cockroaches skittered at the echoes of our footsteps. A card table served as a dining room, and two leaning chairs made up the sitting room. The bay windows were boarded up. The owner probably boarded them up for fear of break-in. Who would've guessed that now it concealed us from the very beings of bloodshed?

"Let's rest here," Hannah said. "Just for a moment."

"No," Shelley said. "No."

"Where else can we go? Where is safe?"

"We'll just rot here. All he has to eat is stale bread, some cinnamon toast crunch, and beer."

The worker grinned, "I'm fine with the beer."

Shelley didn't find it funny. "We press on."

"To what avail?" I demanded. "When can we stop?"

"When we're safe."

"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*?"

"These are organisms, Mr. Shelley. Living, breathing organisms. They eat. Do you understand that? They eat to do what? To *survive*. What happens when they get hungry? They eat each other! Remember the airport? They two women *ate each other*. They are driven by a need for survival because they *have* to survive. They aren't invincible mortals. How long does it take someone to die of hunger? Anyone know?"

"A person dies of hunger because of fatigue," Hannah said. "These guys don't fatigue."

"No doubt there. But they are organic."

"You said that."

"They eat for the nutrients, right? When they don't get the nutrients, their *organic* bodies will begin to deteriorate. Their brains – soft tissue – will *deteriorate*. The brains deteriorate, and they die! I'm simply suggesting that we lay low, remain silent, spread out our eating and drinking, just try to *survive*. I think – I'm sure – that eventually these things, when their supply of living flesh runs out, will turn to each other. Civil war. They will weed themselves out. Those that survive the longest will run out of food, the brains will deteriorate, and they'll die. And we'll be alive."

"That could take weeks," Starbucks said. "Months. We can't survive months here. If we were in a grocery store..."

Hannah shot me a look.

"What you're saying," Shelley says, "sounds good in paper. But this place isn't secure. There's a dead body in the next room!"

"At least it's staying dead."

Hannah said, "That's a pretty good point."

"It's not secure."

"How do we know?" I lashed out. Ignorance! "How do we know?"

A thumping sound in the room we came through. A shadow danced over the wall and one of them peeped around the hallway.

"That's how," Shelley muttered, grabbing a beer bottle.

The infected shrieked. More behind him.

I raced around the island, holding the glass shard in my hand. Hannah pulled herself on top of the kitchen island, rolled over, landed down on the other side. She grabbed a beer bottle and smashed it on the counter. A splinter of glass cut her finger, drawing blood. She grunted and took the broken bottle, the edges slashed and jagged. Stale beer dripped over her hand, reeking of bitter alcohol. Starbucks did the same – I had a glass ember, and the other three held broken beer bottles.

The infected at the end of the hallway ran after us, bouncing off the walls. They entered the kitchen, throwing themselves over the counter. Shelley drove his bottle into one of their faces, slashing at the cheek. The creature shrieked, not falling. It pressed on him and he fell against the counter. More jumped over the island, swiping and biting at us. I drilled the glass up into one of their eyes, drew it back; the body collapsed on the floor. One leaned in after Hannah; the glass cut up through the base of the skull; it howled and fell, dragging the glass with it; the edges sliced my palm. I gripped them tight, blood seeping through.

Starbucks gripped the hair of an infected and shoved the glass into its throat, turning the bottle as he went. The flesh opened and blood sprayed all over him. The infected kept biting. "The head!" I yelled. "Pierce the brain!" He drew the bottle out, turned it, and drove it through the temple; the reanimate shuddered a bit and went limp in his hands.

The wooden boards quaked, dust falling from the loose screws.

"They've heard us," Hannah said. "I don't think we can stay here."

Shelley shoved a body off of him. He was panting hard and sweating.

Bodies littered the kitchen. Six in all.

"The window is open," Starbucks gasped. "They'll realize it soon. They aren't genius, but they aren't stupid. They learn." Evolve.

One of the boards splintered; hands pushed through, weaving back and forth. I opened my hand, the burn stinging with the flexing muscles. It was a very deep cut. I still have the scar.

Shelley fell against the counter, gripping his wrist. "Oh God... Oh God..."

The worker said, "We need to go upstairs. To the roof. There are helicopters everywhere, it could land..."

Shelley wasn't listening. He was shaking his head. "Oh God..."

Hannah looked at him, fear sparkling in her eyes. A morbid sparkle. "Mr. Shelley?"

"Oh God... Oh God..."

"Mr. Shelley?" she asked again.

He lifted his arm. Blood covered his hand. A round bite mark was embedded in the flesh of his wrist. "He was too heavy, I couldn't..."

Fear rippled through me. *Oh God... Oh God...*

The infected smashed open more of the boarded window.

Shelley took deep breaths. "Guys. Just go. Just go."

"Mr. Shelley..."

"Bite is a death sentence, right? Dirty sons of—" His voice trailed off. More curses. "It shouldn't end like this. I've done too much. I don't deserve this." More swearing. "The rooftop, right? Helicopter? Great idea. You guys go. I'll hold them off. Yes. I'll give you time. Then I'll kill myself. Yes. I don't want to be like them. No way. No salvation for me. God, they're ugly."

All three of us glanced at each other. Starbucks said, "We can't let you come."

"Are you deaf? I'm staying here. Go! Go!"

Starbucks said, "Thanks for helping us out. I'm glad Brittany let you in."

"Yeah. Whatever." Another plank fell on top of the dusty card table. "Could you just go already?"

He nodded and raced for the door to the apartment. Hannah turned her eyes and ran.

I told Shelley, "You're a cooler guy than I thought. None of us liked you. We were wrong."

He smiled, growing weak. "Thanks. But why are you still here?"

I raced after the others. Starbucks had already opened the door and disappeared into the foyer. The door to the apartment locked from the inside; you had to have a key to get in. Dusty windows high up reflected grim morning light. A cryptic stairwell meandered upwards, spiraling five or six stories. He led the way, followed by Hannah, then me. We climbed up the stairwell,

ignoring our faltering breath. Down below there were snarls and screams, thrashing about. I could imagine Shelley duking it out, never giving in, fighting them off. I never saw him again. I didn't hear his screams. His own determination was his cry of death.

We reached the next foyer. All the doors were locked tight. The next landing. One was open. Shadows dancing over the walls. Someone moving inside. We kept going.

Down below, infected came out of the ground floor apartment. They heard our running feet and ran up the stairwell.

We all heard them coming. Starbucks: "We're almost there."

They were much faster. Exhaustion, fatigue, worn-out, we moved our legs like molten lead.

Finally we hit the sixth floor. Both doors were locked. There was no door to the roof.

"No roof," I muttered.

"Not here," Starbucks said.

The infected huddled at the other end of the stairwell beneath us. Their yellow eyes stared at us. We had nothing to protect ourselves with. Blood dripped from their jaws. *Shelley's blood*.

Starbucks kicked in a door. The infected screeched and raced upwards. We poured inside the apartment; Starbucks tried to slam the door, but an infected thrust his hands in, then his head, biting and snapping. Blood and grime traveled down the contours of his face. He swiped at Starbucks.

I ran into a room, grabbed a lamp, ripped it from the wall, ran out and smashed it into the infected's face. The infected reeled backwards; the door locked shut; Starbucks slid the double bolt down. The doorknob lock didn't work.

He stepped back. The infected thundered across the door.

Hannah backed down the hallway. A sudden voice: "You kids are crazy!" Hannah spun and gazed into a room. Her face went pale. I joined her, then – warily – so did Starbucks.

A man and his wife, stark naked, stood in the shower. They were at least fifty years, and the man carried a beer gut that covered less extensive parts of his body. The bathtub was full and the shower was on. Water dribbled down their bodies. A generator beside the bathtub was chugging on a battery; the man held a pair of clips in his hand; water droplets sizzled and sparked on the prongs. His wife was smiling, but her chest was shaking – fear lacerated every pore.

The infected hit the door. The man said, "You kids are running from fate. The youth of today. They just can't accept it. They can't accept things that aren't pleasing. 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 the door? You have nowhere to go! You are stranded! I suggest you come in here with us. Step inside. Fear nothing but fear itself, that great man once said. I fear nothing but becoming like them. And I won't. So the end is here. I can deal with it. You kids can't."

The wife kissed the man on the cheek.

The glutton spoke once more. "The problem, you see, isn't chemical or biological. It's psychological. Spontaneous combustion of pent up rage fueled by frustration over a pressurized society. You kids are the slave drivers of this society. You and your new shoes, your shopping malls, your nice cars and fancy clothes. Look what's it brought. You're to blame. I hope it's painful. I really do. I hope you suffer. Both of us do." The wife nodded, so calm. "You brought this on us. We're innocent. I worked fifty years at a sweatshop for this? No! You complain about fast food and grocery stores. Spoiled brats." The door shook. "Suffer. Bleed. This problem, this snapped postal worker on a national lever, is your doing, and there's no undoing, no rewinding the clock."

His hand relaxed. The chord dropped; the prongs entered the bathwater with a splash. Electricity surged through the water, up into their wet bodies. They screamed and shrieked, suddenly rigid and bursting. The man's nose spit fire and his ears melted. His eyes popped out, landing against the shower wall, and his flesh bubbled and boiled. His wife fell against him, screaming. Their bowels released and they were thrown back and forth through the water. Sparks shot from the generator and suddenly the electrocution stopped; the bodies slumped forward, landing on the carpet. Water dribbled from their steaming bodies.

Starbucks rubbed a hand across his forehead. "People are going insane."

The door burst open, splinters flying. We ran into another room, shutting the door. It was a room with a television, fake fireplace, a coffee table with *Reader's Digest*. Starbucks locked the double dead bolt. The infected threw themselves against it and tried to bust through.

"They never stop," he muttered.

"There's nowhere to go," Hannah said, wheeling around. "We could go up the fireplace..."

"It's fake," I said. "Upper floors don't have fireplaces. Old ones, do, but this one's just grimy."

Hannah ran to a window, opened it wide. A warm breeze fluttered inside. The clearing below was littered with infected; they had been standing there earlier; the buildings all around them were crawling with those poisoned by the disease. Infected skittered back and forth through the narrow alleys. The infected saw her and entered through the broken window downstairs. Hannah spied a bolted rain gutter leading to the roof six feet above the window frame.

"Guys!" she yelled. "Will this work? A rain gutter!"

Starbucks was staring at the door. It shifted, bulged. The hinges squeaked. "It'd better. Is it rusted?"

"No."

"Go first?"

Hannah crawled out the window, grabbed the rain gutter, and shimmied upwards. The infected beneath spat unintelligible profanities. I ducked out the window, looked at them. Starbucks told me to hurry up. I started climbing, feeling dizzy and insecure as I scurried sixty-five feet above the ground. Hannah grabbed my hand and pulled me up. I flopped onto the roof. Starbucks was climbing out of the window when the door burst open and the infected fell inside. They immediately rushed the window. He kicked at them as he climbed, and gathered himself on the roof.

The infected grabbed at the rain gutter.

"They'll climb," Hannah said.

"You were wrong," Starbucks said, kicking at the rain gutter. It twisted and fell; one of the infected on it gave a cry and fell sixty-five feet, splattering on the ground. She moved her head, the neck snapped. The other infected pounced on her, swallowing her up. "It was rusted."

The roof was flat and bare, littered with a few air conditioning pumps and a skylight with broken glass and twisted frames. We were cast in the shadow of a skyscraper. Buildings all over were burning, and a red smoke lifted off from the streets, wrapping the buildings in a foreign smog. I could distantly make out other figures on other rooftops, having the same idea. They would wave their hands in the air as the helicopter rumbled overhead. Napalm lit up a street downtown and the fire spread over the infected, torching them alive. Car wheels melted and the frames burnt to a fine polish. Building windows busted and the fire ate away at the structures. Chicago fire.

A Blackhawk slowly came towards us. Hope! I waved my hands. So did Hannah and Starbucks. The helicopter flew so close our clothes were ripped and tugged back and forth. The soldiers at the miniguns and inside the seats just looked at us with pity and continued on between two skyscrapers.

Hannah wailed, "Where are they going? Didn't they see us?"

"They saw us," Starbucks mumbled.

I ran to the edge of the roof. "The ocean. Didn't the news say the things couldn't swim? Swimming isn't instinctive; it's learned!"

"So is walking. They do that pretty well."

"Maybe they're scared of the water. But the news said they didn't go there. That's where the helicopters are going!"

"That helps us," Starbucks yelled from across the roof. "That helps us a lot!"

"That's where we need to go!"

"We can't!" Starbucks yelled, walking towards me. "There's no way over! We're on a rooftop with nowhere to go! Trapped!" He spun around, gripping at his hair. "Oh God, it can't end like this! It can't!"

Hannah's voice was quiet: "It is."

9:00 a.m.

Convoy
Abandoned
Black out

Red pallor, smoke drenched with blood, rose between all the buildings. *Incense carries the prayers of the Saints to God.* I watched the smoke curling into the sparkling morning sky, clear and blue, the sun rising over the mountains, its orange glow illuminating the wrecked shells of suburban San Francisco. One of the skyscrapers was being eaten alive by fire, the flames surrounding the base and licking upwards, a mouth, a cave, teeth dancing in embers and sparks.

Hannah just stared out at that skyscraper being engulfed. "We've come so far."

We've come so far.

It didn't feel right. Coming so far, journeying through such peril, only to be brought down, wrenched to our knees, upon a rooftop in some god-forsaken state I'd never been in before, completely alone and cut-off, in a world that could be borne only from the minds of an incessant freak. It was just so *wrong*. We had survived this far – I knew I wasn't, but part of me thought I was special. *I* was special because *I'd* survived so well. Clearcreek was a death-trap. We got out. Missouri harbored the jaws of death. We'd escaped there, too. And now we were in San Francisco, and salvation – the ocean, the green cold water of the Pacific – was a mile away. A mile teeming with jaws of death and bloodlust. It didn't sit well in my gut. I wanted to vomit. I bent over and stared at the pitted roof. Puke.

Starbucks meandered over to the skylight and peered down. Infected were gathered together, jumping and clawing at the smooth walls, trying to get on the roof. He backed away, refusing to do anything. He walked over to us, told us the news. We didn't say anything, not really. A mumble or two, but that was all.

Starbucks watched the ripe smoke and ash. "So this is it?"

"This is it," Hannah said.

"They're going to get up here sooner or later."

"Yeah," I said under my breath. "This isn't right. It's not supposed to end this way."

"I don't think we have much a choice."

"Who says we can't choose our destiny?"

Starbucks breathed, "Fate. That's who."

"I deny fate. I hate it. I don't believe in fate."

Hannah: "Then you believe in luck. That's worse. Luck runs out. We've been lucky. Knock on wood."

I spun around on the roof. A Huey rushed overhead, bringing acrid smoke breathing over the rooftop, swirling around our legs, filling our lungs like bitter gall. "No. No, I refuse. Nope. Not happening." I walked over to the edge, peering down, driven mad. "Sixty-five feet. It's a long drop."

"Don't," Starbucks says. "There's no honor in—"

"Honor?" I spat, spinning. "Where's your precious 'honor' now? What do I have to be honorable for? Killing two of my best friends? Allowing my sister to be shot? Killing my own father and watching my mom shoot herself in our downstairs basement? Tell me, what do I have to be honorable? What about me makes me such an honorable guy?"

Hannah answered first. "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. 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."

Starbucks: "Maybe that's why you're still alive."

Shot him a glare. "Why?"

"Do you believe in God?"

"I don't know."

Hannah gawked at me. How *could* she?

Starbucks said, "You're the one who isn't selfish. Maybe God is saving you for that reason."

"Saving me. And letting my friends and family die. Great. I love God. I *really* love him!"

Hannah: "Austin, listen to—"

"Hannah! I'm tired. I'm sick of running, of being scared, of not being able to sleep or eat. I'm tired of this. I just want to wake up and it all to be some big, bad dream. That's all I want. I want this to be a dream so I can walk up to you 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. So I could tell you now that I am selfish — I abandoned Ashlie because I would rather have you. I abandoned my sister so I could have some sleazy night in bed, some false security from you holding onto my arm, so 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 moment 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! I can't take you up in my arms! 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 me. Starbucks didn't move, suddenly feeling awkward. The red smoke passed between us, and she looked away. I turned and walked over to the roof's edge, sitting down, dangling my legs, just looking down at wrecked cars and blood on the sidewalk. The infected moved farther down the street, drawn to a bookstore, crowding at the windows. Survivors inside.

I 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 my bed and it be Friday morning. To go to school, to go through that boring, drama-less existence. That is paradise. I wanted to have it again. I'd never appreciated it. I felt cheated. Jumping. So beautiful.

Hannah stood behind me, but said nothing. She took in a breath, ready to speak, when Starbucks yelled.

"Do you hear that?"

He pointed down the road. Through the putrid, billowing fog a Humvee appeared, then another, and another, then two trucks, and two more Humvees. Soldiers were sitting in the .50 cal, rotating back and forth, preparing to fire. Behind them, in the fog, was jumbled movement. The infected were chasing, but weren't getting close to the guns.

Learning. Evolving.

"They're going to the ocean," Starbucks said, pity and plea in his voice. "Armored convoy."

They passed underneath us. I just said, "So am I," and pushed off the edge.

Hannah and Starbucks yelled.

The wind buffeted me and I hit a canvas awning, slowed, slid off the edge, hit another awning, slowed, hit another awning, and was propelled outwards. One of the canvas-covered trucks was driving beneath me and I landed on the canvas. It bulged and bundled beneath me, and I almost rolled off the edge. Starbucks and Hannah exchanged glances and rolled off, so cautious, and landed beside one of the Humvees, clattering against a smoldering car.

The soldiers in the .50 cal's hollered, "Get in the back of one of the trucks!"

I rolled off the truck and fell into the dirt. An infected in the shadows rushed at me. There was an echo of gunfire and the creature's head burst apart; the body fell against me and slid onto the curb. The soldier behind the smoking .50 cal hissed, "Truck, with your friends, okay?" I smiled, gave a thumbs-up, ran around the side of the truck. Soldiers helped me in and pushed me towards the back.

Hannah and Starbucks huddled with a dozen or so other survivors. Everyone was shell-shocked. The trucks kept going. The Humvee behind us spat fire every once and a while as we drove through the ruddy district. We all pressed together, joining for comfort.

A soldier hobbled up and demanded to know if anyone was bitten: "If you lie, we execute one of you." To prevent the halt of disease, right? None of us had been. The soldier explained, "We don't know how it happened. One minute things were under control, then the city was burning and they were all over the place. Just like all the other cities. All over the coast, this is happening. We should've reserved all our efforts for one city. And started loading survivors in boats, and do it fast. The infected won't go into the water."

"So we're going to the ocean?" Starbucks asked.

The soldier nodded. "There are small sailboats everywhere. A cruiser is just offshore picking up anyone in lifeboats, sailboats, whatever. They inspect for bites, and if anyone is bitten—"

"We know," Hannah said. "Thank you."

The soldier wiped sweat from his chin. "Don't worry about it."

"Where did all the infected go?" I asked.

"They're near the docks. That's where the survivors went."

"There are survivors on the rooftops all over the place," I said. "Can't you get Blackhawks in?"

The soldier shrugged. I hated how he didn't answer.

The truck rolled over a bump. It was actually a body, crushed under the wheels. We passed into a shadow, moving between two sky-searching skyscrapers. The lobby's glass windows were shattered, and inside, amidst sporadic fires and trampled bodies, were figures moving back and forth, huddled in groups or going solo. They watched the convoy from the dark recesses of the buildings. When they tried to get close, the .50 cal's opened fire. A few of the infected would drop and the others would retreat into the safety of the man-made honeycombs. The gunfire hurt my ears.

Hannah gripped my arm. "Did you mean all that stuff you said back there?"

I looked her in the eyes. "Would it change anything?"

"You mean whether we live or die? I don't think so."

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?"

"Nothing."

"Did you mean what you said?"

The trucks grinded to a halt. The Humvee nearly rammed us. Everyone rocked back and forth.

The five or six soldiers at the back end of the truck glanced at each other. There was a roar as the front Humvees opened up in continuous fire.

I grabbed one of the soldiers. "How far are we from the ocean?"

"The docks are just a quarter mile down!" he yelled over the gunfire.

"Why did we stop?"

"How should I know? I'm not driving!"

The rear .50 cal's opened up as the infected from one of the skyscrapers gushed out, swarming the vehicles. The soldiers in the back of the truck raised their M16s and started shooting. I couldn't see anything. Everyone shivered in fright. The gunners would stop to reload their rifles, then start shooting again. The heat was sweltering. I would later learn that the lead Humvee had hit a road block — a tanker had overturned in the road and blown up. The driver was mapping out a new path. Taking the lull, the infected had attacked. The gunners kept them off the trucks and Humvees, but the ammunition was slipping through the massive barrels like sand in a sieve. Once we got moving again, the infected scattered. We rolled around the edge of the skyscraper and I saw countless bodies strewn the marble steps of 5/3 Bank.

In the truck, the soldiers kept reiterating how they were running out of ammo.

"What happens when there's no more bullets?" someone groaned.

Someone ran a finger over their neck and went, "Cack."

A ball hobbled in my throat. We were running the gauntlet through a city. It was the American Mogadishu. It was crazy. I clung to my hope of the water as the convoy kept taking wild twists and turns. We stopped for just a moment; two soldiers jumped out of the back and vanished. The .50 cal's shot off some bullets, and then the soldiers returned with an elderly couple, helping them inside the truck. They'd been trapped inside their car, the infected trying to get in. A soldier on a Humvee had killed the infected and the elderly had been taken up under the Army's wing.

One of the soldiers said, "You can smell the ocean so strong! I saw it between one of the buildings!"

"How close?" someone begged.

"The beach was just thirty feet beyond the surf shop!"

A noise like nothing I've ever heard rumbled through the air. A car had been speeding for the beach from a branching road, going fast enough to smash through any obstacles and zombies in the way. The convoy had crossed in front of it; the driver had smashed on his brakes, but his car fishtailed and rode helter-skelter into the second Humvee. The gunner raised his arms and shouted as the car smashed through the heavy frame of the Humvee. There was a brilliant explosion that completely overtook the Humvee; the ammunition inside the Humvee lit up and started popping; all the soldiers inside were burned to a crisp and tore apart by hundreds of rounds. The bursting magazines popped out the windows and flames reached out to swirl amongst the hood of the truck. The intense heat ignited fuel lines inside the truck and they lit up; the hood popped and fire snaked outwards. The driver opened his door to get out, his partner was already fumbling to the ground when the cab exploded; the fire smothered them both and they ran between jumbled cars, turning and swirling, ablaze and screaming. The truck lurched upwards with the explosion and everyone was thrown backwards out of the truck. The soldiers toppled to the ground; a gun accidentally went off, wounding a soldier in the arm.

I was thrown against the bed of the truck. I looked up to see Hannah leaning against the Humvee. Starbucks was behind me, coughing and rolling over. Smoke gushed from the cab. The fuel tanks were under the bed of the truck. The flames were moving forward. I crawled out of the truck; people were getting up, dazed. The .50 cal started shooting; drawn by the explosion, infected popped out of every nook and cranny. All I could hear was roaring in my ears as I knelt beside Hannah; I puked all over the Humvee's tire, stomach retching with the smoke.

"Austin—"

Starbucks was crawling from the inside of the truck. The fuel lines ignited; there was a brilliant flash and Starbucks screamed; the whites of his eyes shimmered for a moment before the entire truck was lifted off the ground, propelled by exploding gas tanks. Fire reached out over the spilled passengers, and the truck toppled over, completely up in flames.

The former passengers screamed, clothes on fire. Those closest to the truck had been utterly scorched. Pressed against the wheel, I'd simply felt a blast of steaming air, then deep ringing. Hannah's eyes fluttered. I wobbled to my feet. People were running around, burning alive. Hannah stood next to me and we leaned against the Humvee, the world spinning in frantic circles. My head pounded, pulsated, and my neck scorched with searing pain. Hannah squeezed her temples.

The wall behind us began to move. The Humvee lurched forward.

I tried to keep up, begging softly, hardly able to talk. The explosion had completely set me off-scale.

The gunner didn't seem to notice me. They rolled over the scattered bodies and kept going. The last Humvee passed. I tried to keep up, but it was impossible. I collapsed in the street. Hannah picked me up. I really don't remember a whole lot, except she was whispering in my ear, and there was the smell of sulfur and smoke was everywhere: in my throat, my eyes, my skin, my nose. I was coughing and retching and tearing. We walked across the street, between burnt cars, onto a sidewalk.

There was a creaking noise and then I blacked out.

10:00 a.m.

Surf Shop
Lilies
Exhaustion of the Soul

She sat in the front of the car, and I sat in the back. She was saying something, counting change or something, I really didn't notice what. Her hair was so beautiful. The seat fell backwards and her hair fell into my lap. She looked up at me with those beautiful eyes and started laughing; my hands ran through her silky strands and I just laughed, too.

She undid the seat belt and crawled into the back with me, pressed her face against mine. Her breath was warm, smelled like a wintry forest. "You love me, Austin?"

"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."

I grinned and leaned towards her lips.

Splinters of excruciating pain shredded the wonderful dream to pieces. My eyes opened and I felt dizzy; what felt like iron spikes being driven into the back of my head made me gasp in pain. The world around me swam, as if in a fog. My back was hard: I was lying down. Exhaustion drenched me in its mahogany sweat. A dull light covered my face, and a window revealed red sunlight. There was movement behind me, then something cold and wet splashed on my forehead. Cold water dribbled down my face; I let out a grunt of satisfaction – the water cooled me off like rain on an overheated engine.

Hannah moved around me and sat down. I just stared at the plaster ceiling. The room was small and stocked with boxes; there were some scattered clothes, a rusted-out sink, some surfboards stashed against one of the walls, and a small window at the top of one of the walls. I heard the sound of cackling flames, the wind against the building, and silence. Hannah just watched me as I lay there; balling my fists, I begin to feel small trances of energy spitting through me, water in a fire hydrant, trickling, beginning to gush. Muscles awoke. The pain diminished. Didn't leave, but slackened.

"How long was I out?"

"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?" I wouldn't be able to remember it at all until after it all was over.

"At the trucks."

No recollection. I tried to get up but lightning pierced my neck. I lay back down.

"Does it hurt?"

"Slightly."

"You got knocked around pretty hard."

I looked at the walls, eyes rolling in the sockets. "Where are we?"

"Ron Jon's Surf Shop. Combined with Pacific Sunwear." I'd seen those t-shirts at school.

"We're in a storage room. It's small, there's water, and they don't know I'm in here. The door locks, too."

"They don't know?"

"Smoke from the explosion covered everything, even us. I dusted you off. The smoke, it veiled our movement."

"Why is your sleeve bloody?" God, was she bitten?

Sheepishly, "The owner was in here. I had to get rid of him."

"What happened to the convoy?"

"I haven't seen it."

"Probably overrun."

Hannah said nothing.

"How close are we to the ocean?"

She weakly smiled. "About twenty meters," she said. "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 is a rowboat, tied up."

"Can we get to it?"

"I've seen a few of them meandering across the beach. I've been watching."
 I closed my eyes. Could I sleep again? Run to the dreams, forsake this awful place?
 Hannah got up, looked out the window, sat back down. "You never answered my question."
 "What question? Sorry. I'm a little... out of it."
 "Back at the trucks. I asked you if you meant what you said, about me. Do you remember?"
 "I can't remember the trucks very well."
 "Do you remember the apartment building roof?"
 That was clear. "Yes."
 "Do you remember what you said, about it all being a dream?"
 Had I really said all that? "Yes."
 "Well. Did you mean it?"
 My lips smacked, parched. "I meant it... at the time."
 "At the time? What does 'at the time' mean?"
 "It means I meant it at the time."
 "What about now? Do you mean it now?"
 "I didn't say it now."
 "If you did, would you mean it?"
 Roaring silence. Cackling fire.
 "I don't know."
 "It's either yes or no, one or the other. You have to make up your mind."
 "I don't. My head hurts too much. I just want to sleep."
 "Don't fall asleep. Answer my question. Yes or no."
 "Why do you want to know so bad?"
 "We're all we have left! I think I should know!"
 "Keep your voice down."
 "Tell me, Austin. Tell me if you meant what you said."
 "It doesn't change anything."
 "Yes, it does."
 "How? What? How in the world does it change things, and what does it change? Look outside that little square window. Are there any walking on the beach now? Probably. And guess what? They'll kill us! We're either going to die of 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?"
 I leaned forward; pain; fell back. "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 muttered under her breath and got up, going to the window. I mentally bashed my brains out as I lay on the chilled storage room floor. She crept up to the window and peered out. A moment later she ducked down. "It's clear. Right now. So is the dock. It's clear."
 "You're crazy," I said.
 "What have we got to lose?"
 "I can hardly walk."
 "It's all psychological."
 "Oh, I forgot, you're an expert. Are *you* laying down here?"
 "Get up! Do you want to get to the boat or not?"
 "Hannah! I am mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually exhausted. I don't think I can run anymore."
 "Spiritually exhausted? What does that mean?"
 "How am I supposed to 'grow in my Hannah' when my family is trying to kill me?"
 She didn't answer.
 "I 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 fidgeted with the window.
 I propped up on my arms. The pain was draining away. "What? Where are you going? No."

"You want to die of starvation? The longer I wait in here, the longer I am convinced that had I gone for it, I could've escaped. I'm going for it. If I die out there, at least I'll have made an attempt. And you can just lay on the floor and let your insides rot out for all I care."

"Hannah. Hannah." I started to get up.

She pretended not to notice. The small window opened.

"Hannah. You can't just-"

She did. Her body disappeared out the window.

I stood alone in the surf shop, wrestling with my thoughts, and finally gave in.

The sand on the beach was warm.

11:00 a.m.

Laughter and Love
Hemmed-in
Treading water

Children ran back and forth, laughing, building sand castles and throwing sand at each other. Fathers and mothers watched their kids in the shallows; the teenagers went further back, even beyond the grandparents, to swim and duck and see who could swim under the docks without being seen. The sound of a city alive filled the air with the cries of seagulls, the laughter of children, the love of family and friends – life worth living. Umbrellas propped up on the beach; crowded on the blankets, couples made out, sun-bathed, read *John Grisham* and *Harry Potter*. A mother pulled out some food for a picnic, smiling at the bright sun. Peace.

She sat on her blanket, watching the little kids rolling in the shallows. The green waves lapped at the shore, spewing clumps of seaweed and scattered sea shells. She propped up her arms, elbows sore, wondered where he'd run off to, and picked up on chapter twenty-eight of her new favorite book. Suddenly he returned, dropping down next to her, gripping his arm. He was cussing and swearing; she dropped the book, seeing blood gushing down his arm, through his hands. He was shaking all over. He collapsed onto his side. People across the beach dropped what they were doing and watched. The man rolled onto his back, coughing up blood. The woman shrieked, screaming, *Someone help! Oh my God! Someone! Someone!* He lay still. She stared at his still body. Muffles flittered through the ranks watching. She hovered over his body, sobbing. His eyes opened. Hope fluttered through her; but the eyes, she saw, were not his own. He screamed and launched upwards, swiping at her. He knocked her into the umbrella; it toppled down and she lay pinned by him as he bit into her breast. Her shivering screams carried up the beach. No one knew what to think. Similar atrocities were happening all up and down the beach.

That's how it'd looked in the beginning. Now the beach was empty. Umbrellas tossed here and there, buckets of sand left next to crumbling sand castles, splotches of blood and frantic footprints etched into the sand of time. A picnic luncheon, swarming with flies: bologna sandwiches and potato chips. Seagulls fluttered above us, grabbing food from the overturned baskets. Hannah weaved her way between piles of abandoned beach equipment; I followed her tracks. The waves rolled against the beach, frothing and foaming.

Out beyond the shore a fine mist draped the ocean. The edge of the dock was veiled in the mist.

Infected came from the buildings against the beach's edge. I saw them coming, yelled: "Hannah! They're behind us!"

She whirled around, gasped, turned, kept going.

"Don't stop!" You got us in to this. I won't lose you now.

I reached down as I ran and grabbed an umbrella. Snapping off the pole, I tossed the umbrella away and swung the pole in my hands. Hannah's feet tapped over the wooden dock. The infected rushed me. The pole chastised the air, and I splattered brains at my feet. Shoving the pole into the face of a girl in jeans and a ripped t-shirt, I watched her body fall to the dock – watched with sublime satisfaction – and ran after Hannah.

The infected climbed over the girl's body and raced the dock.

Hannah yelled, "The boat's leaving! It's leaving!"

Horror ripped through me.

"It's leaving! It's leaving!"

In the mist that caked the edge of the dock, we could see the boat paddling away. Figures danced over the dock and they ran towards us. Hannah slammed to a stop and I rammed into her. She gawked, "They're all over. Now what?"

They won't go into the water.

I shoved Hannah hard; she let out a shot 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. She gaped up at me. "Austin–"

Hands grabbed at me. I ripped away, fumbling off the edge. My legs bashed over the lip of the dock and I crashed into the water. Silence thundered. I twisted and turned. The water was so cold, sending icicles up and down my frostbitten spine. My hands brushed the rocky floor, and I propelled upwards. Eyes opened, the salt burned, stung. The light barraged me, and I surfaced, gasping, choking up water. Hannah was swimming against the current, towards the ocean. I looked back as I followed.

The infected yelled at us from the dock, and kept up with us, running parallel to us on the wooden planks.

Hannah kept herself afloat. "We're going to drown..."

"No..."

"We're going to float out to sea..."

"Go with the current. Towards the dock."

"They're on the dock!"

"Go behind the warehouse. They'll think we kept going. And then hold on."

The current swept us away from the shoreline. The infected followed on the dock.

The city behind us was a blend of red smoke and flames, a smog of epic proportions engulfing every building and street. There was a roar as the skyscraper aflame tilted and fell. It didn't seem real. It smashed into a dozen buildings, breaking apart, shattering. Dust blew out from every direction, engulfing all the nearest buildings. The streets turned an ashen brown. The dust rose like incense to God.

We swept behind the warehouse. Our hands slipped and slid over the lichen-eaten warehouse.

Hannah: "I can't grab on... It's too slippery..."

"There's a ladder coming up," I said, choking up water. "Just grab that."

She grabbed on, and so did I. The ladder led up to a door. She crawled first and opened the door. She looked back and forth and pulled herself inside. I watched the bloodied city skyline and climbed up and in. Hannah shut the door, submerging us in blackness.

"Let's just rest a moment," Hannah said, breathing heavily. "Give those guys time to forget about us."

I agreed. I sat down, and shivering, soaked and cold, I blacked out.

12:00 p.m.

Fogged glass and moaning
Discovery
No red carpet

We awoke some short time later, aroused by sounds drifting through a large, iron, padlocked door. I stepped around Hannah and pushed it open, expecting the worst. It had come to the point where I did not care – whatever happened, I was sure of this: there was no Heaven or Hell. There was only us, only them, and only death, simply a matter of when, how, why...

Wooden crates were scattered everywhere. A tool chest against the far wall. Water dripped from the rafters; the air smelt of salt and granite. Most of the room was drenched in shadow; at the other end of the cavernous chamber was a glass window; the glass was tempered, made to look like ice. Dark shadows, the outlines of hands, palmed the glass, drew across the glass. Moanings from the other side. They weren't scary – ominous. We just stared at the fogged glass, the hands drawing back and forth, and without speaking we told each other to be quiet.

I moved between the mountains of crates, covered with a fine layer of dust. There was a dolly and several metal barrels. I pushed myself forward in the darkness; my hands touched something cold and rutted: a large hangar door. Why a door? Hope lit inside me; fumbling about, I felt the smooth surface, curved, and followed it to a broad slice above my head. A hull. My heart hammered. I moved along the hull, feeling the smooth surface; a body bumped into me.

"A boat," Hannah said.

"Yes, I think so."

Eventually I discovered a ladder and climbed up, stepping onto the bed of the boat. My eyes were adjusting, and I saw that it was a speed-boat with a lower level. The gears and wheel were drowsy in the shadows, and I crept down into the lower level. My feet scooted over carpet, and my hands brushed over a polished dresser, something slender; I found a chain and pulled. A grunt escaped from my throat as blinding light sprinted everywhere and melted the shadows to nothing. There was a large bed, a chair, two dressers, and a small closet. The bed was made, the dressers bare. Dust on everything. It hadn't been used forever.

Hannah followed the burst of light racing onto the deck and came down. She gawked at everything.

I opened a cabinet and found boxed foods, some cans. In the closet were gallons of water.

"This is amazing," I breathed. "Geez! Think, Hannah – if we can get this thing out of here, we can just speed out offshore and eat the food, drink the water, until these things die out. It's a miracle."

Hannah nodded. "Can you get it started?"

"Bryon taught me how to hotwire a car."

"This isn't a car."

"No," I said. "But how much different could it be?"

"I'm thinking a lot different."

"Ye of little Hannah." I crept upstairs, to the engine. There was a slot for the key. "If I can get this panel off–"

"Maybe," Hannah said, "I could look for a key?"

"Give me a chance, okay?"

"You'll end up breaking it."

I fiddled with the panel. "No, I won't."

She watched the infected patting the window. "I can see it now."

"Hannah, just have Hannah. Your name is Hannah and you don't have Hannah."

"I have Hannah that the engine is supposed to start with a key."

"Do we have a key?"

"Let me look for it."

"Needle in a haystack. Besides, those guys are pounding on the glass..."

"They aren't getting in."

"I have it, Hannah, all right?"

She sighed and dropped down off the boat.

I couldn't get the panel off. After several tries, I sat back and stared. How hard could it be?

Hannah climbed up. "Look." She tossed me a key. "It was on a rack against the wall."

"Stroke of luck."

"Stroke of genius."

I inserted the key and turned. The engine rumbled to life. We both looked back at the fogged window. The pattering had ceased. Their shadows just lurked behind the window. Were they wondering what the noise was?

Hannah said, "Gasoline is on empty. We need more. Dang it. Always *something*."

"I saw barrels down on the floor. I'll put one on a dolly. Find me some tubing. Look in storage."

I pulled the dolly and barrel over; she had found some tubing. We hooked it up to the gas main. I sucked a few times and finally the gasoline spat out all over my jeans. I grunted and thrust it into the gas tank. The tube gurgled and gasoline splashed.

"So are we going to just roll out of here on a red carpet?"

"What?"

"How are we going to get the door opened?"

"Maybe there's a garage door opener or something."

"Hold on." She disappeared.

I kept fueling. Gasoline bubbled over the edges. I stopped the fueling and wheeled the barrel, tubing and dolly out of the way. There was a grinding noise and the door began to lift, rising up; bright afternoon sunshine split into my eyes and it hurt. I had grown accustomed to darkness. The sun's beating rays were torture. I covered my face against the brightness, against the sound of the ocean, against the sweet smell of salt. The light bled through the room, illuminating piles of crates, barrels, racks of tools and equipment, the fogged window, Hannah standing by a button panel dangling from the ceiling, and the one-hundred-foot-long sports boat we were commandeering.

I climbed up onto the deck and turned on the engine. It roared to life. The propeller slowly spun.

"We need it in the water!" Hannah shouted.

"Can you give me a push?"

She did. Nothing. "It's too heavy!"

I told her to take the wheel; she did, and I tried. Nope. "Work together," I said.

She hopped down and pushed with me. The wheels of the boat ramp began to turn.

"We're golden," I grinned.

Then the fogged glass windows shattered and they poured inside.

1:00 p.m.

The Warehouse
Hannah falls
Mount Saint Helens

The infected launched over the crates and came at us. We spun around against the boat ramp as they charged. Hannah climbed up onto the deck, kicking her feet. I smashed the head of one of the infected with my fist and carried after her. They grabbed onto my pants, pulling, snarling, trying to – God, no – bite me. Hannah appeared with a broomstick and jabbed at the creatures', bludgeoning them in the face. They reached for the broom, letting go of me. I toppled onto the deck. She tried to fend them off; one grabbed the broomstick and ripped it from her hands. Splinters tore into her. She gasped and raised her hands in the sunlight.

"Austin! I don't have anything!"

I ran over to the wheel, searched the gears, found it. I pressed the power all the way. The propellers began to spin faster and faster, until they were a blur. Blood sprayed all over the crates as the blades sliced through human flesh; an infected fell back with half her body missing.

Hannah kicked at them as they tried to get up. "Austin! Do something!"

"What does it look like I'm doing!" I yelled, fiddling with the gears.

"Nothing! You're doing absolutely *nothing*!"

I smashed at the gears, cursing. As I smashed it with my feet, the panel opened. A 9mm slid out. I picked it off the ground.

Hannah wailed and fell over; one was climbing on top of her. I turned and blasted the trigger. The back of the creature's head turned into a bloody flap and it spilt its brains all over the boat deck. The body went limp. Hannah shoved it off and crawled towards me. More infected reached over the edge of the boat, avoiding the propellers. I shot them as they came, right in the head. One fell onto the propellers and turned into a mess of blood and guts covering everything.

Beside me, Hannah panted, "We're not going anywhere!"

I raised the gun. "Hold on to something!"

"What are—"

The gun roared. The bullet sped over the invading infected and lodged itself inside a gasoline can. There was a roar and the explosion lit towards us, combusting with the dust. The shockwave knocked me off my feet; I landed against the wheel; Hannah was thrown to the ground. The boat ramp shuddered and groaned forward under the blast; the boat dipped into the choppy waves. The ramp sunk and the boat bobbed. The end started to drag downwards; it was roped to the ramp.

I got to my feet, grabbing the wheel. The engine spit water, but we weren't moving. Our end was sinking.

Infected clambered through the warehouse as the flames began to die down.

"Hannah! The ropes on the sides! Cut the ropes!"

I leaned over the edge of the boat and began untying the rope from the railing.

The railing on Hannah's side snapped; she gave a gasp and was thrown overboard.

The rope on my side slithered away; the boat righted and began moving away.

Hannah swam in the water, waving her hands. "Austin!"

I saw her disappearing behind me, in the shadow of the docks, and I grabbed the engine controls, cutting the propeller down in speed. I felt the acrid heat and dust from the city washing over me as I turned the boat around, driving over to her. She reached up at the slick sides but couldn't grab; I ran over and reached down, taking her head. I pulled. She kicked. Eventually she flopped over the edge, landing on the deck, breathing hard.

I left her to pull away from a collision with the dock. I grabbed the 9mm again and aimed it at the warehouse. Infected were everywhere. I aimed like I did in video games and pulled the trigger.

A blast like Mount Saint Helens sent waves rolling outwards from the dock. The gasoline can I hit ignited, engulfing the others, and the gasoline blew apart. The warehouse filled with fire and the blast tore out the moorings and the bolts. Infected were consumed in an instant, vaporized, and the dock tilted, sinking; the warehouse fell apart and disappeared in the water, in a billowing freak show of steam and smoke. The dock the warehouse was attached to bent, pulled, groaned – snapped.

We both watched as all that was left of the warehouse were a few floating debris, slowly sinking into the shallows.

Hannah took several deep breaths. "So we're in the water."

I leaned against the wheel. "We're in the water."

Salvation.

2:00 p.m.

Beauty in the Ashes
The Pyramids
Why Me?

"Where are we going?" Hannah asked.

The wheel was in my hands. I felt the boat rising up and down, side to side, the waves splashing and gurgling, breaking against the hull. "I don't know. Just not there. Away from there. I don't want us to fall asleep and suddenly wake up beached."

"We're just going into the middle of nowhere?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so. At least for now."

"For now?"

"I was thinking we drive until we don't see land, cut power, drop anchor."

"What if it's too deep?"

"We go inland a little bit. When we run out of food, we can return to the shore."

"So that's the plan?"

"Right now it is. I'm just making this up as I go. You knew that."

I cut power, not wanting to waste anything. And we let the boat drift west, towards the middle of the Pacific – no aim, no resolution – no plan. Just gratefulness. Gratefulness that we weren't in constant danger. Grateful that we could now sleep – and sleep well. None of them were anywhere close. I felt the wind in my hair and just listened to the waves carry us along. Hannah went down below. I stayed on the deck, completely free, relaxed, without a care in the world.

It was the most beautiful experience of my life.

How lucky was I? The numbers would ring in 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 America. Of that two hundred eighty-one and a half million, only 50,000 would survive and make it to the next census nine years later. How long people held out throughout the continental U.S. is still a mystery. Worldwide, it was estimated that there were six billion, four hundred ninety million, eight hundred and forty-one thousand, seven hundred and fourteen people. Out of that, only 500,000 survivors in nine years. In America, there were only about 49,999 people other than me who would survive nine years. Worldwide, 499,999.

I didn't know this at the time. But I knew I was lucky. I felt my own arm. My own. I'd never been grateful for that before. Now life seemed so much more beautiful. Beauty in the ashes. I closed my eyes and just stood there. Stood there and thought about... nothing.

A plane flew overhead, circled, and vanished into the sun's shadow.

Refugees huddled amongst the giant stone pillars, praying and weeping, praying some more. The sunlight sprinkled them in its wonton glow, and somehow, as they looked up at that sun breaking through the stone pillars, there in England they knew everything would be okay. Hope ruffled through the group. Their prayers had been answered. They were spared.

In the dark catacombs it was cold, freezing. You couldn't see anything. The men and women didn't eat anything, but remained underground for days, drinking sparse water and eating beetles scurrying over the dirt floors. One by one they meandered through the stone maze, and exited into brilliant sunlight, the triangle shadow before them shaking 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 each other, ate each other... and one by one, they rotted away due to the malnutrition. The survivors, weak and shaking, having survived on pigeons and insects, crept down the winding staircases, to the dirt floor. They looked about at the crumbling ruins, and felt they deserved their place there. Now they were survivors. They were heroes. The silent onlookers cheered. Birds sang.

I abandoned the wheel and walked downstairs. Hannah was sitting on the bed, staring numbly at the wall. I sat down next to her, the mattress squeezing beneath me. She acknowledged my presence with a brief nod, and looked down at her feet.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Probably what you are," she said.

"Thinking about how we've overcome? Thinking about how now we can breathe and sleep... in peace?"

She managed a quiet laugh. "I guess so... I am thinking about.."

"What?"

"I'm thinking about everything. About everyone. It just floods my mind."

"Maybe it's better, now that it's done. God cleansed the earth with the flood. Preserved the righteous."

"Your parents were wicked? My parents were wicked? Ashlie and Peyton were wicked? I thought you didn't believe in God."

"I guess now, I do."

"That's great," she said, almost sarcastically. Her arms were shaking.

"You're afraid it isn't over?"

Slowly, "I don't think it's over."

"But that's not what you're thinking about. I can read it in your eyes. You're thinking, *Why me?*"

3:00 p.m.

Hidden Past
The Fallacy of Beauty
So simple, so close

She looked over at me and a tear sprinkled her eye. "I don't even know who my real parents are," she said. "They tossed me out of their house when I was just a baby. I was passed between the family members, shunned and forgotten, the little orphan under the stairs. My birthdays were barely remembered; if they were, my birthday gift was my own plate of macaroni and cheese. 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 ran off and was never identified. I remember being driven places and left, told to walk home. Left at bus stations and train stations, having to wait for hours in the rain and snow for some other off-the-wall family member to pick me up for my unwanted three months there. It wasn't until Mom took me in that I was really cared for. She loved me like no one else ever has. She gave me all new clothes, she took me with her to church and social functions, 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, six years old, huddling in my room, hearing them fight, and I hear her scream, and a door slam. 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 the man had... stabbed her three times. My mom met a doctor and remarried. That's who I call Dad. That's who everyone thinks is my real dad. No one really knows that I've been tossed around and abandoned so many times."

I didn't know what to say. All this was new. So I didn't say anything.

She continued: "I've always wanted to be loved, Austin. I've always thirsted for it, hungered for it. My diaries are full with it. I just always looked to the football players, the jocks, the preps for it. I opened my legs wide hoping they would really love me. I don't know how many... how many guys took advantage of that. I love God, I *loved* God, but I just needed something more, and this controlled my life. It took me down so many bad roads. I just wanted someone to tell me, 'You're beautiful,' someone to tell me, 'You're everything to me,' because almost no one ever has. And all my friendships are superficial, social-status friendships. Except for a few. Like you.

"I was corrupted by the high school society. In high school, everything is about competition. Who isn't a virgin? Who's the best looking? Who's the greatest athlete? Who flirts the most? It's all driven by a bite-your-head-off competition. It really is sickening. Everyone is out to prove themselves, to be better than the rest, and this just leaves us empty, barren, thirsty and without

water. Have you ever noticed how those who just go with the swing of life, who don't try to outdo everyone, the ones who take a back seat, are the ones who ultimately succeed, are the ones who are happy, the ones whose dreams come true? How does that work? I don't know. Maybe it's a God-thing, maybe it's just chance, but you can't deny that it happens. I was burned out on that competition mindset. I was burned out to the point where my competition was look good and be seen as good. There's where teenage girls take the plunge."

"Take the plunge?"

"Shallow."

"What's shallow?"

"We are. All of us. We spent our time doing our hair, painting nails, worrying about stupid stuff like age lines, ingrown toe-nails, pimples, dimples. Eye shadowing was our god; we worshipped the idol of beauty, dedicating our lives to it. Our own ignorance kept us bound."

I cracked a smile. "Doesn't sound like you're too absorbed in the whole mess."

"What happened changes people. I trusted in worthless junk. I put my trust in crap. I forsook my family, friends, I backstabbed those who'd helped me in life just so I could put myself higher. Every mistake I made wasn't mine; I was perfect. I was a queen, a god, a teenage idol. Everyone wanted to be me. I was conceited. So much that I devoted my life to excelling in my conceit. I didn't eat, I ravaged my body thin to the bone. I slept around. Did everything for peoples' attention. I was a beautiful monster, but a monster to the bone. 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, then keep digging until you can't escape. I never even realized how trapped I had become, not until now." She shook her head, staring through a prison of bones. "I was a prep, doing everything for acceptance, refusing to admit the fact that I was crap. My life had become worthless, my goals were worthless, I was worthless. I put down others, exalted myself, in a rise to reach a goal that was so gorgeously terrible. I was a god... until I came here. Then I realized how horrible I really was."

"Do you know what we used to complain about? How bad our cuts and scrapes affect the color and smoothness of our skin. How bad our hair is messed up from the rain. How we stink with sweat. We hadn't realized how pretentious and ignorant, how stupid we really are. Beauty is fallacy. It is nothing. It's a whisper in time, then gone. Our bodies die, rot, all beauty is lost. The beauty is within. I didn't realize that. Not until now."

"I never thought I'd hear words like that from you."

She managed a cleft smile. "Neither did I. And it's not just beauty, Austin. We all jive for popularity. Everything is prep fest. How will I look if I do this? What will people think? Our lives are dictated by the choices of others. Our own desire for control controls us. It is like being enslaved by freedom. You never realize it until you step back, step back and really... see."

She fell back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. "Do you know what I 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 have fun. I wanted to 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 loved anyone before."

"I didn't realize that I'd had that simple life. I was blinded by the simplicity of it all."

"And I didn't realize that person I so desired, I so craved, was so close."

4:00 p.m.

Oasis A Better World Revelation

I rolled over, lying down next to her, my face almost touching hers. She rolled onto her side and looked into my eyes. Those eyes, the wellspring of grace, from that oasis I drank, drank my fill, deep and heavenly, a void of celestial paradise. Those eyes.

"Somehow I always knew," she said, her sweet breath falling over me like lilies in spring.

I ran a hand through her hair, so soft. "I didn't want you to know. I didn't want-"
"I always knew," she said, and she wrapped her fingers around mine. Her skin was so beautiful.

"You're not scared?"

"I've been so scared. But not now. The time of running is gone. I can't run anymore."

Our faces closed in. Her mouth opened, and we pressed together. My tongue entered her mouth, and those feelings, those arousing, rushed through me, a platonic plague. Our lips smacked and we drew in heavy breaths. Our legs kicked and our arms shuddered, and we shivered against one another, lying on that bed. One of my hands touched her hair, the other her cheek. She wrapped her arm around me and closed her eyes. Glad for what we've got, done with what we've lost, our who lives laid out – right in front of us. The passion kindled, exploded, burst through me. Energy coursed through me. She was close. She was there. My obsession was realized.

I reeled backwards, breathing hard. Her own hair covered her face. She was sweating; so was I.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm so-"

She wasn't allowed to finish. I rolled on top of her, kissing her face. She kissed my neck.

As I kissed she panted, "I'm sorry, so sorry, gosh, I'm so sorry..."

I leaned forward, pressed my face on her chest, felt her breathing. "It's okay. It's okay."

"I'm sorry... You don't understand..."

"I don't have to," I said, looking into her eyes. "This is all I've ever wanted."

She stared into my eyes, and leaned forward, pulled me close. Once so shy, now so brave. Her hands were stiff with excitement. Our lips entwined and we rolled over on the bed, messing up the sheets. She hovered above me, kissing with such deep passion I'd never imagined possible, and I closed my eyes, let her explore my mouth with her tongue.

Suddenly she rolled off, landing beside me. She was crying.

I propped up next to her. "It'll be okay," I said, whispering into her ear. She embraced me and kept crying. "People have always survived - we will, too. We survived the Romans, the Crusades, the Black Plague, World Wars, we'll survive this. It's nature's way of thinning us out so we can build a better world. We'll survive. We'll build a better world. You and me. We'll be together. We'll build our lives together. It is beautiful."

She just cried harder, and pulled away. "Austin," she cried. "Austin-"

I reached up her shirt, feeling the soft skin. She cried more. I tried to kiss her.

She refused: "I can't do this. I can't do this to you."

"What? Why not? Where's the minister? Who is going to marry us?"

"It's not that," she said, lying on that bed. "It's not that. I love you. I want it."

"Then why not? Do you just want me because I'm all you have?"

"No. I won't let you, because... Because *I'm* all you have."

"You're not making any sense, Hannah."

"I know," she cried. "I know, I'm so sorry..."

I began to kiss her again, trying to move on top of her. She pushed me off. "Austin. Please stop."

I lay next to her. "I don't understand."

"I just can't, Austin."

"Why not? Hannah, tell me. Why not?"

She got up from the bed, stood beside the dresser. I lay on the mattress staring. Her chest heaved in sobs.

"Why not? Why-"

She bent over, grabbed her pant leg, pulled it up.

Color drained in my face.

5:00 p.m.

Oasis

Heaven & Paradise Revelation

My head was spinning. I rolled off the side of the bed, onto the floor, gripped at the carpet. My stomach retched, but nothing came up. *God, no, God – you can't do this. God, no, no, no...*

Hannah fell against the wall.

I pulled myself up against the bed, stared at her. "When?"

"The surf shop," she moaned. "That's why I... That's why I had to get you to move. Because I knew that if we waited, then... Then I'd turn, and you would die... I had to get you moving, had to get you to a boat, had to save your life, because you saved mine. Now you're safe, and I thank God, every part of me thanks God, my wish... You've been blessed-"

"I've been cursed," I cried out. "I lose you, I lose everything."

"I just wanted you to be okay."

"How can I be okay without you?"

"Now you have to kill me," she sobbed. "You have the gun. You have to shoot me..."

"No," I moaned, standing. "No."

"You have to... I am already feeling sick..."

"You'll turn, and you'll bite me, and I'll turn, and we'll be together."

"It doesn't work like that. It wouldn't be me. It wouldn't be you."

"I can't stand you being one of them. God-"

"I won't. When I die, I'm gone. I'll be waiting on the shores of heaven, I promise."

There is no such thing.

I coughed. "Hannah. Please..."

"Give me the gun," Hannah said. "Give me the gun and I will do it."

"No. You can't. God, no..." I stumbled over to her, fell down at her feet, kissed her legs. "No..."

A thumping sound filled my ears. It was growing closer. The boat was rocking.

Hannah kissed my forehead. "Go, Austin. Go."

There was a sound of uncoiling rope, footsteps. Several armed men descended into the hold.

"Survivors!" one of them yelled. "Let's go!"

They reached for us.

Hannah said, "Leave me."

A soldier: "Are you crazy?"

"I'm bitten. It'll be a few hours or so. I'm just going to stay here and... and watch the sunset."

The soldiers nodded. "Okay." They grabbed me and pulled me away.

I writhed in their grip. "Leave me, too! Leave me, too!"

"Go," Hannah said, wiping tears from her eyes. "Goodbye."

I was pulled onto the deck, into the evening light, kicking and shouting, cussing and fuming. They loaded me into a carriage and the carriage was wheeled high into the air, and I was pulled into the hovering Blackhawk. I tried to resist but they injected me with some green liquid and exhaustion wrapped its arms around me. I dimly remember the other soldiers catching the carriage and joining the Blackhawk. The doors were slammed shut. I crept up against the door, peering out the window, the beautiful ocean stretching against a backdrop of burning skyscrapers and ashen skies.

As the Blackhawk tore through the sky, I saw Hannah standing on the deck, shielding her eyes, watching me leave. I cried out, but was unable to do anything. The soldiers were quiet.

AFTERWORD

NINE YEARS LATER

The twin propellers churned through the air, blasts of air sending clouds shooting in every direction. The heavy Chinook helicopter descended from the overcast sky, falling with tremendous speed, towards the rolling foothills. Forests, valleys, creeks and ponds filled the eye forever, as the neck craned, and filled the windows of the rustic helicopter. A sheet of snow brushed over the ridged tops of the ancient ruins. The helicopter bucked slightly, warm currents wafting over the hulk of the vessel. The pilots weren't uneasy; they were stationed off an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, and furious winds often threw the helicopter around like a rag doll. This was fine weather. Even with the intensifying lightning bursts in the far distance.

The helicopter flared, tilting slightly, the pilot decreasing throttle and using the air beneath the belly to slow down the descent. The pilot glanced over his shoulder, beyond a wire netting, and said to several men in ghostly masks, laden with all the technical equipment of the century, "Only a few more moments! See all the lights down there, in the trees? That's it. Hold on. Wind sheer is strong between with the two fronts hitting, and—" The chopper jostled around; equipment rattled as steep, tree-covered slopes rose to either side of them. "You see what I mean." The men in the back exchanged worried glances.

Snow began to pelt the titanium steel and Plexiglas windows. Giant wipers whistled back and forth. The pilot argued with the controls, and finally the chopper fell a few more feet, and the extended wheels touched home. The giant Chinook landed on the pavement. The pilot shut down, and the rotors swung to a stop.

The door flung open. Several soldiers dropped down onto the pavement. Down the road it was completely quiet. A few parked cars, rusted and falling apart. The trees were bare, and a fresh layer of snow draped the earth in angelic lace. The snow crunched beneath their feet as they held onto the assault rifles, wearily peering down the road at the homes. Broken windows, open doors, sections falling apart; some had been burnt down, only the timber remaining as the carbon returned to the earth over the last near-decade.

"Wait here," the captain said. "Please. It's safe."

The other soldiers nodded and sat down in the snow, folding the assault rifles over their laps. They lit a cigarette and began to smoke, moving their fingers, numb from the cold.

The man left footprints in the snow as he stepped past the skeleton of what had once been a vehicle. *Ashlie slowly walked into the study, pulled back the drapes. She stared across the street, saw the broken door and windows of the house opposite us. Above the trees rose several withering columns of smoke into the air. Some patches of blood stained the street; the Jeep was ramped up in the grass, much of the glass broken and smeared with handprints and blood. The front fender was bent and dented and splotched with strips of flesh, and the wheels and axels were twisted from rolling over bodies. The doors were wide open, and blood covered the backseat. Ashlie just stared, unbelieving, and closed the drapes. She didn't move.* He let his hand glide over the freshly-lain snow, brushing it away, revealing chipping green paint. He closed his eyes, moved forward.

The garage door was twisted, snapped apart on the right. *I ran over someone's foot as I went forward; going back again, the garage door began to shred apart. I drove up close to the wall, put it in reverse, and slashed my foot on the pedal as hard as I could. Infected tore off the sides of the truck as the back end barreled through the garage door; paint tore and withered; screeching metal filled the air; the side mirrors were torn off; but I peeled into the driveway, into the night, leaving the infected jumping through the hole in the garage door.*

Now he stepped back through the hole. Snow had come in and rested against scattered tools, against the van secluded in the corner. The door to the house was left open. But his eyes drifted down to his feet, down to beside the door leading to the side yard. A grotesque skeleton, twisted and inhuman; the head had been snapped off and lay against the dog's bed. Tattered clothes still covered the bones, and the cloth was brown with what had once been red blood. *The broad of the axe connected with his shoulder, throwing him against his truck. He snarled and fell to the ground, squirming to stand. Energy sapped from my arms and legs. I swung the*

blade down, chopping off part of his leg. Blood sprayed up at me. Dad howled—but it wasn't Dad, it wasn't Dad!—and he leapt towards me, but fell to the ground, writhing. I stepped back, gasping for air. "Sorry, Daddy." And the axe went down, into his forehead; his cap fell back and blood and brain matter stained the cold concrete flooring. I let the axe be and sauntered away, seeing spots.

The man entered through the kitchen. The blinds were disheveled and hung loose. Snow had crept its way in, covering the moss-eaten tile floor. My eyes swept to the empty island sitting in the middle of the kitchen. *Amanda sat on the kitchen island, clasping a hand over her arms. Faint trails of blood echoed between her fingers. Her face was a contorted mask. Several soiled towels lay next to her, clothed in blood.*

He took the steps slowly, his hand moving over the guardrail. So familiar... so foreign. He stood on the upper floor; he pushed open the bathroom door. The shower mirror was licked and spotted brown, but it held the reflection of a skeleton contortedly hurled against the wall and fallen to its demise. *Blood had been splattered all over the mirror, and a bullet had fragmented most of it into a webbed masterpiece. I saw my own horrid reflection in the mirror, yet was drawn to Amanda's naked body, sick and twisted, purple and ghastly, a skeleton of death, opened its yellowed jaws, hollering in rage. She leapt up at me, springing agile; I ducked out of the way and sliced at her with the knife, slitting open her chest. Blood sprayed all against the wall; I elbowed her hard in the face, breaking her nose. Blood trailed down to her mouth; she reeled at me, jaws gaping, teeth dripping with malicious poison; I drove the tip of the blade into her eye; she screeched once and fell still against me. Suddenly the body was so heavy. I side-stepped and let it fall onto the counter, and then into the floor, where blood began to form an ocean on the white-washed tile.* Brown stains still covered the tile, dry and flaky. He shut the door and continued down the hallway, into a bedroom.

Dad walked in. His eyes were sunken, and he scratched his back. "Are you up?" Groggy.

"I'm up," I lied, lying in bed.

"You're going to miss the shower."

"I'm up."

He shut his eyes, almost left, but forced himself onward. He looked over the bed, the fish tank – fish skeletons at the bottom – and the dark computer, everything bathed in a yellow glow of dust. He peeped through the window blinds, saw the Chinook below, rotors slowly spinning, the soldiers laying cards out on the fresh snow, laughing. A pack of dogs roamed several houses back. The man turned away and opened a compartment in the desk. He ruffled through it and drew out a small notebook. He flipped it open.

January 21, 2004 Wednesday

School. Woke at 5:30, got dressed, slept with Goldie on the couch with a glass of Faygo. Art boring; read magazines – looked like I was working. Geometry, didn't do homework, me and Ricky bashed – Erika in a good mood. U.S./World Studies – didn't know homework was due, though everyone else did – I was like, "Since when?" Chemistry, did a fire lab; Tony and I arguing over density formula. I was right, it really was 100g, not 1,000g, as Tony held. Lunch uneventful – spicy chicken fajitas. Study Hall packed. Accounting class – W-4 and W-2 forms – will I get money off taxes? Hope so. English, went over realism and naturalism – *Career Passport* tomorrow. Grabbed info on Teacher Academy. Dad went to SHS meeting – good news with Teacher Academy. Drake, Les, Bryon over – disaster avoided on roads haha – Bryon almost did a U-turn down at Farmer's Market intersection. Drake got us pizza from Dominoes and I picked it up. Bryon learned *I Can Only Imagine*. Drake addicted to *Battlefield 1942*. Finished English and Geometry homework before bed. Tired. Listening to Led Zeppelin. Can't forget Rikki. Oh, how I want a girlfriend to spend time with, to be connected to – how I want to be wanted!

He closed the journal and shut his eyes. The day remained in his head, a bad memory. *I just wanted a simple life, and I already had it.* He slid the journal inside an Army bag and

descended downstairs to the front door. He opened the front door, but looked down the steps; a skeleton lay propped against the wall, back of the skull laying in pieces at the floorboards.

"Mom..."

No.

No.

No.

"It was meant to be," she told me. "This was supposed to happen. I don't want to be like them."

I just stared at her.

"I'm sorry it has to end 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 I kissed every morning before school. I stepped towards her. "Don't, Austin. Don't get close. Please. I don't have much time. He bit me." She squeezed her eyes shut, the revolver to her head. "I love you. Don't get too close. Protect your sister. I don't think he knows."

"Mom!"

The revolver barked; the back of her head splattered all over the wall and she pitched to the side, landing hard. The pistol rolled out of her hands. I screamed and dove for her, landing next to her. But her eyes were vacant. Blood gushed all over the carpet. Those terrible, awful, loveless eyes stared at me, blank and unrevealing. I shuddered and tore away, lunging for the door. I spewed vomit all over my pants and fell out of the room, swinging the door shut. I fell to the ground, cowering, pulling my knees up to me. She was dead. She had killed herself. I had seen it. Tears fell down my face.

He pushed the front door open and walked past the snow-covered Jeep. "Pack up your cards, boys."

They grabbed at the deck. In the biting cold, one asked, "You know this place?"

"This is my home," he answered, looking back.

No one said anything.

"Get on the radio. Salvage crews can get in. There might be some places in town."

They loaded into the helicopter and it sped up into the air. The snow turned the ruined town into a winter wonderland. As the helicopter ascended, you could look out and see the skeletons everywhere. Thousands of skeletons, covered with a frosty blanket of snow. He had been right. They'd attacked each other, and eventually starved to death. It had taken nearly two months, but it had happened. And now the survivors were salvaging and reconstructing.

"Can we hurry up?" the man asked. "I want to get home to my wife and boy."

The helicopter disappeared into the snowy skies.

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Halfway across the world, on the sun-bleached deserts, the ocean touched the dust with dull legacy. A boat washed ashore, lodged in the rocks, the hull yellow and brown from the years. Over the distance smoke rises, and the horses trot to a stop next to the ocean. Aborigines disband. They knew nothing of the virus, nothing of *Copernicium arretium* – secluded, out-of-the-way, the aborigines had survived the 36 hours and the two months without hassles or cares. Now they approached the boat; one of them climbed inside, and shook his head.

His eyes looked down.

A skeleton lay sprawled on the deck, bones loosely jointed, dressed in shaggy clothes. A small hole reflected in the forehead, and another hole cut into the back of the skull. The aborigine dropped down to the ground, shouted orders, and the bones were given a proper Australian Indian burial.